

They massaged my legs and back through the contractions and together we got through them one at a time. To my surprise I was most comfortable sitting backwards on one of our dining room chairs, leaning against the back and swaying to the music during the contractions. I think I spent a short amount of time in the bathtub, but the whole thing is kind of a blur at this point. After about six hours our doula, Amanda, arrived and asked me if I thought I was ready to go to the hospital. I said I thought so, but wasn't sure. We'd learned in our classes that we should head in when the contractions were about 3-4 minutes apart, but mine were two minutes apart from the get-go, so what did it mean???

Amanda told me that only I knew the answer and to listen to my body. So, we decided to head in. We packed up the car and I made it through the car ride (following our pre-planned, timed route) by hugging a pillow and rolling my window down to enjoy the fresh air. It wasn't as terrible as I'd expected! In fact, while walking down the hospital hallway towards labor & delivery, I even looked at Amanda and said, "Somehow I thought it would be much harder than this." Again, ha! She just smiled and kept me moving.

Upon checking in, the triage nurse got me settled and did a cervix check. After six hours of what I thought were pretty darn good contractions, I was only dilated 1-2 cm and the baby was still very high at a -2 station...basically where he was a week prior, BEFORE I was even in labor! Whaaaaaat??? I couldn't believe it. All that work and I'd made almost no progress. The nurse told me that as a first-time Mom I didn't know it, but I was merely in "early labor" and it could be a day or two until we actually had the baby. She told me to go home and do the things I wouldn't be able to do once the baby arrived: "go see a movie, go out to lunch, have sex!" I could have vomited. I was feeling very discouraged as we headed back out of the hospital and towards home. I remember looking at Amanda and asking for the first, but not last time that day, "How the F am I going to do this???"

Fast-forward 11 hours, which were spent mostly in the bathtub at home, with contractions that had become MUCH stronger and had turned into hard, back labor yet never slowed down, and we were back at the hospital. The time at home is still a blur. Mike and my Mom alternated shifts of sitting by the bath tub and talking to me, trying to get me to eat (nope), and ensuring that I didn't drown as I was sleeping (and snoring!) during my two-minute breaks and waking up to ride out the contractions before passing out again. By the time Amanda had arrived back at our house I had passed a lot of bloody show in the tub and I remember Amanda saying that we needed to get to the hospital or the baby would be born in the bathtub. I remember thinking "well, I guess that's happening since there is NO WAY I'm getting out of here!" Then came the second time I asked Amanda that day "how the F am I going to do this???" I eventually did make it out of the tub and into the car where I knelt on the floorboard with my head in the seat and told Mike to forget our pre-planned route, "take the highway and drive faster than you've ever driven!!!" By this point I had been doing a fair amount of vomiting and continued to do so all the way to the hospital. It was not pretty.

Upon arriving back into labor & delivery triage a midwife, LCDR Resetter came in to check me. She took one look at my belly and immediately said she thought the baby's positioning was off. After a quick check she said, "Well, you're at 5 cm with a bulging bag of waters, but he's flipped posterior (or sunny-side-up)". This explained my super-intense back labor. They admitted me and got me moved into my room with a plan to try to get Houghton into a better position for birth and hopefully move my labor

along. Because I was still au-naturel at this point our goal was to get a quick 20-minute strip of monitoring the baby, set up my IV port (just the port, not continuous fluids unless it became necessary) and then if all was well we'd be able to do intermittent monitoring so I could get up and move around the room. We'd planned to use a birthing ball, the shower, and various positions to labor in. Unfortunately once we were in the room the corpsmen were having a very hard time getting my IV inserted and getting the monitors positioned on my belly. The contractions continued coming hard and fast and at one point they even let me get on the birthing ball to try to relieve some of the pressure while they kept trying with the monitor. Finally after about an hour and a half they'd gotten what they needed. At that point our midwife returned with bad news. She said that Howie's heartbeat did not look good enough for me to go ahead with intermittent monitoring. It wasn't accelerating and decelerating during contractions the way it should have been. Therefore, it was in our best interest to stay in the bed with the constant monitoring. This came as a pretty devastating blow to me. At this point I'd been at it for almost 19 hours. I was exhausted and though I still felt pretty confident, I was starting to crack. Right at that moment a man entered the room and introduced himself as the anesthesiologist. He said that he was about to go home for the day and that IF I was going to want an epidural now was the time because the on-duty anesthesiologist had just gone in to a 6-hour surgery and it'd take him 45 minutes to get back to the hospital if I changed my mind. As we'd discussed time and time again, Mike immediately tried to take the anesthesiologist out of earshot to explain that we were having a natural childbirth and thanks-but-no-thanks, but I wasn't having it. Amanda and Mike were on one side of me, gently reminding me of my birth plans, while my mom stood on the other side and encouraged me to go with my gut and reminded me that I'd worked so very hard up to this point and that it was okay to take the epidural. At that very moment, the midwife returned and told me that Howie's heartbeat had turned around and I COULD get out of the bed now if I wanted to! I couldn't believe all the back-and-forth that was going on. It was like something out of a movie. Alas, my resolve was shot and I knew I'd done all I could do and told him I wanted the epidural. I could no longer imagine getting up onto the birthing ball or the shower or anywhere else. I was beat! I apologized profusely to Mike and Amanda for "giving up" on our plans but they were both so sweet and just kept telling me that it was ok and they were so proud of me. I was conflicted emotionally but physically and mentally I just knew that this was what I needed. The epidural was in before I knew it and I felt like a million bucks. He had done it very lightly so I could still feel my entire body, but it had taken the edge off big time. I could still move my legs and lift my hips and everything. All the tension of the day seemed to disappear and for what was probably the first time all day I was smiling and laughing and finally excited to meet our son. Up until that point I hadn't even been thinking that today was the day our baby was coming, I was just concentrating on getting through the contractions. Our midwife came in and gave me a direct order to take a nap since I'd been awake almost 20 hours at that point. She said she'd be back in two hours or so to check me and then shortly thereafter we'd be "having a birthday party". We all settled in to sleep and I felt like the hard part was definitely over.

After our naps LCDR Resetter returned to check me. I was feeling good but had had some trouble sleeping because I was starting to feel the pressure of the back labor again. It wasn't excruciating, but I wasn't comfortable anymore. As she was checking me she said "oh good, you're at 7-8 cm but, whoops I just broke your water and there is meconium in the fluid". I knew this could be bad news for the

immediate skin-to-skin I wanted, as well as our desire to do delayed cord clamping. It meant that there would be a team from the NICU in the room for the delivery and that if Howie came out and didn't cry right away they'd have to whisk him away to make sure he hadn't aspirated any of the meconium. I was sad but the excitement of him coming out outweighed the disappointment and we moved on. After a short while I was fully dilated and effaced and it was time for "a few practice pushes". Our nurse was propped on the end of the bed coaching me on where to direct my pushing and I asked for a mirror so I could see what was going on. Pushing was a lot harder than I expected it to be! The back labor was pretty bad again by this point and Amanda was helping me out with some (in retrospect) pretty funny techniques to relieve the pressure. She was basically all up in my butt cheeks massaging and pressing and it was heavenly! We definitely got "close" at that point!

After what felt like a lot of "practice" with the help of Mike, my Mom, and Amanda I was in a lot of pain again and I finally asked how long I'd been "practicing". I was kind of surprised when they told me it had been an hour and twenty-five minutes. I hadn't really researched this part of labor & delivery (because I didn't realize it would be so much work!) so I wasn't sure, but that felt like kind of a long time to me. Over the course of the next two hours I switched positions quite a bit. I tried pushing on my knees holding on to the back of the bed, on my left side, my right side, my back...I did it all. I was BEAT. The midwife would pop in and out of the room and tell me what a good job I was doing, but I wasn't buying it. I could see the top of Houghton's head in the mirror and it was about the size of a quarter. From what I could gather from the conversations taking place I was doing a great job pushing but he was still sunny-side-up AND his head was cocked to the side, so he was moving down when I pushed but when I stopped in between pushes to breathe he would slide right back up. The goal was to get him lodged under my pubic bone so he wouldn't slide back up and it just wasn't happening. Just past the 3-hour point the Chief of OB, CDR Sexton was called in. He evaluated Howie's position and watched me push and determined that our best way ahead was to try a vacuum-assisted delivery. He said that if the vacuum popped off three times we'd have to go to a C-section but he was pretty confident that he could do it with the vacuum with some serious pushing on my part. I knew at that time that I didn't have the energy to continue with the amount of pain I was in and told everyone that I was sorry but unless I could get some kind of "boost" in my epidural I didn't think I could do it. This part was kind of a blur again, but a couple anesthesiologists came in and worked on me, to include the original guy that had administered the epidural NINE (!) hours prior. They hooked me up and got me nice and numbed after a couple of tries and I was ready for the vacuum.

The OB got all set up and we were all very excited knowing we'd be meeting our little boy soon! They took the mirror away, so I couldn't see what was going on, but according to Mike while I was pushing with all my might CDR Sexton attached the vacuum cup to Howie's head and was pulling with all his might. I pushed HARD and heard a resounding POP. That was one. We got set back up and...POP. That's two. After the third POP he shook his head and said "we're going to C-section, get her prepped". In my wildest dreams I'd never imagined I'd be having a C-section. In retrospect I don't know why I was so sure, I think it was just so far from what I was planning that I never even considered it. In fact, when C-sections were covered in our prenatal class Mike and I looked away because we didn't want to see the gory surgery and it didn't apply to us anyway. Whoops. By this time I was so exhausted that I was too

tired to even be scared or worried. They wheeled me out of the room as Mike was getting suited up in scrubs to join me in the operating room.

The prep and surgery were uneventful. I'd had my appendix out a few years back and this actually felt pretty similar as they prepped me. The big difference was that I'd be awake for this surgery. The biggest thing I remember was shivering and being really cold. Before too long I could feel lots of pressure and tugging and all of a sudden we heard it: our sweet boy's strong cry! Mike and I looked at each other and were so happy! We both cried and were so excited to hear our sweet boy's voice, though we couldn't see him yet. In a few minutes Mike was able to go over and meet his son. Shortly thereafter he came back with our boy! I couldn't touch him but I was able to give him a kiss and he in turn started licking his little lips like he knew I was the milk lady! He didn't cry and he had the sweetest, most angelic little look on his face. I couldn't believe he was finally here. The whole thing was so surreal. Mike and Howie were taken back to our room and I was stitched back up for another 30 minutes or so. I was pretty much in a daze at this point.

Once I was taken back to our room where Mike had been having skin-to-skin contact with Houghton, I was finally able to hold my son. There was a lot going on and I was covered in monitors and wires and beeping buttons but all I wanted to do was look at his sweet little face. It was kind of hard to see him because of the position I was in, but I remember being so drawn to the way he smelled as he nuzzled up to my chest and we just lay together. I tried to breastfeed but we weren't quite ready yet so we just sat there and got to know each other and rested from all the work we'd done over the previous 27 hours.

Much like that moment where you go walking down the aisle, I think most women my age have spent a lot of time imagining the moment they hold their first baby for the first time. Well, my experience was different than what I'd imagined. With all the hustle and bustle around me, and the exhaustion of the day catching up to me, I didn't feel the overwhelming surge of emotion that I'd expected right away. I was happy to finally meet my son, but it hadn't quite hit me yet. But, at about 3 o'clock that morning I woke up to feed him and with him passed out on my chest, as I lay awake just staring at him it hit me like a ton of bricks. The surge of emotion overcame me and the love rushed in to my heart. This sweet, perfect, sleeping baby was mine and all of a sudden I'd found that love that everyone describes, and it was worth every second that it took to get there.