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Cradle and All

By Laura English

If only I could sleep, it would stop—this tightness in my throat, this lurching in my stomach. Yesterday I wanted to throw something while the baby was crying in my arms, the kitchen flooded with midsummer sun. Instead I hurled my housemate's bottle of lotion. Nothing broke. I didn't throw the baby. I held him tight like a purse.

Day after day, my arms ache from carrying my newborn. I take him in the shower. I cradle him while I eat. He never stops howling unless he's sleeping. After midnight when I put him down, I'm wired as if I've drunk a pot of coffee. I've stayed awake so many nights that I can't count them.

Some sort of membrane used to protect me from being too aware, attuned to every noise, keen to each smell, the singed scent of dryer lint strong as wildfire. Now the branches creak outside the window. There's a rustle in the bushes, louder than ever. Someone waits to attack us. The wind? The membrane grows thin, like the heel of a sock that's been worn too many times.

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A parade of horribles is what they called it in the old days when people marched in the streets wearing grotesque masks. Now it refers to situations that lead to terrible outcomes. It's a parade of horribles, for instance, when we don't effectively support a person with mental illness. She goes from being a functioning member of society, to a wraith in the psych ward, her bills paid with the hospital's charity fund. Her children end up with relatives or in foster care.

The mask of insanity disturbs us. We decide that the mentally ill person chose her condition; she can fix it herself. She might avoid disaster if we could come together and form a giant web—a living net fortified with goodwill and hope to keep her from falling.

But what am I saying? It's the fault of the mentally ill themselves. They never take their medicine. They expect everyone to take care of them. They never listen.

* * *

I wasn't taking my medicine for bipolar disorder. I never listened. Or, I listened to the wrong things. "It's dangerous for you to have a baby." I only heard: "It's *possible* for you to have a baby."

I was living in Baltimore, tutoring at a college. Mary, my housemate, convinced me that I didn't have to get an abortion when I confessed that I was unexpectedly pregnant. Her optimism

prevailed, but she had never seen me mad—and I don't mean "angry." I mean, half naked, staring into mirrors, not eating. I stopped my medicine to prevent birth defects and hoped for the best.

I heard this: "Postpartum depression affects 10% to 20% of women in the US." But I wouldn't let that happen to me; I would fight it.

I never listened to the doomsayers: "Postpartum mania will devastate you." Did anyone actually say it? I had never heard of this diagnosis until it was typed on my chart. And no one ever said, "Childbirth can trigger psychosis," because that happens to only one in 1,000 women. So I never had a plan for staving off hallucinations.

If there were an omniscient guardian for each of us with mental illness, then that person could serve as the steady hub while others worked together like spokes.

It wasn't that nobody supported me after the birth of my son. It was that my friends and family weren't connected. Each was like a spoke hanging loose from the hub, ineffective. My housemates sometimes rocked a colicky baby when they weren't working late. But Mary and Dan didn't have backup. My parents might have known what to do as I deteriorated. They had witnessed symptoms of mania and depression before. But they lived two hours away, and my friends hesitated to call. They didn't ask for my parents' phone number until we were all desperate.

This isn't so much the story of a single woman who descends into madness after childbirth. It's more about how mental illness is often treated without a plan, without paradigm, and how help comes too late, when the broken web makes a desperate attempt to mend, when the hospital, which should be the last resort, is the first response.

But can I really blame the people who sacrificed their time and energy to look after me? They were all exemplary human beings. Their only mistake was that they counted me competent without understanding how literally useless a person is against the blitzkrieg in her brain. They thought *I* embodied that omniscient guardian, looking down on myself. I couldn't even get dressed to leave the house.

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How can I blame Nancy? I was nine months pregnant waiting in line in a church basement where folding tables and chairs had been set up. It was Thursday: Community Dinner Night. I laid a couple of dollars in the offering basket and let a volunteer fill my Styrofoam plate with spaghetti. Someone spoke behind me. I'd seen her before at these dinners—a petite woman with dark eyes and hair, wearing a long skirt flecked with shisha mirrors. She asked how I was doing.

"I'm ten days past my due date. The doctors talk about inducing labor, but I don't want to do it."

"I was a childbirth assistant for seven years," she offered. By the end of supper, I had her phone number and a plan to call her when I was in labor.

Beautiful Nancy, mother, former childbirth assistant, pediatric nurse. Stranger in a black shirt kneeling beside the bathtub, breathing with me through contractions. Nancy, helping the baby to latch on and nurse. Nancy, smelling of lavender, bringing us flowers.

And Mary, the one who had talked me out of an abortion, who held me during the worst of labor. And Dan who drove me to the hospital through rush hour traffic with Buddha-like calm. I thought I had all the help in the world.

"One of the risks of your pregnancy is lack of support," my counselor sighed when I told him I had decided to keep the baby. I didn't understand. Two friends lived with me. Weren't they enough? What he meant was that I had no husband or boyfriend, no family that lived close. If my counselor had been able to talk to my parents, maybe my mother would have said yes. *Can I move back home when the baby is born?* There were privacy issues. Parents don't have the therapist's confidence when the patient is over 18.

I saw several psychiatrists the year before I delivered my son. They all practiced at Behavioral Health Clinic, a place for people with mental illness who had no health insurance, the same nondescript office where the counselor worked. I don't know how well the departing doctors relayed information to the new ones. I don't remember any of their names. One had dreadlocks. One spoke with a Russian accent and told me, "Submit to no one but God." Two weeks before I delivered, I was assigned a new doctor.

What if those psychiatrists had spoken to Jane, the social worker who ran the free childbirth classes at Waverly Center? She was a cheerful woman in her sixties who welcomed expectant, single moms on Wednesday mornings with cheese cubes and doughnuts. She showed us videos on breastfeeding endorsed by celebrities. Maybe my doctor (which one?) could have warned her: At the first sign of illness, I'd need to go back on lithium, a drug which causes an infant to dehydrate as soon as it hits the breast milk. I'd have to depend on formula. He might have asked Jane to remind me that bottle-feeding can save the day.

It didn't occur to me to stop nursing when the mania started. Taking lithium would let me sleep, but it would ruin the way it was supposed to be: mother with infant at her breast. Nancy sensed that I wasn't sleeping. She visited frequently under the pretext of checking on the baby. One day she said, "The colic might be an allergy to something in your diet. Try cutting out dairy."

If my housemates had been there, they might have protested. *She's barely eating as it is.* But I skipped milk, cheese and yogurt. I ate next to nothing while my son continued to cry.

If only Nancy had spoken to Will. He was the silversmith who would sometimes do favors for me, like pick up the radishes and bitter chocolate I craved. I had no car, so Mary asked him to drive me to the clinic where the revolving doctors worked. He probably wondered how he got himself caught up in the web. He had dated me once before he found out I was pregnant, and now he was taking me to a clinic as I rambled on, distracted by his side mirror, laughing too hard at the duct tape. *But who had the baby now?* he must have wondered. *Who was this Nancy?*

Nancy might have told Will to go into the office with me and speak on my behalf. *Don't just drop her off.* He could have warned the doctor not to prescribe a certain medicine that was safe for breastfeeding: "That's not going to work." *I* certainly wasn't going to say it. My mind rejected logic. I only knew that breastfeeding was best for my baby – and maybe I could muddle through with "just a little something," be it a sip of wine or a drug used for epilepsy. The low dose of a new medicine seemed perfect. So what if it would prove ineffective? Will had never talked to my mother, who might have told him, "She needs lithium. It's the one thing that works."

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Even though Mary was hardly ever home, she was the one who realized something needed to be done. She had observed me walking around the house shirtless, nursing, refusing to put down the baby. Her cats were moving with frenzy, missing the litter box. I was thin and shivering in the July heat. There was a mixture of fatigue and wildness in my eyes.

One night Mary called my parents. *I think Laura's in trouble.* My mother drove from Pennsylvania and saw my state—how tired my eyes looked, how my speech went from calm to hysterical in seconds. "I'm fine. I just have to sleep. Leave me alone!" She dragged me off the couch by my wrists and ushered me to the car. But someone (Mary? Dan?) had called Nancy first to come and stay with the baby while my mother figured out where to take me in a strange city, some place that would accept medical assistance. (Dan's advice?)

At midnight I was admitted to Sheppard Pratt, a hospital north of Baltimore. It seemed the building stood in the middle of a wicked forest, all shadows and thorns. If only my mother had talked to the nurses—but who gets to speak directly to staff during the intake? She might have told them I had been breastfeeding. Then the nurses wouldn't have yelled angrily when I got out of bed during the night to empty milk from my rock-hard breasts. I never could make them understand what I was doing bent over the sink in the dark. No one really listens to the insane, but maybe my mother, on the outside, could have functioned as my voice.

That summer didn't have a Hollywood ending. It whimpered to a close. After two weeks in the claustrophobic ward where I was prohibited from seeing my son, we moved in with my parents. The dose of medication wasn't quite right. Again I couldn't sleep. Late one night I took off down the street barefoot as if I were outrunning a storm. When I stopped, I stared into the darkness at the figure of a man who wasn't really there. Before the sun rose, I found myself in the emergency room of the Penn State Medical Center, five minutes from my parents' house. I had no idea how I got there. Had I walked by myself? What was the date? Who was the president? A man in teal scrubs wanted to know.

When I was well enough for discharge, I didn't know how to be a mother anymore. My mother would place the baby on a blanket on the floor with some toys. She would walk away to do a task, and I would panic, sitting cross-legged, staring down at his face. My attention squirmed. My legs twitched, ready to run again.

Days passed, faltering and awkward. Soon I was baking a first birthday cake. My brain had mended with the help of a good doctor and the support of my parents. I was lucky to stay in a stable home

with cooked meals and clean laundry. At Sheppard Pratt, I'd met a man more like a boy who was discharged a few days after I arrived. Soon he was back, picked up by police as he wandered the streets. His network had frayed, and he had chosen homelessness.

* * *

When my son turns three, I marry Rory and—bravely, foolishly?—I do it all again, get pregnant and stop my medicine to prevent birth defects.

Only this time the web holds together, each strand bound to the others. My mother has passed away, but Rory has my father's number in his phone. When my second son arrives and I can't sleep because of constant feedings, Rory stays up and takes over with a bottle. Unlike millions of Americans with mental illness, I have health insurance and can afford a practice where the same doctor has worked for years. I've made a series of appointments in advance. The plan is I will stay off my medicine and breastfeed only if I show no symptoms of mania or depression. Rory will keep watch, and my father will be our backup. For nearly a month, Rory stays home with me. The midwife writes his boss an explanation for the absence. It's a bit of a lie: "… to support his wife who has a history of postpartum depression." Because who ever heard of "postpartum mania"?

Who had known what to make of the madness that summer? Who instinctively knew what to do? My life was the revising of a paradigm. Every June reminds me of a baby's arrival to a place of fragility, and when a warm breeze blows, I remember the delicate rose that bloomed outside the Cape Cod whose first floor I rented with friends. On the Fourth of July we watched fireworks from the roof of a nearby church even as my sanity unraveled—Mary, Dan, Nancy and little Isaiah—all of us together under breaking strands of light.

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