Ages of Her

By Shira Nayman

Illustration by Melanie Luther

It's a memory-like dream, almost hallucinogenic, and it hits me with distressing frequency. Like a sore in the mouth you can't keep your tongue away from, you probe and prod and it flares with a strange pain-relief you want to intensify and avoid at the same time. I'm at the end of a very long labor; the battle is almost over. The extraordinary pain, the feeling that I'm being ripped in two, because I am.

Stifling the screams, hanging onto that strange thing we called dignity back when I lived in a physical world that hadn't known the ineffable, unbearable, utterly natural cosmology of childbirth. The earth is being wrenched open as am I, the universe turned to gaping agony. And then, I open my eyes: the smiling face of my young doctor. *It's a girl*, she says, handing my baby to me. I reach out across the ages, across the full sweep of humanity, countless millions, a woman reaching for her child, and then, the first touch. Flesh on flesh. My flesh on my flesh, her flesh on her flesh, the two of us one, reunited after that timeless tearing apart. Together again, at last.

I look down. Strangely blinking eyes, blinking through a white coating, a coating that came from her that came from me, the flashing, between blinks, of the impossible: eyes that have never before seen, eyes that are seeing for the first time, eyes whose first glimpse of the world is the world that is Mother, the world that is me.

Words leak from my lips, from my soul; they come from deep inside. *My baby*, I say again and again, naming her, naming me anew—now, I am Mother—and for the first time, and from the deepest part of both the universe and me. *My baby* is all I can feel, all I can say.

From that day until this day, more than 18 years later, my life has been that joyous, hair-raising, life-affirming roller-coaster ride of par-

enthood. The oneness of me became a twoness that day, as sure as my body was wrenched open to birth my child. It was a splitting of the self that was at the same time a strange unifying, a finding of oneself in something bigger, more complete. It is what the old-fashioned expression attempts to make sense of: *she had a baby, she's so fulfilled.* Something my mother used to say about women who'd had babies. Fulfilled. No longer empty. Ever full, filled. Oneness. The whole.

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It only hit me at my daughter's high school graduation, it really was going to happen: my daughter was going to leave for college. From that day on, throughout the summer, a strange *thing* would happen. I'd be in the middle of something—dealing with a work issue, taking care of paperwork, cooking dinner or drying the dishes or out doing errands—and a great roiling of emotion would overcome me and just about knock me down. Nothing that words could hang onto. A furious hurricane, black clouds swooping in, the deafening roar of a thunderclap that left me feeling sick. I'd double over, grip onto something, on occasion fall to my knees. My head would hang and a great, silent sob would grip my throat but no sound, just a sudden inability to breathe. I'd struggle to draw in breath, in that panic I remember from childhood when a rough game left me winded. Wanting to cry or call out but unable to breathe, unable to make any sound at all. And then, a terrible sound might come out as I would sink to my knees, my head hanging ever lower. A squeezed, desperate grating, like metal being dragged across a stone floor, and then a thin layer or air squeezed into it, breathy and high-pitched, like those sounds only audible to animals. The sound of an animal that knows its wounds will not heal, that knows there is no tending or succor, aware that existence is leaking out, sensing, in fact, that it is over.

It all sounds so melodramatic, but it's an utterly solitary feeling. No one to hear it, no one to know it, alone in a cell, four walls, no windows, alone in the knowledge that that double birth—baby and mother coming into the world anew at the same time—has somehow been undone. The *two*, slammed back to a new kind of one, but diminished. The new configuration, then, not one, but a half. An axe brought down to split the thing in two. The god-awful sound of the wrenching, the creak in that silent, empty forest, as the thing that was *you* teeters and then crashes to the ground.

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My daughter couldn't bring herself to pack up her room. She was busy, never the right time, never a moment to spare. I understood I would not see much of her that summer—prom, graduation, work, and of course, friends. Friends: that little parliament of her own—not twoness-as-one, as it had been for me with her, but becoming-in-many, each of them an indispensable jeweled piece in the kaleidoscopic whole as they all reached for a new sense of identity, new ways of being. So there I was at home, alone, through much of the summer. My husband and 13 son off on their own adventure, beginning the year away we'd long planned in a South American country. There I was, packing up the apartment we were going to rent out, keeping up with work, taking care of the endless business involved in moving one's life abroad. Every now and then, I'd half-heartedly ask my daughter when she planned to pack up her room. Four years of high school crammed into her oversized space, four years of notebooks and keepsakes and clothing (actually, more like six or eight years, as middle school had also been preserved). *Soon, Mama, I'll get to it soon.* I think she and I both knew she wouldn't get to it at all, nor would she find a way to help me pack up any of the rest of the place. I slogged through every other room in the house, every closet, every drawer, dismantling our lives, making endless discard piles that went into several categories—giveaway to relatives or friends, giveaway to charity, put out on the street, throwaway. Other piles—long-term storage, short-term storage, storage at my husband's sister's, storage at my husband's office in New Jersey. Every night after work, all weekend long, my life reduced to piles, to sifting through endless bits and pieces, swallowing the panicked, irrational feeling that it would never end, that my life would forever be this Sisyphean purgatory of the dismantling—an unending sorting through of the petty remains of my precious, child-rearing years. Somehow, I limped to the end of it and then there it was, staring me in the face:

My daughter's room.

This time the sorting, the pile-making, took place as if in a swimming pool, everything filtered through tears I couldn't control, tears that would flood the minute I set foot in her room.

I did it all. The *go to college* pile was the hardest. The pile that would have none of me in it, the pile that signaled the sundering. The place away. The self away. The cleaved me that filled the room with the silent tree-falling-in-the-forest that no one could hear.

Finally, I found myself zombie-like, four in the morning, wandering around the empty house. Our lives sorted out, packed up in a surprisingly small number of boxes and vacuum-sealed bags, the rest discarded, gone, finished, over. My daughter was, of course, out with her friends, making brief text appearances from afar—trying to get a cab, getting in a cab, en route to a friend's house to sleep. Me checking in, keeping tabs, as I had through four years of high school, knowing full well that even this texting-update-connection was over, pointless, as soon as she'd be there, in that mythical place we'd talked about in the abstract for such a long time, it seemed, college, which had always had an oddly sedately thrilling sound but was never really real. More an idea we had fun playing with, a supposed striving towards, but nothing really serious, not really. Just another game played with my kid, if a somewhat grown-up game. She humored me, knowing we both knew this kind of thing—keeping me up on her movements—was about to end once and for all.

The drop-off was awful, at least for me. Okay, I think, for my daughter. It probably went down the way that was best for her, that made it easy to stomach, or at least bearable. I won't go into it. I'll only say that none of the special moments I'd imagined and planned on happened. It was all a frenzied rush. Just me, as the other half of the family was still in South America since our son had started school. No time for anything, the quickest, most hurried of goodbyes. The heavens decided to open in a deluge, the worst I'd ever encountered. I drove home terrified; I had no choice but to brave the treacherous roads as I had an appointment the next morning having to do with my passport that could not be missed. A five-hour drive took eight. I battled a crippling migraine the whole way, at times barely able to open my eyes through the blinding pain. I tried a few times to pull off the road and find a hotel, but there was none to be had—none within ten miles, according to my iPhone GPS. And my iPhone was fast running out of juice.

Well, no more on that.

And now. Two months into this new order. It still comes at me, this half-

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dream memory of my daughter's birth that I cling to, that is both agonizing and a comfort. The years flash before me, cycling through: all the ages of her, the little baby, the toddler, the young child and so on, back and forth, scary little existential leap-frogs through time, blurry images of me as well, the young mother, so young. How different I looked, how different I must look now to her, in her memory I am that young mother; not much older in fact than she is now. I close my eyes, feel that extraordinary fullness of the twoness-one of me, that fulfillment, that me that is no longer, that I ache for, that can never be reunified, that can never be made to be upright and whole and pumping solid with sap. I double over, that awful, wide-mouthed silent shriek takes hold and I give into it, feel the pain, hold onto it, and struggle. And then I stand up, wash my face or take a bath or try to do some yoga and remind myself of—what? Of the fact that this is simply how it is. I listen to everyone else putting a good face on it—my boss's wife—*I love the relationships I have with my adult children*, and the like. All true, all very well and good, but I know in my heart the other truth, that something very beautiful, that something I built my world and self and life around, is over. Other things are there, it is true, but no longer that. The young-children-family, the all-of-us being and growing, the wonder, the endless daily joys. I can't put a good face on it; I don't want to. I can only move through it and wait to see what happens next. ■

Author's Note: Ten months later, I am delighted to see how my daughter has taken flight in her new, almost-adult life, aware that the increasing mother-daughter separation is right and good. I also nurse an ongoing sense of loss as I think back to those young-children days, when our family lived in a shining bubble of visceral togetherness, our identities more wholly interwoven. At the same time, I see more clearly that life's natural order involves family connections that shift in nature and intensity and yet remain, nevertheless, enduring, inviolable, and filled with meaning.