

SALLY RASPIN

## Memories of Post Natal Depression

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*Memories of Post Natal Depression (PND) is a narrative of one woman's experience of undiagnosed post natal or post partum depression. It serves to help broaden the existing definition of PND that relies on the inability of the sufferer to function at a normal daily level for a diagnosis. What happens to women who manage to get up every day and keep going? Who notices them and how can they be diagnosed?*

I am driving in my white Datsun 180B with a black vinyl roof. It is a 1979 model. Very reliable with wish bone suspension, whatever that is, but I know it's good, the cadence in the mechanic's voice tells me so. I bought it for \$2000 in Sydney and it is my lifeline, my conduit to the outside world.

I am driving around in my Datsun 180B with my two small children in the backseat. They are properly restrained according to the laws of the day. We are driving the winding dirt roads showering ever more dust over the already drought dusty bush. The drought seems interminable. We drive to the school bus, the supermarket, the bank, the preschool, the post office, the general store and the beach. My daughter hates being restrained for the first two years of her life. She hates the motion of the car and begins screaming about fifteen minutes into any trip anywhere. Only when she can understand the need and purpose and the destination does she learn to tolerate the car. My son is older and has always loved the car, the adventure, the motion, and sings and chats and sleeps without ever getting restless or bored. He rarely asks 'How much longer?' or 'Are we there yet?'

I am driving around in my dust covered Datsun 180B filled with my children and our collective effluvia: books, matchbox cars, stuffed animals, spare clothes, beach stuff in a stripey bag, sometimes the groceries and a rifle in the trunk.

I am driving around in my dirty Datsun 180B, my children mostly in the backseat. In the trunk I have a .22 rifle. The loaded magazine is in the glove box. The rifle belongs to a friend of my husband. We have borrowed it to shoot foxes but I have it in the trunk of my car and my husband hasn't noticed its absence from the house or at least he hasn't spoken of it. I don't seem to think it odd to have a gun in the car.

Before the 180B there was the VW beetle. It began back there when my daughter was new, about two months old perhaps. The trips to town still dusty and even at that early age she was intolerant of the car. How do you explain to a wee baby that you have to get to the bank, supermarket? You can't and she screams a lot and it wrenches at my stomach and tightens my chest. On one occasion I stop 16 times in about 90 kilometres on our way to the city, 360 kilometres away. In the end I drive and she cries for an hour and a half until exhausted, then sleeps.

It begins in the supermarket. An iron tourniquet grabs my chest. I can't breathe. My blood pounds in my ears. The cornflakes and canned pineapple crowd me as I fight for air.

I leave the trolley in the aisle, half loaded with our frugal supplies and simply go home. Our town is spread out and involves any number of stops to complete the week's chores. Inevitably, it seems, I run out of whatever keeps me going, before I run out of things which must be done. I hustle my son and cram my daughter into their seats and flee with my heart banging against my ribs, my lungs struggling for air. I know I'm going to have to come back, a thirty kilometre round trip, to finish the chores. That knowledge doesn't seem to save me, so I find us heading back to town earlier than might be, to get the things I left abandoned in the supermarket aisle. In the car my thoughts float and meander, take curious, unexpected turns with a tendency to spiral downwards. Too difficult to explain to a querulous husband why I haven't come home with the coach bolts, bacon, butter. So I don't explain. There is a feeling that if I let it out, this thing growing inside me, our world will fall apart and I must hold it together. My silence contains it.

I must get up in the morning and be a mother, a wife.

When my son was born, the homebirth midwife said to me, "If you can't cope, if everything is too much and you don't know where to turn..." I thought she was throwing me a lifeline, that she would be my friend.

"Get up an hour earlier," she said. I think it's good advice and I do. I get up earlier and earlier. My children are not good sleepers, or maybe I have never figured out how to make them sleep. The sound of a baby or child crying breaks my heart. I cannot do what I am told and let them cry. This inability

leaves me terminally tired. I end up with them, each in turn and sometimes together, in our bed, breastfeeding in a zombie state through the night. It is a good day when I can function past lunchtime. I fully understand why the Geneva Convention considers sleep deprivation a form of torture.

I am driving around in a dusty, dirty Datsun 180B with my children mostly in the back. I am planning and waiting for the right moment when I can drive alone down a bark strewn logging track to nowhere and put the rifle in my mouth. I imagine how it will taste, the metallic smell of oily steel, the hard, cool rim of the barrel end against the roof of my mouth and where the bullet will go. I don't want to botch it and end up a brain dead burden on the state. I have no idea why the rifle and not a rope or poison or a razor blade or the car. I am left handed, never joined guides and can't tie knots, so hanging would likely leave me a quadriplegic. My husband doesn't seem to like me much now and I can't imagine he would cope with an invalid version of me. A razor is messy and we mothers and wives don't like to bleed on things, which is why, I suppose, so many do it in the bath.

I don't actually put the gun in my mouth, I just imagine it.

I imagine it while I am driving my children to the beach, while I am driving to work, as I am driving home. I spend so much time inside the VW and later the Datsun 180B.

My car is my carapace.

The moments of panic continue and grow. The butcher shop is difficult. I can't look at the meat. I can cook it with an effort and have no trouble eating it; it's just the shop which is tricky. This started when I was pregnant with my daughter and grows.

When my husband's friend needs his rifle back, I settle on the car. Far more appropriate since I spend so much of my life here. I keep a roll of duct tape, one of the miracles of modern invention, inside the vacuum cleaner and imagine simply drifting off. We are not on the electricity grid, so the vacuum cleaner is not often used. I haven't tested the hose to see if it's long enough, but the 180B is quite short so it should do. I imagine simply putting my foot on the accelerator and letting go, but either the children are with me and I still see hope for their small lives or I am on my way to them and their need of me outweighs all else.

I find I can't get home after sunset. As the sun sinks, I panic. No matter where I am or what's happening, I must go home. My chest tightens, and the now familiar fear threatens to drown me. This begins in the early days of the VW, coming home from my part time job at a women's refuge to a cold, dark house with no dry wood and no lights, a hungry child and a cranky baby.

The tilley lamp primer keeps going out before I can turn the kerosene on, the generator won't start, and I can't get the wood stove going.

My husband deals with his own private hell by going to the pub, which is where he generally is on these occasions.

I tell no one of this. That would be letting it out, letting go, giving it a name, a being. My children need me to be in control. If I don't give it a voice, maybe it doesn't really exist.

One evening I arrive home after dark and am fighting with the tilley lamp and stove when my parents phone. My dad actually, which is even more rare. They must sense something is awry. Maybe I haven't written to them. Dad makes the mistake of saying "How are you Ducks?" and I fall to the floor weeping and can't speak for a long time. I think they get the message that all is not well.

They pay for the children and me to visit them as we have no money. It is a long and complicated journey involving a five hour ride to the city airport, squeezed into some kind friends' car, a much delayed flight to Hobart via Melbourne, another hour drive home. My son, who so often mirrors my state, is manic in the airport. Hyped on unaccustomed Easter chocolate and excitement and the delayed flight, he climbs over seats and furniture, picks his nose in front of the elderly passengers and uses words picked up from his dad while building the house. As we finally leave to cross the tarmac he warns a cleaner of a particularly smelly nappy I have just dumped in the bin. Bless him. On the plane he drinks Coke and visits the pilot. I sit very still, my daughter held tightly in my arms. I'm not sure who is saving who. The air stewards avoid us.

My trance state continues at my parents'. They guide and prompt me through the day. I get up and feed my son and daughter, or maybe my mother does. At some point in the morning my father suggests that my daughter should be put back to bed.

"They grow while they're asleep, you know," he says.

My son relishes the attention and perhaps the sense of security. I can't go out the gate for the first week. The picket fence is my protection. I feel safe inside, sleeping in my childhood bed with lace curtains choreographing the morning sun as they have for thirty years. Neither of my parents addresses me directly about my vague, laissez faire behaviour. I do eventually make it out the gate to my sister's. She doesn't see it either. Or maybe they do. There's only so much rescuing family can be expected to do.

At night my mother takes charge. She wakes me for my daughter's ten o'clock feed and retrieves her before I drop her some time later. I am asleep in a sitting position on the bedside. I am confused to find myself sitting with my daughter sliding slowly to the floor.

I feel like I'm drugged. My parents probably wonder if I am. I am after all

the middle child, the black sheep, the hippy.

There are sunny times. Days on the beach introducing each child in turn to the magic of the ocean fringe. One of the great joys we share.

In winter I begin taking the children somewhere on Sundays. Sometimes we drive up the mountain behind us and explore the rocky rainforest creeks which my son calls "Fairyland." From some points we can see way out over farmland and bush to the sea and the island. Being there gives me a sense of peace and distance. The children are happy. Some Sundays we go down to the bay and play on the swings or practice skipping stones when the sea is still. In summer I carry our stuff in the big stripey bag down to the rock pool where I teach my son to swim and my daughter explores for tiny sea creatures and shells. The shore is bountiful in this little place.

There is a time when my husband is working full time for six months. The drought has ended by then. This is a golden time filled with sunshine. I play with my daughter; it feels, for the first time. I play with my son; have time for myself. Maybe this is later, when my daughter is three. I'd stopped carrying the gun in the car by then and was using the vacuum cleaner hose for its original purpose.

Sometimes my children seem to embody the spirit of the times of their conceptions and gestations. My son is optimistic and enthusiastic about life, eager for the next adventure. At the beach from a very early age, he likes me to sit still on our beach towel so he can roam way down the shore. He can go anywhere, but I must stay there for him.

My son was conceived in a time of optimism and adventure, my daughter in the longest drought and toughest time I had then known. Life is more difficult for my daughter. She is gifted in many ways but still life is difficult. I know my state of mind during her earliest years has contaminated her.

At 23 my daughter goes to a palm reader, a friend's grandmother. The palm reader tells her, among many other things, that she was disconnected emotionally at a very early age and asks if her mother suffered from post natal depression. My daughter says no, and then later asks me: "Did you have post natal depression with me, Mum?" This is the first time those sad and desperate years have been given a name. I feel both sorrow and lightness when I say, "Yes, love, I think I probably did."

I weep for those years for the very first time. My beautiful daughter, my joyous son. How I grieve for those precious years.