

Angelica Patera
Baby Blues

BACK IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, when I was an arrogant, headstrong, aggressive, and opinionated young woman, I was under the impression that post natal depression was a term coined by the patriarchy to define and pathologize yet another facet of motherhood. During those transformative university years, I had taken a course on the representations of the body in culture. Late in the semester, we were shown a woman's home birth footage. I clearly remember I had found some of the scenes rather unsettling and gruesome, clenching my eyelids shut at some point while trying to block the sounds of some of my classmates retching. Despite the turmoil within, I hadn't voiced any such ideas in the discussion that followed because I knew they reflected some sort of conservative residue that still existed somewhere inside of me and I wanted to stay on high moral ground. The professor had talked eloquently about the medicalization of pregnancy, explaining that it was a shadowy dance, orchestrated by the patriarchy to exert control over one of nature's most primal forces: pregnancy and birth. Pregnancy was reduced to a medical condition, branded "unnatural" and demanded medical intervention and interference.

Back then, any thoughts of mine concerning pregnancy were solely fixated on its prevention. I had never dreamed about giving birth at home, in a fluorescent swimming pool full of rose petals with a doula caressing my hair and Sigur Ros playing in the background. I had no birth plan. I had no plan in life whatsoever but I was convinced that motherhood was definitely not among my priorities. My plans and contemplations were confined to the imminent arrival of that summer. My priorities revolved around matters of survival, academic excellence, employment and general well-being: I was planning to stay alive, navigate my way through the difficult end-of-semester exams, keep my job, go to as many concerts as possible and go on holidays someplace artistic, sophisticated and most probably pretentious. Top of Form

Therefore, in the wake of that transformative discussion following the live birth footage, my curiosity was piqued and I felt compelled to further explore the subject. I spent the next days at the university library, reading about the medicalization of birth. I became convinced that the patriarchy had slowly and steadily woven its way into this realm, rendering pregnancy and birth "unnatural" and "unhealthy". Driven by these newfound realizations, I made a deliberate choice to assert my agency and autonomy by changing my obstetrician, not due to any problems but rather because he belonged to the male gender. Suddenly, his well-intentioned advice "always remember to change after swimming" and "always pee after sex" took on a patronizing hue. In retrospect, having met truly sexist doctors that deserve to be hung by their testicles, I realize that this choice was a foolish one as this particular male obstetrician had been a soft-spoken and gentle old man who constantly showed me pictures of his grandchildren. The radical feminist I thought I was, I decided to make a significant change concerning all my healthcare providers. I changed them all on the principle of gender: from the trusted general practitioner who had treated my family for years to the specialist that tended to my ruptured eardrums.

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I didn't want to leave space for sexist bullshit and condescending attitudes. In a whirlwind of feminist rage, I decided to purge my life of men entirely. Most of my friends at that point were male; I deconstructed their behaviours and dissected their actions, subjecting them to extreme scrutiny through my newly found feminist lens: had these men upheld feminist ideals? Had they consistently treated women with respect? Had they ever attempted to make advances towards me? Had they ever demonstrated behaviour that reeked of masculinity? In most of the instances, my male friends were indeed harmless, posing no tangible threat to humanity. We were barely over twenty, struggling to navigate the complex realm of adulthood. We seemed to be equally baffled by the intricacies of human relationships. One had cheated on his girlfriend at some point. I severed our ties. Another one had kissed me in a drunken blackout. I stopped talking to him too even though I had reciprocated that kiss with more passion. Another one was into hardcore punk, residing in a squat that I frequented. However, looking through my newfound feminist vantage point, his attitude and his attire exuded enough machismo to reject him too. Instead, I decided to embrace a "sisterhood of friends", a motley crew of students from my gender studies study group consisting of people identifying as women. We didn't have much in common, yet, in this unconventional assembly, I felt I was being true to my principles.

Fueled by unwavering enthusiasm, I decided to center my master's thesis on the pervasive medicalization of womanhood in general. It was an exploration that unveiled the intricate layers of societal construction as they intertwined with the natural experiences of women. Puberty, a normal rite of passage into adulthood, is definitely the initial fraught juncture; menstruation becomes the central problem and focal point for the patriarchal society. You hit twelve and suddenly you need training bras that segue into normal cotton bras, menstrual pads and tiny tampons and painkillers labeled "especially for period pains". If you are prone to acne, you get screened for PCOS and androgen levels. If you are chubby, you get treated for pre-diabetes. If you are skinny, adrenal issues need to be addressed. If you are feeling somewhat rebellious or angry or overwhelmed, "it's hormones".

I had spent all of my adolescence struggling to hide that I was undergoing tremendous physical changes. The thought of being called "a menstrual mess" –along with all the other derogatory schoolyard jokes that tagged along- revolted me. Clad in baggy grungy clothes and the heaviest Doc Martens I could find, my hair hacked into a short and half-shaved mess of blue rebellion, I spent most of my adolescence cloaked in an armor of deliberate toughness. I didn't want to be labeled "menstrual" and "feminine" and "fragile" so I put up a façade of aggressiveness and anger and bared my teeth every time someone tried to mess with me, like a kitten being approached by a stranger.

The more I studied for my thesis, the more convinced I became that the most treacherous terrain lay ahead of me. The summit of this journey into the "problems of womanhood" seemed to culminate in menopause. I realized that beyond menopause, women seemed to be rendered genderless and thus, they become less problematic for society, sharing more or less the same problems as men. My thesis was presented in front of a panel

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dominated by men. I was overly aggressive and passionate, exhibiting an eruption of fervor and intensity. I got a triumphant “A+” and deep inside I thought that my aggressive storm might intimidate my examiners.

A few months after graduation, as I was struggling to secure a better job, I realized that my “sisterhood of friends” wasn’t working. We discussed politics, we rejected all forms of authority, we wore out homosexuality/ bisexuality as a badge of honor, we read all sorts of radical feminist literature but still, I felt that I was constantly under surveillance. Each and every one of my words and actions was subjected to detailed scrutiny and judged against a set of unspoken feminist rules. The way I dressed was interpreted as a coy way I used to assert my femininity. Applying makeup or shaving my legs was seen as catering to the male gaze. The music I listened to was deemed “chauvinist and dominated by men”. The authors I read had no feminist pedigree. My Sylvia Plath tattoo was heavily criticized as it supposedly glorified a woman that committed suicide because of patriarchal oppression. To make matters worse, I fell short of their non-conformist ideals. I wasn’t vegan. I didn’t have a therapist. I wasn’t spiritual. The chocolate I ate was not organic and cruelty free. I drank gallons of coffee instead of matcha tea. I wasn’t interested in acupuncture and alternative medicine. While I had a history of experimenting with drugs, I was acutely aware of the paranoia most substances triggered in me so I wasn’t interested in spending whole weekends pursuing transcendental experiences aided by ayahuasca. My job wasn’t radical enough. I was barely twenty one. The last straw came when I found myself madly in love with a man, unapologetically and without any desire to conceal my feelings or my growing enthusiasm. One of the most prominent members warned me that succumbing to a heterosexual relationship was like “sleeping with the enemy”. I laughed out loud at the absurdity of this idea. I was immediately kicked out of the group.

Fast forward a few years later, I found myself facing an unexpected reality: I was pregnant. Initially, I was in complete denial, taking the first pregnancy test towards the end of my first trimester. Strangely enough, although it was totally unplanned, I had sensed my pregnancy before that test, before even realizing I was a couple of days late. I just knew but I was too scared to actually confirm it. In the past years I had taken numerous pregnancy tests, even on the first day of a missing period, terrified that they would confirm a pregnancy. This time, I was terrified of being wrong and getting a negative result. So, after a couple of months of no periods and exhausting nausea, I took a test. It was positive. Doubt still lingered so I took another one. And then another. Still uncertain, I had some blood work done. It confirmed that I was nearing the tenth week of pregnancy. Despite all these, I remained skeptical so I asked my obstetrician to perform an ultrasound. There, on the doctor’s bed, I heard a rapid heartbeat and saw some dots on the monitor. It was undeniably real. I was indeed pregnant. I had already medicalized this pregnancy through a plethora of tests just to confirm what my instincts had been screaming for weeks. Top of Form

What worried me and made me feel that I had betrayed my principles was that I craved the sense of security that medical observation provided me with. I wanted this pregnancy to stay medicalized and monitored.

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I was consumed by fear. I had all the blood work done diligently. I did both the compulsory and optional ultrasounds. I even had an amniocentesis done –following a questionable ultrasound- to make sure everything was fine with this baby. My bookcase selves once filled with Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous were now overflowing with pregnancy books. I deeply committed to studying them. I learned the jargon of pregnancy, words I had never encountered before like perineum, Braxton Hicks contractions, breech, meconium, spina bifida. I downloaded an app on my phone. I kept a journal to track my symptoms. With unwavering dedication and determination, I abstained from everything that was prohibited and everything that was suspicious: coffee, sushi, salmon, tuna, unpasteurized cheese, any cheese I didn't recognize, any dessert that may or may not contain raw eggs, any meat in case it wasn't properly cooked, any salad that may have not been properly washed, concerts because of second-hand smoke, crowded places because of virus transmission, bumpy roads. I took up prenatal yoga. I slept on my left side with my knees bent to increase blood flow. I took all the supplements even though they aggravated my hyperemesis. When I suffered a sudden placenta abruption, I felt betrayed by my body. Despite my vigilance, my illusion of control over my body had been shattered. After a short hospitalization, I was put on bed rest, hoping to reach the thirty sixth week mark. I was fighting a losing battle: I wanted to assert as much control as possible over something so uncontrollable.

During these weeks of bed rest I felt like I was descending into an abyss. Top of Form I started fading away, slipping away, leaving behind a shadow of who I used to be. I was looking forward to the ultrasound of the week, two minutes of loud heartbeat and blurry images of an alien moving inside of me. The hospital environment filled me with a sense of security and repulsion at the same time. My obstetrician was a strong, supportive woman but I met medical staff that ridiculed or belittled me. One day, as a male nurse was taking a swab cervical sample, I dared to utter that it was painful and he laughed out loud "This can't be painful to you, I can see you are no virgin and you haven't been one in a long time". When a supervising doctor saw me cry, he yelled at me "Stop acting out, what kind of mother cries like a baby?" Normally, I would have reacted; I would have fought back. But I didn't. Fear kept me captive. I found myself experience something akin to Stockholm syndrome. I wanted to get rid of everyone who wanted to wield his power over me and at the same time I wanted to relinquish control and allow them to assume full responsibility of me.

Incredible though it may seem, my status as a young, white, middle class, educated woman gave me a vantage point. Thanks to the purely incidental circumstances of my birth, I was granted the "western privilege" of being pregnant and giving birth in an organized and hygienic environment instead of a remote village, a slave ship crossing the Mediterranean or a war-stricken country. However, this realization came with a heavy burden. Although I was often gaslighted, during my stay at the hospital I observed less fortunate women enduring excessive mistreatment and discrimination: Muslim women in their hijabs begging for privacy, undocumented gypsies being mocked, women in their late forties labelled

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“geriatric pregnancies” and ridiculed by nurses and doctors, drug addicts being ignored, gay couples being denied the right to be together in the operation room. The public hospital concealed an obscure underbelly of racial discrimination, ageism, ableism and homophobia.

During my short hospital stay, I often pondered how my former circle of feminist friends would react to such circumstances. Would they embark on legal battles against the hospital? Would they organise a protest? Would they attack the wrongdoers and spraypaint SEXIST all over their cars? As I was still on bedrest, time lay abundant in my hands so I seized the opportunity to reconnect with some of the people I used to know. To my astonishment, I found out that their realities were quite distinct from what I had envisioned. The majority of them had moved on with their lives; most of them were leading normal lives, working as civil servants and lawyers and teachers. Some of them had even got married and had children who attended posh private schools. Some of them vacationed in places like Dubai or Aspen. One of them had become a nun. All these years I had grappled with a sense of betrayal for being in a long term, monogamous relationship with a man. A revelation unfolded: no one was there to judge me. Top of Form

At some point I came to the profound realization that everything was beyond my control so I sought the help and guidance of a therapist. At the clinic they recommended a young guy who was supposedly familiar with “cases like mine”. Although he had a kind and soft-spoken demeanor, after a few sessions I felt like I was being infantilized. I decided to go with the flow; perhaps being treated like a confused child would actually help me. He gave me a lot of homework and tons of advice but it all felt very generic. I dared to ask him about prenatal depression and he laughed it off, denying the existence of such a condition. I decided to put up a façade of normalcy like he had suggested. When I was allowed to return to work, I tried to outdo myself, showing unparalleled vigor. I invited people over for dinner. I picked the most challenging books to read. I visited art galleries. I took up piano lessons. I did everything I could to keep myself distracted. I refused to go shopping for the baby.

The baby. A baby I could feel kicking and swirling inside of me but could not get attached to, terrified that I would love it and lose it the next moment. A baby whose sex I didn’t want to know. A baby whose room I hadn’t prepared. A baby whose name I hadn’t chosen. This baby felt real and unreal at the same time.

The baby’s father, my long-term partner always maintained a positive outlook, as if this was just another setback along the way. While he seemed to actually realize that this was indeed a high-risk pregnancy involving a lot of challenges, he didn’t seem to be able to understand exactly how I felt. Amidst my inner turmoil, I transformed into an unbearable being, constantly confronting him with brutal honesty, detailing all the frightening possible scenarios, enumerating the potential pitfalls and the negative outcomes. He was gentle and caring and I found it infuriating. If I lost that baby he would suffer immensely but he would get over it. Yet, my own pain would eclipse his.

When the long-awaited time to give birth finally came, I found myself surrounded by half the hospital nurses and a dozen medical students

checking on the progress of my cervical effacement and dilation. I was asked about my birth plan. Once again, I had no birth plan. My sole aspiration was for both my child and myself to emerge from this ordeal alive. I became the most obedient student and followed all orders. Don't drink. Don't eat. Don't walk. Lie on your back even though it is incredibly uncomfortable. Don't scream. Don't waste energy. Don't faint. Don't look at all this blood. Don't move. Don't cry. Push. Don't push. Hold your breath. Stop crying, the baby's heartbeat sounds faint. Stop crying, your oxygen is alarmingly low. Stop crying. Push harder. Stay with us. Don't close your eyes. Breathe. Stay with us. At some point, the pain had become so overwhelming that I finally stopped analysing and focused on the task at hand: and that moment of surrender was when the magic happened. My daughter came and she changed everything.

During the first weeks with a new-born, I was in a haze. Both my obstetrician and my daughter's paediatrician gave me a lengthy talk about post natal depression. Of course, I had done my homework, having always been a meticulous student: I had already read everything about post natal depression. I had pictured it in my head in a very specific way: tears streaming down one's face all day long, sobs in the bathroom, a sensation of immense psychological pain, lying in bed like Margarita Gautier unable to lift a finger. I had accepted it wasn't a patriarchal construct to manipulate women; I knew that it was a medical condition attributed to a hormonal imbalance. Contrary to what I believed post natal depression would be like, I was feeling literally nothing. For the first year of my baby's life, I felt like an empty vessel. I obviously worried about everything and I cared for my baby all day and all night long and I took her to the beach to see the waves and I played Brahms and Mozart to stimulate her brain and I looked forward to showing her the world but for a whole year I felt like I was sleepwalking, stepping outside my life, observing it silently and stepping back inside to breastfeed or prepare apple puree. There were neither low lows nor high highs. I felt detached and alienated. Nobody could pinpoint what was wrong with me because none of the "alarming signs" were present. I didn't cry. I didn't neglect my baby or myself. I didn't sound suicidal. I functioned seamlessly at work. I actively participated in intricate conversations with friends. I watched Dunkirk and I could analyse it. I talked about records and concerts I had attended in the past with great accuracy and impeccable detail. I was desperately trying to convince everyone that I was still me.

But it all felt like an echo. I felt drowsy and hazy but sleep continually eluded me. Every night seemed to be a series of consecutive awakenings, leaving me frustrated and desperate. Amid this turmoil, everyone gave me the same impractical piece of advice "rest while the baby is sleeping". That was impossible on so many levels; my once minimalist home had turned into an unrecognizable hell of baby paraphernalia: breast pumps and heaps of onesies, creams for diaper rash and lidocaine ointment for my stitches, towering stacks of diapers and boring baby books. I had to unearth time slots to get prepared for work because, as I had suspected, although everyone congratulated me on my new baby and on how "good" I looked despite having lost gallons of blood, I was expected to yield the same results as I did before my life was turned upside down. Moreover, I could no longer recognize my body. Despite having watched countless

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body positivity videos on the internet, I couldn't embrace this new body: the angry purple stretch marks tracing my thighs, my once toned belly looking saggy and shapeless, my breasts looking sore and unrecognizable, my hair chopped in a low-maintenance boyish pixie cut, my skin looking pallid and dry. But most importantly, I couldn't rest. I remained fixated on her, checking her breath, feeling her skin, making sure her airways were clear.

I kept on reading maternity and early child development books throughout the first year of my daughter's life. I scoured countless boring mommy sites and forums, desperately seeking some sort of explanation for my condition. Everyone kept referring to this alleged "maternal instinct", a spiritual and physical awakening that would help me connect to my baby, to my partner, to the world around me. I could vaguely recall a complicated research study from my university days about the fallacy of the so-called maternal instinct. I could remember reading how the prolonged exposure to a new-born could elevate oxytocin and prolactin levels and alter the behaviour of the caregivers. However, my university years –along with the research study- felt like a lifetime ago. I struggled to remember where I had stumbled upon that research and I lacked the energy to post it on all those mommy groups. As I swiped through images of mommy meetings and playgroups, I couldn't help but notice that all the mothers looked ecstatic, like the statue of Saint Teresa; their eyes were vacant yet beaming and their smiles were strained but wide. All the mommies wrote that they felt "blessed" and "complete". I felt bleak.

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Feeling desperate, I decided to consult a psychiatrist. My financial constraints limited my choices, leading me to the only doctor my insurance could cover. He posed the expected trilogy of questions "Do you harbor suicidal thoughts?", "Do you want to harm your baby or anyone else?" and "Are you able to function?". I replied "no, no and yes". He embarked on a lecture about hysteria and prescribed stimulants. I complained "no uppers please, I need something to sleep". He looked at me in a spiteful way and suggested in a wry tone "then drink some chamomile tea". Perhaps the uppers would have lifted my spirits but, judging from my past encounters with recreational substances, sleep would be a serious problem.

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What was genuinely peculiar was that I truly wasn't contemplating suicide. Having been a helplessly melancholic Goth, I had romanticized the notion of suicide all of my life. While I had never attempted it, fleeting contemplations had wandered into my mind during moments of glory, exquisite beauty or overwhelming happiness. In my junior year at university, I remember sitting on the rooftop of a campus building watching the sunset, smoking weed and listening to Jane's Addiction when a thought flitted through my mind "what if I were to leap?" In another instance, a couple of years later, on a scorching hot August day I was swimming languidly on my back, admiring the ruins of the ancient temple of Poseidon right above my head and the idea suddenly popped "what if I surrendered to the currents?" After a charged, life-changing Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds concert, a throbbing headache drove me to pop an innocent painkiller and

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a peculiar thought emerged out of nowhere “what if I downed the entire contents of my medicine cabinet?” Despite these passing musings, I never came close to inflicting any sort of self-harm. I treated my body with respect and reverence. I had regular check-ups done to make sure everything was fine. I took my vitamin D and iron supplements. I never missed a pap smear or a breast ultrasound. I brushed my teeth and flossed diligently. I never smoked. I swam a lot. I always took the stairs, and I walked a lot. When I realized that booze made me depressed and drugs made me paranoid, I promptly quit. Although what I was experiencing after the birth of my daughter was by all means challenging, suicide never crossed my mind. In fact, I felt like I had signed an unspoken contract obliging me to stay alive for the next couple of years to nurture this fragile new person that fully depended on me.

Halfway through the second year of my daughter’s life, the clouds started to dissipate. I felt like the right wires were being connected and that a complete circuit would be attained any moment. I started sleeping a bit and some dormant emotions began to flicker back to life. I laughed hysterically at simple jokes or comic situations, leaving everyone around me looking bewildered. Tears started forming on my unused tear ducts, threatening to overflow on various occasions. I revisited cherished books I had enjoyed in the past and it felt like a warm embrace, as if I was greeting old friends. Hello Roth! Hello Anne Sexton! It’s me, again! I started listening to albums that I loved in my youth and it actually felt like I was unearthing them for the very first time. I was rediscovering myself. Top of Form

Nearly seven years have passed since the birth of my daughter and although relics of my old self have resurfaced, transformed by the crucible of motherhood and my new life experiences, the much desired complete circuit has yet to be attained. I am certain that the inner turmoil I experienced during my pregnancy and in the first years of my daughter’s life could be attributed to perinatal depression. I do realize that complaining about such trivial matters amidst the chaos of the world makes me sound like the worst case of a Westerner complaining about first world problems. I still believe that pregnancy and birth are deemed “unnatural” in the western world (and ignored in the developing world) to subordinate women and render them “docile creatures” who need to be confronted, controlled and contained. I certainly wish that more health practitioners would be educated about the numerous faces and manifestations of both prenatal and postnatal depression to facilitate early detection and prompt treatment. Of course, it is imperative that all medical practitioners who enjoy their authority and exploit their position to propagate misogynistic, sexist or racist ideologies be removed from the field. In hindsight, I also blame myself for my stubbornness. I should have actively tried to seek help. I shouldn’t have wasted so much time masking my symptoms and pretending that everything was fine. I should have done more.