
NON-FICTION | FALL 2024

Family Album

By Kavita Parmar

Birth

It's all the Jolly Ranchers' fault.

If they weren't so tropically tantalizing, I would settle for the tasteless ice chips offered by my husband during labor. I need something more dramatic, something to distract from perinatal melancholy hanging like thick fog over my swollen belly, partitioning me from the infant ripe for birth.

Whose idea is it to have a woman receive such an imminent, drastic change to her life so passively? Feet cupped in sterile metal stirrups, foreign fingers poking and prodding my sacred space, I'm jealous of my husband, mother and mother-in-law having front-row access to the performance of a lifetime. I just lie there, trusting the obstetrician, trusting my family that the fog will dissipate and radiant love for this newborn will shine through.

After a few painless hours of pushing (thanks to the numbing effects of an epidural) mixed with the obstetrician's patience and generous use of mineral oil so I won't tear, I feel the worst part of labor and delivery is over. A six-pound, five-ounce caramel-colored squishy being crowned in bloody mucous and black hair emerges from my darkness. The umbilical cord is neatly cut, as if separation is inevitable. The baby is then suctioned, swaddled and weighed before she is placed on my chest. As if she knows something about my maternal line, a nurse nearby is eager to encourage maternal-baby bonding and breastfeeding before it is too late.

Maternal hormones that enable a postpartum mother to breastfeed should be fully functional. They are overpowered by the sedating effects of the Phenergan I receive for nausea from sucking on so many Jolly Rancher's. I want to bond with this baby, offer her the bounty that is her birthright from my leaky breasts. But the lure of endless sleep is unavoidable. I succumb to the thick blanket of fog.

It's easier, and all the Jolly Rancher's fault.

Postpartum

Mother's milk is supposed to nourish and sustain. At least that's what I am told. I wouldn't know. My mother stopped nursing around six weeks. The story is vague, locked in the forbidden rooms of memory she would rather not revisit. Something about a breast abscess, a gambling husband selling her jewelry and a formidable mother-in-law who blames Mummy for her son's restlessness.

“Kavita, at least you have a husband who cares, who took all his paternity leave to support you. What I went through was different.”

Mummy’s words burn more than the raging yeast infections I keep contracting in both breasts despite prolonged courses of Diflucan. Forget maternal bonding and skin-to-skin contact.

Despite the use of a breast pump, firsthand knowledge of all the benefits of breastfeeding I’ve learned as a family physician, and support from my loving husband Sachin, I give up. The physical pain, exhaustion from sleep deprivation, and unpredictable moods are like a swirling storm uprooting me from the home I once knew, the woman I used to be.

In the months that follow Neha’s birth, I revisit my home as a stranger, required by Mummy and Sachin to carry documents of sound mental health for re-entry to be granted. Secretly, I keep clicking my heels together, repeating the mantra: *There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.* I fight and plead with them that I’m not volatile. Thoughts of slitting my wrists to release the pain are hidden and replaced by facades of smiles and infant lullabies—a mother who coos to Neha and proudly carries pictures of her to show others. A frantic mother overwhelmed by fatigue and intrusive thoughts would only stain the family album.

Mother’s milk is supposed to nourish and sustain. Neha, will substituting breast milk with Enfamil, repressing true feelings to live up to some idealized standard be enough? What am I feeding you?

Therapy

Mothering must be easier with a map that can guide you, a lineage unburdened by trauma, a cord that does not easily fray when subject to life’s stresses. Oblivious to these possibilities, I continue to live life: seeing patients part-time, raising Neha with Sachin and Mummy’s physical support.

Nine months postpartum, two therapists give a presentation at work on perinatal and postpartum mood disorders, so primary care physicians are more adept at recognizing the telltale signs in their patients. After the meeting, I’m torn between the paralysis of truth and the need to quickly move to my office where tears can safely slip into a lap of lonely recognition.

All the carefully repressed feelings escape my professional composure like impatient demons finally gaining honest representation on a day other than Halloween. Breathless, I call Sachin and try to explain through choked words and sobs, the demons refusing to disappear till I am honest.

“I think I have postpartum depression and anxiety.”

In therapy, I learn that my mood and tenuous connection with Neha are not just about severed umbilical cords, breastfeeding nightmares and distorted perceptions of reality. Mummy also suffered from something similar. Perhaps it’s because history repeats itself in the photos of family albums with different dates, times and locations of births too painful to relive, or

because the excavation of memories draws fresh wounds, that Mummy denies any connection with her experience to mine. The burdens of postpartum depression and anxiety are not mine alone to bear.

Mummy had her reasons for leaving me in the care of my aunt and uncle at eighteen months of age. Too angry to contemplate her reasons, I unleash my rage in bullets of blame. I'm thirsty for her blood, her vulnerability, in the way adults often are when regressing to their own childhood traumas. The scared, abandoned former apparition of me is ready to harm everywhere I turn, either those I love and hate in equal measure or myself to restore sanity and stillness.

Mothering without a map, with a lineage burdened by trauma, I'm still searching for a lifeline that can sustain me when mother's milk is not enough.

The Middle Way

The Buddha taught the Middle Way, a path that does not veer to either extreme of indulgence or denial. After a year of psychotherapy, I understand how family dynamics and neurobiology influenced my mental and physical wellbeing. But like an inquisitive child who is not satisfied with her answers, I keep questioning the therapist. How do I open to each challenging experience without drowning in it? Is happiness contingent on picture perfect outcomes? Sensing my restlessness, she recommends a teacher at a nearby meditation center.

Over the years I practice mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation diligently, reading and attending weeklong retreats wherever and whenever possible. Like hailstorms reduced to a gentle rain, the frozen anger towards Sachin and Mummy for not being able to meet my psychological needs begins to thaw. Sitting with uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations helps cut through some of the distorted perceptions I've carried. They are not solely responsible for my dissatisfaction. I am not my thoughts, feelings or physical sensations; they are ephemeral clouds that arise and pass in response to causes and conditions. Nothing can stain the vast sky of awareness.

Then why do postpartum daymares continue to haunt me? I take Neha to learn about mindfulness meditation. I invite some of her friends and their mothers to celebrate the transition from elementary to middle school. When she gets her first period at age twelve, I commemorate this rite of passage with a meaningful ritual and gift. Yearning to strengthen my connection with Neha, I don't realize that I'm severing it while attuning to a hysterical inner child.

The Buddha taught the Middle way, a path that does not indulge my inner child or deny her existence. How do I appease her? How do I become the mother Neha needs me to be? Sachin is parenting as best as he can. Mummy is cooking and cleaning. Neha, I am still trying to figure out how I fit into this family album.

Prom Night

Neha shares stories about prom night, particularly the photoshoot at a friends' place where some parents are invited to capture their beloved teens' photos for family albums. It sounds like a red-carpet event. It sounds important. Sandy's mother is there. Becca's father is there.

My husband and I are not there. We are not invited. Or maybe the ticket exclusion is meant just for me.

I'm the one who threw a menstrual coming-of-age party for a twelve-year-old non-binary being I insisted was a girl. I'm the one who insisted she wear bright Indian dresses for family events—embroidered, sequenced fabrics that chafed the skin like corsets from 16th-century Europe. I'm the one who received a phone call from the school counselor about Neha's suicidal ideation in eighth grade banning them from a trip to Washington DC, and smothered them with more concern.

I think of Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* bearing the letter 'A' on her chest. My letter is different, an 'F' hidden from others. Sometimes it's the inconspicuous scars that are most cruel and hard to erase.

'F' for failure as a mother, failure to support my only child's nonbinary identity, believing it is a choice like ice cream flavors, hobbies, favorite singers. I'm scared to lose her, terrified to release the tenuous thread connecting our maternal line. My mother and I both had postpartum depression and anxiety, so Neha already swam in an amniotic sea of dark emotions even before they were destined to know light. Nonbinary gender identification will only add to the psychological burden of maternal stress.

Is it their stress or mine to carry?

Is it even a choice?

I want to change them back into the daughter I gave birth to, change myself into a more understanding parent, whichever is easier, whichever comes first.

Neha shares stories about prom night, the way their crimson suit, black tie dotted with tiny glistening red roses, polished black shoes and makeup all make a definitive statement of who they are. Even their dichromatic midnight black to radiating fiery red nail polish refuses to be stereotyped.

I listen attentively, capturing the photo for the family album through words. I am not there to take a picture.

I no longer wish to change them or change the conflicting emotions arising in me throughout their teenage years. What I want to change most are the boundaries of perception that limit the natural unfolding of things as they are, without needing to change a thing.

'F' is for failure. 'F' is also for forgiveness.

Saying Goodbye

Sometimes the perfect picture is not an airbrushed snapshot receiving a thousand likes on Facebook, but one that is most authentic framed in loving acceptance.

In the months leading up to Neha leaving for college, I start therapy again. Combining Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy with an advanced meditation practice, I yearn to hold all parts of me, all parts of my family in unconditional love, like the full moon in the Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu's enlightenment poem:

*Watching the moon
at dawn,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out.*

After Sachin and I help Neha move into their dorm room, we all walk to the car in silence. Saying goodbye to Neha feels surreal, the last eighteen years distorted by so much blame. Neha launches themselves into Sachin's protective arms, hugging him fiercely. He is all earth element, solid and dependable. In contrast, Neha awkwardly embraces me, as if the years of vulnerability have turned me into glass – delicate and easily shatterable. Aching for wholeness, I want to take a piece of each painful memory to create a mosaic that is meaningful. But the waxing crescent moon isn't ready to reveal all parts of itself just yet.

A late autumn breeze inspires encouragement. With one hand on my heart, I pledge allegiance to the moon, to our family with the following intention. *Neha, one day you will learn to trust me, when I have learned to trust and accept all parts of myself.*

Sometimes the perfect pictures are found in a family album filled with regret and renewed hope. Goodbyes are not ONLY endings; they are also beginnings.

Kavita Parmar is a family physician, healer and writer living in California. She enjoys meditation, mindful movement, singing, poetry, nature and practicing full moon loving presence with all of life when she is connected to her own heart.
