

The Scent of Almond Oil

Morning brings the scent of sweet almond oil.

Within days of Sophie's arrival we established a routine, to help bring order to our overturned lives, to keep ourselves moored. Wrapped in a hooded, yellow towel like a fairytale troll, Sophie is carried to the kitchen sink. We ease her into the warm water, lather her with words, wash the sleep off her skeptical face. A quick bath and she's back on her change table, naked and vulnerable. We dry her flossy hair. We rub almond oil into her plump body, careful not to miss the doughy folds, the long, supple fingers, the edible toes.

Sophie's morning massage is as much for my sake as it is for hers. Most of her days are spent adrift in sleep or by the hearth of her mother's breast. Fathers can do many things, but even the most confident of our lot cannot breastfeed. As a nursing mother bonds with her child, a father can only watch. Touching Sophie, skin to skin, keeps me close. Without the morning massage I feel disconnected, off-balance.

Mornings are different, now that they are always the same. The same ritual, the same reassuring rhythms. Sophie has slipped into my life the way she slipped into the world one late December evening, effortlessly filling a gap I hadn't known was there, until she arrived.

First born children are often late. Sophie arrived a week early. I thought I had time to clear out my office to make room for her crib, her dresser, a closet-full of doll-like outfits. Babies, I quickly learned, live according to no one's schedule but their own. Due dates be damned. She was ready to come out.

Sunday morning. My wife has lost her mucous plug. In the veiled fog of five a.m., I stagger through the index of a reference book on our night table. "Mucous plug" is one of the phrases new parents utter when they are learning how to talk. *Dilated, episiotomy, placenta?* The words sit in our mouths like strange candy. A "cork" of mucus seals the opening of the uterus, shielding the baby from infection. The plug can dislodge a week or two before the first real contractions, or just as labour begins. Relief washed over me. This wasn't labour, I repeated to myself. We had another week, probably two. A few hours later, Kathy's water broke. I surfaced from the deep river of denial.

By noon the next day we were in hospital, our plans for a home birth derailed by slow contractions and concern when the baby's heartbeat decelerated. By seven-thirty that evening, intense contractions seized Kathy's body. "Labour" barely begins to describe the process, the Herculean exertion I witnessed. An epidural had given Kathy time to sleep, time to regain her strength for the long journey ahead in the company of some very fine women: the midwife, the student midwife, a nurse, the doctor.

And one anxious man. I held my wife's hand, wiped her brow, whispered the words. I thought she needed to hear. With every push, the baby inched forward. After three and half hours, a head peeked through, slick and black-haired. Kathy and I caressed our daughter's soft head, unreal beneath our fingertips.

The rest of her head slowly emerged. The doctor coaxed her out, wedging her fingers beneath the umbilical cord Sophie wore like a collar. She slipped out with a wet slap, kitten-like, the umbilical cord trailing like a leash. I cut the cord, surprised by the texture, more like a rope than a sausage. Sophie was placed on her mother's stomach, lulled by the familiar heartbeat that had soothed her in the womb. A nurse carried her to a table flooded with bright light. She was covered with vernix, a cheesy film that coats the fetus in the uterus. I put my bare hand on her body. She was ten minutes old. I wanted to cover her, hold her, warn her. After she had been tagged and swathed, I held her in my arms and told her she was loved. I gave her to Kathy. Guided by the midwife's knowing hands, Sophie groped for her mother's breast. Mother and child were reunited.

I followed the nurse to watch Sophie get weighed, anxious not to let my daughter out of my sight, haunted by tales of babies switched at birth or snatched by desperate hands. I had been a father for barely an hour, and already the molten instincts of parenthood had turned to steel.

The first week of her life was spent on a windless island of warm blankets and soft pillows. Our bedroom became our world, Sophie its tender core. Nothing else mattered. Winter is an ideal time to bring a newborn home. A merciless, bitter cold is the perfect excuse to retreat, to shelter the child from hostile elements. We needed time to get to know each other, to adapt, to soak in the newness.

Trial and error. Sophie is a few days old. Kathy gently asks me if I knew I had been diapering our daughter backwards. Diapers for newborns don't come with detailed instructions, but there is a notch to accommodate the umbilical cord. For the diaper-challenged, playful pictures on the waistband make it difficult to diaper backwards. Difficult, but not impossible.

Before she was born, I vowed my daughter would learn a valuable lesson about the virtues of independence at a very young age. I was determined she would sleep in the crib down the hallway after a few nights in our room. Then I held Sophie for the first time, and my convictions dissolved. No one could pry my daughter from my arms. She slept between us, a swaddled bundle bracketed by her parents. A week and half passed before we surrendered her to a basket beside our bed.

The hunger for sleep left my limbs unhinged and my mind frayed. Impatience feeds on the soil of an overtired parent. Rocking Sophie at an hour when everyone else was basking in sleep, I was sure she was willfully keeping me awake, as though this small creature could distinguish between night and day. I tried to reason with her, blindly hoping she would latch onto logic as though it were a breast. Outside, street lamps spilled lame, yellow light onto silent sidewalks.

Inside, my wide-eyed daughter lay in the hammock of my arms, her piercing, animal eyes shining in the dark. Impatience yielded to awe.

I had fallen in love again. But this was unlike any emotions tapped by a lover. A baby doesn't come with a messy past, a history of tangled relationships, any of the warning signals that caution us to keep part of our soul on reserve. Unconditional love flows effortlessly towards a newborn. Sophie's every gesture inflates my heart. Her face alone makes for enthralling entertainment. Give her sixty seconds, and she appears to span the spectrum of human emotions without saying a word: curiosity, fear, contentment, apprehension. I marvel at the sounds that issue from her tiny lips. Late at night, I bend over and listen to the song of her shallow breaths, astonished she began as two cells.

The magnetic pull of her eyes, the draw of her tiny body was a force I had never anticipated. Soon after Sophie arrived, I asked Kathy if being a parent for the first time had brought any surprises. She paused, then spoke of the depth of love she felt for our daughter. Some depths defy measurement and cannot be gauged. In Sophie's absence, I feel her presence: Disney facecloths drying in the bathroom, an empty swing in the living room, a tiny, wool hat draped over a chair.

Shackled to my love for Sophie is a numbing fear. A friend of mine who is a mother of two told me she can't bear to watch another movie about missing children. Now that I have a child of my own, the world beyond our front door teems with landmines. Predators lurk in schoolyards, waiting to swoop. As a female, Sophie will face more threats than if she were a boy, who grows up and takes all the rights that are owed to her for granted, never thinking twice about walking alone at night or standing at a lonely bus stop. Fear is its own prison. We are unable, and unwilling, to keep Sophie insulated from harsh realities. We can only hope she receives the strength to carry on.

Within days of her birth Sophie's maternal grandparents arrived from the Maritimes, buffeted by the boundless hope a new child brings into the world. Sophie's circle was widening. When she was six weeks old, we took her from Toronto to Montreal to visit my parents.

My father was at a rehabilitation center, having lost a leg. I knew he was feeling diminished, less than complete. I knew the mere sight of Sophie would restore him, give him something that could never be taken away. I am his youngest child. For the first time in my life, I am both a son and a father. The angels of continuity hovered in the room as I handed my father my first born to cradle in his arms, as he had once held me.

Right now, my life is entwined in an inseparable braid, a strand each for Kathy, Sophie and me. Slowly, the braid unravels. In a matter of months, she went from our bed to a bedside basket to a crib in a room of her own. For every new stage of her life, another is left behind, discarded, never to be retrieved. Parents are left to sift through the remains. It's all so bittersweet, but I'm beginning to understand one of the cruel ironies of parenthood: preparing our children from the time they arrive for the day when they leave.

Some day, Sophie will be out on her own, with no memory of this time of her life. Who can remember being rocked at three in the morning? It is not for her sake that I became a father, but for mine. She arrived to be appreciated, a gentle reminder not to let the miraculous become mundane.

The profound joys and sorrows of fatherhood will change as Sophie does. Soon she will crawl, then walk, then run. There will be no stopping her. We will weather the tempests that carve a swath between parent and child. Through all the changes, expected and unpredictable, an immutable truth runs beneath the surface of our relationship, steady and sure as a river: she will always be my daughter, and I her father.

Some day, I must be sure to tell her what she means to me. Some day, Sophie will be a young woman, and I will be an old man. I will bring my fingers to my mouth like a newborn, searching for the smell of almond oil.

Emil Sher

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