

She was crying the first time I met her. Jenny had been on our maternity ward for a week, but this was the first time I had been looking after her. Admitted at 32 weeks gestation with complete placenta praevia, she would have to remain an inpatient until her baby was born.

That day had been a miserable one. Jenny's husband and three year old son had made the long drive up from the small town they lived in to visit her, gate leave had been arranged and they were going to a near-by park for a picnic. Almost as soon as they had arrived, Jenny's son fell over and skinned his knee, a seagull stole his hot chips, he dropped his ice cream into dog poo and it began to rain. Now, back on the ward, Jenny's tears were those of a camel who's back had been broken by that last straw. She was tired, bored and missing home, all combined with the anxiety of knowing that a bleed could happen at any time.

Over the next few weeks we got to know each other and I tried to stop by Jenny's room for a chat even when I wasn't officially looking after her. It was during this time that I asked Jenny about her last pregnancy and birth and how things had gone in the postnatal period. I learned that Jenny's last labour had ended in an emergency c- section. She had then developed a wound infection and had had to be readmitted to hospital, very unwell. Although she had been keen to breastfeed her baby, her milk supply was never well established and eventually dwindled away. She had resigned herself to another difficult and frustrating experience this time around as well.

“What makes you say that?” I asked her one evening as I ran the doppler over her belly, listening for the baby's heartbeat. “What are you most worried about?”

The familiar galloping horse sound of the fetal heart filled the room for a minute as I counted the beats.

“Well, this baby will be early, my c- section is at 36 weeks. So he'll be little, and he'll probably have to be in the special care unit. And what if I don't even make any milk? Maybe I should just not even think about breastfeeding him.”

“Do you want to breastfeed? It's up to you, your decision, but if you want to try, we will help you.”

Jenny looked at me. I had the feeling that she was sizing me up somewhat, trying to gauge if I meant what I said, or if I was just giving her the brush off. I looked steadily back at her.

“Yes, I do want to try.”she finally said.

I was on night shift the night before Jenny's caesarian was booked. In the early morning I went to her room to get her prepped for theatre. She was already awake, nervous energy radiating out of her.

“I'll be back tonight, Jen.” I told her. “I can't wait to meet this little guy of yours.”

Jenny smiled a wobbly, scared and excited smile. It had been a long road. I went home to bed. Each time I surfaced from sleep that day I thought of her and wondered.

When I walked back onto the ward that night I checked the patient list straight away.

“Jenny's baby is with her then? On the ward?” I checked with the midwife who was handing over to me. She grinned and nodded.

“Yep, he was 2.5 kilos. Bigger than expected. Jenny was ecstatic.” Emily said.

Little Charlie was all bundled up in the cot beside Jenny's bed.

“Oh, Jen, he's gorgeous! Congratulations.”

Jenny gave a tired smile. “Thanks. I'm so relieved he's finally here.” she said. She looked a bit down though.

“So Charlie has been a little bit on the cool side, but he's maintaining his temp nicely now.” Emily told me. “He hasn't actually been to the breast yet, a couple of little sniffs, but no suckling. Jenny's got lots of colostrum though, so he's been having some finger feeds of expressed milk.”

Jenny looked away, towards the window. I put my hand on her arm. “I'll be in to see you once hand over is finished.” I promised.

By some miracle that night we were actually well staffed, with enough midwives on shift that we were each allocated only four women and babies each. After I had done a round and checked in with the other three women I was looking after I headed towards Jenny's room.

She was propped up in bed, against pillows. The only sound in the room was the swishing and sighing of the calf compressors on her legs and the humming tune from the IV pump.

“How're you doing?” I asked quietly as I attended to her observations and checked the wound.

“I'm OK.” she told me. “Glad it's all over.”

“I'll bet. That was the longest four weeks in history.” I unwrapped the blood pressure cuff from her arm.

“Now then, shall we see what this little kid is up to?”

I turned to Charlie, who was beginning to stir, making some grimaces and smacking his lips. I checked his respiratory rate and heart beat and then took his temperature. Charlie let out a squeal at the feeling of the thermometer under his arm and looked at me accusingly. His temperature was nice and stable now, so I began peeling off the layers of blankets that he had been wrapped in. By the time he was unwrapped and just in his nappy, Charlie was wide awake and staring at me with his shiny, dark eyes.

“OK Jen, would you like to get Charlie settled against your chest?”

“They did that already. It didn't work. He just got cold.” Jenny said, despondently, but she shuffled up against the pillows and moved her gown out of the way. I placed Charlie skin to skin against his mother, his head resting on her sternum level with her breasts. I covered them both with a blanket.

“Let's just give it another try. Charlie's maintaining his temperature really well now. Often it just takes time for babies to sort themselves out.”

Jenny looked at me, unconvinced. I deliberately moved away and began fixing things up around the room, refilling the cup of water, adjusting the blinds on the window. I wanted Jenny to focus on

Charlie, to not have anyone looking over her shoulder, silently judging.

This was the beginning of a dance, a dyad. The start of something so old and yet completely new for these two people. At first Charlie lay still and quiet on his mother's chest. As I potted around the room I heard Jenny's breathing slow. Her hands came up to cradle her baby, she kissed the top of his downy head.

"He's not doing anything." she said, defeat in her voice.

"Watch his little hands, Jen. See how they're moving?"

Unfurling like sea anemones, the tiny fingers began to drift across Jenny's skin, searching. The baby made a sound, like a mewl.

"Hello Charlie." Jenny whispered.

Charlie moved his head from side to side and pushed his little bottom up. Gently, Jenny supported him with her hands. His head bobbed across her breast.

"What should I do?" Jenny asked.

"Exactly what you're doing now." I answered, coming to stand at the head of the bed. "Give it time."

I watched for a few more minutes, noticing how Jenny was becoming more comfortable and sure of

herself. It was time to step away and let mother and baby be alone with each other for the first time.

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes,” I told her, “Buzz if you need me sooner.”

It was a long twenty minutes.

I crept back into the room, shutting the door gently behind me. Jenny looked up at me, and in the glow from the street lights outside the room I could see tears in her eyes.

“He’s feeding! He’s doing it!” she whispered, fiercely, her words catching in her throat. I felt a lump in mine.

There, in the quiet dark, little bright eyed Charlie had latched on and began to feed. The moment had been private, just between the two of them.

“I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.” Jenny said, over and over again.

Charlie stayed on Jenny’s chest for several more hours, suckling, sleeping, listening to his mother’s steady heartbeat and her soft voice. Through that gentle, sleepy night the two of them became acquainted and bound together. At last Charlie settled into a deep slumber and Jenny’s head was nodding. I helped her dress him again and wrap him snugly before putting him back in his cot. My shift was nearly over, I tucked Jenny in for a well deserved nap and headed home to my own bed.

They say that midwifery is about watchful waiting, and I have learned that this is not just when it

comes to supporting a birthing woman. Women expect that the mothering instinct will come instantly for them, but in reality it takes time and patience. As midwives we often want to step in and 'fix' things and to make it easier for the women in our care. But the bond between mother and baby cannot be rushed or fixed. It is learned gently, through touch and time.

I had several days off following that shift, and by the time I returned to work Jenny had been discharged. I heard that she had gone home breastfeeding well, little Charlie thriving. A week later it was International Breastfeeding Week. An article was published in our local paper about the subject and the photo used was of a radiantly smiling Jenny, breastfeeding Charlie on the hospital ward. The article itself outlined her journey, her difficulties with her first breastfeeding experience and her happiness and hopes for this one. That article is still on the patient information noticeboard on the ward. On days when I'm feeling overwhelmed or exhausted I walk past that picture and remember. The quiet night, the muted voices of mother and baby, the watchful waiting. And I smile.