

Sarah, Hartwich Royal Infirmary

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I was eleven years old when I killed my mother. A pointless death on a perfect morning. The fault of my childish waywardness. Ever since then I have tried to be perfect. All I want is to keep everyone safe.

‘Midwife’ means ‘with woman’. The title carries the heady whiff of vocation. Who could resist it? I thought it would give me the chance to do something pure and worthwhile. The perfect career for a woman who wants to be perfect. Maybe I could even atone for what I did. Midwives are expected to be perfect: angels of compassion with flawless competence and gimlet-like decision making. A midwife can smooth a woman’s troubled brow with one hand while palpating her abdomen with a second and writing accurate notes with a third. All while never, ever making a mistake. Impossible of course.

Plenty of people will tell you that birth is safe. We get wide-eyed first-timers here on the Labour Ward every day, fussing about their aromatherapy and complaining that they wanted a homebirth. The breathy hypnobirthing types think whale music and lavender oil is all they need to waft their babies out. They always ask for candlelight and want the midwife to stay out of the room. You try suturing a ripped vagina by candlelight. They soon change their tune when the pains kick in, and the baby is malpositioned and the labour prolonged. Then they’re all screaming and begging for an epidural. Lots of them end up going to theatre for a c-section. This isn’t some hippie yoga class. We save lives here.

It’s all very well going on about nature and mammalian instinct. I’ve read ‘Spiritual Midwifery’ and that French guru fellow too, and sat through films about orgasmic birth. Some of the lecturers at university hadn’t worked in a hospital for years. But the fact is, birth, like life, is an unpredictable business. Nature is not to be trusted. Babies get stuck sideways, their blood supply is cut off, infections rage, women bleed, sometimes catastrophically. My job is to keep my women and their babies safe through the stormy voyage of labour and birth. Yes some births are nice and straightforward. But every now and then, often when you least expect it, death shows up. People think midwifery is a nice job cuddling babies. Not so much when you have to tell a woman her baby doesn’t have a heartbeat any more. I had one of those last month; she kept pleading over and over again, ‘Do a c-section, do a c-section, maybe she is still alive.’ But of course there is nothing you can do. It turns you cold inside.

Today I am looking after a woman who speaks no English, so I know this won’t be easy. It’s difficult enough to make them do what you need them to do when you can communicate, let alone when you can’t. And to make matters worse, Sister Brenda is in charge, waiting to trip me up. I will need to stick to all the rules today. My client (we call them clients, not patients, as lip service to the mantra of natural birth) has arrived on the Labour Ward alone. Her husband is at home caring for their other children. Her notes imply that she comes from Afghanistan. She walks into my room like an oriental princess, arrayed in multi-layered, traditional dress in all the colours of the rainbow. Her head is draped with an embroidered veil. She leans against the wall as a contraction grips her, enduring its waves in silence. She doesn’t look like the sort to shout and complain, but I am worried she may not be very cooperative. I greet her with a professional smile and then turn away from her to study her notes.

My client's name is Damia. She had planned to have her baby at the Birthing Centre next door where the atmosphere and rules are more relaxed. The natural midwifery brigade prefer it there; it's all beanbags and birthing pools and deep breathing. But as soon as anything goes wrong they send them here to us, usually missing cannulas and blood results, and we have to pick up the pieces. I prefer my woman on the bed where I can keep a good eye on her. It's too easy to miss the signs of trouble if you let them just wander around. Damia's waters broke yesterday at 07.30 That was twenty-six hours ago, so she's at risk of infection. I need to manage her labour properly now, to keep her and her baby safe. My job is to be more reliable than nature.