

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEAT BELTS

I had the best time talking to her. I can't believe that I'm writing all this down, it's gone from a letter, to a series and before I know it, I'll have written a book about her! Something on the order of "great women I have known," only there's only one young woman I knew briefly who lingers with me. I hear her voice and it is a pleasure to return to these letters after long hot days in the clinic, repeat the stories in my mind, to your mind.

What do you suppose the pleasure is in communion? I am sandwiched, in the midst of two perfect communions. The answer I feel is mercurial, I put the finger of my mind near it and it fractures, escapes me. What does it mean to be heard, that someone hears you and recognizes what you are saying? It's tremendous. Tremendously good, tremendously huge, tremendously unusual to be understood. People don't have the patience or the time to listen to the stories of others. Or else people lie, silly lies, but they get in the way, they make understanding mythical. And, of course there is the question of vocabulary. How can people communicate without any common, coherent vocabulary? Math will do as well as English, maybe better. Music works well sometimes and then sex, the universal leveler, the language that we all might understand. If we would. It boggles to think how we are content to babble our way from confusion to confusion.

There is safety in obscurity, or at any rate the illusion of safety. If you don't know the real me then you can't possibly judge me, turn on me, disinherit me, tell me I'm worthless. The risk of hurt is so great between people. I think people much prefer physical pain to emotional confusion. This is how I read Freud. Why I brought the children up the way I did. You know, we haven't spoken of it for a long time, but I've thought about it quite a bit lately. I told Jacqui how, when Maggie was born, it meant so much to both of us at the time, but since then it has grown in importance, the intensity of the experience has had repercussions, has altered how I interpret my life. I have to get a running start into this.

After Josh was born in the hospital, you weren't there, it was awful, they did everything but tie me up to the damn table, my mother was useless, babbling around about her daughter and pain and women dying in childbirth, she was extraordinarily out of control even for her. I had always imagined that underneath her efficient bustling nervy exterior was an hysteric but I can't say I was enjoying being right. I was in labor, my God, it was the first time for me. My mother had never once talked to me about sex. You were my teacher, a good one, but there are things that men don't know, and I had this vast ignorance of my body, of women's bodies. This was not the day of childbirth classes. The pain is not like any period I've ever experienced. It's like pain inside bones. The closest I ever felt was when my back went out. There was no locality to the pain. A

universal and inescapable pain. They gave me a pill that made me floppy and nauseous. The room was spinning. I was longing for the universal pain. Anything was better than disorientation. Labor is inescapable. Pain that screws up your eyes, that has no beginning, no locus, no discernible end. There's an aching itch discomfort between your legs but no pain there. Your back is sore. Pain is generating like an unquenchable Olympic fire. When you have been at sea in storms I have imagined it to be like labor inside out, the craziness around outside you has a source about which you are ignorant. There is no way to alter your circumstances. You must adjust and endure.

I've never seen a painting of a woman in labor. Not a good one. Not a bad one. I've seen lots of paintings of storms at sea, ships attempting to carry on in all kinds of weather. But not a single solitary painting of the way every single one of us came into this world. The gateway to paradise. The premier passage.

There are tons of death pictures. Well, there are. So and so at his deathbed. So and so with other so and so's dying on the battlefield. The crowning moment, pun intended, is not a subject for art? We are ashamed of where we come from, from whence we emerge. How damnable. How peculiar. How wrong. Tons of rape pictures. Rape is more palatable than birth. It isn't that birth is private, no I don't think you can make a case for that. People flood those birthing rooms. They take videos nowadays. Can you imagine? Even in the old, old days there were as many people in the birthing room as attended the death beds. Every member of the family peering into that mysterious chasm from which human life emerges. We take photos. No paintings. No great work of literature to parallel The Death of Ivan Illych, on the beginning of a life. There is an imagination vacuum, an utter blind spot, a blank space. Why?

I am working my way to Maggie's birth. Josh first. The doctor slapped my face. I remember thinking that if you had been there he never would have dreamed of doing such a thing. I can't remember why he was mad, I think I said something clever. He was prodding me. I asked him if all this poking about was absolutely necessary. He retorted something about my lack of female something or other. I forget exactly what I was lacking. I said something about men should keep their pencils in their pockets if they can't handle women. He slapped me.

The nurse was shocked with him. He grabbed me, acted as though I'd gone all hysterical on him. He had to slap me again to make his constructed scenario believable, "Snap out of it, Mrs. What-not" He couldn't remember my name. God, I was so mad at Henry for letting his daughter get married when I needed him to deliver Josh. I forgive Henry though, because that horrid little doctor taught me to trust myself.

Josh, poor little poodle, was delivered by that idiot. I was completely whacked out by those drugs. I woke up alone in a room. I had no idea whether we had a boy or a girl. If it was alive or the unspeakable. If it was healthy. I was in a

holding tank of a room, bare, no buzzer, nothing, grey green walls. I tried looking around for my baby. When I lifted my head, I vomited green slime. A result of the drug, they told me later. There was an aluminum dish provided for my vomit but no note or sign to tell me where my baby was, what it was, how it was, if it was.

I touched my belly to see if there was anything there inside the flab, maybe I hadn't delivered after all. I was dizzy. I lay down looking out the glazed window. All there was to see was a frosty glow. I sang my old nursery songs. I felt sick and sad. I cried.

I know I haven't told you all of this before but I used to feel that it was my fault. I didn't want anyone to know that I botched my son's birth, least of all you.

Finally a nurse came in. She told me we had a boy. My breasts were aching the way the earth must before a quake. I reminded her that I wanted to breast feed him. She tsk-tsked me, gave me some nonsense about women like us don't have to put ourselves through that. I tried not to get in another fight. Time dragged til they brought me to my room and let me have Josh. Then they kept taking him away from me. He had more appointments that day than he has now. Born with a full dance card.

I was so relieved when we got to go home at last. I didn't put him down for days. I carried him everywhere with me. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was so beautiful, a scrunched up version of you. He could be your clone. Sometimes when I watch him with Gloria, I think I am time traveling back, looking at us. He turned out so well from such an horrendous beginning. He's always been very patient with me, as if he remembers, as if he thinks, "Poor ducks, she went through so much for me." He seems at home in complex situations, patient with hypocrisies and bureaucratic institutions.

Elizabeth was easier. First of all, you were here. We had that crazy midwife, remember her? She goes down as one of my top ten mistakes. How could I have trusted her? She was atrocious. You never liked her but I thought that was because she was taller than you. An Amazon. After Josh, that's what I thought I needed, someone who could punch the doctor or sit on him if he went horrid on me. But this time Henry was there and it was the Amazon who went berserk.

It makes me laugh now, at least the beginning, the part where I almost die strikes pause, but the beginning reminds me of that scene in the Marx Brothers movie, in the stateroom, when people keep arriving. How many people did she bring? Twelve? And, we had agreed to feed her people. There you were, taking care of Josh. None of these twelve could be bothered with a child, no. And you cooked for them. Constantly. It was like having a house full of teenage boys. We ran out of toilet paper. It's funny now. Why is it impossible to see these things when you're in them?

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They kept you away from me. They kept us apart so that you didn't know what was going on upstairs. I wonder if they could have done it with you there. I fancy that you would have seen through all of it instantly but I was in this romantic haze of women fending for themselves, returning to the great mysteries of the past, strength in the solidarity of womanhood. Whatever it was, it was not a clear sighted intelligent choice. It was a scene from the all female Satyricon. They had me take off my clothes and walk up and down the hall. It was set up like a relay, with women posted along the route. I was so thirsty. They wouldn't let me drink anything. They touched me a lot. In the south room the Amazon was posted with two others. One had an enormous bottle of baby talc. I'm sure we paid for that. The other had a cloth. The one showered me with powder, the other patted me all over. They all kept saying, like perverted cheerleaders, in a horror film, "Pain. Pain. A woman's life is pain." When my legs got tired and I collapsed, the Amazon got scared and called for you. You were angry. I've never seen you so angry, never. Thank God for your anger.

You made them get me clothes. You put your arms around me. You stroked my head and asked me what was going on. I cried and jerked out that I was thirsty. You told them to get me apple juice with ice. They gave you some lip. Josh was crying. You kept your arms around me. You looked at those lunatics like thunder.

"Take care of the boy," you said. "And get her the juice. Now."

We figured out later that I had walked for two hours naked and barefoot. What was I thinking?

All the juice was gone. There was half and half or water. We laughed. I drank the water. You called them vermin. You called Henry. We went to the hospital with Josh. They gave me something to rest, drained my bladder of about two gallons of urine. You took Josh to your brother's house where he could play with Zach. You were back before I knew you had gone and stayed right there, like the good fellow you are.

Henry came in all bright and shiny. He said "Let's do it." He suggested I squat. He said that always brought him good healthy babies. We got quite silly then, I told you the world was going to hell, and you said great, as long as we're together. I didn't tear. I pushed, Henry pulled. You sat behind me, the supporting role. We were goofy, yelling and cursing, praying and crying, but we did it. She came out just as joyfully as she went in.