



Angel Spencer

The First Delivery

By Caitlin Dunham

Welcome, Baby

I felt you before I saw you. A firm roundness, rough beneath my gloved fingers, pressing just to the edge of my palm, your mother's cervix a whisper of satin ribbon about your head. "Eight centimeters?" I can't keep the anxious rise out of my voice. It's only my second day. "Nine," came the crisp voice at my shoulder. "She's almost ready." P, the midwife, stands there: her words cheerful, her manner calm, her presence kind but firm for me and for your mother. It's not clear which of us is comforted more.

A sigh comes from behind the sheets as I withdraw my hand. Your mother's blood stains my fingertips. Her ordeal is far from over. Her hands and lips quiver with fatigue and anesthesia. "Your first?" I ask. She whispers in the affirmative. "Mine, too." I give her my gentlest smile, but she cannot see it with her eyes squeezed shut.

It's not long before I can see you. A tight curl: black, silken, sodden. You're bobbing like a cork, more of your scalp visible with each push before retreating again. Trickle of fluid, pink and orange, join the growing pool in the padding. I can see the whites of your father's eyes across the bed.

"What size gloves?" asks M, the lovely Irish nurse. She's fetched me from the call room, where I'd watched your tracings on the monitor above my bunk. I'm gowning, heart racing, sweat gathering at my hairline. You will make your appearance soon.

"I can't! I CAN'T!" Your mother is shrieking. "You CAN!" says M. "You MUST! Your baby will not come out unless you PUSH!" P is humming to herself as I arrive by her side. "It's all right, dear. You'll do just fine; just put your hands there and I'll help you." It's not clear whether she's talking to me or to your mother. She grasps her thighs. I grasp your head. One last push! Your head emerges. You wear your cord as a necklace. My heart stops, or has time slowed? Am I trapped with you between heartbeats? P's knowing fingers slip your necklace off. I breathe again, and now, so do you. You are in my arms. P suction your mouth and nose. You cry. Your mother and father cry. I cry.

Your skin is gray and blue. I've seen it before: the lividity of death. Our color is the same as we enter and exit the world, it seems. Soon you are pink as a fingernail; your silken curls less sodden. Eight and nine according to M. Your mother thanks Jesus. I thank P. Your father doesn't speak at all, but smiles through his camera at you.

You are at your mother's breast. Your father strokes her hair and your feet. I slip away, skin prickling with receding adrenaline. The lullaby plays on the PA system.

Welcome, baby girl.