Having a Baby - A Christmas Story

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Summary: A reprint of her description of the labor and birth of her daughter Tamar in 1928. The memoir describes waiting to begin labor and commenting on the women around her at Bellevue Hospital clinic. Assisted by her cousin Carol, she returns to Bellevue several days later when her labor pains begin. Vivid description of the pain she endured, her thoughts, and of the people she encounters during those hours. Tender description of breast-feeding and her first few days with her daughter. (DDLW #583).

When I was in Mexico many years ago (in 1929!), my daughter Tamar was three years old. We were one day visiting Diego Rivera, whose beautiful murals were all over Mexico City. He looked at my daughter, saying, "I know this little girl. Your article 'Having a Baby' was reprinted all over the Soviet Union, in many languages. You ought to go over there and collect royalties."

I had written the story for my old friend Mike Gold, who was editing the "New Masses" at the time (June 1928). While not yet a Catholic, I was firmly resolved to have my child baptized one.

She is now the mother of nine, and the grandmother of twelve! She has been spending a week with me, and has just returned to her home in Vermont. (Needless to say, she needs to get away from that tribe once in a while.) We had a delightful visit!

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On Wednesday I received my white ticket, which entitled me to a baby at Bellevue. So far I had been using a red one, which admitted me to the clinic each week for a cursory examination. The nurse in charge seemed very reluctant about giving out the white one. She handed it to me, saying doubtfully, "You'll probably be late. They're all being late just now. And I gave them their tickets and just because they have them they run into the hospital at all times of the night and day, thinking their time is come, and find out they were wrong."

The clinic doctors acted very much disgusted, saying, “What in the world’s the matter with you women? The wards are empty.” And only a week before they were saying, “Stall off this baby of yours, can’t you? The beds are all taken and even the corridors are crowded.”

The girl who sat next to me at the clinic that day was late the week before and I was astonished and discouraged to see her still there. She was a pretty, brown-eyed girl with sweet, full lips and a patient expression. She was only about eighteen and it was her first baby. She said, “Ma’am,” no matter what I said to her. She seemed to have no curiosity and made no attempt to talk to the women about her; just sat there with her hands folded in her lap, patient, waiting. She did not look very large, but she bore herself clumsily, childishly.

There was one Greek who was most debonair. She wore a turban and a huge, pink, pearl necklace and earrings, a bright dress and flesh-colored stockings on still-slim legs. She made no attempt to huddle her coat around her as so many women do. She had to stand while waiting for the doctor, the place was so crowded, and she poised herself easily by the door, her head held high, her coat flung open, her full figure most graciously exposed. She rather flaunted herself, confident of her attractions. And because she was confident, she was most attractive.

When I got home that afternoon, thinking of her I put on my ivory beads and powdered my nose. I could not walk lightly and freely, but it was easy to strut.

There was another woman who was late, a great, gay, Irish wench who shouted raucously as she left the doctor’s office, “The doctor sez they are tired of seeing me around and I don’t blame them. I rushed over three times last week, thinking I was taken and I wasn’t. They sez, ‘The idea of your not knowing the pains when this is your third!’ But I’m damned if I come in here again until they cart me in.”

So, when I was philosophically preparing myself to hang around a month, waiting for my child to knock on the door, my pains started, twelve hours earlier than scheduled. I was in the bath tub reading a mystery novel by Agatha Chrystie when I felt the first pain and was thrilled, both by the novel and the pain, and thought stubbornly to myself, “I must finish this book.” And I did, before the next one struck fifteen minutes later.

“Carol!” I called. “The child will be born before tomorrow morning. I’ve had two pains.”

“It’s a false alarm,” scoffed my cousin, but her knees began to tremble visibly because after all, according to all our figuring, I was due the next morning.

“Never mind. I’m going to the hospital to exchange my white ticket for Tamara Teresa”

- – for so I had euphoniously named her.

So Carol rushed out for a taxicab while I dressed myself haltingly, and a few minutes later we were crossing town in a Yellow, puffing on cigarettes and clutching each other as the taxi driver went over every bump in his anxiety for my welfare.

The driver breathed a sigh of relief as he left us at Bellevue, and so did we. We sat for half an hour or so in the receiving room, my case evidently not demanding immediate attention, and watched with interest the reception of other patients. The doctor, greeting us affably, asked which of us was the maternity case which so complimented me and amused Carol that our giggling tided us over any impatience we felt.

There was a Black woman with a tiny baby, born that morning, brought in on a stretcher. She kept sitting up, her child clutched to her bosom, yelling that she had an earache, and the doctor kept pushing her back. Carol, who suffers from the same complaint, said that she would rather have a baby than an earache, and I agreed with her.

Then there was a genial drunk, assisted in with difficulty by a cab driver and his fare, who kept insisting that he had been kicked by a large white horse. His injuries did not seem to be serious.

My turn came next, and as I was wheeled away in a chair by a pleasant, old orderly with whiskey breath, Carol's attention was attracted and diverted from my ordeal by the reception of a drowned man, or one almost drowned, from whom they were trying to elicit information about his wife, whether he was living with her, their address, religion, occupation, and birthplace - - information which the man was totally unable to give.

For the next hour I received all the attention Carol would have desired for me - - attentions which I did not at all welcome. The nurse who ministered to me was a large, beautiful creature with marcelled hair and broad hips, which she flaunted about the small room with much grace. She was a flippant creature and talked of Douglas Fairbanks and the film she had seen that afternoon, while she wielded a long razor with abandon.

Abandon. Abandon! What did that remind me of? Oh yes, the suitor who said I was lacking in abandon because I didn't respond to his advances.

Thinking of moving pictures, why didn't the hospital provide a moving picture for women having babies? And music! Surely things should be made as interesting as possible for women who are perpetuating the race. It was comforting to think of peasant women who take lunch hours to have their children in, and then put the kids under the haystack and go on working in the fields. Hellish civilization!

I had nothing at home to put the baby in, I thought suddenly. Except a bureau drawer. Carol said she would have a clothes basket. But I adore cradles. Too bad I had been unable to find one. A long time ago I saw an adorable one on the east side in an old second-hand shop. They wanted thirty dollars for it and I didn't have the thirty dollars, and besides, how did I know then I was going

to have a baby? Still I wanted to buy it. If Sarah Bernhardt could carry a coffin around the country with her there is no reason why I couldn't carry a cradle around with me. It was a bright pink one - - not painted pink, because I examined it carefully. Some kind of pink wood.

The pain penetrating my thoughts made me sick to my stomach. Sick **at** your stomach, or sick **to** your stomach? I always used to say "sick to your stomach" but William declares it is "sick at your stomach." Both sound very funny to me. But I'd say whatever William wanted me to. What difference did it make? But I have done so many things he wanted me to, I am tired of it. Doing without milk in my coffee, for instance, because he insists that milk spoils the taste of coffee. And using the same kind of tooth paste. Funny thing, being so intimate with a man that you feel you must use the same kind of tooth paste he does. To wake up and see his head on your pillow every morning. An awful thing to get used to anything. I mustn't get used to that baby. I don't see how I can.

Lightning! It shoots through your back, down your stomach, through your legs and out at the end of your toes. Sometimes it takes longer to get out than others. You have to push it out then. I am not afraid of lightning now, but I used to be. I used to get up in bed and pray every time there was a thunder storm. I was afraid to get up, but prayers didn't do any good unless you said them on your knees.

Hours passed. I thought it must be about four o'clock and found that it was two. Every five minutes the pains came and in between I slept. As each pain began I groaned and cursed, "How long will this one last?" and then when it had swept over with the beautiful rhythm of the sea, I felt with satisfaction "it could be worse," and clutched at sleep again frantically.

Every now and then my large-hipped nurse came in to see how I was getting along. She was a sociable creature, though not so to me, and brought with her a flip, young doctor and three other nurses to joke and laugh about hospital affairs. They disposed themselves on the other two beds but my nurse sat on the foot of mine, pulling the entire bed askew with her weight. This spoiled my sleeping during the five minute intervals, and, mindful of my grievance against her and the razor, I took advantage of the beginning of the next pain to kick her soundly in the behind. She got up with a jerk and obligingly took a seat on the next bed.

And so the night wore on. When I became bored and impatient with the steady restlessness of those waves of pain, I thought of all the other and more futile kinds of pain I would rather not have. Toothaches, earaches, and broken arms. I had had them all. And this is a much more satisfactory and accomplishing pain, I comforted myself.

And I thought, too, how much had been written about child birth - - no novel, it seems, is complete without at least one birth scene. I counted over the ones I had read that winter - - Upton Sinclair's in **The Miracle of Love**, Tolstoi's in

Anna Karenina, Arnim's in **The Pastor's Wife**, Galsworthy's in **Beyond**, O'Neill's in **The Last Man**, Bennett's in **The Old Wives' Tale** and so on.

All but one of these descriptions had been written by men, and, with the antagonism natural toward men at such a time, I resented their presumption.

"What do they know about it, the idiots," I thought. And it gave me pleasure to imagine one of them in the throes of childbirth. How they would groan and holler and rebel. And wouldn't they make everybody else miserable around them. And here I was, conducting a neat and tidy job, begun in a most businesslike manner, on the minute. But when would it end?

While I dozed and wondered and struggled, the last scene of my little drama began, much to the relief of the doctors and nurses, who were becoming impatient now that it was almost time for them to go off duty. The smirk of complacence was wiped from me. Where before there had been waves, there were now tidal waves. Earthquake and fire swept my body. My spirit was a battleground on which thousands were butchered in a most horrible manner. Through the rush and roar of the cataclysm which was all about me I heard the murmur of the doctor and the answered murmur of the nurse at my head.

In a white blaze of thankfulness I knew that ether was forthcoming. I breathed deeply for it, mouth open and gasping like that of a baby starving for its mother's breast. Never have I known such frantic imperious desire for anything. And then the mask descended on my face and I gave myself to it, hurling myself into oblivion as quickly as possible. As I fell, fell, fell, very rhythmically, to the accompaniment of tom toms, I heard, faint about the clamor in my ears, a peculiar squawk. I smiled as I floated dreamily and luxuriously on a sea without waves. I had handed in my white ticket and the next thing I would see would be the baby they would give me in exchange. It was the first time I had thought of the child in a long, long time.

Tamara Teresa's nose is twisted slightly to one side. She sleeps with the placidity of a Mona Lisa, so that you cannot see the amazing blue of her eyes which are strangely blank and occasionally, ludicrously crossed. What little hair she has is auburn and her eyebrows are golden. Her complexion is a rich tan. Her ten fingers and toes are of satisfactory length and slenderness and I reflect that she will be a dancer when she grows up, which future will relieve her of the necessity for learning reading, writing and arithmetic.

Her long, upper lip, which resembles that of an Irish policeman, may interfere with her beauty, but with such posy hands as she has already, nothing will interfere with her grace.

Just now I must say she is a lazy little hog, mouthing around my nice full breast and too lazy to tug for food. What do you want, little bird? That it should run into your mouth, I suppose. But no, you must work for your provender already.

She is only four days old but already she has the bad habit of feeling bright and desirous of play at four o'clock in the morning. Pretending that I am a bone

and she is a puppy dog, she worries at me fussily, tossing her head and grunting. Of course, some mothers will tell you this is because she has air on her stomach and that I should hold her upright until a loud gulp indicates that she is ready to begin feeding again. But though I hold her up as required, I still think the child's play instinct is highly developed.

Other times she will pause a long time, her mouth relaxed, then looking at me slyly, trying to tickle me with her tiny, red tongue. Occasionally she pretends to lose me and with a loud wail of protest grabs hold once more to start feeding furiously. It is fun to see her little jaw working and the hollow that appears in her baby throat as she swallows.

Sitting up in bed, I glance alternately at my beautiful flat stomach and out the window at tug boats and barges and the wide path of the early morning sun on the East River. Whistles are blowing cheerily, and there are some men singing on the wharf below. The restless water is colored lavender and gold and the enchanting sky is a sentimental blue and pink. And gulls wheeling, warm grey and white against the magic of the water and the sky. Sparrows chirp on the windowsill, the baby sputters as she gets too big a mouthful, and pauses, then, a moment to look around her with satisfaction. Everybody is complacent, everybody is satisfied and everybody is happy.