



Do You Feel This?

The first day of the rest of your life as a mother.

By Tess Callahan

During a recent exam, my gynecologist mentioned that he had just lectured about my twins' delivery at a medical conference.

"Really?" I said. I had no idea it was so notable. He looked at me strangely. "You remember," he said. "The toxemia, the platelets, the hairy epidural."

"Oh, right," I said. On the day of the delivery, he and I were on different planets.

During the final week of my pregnancy, one watch and then another stopped dead on my wrist. One twin lay so low in the chute I thought he might fly out when I sneezed. When I walked down Main Street, I struck fear in the hearts of loitering teenagers whose averted eyes said, *Don't have it here*. A truck driver yelled from his window, "I hope it's today." I waved back. The watches didn't concern me. Everything about me said imminence.

But in the delivery room, it turned out my little bugger's chin was cocked, and despite crowning, he wasn't going anywhere. Not wanting to use forceps or vacuum on twins, my doctor announced the time for a C-section had arrived.

I cried. I wanted a natural birth. My children were not even born, and I felt I had already failed them. "Look," the doctor said patiently. "You did your part; now let us do ours."

In the O.R. they strapped my arms out akimbo and raised a curtain to spare me and my husband the view. Since I arrived at the hospital, dozens of black-and-blues had mysteriously appeared on my arms from blood tests taken weeks before. That, apparently, was because my platelets had plunged. *Odd*, I thought, *where had they gone?* As a result, it took my doctor three tries to find an anesthesiologist willing to give me an epidural. "Are the babies O.K.?" I asked.

"Looking fine," the nurse said noncommittally.

The anesthesiologist went to work, and the doctor systematically pricked my skin with a needle to test where the increased epidural was taking hold. His voice came through the blue curtain, asking me in the same flat tone, two or three dozen times, "Do you feel this?" to which I answered yes, no or a little. The anesthesiologist gazed down at me through milk-bottle glasses. "Do you feel that?" The plastic oxygen shell over my nose made

it difficult to answer.

The doctor announced he was about to begin. Before I knew what was happening, my son's cry hit the cool air of life. Then, my daughter's piercing wail. A nurse brought my son over for me to glimpse, his face compressed in a roaring scream, and I wept, crushed by joy. At the same moment, an arc of pain sliced under my ribs. I could hardly breathe, and when I looked up into the anesthesiologist's eyes, he said, "It's just the doctor, repairing your uterus." It felt as if I were being murdered from the inside out. The epidural, apparently, was spotty.

In the recovery room, a nurse entered with new bags for the IV, Demerol for the pain, magnesium for the toxemia, which appeared unaccountably and raged during the last hours before birth. When I asked what toxemia was, the nurse said something about high blood pressure, blurred vision and swelling, which I hadn't noticed until she mentioned it. My legs were like tree trunks, and from the look of my stomach, I was more pregnant than before. "But wait," I told the nurse. "Just yesterday I was out hiking with the dog." She gave me a sympathetic smile. That was the other life, the *before*.

The babies were fine, my doctor said; the pediatrician would bring them to me shortly. I asked him when my swelling would go down. He said, in his usual style, never. I tried to laugh but instead cried. He said that all women cry, that my hormones were through the roof. But I knew I was crying because soon two infants would be wheeled into my room in need of my constant attention, and my body was a train wreck.

When at last they were brought in, I saw my daughter with her skinny legs and watchful eyes for the first time. "Small but feisty," the nurse said, handing both to me. Their image blurred in my arms. Toxemic vision made my twins into quadruplets. For an instant, I worried that I might never see them clearly. At the same time, I was sure I had known them all my life, and even before that. I closed my eyes and held them, two distinct human beings who were not me, not my husband, not each other. My husband caressed my arm. He was speaking, but I could not register his words, only the spaces between them. People said time would accelerate with children, but at that moment I heard only the brush of tiny fingers against the sheet, and the infinitesimal pause between the inhalation and exhalation of each wispy breath. ■

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