

viva hammer

.....

The Demon Who Delivered Me My Daughter

*Dedicated in honor of Bruria's bas mitsva and Gael's reaching the age
of gvura.*

Like all demons, the labor pains appeared first at night. They were so faint I barely woke; there was the sense of something pressing firmly at my back. Back labor—I knew the symptoms from the birth instructor's description, the only time I was able to use anything I learned from her. Perhaps the classes are merely to appease the nerves of the expectant mother, but as I passed through the passage of childbirth, I found what they taught me irrelevant: you cannot prepare for childbirth any more than you can for death. The experience is incommunicable.

The morning after the pains started, an ordinary Friday morning, I dutifully turned up for work, breathing deeply when the contractions came, but not bothered by them. My boss poked his head into my office and asked me to write up a memo, and for the first time in my life, I said no. Everything was left in perfect order for him, I explained, but I was in labor and it was time to leave.

None of this evoked any nervousness. There was nothing to be nervous about. The baby would come whether I exerted myself or not. No performance was being demanded of me, I would not be graded, and there would be a promotion at the end, irrespective of the standard I reached during the procedure. If I decided to switch off, they would rip that thing out of me. There would be

a thousand professionals doing their duties—I was merely the vessel for their efforts. It was a relief, really. I had been driving myself to distraction at work, proving myself in a cutthroat competitive field, desperately trying to overcome the shame of having started the job pregnant. I had stayed at work through nausea, exhaustion, depression, constipation, and high fever, imagining what they must have thought of me, disgusted with my femaleness and manifest fertility. I had transformed myself into a pregnant man, driven till my engines steamed from overuse.

The demon that had hidden its face that Friday morning returned with the darkness, and now the pressure at my back felt like a tight squeeze. My labor did not fit into any of the neat patterns the instructor had described in class. Every half hour I woke, and someone wrung my back long and hard for ninety seconds. I got out of bed each time and walked round the wall that separates the living room from the kitchen, living through the pain, knowing it, hating it, knowing that it could not be avoided, hating it, hating it. What energy it takes to be in pain.

I looked in the fridge, needing a quick fix. There they were: two fat brownies my husband Moshe had bought for a Sabbath treat. Before me sat the terrible temptations that I had fought all through the pregnancy, the desperate craving for sugar that I could never fight away, but never gave into. This time I would answer that call. I don't think I have ever devoured something with such relish, and such need. It was a powerful combination, the sugar and the chocolate and the caffeine. I fell into a deep sleep.

Relief from the pains came again with daylight. My husband was a rabbi, and that Sabbath morning he did his thing in synagogue as usual. After he came home, we smiled over how we had planned what we would do if I went into labor when Moshe was in synagogue. We do not use the telephone on the Sabbath and we weren't sure how I would contact him if I had to rush to hospital. The way things were moving at that point, he could spend two Sabbaths in synagogue before I was ready to deliver! As with everything in my life, I was a slow mover, slow and steady.

Everything I ate took a quick exit. My body was a multiuse civilian vehicle transformed into a war tank, with its weaponry trained to one target and capable of accomplishing only one mission.

More frequent visits from the demon that Saturday night, but still bearable. Round and round that living room wall I walked, as gently as I could, because the bastards downstairs had complained about my pacing the night before. That morning the squeezer demon stayed even with the coming of the sunlight. The wring-outs continued, and I could not rest. My mother-in-law called to say that she *had* to see me that Sunday, but I told her I was busy with work, and couldn't make it. She pressed me further, and for the second time in my life, I said no.

My sister came with a truckload of baby things. I rocked on our new chair while we sorted them through, laughing and chatting nervously as the pains rose and subsided inside me.

I called the obstetrics practice when the contractions started coming more often.

"Are they coming every five minutes for thirty seconds?" he asked, repeating the mantra we heard in the birth class.

"Not really, but it's been three days almost..."

"No, you're not ready yet if you can still tolerate the pain. I think tonight is your night, but you have a good few hours to go."

My sister went home. Ten minutes later the mucus plug slithered out, and I was seized by a pain so terrifying that I fell onto the bed. I called the doctors' office again, and someone new was on duty. She went through the whole questionnaire again about how many pains and how long they lasted, and again I failed the test.

"Look, I don't think you're ready yet," she pronounced.

"Dr. Howard, I can't bear the pain anymore. If I'm not dilated by the time I get to the hospital, I'll come back home, but I really would like to come to the hospital now."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll meet you there at six."

We ordered a taxi, and when it arrived Moshe told me it was time to go. I lay tightly wound up on a corner of the bed, unable to move.

"Fuck off," was all I managed. Moshe looked at me, confused. "Wasn't it *you* who ordered the car?" he asked.

When I could stand up, I limped down the stairs and slid into the car. Fortunately, the contractions slowed down with the movement, because otherwise

I would not have managed the trip without screaming. Focusing on the glove box, I did deep, controlled breathing for the two contractions that did hit me during the ride, and squeezed Moshe's hand.

Slowly, slowly I trudged though the endless hospital lobby. One foot, one foot, one foot, step, step, step. On the eighth floor they strapped me up and I waited for Dr. Howard. Only one light contraction crawled across the monitor, and she was skeptical. But when she did that critical measure, I made it: four centimeters. "I don't have to go home?"

"No, you're staying here."

We watched the monitor some more, and I writhed on the bench as the lines moved up.

"How can you ever have children after watching all this?" I asked the doctor, forever perplexed about why anyone had children, especially a woman who watched this hideous beginning every day of her life.

"This isn't a very important part of the process," she answered, and I was disgusted. How could she be blind to the magisterial importance of the birth? While I sat there being measured and monitored, Moshe registered me downstairs. They gave him trouble because of our insurance, so he put me on the phone to say something lawyerly. It's extraordinary how the mind can remain tethered to earth even when the body has long gone.

Everything my friends had told me I remembered, with the heightened sense of crisis: keep going to the toilet, eat ice chips, walk as much as you can, get a birthing room, collect extra pillows, put on two hospital robes.

It was a quiet night, and both birthing rooms were empty.

"Do you want the room overlooking the Chrysler Building or the one facing East, to see the sunrise?" asked Valerie, the nurse assigned to me for the ordeal.

"The sunrise," I answered, because of course we would be there all night, maybe even forever, and the sunrise is so encouraging. The birthing room was attractively decorated, all wood panel, small and intimate, with a couch that converted into a bed for the significant other. In front of The Bed, hanging from the ceiling, was a television screen, and it was playing one of the *Superman* movies.

I took a few steps around the room, and a contraction came, big and round and powerful. It pressed so hard I thought I was going to burst. I gripped onto

the rail at the end of the bed, put my head down, and squeezed my eyes shut. No rules here, no techniques, just survival.

“Why,” I panted to Valerie, “why do I feel as if I’m going to burst?”

“That’s the bag of waters, about to break.”

Dr. Howard walked in “You’re not moving very fast, we may have to break your waters.”

“I just arrived!” I cried. “Just let me be for a while, please?” I pleaded.

Always in a hurry, these professionals: get the memo out, close the file, launch the book, deliver the baby. But this time I was the client and the pace was set by me.

Moshe came in from filling in forms and having some money wrung out of him. The doctor left the room and I paced the floor once more, till the force came that pushed the bag too far and the membranes burst. Relief lasted for about a minute before the soldiers came marching in. I lay on the bed, wound up as tightly as the fetus had been before it decided to emerge. I was utterly possessed, inhabited by the contractions. All over they grabbed me, twisted my every fiber, round and round and round they twisted, and I grabbed the rail in front of me and yelled. A little time, and it started again. “Valerie! Val!” I called, and she came, and rubbed, pounded my back, fought back the demon which devoured me, breathed those rhythmic breaths, and counted the seconds till the end of the contraction.

“Only fifteen, fourteen, thirteen seconds, ten, nine, eight, oh no, here comes another one.” Rolling, one on the other. I lay still on my side, and an apparition appeared, a man in a blue frock and blue shower cap, a pretty young thing.

“My name is Dr. X and I am your anesthetist,” he said.

“Relax, unclasp your fingers, relax between contractions,” Valerie soothed.

“Yes, that’s what they say,” confirmed the pretty young thing. “You should relax between the contractions.”

I looked straight ahead where Superman was taking a swoop around Gotham City, and then turned back to the gentleman at my side.

“I am here to make this process easier for you. I can do a number of things. If a C-section becomes necessary, I will...” and he launched into unintelligible details.

“Valerie!” I called “Vaaaaal.” It was coming again, the demon, and I needed her to fight with me. I held the rails tight and was possessed, departed from this world, yelling or silent.

“It’s ending, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve...”

I ungripped the rails and watched Superman change into Clark Kent, while the man at my side persevered. “On the other hand, I can also perform an epidural. This involves threading a line through your spine and the insertion of some...”

I closed my eyes.

“I think she’s checked out, doctor,” Valerie said.

“Oh, is she deaf as well?” he inquired. “I noticed that her husband wears hearing aids, does she...”

“No doctor, she’s not deaf. She’s checked out.”

It was coming again, it was coming again, it was coming all the time. I couldn’t bear it anymore. I had known pain: continuous dull, aching pain; sharp, wrenching, screeching pain; I had lived with pain all my life. But this pain took the self out of me. I couldn’t maintain consciousness when the contractions reached their peak.

“Moshe,” I breathed slowly to my husband, “Moshe, could you ask the doctor if she could do something for the pain?” He knew that I didn’t want any intervention in the labor, and he hesitated, listened to me yell once more and ran for the doctor.

Dr. Howard walked back in.

“Let me measure you,” she said.

She put her hands in, felt around.

“Ten centimeters,” she announced. “Get the room ready for delivery.”

I had made it! Not a single alien substance had entered my body and I had borne the pain on my own. I was overwhelmed with pride.

“Get your feet onto these,” someone said and they pulled me onto stirrups, while Superman flew over the Empire State, robe streaming majestically behind.

The pretty young gentleman on my left disappeared, and we were just women in the room: Dr. Howard, Valerie, another delivery nurse, and me.

There were a couple of males around the edges: Moshe, God, Superman. But while we did the work they just watched, and wrote the story.

“Okay Viva, BIG BM,” the doctor ordered.

And I pushed. Oh the relief of pushing.

“Harder, big, big BM,” they yelled at me.

I could feel it coming down. Now I could fight the pain, the convulsions moved with me, helped me. Pulling my legs back, squeezing my eyes shut, I pushed and worked and then:

“Viva, put your legs up here,” the nurse ordered me back into the stirrups.

“No, she’s got her own system there, leave her,” the doctor ordered. “Viva, BIG BM.”

Dr. Howard was dressed like a welder in a garage, heavy plastic curved right over her face, gloved, hair capped, not a piece of skin exposed, cutting, pulling, working quickly while the metal was soft.

Three BMs, and out it slivered. Yelling piece of sliver.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor said.

“Is it alive?” I asked, terrified. “Is it alive, is it alive?”

I repeated the question a hundred times. How could my horrible, twisted, malfunctioning body produce something live? How could any being survive those rolling, violent, strangulating contractions? How could anything survive my mad, anxious, hateful, exhausted, bitter pregnancy?

“Yes, she’s alive, why do you keep asking? Can’t you hear her?” the doctor answered, annoyed.

I pushed once again and I got rid of the real devil, that army that had invaded me and eaten me alive, that progesterone-saturated placenta. I was single again, alone, redeemed. I was like Paris in the summer of 1945, released from the noose of her Nazi occupiers.

They gave my daughter to me and I put her on my breast. For one breathtaking second we watched her, and then she sucked, and oh! for this I was born. I turned to Moshe and together we said the blessing for the birth of a girl. Then I turned my face back to watch my piece of divinity, beautiful as the day on which light was separated from darkness.