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Michaela Barnett

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Tree of Life

Michaela Barnett

“Wait, you haven’t heard the placenta story?” I’ll ask, incredulous, while those familiar with the tale roll their eyes or grimace in anticipation. I really need to collect new material if I become stupefied when someone doesn’t know the intimacies of my afterbirth origin story. I throw myself headlong into the telling of it, a classic with all the elements that make up a good party story: intrigue, surprise, and a complex cast of characters that include Carol, my rotund, alcoholic maternal grandmother, my hippy mother, and my ever-pragmatic father. Grandma comes complete with black, tattooed eyebrows that are just askew enough to paint her face in a perpetual state of confusion and surprise and a morbidly obese Chihuahua, Tuxedo, always in tow.

I start by capturing my audience with a good hook, like when I tell my story of the one night I spent in jail or how my mom once thought she lived through the Holocaust (she didn’t). What could be more captivating than the mucous membrane that allowed me to exist for nine months in the womb? Many things, but I usually charge ahead despite (or because of) the aghast faces that stare at me. I chalk it up to engrossment in the tale and use it as encouragement to continue, though now as I reflect upon their strained faces, they might rather be masks of supplication, begging me to stop.

“So, I and all of my sisters were born at home, except for my oldest sister Megan. My mom had a pretty traumatic experience in the hospital with her, where she felt like she couldn’t control the situation, which, as a pregnant woman giving birth for the first time, is just about the worst thing. For the rest of us, she decided to do at-home births where she could feel cared for and bring life into the world the way she wanted.” This part of the story elicits two types of responses. The first: *You were born at home? People still do that? Were there doctors?* Yes, yes, yes, and a midwife. The second: *That’s neat.*

“She actually made the news in Chicago for being the first at home VBAC,” I’ll inject, inserting some power of fame into the story. *Veeback? What’s that?*

“Vaginal Birth After Caesarean.” Then, when my audience’s faces are still contorted by the word ‘vagina,’ I bring us back down. “So my oldest sister, Megan, was born in the hospital, and Lindy was born at home in Chicago, and then my sister Kelsey and I were both born in the house I grew up in all my life. So my parent’s bedroom was where I began.” In more ways than one.

“My mom was a total hippy, right? Grew stuff on the farm, had home births, all that.” I start to feel real rapport with my listeners at this stage of the telling. They’re transfixed and I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat, ready to drop plot bombs around the corner of every sentence. *Dear god, please tell me your mother did not eat the placenta.*

“No, none of my family members ate it. Not even a nibble. But when I was born, my parents wanted to plant my placenta with a tree that would become my life tree. Very beautiful, symbolic; the substance that fed me while I was still in utero would feed a tree that would grow and be my tree. My life creating more life.” I gesture with my hands at this point, crafting trees out of the air.

“The only problem is, I was born in November. In Ohio. When the ground is frozen. So they couldn’t plant a tree, because besides the tree just straight dying in the ground, they wouldn’t even be able to dig a hole. You’re not getting a shovel into that frozen sod, I tell ya!” I’m growing more animated at this point, but most of my audience is either suburban or city-born folk. They aren’t as tickled as I am about the notion of digging a hole outside in the dead of winter to plant something. I charge on.

“What do you do with a placenta you can’t plant for five or six months? You freeze it.” *Your placenta was in the freezer for six months? Please let this be the weird climax to the story.*

“Well, my grandma came up from Texas to help my mom with the three older girls while my mom was recuperating from, you know, birthing a child. And I was a big baby. My mom actually thought she was having twins at one point when my shoulders squeezed out . . . but that’s another story. The birthing story’s a classic too,” I chuckle to myself. *Is she going to make us listen to the birthing story after she finishes whatever this is?*

“My grandma’s not a domestic lady. This is the same woman who made soup one time and when we asked for some, refused us. It was for

her dog, obviously. The same woman who forgot we were coming one year for Christmas and gave us pens – like writing utensil ball-bearing pens – for Christmas. So my dad comes home from work one day to find the placenta thawing in a bowl in the sink.” My audience gets anxious. *It’s a trap! She was lying to us when she told us no one in her family ate the placenta.*

“So my dad asks her, ‘Carol, what are you doing?’ and she tells him, ‘I just thought I would get dinner ready, and I found some meat in the freezer and thought we could cook it tonight. *What is it, anyway?*’” *What does a placenta look like? I’m not eating meat for a week.*

“My dad redirected, grabbed some frozen beef or something else, and spirited the placenta back into the freezer, into the depths where no one would find it. They never told my grandma she almost made us placenta. Can you believe it? At least, when I told her this story a few years ago she had no idea. But maybe that was just the eyebrows.” *This family is weird.* They begin to inch away, mistakenly believing that my origin story has come to an end.

“Wait! You’ll never guess. When spring finally came and they planted my life tree with the placenta...” I pause in anticipation of the finale. *Please just tell us.*

“The tree died! My placenta killed it. Bad omen, huh?”