

A Modern Girl's Guide to Childbirth

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You will be deep in the throes of labor when your husband deposits you at the entrance of a downtown hospital. An attendant, a man whose name you'll never know, will wheel you to the 11th floor while your husband parks.

If this were Greece, say 430 BC, two midwives would have come to your home instead. They would scour your bedroom for knots— knots being unlucky— before parting the sea of women around your bed to coax you to a small birthing stool and whisper guidance in your ear. If your labor had happened in 17th century China, a Taoist priest would have done the whispering, his prayers echoed by the women attending you.

Your hospital birthing suite is hygienic and bright and the EKG hides behind faux oak cabinets. Wall-mounted dispensers wheeze disinfectant gel. Forceps, scissors, and clamps line a metal tray. A window faces west so that your view is not the boats in the harbor, but the hills of the historic Greenmount Cemetery where you like to walk. In your chart is the birth plan that you carefully hand wrote and which the nurses and the doctors will ignore because they know it impossible to plan the trajectory of a birth, let alone a life, and the sooner you learn this the saner you will be.

If this were 1800s France, the midwife would warm her hands in almond oil after lining your bed with boxes of powdered cumin and myrrh meant to dust the baby and protect her from evil spirits. Your mother will be banned from the delivery room, the consensus being that she is the ultimate source of evil.

There will be a grab bar, an inflated ball, and a tub, and you will try each in a circuit. Your husband will ask if the water helps and you will say, "I'm in labor. Now I'm wet and in labor," and they will call for a man who cleanses your back with iodine and inserts a thread-thin catheter that streams epidural.

There will be a head nurse and an attending nurse and an RA; there will be a shift change bringing new nurses. One will inform you of a woman screaming in the

lobby. "She says that she is your mother." Your husband will be the one to send her away.

When it no longer matters, when you are too far gone from pain and joy and something otherworldly that compels you to push, the actual doctor will arrive. After, you'll wonder how nobody prepared you for the waxy vernex coating your daughter or the sweet smell of her, a smell you cannot reconcile with the inside of the human body. Your husband will not wrap the placenta, still warm, in an animal skin and sacrifice it to the wild as the Chinik Eskimo would. Instead, he will spiral the hospital garage in search of a Honda Civic with a camera in its glove box.

You read in a book that your baby would root for your breast, the very act changing your body to food, and now you think how extraordinary it is that we come into this world already starving, our human hunger innate. You will not know how to breastfeed in spite of the books that you have read.

In Greece, in China, in France, in the past, the women would have stayed until you found your feet again. You, however, will not know that your great-grandmother soothed her baby's whooping cough with ginger or that your grandmother warmed a finger in clove oil for teething.

After 36 hours you will be discharged into the bright day and into the car where you will sit in the backseat with your hand resting on your daughter's butterfly heart. Your husband will drive west, toward the cemetery, where you will see its grounds as if for the first time, a palimpsest of shaling stone, grass and soil, of wood and bone, layer upon layer, invisible beneath the surface because the past has been erased and a new story has been written over top.