

The Night a Student Doctor Cut the Cord

Elizabeth Ann Fleming

I roared onto North Avenue, inches behind my mentor in her Volkswagen. We ran through the hospital, saying hellos up to the fifth floor. Urgent.

The room was dark. Two nurses in pale blue scrubs greeted us; the patient barely noticed, softly pleading for the pain to cease. At once the room flooded with a calm tension. There were no family members decorating the starkly empty plastic chairs. Her mother and aunt returned a few minutes later. Her aunt was short of breath from the brief walk down the hall. The father brought fast food, and the smell of grease quickly permeated the room.

The patient urinated just after we walked in, pleaded an apology as I stared decidedly at the floor. The nurses calmly wiped it up.

The father held her hand, eyes shielded from the end of the bed, squeamish of her pain, red trickling onto the sheets. The women teased him for his hesitation, but they stayed glued to their plastic cushions. I stood plastered to the wall. I told myself I didn't want to intrude, but in truth I didn't know what to do.

I imagined she looked lonely. When my sister had her son, we all fed her ice and doted on her, we played music and rubbed her

feet and told her how beautiful she was through the pain. This woman seemed alone, her mother making a phone call, her aunt telling jokes, her partner looking pointedly at the floor. I suppose everyone is alone in childbirth.

The doctor slid her hand inside the patient, checking the cervix to measure dilation. This sacred space no longer belongs to her but to the child on his way. "Nine centimeters, almost there." When she removed her hand it was bloody and dripping. She wiped it clean with starkly white gauze.

They rolled a rectangular table over to the bed and removed the pale blue paper covering the instruments. I put on a sterile gown, awkward and unsure what to do with my hands. The size 7 gloves felt soft, like a second skin. My mentor forgot about covering our feet; I was startled at the realization we would need to. The nurse slid the sterile paper over my shoes. I was acutely aware of the vast difference between her experience and mine. I thanked her twice. She said no problem, but her eyes suggested otherwise.

The actual delivery was surreal. It felt like the melting clocks of Dali, Reich's metronome slowed, and the lines of reality blurred. I had to suppress the tears that drifted in sympathy for the pain flooding through her lips. I could nearly make out the jagged red and copper spikes as they slid from her womb, sliced into her nerves, and exploded through her synapses, flowing in

crystalloid curls and expressed as hushed exclamations, small desperate pleading. I wondered if this was just the beginning of the pain this child will cause her. I hope he does his chores, finishes his homework, and respects her opinions.

There was only a soft trickle of blood at first. With each contraction she begged to push. Then I saw him, just a tiny glimpse of his hair. The doctor said she could push when she was ready. They told her to grab her thighs, hold her breath, and bear down as hard as she could. With the next contraction, she said, "I can't do this," but she did, slow and strong. Anyone who believes men are the stronger sex should see a birth. So fierce and lovely, this woman contracted her abdomen, uterus, diaphragm, legs, each individual muscle fiber telling her child that this is his time. As his little head forced through, just the crown, I wondered how he will wear his hair, what his life will be—and then he flopped out of her. His head pushed through and the rest of his body seemed to fall out in obedience; if only our bodies always followed our heads as in this first motion.

He was coated in blood, and there was caked yellow fluid on his thighs, remnants of the amniotic fluid he was recently suspended so gently within. Now he is cradled in air alone. He looked distinctly confused, his little scrunched face quietly whining about his abrupt exit from warmth. She cradled him gently in all his goo as he began

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From the Department of Family and Community Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin.

to cry an alien sound, a sound I haven't heard outside the delivery room.

The doctor asked Dad to come cut the cord. He made a face. "Okay," she said to me, "then you're going to do it." She clamped it on both ends, told me to pick up the curved scissors, and informed me it would feel like jelly. I thought it felt more like slicing through uncooked octopus. I cut slowly, acutely aware that I was physically separating mom and child for the first moment since he cozied into her flesh when he was only a few cells old. I hope they'll be close, that she will trust him, that he will listen to her, that she will love him as he grows and that he will love her as she fades.

The doctor pushed on her uterus to keep it in place and gently pulled the placenta free from its walls. I was amazed it was ready to detach so quickly. The rubbery sack sloshed out of her with a thud, into the bucket I held below. The part against mom felt grainy to touch. I pictured the drawing in our physiology textbook. It did not begin to

portray the beauty of this organ. "The granules are calcified deposits," she told me. I felt the arteries and veins along the inside. The twisted pale-white meshwork was brightly outlined in blood. It curled into a lovely fractal arrangement of overlapping pathways that merged where the cord left the placenta. The part that had laid against him felt like water in my hands: slippery and soft.

She was exhausted. Sadly we weren't done. "Do I need stitches?" she asked, still pleading for her pain to be over. The doctor spread her labia gently, but she recoiled in pain, perhaps just now regretting her lack of epidural. She was still bleeding. The doctor applied pressure, and I silently asked God to please stop the blood so she could rest. Still bleeding. After three excruciating times checking and holding the tissue in place, it stopped. No stitches. We cleaned the blood from her folds, changed the paper beneath her, and we left her to rest.

Cody had a perfect little heartbeat, sweetly fragile and strong.

I could have listened to it forever, gentle thuds pumping blood through his tiny muscled organ. I felt his fontanelles, soft geometric shapes carefully set into the bones of his skull: a diamond on his forehead, like a superhero. I felt the bones of his clavicle, so fragile, clean, and perfectly white inside him. I palpated his stomach, felt its labile peach softness. A completely healthy 3-minute-old baby.

The nurses wrapped him like a football and finally introduced mom and baby. Mom glowed through exhausted eyes at her son as he wriggled tiny fingers up at her. That afternoon I walked into clinic in my neatly starched white coat with facts swimming through my head. That night I met my future in medicine. Unpredictable timing, soiled sheets, and perfect introductions. I peeled off my gloves.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to Ms Fleming, Medical College of Wisconsin, 4712 Toepfer Road, Middleton, WI 53562. 608-213-6981. efleming@mcw.edu.