

I. BIRTH

Patty and I are burrowed into sleeping bags in a tent, when she wakes me to tell me she's having contractions. We stay in a nearby motel, and are going to deliver this baby ourselves, just the two of us. Our daughter Rachael's tucked up in bed, while we spend the entire night in the bathroom.

I pick this motel for its endless hot water. And the bathroom has a small window that opens and lets in the wind, which here in Deming, New Mexico is always blowing.

The contractions get very strong around eleven or twelve at night. She sits naked in a chair and I rub her back, hour after hour. The bathroom is tiny, there's barely room for the two of us outside the tub. But the wind fills it with fresh desert air, and the steam from running the water keeps us warm.

The light is off while a candle burns on the floor. Some streetlight filters in. We can't hear anything over the hiss and gurgle of water falling out of the faucet.

I stand in a daze and knead her back. We're both half asleep. I don't have the pain to keep awake, so at times my mind gets woozy. Rubbing her back doesn't ever seem to go anywhere. It's exhausting, monotonous, and futile. The tension never goes away. Her back is a stubborn wall of muscles that are all ganged up and stuck. But she mumbles that it helps the pain. And it's something else to focus on.

Things accelerate in the morning. She lies in the tub and waits for each contraction. I see it as a process of being beaten down into submission - a complete extinguishing of the mind. She needs energy but can't eat, so I go buy a whole assortment of juice. And I pick up some rubber bands for tying off the cord.

Once I'm back I fill the sink with ice, and all the different juices. But she doesn't touch them. She's too nauseated. I put on cartoons for Rachael, who's almost two, and occasionally check on her. She has no idea a brother or sister is on the way.

Patty hardly makes a sound. Her face has a powerful look of concentration, and the occasional wince. She's a little bit terrified of dying an agonizing death in some dingy motel bathroom. But she doesn't dwell on it.

There's one bout of hysteria where she stands up and says wildly, "I can't do this! I can't! You're going to have to take me to the hospital. Right now. I'm serious! Pack! I have to go to the hospital. Yes! I can't do this."

I can hear in the urgency of her voice that maybe there's still time to escape. Then she prepares for another contraction.

I listen to her, but won't budge. I'm hardened to this sort of pleading. We've been at this stage before with Rachael. Then I caved in to stress and worry and doubts, and we ended up in the hospital with a c-section. It's my job to protect her, to stay rational. I'm determined, as long as everything goes well, to see this through.

So I stare away and tell her she's perfectly fine, that everything is going wonderfully, and we're not going to any damn hospital, and if she won't forget it I'll go out with Rachael. Besides, I think I read somewhere that panic means you're close.

She calms down and stands in the tub with her hands on the shower rod, which I've lowered for her. Mostly because she feels like it's too late now anyway. My insouciance enrages her, but she's too busy. She focuses and stares out the window.

I keep telling her not to push, I keep poking in and saying, "You're not pushing are you?" She shakes her head no. With Rachael she'd pushed and pushed before she was fully dilated, and inflamed her cervix, which caused it to swell. Though she says no, I feel like she's lying and secretly pushing. Trying to hurry it and get it over with.

She stands in a slight squat with her hands on the rod for quite a while, taking big contractions. They're coming regularly now, a couple minutes apart, which is good. I go in and out. There's not much I can do, besides be somebody there, somebody to tell her everything is all right. It's like she's undergoing a severe test. A test of every particle of her being, a test of strength. And I'm on the outside, watching it happen, not really involved.

At one point I come in, and she's in the same position with her feet apart. The water's still trickling, but the plug is out so it all drains away, and the tub is empty. Daylight floods the room. It makes everything stark. The lips of her vagina are swollen, purple, and gaped. Every ten seconds or so, blood drips from it and splashes onto the floor of the tub. Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . And it is dark blood - almost black. A nausea hits me, all the way to the throat. Not a repulsion for something gross, but a nausea at blood, at violence. I get a little afraid. There's this force that's gripped her, that doesn't give a damn for her personality. She might be even expendable.

I can't get it out of my head, even when I walk into the other room. Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . It's very humbling. I'm used to seeing that part of her as small, secretive, and receptive. This was a whole other phase. It had a purpose much, much greater than simply pleasing me. It's like I stand before this terrible power of femininity, and feel puny and useless.

Now things happen fast. Huge contractions sweep over her, one after the other. It's like one unending contraction. She never gets a break. Her teeth are clenched, her legs shake, and she makes little gasps when she thinks they'll finally taper off, and instead they intensify.

She says she can feel it. What do I see? Can I see anything? She's still slightly squatting, her vagina's wide open, and it looks like there might be something there, but it's hard to tell. There's an anxious, desperate, cornered look in her eyes as she feels around for it. It all suddenly becomes so real, there's no turning back now, I think I'm hyperventilating. She's positive it's there and sits carefully in the tub, leaning back with her legs apart. Her thighs were exploding. She'd been waiting to collapse.

There's one ferocious contraction, I can see she pushes with it so hard her body vibrates, and I definitely see something move. There's a mass of bloody something between her legs, some sort of shape. I guess it could be hair. I feel like my heart is seized while I stare and wonder what is next.

She's worried the baby will somehow get sucked back in. She doesn't want to lose any ground, so she pushes with sheer tenacity. The head slips out. But it's weird, it faces down, it's hard to recognize. All I really see is a misshapen bulge. But I peek under, and beneath all the muck and gore are features. It's really a little person! It's so momentary, and insane, the sight of this child's head between her legs. I'm wondering how many more to get it out.

At the end of the next contraction she gives a little surprised yell, and this mass this figure just slides entirely out of her body, like whoosh. It's faster than I can comprehend it. The shock paralyzes me a moment, and before I can even get my hands out the baby slides along the floor of the tub and then stops, face down.

There's some panic as Patty and I both fumble to get a hold of it, but can't because it's too slippery. It would be comical if we weren't both so stressed. Finally I've got it, and set it gingerly down on Patty's chest. I stand back and am cruising on this euphoria. Patty looks so different, so pleased, so relaxed . . . just like that, it's over.

The baby squirms a lot but doesn't make a sound. I guess it's as dumbfounded as we are. It's good it's a girl. Rachael will have a friend.

I wash her off gently with warm water, but I guess not gently enough, or maybe she gets cold, because she finally starts crying. It is the softest, meekest cry, next to Rachael's wail, it's almost hard to take it seriously. Maybe I've gotten used to crying after two years of Rachael.

I think the baby's sinuses have to drain before she nurses, so I try to put it off a little while. But that new, tiny blind cry of hers is so insistent and compelling we must react, so Patty puts her to a breast. She snaps on it and starts sucking right away, strong, rhythmic sucks. It's satisfying to see. I'm relieved we don't have a dud baby. This one's a fighter. I'm very impressed.

I feel great pride and respect for what Patty's just accomplished. To go through all that on her own in silence blows me away. It's shocking how much her face has changed. From an expression of gruesome effort, and pain, to one of worn relief - she's already thinking about recovery. And she's smiling again. It feels like it's been so long since she smiled. It's a spontaneous, grateful, overwhelmed sort of smile, almost tears. It's like she's returned from some terrible journey. And is just happy to be alive.

Even with ventilation, the air in the bathroom gets very dense. There's a strong smell of caul, a smell of insides, that fills the room. I don't feel so good. She sends me out to get something. I forget what the second I leave the room, and go sit on the side of the bed. A vacancy comes over me, a sort of collapse of interest. I send Rachael in to see her new sister, who we've named Brooke. She's so hardy it seems to fit. The middle name will be Deming. And then I think I lean back.

There's a terrible bang and I look around startled. I can hear some voices in the bathroom. I go over worried.

"Where have you been?" Patty asks me. "We're freezing."

"What was that noise?"

“Rachael dropped an ash tray.”

I get towels and blankets and shut the window. The placenta’s lying on the bottom of the tub, still connected to Brooke. It looks basically like a slab of meat. And it’s quite big - at least a pound or two.

“I guess I fell asleep. How long was I gone?”

“About a half-hour.”

I can see she’s irritated. It’s embarrassing to have fainted. But it was that smell, that fume. It’s gone now. I tie off Brooke’s cord with a rubber band, and snip the other side of it, leaving enough to scab and fall off over time. No blood flows out of the cord, so I guess we waited right. I cover them both with a towel. I think Patty wants out of the tub, but at the moment is too exhausted to move. And she’s reluctant to disturb Brooke, who’s nursing peacefully.

I double-wrap the placenta in two plastic bags, and stick it up on a shelf out of sight. And again, when I pick it up, I’m surprised at how heavy it is - a real organ. I don’t have any big plans for it. Many primitive cultures attach a lot of significance to the afterbirth, often burying it beside the birth-tree . . . or making a ceremonial meal. For the moment I just need to get rid of it. But I don’t want to put it out in the motel trash can, and tip them off to the fact we just delivered a baby in their room. I’m kind of hiding it.

Patty washes and is so relieved to get out of that bathroom. It wasn’t just cramped and uncomfortable - there were times it felt like a torture chamber. It’s almost afternoon. She looks utterly, utterly exhausted, an almost bitter exhaustion. A look of suffering really, now that the elation’s worn off. And there are just zombie motions of her back and forth through the room.

But at the same time, underneath all that, she looks so free, and contained, and has an independent grace, that I guess had been missing for a long time. Just the sensation of walking, even on her wasted legs, is so new without that burden. So liberating . . . like there’s suddenly all this potential for herself, besides just this goal of birth. She’s got her body back. It’s a beautiful thing to see. She’s been a sort of cargo vessel for so long. A singleness has come back. A lovely compact singleness, spiked with eroticism.

She brings out Brooke all clean and bundled up once she’s prepared a bed for her. Brooke’s of course adorable, with her little face peeking out of the blanket. She’s got a sniffle though, that’s troubling. I’m worried we didn’t let her sinuses drain enough. Our one mistake, that I hope doesn’t blow up into something serious. Rachael looks over at Brooke all wondering, and it hasn’t sunk in that this is a new, permanent member of our family. Right now she’s just a curiosity.

We stay on in the motel a few more days for Patty to recover. The first night is agonizing, with Brooke’s sniffing and clogged breathing the entire night. But she improves and seems to get it all out of her system over a couple of days.

Brooke and Rachael have a tendency to wake each other up all through the night, which is interesting torture. But Rachael does grow up immediately. We’d always called her ‘Baby’, I

guess because she was one, and was our only child. But she sees she's not the baby anymore, and acts all big and helpful. We now refer to her as Rachael. We also celebrate Rachael's birthday, which is February 10th. Brooke was born on February 8th.

About day three the placenta rots, and I've got to get it out of the room. I chuck it in the trash out front. I'm too revolted to cart it off to some distant dumpster. Besides, that might look suspicious. Hopefully they'll think it's steak.

While Patty sleeps, I pore over maps to find our next destination. Everything we own is packed out in our truck, which is an old blue Cherokee. It's mostly camping gear and food. We're minimalists. We have no home, no family, no friends . . . nothing to fall back on. We've cut completely away from the past. Every bridge that could be burned, was burned. We're just looking straight ahead.

Two hours north of us is the Gila Wilderness. It's why we're here.