

Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

Volume 8
Issue 1 "Am I Invisible?" -- *Voices Society*
Silences

Article 12

2022

Untimely Ripp'd: The Full Story of My Delivery

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Recommended Citation

Zekri Masson, Souhir (2022) "Untimely Ripp'd: The Full Story of My Delivery," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol8/iss1/12

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Untimely Ripp'd: The Full Story of My Delivery

Cover Page Footnote

To my son Louis, with love. To all the midwives of Tunisia and elsewhere, my deepest gratitude.

What would I share about my pregnancy and the circumstances of my delivery if I didn't fear the shame of being considered an unworthy mother?

Would I explain that I had four fibromas which were growing in parallel with the baby?

Would I then have to explain that a fibroma is a non-cancerous tumor that appears in the smooth muscle layer of the uterus?

Would I explain my feelings at month five, during the morphological ultrasound, at the doctor's round eyes wondering at my fibromas, almost ignoring the baby, and informing me how much suffering was in store for me in the near future? *How did you even get pregnant with those anyway?*

Would I tell the other mothers or would-be mothers that I had cardiac arrhythmia at month six of the pregnancy and had to take medication that was potentially dangerous for the baby?

Would I manage to honestly describe the excruciating pain and sleep deprivation I had to endure during the final two months, night and day?

Or would I dare mention the fact that I could no longer stand or even sit down, then barely walk for weeks before and after delivery?

And what a delivery! I have recently come by the (now obsolete) word "confinement" as a synonym for birth-giving, with its strange

undertones of Covid-related terror, entrapment, and contagious sickness.

One part of me is thankful for medical progress, for Caesarean sections, for the exceptionally humane treatment of the doctor, all of the conditions without which my baby and I would never have survived. The other part of me is filled with traumatic memories, with my desperate, guttural calls for help, begging for the pain to stop in the loneliness of the night, begging for the baby's safety on my two trips to ER because of suspicious contractions, begging one of the midwives to stay with me in the operating room because my water broke too early...

How can I possibly forget the fear of having my baby contaminated because amniotic liquid was running low?

How can I possibly forgive the cleaning lady who admonished me to recite the Quran (and potentially tip her) and be grateful for being alive?

I think the worst of it all was that white-tiled, metallic room, reminiscent of cold storage rooms and butcheries, a place of death rather than coming to life. The midwife held my hand, I was glad she was there, my last resort, the only female presence. I was terrified to the bone. Surrounded by nervous faces. I suddenly felt the scalpel's glacial touch in the middle of my belly.

- *I can feel the scalpel cutting through my skin, sir.*
- *No madam, it's not possible, you're under epidural. Aren't your toes numb? Then it's the epidural at work.*

- *I'm telling you I can feel the scalpel!*
- *Give her some oxygen!*

They put a mask over my face. They knocked me out unconscious, under general anaesthesia, without prior notice or permission. I woke up three hours later, manhandled by a ghost-like, gloomy man in a white coat.

-You need to help me move you onto the stretcher, ma'am. It's going to hurt like hell.

My mother was very supportive, silently and fearfully supportive. My father and husband broke down and cried when I told them I was the biggest coward on earth when the doctor came to remove the suction drain, the last vestige of the delivery/operation, because they knew I had almost died of haemorrhage, because they knew I hadn't met my son yet, because they knew I was a survivor. Only *I* didn't know.

Two days later, I was to meet my son.

The clinic I gave birth in had very precarious incubators, or none at all, I can't remember. So when I woke up from anesthesia, my baby wasn't there. I wasn't able to hold or smell him, I couldn't hear him. He was taken by ambulance to another, more modern clinic. He was torn away from me in the earliest moments of his life. A very hurtful hole gaped open and cried out:

-Where is my son, mom? I miss my son!

-How could you miss someone you haven't yet met? (Motherly attempt at humorous consolation)

I left the clinic two days later, I had managed to regain some strength but still couldn't walk or eat properly, because of a stunning double anesthesia and severe anemia caused by a breach in one of the fibroids.

My son was brought to me in a brown straw cot, asleep, quiet, and mature-looking. He had almost died of hypothermia and hypoglycemia that same night because, as a premature baby, he couldn't suckle properly, as if paralleling my unwanted starved state. The "modern" clinic called us to pick him up without showing my husband how to give him the bottle *like that, by pressing your fingers on the teat to help him drink the milk!* I am ashamed, even now, that this happened, that, after all the troubles I went through to save my son, I could have lost him in such a stupid way..

I look at myself in the mirror now and try to impregnate my mind with the idea that I have suddenly turned into a mother. Am I really a mother? What does it...what should it take? Calling him my son? Being happy to see him, to feed him and take care of him? Or is it crying desperately when he suffers or is unhappy? Perhaps is it that deep connection I feel when I look at him and listen to him "purring" in my arms? But then again, I keep wondering whether he knows I'm his mother... Yes, he's my flesh and blood, as we say in Tunisian, he stayed in my belly for eight months, listening to my voice and its vibrations, his body in harmony with the constellation of my organs. He kept touching me from the inside, tickling or pounding...Then he came out without meeting me...How can he possibly know I'm his mother?

*And now I'm entrapped in my aching body, trying but not being able to take him in my arms at will, having to depend on other people's help, then having to watch him being nursed and nurtured by someone else, smelling **their** skin and getting used to **them**. How can he possibly know I'm his mother?-*

Ten days later, another episode of cardiac arrhythmia took place and I had to spend the night at another clinic. The heartbeats were so violent I could actually see my chest moving through my shirt. Curious nurses came to my room just to look at me, like a fair-ground freak: *that patient with the protruding belly, she's just had a C-section and her heart is acting crazy!* I couldn't nurse my son after that because my milk dried up. I must admit that I was half relieved because I was tired of being trapped in my body again after delivery. It felt like a real delivery now and I could finally become myself again. I stood vigil over my sleeping son, like a sacred Egyptian cat, patiently and silently waiting for a previous self to come back.

No. No one likes a story like that, with blood, endless pain, and tears all over the place. The other mothers would perhaps look the other way, or ignore my story, or interrupt me and change the subject, because it disturbs their own narratives of socially acceptable pregnancies and deliveries, stories with happy endings, with jolly visits to the newborn and its half-tired but smiling mother at the clinic, talcum-perfumed, light, sugared-almond colored and sweet. I don't judge normal, healthy pregnancies and deliveries, I don't even envy them. I just resent the guilt and shame other women have created in me because they felt uncomfortable listening to the

details of my story. I became aware of a fantasy (or reality) I had been deprived of because of my “condition.” So I stopped telling it.

Apart from the shaming of some mothers, there was another reaction on the part of my nonTunisian sister-in-law, a mother of two herself, who thought my son resembled “them” because he was blonde and blue-eyed and I wasn’t: “That’s our type of white skin, he doesn’t look like you, he should be mine, in fact, because he looks like my own (blonde and pink-skinned) children. I’m sure he would be happier with us.”

She was reclaiming my son like her part of the bargain, like a piece of lost luggage, or a lost second language. He is like a second language, my son; a stranger and a familiar. His impeccable first French words, his likeness to his other nationality’s traits in its most cliché aspects of bluest eyes and haylike, golden fine hair, will continue to estrange me in my own home. My son had been an expatriate in my belly, his exotic beauty has now turned into a second c-section scar, a rosy-cheeked pain that tickles and pricks as it heals. But it does, and will heal, eventually.

I love my son, every single bit of his being. A boundless, unconditional love fills me to the brim and continues to be refilled every day. It had come to me gradually, motherhood. It wasn’t instinctive, but we had built a solid relationship. Not because of any instinctive feeling or cultural legacy or geographical belonging, but because he is the baby/child I have been taking care of for the past five years. Because I need him as much as he needs me. Because he has transformed me into a more caring, grown-up woman and increased my empathy, and helped me recognize my own strengths and weaknesses. He has made me grow into the self I have always wanted to be.