

COUVADE

AND THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

"The state of man: inconstancy, boredom, anxiety." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

by Michael Finley

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The concept of the pregnant man touches a deep and persistent chord in our civilization. The covers of grocery checkout tabloids boast about a man carrying a child, and usually the story, half a column in length, turns out to be that a disinterred body in Dutch Guyana shows a sizable tumor in his girth, an hormonally confused Senegalese is widely reported (but narrowly documented) to have borne twins, real milk has issued from the breasts of an 109-year-old Cossack, or a deluded fireman in Pensacola insists he is carrying Amelia Earhart's baby, and rocks, and rocks, and rocks.

Such stories make headlines because, whether true or not, they turn on an elemental obsession of our culture and of all cultures -- the idea that woman is woman and man, man, and any departure from this formula is a marvel, a freak. And we like thinking about freak occurrences because, while they suggest the possibility of monstrous error on the part of nature, they are "out there" -- they do not really touch the lives of those of us outside the carney wagons.

It can be alarming for a male in our culture to suddenly find himself emulating the female of the species. The expectant father is prone toward all sorts of "mother imitations" ranging from morning sickness, vomiting, heartburn and constipation through such motherly other complaints as backache, abdominal swelling, appetite changes, insomnia, snappiness and a general dragged-out feeling.

Ritual couvade was unknown to the West until the nineteenth century, and the establishment of the modern science of anthropology. As preliminary observations and records were taken of peoples long remote from European and American academic eyes, long-cherished attitudes about what was civilized and what was savage began to falter. Anthropological pioneers were particularly taken by the habits in different cultures surrounding courtship, marriage and childbearing. The practice of ritual couvade, manifested so similarly in cultures continents and oceans apart, alerted researchers such as Margaret Mead in the South Seas and George Gorer in the Himalayas that something nearly universal had been uncovered. It was remarkable in its intensity, in its thoroughness, and in its ornamental embellishments. It was given the name couvade, for brooding time, for hatching.

When the full moon had shown its face thrice and the woman had not purged herself in that time, the New Guinea hunter withdrew from the rest of the tribe. He began to construct his own clothing for the waiting time, earrings of conch because his woman wore conch and a headdress of the feathers of the megapode, because it was said that that bird, which walked so close to the ground, was always nesting.

He did not sit by the fires and boast of his prowess, even though it was not his nature ordinarily to downplay his accomplishments. He did not want to bring down upon his family the anger of spirits. He visited with his wife's family and eschewed his own, even his own mother.

Through the fifth month he worked hard gathering food and hunting, and then he ceased going out into

the forest to hunt, relying instead upon the gifts of his woman's people. He put his energies toward building a separate hut for himself, a stone's throw from the woman's.

He prepared his food and she prepared hers. At night they slept apart, and he neither drank after dark nor chewed the betel nor ate of the soma roots. In the final weeks he took to his bed alone, and prayed and chanted as the spirits roiled inside him, tormenting his parts. The forest night was filled with his cries of lamentation.

On the seventh day of his ordeal the woman came to his hut -- the first time she had visited him. She handed him her newborn child -- a son. He smiled, and pulled the infant to his breast, and gave suck to him, for it was his.

Rachel and I were more conventional than most people probably realized. And though neither of us knew much about kids, we figured it was an important part of life as human beings, and we were afraid if we don't go through with this, we'll wind up missing out on something somehow important.

Coupled with our vague hopes were specific fears, problems which I was sure would come to some sort of head in the months to come. I had a strong sense that I was still a child myself -- Rachel, too. In making a child, what would happen to our childhoods? What would we gain for all that we lost? What assurance did I have that I had any business taking on the role of father? Where would the new energy come from? How would I avoid the pattern of errors I perceived in my own upbringing? Would my parenthood be a case of "like father, like son"? What if it didn't come? Why, at age 34, should I suddenly begin liking children? What kind of world was I bringing a child into anyway? Wouldn't I be better advised subtracting from the overpopulated earth than adding to it? Finally, how does a father save a child when dangers greater than wolves and bears lurk everywhere, from the gyre of holocaust to the chromosome's twist.

Looking back, I can remember feeling that I was sure being a good guy, doing all this for Rachel. She was the driving force behind the decision to have a child then. I tried to be agreeable, supportive. If I had doubts about having a child I kept them to myself. Mister Goodguy.

Which was fine by me, by and large -- I was playing the role I thought a Dad would play. If all I was ever asked for was a bit of play-acting, I'd have done a lot better than I did.

The dilemma of the expectant father today is simply ignorance. For many men, the fact of their partners' pregnancies is the first true mystery to come their way in life. For once, it is the mother who (to his thinking) operates within the traditional "male" perspective of problem solving.

She is the one who has calculated and now notices the cessation of menses; she is the one who consults with outside experts to determine the nature of the situation; and it is she who typically rolls up her sleeves and gets to work planning the project, conducting the research, charting the progress from month one to ten.

Amid this whirl of directed and perfectly logical activity, the father's status shifts abruptly, and the traditional roles played by the sexes do a flip-flop.

Suddenly and horribly, it is the man who feels omitted from the excitement of an important project. It is the man who feels he hasn't enough data at his command with which to make decisions. It is the man

who feels helpless and boggled at the prospect of dramatic change in his life while the woman goes her businesslike way adapting.

She, carrying conclusive proof of her condition under her belt, is free to perform systems analysis and chart timelines. He, who until this moment was the linear, dispassionate, deductive, problem-solving half of the relationship, is suddenly oscillating in decidedly unmasculine hemi-demi-semiquavers.

All of these perceptions are misogynist claptrap, and transparent misogynist claptrap at that. She was never less logical, or practical or acute at so-called male activities than he. But he considered them his demesne nonetheless. And now the poor fellow's world has turned upside-down. His map of the universe has been transformed. The mountain ranges have become seas. The seas have become stone. He's got a lot of orienting to do.

At the heart of this transformation is mystery. To oversimplify, we may say that (from the man's point of view) pregnancy for woman is process, for man, mystery. And it is mystery as unresolvable and as elusive as any religious enigma. Until now, the inner workings of his partner's body were no concern of his, because they did not affect him. Now the secret within her body not only affects him dramatically, but is one which cannot simply be whispered into his ear -- it is too profound, too resistant to ordinary description.

He sees his life as catastrophically collided -- much as a planet is struck by a hurtling comet. And yet he cannot see the approaching star. He is asked to accept the good news on faith, and he feels in the dark for the switch that is his faith, and he cannot find it.

Then something terrible happened -- we got pregnant. Rachel missed her period the third month of trying, and within a short time the urine tests confirmed our best hopes and worst fears. Sometime in mid-August, we two would become three. I say "terrible" not because it was really a terrible thing. It was terrific. I wanted to be a dad -- that's not where the ambivalence lay. It was in not knowing what it meant to be a dad. From day one something was eating at me about becoming a father. I didn't show it, but it was there, and it bothered me.

Getting pregnant was the start of a series of events which taught me more about myself than I ever thought I'd need to know, much of it unpleasant. Before the pregnancy came to term, my Mister Goodguy act would run the gamut of emotions. Anger, guilt, desperation, anxiety, the heebie-jeebies. This may sound awful, but the closest thing in my life to expecting our child was when I was a kid, and my best friend's dad lay dying of cancer for six months. The same awful sense of time suspended. The same inability, deep down, to believe what was happening.

I took Rachel out to dinner the night the test results came in, and she chattered merrily about the excitement in store for us. I kept up my Mister Goodguy act, smiling and suggesting we drink a toast. Oh no, Rachel said, no alcohol for her, not until the baby's born. But you go right ahead.

So there I was on the very first night of expectant fatherhood, drinking alone and just beginning to realize the changes ahead. I even drank an extra one, and claimed I was drinking it on Rachel's behalf.

Couvade is a crisis of faith -- the faith a man has in his ability to face the unknown. As the wife increaseth, the husband decreaseth. In his despair, he is at the bottom of the barrel of his manhood. There he gropes for something new in his composition to help him to cope; and what he finds is something very, very old -- an ancient technique to help man survive this very normal but very upsetting ordeal.

Ancient tools, ancient tricks, ancient masks. What he discovers is that modern man and ancient man, different as button-down and buckskin, are quite alike in one respect -- they both value their security, and are both threatened when their manly armor starts to crack.

The cloud of unknowing in which the expectant father drifts can be a torment. A man who cannot bear to be kept in the dark about so important a matter as incipient parenthood will have great difficulty finding peace and minimizing the stress of transition to a new social status.

A man who, on the other hand, understands that there is a purpose for this suspension of his traditional "hunterly" practicality and clearheadedness, will be better able to grope toward understanding and adapting.

Couvade may be thought of as a sustained, low-grade anxiety attack. This may not be a pleasant way of regarding it, but as such it does have the advantage of having a beginning, middle, and an end. That it does indeed end, and with such a knowable marvel at the end, i. e. , a baby, is very good news.

The man who understands that couvade is a necessary preparation for the new role of father, a rite of passage or crisis in his development as important in its secondary status as pregnancy itself, can more easily "give himself" to the couvade, hit bottom sooner, and find himself once again on the surface of his life, this time stronger, clearer, perhaps even wiser.

But while I was spreading the news with one part of my head, another part still seemed to be in the dark. Periodically I'd ask myself how I felt. Great, I answered. Fantastic, I'd tell myself. Oh God, I finally broke down and admitted -- what in the world had I got myself into?

The first two months seemed very unreal, like sleepwalking almost. At work, everything continued as usual, except for some of my colleagues who pumped me for details, at which I grinned and improvised, not actually knowing any correct answers. Did I prefer a boy or a girl? How did I know? I just hoped it (all I ever called it was it) was healthy and didn't hurt my wife too much. And didn't cost too much. I found I could hardly talk about specifics. I didn't know anything. I couldn't even feel anything.

*I could feel myself shrinking, like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Day by day I felt increasingly insignificant -- whereas a year or so ago I had been Romeo to Rachel's Juliet, now I was more like Friday to her Crusoe.*

She was so happy and busy and businesslike, putting all our bureaucratic ducks in a row -- sorting out our health insurance and maternity leave benefits, lining up our doctor and midwife, finding a good back-up obstetrician -- tasks that all seemed somehow beyond me at the time.

I admired her so, but felt so inadequate myself. My main accomplishment was lugging a used air-conditioner up two flights and installing it in the bedroom. And when that was over, feeling a sharp twinge about midway up my back. My back would ache virtually nonstop through the duration of Rachel's pregnancy.

The spectacle of ritual couvade -- it was called institutional couvade because it followed a set form which must not be deviated from -- was an astonishment to Western eyes, and today still seems foreign, exotic and unimaginably odd. Thus the suggestion that there is some connection between what expectant fathers feel and do today and what this pagan felt and did in the woods of Borneo a half-century ago seems ludicrous and worse, useless.

But consider the advantages of our man in the field. Ask what his objectives are as he undergoes his rituals. They are simple, but they are also immense.

He wants, first and foremost, that *his family be healthy and whole*. He does not wish to trade a partner for a child, or vice versa, and in this there is nothing obsolete about him -- expectant fathers cite this worry as their number one source of concern during pregnancy.

Couvade achieves this objective through ritual. By wearing special clothes and withdrawing from the dangers of cheap society, by abstaining from polluting substances, by undergoing the trauma of birth itself, he has taken the danger away from the woman and onto himself. In this sense couvade is far from a show of "womanishness" -- it is bravery and resourcefulness in the face of the gravest source of danger -- angry spirits. In its truest sense it is heroism.

He wants, secondly, *to express various things* that need expressing. He wants to state unequivocally the bond that henceforth exists between father and child-- a statement which we in the West have struggled over the centuries to make, and usually failed. He wants to announce to the world that he accepts his new responsibility and status as father, and that this child, whom he has not seen, is indeed his.

This stands in stark contrast to the modern father, who greets the prospective new arrival with large helpings of incredulity and self-doubt.

He wants, thirdly, *to get himself through a tortuous season* in a man's life without losing his cool. The time of pregnancy has always been a time in which powerful forces are at work, evil spirits within and without a man easily capable of violence, hysteria, hostility, flight. Ritual couvade provides a culturally sanctioned outlet for the father to vent some of this passion. It is an established safety valve for the excess of emotion in the expectant father.

He wants, finally, *to tell himself certain things* -- to admit to himself what he is also admitting to his society. Whereas his life before centered on the hunt, on the courtship, on the games and friends, all that must now change and he must accept these changes. Couvade changes the expectant father from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. Once he has successfully performed the recommended tasks of couvade, even the least articulate father-to-be understands the powerful transition he is caught up in, and is better able to move within its currents.

Why was all this happening? I asked myself. I began thinking conspiratorially that I had no proof personally that a child was on the way. Rachel wasn't showing, she was still wearing her usual clothes. Nothing seemed different, and yet everything was.

Whereas most people think of me as sociable, cheerful and outgoing, a dark and sinister, Darth-Vaderish streak was beginning to show. At work I found myself quarreling at the drop of a hat, usually about some perceived slight, but just as often about my new, true field of expertise, obstetrics and gynecology.

For some reason I took it upon myself to wage war against the excesses of the medical establishment. Soon this general defensiveness became generally offensive, as I began lashing out at doctors in general. All they want to do is pump you up, cut you up, and hit the links by two, I told anyone who would lend an ear. Sophisticated stuff. My colleagues shook their heads -- I was on my way to being the company crank.

An angry, misanthropic side of me blossomed. I became very impatient with colleagues reducing me to

the least common denominator of EXPECTANT FATHER. Wherever I went, it was, "How's the mother?" or "When's that due-date again?"

It annoyed me that people should have forgotten I was a human being with diverse interests. I still liked baseball, I still followed the Brewers box scores. My work never suffered, I never missed a meeting. I read novels, not baby books. Why this typecasting? Wasn't I still me? I felt betrayed by my so-called friends and co-workers, and withdrew further and further into my work...

The only remaining issue to understanding ritual couvade is to apply the test of modernity to it. Does it work? Or is it just some hocus-pocus, backwoods weirdness that anthropologists dote on but doesn't have much to do with anything? How can any reasonable person believe that dressing up and pretending to have a baby serves to anchor a man during pregnancy?

The answer to this question is a complicated one. But understanding the appeal of maternity for men has little to do with our concept of modernity.

So I withdrew into my work. And into my aspirin bottle.

Week by week my back hurt more and more. Pain killers couldn't touch it. Eventually I had to quit running because exercise aggravated the pain. It was like my rib and tenth thoracic vertebra had collided and were now sparking like downed power lines. I squirmed in my chair at work, and twisted from side to side as I drove on the freeway. I was coming apart at the seams and couldn't understand why.

Rachel was terrific. By four months she was clearly showing, and morning sickness and drowsiness were taking a heavy toll on her energies. We would sit at nights and gaze forlornly into one another's eyes, each knowing the other was uncomfortable, each wishing he or she could swap lives with the other for just one day.

Days would go by and I would numbly know that a baby was on the way. Ten months seemed like eternity. Gradually I came to think of pregnancy as a permanent condition, an ordeal which had no reasonable end.

Rachel gained weight. I did too. Without exercise, with my back hurting more and more, and without a strong sense of my own center, I lay about a lot, drinking several beers or wines every evening, snacking on a bowl of popcorn with the seating capacity of the Astrodome.

Rachel abetted me with her own ferocious appetite. I joked with her about plucking snails off trees and gobbling them, immune to their pathetic little cries. I saw her hunger as an excuse to stuff myself. Since I've always had to be careful about my weight, I should have known better. But I was in the throes of some great wave of denial, and munched onward.

By mid-term we were obviously going to have a baby. My back was killing me, plus someone was clearly living inside Rachel, and was pounding on the walls of her tummy, looking for secret panels, I think. Rachel was down to three or four outfits for the duration of her pregnancy, and I was down to two pair of pants that would still fit my expansive self.

We are moving more and more toward the view that modern couvade solves, in its frustrating, willy-

nilly way, the same problems as ritual couvade. First, it re-inserts the man in a process from which he has been removed. His complaints serve notice to all that the change that is upon him has not gone unnoticed.

In a subtler sense, a man's psychosomatic lashing out at his own body may be as magical as anything anyone ever did in the jungles of Borneo -- his bellyaching may well be an expression of his profound caring for the partner and unborn child. Despite his outward ambivalence, the expectant father may well be acting as decoy for the evil spirits of the modern world, the bogeys of stress and anxiety which prey on all our weaknesses. This is modern man's one shot, and in its recoil we get a glimpse of something rare today -- a look at man's unresolved need to nurture and to be nurtured.

Only now did I begin to get into the swim of birth preparations. I finally met our midwife, a spacey, California-esque Aquarian type named Felicia who ran roughshod over us in a mellow, sparkley-eyed way ("Remember, it's your birth, not mine," she explained, handing us our forms).

I met our doctor, an eccentric, stammering Scot who wore red plaid pants and kept an electric shoe-buffer in his waiting room. And we booked visits with a genetic expert to perform ultrasonographic examinations and amniocentesis on the baby.

Upon visiting the genetic counselor, I got my first true taste of the horrors of parenthood. A cultivated Spaniard, he gave us computer printouts listing such possibilities as Down's syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities, the risk of spontaneous miscarriage, neural tube defects such as anencephaly, spina bifida, congenital malformations, ethnic genetic diseases, etc.

I felt my heart sink. How could I have been ignoring these terrible realities? It stuck me how irresponsible I had been behaving, crossing my fingers and hoping for a lucky draw. Face it, I told myself, no one's normal. Somehow I knew my child would be a monster of unspeakable deformity.

Watching the monitor on the ultrasound machine, I saw my child for the first time -- skeleton first. It was breathtaking, terrifying and gorgeous. For the first time, my knees went a bit weak. There it was, turning slowly in the monitor screen -- my replacement unit, stewing away in its mother's broth. And outside its chest (at least it looked like that) I saw its little heart beating away. It looked like some sort of frantic, kiss-blowing tulip.

It seemed so brave to me, all of a sudden. Coming into existence, unarmed by anything at all except the will to life. There it was, the most helpless thing in the universe -- and it was a juggernaut.

We asked not to know the child's sex -- we wanted to save that surprise for the moment of birth. In this one way we were still old-fashioned.

Our worry deepened, and so did my guilt. How could I be the kind of caring, watchful parent my child deserved, I asked myself, if I continued my indulgent, crackpot ways? I felt a solemn seriousness set in. Rachel was doing all the work, while I fretted and sipped beer. I finally started reading the baby books -- though I could not finish any, as I kept looking up from the books, daydreaming. My son, I kept thinking. My daughter.

After all the travail of the couvade experience, there appears to be but one sure-fire cure, the birth of a child. Aspirin may help with headaches. Maalox may help settle the queasy stomach. A regimen of regular exercise may help reduce stress levels overall. But only a flesh-and-blood baby, squinting up at the new father through his or her swaddle of receiving blankets, can ultimately and effectively end the

transformative process. Thus one great mystery comes to an end, and another, perhaps even greater mystery, makes itself known, with a fanfare of squalls and frowns.

In the end, of course, it is foolish to speak of couvade as having any sort of cure. Diseases are cured, life struggles only "happen." It would be truer to think of couvade as a cure itself, for it is nature's instinctual school for fatherly preparation. Whatever it is that a man brings with him into couvade, he exits as a new father. Modern man is compelled to admit what the so-called savage engaged in ritual couvade knew for centuries -- that it works.

Soon it was summer, and Rachel had gained 30 pounds. We decided to make a last-ditch romantic trip together, and flew for a week to Puerto Vallarta and points south, all on borrowed money. We wobbled, two giant norteamericanos, up and down the cheaper beaches of the Mexican Pacific, my sweating hand in her edematous hand. We were fat, we were nauseous, we were in love.

Upon returning we discovered that Felicia, our midwife, had decided to move back to California for a month -- right when we were scheduled to deliver. I was furious, and called her down to the house to face my wrath. Now here was a side to me few people, myself included, had seen -- do it to Mikey, I'm used to hearing, Mikey doesn't get mad about nothing.

I told her how betrayed we felt, and how ironic it was that she, who had been busy forming all sorts of magical Aquarian bonds with us, and telling us about the importance of trust, was now clinically assuring us that any old midwife would do. It wasn't her fault, but I was still very hard on her. Suddenly I saw myself facing a birth without the people I had been counting on. I wiggled out. I was tacky, I was childish, but I showed spunk and initiative. I was not ashamed.

After that, I stopped trusting folks to do my job for me. I polished off the last of the baby books and went and dug up an old shower curtain and spread it on the bed. This, I told myself, would keep all that blood from destroying the mattress and box springs.

The baby still needed a name. I issued the decree that if it were a boy his name would be Isaac, for "he laughs." My son would have a tough enough time amid the future without a sense of humor, I decided. His would be built-in.

If it was a girl? I didn't know that yet. No name seemed right. Rachel wanted to name the child after her father, Daniel, who had passed away when she was sixteen. But Danielle seemed too française or something. We would be condemning our child to be coquette for life. I'd come up with the right name, I told her.

We attended a party at the medical/dental clinic where Rachel had been working, and I watched on as Rachel danced the tango, the jitterbug, and other steps with a dashing doctor friend. She was rotund, yet so graceful on the dance floor. She never looked so beautiful to me.

Ritual couvade achieved a variety of ends. It functioned to protect the infant and mother by serving as a "decoy" to evil spirits in the vicinity. It served as a symbolic expression of the close physical and moral bond between father and child. It signaled acceptance of a new role and status in society, lest anyone doubted. And it was a somewhat public and therefore legal admission of paternity. Ritual couvade was also a valuable outlet for potentially violent emotions. In social systems which tended to shut the father out from the rest of the family, couvade was a way for the father to reinsert himself.

The beauty of ritual couvade was that it was purposeful behavior. And it was learned. It did not simply "occur" to a man to take to his bed and commence pre-enactment of a birth -- it was expected, it was the law.

Couvade today is, due to ignorance and lack of community support, improvisatory on the part of the father. He does what he can to achieve the same objectives sketched above, in his blind effort to assure the safety of mother, child and yes, self. He has no idea he is "doing" anything. And yet, at some subconscious or unconscious level, some kind of business is getting "done," and in its own bumbling way it is empirical and it does indeed work.

Four days after the due date, then five. Then one night we kissed one another and went off to sleep.

Later Rachel told me that the phone had rung, and some fool asked her what she was wearing. Disgusted, she slammed the receiver down, and grumbling remaneuvered herself under the covers.

We woke up around midnight, the bedding swamped with water. Rachel's bag had ruptured in her sleep. We turned on the lights, glanced at one another. Without a word I rose and called Felicia. I moved in a kind of unthinking but purposeful fog. Rachel began to worry about various things. I patted her hand and stroked her face. She had the look of a condemned prisoner.

She asked me to listen through the fetuscope for a heartbeat. I listened and could detect no heartbeat. Rachel panicked. I looked at her, sucked in my breath, and told her I was picking up a beat. Counting -- 140 beats per minute! It was a lie, a very dangerous one, but it relaxed Rachel, who I now saw was ready to trade her life for this new one inside her. If she was willing to take a risk, I thought, so was I.

Felicia, fresh from California, arrived several hours later, Doppler in hand, and took the baby's pulse. My heart was tripping so quickly I half expected her stethoscope to pick it up. Beat! , Beat! , I urged that little tulip inside the baby, and sagged with relief when the reading showed a strong heartbeat-- and get this, at precisely 140 beats per minute. Believe it or not.

There is no cure for couvade. Couvade is itself a kind of cure for fathers of their non-fatherliness, and the process is finally capped by the birth of his son, his daughter, or some fearsome combination of the two (twins, triplets, etc.). And the most painful couvade is the one which is most ardently avoided.

Just as the mother discovers (generally around mid-afternoon of the baby's first day) that pregnancy and birth are less significant than the greater issues of parenting that have only begun, so does the father understand that couvade is very much of a stop-gap action against a short-term problem.

From birth on, the cloud of unknowing is lifted. The problems of parenthood get, if anything, more and more difficult. But the father -- expectant no longer -- has done his homework. He is prepared for the challenge. He may not know what exactly to expect, but at least, henceforward, he will know who it is he is dealing with.

In nature's wisdom, the travail of couvade gives way to the even more heroic struggle of day-to-day fatherhood. Thus the day of birth marks the completion of the first long cycle in a man's life. Without this process, that man's growth, at least in one direction, can never continue. In retrospect we see that couvade is a man's way of giving birth not only to his offspring, but in a deeper and more abiding, more private sense, to himself. It is, or ought to be, a time of joy.

For the next 20 hours, the little heart beat out time for us. Rachel and I walked, we rocked, we laughed

and cried. We walked in trembling circles in the courtyard of the building. Kids on bicycles rang past us, laughing. I loved us both so much at that moment. During transition we put Rachel in our neighbor friend's bathtub and kept the hot water coming. We sang. Took pictures. Ate popsicles. Worked. Friends drove all the way from Minneapolis to Milwaukee to help us through. Another made beet and carrot soup.

I was never so proud of Rachel -- you could read the will to life in the furrows of her brow. And I was proud of myself, too. No squeamishness, no fear.

Except at the very end, a final shudder inside me. It was time for Rachel to push, for the baby to finally be born. All the panic rose up in me, and I walked outside the birthing room and stood by a window, watched the traffic pass by outside. Soon this great ordeal would be over. Soon the great unknown would reveal itself. My legs quaked far below. I nearly fainted.

But I didn't. I was done indulging. I had been through so much the past ten months. All the worry, all the evasion, all the screwy ways I had devised to get ready for this one telling moment. I was ready.

*Except for one thing, our accompaniment. I flipped through my cassettes looking for a moment too long for just the right fanfare for the new person. Finally I settled on Gustav Holst's *The Planets* and returned to the bedroom. Within a half-hour (the tape was on "Saturn") I caught the baby as it slipped from its mother's womb.*

It was a little girl. She looked around, blinked once, and sighed with relief.

Ahh, she said.

And I held her up to look at her, to gaze into her dark, solemn eyes. I felt tears racing up my face. She felt like butter to me, impossible to be so soft and so prudent. How insipid all my worries suddenly seemed, how self-referential when all along this marvelous person was boring into existence out of next to nothing, a gob of germ, calling to itself such completeness.

I thought about how hard it was for a person to come into being. Hard on the mother and hard on the father, too. Judgment that you had planned on isn't there any more. The you that was is someone new now, everyone is new. I saw how all my convolutions and worries were maybe my way of drawing fire from the real action, which was now in my arms, blinking at the silent bedroom full of people, this hungry life, my heart.

There is honor in a newborn's eyes. It seemed to me there was honor everywhere, nobility and valor filling every seam and every interstice of the world. I forgave everyone everything, total amnesty, and after, champagne.

I snipped the cord and laid the girl on her mother's heaving breast.

"This is Daniele," I heard myself say, patting the still-wet skin.

August, 1984