THE JELLY BABY

Conception, Immaculate and Non-Immaculate*

BY HARVEY R. GREENBERG, M.D., H. ROBERT BLANK, M.D., AND DANIEL P. GREENSON, M.D.

The Adolescent-Latency In-Patient Service of the Bronx Municipal Hospital Center’s Department of Psychiatry is a 25-bed unit located in a “general” city institution. Patients come from low socioeconomic strata, and are usually products of exceptionally deprived and disordered families. Adolescents stay no longer than six weeks, and turnover is relatively rapid, with an average stay of less than three weeks. Nevertheless, the ward is run as a therapeutic community, with integral educational, occupational and recreational facilities. The sexes are not segregated. Group therapy thrice weekly is led by a first-year resident psychiatrist, with his assigned patients and other staff members participating. A complete description of the milieu will be found elsewhere. During their work in this setting, the authors recently stumbled upon a bizarre birth fantasy which has not been previously reported in the literature, and which is unlikely to be encountered among psychoanalytic patients.

At a time when the ward was in maximum ferment over a heterosexually-tinged liaison between two adolescent females, a masochistic, acting-out girl revealed during group therapy that, while at the Bronx Youth House (a detention facility for wayward children), she had discovered that “you could become pregnant after sex with a ‘butch’” (the active member of a lesbian relationship). Her announcement was greeted with great consternation. She was unable or unwilling to describe the precise nature of the sexual activity which transpired between “butch” and “fem” (the passive partner), but revealed that the “fem” subsequently would develop abdominal swelling, and within three to six months deliver a jelly-like whitish mass which was disposed of by flushing it down the toilet. She was unclear as to whether menstruation ceased during this gestation, and did not know if the “Jelly Baby” was alive at birth. The topic was obviously repulsive, yet fascinating for her; she could only add that while she had never seen a Jelly Baby

*From the Department of Psychiatry, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and the Bronx Municipal Hospital Center.
herself, she knew of other girls who had. She was mum on the subject thereafter.

Upon checking discreetly with other groups, we found that one more ex-Youth House inmate had heard similar tales about the Jelly Baby. While this borderline patient’s description generally tallied with the first account, showing the same haziness with regard to the type of homoerotic activity and length of gestation, she believed that a Jelly Baby was not whitish in color, but covered with “blood and hair.” She gave a shudder of disgust and refused to speak further on the topic.

Our curiosity was piqued, and we contacted the Bronx Youth House. Initially, their staff was as amazed as ours, and as much in the dark about Jelly Babies. However, after inquiring among staff members who worked in closest informal proximity with the girls, the following information was gathered.

Since 1961, delinquent females at the Youth House have, from time to time, reported knowledge about Jelly Babies which they picked up “on the street.” The stories told have shown remarkable consistency from one girl to the next, with minor variations. If, while the “fern” is menstruating, a “butch” penetrates her vagina with finger or tongue, the “fern’s” menses stop immediately and the menstruum coagulates. Two to three weeks later, the accumulated material is expelled as a whitish, non-viable amorphous jelly, which is flushed down the toilet. Some inmates state they have actually seen Jelly Babies, but most only know of others who have. An alternate variation to the Jelly Baby theme was discovered: the term is occasionally used to describe the embryonic product of a self-induced abortion or spontaneous miscarriage (usually the former). It is noteworthy that little if any anxiety was expressed when telling Jelly Baby stories to each other or to the staff.

Discussion

This obscure group of fantasies appears to have arisen spontaneously from a street society of delinquent girls, some of whom were subsequently admitted to the Bronx Youth House and other institutions such as ours. The Jelly Baby stories have spread with that peculiar contagion Fraiberg has described; their validity now seems to be a matter of almost unshakable conviction for an unknown but possibly quite large number of adolescent females, delinquent, lesbian, or otherwise.