

Love is a Let-Down

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Some Lessons from the Storm of New Motherhood

(for Alyssa Polinsky)

I DON'T THINK I JUST IMAGINED HER, THE WOMAN I WAS LEFT ALONE WITH IN the last few minutes before I was taken into surgery. I don't know if she was a nurse, or some kind of technician, but she seemed terribly official, sitting at a table with paperwork while I contemplated the IV needle stuck in my hand.

"Section?" she asked me, and I told her yes.

"What for?"

I said, "The baby's transverse." Lying across my womb, its little bum wedged in at the top and refusing to budge no matter how much I stood on my head, played soothing music into my pelvis, or shone a flashlight into my vagina.

"Well," said the woman at the table, sorting through her papers. "Kids will screw you somehow. If it wasn't that, it would be labour, then they'd grow up to be teenagers. They always find a way."

"But it's all worth it, right?" I asked her.

"No." She put down her papers. "I don't think it is." Then she got up, left through a different door, and I never saw her again.

That night, my newborn daughter sucked colostrum from my nipples until five o'clock in the morning, spending about twenty minutes on one side and then screaming until we placed her on the other. Because my abdomen had been sliced in two just hours

before, I had to lie down to feed her, which required my husband, Stuart, to rise from his bed on a vinyl chair in the corner (a jacket for his blanket), hold the baby while I went through the painful process of turning over, and then he'd place her on my other side, and start the twenty-minute cycle again.

I spent that night imagining various scenarios in which we gave the baby up for adoption. Which has become an amusing-sounding anecdote I pull out now and again, but that night I'd never been so serious, or desperate. If nothing else, I thought, we might sneak out of the hospital without anyone noticing, and go home to resume life as normal. Surely this was a possibility? My daughter was perfect, and beautiful, and I was extraordinarily blessed, but the last point was something I had to keep telling myself. I was exhausted, it hurt to breathe, the baby kept crying, a swaddled bundle of discontent, and her tiny button face was a stranger's.

There were people out there who would have given everything they owned for our good fortune, for this wonderful baby, for the opportunity to be parents. Which was, I thought, all the more reason for us to offer our daughter to them, never mind the nine months we'd spent preparing and waiting, how thrilling it had been to finally meet her. *I'd just never thought it would be like this.* That first night, lying there in my mechanical bed with a baby whose needs I was incapable of meeting, I could only think of one good reason to keep her, no way around it. The only reason we couldn't give the baby up for adoption was that her grandmothers would never forgive us.

I'd just never thought it would be like this: what a spectacular failure of imagination. Though the failure wasn't mine alone—a baby's birth in movies is a cue

for credits to roll; the TV newborn grows into a wise-cracking toddler in the space between episodes; tiny babies in literature are especially rare, or maybe I just hadn't been paying attention to them. Some women have written about new motherhood, in memoirs in particular, and I'd even read these, but their words hadn't registered, I hadn't conceived the weight of it all. The days without sleeping, how time slows down, the world shrinks, the unceasing cries, that unceasing *need*, and being the one person in the world equipped to meet it. All those things you really have to experience to understand, which is another way of saying things you'll have a spectacular failure to imagine.

Such a failure, however, is reasonable, because who would want to imagine it? The enormity of the experience would hardly be lessened by this preparation. People don't make movies about this stuff because nobody would want to watch them. A novel about three days in the life of a new mother would be the longest book in the world. It's no coincidence that it's visual artists who have cornered the market on newborns, their babies being inanimate, quiet, and usually sporting a halo.

I was more miserable than I'd ever been during my first days of motherhood, and by "first days" I really mean about six weeks, and three months, and maybe more than that. And I'm not even talking about postpartum depression. Though no doubt, PPD is a very real affliction, it's also a label that undermines the very simple fact that living with a newborn is, as writer Ariel Gore describes it, "like suddenly getting the world's worst roommate, like having Janis Joplin with a bad hangover and PMS come to stay with you."

When we finally left the hospital, after three days, it was with a great deal of fanfare. The nurses were gathered, waving goodbye. I heard one of them telling

another, “Harriet’s going home now,” the first time I’d ever heard the baby referred to as an autonomous someone. Stuart was laden with everything we’d brought with us, and all the extra we’d acquired since—cards, teddy bears and flowers, a tangle of ribbons attached to a helium bouquet. He was pushing me in a wheelchair, and I held our daughter in my arms. She was wearing a white cap with yellow ducks on it, a sleeper with gender-neutral stripes. The temperature outside was over thirty degrees, but she was wrapped in the thick blanket I’d knit while I was pregnant.

I was crying. For four days the hospital had cradled us, with its climate control and fluorescent lights, fourteen stories up in the sky. And now we were being released into the outside world, into the sunshine glare, the traffic and smog, the towering staircase up to our front door, and no saviour to appear at the press of an alarm bell. We were taking the baby away from the only home she’d ever known.

The elevator was crowded but stopped partway down to let on another passenger. She looked down at me (admiringly, I imagined), at the tiny baby sleeping in my arms, but then she hinged at her hips, yanked the knitted blanket over my knees. I was wearing a sundress, the first time I’d worn clothing in days. She spoke to me in that tone reserved only for small children or people in wheelchairs. “Oh, honey,” she said. “You’ve got your legs wide open. You don’t want to go showing that to everybody, do you?”

Downstairs, I waited in the lobby while my husband went to get the car. I can’t remember now if the baby was sleeping or awake, but I remember her solid shape tucked in my arms, the still-strangeness of her funny little face. The outside doors kept sliding open, and I could feel a thick layer of heat in the air.

The crowd was big-city typical—someone brought in by the police after a fight, homeless people bunched down in vinyl chairs for the afternoon, various

people chatting to themselves, a crying teenage girl with make-up running down her face, and someone else who kept laughing at nothing.

I whispered to the baby, “Don’t worry. Not everybody is schizophrenic.” I thought it was kind of funny.

A woman sitting across from me was staring. “You’ve got a beautiful baby,” she said. “Boy or girl?” and I answered her friendly inquiries until my husband arrived.

She didn’t notice when I said good-bye though, too busy talking to the empty chair beside her. “It’s a girl,” she was saying. “Her name is Harriet. She was born on Tuesday. On Tuesday, I said. It was a cesarean. She’s going home now. Her name’s Harriet.”

Motherhood is a storm, a seizure: It is like weather. Nights of high wind followed by calm mornings of dense fog or brilliant sunshine that gives way to tropical rain or blinding snow. Jane Louise and Edie found themselves swept away, cast ashore, washed overboard. It was hard to keep anything straight. The days seemed to congeal like rubber cement, although moments stood out in clearest, starkest brilliance. You might string those together on the charm bracelet of your memory if you could keep your eyes open long enough to remember anything.

—Laurie Colwin, from *A Big Storm Knocked It Over*

In her wonderful memoir *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*, Rachel Cusk writes about how reading is different after her daughter is born: “Like someone visiting old haunts after an absence I read books that I have read before, books that I love, and when I do I find them changed: they give the impression of having contained all along everything that I have gone away to learn.” Of course, I didn’t understand this until I experienced it myself, the first time when I reread

Laurie Colwin's novel in the days after Harriet's birth and discovered the one paragraph that finally articulated to me the truth about new motherhood.

The paragraph doesn't say it all, however. Laurie Colwin was a writer whose touch was agonizingly light, and she shied away from the eye of the storm, or maybe my point is that everybody skirts the issue. Although motherhood is a storm that passes, fleetingness is little consolation before the passing is done. When it's still not clear whether it's a storm or whether your life has just descended into an all-enveloping hell. When it seems as though your entire universe has exploded, probably because it has.

I want to write it down though, how it was, because most people don't ever talk about this. They don't talk about it because it passes, and because of what you get to show for it, and because if everybody told the truth, pregnant women would start jumping in front of buses in droves. And also because this truth is not everybody's—writer Katie Roiphe published an article called “My Newborn Is Like a Narcotic.” But for those of us whose personalities are less addictive, the narrative of new motherhood is remarkably different from the standard.

Standing out moment, in clearest starkest brilliance # 1: That walk we took in the hospital, halfway down the corridor to the “Hey Diddle-Diddle” mural—it was the farthest we'd ever been. And then we had to stop because I was exhausted, my incision ached. “Hey Diddle-Diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. The little dog laughed to see such sport, and the dish ran away with the spoon.” It was Harriet's first nursery rhyme. “And the thing about Harriet,” I said to my husband, “is that she's so little that she doesn't even realize that fleeing cutlery is something unusual.”

I was crying.

The understatement to end all understatements, during this time in which everything had been an understatement, was that I would find myself “a little weepy” when my milk came in. I'd had the impression that weeping would be purely physical, that tears would simply roll down my face and I'd look on, somehow removed from the experience. I hadn't counted on full body-racking sobs, and that with each one, I'd feel the emotion so intensely. That all these feelings would be brutally real, and somehow worse for having no point of origin, for their aimless churning. It was impossible to articulate what exactly was wrong, partly because everything was wrong, but also because it was nothing, and the feelings were pummeling me over and over again.

I cried the day after we left the hospital, when Stuart and I went for a walk and we only made it to the end of the driveway. I cried because our daughter was so wonderful, it was unfathomable, and because I loved Stuart so terribly, and now I'd gone and destroyed our life. I was dreadfully sorry about that. Then I cried because I couldn't help it, and the sky was so blue, the trees were so green, and the entire universe was such a miracle—what a gift to be here. And also because I kind of wished I was dead.

I cried at the space the new baby had made in my life, how she'd managed to overwhelm everything else, and how I hadn't ever realized what I was lacking before. Maybe because I hadn't been lacking anything. And I also cried because now I knew that if anything ever happened to her, it would destroy me, a new vulnerability that was terrifying to consider, and then when I was finished crying about that, I cried at “anything ever happening to her” in the most benign way, that life was hard and I wouldn't always be able to protect her.

I wasn't the only one who cried. Harriet cried too, a

lot, though later we discovered this was mostly because of gas. Stuart cried a couple of times, during those rare instances in which he had neither hysterical wife nor hysterical child to comfort, when it would suddenly dawn on him that he couldn't take it anymore.

Once Stuart went back to work, the baby and I spent much of our time crying together. I cried because the breastfeeding consultant told me to spend my days on the couch watching Oprah and Doctor Phil. I cried because I wanted to walk out of the house and never come back, and I cried because I knew I never could. I cried because the baby had been up all night, and was still going come the morning, and it seemed that administering to pure, insatiable need (for what, though?) was going to be the rest of my life.

I thought that if I wailed with the windows wide open, somebody might come along and take her away from me. One day when I was crying and thought things couldn't get any worse, the baby threw up in my mouth and I had it confirmed that whenever you think you've come to know the baby, she will always turn around and surprise you.

Standing out moment, in clearest, starkest brilliance #2: Setting the alarm clock all night long, to get the baby fed every three hours. CBC radio when the world is asleep featuring programs by international public broadcasters. Listening to Sweden, Australia, The Netherlands, and Britain. I don't remember the content of any of these shows, but I remember the company of their voices, the accents which confirmed that there was life out there while we three were cloistered in our bedroom whose four walls were the whole world, which seemed room enough, but how amazing were those messages from the farthest reaches of outer-space.

I was crying, but this wasn't unusual. And though it was sort of unusual that the baby was nursing properly, she was only doing it because somebody was watching. When she breastfed unobserved, she'd either fall asleep or start screaming, but with someone looking on (and particularly someone who was trying to determine why exactly our daughter had lost 11 percent of her body weight), the baby latched on and sucked away like a champion.

Here's something I'd spectacularly failed to imagine: when eight pounds is your entire mass, every bit of every ounce is extremely important. It can be a matter of life and death, though we were fortunate to get only so desperate that ours was a matter of life or lethargy. Harriet had lost so much weight that she was too tired to feed, a vicious cycle we had to counter by stripping her down to her diaper and shocking her with dripping, cold washcloths, by supplementing her breast milk with formula, by feeding her through a narrow tube attached to a syringe so as not to put her off the breast altogether with "nipple confusion."

My milk had come in, in the way that I'd thought that the weeping would, pure physiology. Except that it wasn't entirely, because it was the milk that had me weeping, but the connections between all things weren't yet apparent. During my pregnancy, I'd feared that I'd have no milk at all; how could my body know how to do it? But it did, amazingly, without even consulting with my mind, the great micro-manager. My milk was even plentiful—people kept squeezing my breasts and telling me so.

The baby was feeding now, displaying that fantastic latch that had tricked everybody in the hospital into thinking we were doing just fine. I was sitting in my living room, the window shutting out the fine spring day because there was a breeze and we were concerned about the baby getting a chill. The midwife was crouching before me, slightly adjusting our

position—my hand on the back of her neck, the angle of her mouth on my nipple. I could feel the sucking, a gentle tug-tug that pulled deep inside of me, and from the way her jaw moved I could see she was swallowing.

The problem, however, was that she would stop. Her mouth remaining at the same angle, me still holding her head as taught, but the movement of her jaw was different, smaller. I could feel the tug-tug still, which was the tricky thing, but this was her sucking for sucking's sake, for pure comfort, rather than for the sustenance that was so important now.

“So, you’ve got to wake her up,” said the midwife. “Start again, and keep going. Breastfeeding takes patience.”

Harriet gained her first half-ounce when she was four days-old, this confirmed by that midwife weighing her in a sling scale. And when she peed through the sling’s fabric and onto our bed, it was a further sign of an upswing: confirmation of hydration! I duly recorded the incident in the log I was keeping of all the baby’s outputs, a log I would keep for nearly three weeks. These were the details that consumed me, the difference between green shit and yellow shit, or whether a wet diaper could be classified as “heavy.” The daily tallies I kept of wet and dirty diapers, which got confusing when one day leaked right into another, but the days were like that then, borderless, giving the impression that time had ceased to exist. And then the clock would tick over.

The sun came up and the sun went down, not that it made any difference to us.

Standing out moment, in clearest, starkest, brilliance #3: When Harriet spits up onto her burp pad, and the stain has a reddish tinge. We could almost ignore it, because it was easier, and then she spit up again, undeniably

blood. The rush to the emergency room, waiting in an enormous queue behind a man whose daughter has apparently been barking like a seal since November (and, do note, now it’s June). I’m crying, clutching my five-day old daughter. I imagine that she’s dying, that this is what you get when you wish you’d never had a baby in the first place. I know that she’s singularly beautiful, that I’m undeserving of her, and the sadness I feel at her deprivation of true maternal love makes me cry even harder.

We get to bypass the queue, walk through corridors of visibly ill children and infants stretched out on gurneys, their anguished parents. Because Harriet is so small and the hospital is rife with disease, we are quickly ushered into a room with a door, a doctor comes to us quickly.

The doctor diagnoses a cracked nipple: Harriet has been drinking my blood. I didn’t even know it was cracked, but these things can happen deep under the surface. But the doctor wants to be sure, to get a second opinion. Two more doctors come in to examine her that night, pressing carefully on her tiny belly, working around her tender umbilical stump. Our case is easy; we’re a brief holiday from awful. The doctors tell us our baby is beautiful.

We leave the hospital at three in the morning, the corridors still lined with the children we’d passed on our way in. We’ve just been given a glimpse into the darkest places life can take us, and then we are lucky enough to turn around and come back out again.

It was the cards that killed me, they really did, though I’m grateful that people were thinking of us, that we were connected to so many who cared. We had the cards lined up all along the windowsill, three or four deep. The messages inside them were heartfelt and so comforting, scrawled in all manner of hands,

from friends and family, from people we hardly knew. But it was their outsides I had a problem with, their candy-floss tones and insipid greetings. *The softest little cuddles/ and the sweetest/ dreams-come-true,/ The warmest hugs/ and love to share—/ your baby girl/ and you!*

I began to think that sympathy cards might have been more appropriate—“We are thinking of you at this difficult time.” In fact, that very sentiment delivered me a great deal of comfort. The friend who said, “You know, it’s natural to grieve for the life you had before.” Another who told me, “I remember how hard it was, and the worst part is that *I’d thought I would be good at it.*” Someone else said, “They’re dark days, the early ones,” and I wondered why the cards were so incongruous. Why they kept mocking me with lines like, *A baby girl! You must be over the moon.*

When the baby was about two weeks old, I ran into a woman who’d been in my prenatal yoga class. Her due date had been close to mine, our daughters born a week apart. I was out buying baby wipes, wearing jeans and a warm fleecy jacket, even though the temperature was in the high-twenties. I kept doing that, forgetting it was nearly summer, forgetting the world until I went outside and it surprised me. My attire was the least remarkable feature of my appearance, however. My pallor was ghostly, my eyes ringed with blue.

“So, you did it,” she said to me, and we wished one another congratulations. It felt strange to be there, on the other side, like we shared a few secrets we didn’t want to talk about now.

But I did want to talk about it. “It’s so hard,” I answered when she asked me how I was doing. “We’re still trying to figure out the difference between day and night, and I’m so tired. I never thought it would be like this, but I guess you know how it is.”

“Well, not really,” said the woman, who was dressed

for the weather. “We’re doing pretty well, having fun together. It’s pretty great, actually. I don’t know if I’ve ever been so in love in my life.”

Standing out moment, in clearest, starkest brilliance #4: When we start walking in the evening, which is the time when Harriet cries. We usually walk in the direction of ice cream, which delivers me enormous comfort during this time of need. As does the setting sun, the summer evening, the mild temperature, the fresh air as I breathe it deep, and the comfort of my husband’s hand in mine. He’s wearing the baby on his chest, and she’s asleep, tucked in so snugly against him. We walk the neighbourhood in circles, part of a parade of families in similar arrangement. I used to see them before I had a baby, looking on admiringly at their quiet containment, and it is ironic now to think that they’d been my inspiration. I’d missed the point of them so entirely.

But there was a great sense of comradeship between us. One night, we walked past one couple whose desperate expressions were like looking into a mirror.

“Good luck, tonight,” I told them.

“Thanks. How old’s yours?”

“Four weeks. You?”

“Six.”

“I’ve heard it gets easy at six.”

“Hmm, no.”

“Oh.”

“We passed a couple back there though, two weeks. They were totally shell-shocked.”

“Two weeks.”

“I know.”

“I could never go back there.”

But we wouldn’t have to, and right now the babies are sleeping. A moment of reprieve, as we soldier on our separate ways. We had the summer breeze, and the

ice cream cones, and the sidewalks before us stretched on until sunset.

I never felt my let-down, when the baby latches onto the breast and the milk begins to flow. In some ways, I am lucky because for many women let-down can be inordinately painful. (And this is one of the many ways in which I'm lucky, I realize. Having struggled so much without any problems, I wonder how badly I might have fallen apart had something actually gone wrong). I worried about it though, that it might mean the milk wasn't coming. When your child has lost 11 percent of its body weight, that kind of anxiety lingers.

A quick internet search would reveal my experience as normal, however—the physical symptoms of pregnancy and motherhood are all remarkable in their failure to conform to generalizations. Harriet was getting enough to eat, as attested by my daily tallies (since abandoned) and the weight she was now gaining at a steady pace. I'd even become savvy at detecting when she was eating or simply soothing, and therefore I could get feedings down to twenty minutes at a time. I figured out how to hold a book so I could read during those twenty minutes. The pacifier had become my friend, helping Harriet sleep, and I'd learned that she slept best beside me, her fist wrapped around my little finger.

Things never got easy, but they became *easier*. Some time between three and six weeks, I stopped crying every day. There began to be mornings again, though I was usually still exhausted when they found me. Moments standing out in clearest, starkest brilliance started to be strung closer together.

That I was thinking this was the denouement, however, demonstrates precisely what was wrong with my approach to everything—neither pregnancy nor motherhood was an end in itself, and the story would have no conclusion, not for a long, long time.

There remained the question of love. *I mean, of course I love the baby, but.* Which was a phrase I'd kept saying though the reservation made me uneasy. Wasn't I supposed to be "over the moon"? I wondered if my c-section had been the problem—if I'd given birth to her naturally, would I have never been so in love in my life? Would I have been writing articles entitled, "My newborn is like a narcotic." Or was I simply cold and heartless, *Mommie Dearest*, Susan Smith. And how much had I compromised my child's development by failing to give her the love she was entitled to by virtue of existing?

But love is a let-down, I realized, as the weeks went on, and we started measuring the baby's life in months. Love, though I couldn't even feel it, had been there beneath the surface all along, doing its job. Love was me not walking out of the house and never coming back. It was throwing out the bathwater but not the baby. And it was persevering through two hour nursing sessions twelve times a day. It was holding her when she cried, even if I was crying too; it was keeping her clean and warm, having her sleep on my chest and learning ingenious ways to provide her with comfort, desperation being the true mother of invention.

In those terrible early congealing days, love was *doing*, instead of feeling. And sometimes it wasn't worth it, but sometimes it was, and then (though this is far from the point) one day I noticed that the storm had been over for a while.