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## The Delivery

Archana Vijay

The fetal heart rate monitor makes a beeping noise. The steady graph is now distorted by a sharp spike. I close my eyes and clench my fist. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, I tell myself. Thirty seconds of excruciating pain makes me quiver. Thirty seconds that seem like an eternity. And then I relax. I know that I have less than ten minutes before the next contraction. Ten precious minutes to recollect the lessons learnt in the Lamaze classes and get prepared.

‘Concentrate on happy memories. It helps during labor.’ The childbirth educator had instructed. I try concentrating.

‘You are going to become a father.’ I remember telling Vinod, eight months ago. I am not good at expressing emotions through words. So, I told him on the phone. Just like that.

‘I am... what?’

I waited patiently, while I let the information sink into him.

‘You mean, you are? Oh my God! You are pregnant! I am going to become a father!’ Vinod was ecstatic. ‘Excellent news! I will be there in an hour’, he said.

How many years of wait! How many years of enduring the fertility treatment! He deserves to be happy. I was glad that I made him happy. Still, when he was home in forty seven minutes with a bunch of roses, I couldn’t help judging his whole reaction as melodramatic. There were months to get past before having the baby in his arms. Why did he have to leave office immediately and hurry to see me? And what was the need for flowers? The smell of fresh roses made me feel nauseous and I threw up my lunch. That was the first time I vomited during my first pregnancy.

The nurse enters my room. ‘All ok?’ she asks.

‘I think so.’ I mumble, even though I know that she wouldn’t take my word and leave me alone.

She checks my pulse and goes about doing whatever she is supposed to do to make sure that the labor is proceeding as it should.

‘Good. You are doing very well. In another hour, we’ll shift you to the labor room.’ She smiles. I fake a smile in return and avert my eyes.

I’ve always been a shy person. Even during my days in the ladies hostel, I had never felt comfortable changing my clothes in front of other girls. I had always locked myself in the bathroom, and hopped and skipped on the slippery tiles, struggling to pull up my jeans without the corners getting wet.

But this morning, I felt exposed when the nurse shaved my pubic hair in preparation for the labor. I felt humiliated when she performed an internal examination to check the degree of dilation of my cervix.

I am too embarrassed now to look into her eyes and smile. Well, I don't have to pretend too long. I can feel the beginnings of my next contraction. I shut my eyes and I grit my teeth.

The nurse holds my hand and massages my back soothingly. 'Hold on, just a few seconds, the pain will pass.', she encourages.

I don't need encouragement, especially, not from her. I just want her to go. She fusses around me until the contraction subsides fully. She leaves only after scaring me that the next one would come faster and last longer. I need more happy thoughts. I need to concentrate hard.

Vinod has been a very caring man. I'll have to give that to him in spite of my initial judgment of Vinod as an out-of-the film character. He checked on me every day. He never missed a visit to the gynecologist. He satisfied most of my cravings. Yes, after the roses episode, he started bringing me orange and lemon flavored sugar candies that helped me cope with the nausea. He cooed and talked to my tummy, even though it hardly showed any traces of pregnancy yet. I found it sexy.

Friends, I mean, people who consider themselves as my friends, have often told me that I am a strange person. I generally don't respond to love stories the way the other girls do. I don't make a big deal about a puppy or swoon over a broken nail. I don't flutter my eyelids to attract the attention of charming men. I don't like charming men. I like them plain and simple. I like Vinod.

The graph is steady again. Good. That means more time to think about him. Lately, I've been thinking about him a lot.

It was my second trimester and I was under complete control of the hormones. Every time I saw Vinod, I imagined myself in bed with him. I imagined him stroking my naked tummy as he talked to the baby. I would have allowed him all that and guided him for more if I had not known about the other woman.

A sharp pain springs from deep inside—I let out a moan. I had promised myself to handle the labor with as much dignity as I could, but the pain shatters all promises. Tears of shame and anguish roll along the corners of my eyes as my voice refuse to listen to me. I begin to moan uncontrollably.

'Would you like to have an epidural?' Vinod had asked two weeks ago when we were discussing about the delivery.

'No. I can cope with the pain. I will be fine.' I said. I had always considered myself capable of handling pain. If I could bear the trauma that he was causing me every day without giving him the slightest suspicion, physical pain would hardly be a problem.

'Are you sure?' he double-checked.

'Of course, I am.'

'Thank God! I was worried if an epidural might harm the baby. I know that the doctors have assured otherwise, but still, I am a little paranoid. But, you don't worry about me. If you want the pain medicine, you can have it.'

By saying that, Vinodhad made sure that I will never ask for it even if I wanted it.

‘Aaaahhh’, I scream for the entire corridor to hear. I can no longer concentrate on anything but the thousand daggers piercing me from inside. It has become too much to bear. I want to get over with it. But when it gets over, will Vinod continue to care for me? Can I continue loving him without the excuse of pregnancy? No, I don’t want it to get over.

‘Aaaaahhhhhh’, I scream again. This time, for the entire hospital to hear. Alright, now I don’t care if things change when this is over. I want this to get over.

I am wheeled into the labor room and am made to lie on the delivery table, with my legs spread wide, in full view of the doctor and the nurses. But, I am not shy anymore. I don’t care at all.

‘Push. Push’, the doctor urges me.

I try. I push.

‘Come on, come on, and push harder’

It is not easy. I take a deep breath and push with all my might. I feel as if my insides, my intestines, and all my organs are trying to slip out from between my legs.

‘I can see the baby’s head. Go on, you are almost there. Push’, the doctor pushes me to push more.

I feel wet under me. Is it water? Is it blood? I worry for a moment. And then I realize that I don’t have to worry about it. I don’t have to worry about my life changing after the delivery either, because by now, I am fairly certain that I am not going to survive this ordeal. Just before I die, I have to do one last thing for Vinod. I have to push.

I muster all my strength, pull myself together and push. And push and push. I feel something huge wriggle out from between my thighs and I give myself completely to the searing pain. The pain that pulsates through my body, making every nerve announce its presence. I scream the roof down. The acoustics of the labor room resonate the sound to unbelievable amplitudes.

I fall back on the table, close my eyes and allow myself to die. But I don’t. Instead, the pain fades away slowly, engulfing me with a calm that I hadn’t known until this moment.

I hear a feeble cry. Something that was a part of me all along is now separated to live a life of its own. A part that now has a name. A baby.

‘It is a girl. You want to see the baby?’ The doctor asks.

I am too tired to reply. I nod.

The doctor shows me a tiny body, covered in blood, my blood. I touch its little fingers and choke on a queer feeling. The baby continues to cry and I presume that it cries for having been separated from me. I cry too. What is happening to me? Is this what they call getting emotional?

‘We are taking the baby to the father.’ The doctor says as a matter of fact and walks out of the room with the baby in her arms. My eyes trail her footsteps.

As the doctor opens the labor room door, I see Vinod through the crack between the doors. He glows at the sight of his baby girl. He is excited and cuddles her as if she is the most precious thing in the world.

‘We will keep the baby in the neonatal unit for an hour. When we have made sure that she is completely fineto breathe and survive by herself, we’ll bring her back to you.’ The doctor coaxes Vinod to let go of the baby girl.

After the doctor succeeds and leaves, I see Vinod pick up his mobile phone and speak animatedly. A pain that is a million times worse than the labor pain, a pain that I have to live with for the rest of my life starts seeping into me.

‘Darling, you can come over to the hospital now. Our little girl is born. We are parents, finally!’ I hear him say. ‘Oh yes, everything is alright. The surrogate mother is doing fine too.’ Vinod told his wife. I close my eyes and weep.