

DAY OF REMEMBRANCE



An odyssey of experiences, there were many. Some have been told while others remain... untold.

It was the penultimate night before the delivery of my firstborn. I was a bag of nerves. I could sense every type of emotion running through my large frame: there was fear and anxiety; there was excitement; and above all, the suspense of the gender of the newborn.

The night was drawing to a close and I felt a little uneasy. Before I knew it, I was on my way to the hospital. The already packed overnight case was flung into the car; my husband's hasty actions felt as though we were about to miss a flight. If I was nervous, there was panic showing on his face too. A first-time experience for both, we sailed in the same boat.

The big moment had arrived. As my husband Ajay (fondly referred to as 'AJ' by everyone) helped me into the car, I wailed as I crouched in the rear seat. The pain from the onset of the contraction was intense and I screamed loudly. AJ quickly slipped behind the wheel and we headed out. In a desperate attempt to reassure me, my kind man tried to remind me of the breathing technique from the ante-natal classes attended. As I caught sight of him looking through the rear-view mirror again and again whilst he drove, my anger simply soared. The next instant saw him as the easy target. If my screeches from the pain were loud, my screams directed at him were just as wild.

"Look ahead!" I said, somewhat yelling.

"Eyes on the road... Drive safe!" I nagged constantly. The nagging was harsh. It seemed to drown out all the golden hints and the breathing techniques.

We arrived at the hospital blanketed in darkness. It was just before midnight and the wind was cruel. The chill in the air on the icy

night in November was bitter and made my teeth clatter. I just about managed to make my way in and a nurse walked towards us with her quickest pace. She waddled just like me, carrying her largish frame. She helped me get changed and settled into bed.

“Phew!” I was almost out of breath. The settling was a little problematic as my size had become incredibly large in the nine precious months.

“Big baby, eh!” the nurse said smilingly, in her heavy African accent. Her teeth shone beautifully white through her pouty lips. Her heart-shaped face was flawless in complexion, but it was her gelled hair that gripped my attention more than anything. My gaze simply widened. Wavy and side parted, pinned up curls peered out of her hair. I found myself staring at her head and in my already agonised state, I managed to compliment her.

“Like your hair,” I said, somewhat breathless. She looked at me with glinting eyes.

“Had it done just yesterday y’know,” she chuckled a little.

“Thank you,” she then said, blushing through her dark skin.

“When was your last contraction dear?” the nurse enquired as she checked my pulse. Her touch was icy cold and her hand felt slightly heavy on my wrist. I informed her about the onset of the contraction as she strapped my arm between the pads to monitor my blood pressure and, “Spot on,” she said, assuring all was well.

“Got to wait now,” the nurse said, smilingly, and was soon gone.

My husband by my side was the one and only consolation. The excruciating pain from before all of a sudden seemed to have fallen a notch and my breathing returned to normal. Even though my sweet man tried hard to keep my mind diverted, sadly, his talks fell on deaf ears. I was simply not interested. I remained under observation for the next few hours. I looked around, feeling somewhat helpless. There was very little happening in the deserted ward and with a solitary nurse on duty, it all felt rather quiet. An unusual silence lingered, almost permeating every corner. The grey walls stood bare, adding to the dullness and the row of beds seemed empty. It almost felt like being in a dormitory with no companions in sight. That sense of a ghost town had begun to make me feel a little uncomfortable. The hours ticked away slowly.

The nurse stopped by a couple of times to check on me.

“Any further contractions?” she enquired, feeling my pulse. I simply nodded gesturing, ‘no’. Whilst AJ sat sipping cups of coffee to keep awake, I stared into thin air with my eyes almost bulging out.

“You feeling okay?” AJ asked, in a nervous tone.

“Hmm, but it feels a little ghostlike in here,” I said, with a strange sense of uneasiness within.

“A... calm... before... the... storm,” a deep husky voice chimed from within. I welcomed the calm and I ignored the latter.

The first sight of the dusky sky and the tweet of the early birds revealed the start of another day. Something seemed different. The intense pain from the previous night seemed to have simply vanished. There was no sign of any further contractions and I could once again feel some peace within. Same morning, it had just gone past the ten o'clock hour, when a senior nurse visited. Fair skinned, tall and slender, she walked straight-backed towards us. AJ stood up instantly to greet her.

“Hello, I'm Nurse Turnberry. How are you doing?” She smiled at both of us and then turned her head towards me.

“I'm well, thank you.” The zest in my voice seemed a little restored and as I was about to bring myself to sit up, “Oh please, please keep lying down,” she said, very politely. The nurse started to cordon off the area by pulling at the ringed curtains and whilst she did that, AJ stepped outside. I started to feel a spurt of nervousness arising. Nurse Turnberry skimmed through my notes briefly before she examined me.

“It's a very big baby and the baby is pushing on your diaphragm,” she said. I barely smiled. The nurse then patted me on the arm and smiling, she added, “You're not in labour dear, not as yet.” The expression on my face fell as I stared into her steel grey eyes. Nurse Turnberry quickly jotted something down, added it to my notes and with a pat on my shoulder, she made her way out. AJ stepped back into the cubicle and finding me with my face buried into the cup of my hands, “Are you alright?” he asked.

“I don't believe this!” I remained in slight shock and as I was informing AJ about what had been said, the nurse with the fancy hairdo returned.

“Simply got to wait now,” she announced, through her brilliant smile.

A false alarm, it turned out... I was sent back home.

“How can it be? How can that be?” The questions were a sort of mantra chanted on the drive home; we arrived quicker than we had left.

“My predicted due date for the baby’s arrival... the date is short of a day,” I told AJ. “The timing was just perfect.” I was sensing a tinge of disappointment in my voice. In equal disbelief, AJ simply nodded with a smile. Sadly, the long wait for the cherished arrival was extended, leaving us most disappointed.

Breathing in a sort of pant, I could manage very little around the home. The effort to lift myself off the couch was enormous and with my hands in a steam, I constantly dabbed the beads of sweat on my forehead. I put my feet up for the rest of the day whilst AJ, turning into quite the ‘Superman,’ helped almost everywhere. He did the laundry. He washed the dishes. We had barely finished with the evening meal when the excruciating pain reappeared. The pain came in more frequent intervals and it seemed far from a false alarm this time. A quick call to the hospital and I was being admitted for a second time.

The experience of my first childbirth goes back almost three decades. Still, not an ounce of the memory has diminished. Daylight streamed into the room as I went in and out of consciousness. With the midwife stroking my forehead and AJ gently rubbing my arm, I knew I was in safe hands. The pain from the delivery was intense and I screamed, as I held tight onto AJ. I could almost feel my nails digging into his hand. Within minutes, all I heard was, “The baby is breech.” The mention of breech in a frantic voice echoing in my ears, I found myself being wheeled into the emergency theatre and with the anaesthetist being paged, there seemed a kind of scuffle in the room. It felt nothing less than an emergency alarm gone off, with everyone making desperate attempts to turn it off.

With a sense of panic, I caught sight of some worried faces looking down at me. As I struggled to push the baby out, it felt like a losing battle and with forceps being used, the doctors seemed to have a battle on their hands, too. The senior obstetrician was at his best,

yet the delivery remained challenging. I had never been so awake during the course of my labour as I was at this point and it was obvious something was not going right.

“It’s a boy,” I heard a voice say eventually and the announcement of the new arrival lent a spot of relief. I thought the ordeal was almost over, but... but, I was horribly wrong.

“In distress, the baby is in distress,” a voice shaky, yet filled with power was heard in the next instant. I remained unsure of the implication. I continued to fight the agonising pain. At the last stage of the delivery, the challenge seemed harder than ever before. It saw the baby’s head stuck. The maneuvers increased and the whispers prolonged.

“You’re doing very well!” I heard the nurse’s soft voice as she gently rubbed my forehead. A solitary tear rolled down my cheek, not from the pain of the delivery, but from the pain my baby was enduring trying to make his way into the world. The eight-hour struggle with forceps and maneuvers finally ceased and the obstetrician along with the team of doctors managed to get the baby out. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the baby, before it was rushed to the special care unit. Sadly, with our precious kept at bay, the first cherished hold seemed far away.

It was the Day of Remembrance... the eleventh day of the eleventh month when our joyous bundle made his journey into the world. A pair of eyes always easy to read revealed the truth – I looked at my husband and his eyes said almost everything. As he gently stroked my cheek, another tear escaped the eye.

“The baby suffered a slight shortage of oxygen and needs to be monitored,” AJ whispered with a heavy heart. Emotions ran high as we struggled to say anything to each other. The uncertainty of battling the unknown weighed us down. We waited for someone to assure us our baby was doing fine; the wait became desperate and long.

“Would you like some tea and biscuits?” the nurse had stopped to ask.

“I don’t want your biscuits. I want my baby...” I was crying within, biting back my tears.

“Someone please... please... tell us how the baby is doing.” The pair of nurses seemed to be going about their duties, attending to one other lady admitted in the ward. They carried on in a sort of lethargic manner and the response from them was lukewarm. Often I felt that the nurses were merely looking busy but doing nothing. News on the baby’s condition filtered in dribs and drabs.

The baby was delivered in the early hours of the morning, yet it wasn’t until late afternoon when a nurse walked into the ward. I haven’t seen her before, I thought to myself, starting to feel slightly nervous. I sat up almost instantly and looked at AJ. He squeezed my hand gently and we both seemed to be yearning for the same – the news that our baby was doing fine. The nurse had a quick chat with one of the other nurses and glancing over, she started to make her way towards us. It was obvious she had come with some news. I could sense fear gripping me tight. My heart fluttered and the numbness within started to rise.

AJ stood up to greet the nurse. With a surge of warmth in her greeting, she introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m nurse Sally Jones from the special care unit,” she said, shaking AJ’s hand. My heart had begun to palpitate and my limbs shivered. She then smiled at me and enquired about my well-being.

“Your baby is doing fine. You can come and see him now,” she announced with a warmish smile. I heaved a sigh. My shoulders slumped as I let a gush of built-up pressure drain through them. With a light pat on my back, the nurse reassured me in the softest voice, “You did very well.” My head tilted down trying to shield my wet eyes and remaining silent, I simply nodded.

“You okay?” The nurse’s spoken words were kind. I nodded very briskly this time to say ‘yes’. She must have come from the land of angels, I thought. As we thanked the nurse, she explained the whereabouts of the special care baby unit.

“See you there,” she said with a gentle pat and made her way out of the ward.

A sudden silence dawned. I felt AJ’s arms locking around me and forcing a smile in, slight disbelief, we said little. The wait had been long; the wait had been anguished. The wound from the delivery still raw, AJ helped me sit on the wheelchair and with a blanket wrapped

around me, I was wheeled into the special care unit. I clutched myself in fright and my heart seemed to be skipping almost every beat. There was a flurry of movement in the surroundings and with the scale of activity around, it felt an obvious contrast to the general ward. If doctors were pacing up and down in their white coats with stethoscopes hanging around their neck, the nursing staff seemed simply on their toes.

A warm, welcoming nurse led the way. Trembles and fright gripping me all over, I could sense a cold shiver in almost every part of the body. As the wheelchair came to a halt, my heart thumped and my nerves jolted. There he was... our precious one, with a skin tone close to fair and a tuft of beautiful dark hair. Tubes were attached all over his tiny body as he lay in the incubator; his heartbeat was rapid. AJ and I exchanged a fleeting glimpse and fell into quietude. We turned to look at our little fighter, who seemed so unaware of his incredible journey.

A team of nursing staff working round the clock attended to our little one, as well as attending to two other babies in the same unit. Our precious wasn't alone, he had company, I thought to myself, although not sure it was any consolation. The FM radio played song after song in the background, yet the nurses remained focused. Their attention and dedication were phenomenal!

With a go-ahead from the nurse, I put a trembling hand through a small opening in the incubator to stroke our angel. His tiny eyes opened slightly. The moment was truly magical, our prized possession, 'Our Little Angel,' as I would like to address him from here on, had made his journey into the world.

My heart felt like a bagful of conflicting emotions – it weighed heaviest with pain this time.

"If only I had a wand of magic to take away his pain," I said within. As we watched our angel slip in and out of sleep, a gush of childlike glee broadened our smiles each time his eyes opened. The reality of the painful experience that had unfolded not so long ago gradually began to sink in and the thought that our little one had eventually come into the world, lent some solace.

Guarding our angel in silence, the quietness seemed to permeate deep within. Daylight was slowly giving way and the clouds had

begun to darken. The lights in the wards blinked on everywhere and my eyelids were beginning to droop with drowsiness. It was obvious that the exhaustion from the delivery had started to take its toll. I was struggling to keep my eyes open, when a nurse came by to suggest, "I think you should try and get some rest, dear." I sat up straight. A pretence to open eyes wider and all efforts to stay with our angel seemed to fail. I knew it was time leave.

"Goodnight, Little Angel," I whispered, as we stroked our little bundle one more time, hoping the light whisper had seeped into his ears.

Wheeled back to the ward, the long hospital corridor felt like a tunnel of despair. Thoughts of the delivery flashed across my mind. I was shattered by the experience and as AJ helped me onto the bed, my hands trembled and my body shivered. A profound silence fell between us and there seemed very little to say. Neither said anything for a while. Besides a word or two of comfort from AJ, conversation was scanty. It was obvious that both were distraught, rather, in a state of slight shock.

The night was drawing to a close and the ward seemed covered in a haunting darkness. AJ eventually returned home and I felt utterly alone, crippled with pain. Angry with myself, I had begun to weep under the covers. Listening to the rhythm of the rain, it felt as if the Rain Gods were angry too. If the heart was drenched in sorrow, I found my mind slowly drifting into turmoil. My head seemed to spin with unanswered questions.

Was I at fault in any way? Could I have done anything else to lessen the agony our little one endured? Could the doctors have done anything different had they known the baby was in the breech position? As hard as I tried to suppress my thoughts in the silence of the night, the mind was entangled in them. Questioning myself so, I eventually fell asleep.

The painful night finally gave way... "Hello, how are you this morning?" the nurse enquired in the early hours of the morning as she started to put the thermometer in my mouth to take my temperature. I glanced at her quickly and it took me a while to realise that it was a different nurse from the one here the previous night.

"I'm fine, thank you," I replied, lending a weary smile, even though I felt far from it.

“I learnt of your difficult delivery. I’m sure all will be well.” The nurse’s words, even though comforting, made me struggle to hold back tears. There was a sense of real defeat. I felt like a failure.

The morning, damp and wet, dampened our hopes too. I peeked through the window and it looked foggy outside. The lingering mist seemed to be lifting very slowly. AJ returned to the hospital early that morning. His face looked almost wounded – long, drained and worried. His eyes were puffy and red as if he had cried through the night. The weariness on his face was writ deep and there was a sort of fear in his eyes.

“Did you get any rest?” I asked him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied hastily, looking away. A little fib – the signs on his troubled and strained face said otherwise. I could read him like an open book.

“I hope you got some rest.” As he enquired, I sensed my eyes exploding into tears and simply looked away.

“All will be well, fatty,” AJ was trying to console me, when the nurse brought in the breakfast tray. As she placed it down, I just about managed to find a voice to thank her. I stared down at the tray. There was deep hunger within, not for food, but to simply wrap my baby in my arms and even though AJ tried to convince me, I declined to eat.

In a desperate attempt to console one another, AJ and I made our way to one of the consulting rooms for a meeting called by the doctors. My walk was marked with pain. With a little support from AJ, I managed to steady myself. As we were about to announce our arrival, I could feel myself stricken with fright and even though I felt nervous, I endeavoured to put on a bold front. The door of the consulting room was slightly ajar and the specialist caught sight of us even before we could knock.

“Do come in,” he said. An awkward silence followed us into the freshly carpeted, brightly lit room. One of the doctors had a pen stuck in his mouth, like a sort of dangling cigarette and he seemed to be scanning through some notes. He quickly took the pen out of his mouth and capping it, he closed the file of notes as we entered. The two doctors, sitting across an oval conference table that filled the largish room, stood up to greet us, with each one introducing themselves.

“Please,” Dr. Simpson said, requesting us to sit, gesturing to the chairs opposite.

“How are you feeling today?” the other physician, Dr. Clark enquired, looking directly at me through his darkened eyes. There was definite concern in his voice.

“Am well... thank you. Just feel... feel very tired.” My voice had a tremor, a sort of cracking and I fumbled. A curious silence dawned for a few seconds. They looked at one another, perhaps a little unsure as to who should kick into conversation first. I could feel the pearls of sweat collecting in the palm of my hands and the wait seemed almost torturous.

The details of my delivery eventually began to unravel... “I’m sorry your son incurred a slight shortage of oxygen at the time of birth,” Dr. Clark said, in a voice filled with passion. I was shaking and the next thing I felt was a gentle touch of AJ’s hand on mine.

“Lack of oxygen can sometimes have an effect on the brain and a scan will have to be carried out to rule out any damage,” the doctor added, much to our distress. I looked at AJ. His face had become pale.

The news was hard to digest; the scan was inevitable. There was a brief silence wrapped in uncertainty.

“When do you hope to carry out the scan?” My husband’s voice quivered and he sounded tense as he spoke. The pair of doctors exchanged a look.

“Possibly next week, of course depending on the progress of your son,” Dr. Simpson said. A look was exchanged yet again between AJ and myself; words defeated us and we stayed painfully quiet. After a moment’s pause, AJ enquired about how no one picked up on the fact that the baby was breech, prior to his birth. There was a hint of anger coupled with anguish in his tone. A profound silence fell and the doctors exchanged a swift glance.

“Doctors sometimes miss twins!” Words came gushing out from Dr. Clark. He was quick to respond and hastily brushing away the conversation, he asked, “Is there anything else you would want to ask? Any further questions?” AJ and I fell silent.

“No,” I whispered softly, shaking my head. The meeting ended on a note most sombre. Thanking the doctors, we took leave and came away.