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A Letter to My Daughter (To Be Sent in the Future)

When your angry plum of a face flashed up at me for the first time, cracked open in a howl of rage, incensed at the sudden loss of home, your blue-black eyes glinting from narrow splits of skin, I felt I'd known you all along. Yet you were a stranger to me, your jittery newborn heft unfamiliar in my clumsy hands. I hardly knew you at all—we were acquainted mere minutes—when I put you to my breast. As you scuttled along my skin with your greedy pucker-mouth, this first encounter felt so old and new, like a reunion.

When you were nine days old, you were a squalling madness, struggling in your first grunting, screeching, spastic living. On the inside, I thrashed and screamed too, resisting my enslavement to you. Holding you, I watched your father cut a wild, overgrown yew down to the ground. Our two lives were like battling, tormented, hopelessly intertwined roots. And I despaired of ever pruning you from me. There was no end in sight.

I waited for the time when I could count your life in weeks, even months. Motherhood was round-the-clock trauma. The feedings and diapers were endless. You cried. No one slept. I cried. I had many questions. How did the human race endure? How did people have more than one child? How did they survive the first one? When would I go back to being *me*? You cried and cried; there was no end in sight.

You began life in a tight fetal curl, the petals of your consciousness shut to the world. I watched you open like flower, unfolding out of me and unfurling into the world, your eyes squinting open to let in light, the pink clenched-blossoms of your fists relaxing. Your bruise-colored eyes bloomed a wide sky blue. And you watched me.

That first Mother's Day, I dressed you in blue, and people thought you were a boy. I said to you: "I will *always* dress you in blue to spite the world." And in response, you gave me my gift: your very first laugh, a deep, mischievous burble. This was my reward for two months of mothering you. It was enough.

I read baby books so that I would be an expert on you. I learned many things. For example: at birth a baby girl has within her ovaries all the ova she will ever have. Like a matryoshka—a Russian nesting doll—I carried within me not only you but also (within you) the promise of my grandchildren, just

as a part of me was carried deeply burrowed in the womb of my grandmother within the womb of my infant mother. This was one of the miracles in the wreckage of those first months. This—and the feel of your fist cradled within mine, like a ball in a socket, a joint, a perfect fit. This—and so much more.

You are three years old. We count your life in years. You ask, “When you were *your* mommy’s baby, where was *I*?” I don’t know how to tell you. You didn’t exist, and yet I think you were always in me, in fact and in spirit. For don’t little girls carry within them not just the promise of genetic material but also their own nascent motherhood, learned from being daughter to a mother?

“Are you happy or sad that I’m not a baby anymore?” you ask. “Happy and sad,” I reply. Childhood is a series of superimpositions; you supersede yourself, day after day. I miss the other you’s, but I don’t want them back. When you are eight and fourteen and twenty, I will miss you of now. I am writing to all of you—every person you will be. I am writing to you across time, my adult daughter, my stranger, my friend.

You are the eldest child of a mother who was an eldest child of a mother who was an eldest child of a mother who was an eldest child. Perhaps the line stretches even further back. We are the first, we are girls, and we are big sisters. Because you are bossy and precocious, because you resemble me, because I imagine being a girl again through you, probably I invest too much in you. Your brother, second born, a boy, doesn’t look like me; his not-ME-ness was apparent from the beginning. But I see you in my image, or I see myself in yours. No doubt this will cause us trouble down the road, as it does so many mothers and daughters.

You ask, “Before you were a mommy, who were you?”

“I was just myself.”

“But what did you do before you had me?”

“I don’t know.”

You say, “I think you were lonely.”

And I think you are right. Back then, I would not have said that I was lonely. But now, imagining a life entirely without you—in which I never had a daughter—I feel chilled with the depth of my loneliness.

It is Mother’s Day again, my fourth as a mother. Your father has taken you and your brother to a nursery to give me time to write. This is his gift to me. Upon returning, you run in with my gift: a pot containing three flowers that you selected and planted yourself and a card on which you have scribbled a picture. I ask you what you have drawn, and you reply: “I haven’t decided yet.” Bless you for leaving the options open, for not forming premature judgments. There are many things that aren’t decided. I am changed by you forever; I continue to change. You have made me a mother forever. There is no end in sight. I cannot express the vastness of my love for you. It overpowers me. There is no end in sight. I have come far. I have so far to go. There is no end in sight.