

O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM

Lorren Richelle Lemmons

I've heard many women say that the day their child was born was the best day of their life, but it was the worst day of mine. After laboring for nearly forty hours, my body was cut open and my son pried from my flesh. Earlier in the day, his heartbeat had slowed to a dangerous rate while I was pushing, and my body still shook with the epinephrine that had burned through my veins and the recognition of how fragile we both were, how thin the curtain between life and death.

His heartbeat had rebounded with the emergency medication, but after four more hours of pushing, an impatient doctor informed me that I was done and needed a C-section. She left me writhing on a stretcher, unmedicated, for nearly an hour while she performed a scheduled C-section on a mother who had priority over me. I felt as though she were punishing me for failing to give birth. Once I was finally brought into the sterile operating room, vomiting as the anesthesiologist tried to numb my pain, I had a panic attack and was sedated for nearly an hour after my son came earthside. When he was finally placed in my arms in a curtained recovery room where I could hear another baby crying on the other side of the cloth, my mind was already in free fall.

The weeks that followed heralded failure after failure—my breasts refused to produce milk, and I visibly watched my son's body shrink until a lactation consultant gently but firmly told me I needed to consider formula as medicine for my son's survival. Then, at only five weeks old, he developed a respiratory infection that landed him in the hospital for five days. I laid on the plastic-covered sofa bed, watching my son's oxygen monitor until my eyes blurred and I fell into restless sleep. His first smile came from a hospital bed, nasal cannula taped to

his face. My postpartum follow-up appointment happened during his stay, and the chipper doctor, one I hadn't seen during my pregnancy, said, "Everything's fine! Your son's illness isn't serious!" and sent me off with a smile, ignoring the clear signs that my mental health was deteriorating.

Once we were home, I walked the halls with my recovering son, afraid I'd lose him if I let him out of my sight and convinced every terrible thing that had happened to him was my fault—my fault I hadn't pushed hard enough to give birth to him the "normal" way, my fault I hadn't produced enough breastmilk to give him antibodies against the virus that had put him in the hospital, my fault I was so exhausted and anxious that he cried in my arms and was only soothed when my husband came home and let him sleep on his chest. I stared at the wooden knife block in our kitchen and wondered what it would be like to pull a blade down my wrist. Would I feel the same sighing release of pressure I felt when I picked at my arms, a habit started as a ten-year-old that I'd never been able to quit? Would my head empty of all the demons, digging with tooth and claw at my brain and letting me drift quietly into oblivion?

I put the baby down and called my doctor.



In those early weeks of my son's life, I begged God to heal me, but where I sought relief, he sent only another wave of struggle. That first month, I couldn't see even a glimmer of light—I was groping in a dark sea, gasping for air between the waves battering my body. I still don't know why he left me like that, in my own prolonged dark night of the soul—why it took so long before I could feel his love and understanding begin to lift me.

I've read again and again, in scripture and general conference talks, that Jesus needed a body not only to enact the Resurrection but to truly

understand us, his broken, imperfect, mortal siblings. After my son's baby blessing, only days before he entered the hospital, I gave a bleary, loopy testimony, saying I felt an inkling of what God must feel for us because my heart felt like it was ripped in two when my son was fussy due to gas. (My father-in-law smirked and said, "Are you saying Jesus has gas?") The thought of my son experiencing even minor pain was gutting.

I knew the Savior felt the pains of the world in Gethsemane, but I wondered if there was a difference between the things he experienced on his own behalf in mortality and the rush of world-heaviness he experienced the night before his crucifixion. Surely Jesus cried as a newborn, shocked by the transition from warmth and darkness to open, blaring light. Did he lie sick in bed as a toddler, struggling for breath? Did his mind ever slip below reason, the struggles of the chemical animal dragging the spirit away from joy?

If you ask me if I believe that he felt all of my pains and sins, I will say yes without hesitation. I can stand in front of my ward and cry into a microphone that I believe he knows what I'm feeling, just like I testified of his love after my son was blessed, when I couldn't feel his love but still believed it was there. I believe during that heavy, infinite night in the garden, he must have learned what a woman's body experiences, even though he lived his life in a male one. That's part of the *magnum mysterium*, the mystery of his godhood enveloped in mortality. My finite mind can't make all the pieces fit, but my spirit trusts in the faith I've cultivated throughout my life.

And yet, I still find myself questioning. Could he truly know how warring hormones can make a woman forget who she is? Can he possibly understand the fear of holding a life in your womb and knowing that whether by the knife or the impossible stretching and tearing of your secret parts, you have to deliver it? Does he comprehend the monthly dive into darkness, relieved only by blood spilling from inside you?

I believe he does. I believe in the Atonement. But in my mortal limitation, I wish I *knew* that he could understand in his own body the havoc wreaked by mine.



I started picking my skin in the fifth grade. Small, pustulant bumps reddened what must have once been smooth and soft, and one evening, sitting outside on the faded patio furniture, I began to dig at them. My nails were short and blunt, meant to keep me from clicking against the piano keys when I practiced, but I only dug more viciously, a tiny puff of relief hitting my brain whenever a bead of blood appeared. Sometimes my fingers still seek those little bumps, camouflaged now among hundreds of freckles and dozens of scars.

My parents caught me sobbing in the shower the same year the bumps appeared and my breasts budded. Dripping tears mingling with the shower spray turned into heaving sobs, and my mom hammered at the door, alarmed. Later, my dad sat next to me on my bed and told me he had cried in the shower on his mission in Australia, overwhelmed by stress and thousands of miles from anyone he knew. I was unmoved, one part disbelieving that my dad was capable of falling apart, and one part caught up in my own preteen cocoon of selfishness, unable to care about his past problems while mine were still clouding my vision.

I didn't know how to describe what I was experiencing, but I knew that it was present, malignant, and other from myself. I started crying in class regularly, feeling friendless and worrying that my teacher didn't like me. My teacher called my parents, exasperated with my outbursts, and they threatened to take me to therapy with jagged voices. I'd always been the good girl and being sent to therapy felt like being sent to some adult principal's office, deeper and more serious than any school administrator. Now as a parent, I think my dad was worried about his unstable child, not sure how to help me as I trembled and broke. At the

time, I thought he was mad at me for my flaws, for not knowing how to be happy when everything in my life was privileged and good.

When I search my memories for when I started feeling better, I can't find the answer. I had a best friend whom I was close to, even though she also hung out with the "cool girls" who wanted nothing to do with me because of my public crying outbursts. I have good memories of that first year of depression despite the unshakable poison fog that settled like dust on my fingers and mouth, smearing everything I touched and said. Ever since that year, even times of stable mental health, that malignant cloud has hovered in my periphery, threatening to wilt the flowers I grew in its absence.

Looking back over the crests and troughs of my depression, hormones have always been the electrical charge driving the storm. From the early rumblings of puberty to the ravages of postpartum depression, all punctuated by a monthly mini-descent into hell where I hate everyone and am convinced the feeling is mutual, my fight with mental illness has been woven with my femininity. Is this what God meant when he told Eve, "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"?¹ Am I cursed to carry this extra, other pain because my mother tasted the fruit necessary to enact the plan of salvation?



As a teen, I strained my eyes to read the fine print of my scriptures, looking for comfort. In the midst of another bout with my now well-known shadowy beast, phrases slip into my mind, phrases I read at twelve or fourteen, underlining with my rainbow scripture highlighter—"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."² "I am filled with comfort."³ "I will not leave you

1. Genesis 3:16.

2. Psalm 30:5.

3. 2 Corinthians 7:4.

comfortless.”⁴ I resonated with Paul’s desperate plea for the “thorn in [his] flesh”⁵ to be removed before I could drive a car, although I’m still striving to be comforted by the Lord’s response: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”⁶ I can’t say that I “glory in my infirmities,”⁷ but before I could even verbalize what the Atonement was, I could feel its support, printed on my heart like it was on the whisper-thin pages of my scriptures. I trusted Jesus implicitly, childlike in my need for him.

Sometimes when I look back now, in my thirties, I feel like my faith has gone backward, a sort of spiritual Benjamin Button as my skepticism and questions grow. I once believed the balm of Gilead could heal that thorn pricking at my skin, but as the years have gone by, the wound has deepened and festered. When I hear people speak of miraculous healing, my cynical inner voice reminds me, “But not for you. You’re supposed to be *learning something*, and clearly you’re not there yet.”

My spirit thrills to the scripture, “He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities,”⁸ even as my mind questions it. I’ve heard some say that Jesus could have chosen a more hypothetical passage, experiencing our woes on a spiritual plane, but that statement feels repellently false. A God of mercy and love would succor us through his senses, albeit accelerated and magnified through godly power. And I believe he knows how to succor me, even though he doesn’t have a uterus or a monthly war dance of estrogen and progesterone surging through his cells.

4. John 14:18.

5. 2 Corinthians 12:7.

6. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

7. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

8. Alma 7:12.

But I still keep asking, like pushing a bruise: Do you know me? Do you know this too? Are you truly experiencing my anguish by my side?

My childlike heart hears the answer my overly analytical mind cannot: yes. Somehow, yes. Skeptics would tell me it's intellectual laziness on my part to accept the broad-stroke answer that ignores the details needling my mind, but for me, this is where I must accept that God's ways are not my ways, and that I do not yet have a perfect knowledge of things. I do not know how a man, even the holy Son of Man, can understand viscerally the things my body has wrought, but I believe him still and so embrace the mystery.

LORREN RICHELLE LEMMONS {lorrenrichelle@gmail.com} is the deputy editor for *WRKWDR Magazine*. Her essays, short fiction, and poetry have been published in *Literary Mama*, *Coffee + Crumbs*, *Military Mom Collective*, *Motherwell*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and other publications. Lorren and her family recently left military life and settled in her hometown in Idaho. When she isn't chasing one of her three children, Lorren can be found scribbling in a notebook, playing the harp or piano, or experimenting in the kitchen.