

"Our birth story is much like many others' - it didn't go as expected. We had prepared a rough birth "wish list" rather than a birth "plan", but it was choosing to have a Doula alongside us for our journey into parenthood that was the best birth prep we could have done.

A Doula is a person (typically a woman, most often who has given birth herself) who tends to the mother during labour and childbirth. Her aim is to keep the mother calm, focused, hydrated and supported, and she can offer helpful insights for the unexperienced parents-to-be if the unexpected happens.

We started labour in the early morning of 07 June 2017. My contractions were about 6 minutes apart and fairly strong, and in between each surge I bustled about trying to get ready; I made my baby's bed, I brought out some cake I had baked earlier in the week; I even put on a touch of make up (which seems so ridiculous and groan-worthy now). We decided to keep active and went for a walk to the Olde Beach Bakery - 10 minutes away. Along the way, my oxytocin levels were soaring! Everything seemed vivacious, alive, fresh. I was over the moon. I ordered a hot chocolate from the bemused staff - if ever I deserved a hot chocolate, today, 07 June 2017, was the day. This was exciting - our much anticipated baby was coming!

However by midday, the contractions had dramatically subsided. In the afternoon we crawled into bed and turned on Wes Anderson's "Fantastic Mr Fox". We made it about half way through the film before I couldn't lie still any longer - the contractions had returned around 5pm. I had my hypnobirthing audiobook on my Ipod, and my Labour bracelet (made up of a bead from each of my dearest friends) wrapped around my wrist. With each surge I breathed through any discomfort, imagining I was riding some sort of uncomfortable wave and then returning to myself. My partner Mark pressed on my lower back, helped me sway my hips, gave me ice and water, coconut water.

We had a fire going and it was a crisp winters night. Contractions were once again regular at around 8- 10minute intervals. The hypnobirthing audiobook helped me focus on my breathing, as everything else became more blurry. Around 1am, we needed to do something different. We stepped out of the house and walked along Waikanae Beach underneath the moonlight. We came back in from the cold and continued concentrated breathing, drinking water, swaying. The night seemed to go on forever for Mark, but I had no concept of the passing of time. Contractions were now a constant companion and would continue as such but nothing seemed to have really amped up. I had had no sleep, but somehow was still functioning. Mark was great throughout the night, but was starting to wonder what was going on - he had been tending to me for almost 24 hours and needed some rest himself, so in the morning of 08 July, we called our doula - Anna Driver.

Anna arrived at 11am and was my constant companion from that moment on through to birth. She took over the role of main support which felt so reassuring - she had done this before - while Mark could recharge, remain mentally alert and also assist with hugs, touch and support. Anna was so kind, and it felt very comforting to have a calm, quietly strong woman there who had had two babies herself. She helped me through each contraction by applying pressure to my hips, swaying them, encouraging even breaths to keep me and the baby calm and happy, and ensuring I had a drink after each surge.

Our lovely midwife Andrea had been and visited twice and was happy with how the baby and I were doing, despite the longevity and little progress with my dilation. My waters also had not yet broken. The day progressed and entered the second night. We were in a strange limbo world. Labour was imminent, surges were constant, but birthing seemed so far away. Anna stayed right through the second night, not leaving my side. We were open to the idea of a home birth if it felt right, but by

the morning of our third day of labour, with exhaustion peaking, we decided to move to Paraparaumu Maternity Unit. I had started using a TENS machine that Anna brought with her during each surge. It helped to distance myself from any discomfort, and I definitely needed it during the car ride from Waikanae. Our midwife had joined us and upon reaching the maternity unit was keeping close tabs on us - baby was still fine. It's heartbeat hadn't started racing nor had it dropped.

My breathing was still even; after each surge I was still feeling relatively fine. Time and my place in it had lost all relevance. My immediate presence was immense. This whole while, Mark and our Doula had tended to me, keeping me hydrated, breathing steadily, moving my hips to alleviate the building pressure. My waters still hadn't broken. At the Maternity Unit we still couldn't figure out what was going on. Early into the morning of 09 June, I was no longer feeling fine. We had our midwife attempt to move our baby into a better position manually, vaginally, which was excruciatingly painful for me. I was starting to really tire, and my contractions were becoming more intense. I had started groaning to help purge each surge, but baby was still fine. We were presented with options; I barely remember what was offered to us, but I clearly remember was the feeling of sudden panic. Our baby was still fine, but now we would have to make decisions which could potentially jeopardise that. Fear welled up inside both of us - we had never been in this sort of position before of course - we were first-timers. How could we know what to do?

What I remember clearly is Anna quietly suggesting questions that we should be asking. Asking for details of all of our options; asking how this procedure or that would affect the baby, and me. It seemed that at that point, the path of least intervention was to have some morphine to try and allow me to get some rest - it would have minimal impact on the baby but would allow me to finally sleep before the main show. It turned out that it didn't give me any sleep, and the groaning continued. We also decided to move to Wellington Hospital so that we could have access to a greater range of options, as the length of the labour was taking its toll. We were to be transferred by ambulance - a 50 minute trip. The ambulance arrived, and with it two very nice and very talkative attendants. I was not in the mood for talking. Mark and Andrea travelled with me, and my mother who had joined us at the Maternity Unit followed in our car - so close Mark thought he could reach out and touch the car. Anna also followed us to the hospital.

The ride to Wellington was very uncomfortable, but finally it felt as though the morphine was allowing my body some respite. At Wellington Hospital we were taken up to our own room with a birthing bath in it. A doctor came in and scanned my belly - baby was still fine, and we finally had an indication of what was preventing our birth. Our baby had its arm up underneath its chin, which was creating a difficult angle for its head to engage fully. My cervix had been fully dilated for some time now, but because the head was not engaging, the final stage of labour was not oncoming. The doctor talked through options including caesarean section. This wasn't how we had imagined things happening. Our doula Anna once again offered some helpful questions for us to ask the doctor. By simply enquiring if we could take each measure one step at a time, providing our baby was still happy and safe, we were told that yes, we could proceed. My waters were to be broken manually to see if that would help things along. It was (a tad hysterically at this point) hilarious to see that the tool to break them looked like a crochet hook. It did, surprisingly, work a treat, and my waters were broken. I was absolutely exhausted. My body had been in labour with little medical support for about 50 hours. However, with my waters broken we were in new territory. We had tried the birthing bath but it was uncomfortable and I wasn't feeling it. It still took a further 4 hours, including further manual manipulations of our baby's head, but finally I was in the final stage of labour, and with it adrenalin kicked in. My body was overwhelmed by the strength of the process that had taken over it. The birth felt like it was no longer in my hands, but that some primal knowledge my body

had innately built in was coming in to play. My surges took on a whole new form too and it felt like what I can only describe as concrete waves were moving through my body to help my baby emerge.

It didn't feel painful (thank you, you ravishing blend of adrenalin and oxytocin) but it felt immensely and scarily powerful. I did not feel entirely in control of my body. Suddenly my midwife was getting me into a more comfortable position on the bed, and telling me when to push and when to stop. It was very hard to pause pushing. My mother, Mark and my doula Anna were all next to me, with Anna still talking me through my breathing patterns and guiding me through. Mark held my hand, only releasing it to witness the top of our baby's head crowning. Before we knew what was happening, I was unashamedly making deep animalistic groans and our midwife was directing me through our final push.

Our deliciously healthy baby was born at 4.08 P.M. weighing 3.79 kgs on 09 June 2017 - about 60 hours after our first contractions. Our baby was scooped up into my arms, skin to skin, and it made its way up for its first feed. It was about 10 minutes later that we suddenly realised we still didn't know if our baby was a girl or a boy. We had a look. Our son Theodor ("Gift from God / the Universe") was named there in the hospital room. I felt so empowered, so strong, so proud of my body and Mark, our midwife, our Doula Anna and my mother for the journey we had shared.

4 hours after the birth, we moved from the hospital to the Paraparaumu Maternity Unit. We loved our stay at the Paraparaumu Maternity Unit and are so grateful for the gentle and kind midwives that made our first few days together as mother and baby so peaceful.

We will never be able to thank our wonderful midwife and Doula enough for their tireless dedication and comforting natures.

Birth - you can expect the unexpected. DON'T PANIC. It's all part of your birth journey and crash course into parenthood!"