

Grief's sharp pain

By Ruth Ostrow

THERE are many types of pain, I think to myself as my beauty therapist spreads hot wax on my legs. I can feel the skin underneath sizzling from the heat. I can feel the hairs bristling in anticipation of self-inflicted torture. I grit my teeth as she catches on to one of the pieces of newly dried wax, waiting.

You can usually hear the ripping sound before you feel it in this most bizarre of female beauty rituals. "Aaaaah," I moan out loud as the first wave of suffering hits. "It's worse than childbirth!" I grizzle, loudly.

Marie Gai, who works in Sydney's Darlinghurst, has been doing my legs for years. She knows about pain thresholds. She sees at least six women like me each day, soldiering on in the face of their expletives and cries. Seemingly oblivious to their sour moods and complaints.

Today she has a strange look on her face. "Waxing isn't worse than childbirth," she says quietly. "And there are many pains worse than that."

"But you said your birth was an easy one," I respond, as leg two is primed for the kill. I know Marie has a daughter, Brigitte, whom she worships. For a decade I've heard about this girl.

Marie sucks in her breath. "There were more children," she lets out, as she grabs another strip of wax and rips it up the length of my leg. I want to yell in pain but the pain on Marie's face somehow renders me silent.

"I have had three daughters," she says, bracing her body from the blow of memory. She continues to mix, spread and wax. "Loss is the worst pain of all," she says before telling me about her daughter Sharee, born in 1962.

"The labour literally tore me apart," she says with a sad smile. "It was agony. But what came after was much more terrible."

For 14 days and nights after the birth, Marie held her firstborn in her arms. But it was a tragic waiting game. The child was to be taken away. Marie was an unmarried mother in times when such a thing was considered shameful.

The boy involved had no means to support her. Her parents were unable, because her father was a paranoid schizophrenic and spent most of his life in and out of hospitals. Her mother was exhausted.

"The nurses bound my breasts with tight bandages to stop the milk. But still I held my daughter to my body and wept, struggling to drink in the feel of her skin, the shape of her face, to press her into my memory forever before people from the adoption agency came to take her from me."

Marie's face is tensing as she tells the tale. My mouth is dry and silent. "You cry for years. I kept a diary and every day I wrote in it: 'Sharee would be two months old today'."

"I cried every birthday. You never forget a child who has been taken from you." Six sorrowful years passed before Marie met and married her husband, and soon

after became pregnant with Heidi. When her second daughter was born, Marie again held the child through the night, overjoyed that this time she could keep her precious gift.

But Marie could not hold this child either. When Heidi was 17 months old, she climbed out of her cot and on to a window ledge. As the headlines of the afternoon papers screamed that terrible day, March 12, 1971, the baby fell to her death.

Marie keeps working on my legs. But I can no longer feel the burning of skin wounds.

"At the coroner's inquest, I was numb with pain. I nearly went mental. I remember hearing the story before ours, of another couple who had lost a child, in a boating accident. The child fell overboard and got caught in the propeller. I kept thinking, I'm not the only one who suffers.

"I used that thought to keep me going. But I was racked with guilt. I thought I was being punished for giving my first child away. I just read a lot about Holocaust survivors. People who'd lost whole families. I kept thinking, if they can get through, so can I."

As fate would have it, Marie was unknowingly pregnant at the inquest. And when baby Brigitte came along a few months later, quite unexpectedly, the little girl saved Marie's life.

But the story has an even happier ending. Through the Post-Adoption Resource Centre and its New Zealand counterpart, and the recent open-door policy on adoption, Marie has since tracked down Sharee, who was renamed Clarinda by her adoptive parents.

Clarinda, now 36, has had a wonderful life. She was delighted to find her natural mother, and is coming from New Zealand to stay with Marie for Brigitte's imminent wedding. She will bring with her two beautiful boys -- Marie's grandchildren.

"These days I feel complete. As if my life has really meant something," Marie says as she turns off the hot wax and rubs a soothing cream into my skin to stop the aching. Her face looks calm and soothed in the afternoon light.

There are many different types of pain, I reflect again as I get off the torture table. None that I have ever known can compete with the griefs of ordinary life.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

Your recent paean of praise for the gaunt, luminous face of Robert Bogucki is one of the most inane pieces of New Age twaddle I've read in a long time. Did you intentionally leave out the bit when he donned a Nine network T-shirt to vomit up a banana in the desert? A very spiritual, dare I say Euripidean, moment.

Peter McClelland

Karrinyup, Western Australia

Dear Ruth,

It seems readers such as Reginald (September 25-26), who thinks papers are not for "spiritual introspection and emotional therapy", would consign you to be burned at the stake. But I'd like to thank you for your column. It brings the

search that many are making to its rightful place in the news of the day.
Annie McGrath
Broome, Western Australia

Dear Ruth,
Your time will come. When my son took off for Europe with a backpack, I swore I'd do the same one day. Last year, after my husband died of cancer, I decided it was time to wander. There is both an emotional and physical freedom in having all one's belongings on one's back.
Jackie Hartnell, e-mail

Dear Ruth,
I have walked our country in search of solitude, which reminds me of a Babe Ruth quote: "You have to be careful if you don't know where you are going because you might not get there."
Roy Aitken, Hobart, Tasmania

Dear Ruth,
Regarding your piece on Jacob Kaplan (September 25-26), seldom in my 62 years have I read such an excellent article. Please pass on my delight to Kaplan that his nephew's message will perhaps undo a lifetime of horrific memories. Thank you for reminding us that love can heal even the oldest of emotional wounds.
Peter Brierty, e-mail

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 09 OCT 1999