

Breaking the Waters

Chapter One: Postpartum Haemorrhage

'Postpartum haemorrhage (PPH) is defined as excessive bleeding from the genital tract occurring any time from the birth of the baby to the end of the puerperium. .. [It] is a significant cause of maternal mortality and morbidity.' - Mayes' Midwifery, Fourteenth Edition, page 925.

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Daylight seeps round the edges of the window blind. The feral mewl of a newborn bleeds into the father's dreams. He shifts position in his plastic chair. Everything aches. He has a stiff neck from sleeping slumped over sideways. How long ago did he drift off? After last night's events he could have slept at a strip club.

The infant cries more urgently and he remembers. Rosie wants to breastfeed. She said to wake her up when the baby gets hungry. How long has it been? He fumbles for his phone to check the time.

Rosie is lying motionless in the hospital bed. Her eyes are closed. It seems a shame to wake her. She was flat with exhaustion after the birth. That forceps delivery looked brutal. But the baby is growing red-faced and angry, and the father has no milk to offer him.

"Rosie, love. Rosie, I think the baby's hungry."

No response. She doesn't even stir. Another sound joins the cacophony of his son's demands - the gasp of shallow, panting breaths. Something is wrong. Something is wrong with Rosie's breathing.

He shakes himself awake, suddenly alert, his heart racing. Something is wrong. He is on his feet. He is at the window, yanking up the blind to let daylight flood the room. To get a better look. Rosie's face is bluish-white.

"Rosie!" He is speaking urgently now. "Rosie love. Wake up! Rosie."

He grasps her hand. It is cold and clammy, limp in his frightened grip. He grasps both her shoulders. Shakes her. Carefully at first, and then quite hard. There is no response. Her closed eyes look like bruises. Her breathing is much too fast.

Something is wet and sticky under his feet. He glances down to see on the floor, below her bed, a spreading pool of red. His wife's blood.

"Oh my God! Rosie! Shit! Fuck! ROSIE!"

He presses the buzzer that is supposed to call a nurse. No one had come earlier, when she had wanted a drink of water. He presses twice, three times. Then he runs and opens the door to the corridor. He shouts:

"Help. Someone help please. My wife! She's bleeding."

A midwife in navy blue runs into the room. She glances at Rosie and pulls back the covers to reveal an ocean of blood. It is filling the bed and dripping down both sides. She pulls the big red emergency button in the wall beside the washbasin. Sirens flood the air. Then she grasps Rosie's belly and begins to massage, hard.

Several more people rush in. “Major PPH”, says the midwife. “I don’t like the look of her. Get the emergency trolley. Call the Reg now.” Her tone is tight.

A scrawny midwife in her sixties, blonde hair in a scruffy bun, grabs an oxygen mask from the wall and pushes it onto Rosie’s face. She grasps Rosie’s wrist, looks at her watch, counts.

“Fast bleep the crash team” she commands urgently. “Pulse is over 200 and irregular. She’s barely breathing.”

Someone runs for the phone. More medics appear. Some are in blue uniforms, others in maroon scrubs or grey tunics. No one has time to introduce themselves, and the father has no idea who is who. If just one of these people had been here earlier ...

“Who’s her midwife?”, someone calls. “Where are the notes?”

The little room is packed now like a tube train at rush hour. Medical staff surround the bed, injecting drugs, inserting needles, recording blood pressure and oxygen saturation. Someone has her fist inside Rosie’s vagina, trying to stop the bleeding. She is asking where is the consultant anaesthetist. She is wide-eyed with alarm.

A large man in blue scrubs arrives, sweating and looking worried. He takes charge, ordering the others to raise Rosie’s legs. He calls for blood and a haematologist. Asks for an intubation kit. Then the crash team is here – two more doctors running in and demanding notes and history and observations. Somebody shouts, “Respiratory arrest”.

The new father has squeezed himself into the corner of the room. He is unregarded by the frantic medics. These moments will fill his nightmares forever. He is unable to move or speak. His baby screams in the cot, alone.

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Outside the room, the double doors to the Postnatal Ward swing open. A midwife is returning from her break. She is bundled up in a shapeless green coat, huddled under a hat and scarf as if hiding from the winter's day. Her face is weary but set into dry lines of determination. She is carrying a cardboard cup of coffee.

It takes less than a second before she registers the panic spilling out of Room Two. Her coffee falls abruptly to the floor. Brown liquid spills, splashes and runs to the edges of the corridor in a dirty tide of despair.