

Birth

Christine's labor started out pleasantly enough at 2:00 AM, considering it involved enough pain to make her suck air and place a death grip on anything handy. We watched episode after episode of *The West Wing*, pausing the show whenever the pain was too intense. President Bartlett and his intrepid staff would freeze mid-sentence while Christine gasped; solving the nation's crises would have to wait for a few more minutes. During the contractions, Christine and I faced each other, our foreheads touching as we held hands. In between, I helped Christine nestle into her pillows, where she waited for the next wave of pain to break.

Ten hours later, at noon, things were worse. We'd moved from the couch in our house to the admitting room at the hospital. The well-worn copy of *Reader's Digest* that I found beside the hospital bed was proving useless—laughter was not the best medicine, and Christine wasn't interested in increasing her word

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power. That left me with no props, and I felt exposed and useless. I didn't know what to say or do. I wanted to stay right beside Christine as her strong rock, but I felt like running down the hall and locking myself in a supply closet until it was all over. So I settled for babbling about whatever came into my head, and whenever another contraction washed over Christine, we held hands until our knuckles turned white. As each wave of pain ebbed, I brushed her hair back from her damp forehead.

We were eventually admitted to our birthing room. Early in the afternoon, we decided that it would be best for Christine to have an epidural so she could rest for a few hours and dilate completely. I watched the doctor insert a long, flexible tube into Christine's spine, a section of the body that it's normally unwise to monkey with. Soon Christine reported that her pain was subsiding, as was her ability to feel or move her body below the waist. This trade-off seemed to be worth it, though. When her sister, Lisa, arrived, the three of us began to chat about crucial subjects like Lisa's drive and the weather. A semblance of normalcy settled over the room, though spikes of worry still poked through my defenses every few minutes.

A short while later, our fragile calm shattered. Christine was lying flat on her back, resting, and Lisa had stepped out of the room to make a phone call. Christine fainted,

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her head rolled to the side, and she vomited. Then she stopped breathing and her upper body began to shake and twitch. One of her machines began to beep. All of this happened quickly, like when a garden hose gets a kink in it and the water abruptly stops. For me, time slowed to a speed that was unlivable; how could I be watching my wife die just before our son was born?

Later we learned that this was all relatively routine. Because of the epidural, Christine's blood pressure was lower than usual. As she lay on her back, the baby's full weight pressed down on Christine's vena cava vein and cut off the flow of blood to her brain. A nurse was at her side in seconds. She reacted calmly and did some nurse-y things. She rolled Christine onto her side to restore the blood flow to her brain, wiped up the vomit, adjusted her IV tubes, and then propped her up on a bunch of pillows. One of the nurse-y things she should have done was to tell me that Christine would be fine. Either that or give me a heavy dose of sedatives.

Christine began to breathe again. She opened her eyes—so slowly, it seemed—and their brightness physically hurt me. I tried to smile. Christine was unaware of what had just happened. I held my mask of calm and confidence to my face, but I feared that the cracks in my voice would betray me. Not wanting to worry Christine, I asked Lisa to step into the room for a minute while I went to the restroom. I locked the door and collapsed

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against the wall, sliding slowly down into the corner. I bit on my fist and cried uncontrollably, my whole body shaking against the cold tiles.

When my defenses are down—late at night or when I'm lonely—I often consider why I collapsed, why I fled that hospital room. I think it comes down to my being scared. How was I scared? Let me count the ways: scared of pain; scared of becoming a parent; scared of my own shortcomings, and of discovering more; scared that Christine was going to die, and that I would lose my best friend; scared of becoming a single parent on the day of my son's birth; scared of hospitals. Such was my state, curled up and crying on the bathroom floor. Not a promising start to fatherhood.

Two things got me up. The first was the realization that I was sitting beside a toilet. I open doors with one finger and flush public toilets with my foot. If I had to keep crying, fine, but not while I was camped out in a germ factory. The second was the need to touch Christine. After I washed my hands thoroughly, of course.

It had been only minutes earlier that I'd thought she was dying. I'll deal with my feelings later, I told myself, but now I need to be with my wife. After cleaning myself up, I reentered the birthing room and sat down next to Christine. I held her hand. We spoke about delivery-room concerns—how her legs felt, how many

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centimeters dilated she was, when we thought the baby might be born. I told her I loved her. I put my hand on her stomach and felt our son squirming this way and that, seemingly all elbows and knees. Christine's skin looked almost transparent in the afternoon light. Blue veins traced urgent paths across her stomach. After a while, the baby seemed more restful. Perhaps he knew, on some level, what the contractions all around him meant. Perhaps he was gathering himself for what came next.

Sometimes I think that what happened to me that afternoon is just another example of a typical male trait. Something difficult happened, and rather than dealing with it and sharing it with my wife, I buried it and acted like nothing was wrong. I don't really believe that story, though. That kind of story is poisonous, leaching a steady trickle of toxins into the groundwater of my heart.

The story I believe is simpler and better. It's a story about the way life works. Getting my butt off that bathroom floor was a recognition that life—my life, Christine's life, the baby's life—was still happening. Time didn't stop when I slammed the bathroom door. Our baby was still being squished and pushed by his mother's uterus. Christine was still focusing on her body, trying to listen to its whispers and shouts. It was still nearly time for me to meet my son. That afternoon,

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some big words—fatherhood, responsibility, love—found me and reached out their hands. As they pulled me to my feet, they spoke to me. You'll be okay, they told me. Welcome to the club. You don't have to have the answers or understand everything. You just have to be available. You just have to do the next thing.

In the evening, our friends Aaron and Lauren came to visit. She was six months pregnant, so it was probably fortunate that they arrived when Christine was resting comfortably. While Lauren went to Christine's side and wiped her forehead with a cool washcloth, Aaron asked if anything needed doing, and we agreed that some crappy cafeteria food would be just the thing. We took part in the ordinary goodness of sharing a meal, except for Christine, who continued to enjoy her water and lollipops. We passed around the french fries until the styrofoam boxes were empty. Life kept happening, even under those altered conditions. The nurse checked the vital signs of Christine and the baby. Aaron and Lauren put on their coats, drawing out their goodbyes and adding extra blessings. Time ticked by. Christine and I watched some television. The nurse came again. We dozed. And around 5:00 AM, Christine gave birth to our healthy son, Nicholas, who turned out to be the ugliest, purplest, tiniest, most amazing person that I'd ever seen. I never did have time to go back and finish my cry on the bathroom floor; I was too busy learning

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how to swaddle my son, and calling my parents and my brother, and making sure the car seat was installed correctly, and a hundred other things that you do when you're a husband, a father, and a member of the tribe.