

## On the Road (with Baby) - by China

Looking at her face in the morning, it was hard to believe I didn't feel the newness of my month-old baby—not in the way I had expected. When I stared into her eyes, she just did not seem brand new to me.

My day began with the grogginess of waking up with not enough sleep again, with my suckling sweaty under my sleeping bag. But once up, I felt refreshed. After I pissed behind a tree that didn't hide me, I brushed my teeth in the trailer park water hose, and changed my milk-stained shirt.

She sleeps a lot, not quite in the world yet. I've heard that newborns dream more as newborns than at any other age.

I tie her into her makeshift car seat, and Stacy turns on *Metallica*. The baby sleeps through this as she has through all of our music. (I did turn down the *Butthole Surfers* when I thought the screams might be too emotional for her.) We are back on the road.

Driving through Texas late last night, we set up our tent, in the trailer park in front of the Sheraton Hotel, without paying. It was right off the highway. We were so tired but our conversation dripped with profound thoughts. Stacy told me that the *National Enquirer* ran a picture of a World War II plane found on the moon. She thought it was so funny. She didn't believe the stuff she read in the normal newspapers, either. "What if everything they print in the *National Enquirer* is true?" I said. "No one believes it. You know, just like how most people won't see reality starting them in the face because it's too much for them."

We had driven for twelve hours or more in our truck. Stacy was leaving behind a broken heart; she and Helga had wanted to escape. But me, with my baby—I kept wondering, *What am I doing?*

We drove. We drove by great white mountains and mesas, longing to climb up and sit Buddha-like on top. We had driven through New Mexico. We drove by Volcanoes and great expanses of land.

We stopped in a roadside town, and I filled my daughter's prescription with Medicaid in a drug store. All the towns were like other world. I watched the beautiful young children in these towns. I supposed they were descended from the indigenous tribes of North and South America. I watched sad cowboys walk across big parking lots.

Texas was full of tacky steak houses. Metal oil pumps that looked like they were sucking up every juice left in the earth. Nonstop surrealism. We watched dreams cut the earth as we drove, and we watched the earth rise and fall. We passed neon signs for headstones, the Home of the Ding Dong Daddy, a giant cow statue fronting an Old West amusement park, and a dead cow by a fence. Scenes and places and people's faces flashed by me in patterns.

The night before we left Boulder, Stacy's roommates little black cat had her kittens. They had been talking about it for weeks: "Sassafras is about to pop." That night, I arrived at their house

for the first time, and a few minutes later, Sassafras went into labor. I felt like my presence triggered it.

Laura had been petting Sassy when, right in the middle of the carpeted floor, a white bubble came out from her, and she started licking it. Laura screamed, “Oh Sassy, the babies are coming! Oh!” Stacy ran in from the other room and yelled, “Laura, don’t touch her! Oh God, Oh God!”

And me, I just watched. I wanted to know what birth looked like—this thing I felt not too long before. I knew what it felt like to be the one delivering, but now I was going to see what it looked like to be on the outside of the experience.

I don’t think Laura and Stacy had ever seen a birth before. Sassafras seemed to trust Laura so much, and she climbed into the box we laid out for her. Scared, Stacy had fled the room. We called to her, “Come on back, you have to see this.” We settled down to watch. The kittens looked dead at first. Little wet creatures, they didn’t even look like kittens until they were licked and licked and then finally opened their tiny mouths to cry and we were all just amazed.

I slept over that night, and a funny thing happened. When my baby woke and cried to be nursed, Sassafras ran over to her—with her eyes so round—trying to respond to that cry. She didn’t know what to do. But the small young cat was now a mother, and as a mother, she had that strong tug in her gut to respond to a baby’s cry.

It felt right to witness birth the night before we left. That night was also the biggest, fullest, brightest orange moon that I have ever seen. Right near the horizon. At first I did not even recognize it as the moon. It marked one complete lunar cycle since the full moon when my baby had been born.

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