

Ana Schnabl
THE ONLY SON

Rivulets of sweat poured from the nape of my neck, over my temples and chin and between my breasts. Hair matted my forehead but I didn't have the strength anymore to push it away. The air in the room was heavy and acidic. I didn't feel the bed I was lying on, my legs had gone numb. I could barely keep my eyes open, the blurry scene at the other end of the room was framed by the contours of my eyelashes. Two fat women were using a wet cloth to wipe down the baby. Its short limbs protruded into space and writhed grotesquely, the surface of its skin was greasy and bloody and disgusting. It screamed and coughed and breathed. I had almost fallen asleep when the thin-haired fat woman put the baby in my arms.

"Watch the head."

I awkwardly twisted my forearms under the blanket that framed the inhumanly wrinkled face. I tried, but my arms refused to nimbly come together in a hug. Its eyes were half-closed. It seemed to me that the supple skin covering its skull moved inward, I saw it pulsate like the tiny bodies of Mediterranean lizards. Its wobbly head scared me. I didn't open the blanket at all, I wasn't interested in what lay underneath it. On my thighs, I felt the same weight that had resided inside me just a day before. A swollen tongue protruded from its mouth, its lips twitching greedily and leaving droplets of spit on my arm with every twitch. Chills went down my spine and engulfed my limbs like lava.

"You'll have to let him latch on now," giggled the other fat woman.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed at my huge, aching breasts riddled with blue and violet veins.

"Let him nurse. He has to nurse now. I think it's time we called your husband."

I did as the fat woman said, I opened the soaked-through gown and pressed the baby's face to my nipple. I took a deep breath before its lips made contact with my flesh. It sucked forcefully, I felt as if it were stabbing me with a sharp awl that travelled through my breast, bored underneath my sternum and scratched my shoulder blade. It suckled and suckled, and I was unable to move, it was pushing me towards the top of the bed with all its strength. I shut my eyes and held back tears. I couldn't let the two fat women see through me.

As the door opened, I felt the warm glow of hallway lights on my face.

Jan approached me as one would approach a wounded she-wolf that jumps at the mere sound of wind blowing and hurts at the sound of rustling leaves. Compared to my shallow, tense gasps, his breathing was even deeper and more serene than usual. He gently touched the baby's head with his left hand, brushed aside the lock of hair that was getting in my eyes with

his right hand, and kissed me. The contrast between the nervous suckling baby and the loving man stung in my chest.

“You’re so beautiful, Jasmin. You’re both beautiful,” he said. His eyes travelled across the baby’s face that radiated joy at him, while I stared at his thick, rough hair, hoping that the panic would pass before I had to look at the baby again.

“He *is* beautiful,” I lied. “He’s going to nurse for a couple of hours now. Will you stay with me?”

“Would you like me to?”

I asked myself what he was seeing. In front of him lay his helpless wife and his newborn who was throwing up a storm because the milk was lacking something. I wasn’t glowing and I’m sure Jan noticed it. The proverbial peace and tranquillity had not descended upon me, and my wishes in that tight little windowless delivery room were engaged in the same battle against time as they had been before.

“I’m exhausted. Maybe you could come back a bit later? We’re not going anywhere, I promise.” I did my best to sound caring, to give the impression that I would connect with the baby when I was alone and transfer to it the first pulses of love. I even believed this myself. He nodded understandingly and showered the baby’s brow with a thousand delicate kisses.

“Okay. I’ll be back soon.” Light shone on his eyes and brow as he gently closed the door. Not a wrinkle, not a smidgeon of doubt.

We were left alone. The room was filled by the sounds of the baby’s sucking and by a sullen purr that rose from its stomach. My nipples were numb. My vagina was numb. I wanted to touch it to check the damage that the baby left behind but I couldn’t reach across it. I was overcome by tears, the first one falling right on the baby’s fontanelle. A thought came over me: if I cried on the same spot long and hard, I could hurt the baby. Then it’d leave me alone.

You’re paranoid and insane, I berated myself. I’d never responded well to new things in my life. That’s what it was.

After a few hours, the two fat women took the baby away to better wash it, measure it, weigh it and take its blood. Maybe it’s ill, I thought, and would have to remain here. It’d be fed by tubes or by another woman.

As soon as we were left alone, Jan sat down on the side of the bed. He tried to hug me but I stopped him in time and held a hand in front of his face. He grabbed it and took it to his chest.

“I’m hurting all over.”

“I understand.” He touched my hair.

“Congratulations, honey. A new human being.” The green specks in his eyes glowed, he seemed curious, alert, in love.

“He is new, isn’t he.” My lips softened. I forced a smile. “So new that I’m afraid I’ll break him.”

I wished he’d sense my helplessness so that I could open up to him. I wanted him to listen to me and patiently sift through what I was feeling. To explain to me that sleep deprivation could easily distort reality and suppress beauty. That beginnings are far from being the only thing that determines the intensity and ends of stories. I swallowed nervously and felt my face flush.

“Is there something wrong?” The question rang like a shot in the room. It didn’t belong there, didn’t belong in a place where new life begins and vulnerability rests in its original form between the walls. It emboldened me.

“I’m all ...” I tried to find words befitting a mother, “I’m confused. I don’t know how I’m supposed to act.”

“Of course you are, honey. How couldn’t you be, we’re first-time parents. Everything is different all of a sudden, there’s three of us now.” He kissed me on the lips. The mature textures of his skin and beard were soothing. He convinced me that we were feeling the same, that we were talking about the same thing.

I left the maternity ward after three days. During this time, the baby had changed noticeably, the milk had strengthened it and given it colour. When it opened its eyes, it opened them wide, and as it did so, its eyelids pushed deep under its brow. If it weren’t so tiny it would have seemed deranged. The two fat women at the maternity ward kept saying that he looked upon the world with intelligent eyes and that he’s sure to have it easy with the ladies. As we were saying goodbye they just couldn’t get enough of its cuteness. Just before we left, Jan inquired as to whether the baby’s weight was standard, whether it was big enough, whether the slightly ashen tone of its face would eventually disappear. They engaged in conversation that I was unable to follow.

I asked myself whether my body would ever be as firm as it used to be. Mothers lose their youthful volume. As their body is a prisoner of another, much smaller and weaker body, it takes on those qualities itself. In my mind I counted all the washed out, listless, desperate mothers, mothers with huge butts and thighs supporting a crumbling body, mothers with short-cut, withered hair, mothers with sunken eyes and with limbs flimsier than firewood. I shuddered

thinking of their shapes. I stood silently at my husband's side, absent-mindedly holding the baby whose body I wanted to divorce. I wouldn't let it take me over.

The fat women watched me out of the corners of their eyes. I knew what they were looking for.

"Be well, Mila. Be good to him," said the fat redheaded woman.

I replied with the tone of one who's hiding something: "Too bad we're leaving. It's so nice and quiet here; I could stay for a while longer."

"You know, space issues. We have to give others a chance as well, other women are mothers too," said the other fat woman, pithily stressing the word *mothers*, and that was that.

Jan thanked them for their care multiple times, further accentuating the difference between his excitement and my indifference. Tired of standing around, I tugged at his sleeve. We walked to the car. With the baby in the car cradle I sat in the back and avoided Jan's seeking gaze in the rear-view mirror. I stared through the window, giving automatic answers to the stream of his questions about the delivery and comparing myself to the women I saw strolling on the sidewalks. The baby suddenly threw a powerful kick at my abdomen and my breast.

"Ow, damm...", I stifled the swearword and felt it settle in a more treacherous place.

"What's going on back there?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Jasmin kicked me in the stomach. His eyesight probably isn't very good yet." My voice was clinical, and Jan noticed it as well. I felt a pair of doubting eyes settle on the top of my head.

"No, it really isn't," he said, and then, as he realized I wouldn't pick up the conversation, added with an acerbic tone, "So don't be too mad at him."

A wail rose in my throat but I swallowed it. Sitting here in the back seat of the car, where Jan and I had made love years ago, I was overwhelmed by rules and commandments. Mothers only become mothers once they're spayed, I thought. Our fertility is that which first takes away our freedom. From now on, all my emotions would belong to a being that I wasn't supposed to be mad at. I sunk into myself, and the wail that I had stifled dissolved in my milk and was swallowed by the baby. In its body, it became the devil's cry.

"Wow, what a voice," smiled Jan as he drove.

"Yeah. I don't know what to do."

"Maybe you could rock him a bit? Whisper something in his ear or sing something to him?" The suggestions turned into admonitions and Jan's morning cheerfulness dissipated. What remained were big pieces of joy and smaller, jagged pieces of impatience.

I started singing to the baby and rocking it. Its screams intensified, reached its guttural culmination and broke off into silence just as I wanted to ask Jan to stop the car. The baby had lost its voice; however, that doesn't mean it stopped screaming.

"You see, you're doing well, it's true that your voice can charm just about anybody." Condescension didn't suit him. He realized that and apologized, but my pelvis was already tingling with loneliness. Underneath me, attached at my nipple, rested the baby that seemed as alien to me as the man in the driver's seat. Their expectations had pushed me away from my founts of spontaneity and relegated me to resigned silence. Again I held back tears.

The landscape that stretched between the city and the village where we lived was being evaporated by the heat, losing colours and contours. We were driving towards a house that was thoroughly prepared for the newcomer. From the rooms where the child would be free to go once it learned to walk, Jan removed all furniture with sharp edges and fixed all heavy objects to the walls. The scent of freshly baked bread or apple strudel may have still wafted upstairs. The baby was awaited by a lovely little room that Jan and I had furnished together, back when the germs of my fear were subclinical, back when I waved my hands arrogantly at the thought of infection and ascribed all symptoms to the pregnancy. Just above the door of the room that it would only occupy a year later, I hung a sign saying Welcome home, Jasmin.

As I crossed the threshold of the house with the sleeping baby, I lost my breath. The baby responded to my stillness with anger and crying, it kicked and stretched its hands towards my hair as if it wanted to grab it and pull. It wanted to control even my breathing. As I looked around the hallway in confusion, looking for a surface where I could set the baby down – I was afraid I'd lose consciousness – Jan approached me from behind speaking calm assurances: "There there, Jasmin, it's all right, don't be afraid, you're home now. You'll always be safe with mommy and daddy." I turned around, pushed the baby in Jan's arms and collapsed on the living room couch. In front of me, the brochure from the expectant mothers' workshop awaited on the coffee table.

Holding the baby, Jan seemed relaxed, as if his skin simply flowed into the smooth skin of the baby. His hand gestures were fatherly and composed. Convinced that the baby would be soothed by vibration, he walked from one room to the next, while I asked myself whether he'd ever call me Mila again or would we forget our true names like all other parents.

The baby's crying quieted down. Jan placed it on my numb thighs as if it were a gift and said, "I know you're sick and tired, but I think Jasmin needs to nurse." He sat down on my left and watched intently for my reaction, waited for the magic of nursing. I felt a burning pain in my left cheek that immediately moved behind my eyes. I felt as if I'd gone blind, my head was

ringing and I could no longer tell the ringing from the baby's cry. Jan's voice joined the commotion, demanding, "Come on, take him! His head is going to fall back. This is not a joke."

"Sorry. I can barely keep awake, I have to get some sleep," I told him, never really hearing my muttered words. I picked up the baby and leaned forward to give it to my husband again, when he hesitantly grabbed my upper arm. "But Jasmin really has to nurse. The nurse said we shouldn't withhold food from him while he's so little." He was trying to mask the shock that I immediately saw in his eyes, make it look like reluctance. He was talking in plural, which had nothing to do with my breasts, my thighs and my hands. I was overcome by rage, which the baby immediately translated into terrible wailing. I kept repeating, "The baby has to nurse." I used one hand to pull the tunic over my head, unzip my bra and throw it on the floor. I felt as if my breasts expanded to fill the room, as if they were pushing at nooks and corners, as if their weight was pushing down furniture and crushing it. I was a factory under somebody else's management. I pressed the baby at my nipple and wanted to squirt all the milk into its mouth, so that it would never go hungry and never cry again."

"There you go, see, I'm feeding him. He's drinking his milk and he's quiet. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

These were not the family scenes we imagined mere months ago; Jan tried to nudge us in the right direction. He put one arm around my shoulder, kissed the top of my head and ran his fingers across my collarbone.

"I'm sorry. I don't want you to feel pressured, but ..." his voice again accommodating that sterile, composed, pragmatic tone, "but it's just that you're his mother. You're the only one who can feed him now. But I promise to take care of his food when he grows up a bit." And he giggled as if this was all just a diet issue.

"You're right. I'll feed him and then I'll lie down." I had to work hard to manage the conciliatory tone. All fibres of my body remained aflame.

Nevertheless, I didn't rest that afternoon. The baby's demands intensified and it was constantly pushing towards my breasts. Tiny wounds were already appearing on my nipples, which leaked a couple of red droplets that mixed with milk while I was breastfeeding. They accumulated on the baby's lips and then, when it made a face, ran down to its neck. The hallucinatory image was so enticing that I forgot to wipe them off. The baby's bloody lips were the only truth that I could afford.

I walked around the house as if it were a museum of my former life. The baby always came between me and the objects. The porcelain cups, the pretty dresses, the stilettos, the

cigarettes drying on the windowsill, none of this was meant for me anymore. I always hurried past the mirror in the hall, knowing that I couldn't bear the moment of contact as it gazed into me. I didn't respond to the phone calls of my mother, my sister and my friends, as I knew they'd expect me to be excited. I wrapped myself in silence, because my voice would break glass if I ever spoke. Whenever me and the baby slipped from Jan's gaze, he'd call for me, checking what I was doing. He had lost control of his unease as well.

At night I sat with my back against the wall, staring at the naked, unmarked and attractive male body that had pushed the corrupt woman to the edge of the bed. In spite of my exhaustion, I couldn't sleep. I gazed at Jan's erections wishing to be their cause. I was overwhelmed by jealousy; I knew the place of every woman he dreamed of, but as soon as the baby cried, I realized that they were more powerful than I was. I belonged to a different order, an order that we mistakenly consider eternal. I had become substance, I had become love. Sitting on the bed, I silently dismembered myself; the legs, the arms, the neck, the back, the anus, the vagina, the hair, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the abdomen, the birthmarks, the scars, the scratches, the indentations, the stretch marks, all for one baby, a baby that would never change the world. Whose choice was it, I asked myself and felt the first tear running down my cheek. It was followed by others, cutting, gouging. They were no match for my despair and my aggrieved rage. They could only pour oil onto its fire.

When I failed to respond to the baby's cries and leave the bed, Jan woke and admonished me, just like I often admonished him for snoring. I rose and walked to the crib.

It seemed as if I'd walked for hours. I found myself standing above the crib in pale light. The baby writhed, its mouth was open wide, but the sound never reached me. I was falling in its maw, it was swallowing me like a black hole. I couldn't feel the floor beneath my feet. The surroundings were dissolved and distorted. For a moment, I regarded the abstract image as if it were a guarantor of possibilities. The baby floated under my hands, the only things I could clearly feel were its warmth, the beating of its heart, the crease between its neck and chin. Its body a variation on our bodies, its history one of parasitism. Its heart beating faster and faster, its skin becoming feverishly sticky. I took a deep breath and held it. My fingertips were tingling. My fingers sunk into the silky soft folds of its tiny body and, reaching the bones, pushed against them. The black maw narrowed and eventually closed. The tiny bones of the baby's body gave way like piano keys. I placed both my hands upon them. Above the fugue of fingers, breasts and palms, the light of my eyes went out. Every mother has to make concessions.

The silence was pierced by a terrible screaming. I felt a cold sharp breath on my shoulder, followed by a powerful push towards reality.

“Mila, what are you doing?!” Jan took the baby out of the crib and held it against his chest. He backed away to the opposite corner of the room. He was pale, bathed in cold sweat, his teeth chattered and his hands gently brushed the baby’s head. The baby hid its face, sinking into Jan’s chest. Jan’s legs were flimsy, he was held upright by horror. Nobody runs away from a mother, but he wanted to run.

“Mila ...” the words stuck in his mouth, “what ...?”

“... are you doing? Sleepless again, are you?” He grabs me under my right arm, pulling the left arm that still clings to the railing towards himself.

“Calm down. You’ll wake all your neighbours. You don’t want to do that, do you?”

I rub my palms against the baggy nightgown to make the tingling stop, but it just moves elsewhere. To the crease between my neck and chin. To my nose, my brow, my temples. He grabs me again, pressing my nervous arms against my sides. He leans over to find my eyes. Once our eyes find each other, he continues: “Shall we go for a walk? That usually helps you.” My head is spinning, I lean on the young man in white with almost all my weight. He unlocks the door of the room and a long hallway with yellow walls unfolds in front of us.

“Will Jan be here tomorrow?”

“No, Mila, I’m sorry, Jan won’t be able to come in tomorrow,” says the stuttering young man. He barely manages to intercept me when I collapse. We sit down on a bench. There’s nothing, nobody to be seen in the long yellow hallway. Only children’s cries echo from the walls, inconsolable, mournful cries.

“He’s taking care of his only son.”

“Yes, he’s taking care of him.” He smiles and turns towards me. It seems as if his smile takes me in its arms, telling me I’ve nothing to be ashamed of.

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