

## Pregnancy and Other Natural Disasters

In February of 1997, I discovered I was pregnant. The timing, I thought, couldn't have been better. I was thirty-five years old. I had a home base, a loving partner, and my second book of fiction nearly ready to turn in. After almost twenty years of collecting passport stamps and bad relationships and a list of outdoor adventures so long it was getting hard to keep them separate in my memory, I believed I was ready to hang up my backcountry skis and my whitewater rafts and my whole collection of Lonely Planet Wilderness Travel Guides. I believed I was ready to excel at the mostly indoor sport of motherhood. I believed I was ready to grow up.

For the first few weeks of the pregnancy I was happy, or at least able to convince myself I was. But during the second month a depression settled in around me that by the third month had turned suicidal. My doctor said mood swings were common but I couldn't make him understand that I wasn't swinging. I was down in a hole so deep I couldn't get out of bed in the morning, and sometimes not even in the afternoon. I was in a place so dark that none of the things that usually

heal me—the sight of the mountains outside my window, or Van Morrison's "Caravan," or even the stupid pet tricks of my Irish wolfhound—could make me glad to be alive.

*Things will improve in the second trimester*, my friends told me, but I couldn't even see how to make it through the day. I woke up each morning more and more sure that my life was over, that I had been handed a death sentence, and that even if I somehow lived through the pregnancy, the delivery, and the first few years of motherhood, my life would be devoid, for all that time, of everything I loved: grueling Himalayan treks, frigid winter camping trips, and the class 5 whitewater rivers that for so many years had energized and defined me. And as shallow and selfish as that might sound to anyone who has given up or greatly modified an active outdoor life to have children, the truth is that I didn't know how to exist without looking toward the next adventure. Those days and nights spent risking life and limb on the ocean, in the mountains, and down the rivers had been the things that let me know I was alive for as long as I could remember, and without them I didn't know who I was.

If those worries weren't enough to make me feel as unmotherly and superficial and generally awful about myself as I ever had, there was also the fear of watching my body change into something I could neither count on nor recognize. *Nine months up*, the books said, *nine months down*, possibly more for women over thirty, and though weight gain during pregnancy is hardly something a healthy person should hold against herself, I did, and in a big way. *A fat girl is nothing but a fat girl*, my mother used to say as she squeezed herself into her girdle every morning, *no matter what else she accomplishes in her life*.

Of all the misguided rules for living that my mother handed down to me, that is the one I think about most often, every time a bite of food leaves the fork and enters my mouth.

It wasn't just that my body was bigger than usual that scared me, but that it had become, almost overnight, completely useless as well. *Don't lift that*, is what I heard a hundred times a day from everyone around me, or *Don't push it*, every time I went out to hike or bike or ski. But I had always pushed it, and I didn't know how not to. I shoveled a few inches of snow out of my driveway at five weeks, bled all weekend and very nearly miscarried, and the doctor gave me such a lecture I was afraid to do anything after that. (I didn't even tell him that it was twenty-four inches of snow and that my driveway is a quarter mile long.) The challenge seemed to be to give up my strength and fitness for the better part of two years without drowning in self-hatred, and it was quickly becoming clear that I wasn't up to the task.

I understand now, half a year later, that much of what I was feeling in those early months of pregnancy was out of my control, a psychologically recognizable condition caused by a combination of hormones that soared and plummeted far more than they should have in what doctors call a "normal" pregnancy, and an entire childhood's worth of my own repressed memories that were fighting their way to the surface of my consciousness, trying to break through. I understand also that to say my fear of pregnancy was about having to give up outdoor adventures in remote locations is exactly the same as saying I love the jagged edges of danger—the rapids at high water, the back of a young horse in an open pasture when he's in turbodrive—because they make me feel

excited and alive. Both statements are truths, but only partial ones. And the deeper truth behind them turns out to be the same.

I grew up in a house that was filled with anger and bitterness, so much rage that I was afraid nearly all of the time. The violence in my house was bred of resentment—my mother's resentment over sacrificing a promising acting career to get pregnant, my father's resentment over many things, including giving up his most-eligible-bachelor status to marry my mom. If we believe the theory—and I do—that we repeat our childhood traumas over and over as adults until we get them worked out, that is at least one explanation for why I keep finding myself in the middle of all those tornadoes and hypothermic 3:00 a.m.s and all those near misses with grizzly bears. It also explains why I was so afraid to give them up.

The only other time I was pregnant, my mother said, *You have a very special talent that sets you apart from most other women, and if you give it all up to have this baby you will become indistinguishable from every other woman on the face of the earth.* I didn't know exactly what she thought my talent was. If it was writing, surely having a baby wouldn't stop me from doing that. But the thing that seemed to set me apart from most people—even from most writers—is what I wrote about most often: trekking at sixteen thousand feet in Bhutan where I thought I'd had a heart attack, guiding a wild sheep hunt in Alaska that ended when a mud slide took our tents and supplies and almost our pack mules into the Sagavanirktok River, rafting down the Colorado during the highest water in a decade and flipping my raft in the rapid known as Satan's Gut.

Having a baby *would* have made it much harder to do those things, and if I didn't have those things to write about, would there have been anything else? I didn't know the answer, but the question terrified me enough to have an abortion, which I did in a clinic where I stared at a picture of a sailboat on the wall the whole time. Less than a year later, I was on a sailboat that looked just like it, fighting off Hurricane Gordon for two solid days in the middle of the Gulf Stream, ninety miles—but it might as well have been a thousand—off the Florida Coast.

What I realize now, several years after my mother's death, is that when she gave me her advice she had been talking not about me but about herself, and all that she had given up to have me. The abortion stands in the regret category of my memory, although when I add up the adventures, emotional and physical, I've had since then, they make a pretty good case for a decision that may have been arrived at poorly, but turned out, in the end, all right. And the reason I seek out adventures that come equipped with their own natural disasters turns out to be the same reason I was so afraid to have a baby. There is only one story of our lives and we tell it over and over again, in a thousand different disguises, whether we know it or not.

In late April, I had a miscarriage, and though part of my experience was sadness and loss, my overwhelming emotion was relief, like I had been given some kind of reprieve to figure out the answers to all the questions the pregnancy raised. Can I alter my definition of adventure to include sports that are several steps removed from real danger? Can I give my body eighteen months to be heavy and out of shape without

dissolving in self-loathing and disgust? Will motherhood turn out to be an even more satisfying adventure than the ones I've had so far? Will I be able to work with my own childhood memories thoroughly enough to break the chain of violence and resentment that was so much a part of my past? Is it possible that in spite of (or because of) everything I've said here, the undeniable truth about me is that I can't now and will never be able to resist the sharp teeth of adventure?

What I can say with confidence is that I'm working on the answers, and will continue to, whether or not I decide to get pregnant again. In the meantime, I'm lining up a few more adventures. I'm going in December to ride with the gauchos in Patagonia. I'm thinking about another early-spring dogsleding trip on Alaska's North Slope. I hike in the mountains near my house every day, and try to come down before the afternoon lightning starts to crackle above me and raise the hair off the back of my neck, before it slams into the tundra only a few feet away from me and makes me run as if from God himself. I don't always make it below tree line before the real trouble starts, but I'm getting better at anticipating the oncoming storm. I hear it telling me in advance to take care and take cover, and more and more often these days I do.