

labour of love

Senior editor *Kate Rae* thought she couldn't be any closer to her younger sister, Amy – until Amy asked her to witness the birth of her son.

WHEN MY SISTER AMY SAID SHE WANTED ME TO BE WITH HER WHEN SHE HAD HER FIRST baby – alongside her boyfriend, Bruno – I burst into delighted, excited, terrified tears. Our 12-year age difference had given us a sisterhood with no animosity, no rivalry, no history of stealing clothes or crushes. Our relationship is uncomplicated and unmarred, and a lifetime together meant we had a shorthand – I knew what she meant when she asked for “the thing,” what she needed when she flapped her hand just so.

Number of childbirth experiences at this point in my life: zero. Sure, I'd heard the birth stories of countless friends, but those seemed to fall into two categories: heavily edited, thanks to those beautiful memory-erasing hormones (“The contractions came and then I pushed and then the baby came out!”), and absolutely horrifying (I have one friend who punched a nurse after the epidural didn't take). Neither gave me a real sense of what I was in for. I worried that I would get tired or squeamish or scared and let her down. I was terrified about seeing my beautiful girl in pain or afraid. I worried that her birth plan (at home, no drugs) would get horribly derailed, as these things so often can. I was terrified, yes, but it never occurred to me to say no. The thought of not being able to soothe my little sister's fears was even scarier.

Since Bruno worked during the day and I had a more flexible schedule, I was the one who took Amy to the

midwife appointments, where we listened to the baby's heartbeat, and then to the health food store down the street to buy her bags of the sweet maple almonds she craved. I was at the ultrasound when the technician, who wasn't supposed to reveal the gender, did – by silently circling the foggy crotch region and wagging her finger. I read *The Birth Partner Handbook*, recommended to me by mom friends. I sat with Amy on the floor while a birthing coach showed us posters detailing the stages of labour, and we marvelled at the Borat-like hairdo of the illustrated mom-to-be. I bought things and packed them in a bag that waited by my front door: granola bars, a stopwatch, a notepad. I prepared as much as I could because that's just who I am. It made me feel well armed and ready.

I got the call at 10 on a Thursday night, nine days after Amy's due date, and immediately headed over to my mother's house, where she and

Bruno were living at the time. Amy seemed calm, with contractions that were annoying but bearable. We ate dinner together and then sat quietly on the couch. I wondered how Bruno and I would navigate this shared role – especially given that English wasn't his first language, nor Italian mine. But as the night progressed, our dance – clumsy at first – became more fluid. Using hand motions and carefully enunciated words, we figured out ways to divvy up the tasks: Bruno took on setting up the birthing pool we'd rented, while I held Amy's hand, the stopwatch and her intense gaze through every contraction.

All through the night, we worked as a team. I brought her ice packs and heat packs, placing them on her lower back. Bruno filled the pool. At 4 a.m., the midwives came and set up their equipment, and soon we had even more support as the labour progressed and Amy moved into the water. After one particularly strong contraction, she turned to me. “You are going to help me take care of him, right?” she demanded with a ferocity I had never seen before. “Of course, my darling,” I said. “Always.” She nodded, satisfied. We had never been closer. I had never loved her more.

As her labour intensified, so did ▶

HOW I HAD A BABY

“WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH LYMPHOMA IN 2003, I was told I'd be infertile after treatment, so my boyfriend (now husband) and I had some embryos frozen. Three years later, we tried to get pregnant, but it didn't work. My younger sister, Jenna, who had two kids already, offered to be our gestational carrier. It was a huge gift, and I was overwhelmed. After the second transfer, she got pregnant with my daughter. I felt guilty when she had horrible morning sickness, but Jenna was amazing throughout the pregnancy. When she gave birth, I was in the bed next to her, and the doctor put the baby on my chest. I had induced lactation, so I got to nurse her. Now Addie is a feisty toddler, and I feel like a regular mom. But she will always have a very special relationship with her auntie.” *Karma Brown, 38, writer, Toronto*

her need for Bruno. She motioned for him, and I moved away from the side of the pool so he could take my place. (Perhaps aware of my sudden, hungry need to feel useful, the midwives handed me a flashlight and put me on poop-net duty.) I scanned the waters and watched the two of them. He held her lovely face inches away from his and they murmured back and forth for hours. I heard some words I knew: *amore*. And I learned some new ones: *respira*. Breathe.

Then somehow it was morning and, since this baby clearly did not want to be born in the pool, we transferred Amy to the bed. The three midwives moved around calmly and quietly – no one speaking above a hum. Bruno and I – by now a team – moved into formation on either side of her. He held one leg and I held the other. We kissed her hands and face and urged her along: “*Spingi, spingi, spingi*,” Bruno said. “Push, push, push,” I said. In different languages, we told her the same things: how well she was doing, how proud we were of her. My fears of seeing her in a frenzy of pain vapourized; she remained calm and strong, listening carefully to everything the midwives said. She was simply incredibly excited to meet her baby, delighted that the finish line was so close.

I watched, stunned, as one of the people I love most in this world suddenly became two. He was not there, and then he was: my newest nephew, Leonardo, screaming furiously at his eviction. “Put him back in!” was the first thing Amy said. “I want to do it again!” We all laughed. I couldn’t believe it was over and that everything

sister act

WOMEN HAVE BEEN HELPING OTHER WOMEN HAVE BABIES FOR AS LONG AS MEN HAVE BEEN GETTING THEM PREGNANT. NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THIS JUST MIGHT MAKE FOR AN EASIER BIRTH.

He faints at the sight of blood, gets crabby when he hasn’t slept, and can never remember if you hate orange juice or love it. Are you sure you want your man to be your sole support during labour?

While there are no hard statistics on exactly who we’re choosing to have with us while we give birth, anecdotally, caregivers are seeing a shift away from the father-only model. “It’s thinking of childbirth as a family event,” says Elizabeth Brandeis, a Toronto-based midwife. “And the definition of family is pretty expansive.”

This multi-partner approach is likely helping to improve outcomes: A review published by *The Cochrane Library* earlier this year found that women who had continuous support during birth in addition to their partners – in other words, a (typically female) midwife, doula, friend or family member – had fewer interventions and shorter labours.

For many moms, the decision to have another woman in the room is a no-brainer. “My husband is incredibly supportive but my sister is a different kind of presence,” says Lauren, 33, who had both at her side for the birth of her first baby in 2008. “I wanted my sister there to be tough and to advocate for me.” And Krista, 45, didn’t hesitate to ask her own sister to be there when her two kids were born: “I knew my husband would get me what he thought I needed, and that she would get me what I’d asked for.”

had gone so unbelievably smoothly. The midwife placed him at her breast, his cord still attached, and he immediately latched on. The six of us in the room each welcomed him to the world in a different language: Farsi, Mandarin, French, Italian, Hebrew and English. I went up to the kitchen and told my pacing mother the news and we cried and made phone calls and cooked a huge pan of scrambled eggs for everyone downstairs.

WHEN I WENT HOME LATER THAT MORNING, I was too excited to sleep. Instead, I found myself on the Tiffany & Co. website, musing over the merits of different diamond rings. My older sister called and, when I told her what I was doing, there was silence for a moment.

“Um, do you want to propose to Amy?” she asked.

“No!” I said, appalled. “Maybe?”

She was right. I was totally, completely besotted with my sister. I had never felt prouder of her. I had never felt more honoured. *Amore*.

TWO YEARS LATER, AMY’S MEMORIES OF that night are not so very different from mine. We both remember a feeling of magic and would both testify under oath that the world shimmered just a little bit brighter when Leo was born. There are differences as well: She has no recollection of the teaspoon of honey I had placed on her tongue when she had started to lag, and I can’t ever imagine how she felt when her son first settled on her chest. But that’s the thing: When you hear two women talk about a shared experience, their voices overlap, colouring in the blanks. Getting to view the same exquisite event from two very different angles has made Leonardo’s birth story one about sisterhood, too. ▶

HOW I HAD A BABY

“I ALWAYS KNEW I WANTED CHILDREN, BUT I NEVER MET THE RIGHT GUY. When I turned 35, I started wondering if I could make it work on my own. I discovered an online group called Single Mothers by Choice and met up with some local moms. I decided I’d try to get pregnant with anonymous donor sperm. When I told my mom, she said ‘I was wondering when you were going to get around to that!’ I went to a local fertility clinic and looked through all their donor profiles, but none of them was quite right. Then the nurse brought out one final option. After I read his medical background and looked at his baby picture, I knew he was it. Following the fourth insemination, I found out I was pregnant. The first few months with my daughter were overwhelming and exhausting, but I’m really happy with our life now. She’s four and a half and she isn’t really interested in where she came from. I told her I wanted a baby but hadn’t met a man, so I went to the doctor.” *Beth Tyndall, 42, lawyer, Vancouver*

**Name has been changed*