DEPARTMENT OF AMPLIFICATION

Willa Raeburn: Born May 22, 2006

by Daniel Raeburn

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Around Christmas, 2004, my daughter, Irene, died in the final days of her gestation. My wife, Rebekah, decided not to have Irene's body removed by Cesarean section but instead to go through labor and delivery. She knew that this would give her a slightly better chance at carrying a baby successfully to term in the future. She delivered. Stunned, we carried on. The worst that could happen had already happened, and so, in a sense, we could no longer be afraid. Or so we thought.

Nine months after the stillbirth, Rebekah discovered that she was pregnant again. Almost nine long months after that discovery, her belly was as hard and freckled as a farm egg. The baby was in the breech position, and Rebekah was scheduled for a Cesarean. The appointed day dawned purple, as though the earth, holding its breath, were about to burst.

As I secured our empty infant carrier in the back seat of our car, a neighborhood madman shouted at Rebekah in his hoarse singsong. "Dirty whore!" he cried. "Filthy whore!" He brandished a greasy playing card before him like a talisman, blocking Rebekah from his line of sight. When we pulled up to a stop sign, the car behind us honked. The two young men inside, sporting gold jewelry and oversized clothing, glowered as they passed, their stereo pounding, *boom, boom, boom*. Lake Shore Drive was lined with police cars and sleek black vehicles. Choppers buzzed overhead. George W. Bush was visiting Chicago to proclaim progress in his war in Iraq.

Lake Michigan was as blue and untroubled as the sky. The leaves gleamed in the light; flowers, hairy with pollen, lolled under them. After we had passed downtown, I pulled over and parked. "Our last walk as a couple," I said. Rebekah removed her sandals to walk in the sand. We passed the relics of a fire: scorched driftwood, an abandoned tennis ball, and a lonely, upright beer bottle marking a mound in the sand. Closer to the shoreline, we walked amid sea glass, shells, tiny bones, fossils. Affluent moms jogged past, pushing all-terrain strollers that featured the emblazonry of mountain-climbing gear.

None of it seemed real.

The hospital did not assign us the room we had stayed in for Irene's birth, but the new room was identical. Rebekah said, "Does being here give you flashbacks?"

A burst of resonant oscillations came through the walls; it sounded as if we were underwater, listening to someone dribble a basketball. "A baby's heartbeat," Rebekah said.

A nurse attached Rebekah to a machine that broadcast our own child's submerged thrumming. A ribbon of thin graph paper oozed forth, marking the range of the heartbeat.

"Is this your first pregnancy?" the nurse asked.

“Fourth.”

“And what were the results of the other three?”

“Termination. Then miscarriage. Then stillbirth.”

The nurse slipped a needle into Rebekah’s arm. A plosive rush of static sounded from the monitor, like wind at the other end of a telephone connection, drowning out the caller’s voice. Rebekah shifted and the thumping resumed.

Attendants presented Rebekah with waivers and asked her to sign here, here, here, and here. A doctor entered the room. It was the same doctor who had delivered Irene with incredible grace under pressure.

A knot of figures dressed in blue surrounded my wife and commenced their ritual. They shaved, swabbed, and drugged her. Then they wheeled her out the door, leaving me alone beside her wrinkled and empty bed. I stripped and put on the surgical outfit they’d left behind. It was a bright, youthful blue, cut amorphously so it would fit anyone. The bouffant cap and the slippery, podlike shoe covers made me look like a toddler. I was thirty-seven and a half years old. Statistically, my life was half over.

“O.K., Dad,” a nurse called. She ushered me into a nearby room. The figures in blue were crowded around Rebekah’s body. Only their eyes showed. A blue screen, stretched across Rebekah’s chest, kept me from seeing her innards. I sat on a stool beside her head. She took my hand in hers. I looked into her eyes. The nebulae there seemed to be both expanding and collapsing. I recognized, then admitted, her fear. It was my own. I kissed her forehead. She tried to smile. Suddenly, two drops of blood appeared on the blue screen. The drops quivered. I looked away. I saw a stainless-steel cart loaded with cannisters of emergency oxygen. Beside the cannisters were Rebekah’s sandals, tucked against each other.

“Stand up, Dad,” a voice commanded. “It’s a girl.”

The doctor was holding a baby upside down by its ankles. The baby hung there, as blue as a blueberry and covered in fluids. She wriggled. Someone snipped the coil connecting her to Rebekah’s exposed gray bowels and blood jumped from the nub. The blue baby spluttered. She choked and turned as pink as a piece of candy. She changed from an internal organ into a human being. She cried. Then I cried.

“That is happiness,” Willa Cather once wrote. “To be dissolved into something complete and great.” When I’d sifted through Irene’s ashes, my memory of Cather’s line had brought me some solace.

We named Irene’s sister Willa. We huddled around her as though she were a campfire. Entranced, we watched her shift and sigh and emit small, unexpected noises before she settled back into sleep. Emotions quivered across her sleeping face. In her wavering expression, we divined flickers not only of Irene but of ourselves and our ancestors. Willa’s body was as warm as a pulsing ember.

After midnight, I went to get water. As I passed the window of the nursery, I spied a dozen newborns. All were swaddled in pink-and-blue blankets and capped by pink-and-blue beanies. All were still. Each face looked puffy and jaundiced, but peaceful and somehow Asian in mien. The babies were as alike as larvae. Any one of them could have been my daughter. I wanted to hold them all. ✦

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