

OLD WIVES' TALE

By Cindy O'Quinn

Trigger Warning: This article addresses mental health.

Trauma, at some point or another, we all experience some form of traumatic event. What we believe in or not may help us through. There's one thing I've experienced twice; the circle which surrounds me, opens on occasion, and some kind of otherness, containing light, slips through to keep you safe, or to carry you through when life has to end.

I was eleven the first time I saw them. Days of gusting winds had come to a sudden end on a dead calm, cold December night in West Virginia. And back in 1977 there was snow on the ground all season long. They stood in the doorway, a silhouette of light. A man? A woman? It didn't matter. Their presence woke me. I'd fallen asleep on the couch, and Mom had left me be. I wasn't scared, it was more of a feeling of unknowing, but I did know. Did they tell me what to do, what to say? I don't know. Whatever the reason, I knew to wake Mom and tell her to check the wood stove.

Our house was on fire.

Dad was burning wood in the stove from a tree which had been struck by lightning. That was an old wives' tale. Never burn a lightning struck tree, because bad luck was sure to follow.

Fifteen years later on a beautiful spring day in Virginia, I was tired of being cooped up. Six months pregnant combined with being housebound for a big part of the winter left me with a case of cabin fever.

“Let’s go for a ride in the country,” Tim said.

Looking back, I remember feeling hesitant. I asked, “It’s not going to be a bumpy ride is it?” I recalled my mother saying going for a bumpy ride in the country could trigger labor.

He answered, “We’ll drive to Crozet and stay on the main road along the creek.”

It was a lovely ride. Everything was green with new life. Forsythias and Red Buds were bursting with color, and the sweet smell of lilac filled the air. Yes, filled the air as if it were masking something. Why did I have such a thought?

But it was a good day for a ride. Not a bumpy ride.

I remember seeing the big rock in the creek. Plenty big enough to sit on and have a picnic. We didn’t, of course, but I remember thinking it. Almost felt like the rock was calling to me, warning me of something yet to come. There was debris high up on the rock from flooding the previous fall. That was when I found out I was pregnant. One of the happiest days of my life was the day I knew for sure I was going to have a baby. Do you ever know anything for sure?

The condition of the road changed as we drove along the creek. A pot hole here and there, turned into holes almost everywhere I looked. Tim drove slow and was careful. I knew he could just about see the worry etched on my face.

He said, “Cindy, we’ll turn around and head back as soon as I find a wide enough spot.”

I held onto my belly with one hand and the door with the other, bracing myself for the pot holes, because they could not all be avoided. The vehicle rocked in a not-so gentle motion like an angry sea, as he maneuvered across the rough road.

We drove the route once the previous summer, and it was good, but now it was a bumpy road. I thought of my mother and the old wives' tale. Wives' tales or superstitions, take your pick, this Appalachian girl had lots of them. Eventually, we turned around and drove home. Neither spoke on that drive back. He knew I was afraid. All I could do was hope we avoided enough holes on that bumpy, country road to keep anything bad from happening.

I learned later on, my sister dreamed I went into labor and my baby was born too early to survive. The girls in my family often had dreams which later came true. One rule applied, if it was a bad dream, you ate breakfast before you spoke about the dream out loud, or else the dream would happen. We told one another about our dreams, not this time and not before it came true. Some people are connected. Simply connected. What you chose to do with the connection was up to you.

Within a few hours of going on that little drive along the creek on the bumpy road, I started having pains. My first pregnancy, my first baby was in danger. I was only 26 weeks along. We rushed to the local hospital. I was five centimeters dilated, but my baby was not in position. Why would he be? He still had another 14 weeks to mature and turn to that ready-set-go point. My womb was trying to expel my son.

Medicine to stop labor was given at the hospital. I was loaded into an ambulance for transport to a bigger and better hospital. My obstetrician went along with me and held my hand as we were taken to Charlottesville. My first thought was it was a nice gesture, but I realized he was with me in case my womb ripped open and tried to push my son from my body while he was still sideways. What could he do at that point? Watch both mother and child die in the back of an ambulance, flooded with blood?

Tim followed close behind, so close I thought I saw the reflection of our taillights against his glasses. Was he crying? I hoped not, because it could blur his vision. I didn't want him to wreck and leave me in this world with what was coming. I didn't know what was coming.

I did know.

My mind was numb. I was being prepared for something not good. I begged my mind not to do that. I didn't want to be prepared for something bad. My mind lost control, and something else took over. Something else? Someone else? But my mind was numb, and I was glad.

The meds were not successful, and delivery became imminent. It felt like mere seconds went by since entering the big hospital, and my abdomen was being cut. I was still awake, mouth open and ready to scream, but nothing came out. I felt the pressure of my eyes bulging as they made the second cut across my abdomen. I willed them to look at me. The knockout medicine no longer stalled; it took me away. Away to the place where you know nothing of what's happening on the other side. I knew. I knew because something prepared me ahead of time not to take comfort in the doctors' attempt at hope.

I came back from away haze. Tim was there to tell me the doctors thought our baby boy, Austin, would pull through. He had already started calling friends and family to tell them the good news. I wished he hadn't done that, because I knew. I dared not utter a word about what I knew.

One of the doctors returned. They were wrong. Our son's lungs were too immature. False hope crushed for anyone who hooked into it. After a few hours, our son went downhill in a rush. Blood transfusions and medicines weren't doing what needed to be done to keep him alive.

Austin was placed in my arms. He wasn't put there for me to nurse him, count his fingers, toes, run my hand across his auburn silk hair, or to breathe in the smell of him. Austin was placed in my arms so he could breathe his last few breaths, close to my broken heart, while I tried to focus on every part of him. He was perfect. He was beautiful. No one wanted him more than us. He wasn't perfect on the inside. Why would he be? He had three more months for his lungs to get strong and healthy. He didn't though.

Our baby died in my arms eight hours after he was taken from my angry womb.

A few days later, I was released from the hospital by promising I would return after his burial. I made it clear I had to attend my son's funeral.

The drive home, once again, was a quiet ride for there were no words which could make a difference. Nothing to change what happened. I remember the sun coming in through the windshield, it was so bright, and I could feel it warming me on my insides. I was glad to be driving away from the cold, dark hospital. We left there with so much sadness and without our baby.

I didn't sleep that night. How could I? It was my darkest hour. I sat in a recliner and hoped for the strength required to remain upright while our first-born son was laid to rest. I wasn't strong enough for that, but the silhouette in the doorway told me I was. I asked Tim if he saw it. He didn't.

In those first few seconds my breath caught and I was afraid, but I remembered their visit all those years ago and immediately knew they were there to see me through the night. They remained until the first beams of sunlight broke through the shadows of darkness. Like dissipating clouds, the silhouette was there one moment and gone the next.

We blamed ourselves for Austin. Being a woman or just being me, I blamed myself more. It was my job to carry him to term, and I failed. The doctor assured us, the bumpy ride in the country had nothing to do with the premature birth. How could he know? I didn't.

After twenty-nine years, I still regret going on that Sunday drive. However, I don't regret keeping my eyes open when I saw the silhouette in the doorway.

Not all horrific things are loud and gruesome. I've discovered the most horrific things imaginable are true to life. And in the quietest of hours, you may come face to face with something other. Something other than us.

Over the years, I've continued to glance at doorways more than I probably should. My superstition. My old wives' tale. Unlike so many marriages which suffer the death of a child, ours did survive the loss. Barely. Maybe the silhouette had continued to watch over us from a distance.

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