

The Good Mother: An Abortion Parable

By Kris Bercov
1993

I know
before she tells me
that you're in there

women always know

our bodies talk to us
when we take the time
to listen

I didn't ask
for you

It must have been
one of those reckless nights
when I was trying
to be free

free of caring
free of it always being
my job

free of being
the reminder
that sex has a price
and women,
mostly,
pay it

I'm paying now

It's morning
and the nurse
is telling me
you're here

and I'm trying
to pretend
my life
will ever be

the same

"Do you know
what you'll do?"
she asks me
"You mean
am I gonna keep it
or kill it?"

I want to shock her
for some reason

and I leave
before she can say
another word

It's none of her business

It's nobody's business
but mine

Why can't those people
get that straight
quit trying to take away
the little women have---
that tiny bit of say
left us
when they snatched
our bodies
in the name of God
and the almighty penis

It took me years
to find out
who my body really belonged to

years to figure out
I was barely in it

years to even
want
to come back

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and now
here I am
sharing it
with you

Who are you,
anyway?

One side says
you hardly exist at all---
that you're just some
mass of cells
which could be human
someday

The others?
They're busy
trying to give you
legal status

Personhood,
they call it

Personhood...

I wonder how you
could have something
I haven't gotten
myself
yet!

You know,
in the middle
of the "Big War"
out there
nobody cares
what I think
or feel

and I can barely
hear
myself

A new day...

Are you still here?

I think you were
in my dreams last night
I saw this little girl
swimming around
inside me
looking for
a way out

looking for
just a tiny speck
of light
in all this darkness
and I find myself
wondering
was that really *you*

or just me
wishing
life
wasn't
so
damn
hard
sometimes

What's hardest is

I don't want
to tell the truth

I don't want
to tell you
or myself
or anyone else
that I'm committing
a crime against womanhood:

I don't want you.

There.
I said it and haven't been
struck down
by God
or my country

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I don't want you
and you deserve
to be wanted

I don't want you
and come to
think of it

I don't much care
what you deserve
because / deserve
not to want you

Of course,
that's not what Hallmark
would tell you
Hallmark would say
I'm a mother now
and mothers show
unconditional love
and give you
the rest of their lives
once you're even
a pinprick
inside them

I say
(now that I'm beginning
to hear myself)

that I'm not a mother
unless I decide
to be one

(I don't care *what's*
swimming around
inside me!)

unless / decide
I have something
to give
to somebody

The truth is
I've just started
to fill up
after years of obeying
the first commandment
for women:

THOU SHALT PUT
EVERYONE ELSE
BEFORE THYSELF!

In fact,
thou shalt nor
even *have*
a self

I gave so much away
to so many people
for so long
my body just stopped one day
and wouldn't move
out of the bed
and if it wasn't
for my best friend, Janey,
I wouldn't be up now

I would have just
closed my eyes
and not cared
if they ever opened

and if it wasn't for Janey
coming by
and shaking me
and holding me
and telling me

I mattered

Just for me,
she said

I mattered

and I got up
off that bed
for the first time knowing
what was killing me

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and what I had to do
to come alive

and I'm not going
back there

not for you
or anyone

so I guess
that's all there is
to say
about that

* * * * *

Janey told me
where to call

a clean place,
she said

a clean place
so you don't feel
all the dirtiness?

Even though
it's legal now
I have this fear
someone's gonna
handcuff me
on my way in
and put me away
somewhere

just calling
I feel myself
cringe
but the voice
on the other end
is pretty neutral
just makes me a time
and asks some questions
and tells me
how much money
I should bring

"You mean
it's not free?"

I joke
but she keeps talking
and you can tell
she's been through this
a thousand times before

So we hang up
and now
all I have to do is

wait

til I'm eight weeks,
she said

til *I'm* eight weeks?

as if I'm the one
doing the growing
and not this
whatever-it-is
inside me
which according to her
isn't big enough yet
to take out

There must be
a better way

that new pill maybe
if it ever gets over
the mountain of fear
society has
that we women
might really
have ourselves

When will they get
that it's *my* body
my country

they're trying to invade

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and that any child
they make me keep
against my will
is a rape of
Who I Am!

* * * * *

Life goes on

I don't tell anyone
but Janey

It's not like
you hear women saying

"Oh, I had an abortion
yesterday..."

It's more like a big secret
everybody keeps
from everybody else

I can play the game

no one will ever
know the difference

I keep to myself
where I work
anyway

why bother
to change that
now?

* * * * *

One more week.

Funny
how you really can
just keep on
like nothing's changed
while all the time
something's getting bigger
inside you
and you're staying
one step ahead

of being that mother
you're not
cut out
to be

Sometimes I wonder
what it would be like
to want you

but I can't get there
and it makes no sense
to try

I think a woman just knows
when it's her time

when she has
that extra dose of love
ready to spill out of her
and pour over a child

not like it was
for my mom
barely knowing herself
when I came along
trying to squeeze
whatever I could
out of a desert

and her,
never quite sure
what was hers
and what was mine

I still don't believe
I have a right
to be here

and I'm sure as hell
not passing
that question along
to anyone

* * * * *

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I dreamed last night
I went to the clinic
and it was boarded up
and covered with graffiti
saying "NO MORE DEAD BABIES!"
and "WE WON, AT LAST!"

and I fell to my knees
and gave birth
right there
on the dirt

except it was
a grown woman
coming out of me

stillborn

not a chance
of a breath
in her

and I took her
in my arms
and rocked her
and knew,

in that moment
they'd won
more than a battle

Waking up
I realize
no matter what
we have
to win
the war

* * * *

I hurry
to get dressed

This is the day
and I have to
get to the clinic
and make sure
the door
is still open

I go by myself

Janey wanted to come
but it's just minor surgery
after all
nothing for her
to miss work over
or sit around
waiting
the four to six hours
they said I'd be

I drive up
to the place
and look to see
if any of those people
you hear about
are there
waving signs

and doing
whatever else
they do

but nobody's around
except some woman
like me being dropped off
by her boyfriend, I guess

I don't miss the signs
or the people carrying them
but I do think about

all those folks
who claim to be
for a woman's
right to choose

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some 70 to 80 percent
of Americans, they say
and I wonder
where *they* are today,
why they aren't around
to keep things safe

I imagine they're at home
watching their TVs

damn it

sometimes
it isn't enough
just to believe
in something

The next thing I know
I'm in the door
and swimming in paperwork

You'd think
I was signing
my life away

"No, just someone else's,"
those anti's would say

I don't know why
I can't seem
to get their voices
out of my head

seems like nobody's
over sixteen

I feel ashamed
of my thirty years

like I should have
known better

of course,
it's always our fault
no matter how old we are

First,
we aren't supposed to
want sex---

saying that "No" which according to men
really means,
"Come on,"
and if we plan for it
we're whores
but if we don't
and end up
like me
we're just getting
what we deserve...

Whoever said
it wasn't GREAT
to be a woman?

Somebody calls my name
and my stomach turns over

For the first time
I think I'm scared
wishing I could just
pay my money
and have the doctor
wave a magic wand
and have it be over

a redheaded lady
takes me into a small room
and says she has to
go over my chart
and ask a few questions

"Just get it over with,"
I want to say
but she seems to
want to chat--
to warm me up,
I guess

but doesn't she understand

I'm cold inside
I'm cold

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I let one person in
a few months ago
(the so-called father
I bet you've been wondering
about him)

and nobody else gets through
(he left me when he heard)

for a long time to come

(especially some stranger
I'll never see again)

"Are you comfortable
with your decision?"
I hear her ask me

You mean
do I like the idea
of coming to
some strange place
and spreading my legs
so a doctor can
poke around and
vacuum my insides out?

"Sure",
is all
I really say

I heard you
have to be careful
not to show
any signs of doubt
so they won't think
you'll freak out
on the table
and make trouble

You just have to be
a little soldier
and march through
your abortion
without batting an eye

without giving anybody
cause to think
it might be
a little hard

or you might have
a second thought

even
for a believer

That's all right

I've always been
a good soldier

All the time
Daddy played with me
that way

I just pretended
I was somewhere else
and it didn't bother me
at all

"That'll be \$300."

I must have passed the test
because she takes my money
and leads me to another room

It seems like
a hundred more rooms
until I get
to the final waiting area
where me
and six other women
sit and pass nervous smiles
back and forth
trying to keep warm
in our little flowered gowns

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one blonde-haired girl
looks like she's about to
jump out of her skin
and I find myself
wanting to pat her
or hug her
or take her home with me
like you would
a stray cat

she looks too young
to be going through this--
only a child herself
and I wonder
how her small mind
will make sense
of this big decision

this going against the grain
of every woman's
supposed calling

I know I can manage

but who'll be around later
to help her
learn
how to
live
with
herself...

Just then
they call a name
and my little blonde
is taken off
leaving me
to deal with my body
which is telling me
it doesn't like
being here--
carrying it's own signs
which warn:
"Keep your goddamned hands
off me!"

and I think again of how many times
our bodies
are somebody else's
territory to probe
and prod
and penetrate with no defense--
even the word "No"
doesn't belong
to us

and even though
it looks like
this time
I have a choice
(after all,
I brought myself
to this place)

I realize that
to really choose
you have to be free

free of all the woman-hate
we breathe everyday
and turn on ourselves
without even knowing

and when I hear my name
I almost can't move--
lost and frozen, I am,
in my own dark thoughts--
until a voice inside me
whispers:
"This is a step
towards freedom...
Don't stop yourself now!"

And I know
that though I can't change
what happens to women

I can choose
how I carry myself
through that door

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So I stand up
and hold my head high
and march in line
with that nurse
and shake the doctor's hand
(trying not to notice
it's a man)

They have me
lie down on a table
feet in those stirrups
we can't seem
to get away from

and then
I just leave my body
like I know so well
how to do

and don't come back
until I hear
this loud machine
which means
it's almost over
and all of a sudden
something snaps in me
and I want to jump
off that table
and yell
"You can't do that
to my baby!"

and I hate them
for not telling me
that I'd feel like
I was supposed to
protect
the very thing
I've come
to have
destroyed

and that
this mass of cells
could turn baby
on you
at any time

and that it isn't
all that
textbook easy

when you're dealing
with the
human heart

But I don't say
any of this

I don't think
they want to hear it
and all I want
is to get
some of that
relief
you're supposed to feel
when it's over

They sit me in still another room
full of crackers
and tea
and take care
of my body--
I'm bleeding some--
while my mind
is left to take care
of itself

At one point
the nurse asks me
if I'm okay
and I think
for one second
of telling her
what happened to me
on that table

but I feel too foolish
like it isn't
part of the program

So I just
tuck it away
and bide my time

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Until can put
this day
behind me

forever

* * * *

It isn't too long
before I'm feeling
back to my old self again

back in the routine
of day to day to day

Every time
I find my mind
trying to wander
back to that table

I get busy
with something

What else
is there
to do?

* * * *

It works
for a while

until I have this dream

until I dream of some woman
having an abortion

I'm standing at the foot of the table she's
on
and this conveyor belt
is carrying her dead baby
towards me
except it's all
in one piece--
and curled up on itself
and sweet looking

and I don't want
that woman to see it

I try to distract her

and then the baby
falls into a trash can
full of other babies

and I'm angry
and thinking
the least they can do
is empty their garbage

I wake up
holding my stomach
and still seeing
those babies

and know somehow
I've been fooling myself
thinking it was
over

It's Saturday
so I have the whole day
to think my way through
this mess I'm in

It takes a while
just getting past
the thought
that I shouldn't
be feeling
this way
at all

Does this dream mean
I've made a mistake?

That those anti's
were right
and I had no business
playing God?

Have I done something
I'll be paying for
the rest of my life?

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And I remember
that feeling I'd had
on the table--
that I should be
protecting my baby
and how that was
the first time
I'd even though the word
"Baby"
which somehow didn't fit
with what I believed

with what I thought
I *had* to believe

or maybe I'd just been
too scared
to believe anything
at all

And now here's this baby
coming towards me
in my sleep

like it's asking
for something

and just thinking about it
makes me start to cry
and the next thing I know
I'm screaming

"What do you want from me?"

and the tears won't stop
(and I'm not one to cry)

and I'm not even sure
what I'm crying for...

that woman
in the dream
or her baby
or all those babies
thrown away
like day-old trash
or that blonde-haired girl
or those people
who carry signs
or women just like me
who are just trying
to do what's right
or all the mixed-up people
who make such a mess
of this life
we've been given
or for myself
and how alone
I feel
with it all

Something moves me
to pick up the phone
and call Janey--
who shows up
in ten minutes
after hearing my voice

and for the second time
she takes me in her arms
and holds me

and in that way of knowing
she always has
she says:
"You're sad about that baby,
aren't you?"
and I start crying

even harder
but this time
for that eight-week fetus
I barely said hello to

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I couldn't, you see,
because if it was a baby
and I got rid of it
that makes me
the lowest thing on earth,
a cruel, heartless woman--
the worst mother
of them all

"My baby's gone,"
I hear myself whisper
"and I can't ever
get her back."

"Is that what
you really want?"
Jane asks me,
"To get her back?"

And I slow my tears
and let that thought in

Would I really want
that baby?

And I remember
that I'd already answered
that question
months ago
and not a thing
in my life
had changed

"No, it's not
that baby I want, Janey.
I just don't want
all this god awful
heartache

We talk for hours

And slowly I realize
that who I thought I was
has been shattered
into a million pieces
and somehow
I have to find a way
to put myself
back together again

"What's the hardest part
of all this?"
Jane asks me

and it takes me awhile
to bring myself
to say the words aloud

The worst part,
I tell her,
is that I feel like
a murderer...
a bad mother...
like this letter "A"
is gonna show up
on my chest
for everyone to see

I still can't believe
it's me
saying these words

But I know now
that no matter how hard
I'd tried to pretend
that I was fine
another part of me
had come through my dreams
to tell me different

to tell me
I've been carrying feelings
bigger and deeper
than I'd ever wanted to
or ever thought I could
face

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I also know
that I have
to find a way
out of the shame
eating away at me
that doesn't mean
taking back
what I've worked
so hard for

My right
to be the only one
to say
what goes into
or comes out of
my body...

that something else
has to happen here

besides me
spending my days
repenting or
searching
for some dead child

And then Janey asks me:
"What if you really
weren't a bad mother?
What if you were
a good mother
after all?"

"A good mother?"
I say

"Yes," she repeats.
A good mother.
A woman who makes
a responsible decision--
for herself and
her child."

"Even if it means
abortion?" I ask

"Even if it means abortion."

A good mother.

Just hearing
these words
I feel a mending
inside me

like something
ripped out of me
is being put back...

my Self!

that's what it is
that ME
I've been working
all my life
to hold on to

that me
trying to be more
than somebody else's
mother

"A good mother."
I need to hear myself
say it again

"Well, what do you think
all this struggling
is about," Jane asks
"If you were
really irresponsible
and just didn't care?"

And I feel the truth
of something powerful
being born in me

the truth
of all the love
I'd closed the door on

my love
for that little fetus
I'd had to refuse

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my love
for my body
and the way
it could create
and my love
for myself

doing for me
what had to be done

And I sit with that
a while

in awe of the way
life can turn around
and be there for you
just when you thought
everything was lost

Then I see
that dream baby
coming towards me again
and I know right away
what she's wanting
from me

"I want to
give her a name,"
I tell Janey

"You really *do* think
it was a girl, don't you?"

And I tell her how
when I was pregnant
I'd dreamed
of a little girl
swimming inside me

"Yeah,
it was a girl," I say

"So what
will you call her?"
Janey asks

The name comes to me
right away

"Catherine.
I think I'll call
her Catherine,
after my favorite
grandmother."

"Is there anything
you want her to know?"
she asks me

And I feel
the tears again
as I picture
this little girl
who would never be
and I imagine
talking to her
and telling her
how sorry I am
that I wasn't
ready for her
and that she'll never
get to grow up
and have a life
but that I'd done
what I thought was best
for both of us
and that was all
anyone could hope to do

Most importantly,
I tell her
that I love her
and that she'll
always have
a special place
reserved for her
in my heart

Just talking to her
this way
I feel a peace
coming over me

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and soon I know
I'm ready to say good-bye

A *real* good-bye
this time--
the kind
that can only come
after a real hello

good-bye to her

and good-bye
to motherhood
(at least for now)

and especially good-by
to anyone who thinks
they know
what makes
a good mother

Then I thank Janey
for being such a friend
to my pain--
one of the worst pains
of being a woman
there might be

and I realize
I couldn't have gotten
through this
without her

that we really
can't make it--
especially through the tough times--
alone

When she leaves
I fall into a deep sleep
and dream,
this time,
of a group of women standing over that
trash can
full of babies

and they pick them up
in their arms--
all those children
they just weren't
prepared for--and carry them
to an altar
made of the finest marble
and covered with flowers
and one by one
they lay their babies down
between the blossoms
and hold on to each other
and grieve
for those precious sacrifices
they made
for the sake
of the already born

and behind them
I see a community
of men, women, and children
coming to pay homage
to these women for
their heart-rending choices

and share with them
in their mourning

and help them
to bury and honor
their dead

and last,
but not least,
to give
their sacred promise
to work together
for a world
where all babies
are wanted
and all people
are truly free

and I wake up
from this dream

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knowing
we can't keep quiet
anymore

that abortion
is the next secret
to be spoken
and brought to healing

the next "dark night"
to learn to
love ourselves through

as we take
this long road

Home

-end-