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# THE HAPPY EVENT

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The tears started brimming in my eyes as I realised what was happening. My husband stared fixedly at the little plastic tube in his hand, only taking his eyes off to quickly look at the time.

‘It said we only had to wait four minutes.’

‘Yes, but I just want to be sure. It might change.’

After a further ten minutes of alternately glancing at the clock and staring at the red dot we were finally convinced. Our emotions overtook us, the tears flowed freely and we leapt into each other’s arms. We were pregnant!

Days passed by in a happy blur until the initial excitement wore off and I settled down contentedly into my role of expectant mother. My hands would rest protectively on my stomach as I walked along the street or waited in line for croissants at the bakery. Was it really a little ball of baby cells I could feel growing or was it not more likely a little ball of apprehension steadily getting larger as I began to face the reality of being pregnant and giving birth in a foreign country?

Determined not to be daunted but knowing few people who had travelled down the baby path before me, I decided to hit the books and dived enthusiastically into some Australian birth and baby guides that thoughtful friends and relatives had sent from home. I pored eagerly over the pages, absorbing the wise advice they offered, preparing myself mentally for the months to come and their ultimate climax. As they suggested, I wrote a list of my expectations for the actual birth, noting such details as the preferred birthing position and form of pain relief.

I headed off for my first antenatal class at the maternity clinic full of anticipation. I couldn’t wait to share my ideas about the ‘ideal birth’ and to get down to some serious preparation. The midwife put me at ease instantly with her warm smile and friendly questions and we settled down for a bit of a chat. She was impressed as I reached into my purse and pulled out my birthing plan and she listened politely, head tilted to the side, as I explained that I was hoping for the most natural birth possible, that I was hoping to give birth in a squatting position, that I was against the idea of an epidural, and that, finally, I wished for my husband to be with me at every step of the way.

In response, she hesitated, pursed her lips and said, ‘Hmmm, well.’

‘Is there a problem?’ I asked.

‘Hmmm. Well, yes. I’m afraid that you won’t be able to give birth in a squatting position. Well, that is to say that it will be a squatting position, it’s just that you’ll be lying on your back.’

‘Lying on my back? But the whole point of squatting is so that gravity helps you on your way.’

‘Oh yes, I understand, Madame, but you must think a little – if you were squatting vertically where on earth would the doctor go? Oh no, no it is not possible. You must lay on your back but you may bend your knees if you wish.’

Determined not to be frazzled, I decided to politely pursue a different topic.

‘And what other pain relief do you offer besides the epidural?’

‘None.’

‘None?’

‘What other kind of pain relief did you have in mind, Madame?’

‘Well, I’m not sure. I’ve heard of laughing gas and I thought there were perhaps other forms - ‘

‘Laughing gas? Ha! Ha! Oh, Madame, perhaps thirty years ago but we are very modern here in France with some of the best medical systems in the world. Of course if you choose not to have the epidural and suffer the pain and agony of child birth that is entirely up to you.’

Right. Of course. I took a deep breath. Perhaps all was not lost.

‘And my husband? Will he be able to join me for all of the antenatal classes and to be by my side for the labour and birth?’

‘But of course, Madame.’

Ah! So all was not lost after all. That was good news.

‘That is to say, almost all of the classes. I’m afraid he won’t be able to join you for any of the swimming pool lessons, Madame.’

‘Oh, OK,’ I nodded understandingly, ‘Is that due to hygiene reasons?’

‘Well, no, not exactly. You must understand, Madame, a pregnant woman tends to put on a little weight during her pregnancy and so of course prefers not to have to show herself to other men in her swimsuit.’

And at that moment, with a sinking feeling in my heart, I finally realised that I was in France and that nothing was going to be how I would have expected it to be at home. It doesn’t take long in France to notice the French woman’s obsession with her figure, her weight, her cellulite, her skin, her overall beauty. And being pregnant is certainly no excuse to relax and let yourself go a little. The doctors harassed me as soon as I put on one gram more than eight kilos during the nine months and the antenatal swimming lessons involved sixty painful minutes of a dozen pregnant

women furtively comparing themselves all the while trying to seem as sexy as possible in their maternity swimwear. I began to feel like a fish out of water.

While disappointed by the midwife's revelations I knew that griping about the situation would do nothing to alter it and so determined to enjoy my pregnancy and baby preparations as best I could. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. So where do the Romans go baby shopping, I wondered? Not having a local Target to whip down to I followed the crowds to the annual sales and slowly amassed bundles of soft, pink clothes all the while trying to decipher the complicated sizing system which seemed to change from one shop to the next. Being proud of myself for having overcome that one small hurdle, I didn't even flinch when it came to buying baby care products to discover that Johnson & Johnson's didn't exist. I reasoned to myself that there were after all close to sixty million French people who had turned out all right despite being deprived of No Tears Shampoo, so surely my baby would also survive.

Comforted by this small step towards 'Frenchness' I began to look forward to the second antenatal class. The topic of the day was 'Feeding baby' and I went along eager to hear some good advice on breastfeeding and to swap handy hints with the other expectant Mums. I was about to discover however that an alarmingly high number of French women do not breastfeed their children at all. I naively expected everyone to be looking forward to this unique experience just as much as I was but ended up feeling as though the only unique thing was me. Far from the handy hints I had expected, my fellow future mothers instead tried to convince me that breastfeeding was nothing but a huge hassle, that is was largely painful and was far from being the nurturing, bonding experience it was made out to be and that most of all, it was anti-sexual! I began to wonder if I would always feel this alien in my adopted country?

I somehow managed to get through the remaining antenatal classes and months of pregnancy without becoming totally disillusioned and jumping on to the first plane heading down under. To no-one's surprise D-Day did eventually arrive and my husband and I remained calm as the physical signs of the birth became imminent. We collected my little suitcase, took a final photo at the door, and headed off to the clinic. Once there, I slipped into a hospital robe, clambered up on to the bed and chatted pleasantly with the nurse as she started strapping bands over my stomach and around my arm and hooking me up to a variety of different machines. After a cursory examination she confirmed that today was the day. Wonderful! I started to swing my legs off the bed to get up when she asked,

'Where do you think you're going?'

'Oh, I just wanted to quickly go to the toilet,' I replied.

'I'm afraid that's not possible. I shall bring you a bed pan.'

A bedpan? My husband and I looked at each other in horror. I hastened to say,

‘It’s really no problem for me to get up. I don’t mind’

‘Yes, Madame, but I’m afraid that’s not possible. You are legally obliged to stay on that bed. We need to monitor both you and the baby.’

My heart sank. If only I’d known I would have waited longer in the comfort of my own home. I realised though that there wasn’t much I could do now and miserably accepted the bedpan.

An hour or so passed without event until as midday approached, a rather bossy midwife arrived to order my husband out of the room.

‘It’s midday. You have to leave. You must eat.’

My husband tried to assure the nurse that he was not hungry and preferred to stay by my side but she wouldn’t hear of it. Lunchtime is a sacred ritual in France not to be taken lightly. The majority of banks, hairdressers, small shops, schools and administrative services all close every day between twelve and two. Lunch is to be eaten slowly and savoured and any time after 2 pm is just far too late. No exceptions. That is, unless you happen to be pregnant and in labour and in that case you are not given an option – a sugared water drip is all that’s on the menu!

My husband did as he was told and I found myself alone in the room with only the constant beeps and flashing lights of the monitoring machines for company. As luck would have it, this was the exact moment that the contractions decided to attack in force. As the pain hit me I felt an overwhelming need to stand up and stretch. I hesitated a moment before thinking, ‘To hell with them, this is my body, my labour, my pain – I’ll deal with it how I want to’ and so defiantly pulled myself up to a sitting position and put one foot on the small stool beside the bed. Just as I was readying myself to carefully pull my weight into a standing position, the door swung open and a nurse in white flew into the room in what could only have been an imitation of the Tasmanian devil.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she roared.

‘I want to stand up,’ I pouted.

‘How dare you! Lie back down!’

She took me by the shoulder and pushed me back to a horizontal position.

‘How could you be so inconsiderate?’ she asked. ‘Why aren’t you thinking of your baby?’

Confusion, frustration and anger welled up inside me. I tried to find the right words in French to tell this woman exactly what I was thinking but only managed to snort and to exhale loudly in her direction as another contraction seized my body.

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As the hours passed the midwives persistently asked whether I was ready for an epidural, which I obstinately refused. Disgruntled by the lack of pain relief options I wanted to show them what this little Aussie could do and was determined to grit my teeth and bear it. I had overhead the obstetrician being asked to be there within the hour and so could feel that the end was near. Little did I know that I was about to be gently coerced into submission. The head midwife came and placed her hand comfortingly on my arm. She whispered to me that I was doing a wonderful job and that it wouldn't be long now... that is, it wouldn't be long if I agreed to the epidural. If I refused it I could be there suffering unnecessarily for another six, eight, ten hours? She explained that the waters hadn't broken and that without the epidural they couldn't do this manually. In my exhausted state of fatigue, I listened, trusting and believing the words she gently cooed into my ear, not realising that she was, unfortunately, stretching the truth to accommodate the needs of the medical staff.

I gave in to their persuasive tactics and accepted the epidural. Within moments a cranky old anaesthetist entered looking not only ready for bed, but for retirement also. He quickly prepared the anaesthetic and as he waited impatiently for one of my contractions to pass he looked me up and down as though I was something distasteful floating in his soup and said,

*'Pas terrible! Non, pas terrible!'* (Not great, not great at all.) I fumed on the inside. How dare he judge me? As though this old man had any idea about the pain of childbirth. I struggled to find a suitably sarcastic retort in French but yet again only managed to snort in his direction as another contraction overwhelmed me. I began to wonder if I shouldn't have brought a French dictionary with me instead of my 'Relaxing Sounds of Nature' CD. It would surely have been put to more use.

The obstetrician arrived as scheduled one hour later looking rather chirpy as though he had just played a good round of golf. I could almost smell the odour of freshly cut grass. He rubbed his hands together and said,

'Right, let's get this show on the road! Now, Mrs Quintus, I really need you to concentrate and to push only when I tell you to. Are you ready, Mrs Quintus? OK, now push! That's it, Mrs Quintus.'

I did as I was told the whole time wondering why on earth, given the position the man was in, he didn't feel comfortable enough to call me by my first name? As I considered this cultural quirk my attention must have wavered and my pushing effort decreased because before I knew it, the midwife had leapt up on to the little stool beside the bed and was jumping up and down on my stomach with all her force.

'Come on, Mrs Quintus, the little one's in trouble! We're going to have to use the forceps!'

Little one in trouble? Forceps? I suddenly refocused all my attention on the events at hand and huffed and puffed enough to blow a house down, in the vain attempt to avoid the forceps. Too late. The doctor pulled out a long sterile package from one of the drawers and whipped out what looked like a long pair of tongs.

‘Who’s for a barbecue?’ he joked.

Who’s for a barbecue? I know barbecues are one of our national sports but that was taking it just a bit far! I began to panic as I saw my husband turning white – was it the bad joke that made him ready to faint or the ‘barbecue’ tool the doctor was flourishing about?

Within what seemed like seconds but which surely must have been minutes the doctor had successfully delivered our little baby into the world. It wasn’t until I heard the midwives ‘oohing’ and ‘aahing’ cluckily and I saw the colour return to my husband’s face that I realised that it was finally over. France or Australia, foreign or not foreign, I’d done it!

Once the weighing and cleaning and poking and prodding were all done, the medical staff finally left us to ourselves, dimming the lights in the room as they left. As I took my baby girl into my arms and looked down into her peaceful face, I realised it didn’t matter where or how she arrived, the most important thing was just that she arrived. My husband squeezed my hand and sat down wearily beside me. It had been a magical experience and a long day. And now it was time to call Australia.



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