

It Happens So Often

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"Wow, WHERE DO YOU PEOPLE COME FROM? You're the fourth one tonight!!!" quips the emergency room attendant as I am eased out of my car into the waiting wheel chair. I do not laugh at his joke. It has been twenty-four hours since I began to give birth to my first child, and finally my contractions are three minutes apart. My eyes wander vaguely over the smooth checked pattern of the floors as they whiz by and, counter to all birthing class wisdom, I allow myself to imagine that simply entering hospital doors will hasten the end of this ordeal.

The nurse-midwife checks me and tells me that I can lie in the bathtub if I'd like. My sister Jill spends forty-five minutes with her finger stuck in the little Jacuzzi spout that is aimed at my stomach because I can't bear the sensation. A friend is perched on the counter timing contractions while my husband holds my hand and we moan. I close my eyes against the pain.

I am remembering another day. The African sun is baking the top of my head as I follow a fellow Peace Corps Volunteer down the rutted, dusty footpath to her village maternité—the small cinder block building where all local women are encouraged to have their babies delivered. Gail has mentioned that she is going to help with a young village woman who is in labor, and having never witnessed a birth, I tag along as if this were a picnic. The smell of mildew and bat dung brings me up short. Passing the recovery room—two women and their tiny arrivals resting on straw mats on the floor—we next find the laboring woman. There is one table in the room, strewn with old medical wrappers and broken glass, but she is kneeling, naked, on the grimy cement floor. Her eyes are glazed over with pain as she looks up and I suddenly feel awkward, like a voyeur caught in the act. I cast about in my mind for something helpful or comforting to say, but I'm still new enough in the country that I only know the vocabulary of everyday situations. . . enough to argue over the price of onions, and to ask my neighbors to kindly remove their goats from my garden. An old woman enters and sits, cradling the young woman's head in her lap.

I've heard the war stories. . . about how when I was born my mother's uterus stopped dilating and the big nurse was pushing on my mother's stomach while

the doctor propped his foot up on the table and pulled on the forceps. My father, the physician, always ends this story, "Had you been born 50 years earlier, both you and your mother would have been dead."

Someone forgot to tell me that there isn't always rest between contractions. They are relentless, one on top of the other. When the nurse midwife returns from her nap, she says that nothing has changed since she left three hours ago. I think I am going to die.

Standing in the dank hallway the midwife says matter-of-factly that this labor isn't so bad. After all, this woman is twenty years old and has already borne her husband a couple of children. We've been hovering uncomfortably on the fringes of this drama for about an hour when it begins to rain. The windows have no glass or screen, only big, metal shutters on hinges which we close to keep the water from pooling on the floor. The roof is also metal and the sound is so deafening as to make conversation impossible. The room is completely dark so that we are only conscious of the laboring woman hunched in a corner. When the storm is past, I look at my watch. It is late afternoon and I am a three hour motorcycle ride from my village. It will be a while before the child is born. On my way out, I stop to touch the hand of a tiny baby the midwife tells us will probably die.

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. . . ." In the second day of my labor this is something of an understatement. When the urge to push finally comes I am shocked by its violence. My body is a machine—mine (yes, I still feel everything), but also not mine. My great-grandmother did this seventeen times. Countless generations of women have perished trying—but this process is so confounding, so extraordinary that I can hardly imagine that I am not the first woman ever to bear a child. Is it really possible that every living being comes this way?

The light of early dawn is in the window. With a final burning shove he joins us in the world, a small bluish boy with a head of slick, black hair. We are all crying. . . sobbing. My arms are so shaky with fatigue and relief that I am afraid I will drop him.

He is healthy, and in his privileged world the odds are in our favor that this will be a long association—perhaps till he's a balding old man. What about that African baby? I don't need to look up infant mortality rates to be reminded that I hardly knew a woman in Mali who hadn't lost a child.

It's another brittle, hot day when we hear that our friend Koro's little sister has died. "How can that be?" my husband and I wonder. She is twelve years old, with budding breasts, and we saw her only last week when we ate with the family. No one really knows what was wrong with her. She just got sick, and a couple of days later. . . This is the first time we have tried to learn benedictions for

the dead, "God save her soul," and "May her resting place be cool." We are not sure how to express our own grief at the news and eventually stumble into the family compound with a tin full of flowers from our garden. All composure is lost when tears begin to pool in the eyes of the girl's mother.

I have heard it said that women in developing countries must get used to having children die—after all it happens so often. When I was younger, this argument seemed to me a kind of guilty justification for having so much in an inequitable world. Now I am a mother. Gazing on this beautiful boy who will bear the name of a dear Malian friend, I think of my son's little African counterpart, a child named for my husband. Could it be that when his mother wrapped his tender 18-month-old body for the grave, that she thought, "Oh well, we can always have another one"?

I doubt it.

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