

I have been a midwife since 2001. For five years, I was employed within the maternity service of a busy private hospital. Apart from facilitating antenatal classes and conducting pre-admission interviews, my midwifery colleagues and I rarely had the opportunity to meet the women we cared for in labour, prior to their birth. This story reflects many experiences that I was involved with during that time, which collectively changed my preparedness to apportion the word "routine" to planned procedures, such as caesarean sections and highlighted the importance of having meaningful conversations, with those being cared for.

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### *Breaking the Silence*

It was cold.

The ambient temperature was 22 degrees, but it was the sombre mood, hitting the chest of those who entered, which was most telling. There they were-Pip and Henry. Pip was lying, pale and afraid, with legs akimbo, on the unforgiving surface. She was draped, anaesthetised, catheterised and utterly unable to articulate the magnitude of the moment. She was preparing to step through a void which sadly, she was unable to get through alone- and so it was, that the team assembled.

It was Meg who noticed her first. As the midwife assigned to assist with this, so called, "routine" case, she approached. The others bustled and readied themselves, seeking all means possible to avoid a conversation with Pip as she nestled her head into Henry's shoulder. They had never gotten this far before and so knew no way of processing this moment. Not for the first time, Meg wondered how it was possible that anybody with a shred of decency would feel it appropriate to leave a vulnerable woman so exposed. Quietly, she covered Pip, before introducing herself, giving Pip and Henry's hands a little squeeze and smiling through the most reassuring proclamations, she was prepared to offer. She hoped the authenticity of her reassurance, made it as far as her eyes, which were by now the only identifiable features visible above her carefully applied surgical mask.

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Pip and Henry's story became clearer with the telling. They had been given four chances. Perfect embryos. *"Four!"* they had declared to their erstwhile fertility specialist, *"Imagine having four children to love"*. They had never felt so blessed and almost suffocated on their smugness.

The first had settled in nicely, giving all concerned, cause for celebration, before arriving prematurely and unceremoniously, into a blood filled toilet bowl. As the bereft ambulance officers had bundled Pip off to hospital, shrouded in a cotton blanket, all she had suggested was, that they *"please call Henry"*. Henry- her love, whose name meant 'ruler of the house', had indeed been required to run theirs, as attempt after futile attempt, failed. However, with the fourth and last try, success seemed more likely. Pip, though barely able to fold a singlet or pick up a paint brush in preparation, was absolutely resigned to the fact that, this attempt would end as the others had- in a consultation room, surrounded by platitudes and Kleenex tissues.

However, as the perilous twelve week milestone passed, then the twentieth, not only were they still pregnant, there were two heartbeats. *"Twins"*, they had proclaimed, *"are you absolutely sure?"* Pip was finally able to imagine family holidays and happy laughter; indeed they had begun to not only consider names, but squabble over them. Henry, felt that there was no way, their daughter would be taken seriously, with a name like Daisy, whilst Pip argued that to name their son, Fabien after Henry's grandfather, would lead to a living hell, of endless head flushings and sly, kidney punches.

They were ecstatic in their bubble, until the day, the sonographer, at first stumbled over a clumsy excuse to leave the room, then backed out, leaving Pip's abdomen sticky, and the ultrasound probe dangling in mid-air. *"Both heartbeats gone?"* they had asked incredulously, *"are you absolutely sure?"*

For a time they functioned like empty husks, blowing around in the autumn wind, barely able to make eye contact or construct sentences of more than four words. It was Pip's mother who had at

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first suggested and then insisted, that time out was required as she bundled them into a taxi. By the time they returned to Australia five months later, they were tanned, in love again and pregnant.

When Pip could no longer attribute her intractable nausea, to the lamb curry she had purchased at a roadside stall in Marrakech, she took a leap of faith and a pregnancy test. *"Oh, my God!"* she proclaimed to Henry, as she sat on their tiled bathroom floor, the positive blue line revealing what for both of them had seemed like the remotest of possibilities. *"One day at a time darling"*, he had suggested, *"We will just take it one day at a time"*. And so they had, until the day that Pip found herself, lying pale and afraid, with legs akimbo on the unforgiving surface, wondering what on earth she would have done without him and holding onto Meg's hand as if it were a portal into another dimension.

As Meg excused herself, then scrubbed in preparation, she feigned interest in the surgeon's sink side conversation about ski holidays and golf handicaps, before backing into the theatre, donning her gown and gloves and positioning herself at his right elbow. The reality of this situation for Pip and Henry was as far from "routine", as it was possible to get. By now, the wall clock's second hand was the only indicator that time existed outside this room.

Tick..1142, scalpel to skin, the light hearted banter ceased, as the precise incision was made and rivulets of blood oozed from Pip's fractured capillaries.

Tick...1143, fat, facsia, layer after layer, was dissected, diathermied and torn asunder, until finally, Pip's uterus was exposed and carefully opened- the perfunctory rupturing of Pip's membranes, heralding the moment of truth. Meg was reassured by the torrent of clear liquor, which erupted into the suction canister.

So many times before, this moment had been marred by a sentinel event, a rush down the corridor and the presence of meconium; the dark, tar like fluid that instructed Meg to acknowledge the

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adrenaline charged blood pounding in her ears, since the next thing to emerge from the bewildered mother's uterus, would surely be, a compromised baby.

It was moments such as those and the unrelenting, sleep disturbing, admonishments which followed, which had led Meg to consider advising her youngest daughter against following her footsteps into the profession which she adored. Was it not a mother's duty to spare her child from grief? But in so doing, Meg would also be denying her; the happiness of placing a freshly washed newborn, into the cherubic, waiting arms of a proud older sibling, the joy of supporting a woman through labour, cheering for her as she proudly lifted her newborn baby onto her chest for the first time, or the happiness of witnessing the tears of a proud new father, cascading down ruddy, whiskered cheeks.

Tick...1145, his hand was inside Pip's abdomen and then, a perfect purple head, squilched forth.

Tick...1146, silence pervaded the theatre, as the tiny infant was delivered onto Pip's draped, green, legs. Meg received her into the warm blanket she had prepared for the purpose and rushed to both assess her and address the oppressive silence, which persisted. Meg reminded herself to apply first principles, as she worked from head to toe, providing warmth and stimulation, supporting her transition.

Tick..1147, just as Meg's muscle memory, directed her towards emergency suction, bag and mask, the perfect lips fashioned themselves into a warble and then an indignant wail, which instantaneously infused the room with warmth and gave all assembled permission to whoop with joy!

*"Here is your beautiful girl"*, Meg cooed after a time, as she bundled the perfectly swaddled little girl, into Pip and Henry's eager arms.

....The End...