AIMS For a better birth...

Postpartum: A short story

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Editor's note: *This is a fictional account of the state of mind of a mother suffering postnatal illness. As such, it is a powerful and disturbing piece which some people could find triggering, so please consider its likely impact on you before deciding whether to read it. The following are sources of support for anyone affected by postnatal illness: Home – PANDAS Foundation UK, APNI - Association for Post-Natal Illness | Post Natal Depression*



By Lizzy Lister

I know you're reading this Gracie, you nosy cow. I am melting the ice caps on Greenland for you Gracie. Your house will be underwater in no time. Yes Gracie, I'm doing this for you. Watch that sea rising. Just you wait.

I don't know why I hate her so much. Maybe I blame her. Or maybe it's because she represents control.

The forces of control, the forces of control are gathering… around our heads. That's going in the book. It's an Au-Pairs lyric, one from my inner juke-box. *They're tapping our phones, tapping our phones, you can be sure that… they've seen us.*

Write all your thoughts in the book, says Gracie, it will be just for you. *No-one else will read it.* Like I'd believe that.

Sometimes I write things specially in the book for Gracie. *I take a scalpel and peel away the lemon curd of her eyelids.* It pleases me to imagine her sneakily looking and shuddering as she reads. Power to the people.

Because let's face it, there's not much power otherwise. Except there is for me. I control the world.

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July 13th. The day I discovered my gift. I'd burned my hand, held it over a gas ring. It smarted satisfactorily. I rubbed it with Vaseline and tea-tree oil, giving it a ruby gloss. I was admiring the result when Gav comes in with his phone. "It's sixty degrees in Spain" he says. "Look, here's the thermal satellite image. See that little white spot. That's Madrid."

That map. Why is it so familiar? I look down at my burned palm; the contours, the lines, in the centre a little blister; Madrid on the map. A burning blister, tiny and white. I grab a pin, try to pop it. It doesn't work. A blob of blood rises, lava-like. I wipe it off, compare my hand against his phone. Definitely the same.

"Are you okay?" Gav asks. "What have you done to your hand?" I don't know. Am I okay?

Gav hasn't been the same since *the incident*. We don't talk about that. Just outside things; Ukraine, train strikes, the cost of pears in Lidl.

Am I okay? I don't know. "I need the toilet." A sudden urge to retch.

I sit in the bathroom for a while. I don't want to come out. I don't know what to say. I pretend it isn't happening, like it's *not really* me that made the heatwave. Like it's *something* else, something *out of my jurisdiction*.

When I was little, I had a host of tiny workers inside me. They organised everything; moving my jaw, sorting my thoughts into neatly laundered piles, pushing food about with tiny spades, whisking eggs in my grumbling tummy. Tiny bearded men in little leather aprons and green felt caps.

They came back again after Fay was born. They came back with thick book-binding thread to tie my insides back together. It was like heavy rope to them. They pulled so hard I had to bite my lip, stay silent, wait for it to be over.

It's been hard for Gav. I don't know why he stays. He bangs on the bathroom door.

"Pip are you okay?"
"I'm fine. Leave me alone."

I will be fine. I just need to think. I wash my hands. The water runs clear, stinging the burn. A notification pings on my phone. *Thirty-six die in small boats crossing the channel*. Thirty-six bodies floating down the plug hole, into sewers, into the sea.

I should have seen it coming; in the bucket, after the birth, that great pool of bloody urine lit up like a burning sunset. All the while clouds of smoke smothering France, Siberia, Scotland, Canada. I was oblivious to it all.

Oblivious. I don't know why. Exhausted I guess. The perfect home-birth, all nineteen hours, so much gas and air the midwives couldn't keep up. Hallucinating she'd been born; kaleidoscopes of greens and

browns, a voice saying *would you like some honey?* Gav, pleading *Can't someone do something?*

It keeps me awake at night. My power over the world. Silent power. I can't tell anyone. They already think I'm mad.

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Sometimes Gav looks at me like he can see everything.
"I just wish I knew how to make things better."
It's not him. It's me.

After the incident everyone avoided us. None of my friends called. No-one knew what to say. *Congratulations. A baby girl…* My parents responded with radio silence. Only my sister Kate insisted on visiting. I pushed her away but she kept coming. Held onto my flailing arms. Whispered "It's okay. It'll be alright. It'll all work out. It'll be okay."

I don't know why she still calls, but she does. "I was just passing." It's hardly on her way from work. I think she comes to see Gav. I hear them whispering in the kitchen. I know they are talking about me.

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Gav is going to work. His blue overalls stink of engine oil. I recoil from him. I don't want his pollution near me, tarnishing everything. He looks hurt. "I'll call at lunchtime to make sure you're okay. Don't forget Gracie is coming in today."

There are too many people in the world. I get a pin. Every jab will be one less. Jab jab jab; aids, hepatitis, ebola. It's easy to kill people you don't know. I can do two hundred a minute. A big patch of stinging red is forming on my thigh. I make it into the shape of Africa.

My wrist is aching and my thigh gloriously sore when the doorbell goes. I slip my skirt down over the raw patch. Don't want Nosy Parker asking questions. That's one good thing about NHS cuts. Less visits. Suits me.

"How are you feeling today?" Blah blah blah. What if she had to talk for a change? Her perfect life must be so boring.

I stare at her wedding ring. Her knuckles are swollen with arthritis. How old is she? Fifty-five? Sixty? Her ankles are thick above navy brogues, her brown curls flecked with grey. I wonder if she is someone's mother.

"Come on Pip. Give me an answer. How are you feeling today?"
"Fine."
"No more self harming?"
"No."
"Have you been keeping your journal?"

"Yes."
"Is there anything you would like to share?"

Would I like to share? *Yes. Today I killed four-thousand six-hundred people in Africa, then I created a tsunami in Japan by brushing my teeth. Later I intend to drown more innocent people seeking a better life, then as a diversion am considering starting a wildfire in Italy.*

"No."

I hear Gracie sigh. I know she is trying to hide her frustration from me. Trying her best to*Be Professional.*

"Pip, we do need you to help yourself."
"I am."
Another sigh.
"Have you eaten?"
"Yes."

Yesterday Gav made risotto. Mouthfuls of paddy fields drowning in rising seas, Bangladesh under water. I try not to swallow but I know he is looking at me. He is watching with that worried look he wears. I stretch each mouthful for as long as I can. Try not to cry. Apologise over and over in my head.*I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* My throat is unyielding. I force myself to swallow. Under the table I curl and uncurl my toes.

"Yes, I have."

I twist the skin of my wrists. Every twist makes a tank in Israel. It's a game I like to play with Gracie. My secret. She thinks we are innocently talking, while I am making war. Twist, another tank, twist, another tank. Little bruises moving through the desert, wiping out everything in their wake.

I know when Gracie leaves she'll get into her car and light a fag. Turn on the radio. Move on to the next visit. Probably open a bottle of wine when she gets home. I hope she does. I hope I stress her out.

*

Gav has returned. I hear him clanking around but I pretend he is not there. I am hiding under the duvet. I feel so tired. Killing people is hard work.

"I'm just making a cheese sandwich; would you like one?" he calls. He is whistling. I stay silent. If he thinks I'm asleep he might not disturb me.

He still insists on sharing our bed. Even though I shrink from him. Even though he knows what I am capable of. We do not talk about it. I hum a song to keep him away. It grows into a curtain of semiquavers and minims.

He is still there, persistent.

“Come on Pip. I know you’re awake. You need to eat. You’ve got to come out of this sometime.”

*

It wasn’t like they said it would be. *After the birth you will have a rush of endorphins, filling you with love.* All I felt was exhaustion. They put her to my breasts. I didn’t know what to do, how to feel. Just watched her, flailing her arms about.

They gave me a dose of oxytocin to reduce the bleeding. Then they filled in paperwork, quietly dismantled the baby resuscitation apparatus they’d set up. *Just as a precaution. It’s been a long tough labour for both of you.* It had been a long day for them too. *Placenta delivered. Tick. Vital checks. Tick.* I was glad when they left. Finally I could go to bed. Gav’s Mum was last to go. She leaned over. Kissed my forehead.

“Well done, Pip. You’ve made a little miracle. Make sure you get plenty of rest and Gav looks after you. You hear that Gav. Make sure Pip is well looked after.”

I think Gav was as relieved as I was that we were alone. A family at last. Gav doesn’t show much, but as he held Fay I could tell he was fighting back tears. We’d waited long enough for her. It had certainly been a journey.

A few minutes after they all left I collapsed. Gav carried me back to bed, brought over a bucket. All night the need to pass water was overwhelming, Water flushed with blood. Gallons of it. Gav slumbering in the chair, Fay nuzzling into his elbows.

They were busy in the days after. The little men. Pumping breastmilk all over my clothes. Sticking pins and needles into my flesh. Turning my breasts hard as pears. The feeding wasn’t working. My breasts were sore and my tummy covered in a red-raw rash. The Doctor said it might be scabies. I should stop feeding Fay, smear my body in a anti-parasitic lotion. Avoid holding her for twenty-four hours afterwards.

The midwife was furious. *It doesn’t look anything like scabies. How ridiculous. It’s a postpartum rash.*

After four days Gav went back to work. His Mum offered to come and help, but I didn’t want to put her out.

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The moths are back again. They are whispering in my ear. Since I stopped doing housework they have been carving labyrinths in our carpet. I trace my hand along the hessian underlay. *Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear.*

I run a lighter across the hairs on the back of my arm. I like the smell. Keratin. Today I am burning forests to the accompaniment of Manuel De Falla's Ritual Fire Dance on Spotify. I hum along as the music gathers pace; clarinet trills, dense strings, soaring piano, pounding timpani. My hair frizzes, crumbles into dust. *After forest fires the land grows back a chartreuse green. Some plants thrive on burnt soil. Pioneer plants. It's all part of a natural cycle.*

Natural cycle. Birth, marriage, death. Death. I no longer have any fear of it. It liberates me. I could do anything. It wouldn't bother me any more. I could die now. Quite happily.

Gav would be better off without me. He and my sister Kate. They'd be good together.

*

On the morning of *the incident* my mother phoned.

"How are you? Sorry I haven't called, but I'm flat out with parish council stuff. I'll try and get over next week, all being well. Did you get the flowers I sent? I was expecting a call to say they'd arrived."

"I did. Thank you. They're beautiful."

Actually I found the scent of lilies cloying. There were so many smells, it was one too many. The midwifes gave Fay a quick wipe-down after she was born, but I still hadn't managed to give her a bath. Her scalp was sticky. I buried my head into her downy crown. She had her own special aroma, sort of salty, like wet clothing left too long in the machine. Cracked waxy scales of cradle-cap were forming. I carefully picked them off. She was tiny in my arms.

Everything I do and say to her now will form who she becomes. Everything. I hear my mother's voice. It's up to you not to screw it up.

I was desperate for a cup of tea, but didn't want to risk scalding Fay. My stomach itched, my breasts ached and a sore was forming on my right nipple that was getting more and more painful. Fay wouldn't stop crying. I tried to get her to latch on, but it wasn't working. Spikes of pain with each futile effort. Breast is Best. Radio 2 was playing in the background. Climate change. Jeremy Vine. A woman on the end of the line passionately advocating turning to Jesus. God, I so wanted to sleep.

Fay was still wailing when I picked her up and went into the kitchen. I sat at the table, ineffectively attempting to feed her. Why does breastfeeding make you so thirsty? Awkwardly clasping her to my shoulder I grabbed my empty glass and shuffled to the sink.

What will happen to her? What happens when war in Ukraine spreads? When food supplies collapse? When fires burn, reservoirs run dry? How could we bring a child into This?

Gav had been pretty good looking after me, but domestic chores weren't really his thing. Unwashed plates languished carelessly in the sink, and on the top lay a black-handled knife, a Kitchen Devil,

remnants of cucumber flecking the blade's edge.

A sharp knife. A Kitchen Devil.
I don't know why. I don't know why it happened. It was calling.

Now! Use me! Now!
She won't suffer.
Quick! Quick!
Close your eyes
It's what she needs.
What she needs.
Strike!
Strike!
Strike!

When Gav returned three hours later she was still screaming, lying on her back in the Moses basket, the washed knife hidden in a drawer. He was shouting my name. "Pip!" Pip!" Louder and louder, closer and closer, his voice slow and stretched like he was swimming through thick, jellied water, empty boxes of paracetamol and fluoxetine littering the carpet with their promise of sleep, blissful, dreamless sleep.

*

Gav is putting his foot down. He's not used to it; he always relied on me making the decisions. Poor, easy-going Gav. Not so easy-going for him of late.

"Come on Pip. I know it's been tough, but we can't continue like this. It's been nearly three months. And we can't let our tenth pass without any kind of celebration. I've asked Kate so you've got some support. Just a couple of days. We could both do with a break. It's a beautiful lodge, right on the beach. Please don't resist Pip."

I let him do the packing. Sit watching from the arm of the settee. Decisions are all made for me these days. He packs my pills, the box helpfully printed with days of the week.*Monday Tuesday Wednesday*. A card *To My Darling Wife On Our Anniversary*.

*

Kate is burying me in sand. I am holding my breath, rigid with fear, attempting to save the world. In Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, sand-storms are rising, eyes smarting, lungs thick, mouths crammed with grit. In my head I am singing a protection charm. I close my eyes. Try not to scream. Sand-hoppers jump in and out of my hair. Tickle my scalp. I hear Kate laughing.

"Look Pip. The sea is almost at your toes."

I don't want them to, but they lever me out of my sand grave, straddle an arm over each shoulder, rush

me into the sea before I have time to scream.

This is it. This is the moment it ends. Our watery death.

The surf is cool. The shock of the cold water catching my breath. Gav and Kate are laughing. Go Pip. I can't speak, my whole body is shaking. A swell lifts my feet off the ground. I try to sink, finish it all. But I can't. I'm floating.

A jellyfish drifts past, a gigantic bloodshot eye, watching me. My foot scrapes against sharp rock teeth. Sunlight is playing tricks. Towards the cliff the sea shimmers like glass, to the harbour, nothing but grey.

Kate has picked up a piece of long thin seaweed.

"Look. Spaghetti. You can eat it."

She puts a piece in her mouth. She is far away, in another world. I tread water. Pockets of sun-warmed thermals melt the chill of deeper currents. I am an iceberg, slowly thawing.

I'm pushing back to shore, but as I get there the undertow catches me, drags me under, spits me out like a floundering sprat.

I wait for the tide to rise, to drown us, but nothing happens. The cliffs above. The village beyond. Nothing.

I'm laughing. I'm laughing so hard I can't stop, my whole body shakes. Then I'm crying, crying all the pain, the suffering, the drowning, the burning, the famine, the wars, Gav and Kate taking me by my arms and rushing me off the beach.

I must have slept for hours because when I wake it is dark. Gav is beside me, holding my hand. I do not shake him off. He strokes my forehead. I let him.

*

"You can stay in the car if you want. But as we're passing it would be rude not to call. They'd be hurt if we didn't."

Gav. Making decisions again. We pull up outside his parent's house.*I'm not ready*. I say. *You go.*

There's a tap on the window. Gav's Mum is there. She's holding a bundle of blankets. I screw my eyes shut. Pretend to sleep.

"Oh Pip. I can't let you be so close without seeing your daughter. Isn't she beautiful." It's too late. She's opening the door. Should have locked it.

"Look Fay. Here's Mummy. Look Pip. She's smiling at you."

I open my eyes a little. She is beautiful. Not red and screwed up and screaming any more. Her skin is pink and soft. She's looking at me, smiling. Making gurgling noises.

"I'm not going to make you hold her Pip, but just put out your finger. Feel her grip. She's getting lovely and strong."

Fay takes my finger, bobs it up and down. She is looking at me curiously, trying to catch my hair with her other hand. Gav's Mum is squatting beside me. She whispers "Yes, sweetie. It's your Mummy." I can feel the tears welling again. I am a failure. Gav's Mum hasn't finished.

"Pip you mustn't be hard on yourself. It was our fault for not insisting we came over to help. I know it frightened you, thinking you were going to hurt Fay, but you didn't, did you? You made sure she was safe. And she is safe. Look at her."

She wipes a tear from my cheek with her thumb.

"Pip we're delighted to have her. She can stay as long as it takes, but she's your daughter. Don't be a stranger. You know where we are. And then when you're ready…"

She tails off. I know she doesn't want to push it. I uncurl Fay's fingers. She goes to pull my hair again. She's blurred, but I sense she's still smiling.

*

Gav stands in the door. His overalls are freshly laundered, smell of lemons. Before he leaves he squeezes my shoulders. "I'll call at lunchtime. Don't forget Gracie."

Gracie arrives just after eleven. The journal is on my lap; I'm writing Leonard Cohen lyrics.*The birds they sang at the break of day. Start again, they seem to say.*

She looks tired. Her last visit must have been a tough one. I don't know why, but I suddenly feel sorry for her. It's not her fault her job is shit.

"Hello Pip. Can I come in? How are you feeling today?"
I don't know. How am I feeling today?

"I think I feel okay." I feel nervous, like I'm welcoming a playdate without really knowing how to entertain them. She follows me into the kitchen.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" I ask.

I'm surprised to notice Gracie is fighting back tears. I feel an overwhelming urge to put my arm around her, but stop myself just in time. She gives me her best professional-front smile.

"Yes please. Thank you Pip. That would be lovely."

END

Author Bio: Lizzy Lister is a poet, musician, artist, gardener, mother, eco-warrior, cyclist and sea swimmer who lives with her family in a railway station beside the Cornish mainline and for a hobby adds live soundtracks to silent films with the band Wurlitza.