

Maja Lucas

Mother

A Story of Blood

Translated from the Danish by Steve Schein

The girl is born in March. The birth is induced when the mother is two weeks overdue. She is given a pill with hormones designed to ripen the womb. The father comes straight from work. They walk home hand in hand, set their bags in the hall and go to a café. The pains set in as they're eating. At first she thinks it's a draft coming through the door. It feels like a piercing coldness in the small of her back. A bit later she realizes what it is. Gradually the contractions become more pronounced, more frequent. When they go home, she lies down in her bed and switches her phone to silent mode. She dozes off, can't really sleep, she writes down the intervals between contractions on a piece of paper. At some point she notices her mother has called. She gives the phone to the father and asks him to call her back. It's the first time she has entrusted him with her phone. They call the hospital a number of times and are finally told to come in. They take a taxi, she doubles up repeatedly along the way, clinging to the armrest. In the corridor to the maternity ward she has to stop and lean on a windowsill. A man in a black coat comes over, ignoring the father, and asks if she needs help. *They're just labor pains*, she tells him. The man steps away without saying a word. In the maternity ward the midwife pricks a hole in her fetal membrane and lays a large sanitary pad inside her panties. They are given a little room to wait in. The only thing in the room is a bed without bedclothes. She lies down on it. The father brings in a chair from the waiting room and sits down next to her. The contractions grow stronger and stronger. Until now she has rarely experienced physical pain. Until now she has regarded pain as something abstract, like some kind of mental trial. Especially birth pains, which have no malignant origin. Now, however, she realizes mental pain is an intimation of physical pain, that mental pain is a metaphor. Real pain is inside her now, pain she will do her utmost to

avoid. Her hips are narrow, she has never felt suited to give birth, even though the doctor has assured her there is nothing wrong with her physique. Now she imagines the child ripping her open.

A delivery room is made ready. Immediately the mother asks for a spinal block. The midwife looks surprised but gets hold of a doctor who gives her one. The girl's vital functions are monitored by a machine, her heartbeat registering a slight and steady rise on the screen. The father's eyes are glued to the curve. Now and then he comes over to the mother, wanting to hold her hand, but she asks him to go away. His touch makes her nauseous. The block has lessened the contractions, but they can still be felt as a nagging pain, a kind of recurrent cramp. After a while she notices she's falling asleep in the intervals.

The second-stage contractions begin early the next morning. The spinal block is discontinued. The mother is exhausted. It feels like she has overextended herself, as though all her limits have been transgressed. She doesn't know what is keeping her from asking for a C-section, maybe the possibility of complications. She wishes she could vanish from the ward. She regrets having wanted a child, regrets the relationship that led to the child. She wants to return to her solitary existence without a man, wants to be entirely herself. Suddenly she feels an overwhelming urge to evacuate. Shit sprays out of her, out onto the midwife, who dries it off, unperturbed, and asks her to press again. The girl's head thrusts out. The mother looks at the ceiling, trying now to stop pressing, as the midwife is asking her, but she can't help it. She gets a glimpse of a shoulder. Finally she has the girl up to her, a greasy, squalling clump. She lies between her breasts, showing no interest in them. The mother feels nothing, but tries to smile because the father is taking a picture. After that, he cuts the umbilical cord. Then the midwife asks her to press out the placenta, but she has no strength left. She sees black spots before her eyes, her breathing is getting faster and faster. The midwife calls for a doctor. She weighs the girl and hands her over to the father, asking him to take off his shirt in order to give the girl skin contact. The father looks scared and sits completely

still with her against his chest. The doctor and midwife wheel the mother into an operating room and apply the block once more. The mother doesn't look at them, doesn't look at herself, feels nothing. They tell her she has been bleeding, that she still is. They give her some injections and an IV drip. When she comes back to the maternity ward, she has a strange wound on her arm. It looks like she has been branded. The doctor says she is lucky to be at a hospital, else she would have died of blood loss. The midwife puts a cap and linen diaper on the girl and lays her in bed with the mother. They are wheeled up to the ward for a breakfast of toast and juice. A flag is standing next to her plate. The mother drinks the father's juice and gets more, drinks and drinks.

The girl sleeps, but neither the father nor mother are able. They lie squeezed together in the hospital bed. The father's face is pale. He has the girl lying on his chest, the tiny hand holding onto his forefinger. After some hours he calls his mother and asks her to call around. His parents come, then hers, their brothers and sisters, the niece. Their folding table fills up with flowers and chocolate. The mother has no appetite but drinks incessantly, has a pitcher of juice brought in regularly. The girl awakens in the afternoon and begins to cry. She has had her first bowel movement, a black, sludgy mass. The nurse changes her with the mother and father looking on. They don't know how to apply the diaper, they are afraid of doing the little body harm. Afterwards the nurse urges the mother to nurse the girl. It doesn't feel like there is milk in her breasts, but when she lays the girl to the one, a yellow substance trickles from the other. She gets a little from both breasts and then falls asleep. The mother places her carefully in the hospital's plastic cradle, a kind of aquarium on wheels.

In the evening, the father is sent home. There is no bed for him. The mother hardly dares go to the toilet, fearing that the girl will start crying. She is unable to cope with the thought of what will happen when the girl wakes up. Especially when nighttime

falls. She's afraid the girl will wake up the others on the ward, that her own incompetence will awaken them, the three other women and their three newborn. It feels like a thorn in her flesh to show consideration for the others, especially since the other women must be just as exhausted as she is. She dozes, can't really sleep. She worries whether the girl is breathing, even though the cradle is right next to her bed. She takes her up and lays her on her pillow, but this doesn't help her sleep. In the middle of the night, the girl begins to cry. The mother takes her in her arms and rocks her, walks out to the changing room with her. She changes the diaper, tries laying her to her breast, but the girl turns her head away after a few sucks and continues crying. The mother calls for the nurse, asks her what to do. The nurse fetches a nipple shield and suggests she try again, taking hold of her breast in order to help, for a moment the mother distinctly feels the stranger's hands against her skin. But it doesn't work, the girl refuses. The nurse is called to another ward. Suddenly the mother says *Come here* and lifts the girl up so they're touching noses. It's the first time she is speaking directly to her. Her experience with babies is limited. She has babysat her niece a few times, equipped with mashed bananas and baby bottle, but the niece was older and the ultimate responsibility was with the parents. This is what strikes her in the current situation, that she is the final authority. It's not the hospital and the nurses. Even the father is sidelined in relation to her. It's her responsibility, her fault, her milk, her child. It occurs to her she has never previously felt a responsibility, that previously her conduct has been unreal, excusable. Now she is no longer her parents' child, she is her child's parent.

The following morning she insists on coming home, even though the doctor recommends she stay. They check her blood count, examine the girl, then allow them to leave, though they're asked to come back the next day for blood tests. At home the girl sleeps almost constantly, but they have had impressed on them the necessity of her

being nursed every three hours, throughout the night as well. This seems absurd to the mother, but she can't get herself to defy the doctor's order. On the first night she tries to sleep on the sofa while the father sleeps with the girl in their double bed. They both set an alarm clock to the feeding time, but each time the mother is wide-awake half an hour early. The next night she moves into the bedroom, but also sleeps poorly there, listening for the girl's breathing. After a few days, when the father begins going for walks with the baby carriage, the mother is still anxious, even though she is close to passing out from fatigue. She feels he is doing her a favor when he looks after the girl. She feels she owes him something. She feels that at least she should wash the dishes, go down with the trash. She's so desperate to find some kind of refuge that she denies herself one because she assumes he feels the same way. They have never been as dependent on each other as they are now, but it seems they are less and less on the same wavelength. She bleeds, sends him out to buy sanitary napkins, he comes home with panty-liners. She takes iron pills, eats raisins, drinks juice. It feels as if there is a barrier between her skin and the air. She sees black spots before her eyes when she speaks with someone. A week after the birth they attend a family gathering. The girl sleeps through it all, interrupted by only two breast feedings. The mother checks in on her every five minutes. She is in mortal fear of cot death. Not so much because it would mean losing the girl, she thinks, but rather the impossible amount of effort it would take to give birth again. She wouldn't be able work up the desire to try. It's her maternal instinct that is weak. If she doesn't constantly exert herself, it disappears.

The girl feels like an illness that needs to be overcome. The mother sits on the sofa, breast-feeding, gazing out the window at the drifting clouds. She knows that in a year and a half everything will be different. Almost no matter what she does, the girl will have learned to walk, will have uttered her first words. It's a matter of making time pass, like waiting out a case of the flu. On the one hand the mother is completely relaxed, feels

like the clouds, with no other purpose than nature's, the milk that spurts from her breast. She feels free in a way she never has before. Free, perhaps, from the expectation of others. On the other hand she is enraged by the obligations of childcare. She cannot bear the thought of one more week in this current rhythm, all the nighttime awakenings and long nursing sessions. She cannot stand being merely a body, a function, a mother animal. A cloud.

Still, the girl seems uncommonly beautiful to her. Other babies are shapeless lumps with chubby cheeks, but the girl seems much more completed. Her facial expression is aristocratic. Her black, unruly hair is soft as down. Her round head has an animal appeal to the mother. She is overwhelmed with awe by this being she been given custody of. Then the milk surges out of her again, she clearly senses the draining reflex. She wonders whether it's the same as an ejaculation feels for men.

The father has decided to paint the hallway during his paternity leave. He drives off and buys materials, is up on a ladder for days, painting from morning to evening. The mother is furious that he's spending his energy in this way. She feels he's escaping closeness with the girl, but she can't bring herself to say it because she would be accusing him of being like her, seeking to avoid the girl. Their both being home makes it possible to distance themselves from the girl. In principle, one of them could be drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper while the other held the girl, changed her, talked to her, laid her in the cradle. It enrages the mother that the possibility for normality exists, that someone could lift from her shoulders the burden of the girl. The father is sitting in the living room listening to music when she goes to bed at 8 o'clock, dead tired. Now and then she imagines her throat being cut. She doesn't know where the notion comes from, it just does. There is no pain connected with it, just the image of blood pouring out. Perhaps it's a dream about becoming incapacitated, the longing to disappear. It's not her child she longs to harm, it's herself. When she thinks

about it rationally, she hesitates. There would be no going back. Never before has she been unable to walk away from a problem. She becomes painfully aware that her strategy has always been to pull out of situations, avoid involvement. She is extremely unaccustomed to having someone so close all the time. She has actually gotten used to a lot by now. She accepts the girl sleeping right up against her, accepts that she wishes to be with her almost constantly. The visiting nurse says it is they, the parents, who decide, but it doesn't feel like it. The girl seems like a force to be obeyed unconditionally. The mother is constantly afraid of causing her distress.

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Seeing photos of the girl fills her with the warmest and most loving of feelings. Especially when the girl has a pacifier in her mouth. She finds this odd, but then figures it's because the pacifier keeps the girl from screaming. And that she is put at ease by something other than her, is comforted by something other than her. The mother is ashamed of this idealized kind of love, which she regards as being sentimental, hypocritical. She's ashamed of not being better able to enjoy the girl in real life, that a medium is needed, some kind of interpolation between them. She wonders whether she should never have had children. At the same time she realizes it's probably normal to feel this way and that many others would long ago have availed themselves of all kinds of pacification strategies, like the TV and iPad. But this doesn't appeal to her, she wants to face reality, her defeat, head-on.

The girl is a restless being, an attentive, curious child. She is capable of staying awake for a long time, especially when she is not in familiar surroundings. When it's time to sleep, they almost always lay her in the baby carriage, but even there it doesn't always work.

They walk up and down the streets with her, making sure to push the pram over cobblestones, which has a soporific effect. Even then she might scream and refuse to fall asleep. The mother can control her emotions when the father is along, but when alone with the girl she might yell *Shut your fucking mouth*. And she often cries herself. People they pass on the street look the other way with rigid faces.

On the other hand, when the girl is content, the mother experiences a rare state of calm. She becomes so relaxed that she feels the desire to have sex. It's as though her fatigue contributes to her desire, as though she gets turned on because she has finally found some peace. Like now, on the play mat, as the girl crawls her way toward a pile of blocks. The mother places a hand between her legs. The girl grunts and inches closer to the pile. The mother opens her pants and sticks her hand inside her panties, begins rubbing, comes very quickly as she clenches her thighs, makes a little stifled sound and feels her entire body ease up. The girl knocks over one of the blocks and laughs. She puts it in her mouth and probes its shape. The mother lays the palm of her hand on her clitoris, tightens her muscles and comes again. Then she closes up her pants and sits down by the girl, relaxed.