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Origin Story

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JENNIFER JORDÁN SCHALLER

ORIGIN STORY

“THE DOCTOR TOLD me to push. I said, ‘You try to push you son of a bitch. This baby is stuck.’”

The first time I remember hearing this story, I was five and living with my mother and brother in Hightstown, New Jersey. I remember sitting on the front stoop of our apartment complex as my mother attracted a crowd, a small one including a couple other moms, their kids, neighborhood children who dug in the dirt as she set the stage for a story she would retell (a story I would retell again and again).

The details of that first retelling are blurry, but I remember feeling like I was on the outside of the story. She said, “I told the nurses and doctor, ‘I can’t push anymore!’ I kept passing out. I was in labor for sixteen hours. Sixteen hours!”

Faces in the small audience looked astonished as my mother said, “That’s when they brought in this big woman, a nurse with shoulders like a football player. She’s the nurse they brought out when babies got stuck. I had already punched the doctor. Helga got up on top of me anyway. I said, ‘Get the hell away from me,’ but she wouldn’t listen. She pushed my baby out of me.”

I was enraptured.

She continued, “I didn’t get to hold my baby because she wasn’t breathing. I thought my baby girl was going to die.”

What would happen to that baby? Then I realized she was probably talking about me. Her nickname for me had always been Baby Girl.

“I didn’t get to hold her. I said ‘Where’s my baby? Give me back my baby!’ They took her from me, and worked on her for a while. Then she started breathing. When they brought her to me, I didn’t know what to think. She was a dark, dark purple and had a big, old conehead.”

I was not, nor had I ever been, the color purple. How could I have been purple? Was she even talking about me? Maybe this was my brother’s birth.

She said, “I told the doctor, ‘You have made a mistake. That is not my baby. That is an ugly baby. Get that ugly baby away from me!’”

The crowd laughed, and so did I. Her delivery was on point. It always was. The joke is about humankind, how we can be neatly divided into two groups: those who believe all babies are beautiful, and those who believe some babies have a face not even their mothers could love. My being ugly was a tragic twist of fate in this story, where the protagonist pushed and pushed, all the pain she experienced, all that work, and she gave birth to the ugliest baby she had ever seen.

Sometimes when she told this story, she would add on little, extra details, for example, “When you were born, you looked like one of them coneheads from Saturday Night Live.” Or, “You looked like a raisin, a California Raisin, dancing in those commercials.”

My mother held the crowd in suspense for the sake of good narrative. Right when my upper lip quivered from doubting that she loved me, my mother turned, looked me in the eye, and said, “But they insisted she was my baby. She’s been my baby girl ever since.”

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OVER TIME, I saw the humor in being born purple-skinned and ugly because when the most basic loves are absent—mother-love and self-love—jokes can be made! I re-told my mother’s story as I grew older, using her vivid descriptions to get a rise out of anyone—teachers, friends, parent volunteers at school.

In the third grade, I remember telling my friends, “And then she laid on eyes on me and said, ‘That is not my baby! Get that baby out of here and bring me my baby!’” I held my arms out, waved jazz hands, and captured the audience. I was betraying my own humanity. That’s why it was so funny. I would smile while saying, “She said I was ugly! ONE. UGLY. BABY!” Eyebrows raised. Mouths gaped. Classmates giggled. It defies logic to see a person ridicule oneself—and that’s why it’s so funny.

Demeaning myself meant not only cheap laughs, but also allegiance with my mother. I loved her with biologic ferocity, a thirsty mammal needing milk. Without thinking, I wore my mother’s persona; I saw myself the way she saw me. I never questioned an odd look or two because I didn’t care. I wanted nothing more than to be like my mother. I retold my own

origin story, the version my mother told me, until my mid-thirties because it was a damn good yarn.

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ONE WEEK BEFORE my youngest daughter, Ruby, was born, I went to a faculty meeting at the college where I teach. I was thirty-seven weeks pregnant and my body swayed as I made my way down an aisle in an auditorium classroom. I was looking for a seat wide enough to fit me. I squeezed past knees and elbows, trying to look ordinary, while my waterlogged ankles bulged out in fleshy ripples. I had an extra chin, my nose gained weight, and my belly grew forward: a firm, oblong casing wrapped tightly around flesh, bone, and amniotic juices. I lowered my heavy body into a retractable theater seat. When I sat down, I felt like a lasagna pan bubbling over with freshly-hatched placenta. I was what people call *big*.

“You’re so big!”

Three words didn’t express what I really was--how about fountain of life? How about green pasture growing seed, supporting flesh, nourishing life?

No.

Big.

I was so large that years afterward, from my appearance at this faculty meeting, one woman still brought it up.

“I had never seen a woman as pregnant as you.”

“Usually we don’t go out in public when we’re that big. People stare. It’s humiliating.”

I told her my daughter’s birth was not so bad, even while pushing out eight pounds of human. I didn’t tear, even after I felt the ring of fire, what Roseanne Carter Cash’s song was really about: fire in your God hole. I pushed my child out, and it was true, what people said, that I forgot the pain once I held her. I even wanted to get pregnant again, that very night. Giving birth made me feel like I could do anything. I hadn’t expected to feel invincible.

I said, “Ruby’s birth was not so bad. She was healthy, and I healed quickly. I had always feared having a birth experience like mine. My own birth story is terrible.”

She looked me in the eyes and said, “Can I hear it? Birth stories are something I have done a lot of research on.”

I nodded and proceeded to tell the story I had told many times before, my mother’s story, which became my own. I toned it down for my coworker. I omitted the fact that my mother cursed and accused the hospital staff of mixing up her offspring, but I did explain how she yelled and assaulted medical staff. When I was finished, my coworker sat silent for a moment, and then said, “Having a traumatic birth can set a person back for life.”

Shocked, I said, “She was young when she gave birth. She didn’t have books like I did. I read so many pregnancy and birth books.” I made excuses, to which this woman replied, “Sure, those are a possibility, but the problem could also be your mother.” I had never thought about it this way. What if

the problem in the story was rooted in my mother? What if the problem was not that I had a big, old conehead?

For many of my adult years and all my childhood years, I saw my life and body through my mother's narrative lens. My birth story was family myth: my mother, the protagonist, entered a crisp, white hospital room in Passaic New Jersey, blazened the nurses, doctors, and orderlies with her expletives and her inability to push, and then I was born, misshapen baby, product of her battle. My father Ramon, not present, did not know I had a middle name until I was three. My mother told him my name was Jennifer, the name he picked out.

I was thirty-six years old when I started my split from my mother's narrative. My persona separated herself from the baby girl Helga pushed from my mother's loins. Whose story had I been telling? Who was I pretending to be? Who was my character in the story? What's her motivation? Also, I'm not sure I like her, and I am not sure she is likeable. My persona is a swamp monster rising from a fetid marsh. She has seaweed for hair. She is angry. She can be mean. She doesn't mean to be. She just is. She says and does the wrong things, all the time. She is not me, but I made her from me. I carved her from my ribcage.