Maja

by Ace (Allan C.) Edmands

More than a decade and a half of Junes ago—the day before my sixty-ninth birthday, in fact—my wife Ina and I drove all the way, two and a half hours, to the North Sherman Cemetery to check out Maja's grave. We hadn't been there for five or six years, only once since we'd returned from Japan in 1999. We probably didn't want Hazel to feel weird, reminding her of the daughter who, had she lived, might have meant we wouldn't have gone for another baby the following year: her. Well, now that Hazel had finished college and had a career and apartment out in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was confident we could visit Maja once in a while. She would have been forty years old this coming February.

In front of Maja's granite marker with its engraved teddy bear, Ina planted a small pot of million bells, a miniature red petunia, a throng of compact purple flowers each the size of a quarter. She buttressed the pot with stones and soil. I fetched water from the faucet on the side of the white Congregationalist church, the kind of New England structure I was sure I'd seen in a Rockwell painting. We watered the pretty perennial and took some photos.

Maja is right beside the cemetery driveway, almost all the way to the woods from the church. Next door to her on the right lies a couple named Morren, Andrew and Shirley. He died in January 2003 at the age of seventy, she died two Januarys later, when she was sixty-six. They share the same stone and the same plot, and we smiled at their

now eternal closeness. Their nephew, we found out about an hour later, is Mr. Judd, the man who sold us some straw that day as well as our own plot in the cemetery.

Yeah, I know... so bourgeois! we decided we wanted an available plot for ourselves, to the right of Mr. and Mrs. Morren. We're in excellent health, but if we wait, who knows what will be available? The plot we bought was as close as we could get to Maja, but I imagine the scene from *Our Town*, with all the cemetery occupants just sitting there, chatting with one another.

I've liked everyone we've met so far in Sherman, the ones who stand and walk around and do all their daily business, so I suspect the ones who stay all the time in this pleasant, bucolic cemetery must be agreeable as well. I'm pretty sure the Morrens won't mind relaying family discourse between Maja and us. Also, we'll be able to make sure that our fellow residents correctly pronounce the German name engraved on her stone, *M-A-J-A*: It rhymes with "hi-ya," not with "rajah," just as my wife's name, *I-N-A* (short for Christina) rhymes with "Tina" rather than with "China."

We used to visit Maja every month or so, before I took a five-year assignment in Japan, and now that we've bought our own plot, I guess we'll stop by more often.

I remember when I first met her, even before I knew she was a little girl. As she tumbled around inside Ina, whose pregnancy had evoked such an astounding loveliness, I would feel her, kiss her, sing to her, and tell her—in my halting German, what I called my *Windeldeutsch* ("diaper German")—how much I looked forward to playing with her.

We'd assembled a nursery at our Phoenicia home: basinet, mobile, chest of drawers full of baby clothes. Ina had knitted two woolen sweaters and crocheted two baby blankets, spinning the thread herself on her wheel out of the fleece she'd brought

from New Zealand and dyed with tea. In the basinet she put a cotton comforter lined with lace that had been her grandmother's.

My colleagues at work surprised me with a baby shower, giving us a carrying case for changing, pacifiers, toys. Once, walking across a field on my way to meet Ina, I found a frozen and dirty teddy bear, with all the stuffing intact. Ina cleaned him up, thawed him out, made him as good as new, and sat him down in the basinet.

Maja was two and a half weeks overdue, and Ina's suitcase was packed and ready in the car. We were at the backup obstetrician's clinic in Rhinebeck almost every day for internal exams and fetal monitoring. There was variability in the baby's heart rate, but neither Dr. Verrilli nor Janet, our confident and totally reassuring nurse midwife, was concerned.

I won't dwell on the long night leading up to Maja's birth too much—how hard and fast Ina's contractions came, how Janet promised us on the phone that she'd meet us at the birthing center at two thirty but never showed up, how Sue, the labor nurse, was so nervous she didn't know how to work the fetal monitor and was unsure of the erratic readings it gave, how Dr. Verrilli finally arrived at six, an hour after Ina was at full dilation, and ordered a C-section right away. At six forty-five a.m. Maja's heartbeat was strong enough, but ten minutes later in the O.R., it couldn't be detected.

Holding Ina's hand as Dr. Verrilli worked, I saw Maja emerge from the cut, confirmed that she was a fully formed redheaded girl, and watched as Dr. Bulba and two nurses took her to another table to try to revive her. The room's atmosphere for this birth was one of emergency rather than celebration. I kept holding Ina's hand as Dr. Verrilli extracted the placenta and started stitching up the cut.

As the minutes ticked by, I heard a gurgling from the other table, and I hoped it might be a baby sound. It was the aspirator, though, trying to clear the meconium poop out of Maja's air passage, where she had gasped it in when her heart had stopped. I heard Dr. Bulba's muttering such things as "It's over" and "She's dead." I was crying; Ina was trembling in postoperative shock; Sue was rubbing my shoulders; Dr. Verrilli was still sewing.

At seven fifteen a nurse named Bea handed my daughter to me, still warm, all swaddled in a hospital blanket. Dr. Nussbaum, the pediatrician who had taken over from Dr. Bulba, apologized to me, said they had done everything they could do.

Maja was the first dead person I'd ever been around, and I wasn't sure what to do with her. She was warm, but she didn't make a sound, she didn't move. This was not at all what I'd expected. I showed her to Ina, lying on the table. Ina already understood our baby was dead because she'd sensed the atmosphere in the room and she'd seen my tears.

When Dr. Verrilli was finished with his stitches, he fetched a Polaroid and began taking pictures of the three of us: Ina now back in her room in bed, me sitting in the bedside chair, and Maja in my arms. I considered this photo session ghoulish at the time, but I'm happy to have the pictures now.

I looked at Maja's abundant red hair, her red eyebrows, her dark lashes, her little nose, her lips getting darker and darker by the minute. She had all the toes and fingers she was supposed to have. Seven pounds, three ounces; nineteen and a half inches long. She was pretty. Her heart hadn't been strong enough to withstand the rigors of those fierce contractions without respite, especially that last one on the way to the O.R. She was pretty, though.

Maja was with us in the hospital room for several hours, about half the time in bed beside Ina's face, where we fondled her delicate little fingers and stroked her amazing head of hair. The other half of the time, she lay in a bedside nursery wagon. She looked like she was sleeping peacefully, and Ina and I found ourselves absurdly whispering so as not to wake her from her nap. She got bluer over that time, but she was still pretty. We kissed her goodbye when she was wheeled off for her autopsy. Later Bea brought back a lock of Maja's hair.

We had a lot of arranging to do over the next few days. I phoned my mother in California with the sad news and heard her bawling on the other end of the line. Ina dictated the telegram I sent to her father in Bavaria: "UNSERE TOCHTER MAJA WAR EINE STILLGEBURT (27.2.87). CHRISTINA GEHT ES DEN UMSTAENDEN ENTSPRECHEND GUT. ALLAN" ("Our daughter Maja, was stillborn (2/27/87). Christina is all right, all things considered. Allan"). Ina followed up the telegram with a complete letter. [She had been speaking English so long, she forgot there is no such German word as *Stillgeburt*; the proper word is *Totgeburt* ("deadborn"), and before my father-in-law received the follow-up letter with the details, he sent a congratulations card.]

I told my boss at work what had happened, and she assured me she would take care of informing all my colleagues who had given me the baby shower. I arranged with my ex to meet with Oona and Theo, so I could tell them personally rather than over the phone that their half-sister hadn't survived her birth. I marveled that they were hugging me in sympathy rather than grieving for their own loss.

My neighbor Hans offered to go to our Phoenicia apartment and dismantle the baby room before we returned there, but I told him no. We wanted to face the death of our daughter squarely rather than pretend she had never really lived. State regulations don't allow an official birth certificate if a child dies before birth, even just minutes before birth, but we got one anyway, with her big footprints on it as well as her full name in calligraphy, Maja Ernestine Edmands. I put obits in the local papers.

We were generally sad during the hospital stay, but we had a few occasions to laugh, although laughing hurt Ina, pulling on her stitches. One morning her breakfast featured gooey Farina Cream of Wheat, and she complained it was like glue. "Don't you know that Elmer's Glue is part of the required diet after surgery?" I joked, and then we both tried to stifle that painful laughter.

Ina and I firmly rejected the notion of putting Maja into one of the Styrofoam boxes provided by funeral homes for babies. They look like camping coolers and hermetically seal their contents from the earth and the life contained in the earth. We wanted our daughter to be part of the coming spring. My friend Steve helped me construct a coffin out of pine boards to the regulation dimensions: twenty-four inches long, ten inches wide, eleven inches high. We attached decorative hinges and a decorative handle at each end. When we were finished, it looked like a toy box.

Ina, managing quite well on her pain medication, lined the box with the basinet's comforter, edged with her grandmother's lace. We picked up Maja from the Rhinebeck funeral home, already dressed as we had instructed against the late-winter cold. Her eyes were more sunken behind her closed lids, but she still looked pretty to me. She wore one of the cloth diapers Ina had cut and hemmed, a little undershirt with snaps, snuggly

pajamas in which her feet and hands were tucked, one of the woolen sweaters Ina had knitted for her, and a woolen cap Andrea had given us. The clothing hid her autopsy stitches.

We gently laid Maja into her box and wrapped her in the quilt Ina had made. Around her little neck we put her half of the Jewish *mizpah* chain necklace I had prepared; Ina wore the other half. (If you were to put the two parts together, you could read this verse from Genesis: "May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another.") We put in her rattle and that rehabilitated teddy bear, then we closed the lid.

We had to get special clearance to bring Maja out of state for burial, but North Sherman Cemetery was the only place we considered for her. We had been married at the church there fourteen months earlier, and we couldn't imagine anyone but Pastor Novak to conduct the funeral. Oona, Theo, a few friends, and several of my colleagues from work came to that ceremony, where we celebrated the short time Maja was with us. At the graveside, Ina and I each read a letter to her, telling her we loved her and wishing her well wherever she had to go, telling her how her toy box was also her house. After we lowered her box into the earth, tossing flowers on it and soil, we served a simple lunch of sandwiches and coffee in the church's reception room.

All that was a long time ago, and I rarely think of Maja. When anyone asks me how many children I have, I usually say "Three." Occasionally, not very often, though, I might say: "Four, three of them living."

As we sat in our living room a couple of nights ago, Ina told me that she was going to see Therese for a massage the next day.

"You see her every week now?" I asked.

"I haven't seen her in more than a month," she said.

The time is just zipping by.

North Sherman Cemetery, on a small, not-much-traveled road outside of Sherman, Connecticut, is a very nice place. I'm sure we'll visit Maja more often from now on. We're really glad we secured that plot for ourselves. We just hope our neighbors there won't be too scandalized when they learn that our ashes are thoroughly stirred, blended in a single urn.

[*pictures follow*]







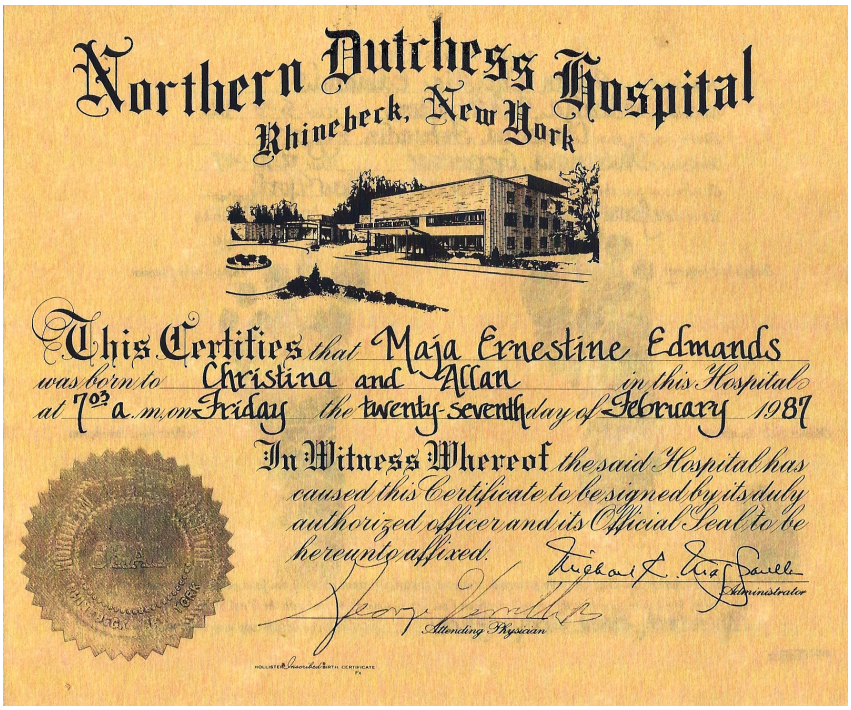
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Maja Ernestine Edmands, newborn infant

PHOENICIA — Maja Ernestine Edmands, infant daughter of Allan and Christiana Eggert Edmands died shortly after her birth on Feb. 27 at Northern Dutchess Hospital, the Freeman has learned.

In addition to her parents, of Phoenicia, she is survived by her maternal grandfather, Reinhold Eggert of West Germany; paternal grandparents, Harry and Mary Ashbrook of Hemet, Calif.; a sister, Oona and a brother, Theo, both at home. Several aunts, uncles and cousins also survive.

Funeral was Friday at the North Cemetery in Sherman, Conn. Pastor Patrick Novak officiated. Funeral arrangements were under the direction of the Dapson Funeral Home, 65 W. Market St., Rhinebeck.



Northern Dutchess Hospital

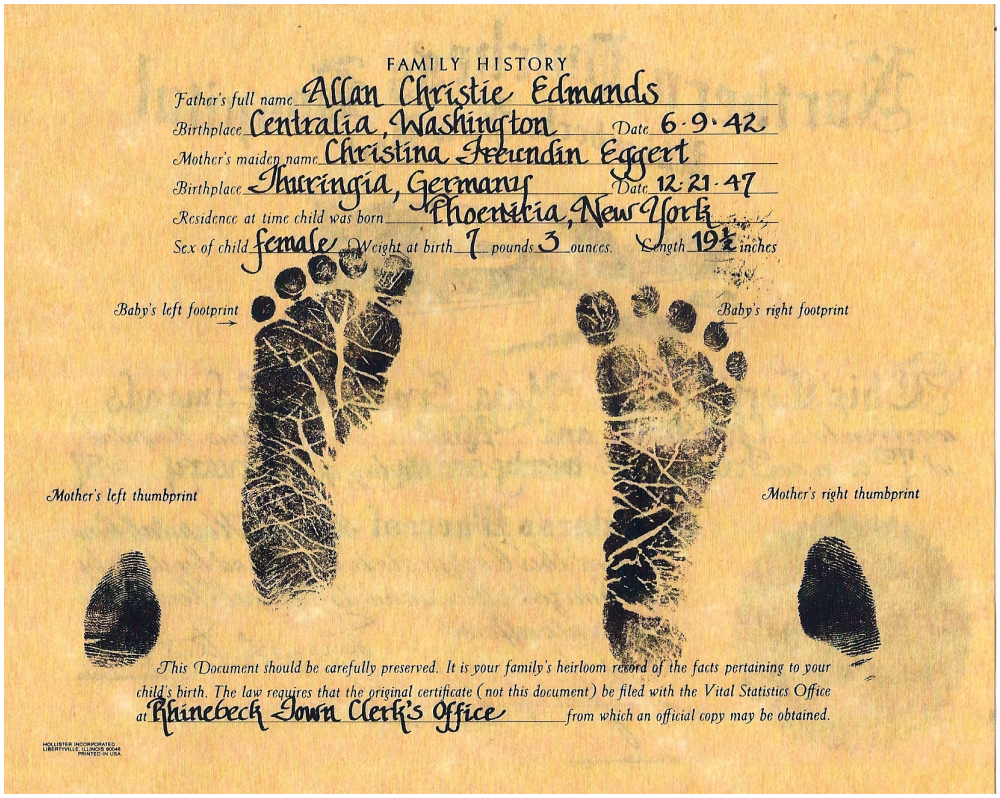
Rhinebeck, New York

This Certifies that Maja Ernestine Edmands was born to Christina and Allan in this Hospital at 7⁰³ a.m. on Friday the twenty-seventh day of February 1987

In Witness Whereof the said Hospital has caused this Certificate to be signed by its duly authorized officer and its Official Seal to be hereunto affixed.

Administrator

Attending Physician



FAMILY HISTORY

Father's full name Allan Christie Edmands

Birthplace Centralia, Washington Date 6-9-42

Mother's maiden name Christina Freiendin Eggert

Birthplace Thuringia, Germany Date 12-21-47

Residence at time child was born Phoenicia, New York

Sex of child female Weight at birth 7 pounds 3 ounces. Length 19½ inches

Baby's left footprint

Baby's right footprint

Mother's left thumbprint

Mother's right thumbprint

This Document should be carefully preserved. It is your family's heirloom record of the facts pertaining to your child's birth. The law requires that the original certificate (not this document) be filed with the Vital Statistics Office at Rhinebeck Town Clerk's Office from which an official copy may be obtained.



After a decade and a half, we needed to replace the cedar grave marker with a granite one.

