

## Mother's Birth

My mother decided to be born in 1922, in an old clapboard farmhouse molting its paint like a snake does its skin each year. It was a house that drifted in an orchard of oranges trees heavy with fruit ripening in the brassy autumn light. The two grandmothers braved the cranky planks of stairs to the sitting porch. There would be no sun tea this afternoon or sharing gossip seated on the wicker rocking chairs. They sat empty as the women entered the house leaving the sword fern to stand guard at the door.

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Seasoned midwives in their starched aprons and rolled up sleeves they prepared for the birth gathering washcloths, towels, and boiling water. As twilight fell one of them lit the kerosene lamps, that cast a warm glow to the birth room's poesy papered walls. Silhouettes of the women danced like shadow puppets on the roll down shades. They'd delivered eighteen children between them and were familiar with the pain and the complications of giving birth. No doctor would be called and there was no money to pay for one.

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The men had been shoed outside and now gathered under the gilded-leafy tent of the century old black walnut tree. They shuffled about like cattle, uneasily, sensing a change in the air. Some of them rolled cigarettes using the bent tables of their knees and others took swigs of Jim Beam grimacing at the familiar burn in their throats. When the sun went down, they lit a fire in a 50-gallon drum and rubbed elbows in front of its flame. Cigarettes glowed and darted in the night like red falling stars. The infant's first wail punched a hole in the plaster walls of the house. Someone slapped her father on the back like he was the one being born.

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She was placed on her mother's breast above her heartbeat's steady rhythm. After she latched on and was content the daughter slept. Her mother wept at the miracle she held in her arms and with relief that the ordeal was over. The swaddled infant was whisked away, and exhausted mother slipped into blissful sleep. Waking in the morning her breasts gorged she whispered to no one "I vow, never to go through this again." She would two years later with the birth of a son.