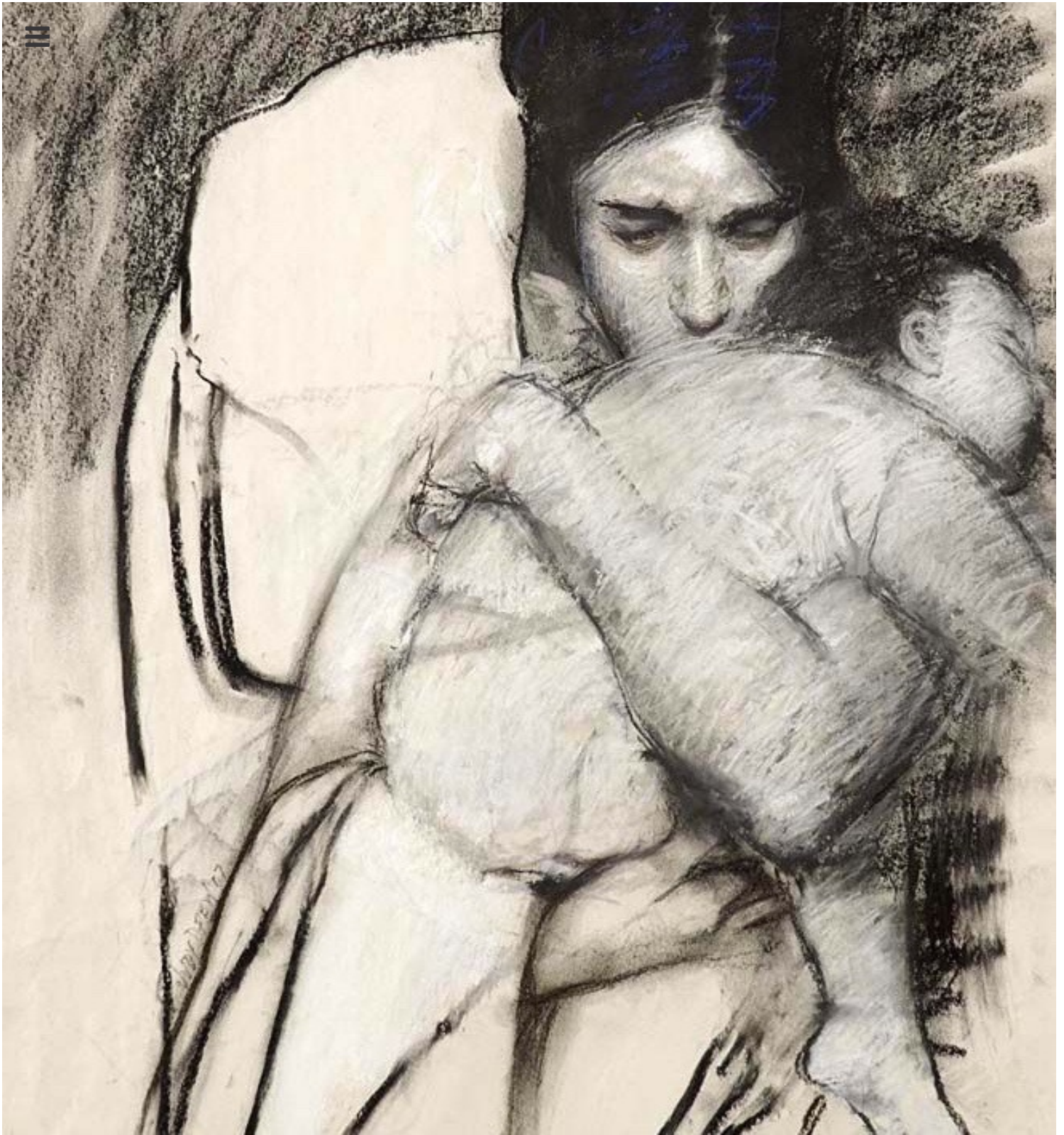




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With new life comes a fear of death



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Before I had kids, I never worried about aging, about dying, about death. No one was counting on me, I thought, so it didn't matter if I died.

I did foolish things, before kids. Things my psychiatrist calls *parasuicidal* when she hears about them, when we talk about my life back then, which isn't often because mostly we talk about how hard it is to be a mom.

If you'd asked me then why I was riding a motorcycle at one hundred and twenty miles per hour, I would have told you that I had trouble feeling alive, not that I wanted to be dead. I had no intention of killing myself.

The world felt more real when I was doing dangerous things—going dangerous places in dangerous ways with dangerous people. Not because I'd been sheltered my whole life, but because I'd been numbed.

Childhood abuse will do that to you. After all, when the worst has already happened, what else is there?

No, I didn't have a death wish before I had kids. But I didn't care if I died in the pursuit of feeling something more than broken.

*

Kids, though—they break you wide open and expose parts of you that you didn't even know could feel pain. My kids have turned me into the most basic, most raw version of myself. My kids make me feel like I'm going one hundred and twenty all of the time.

It's thrilling. It's terrifying. It's exhausting.

Some days, I look at my husband, with his gentle face and mild expression, and I think, *Are we living the same life together? How can he not feel it?*

How can he not feel the terror in the everyday?

Perhaps my childhood did this to me, too—it enhanced everyday terrors.

I marvel that I was ever so prideful to swing my leg over a bike in the first place, knowing I might never get off again.

*

The day my first son was born, I knew I was going to die.

~~As~~ they rushed my premature son to the NICU and me to the operating room for an emergency procedure to try to save my life, I grabbed my husband's hand, stopping the forward movement of my stretcher. In the hospital hallway, I said to him, "You stay with him. Promise me you'll stay with him," referring to our tiny, too-early newborn son.

My husband looked so confused, the two parts of his heart, each so fragile, rolling in opposite directions.

When he didn't move to follow the baby, I released his hand. "Go with him, for me." And then I was through the double doors into the operation suite, gone from both of them, I thought, forever.

I'd done my part. I'd delivered the baby, and I'd given him to his father. Everyone was safe.

I could die, and my family would be okay.

I didn't have a death wish, and I wasn't taking risks. I didn't want to die. In fact, for the first time in my life, I was feeling the exact opposite. Even though I'd only been a mother for a few minutes, my child's life had taken hold of my psyche. Death had become terrifying.

Before the anesthesia, I started weeping. The nurse asked me what was wrong. "I won't get to hold my baby again," I said. "I wish I could have held him one more time before I died."

*

Now, I have two kids. Now, every day, I'm afraid to die.

Now, death is everywhere.

Cars are wheeled death boxes. Ladders are folding death stands. Streets are paved death zones, as opposed to the unpaved death zones, which is basically everywhere else.

The first time I had a panic attack on an airplane, I didn't know what was happening. The plane hit heavy turbulence, and, suddenly, I was struggling to breathe. Suddenly, I was weeping and shaking. I folded my body in half and clung to myself until the involuntary responses stopped.

The entire time I thought, *Who will love my children when I'm gone?*

*

Like most parents, I'm also afraid for my kids.

I spent two mortgage payments on private swim lessons so that they would be safer in liquid death zones, and each child has a selection of helmets to choose from to keep him safe when using a wheeled death toy.

Every time I let them outside in the yard without my wary supervision, I run the numbers. Of all the kids on our street, on our block, in our neighborhood who play outside every day, how many come back inside, alive, well?

The odds of injury and death, it would seem, are low.

The odds do not soothe me.

*

The sun bends prismatic on the freshly-fallen snow. The kids are sledding on the hill in the alley behind our house. I'm by our neighbor's small retaining wall, taking a protective stance in case a kid heads off course. My husband stands at the bottom, where a neighbor's fence hems in the hill's run-off, ready to redirect the kids if they don't turn away soon enough.

Our sons take turns zooming down the hill, avoiding the wall, avoiding the fence, their smiling white teeth reflecting the sun in snowy white, their joy something I could hold in my hands.

Then, our younger son veers off course. He crashes into our mailbox post. I can't move fast enough to protect him. Once at the scene, I assess, quickly. He's unhurt. I realize I've stopped breathing, and so I start again.

Earlier in the day, I pointed out the post to my husband. It's dangerous, I insisted. My husband said the mailbox was far enough away from the sledding course. "It's safe enough," he said. "Nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about. The odds were low.

After the crash, after I ensure my son is unhurt, I'm ready to dismantle my husband for being so careless.

"He could have *died*," I say.

~~No~~,” my husband says gently, “He couldn’t have. Not from that. But I’ll make things safer, okay?”

His loving, unspoken words: “I’ll make things safer *for you*.”

And he does, building a soft barrier around the mailbox and every other potential hazard.

He does these things for me, to keep the everyday terrors at bay for another afternoon.

Katie Rose Guest Pryal is an author, journalist, and former law professor whose parenting style is best described as “lazy lioness.” Check out her blog at katieroseguestpryal.com.

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