

FROM HERE



MATERNITY

With a new introduction

ANN



was face down and it was only that long [gestures] with a tiny little bottom and everything and there it was: the hospital or someone had wrapped it in this cling film. My baby was due on a certain day and it just went on and on and it never got born, you know. My Mum said oh for God's sake what's happening? And I said well it was due, everybody's had theirs except I haven't had mine. And she said oh dear, that's very bad. And I never actually had the baby. . . .

CHAPTER 5

The Agony and the Ecstasy

I thought it was so bad, I thought if it was a question of having the baby or stopping the pain I would stop the pain. . . . No wonder women died in the Middle Ages. . . .

It was just amazing. It was like a miracle. It could be a religious experience. Now I know it's superior to be a woman.

How can the experience of childbirth be described? Does it defeat words? Or is it twisted by being trapped within words so that an event powerfully experienced is reduced to a technical account, a recitation of medical manoeuvres? Some people find it easier than others to put their feelings into words. Questions provoke answers, but the answers may be only clues, signposts. Statisticians sketch another kind of partial picture; to know how many women had what kind of pain relief during labour is not to know how much pain was relieved; to be told how many babies were begged or persuaded into the world with forceps, is not really to know much more than that.

*Certain themes run through the accounts of birth gathered in this research; the problem of recognition — is this labour, is this a contraction, the clash of expectations and reality — now I know how it feels, I know how I expected it to feel; the question of control — am I doing this myself, or are other people doing it to me? How to recognise symptoms of impending birth and how to square these with the images collected from mothers, antenatal classes, television programmes, Victorian novels and so forth — these are the classic dilemmas of women having a first baby. But the issue of who controls birth is part of childbirth today in a more general sense. In entering hospital to give birth a woman becomes part of that great and growing debate about who is having the baby: the mother, the medical profession, the hospital, the family, the state. In the role of *antivist* a mother is vulnerable, but she is vulnerable twice over, for she has not*

certain places. One does not have a baby in the admissions hall, an epidural in the lavatory, a baby without prior removal of pubic hair. This proper way to give birth may seem improper, but as a patient it is not the reasoning behind the rule that matters, only the existence of the rule itself. How to defeat the depersonalisation that results — the feeling of being a cipher, of being one amongst many machines mechanically programmed to produce a baby, like a cup of coffee or a pop song — this becomes a massive, and often unreachable goal.

These statistical statements about the sample women set the birth accounts that follow in their technological context:

79 per cent of the women had epidurals* (with or without other analgesics)

30 per cent had other analgesics only

Only one woman had no analgesia at all

52 per cent of the women had forceps or ventouse deliveries*

98 per cent of women had episiotomies*

41 per cent of women had induction or acceleration of labour with syntocinon*

59 per cent of women had their membranes artificially ruptured

69 per cent of women said they did not feel in control of themselves or what was going on during the labour.

BIRTH PASSAGES

ALISON MOUNTJOY, 27, fashion designer. Labour accelerated. 16½ hours, epidural, forceps delivery:

I'd better tell you the whole story. Do you want to know the whole story? Right. The doctor had said at the hospital that if nothing happened I might as well come in after the weekend to be induced. Which was alright, because I thought by then I'll be two weeks late and I can't keep hanging onto it forever. But you know when you've finished at the clinic, and you have to see the nurse and get more iron pills? Well, this nurse and a woman doctor who was also sitting at the desk, when they heard that I was going to be induced — having the membranes broken — which I hadn't been nervous about previously, but the way those two went on — they were sort of half joking, saying enough how uncomfortable it was, and I was getting a bit worried, I said well you are joking aren't you? Well, it's not too pleasant. You know!

So you can imagine what I felt then. And of course it got worse as the days went on, as Tuesday approached and nothing happened, and then Tuesday morning I woke up with piles. Just the day I had to go into hospital. That just about finished me. I was terrified by them of being induced, terrified of going into hospital, terrified of just about everything, and with this bloody pain up my backside . . . I couldn't even get any toilet paper anywhere near my backside . . . I mean, why did they have to come the day I had to go into hospital?

I went into hospital in the afternoon, and I was so terrified: Luke stayed with me, he went home for supper and he came back and they let him stay. I asked the sister what it was going to be like, whether it was going to be as bad as everyone made out, and she didn't put my mind at rest at all. Yes well, it is a bit uncomfortable. You know when doctors say something's going to be a bit uncomfortable you know it's going to be bloody awful. Anyway, the doctor who was going to do it came to see me about ten o'clock at night and he could see I really was in a state by then, and he said, if you can relax it's nothing. So I said well how the hell can I relax? He said, well look, if you really are this worried, I can give you an injection and you'll just be nice and woozy — you won't care what we're doing to you. So I said well why didn't anybody tell me that before? So we arranged for me to have this injection at about six o'clock in the morning, because they wanted to do it [rupture the membranes] at about six thirty.

They came and gave it to me at six o'clock and I drifted off feeling absolutely wonderful . . . and while I was lying there feeling wonderful I started feeling these wonderful twinges starting and I thought no, no, nothing's happening — too good to be true. They couldn't take me up then, because the delivery rooms were so crowded, they'd had a busy night. So there I was starting off by myself: I felt so proud of myself, and I didn't tell anybody for about an hour. I can't tell you how pleased I was that I started off myself: I was so chuffed. And eventually I thought I'd better tell somebody because I had a show and everything started happening, and they came and timed the contractions and they said yes, you actually are in labour. And I was so pleased: that set the day off right!

So when they did take me upstairs, they didn't do anything. Until about twelve when they decided they wanted to monitor the baby which apparently they do routinely there. And the bag [membranes]

and they were pretty painful. You're not allowed to call them pains, are you? They're contractions. It always made me laugh when I read that because I *knew* they bloody well hurt. Everybody kept asking me every ten minutes whether I was going to have an epidural. And I had been in such a state the night before that I was in no mood to be firm about anything. Also the breathing wasn't working – it's a load of old codswallop, that breathing. I mean it works when the pains aren't so bad that you can remember to do it, but once they get to a certain pitch it just doesn't work – well, it didn't with me. So when the tenth person asked me if I wanted an epidural, I said yes. They did it just after the membranes – that wasn't that bad, it's no worse than an ordinary internal.

The worst thing about the whole of the day, the only bad thing, was that at the same time they did the epidural they wanted to put me on a glucose drip. I wouldn't have the other – the drip that speeds it all up. They wanted to do that straight away when they broke the membranes, I don't know why, I suppose because they didn't want me to be in labour for very long, for their own convenience probably. But I said no: I'm doing alright, aren't I, I said: I'm having good strong contractions aren't I, so you're not going to do it, are you? I had one nurse to start with who was on my side. She talked two doctors out of putting me on the drip. She said this patient is in labour. She doesn't want to go on a drip and there's no need to, is there? I think because I'd gone into hospital to be induced they hadn't really worked themselves round to the idea that in fact, although I had been, in fact things were a bit different. I thought they would just take me up to the delivery room and let me get on with it. I couldn't understand *why* they wanted to put all these monitors in – and when they started talking about putting me on this drip to speed it up, I said what on earth for? Anyway they wanted to put me on a glucose drip and I felt I couldn't argue with that because they always do with an epidural for some reason. And *that* was painful. It took three goes to get it in because I've got narrow veins, so eventually Luke had to help her and that was the only time he nearly passed out.

If you count from when I started having contractions, which I suppose was seven o'clock in the morning, and I had her at eleven thirty at night – sixteen and a half hours. At four o'clock they did put me on the other drip. They said look, you're doing very well, but it

another needle in are you? No, no, we just attach it to the same tube. Anyway I had so many tubes coming out of me by then – the two down there, the epidural, the drip – so it was the fifth thing altogether. You feel so strung up, you think, well what's one thing more?

It was what I *feared* was going to be the case. I think they have actually gone round the bend there. And I think that was why, knowing that hospital was so keen on sticking tubes into you and injections and all sorts of things, I think that was one of the reasons I had the epidural. Because to be honest, when I asked for the epidural, when I finally decided to have it, it wasn't *totally* the pain, it was also the fear of – they're so used to doing all these things to people who've had epidurals and who are completely numb – what's it going to be like when they start doing things to me forgetting maybe that I can actually *feel* everything? I was aware at the time that I asked for it that I felt I was coping . . . I was just scared. It wasn't just the pain. I didn't mind the contractions really. The pain of somebody doing something to you is worse. I had decided beforehand when I got so scared about being induced, I had more or less come to terms with the fact that I'd probably be asking for an epidural. I know my own emotional capabilities and it wasn't anything to do with the pain by then; I was just scared of what *they* would do to me and how much *they* would hurt. . . . I thought, I've had enough, I just don't want to feel it.

Having said that I definitely didn't want an epidural before going into hospital and then deciding eventually to have one to make life easier – for them as well as me – it was actually super; I mean I don't regret having had it, I mean having decided to have a baby at that hospital the best thing to do was to have done what I did. . . . It's terribly unlikely that I'll have a baby there again, because we'll be moving out of London, so presumably I will be somewhere where they will have the attitude of encouraging you and helping you to get over the pain, instead of saying why put up with it, we can give you something for it. [And this in fact was what happened – her second child was born twenty months later without an epidural in a small country hospital.]

And I had a forceps delivery. That was a bit unfortunate because the last time they topped up the epidural was about nine o'clock in the evening, and about two minutes later they were due to do another internal, and they did it and all hell broke loose because they suddenly

was this nice doctor that I'd liked who'd been on duty again by this time which was rather nice, so he also had a look and said, right, okay, start pushing! And the unfortunate thing was that this last top up left me *completely* numb from the waist down, whereas I'd been topped up about four times and each time it'd left me with *something*. But this time I really did have to look at the machine to know when I was having a contraction.

I was *very* disappointed that I couldn't feel to push. I was really *furious*, not with them – I was furious with *myself*, and I suppose it was a good thing that I had been to some classes because I did know *how* to push, but it was a question of getting it right – obviously if you can't feel your bottom, you can't feel it. Sometimes I knew I was doing it right; this little nurse was scratching the sheet to try to get me – there was only one nurse, actually the whole thing was so funny, because I had one nurse on one leg to push, but they were shortstaffed and of course I needed somebody on the other leg, so of course Luke had to come down off my shoulder and hold my leg. And it was so funny because at one point in the middle of a contraction when I was heaving and panting she said to him: oh look, you can see the baby's hair! And he said, well actually I'm not terribly sure what I'm supposed to be looking at! And I just burst out laughing, I just had fits, which I suppose is quite nice because it's not often that you can lie there in labour giggling.

But I suppose the most disappointing thing about the whole procedure was not being able to feel her slither out . . . I would *love* to have felt her slither out or whatever the feeling is that you do have when they come out. I really would have liked to have felt that. I was furious that they topped me up, I was never shouting to be topped up, they topped me up without even asking me: I said what are you doing? I don't need it, I don't want it. They just put it in: I mean you can't really move away. He let me push for an hour which is quite a long time for them because normally it's ten minutes and that's it. But maybe it was because the doctor, because he liked me as well, and I think maybe he was happy to let me go on for as long as he thought was safe. And eventually he said you just can't get the head round the corner. So he said you're going to push it out, but I'm just going to ease it at the same time – good psychology! I mean I don't know whether that's a typical forceps delivery . . . It was one pull, one

epidural – I suppose you miss that feeling of pushing them out yourself. I could feel the pressure of the forceps and I could feel that he was doing something that did in fact hurt, even through the epidural I could feel that, and I could feel it stop, but I didn't know that she'd come out. And then suddenly everybody was saying oh you've got a little girl and all the rest of it, and I said I can't see it, I can't feel, where? And Luke had to pull me up and she was only half out and she was already crying and I was so relieved to see her: she was so obviously all in one piece and crying and . . . I just felt immense relief. She looked *totally right* when she came out: the right size, the right length. I held her all the time they were stitching me up. They just plonked her on my chest. It was *totally* amazing. Looking at her and thinking – well I suppose it was *terribly* difficult to believe that she'd come out of *me*: I sort of half thought that she must have come from under the table somewhere, because having *not* felt but seen the direction she was coming out of, I sort of wanted to go and look under the table to see what was going on under there. It felt very strange. I mean yes: it was *my* baby, and I loved her, but I think I was just so shattered by then that whatever I was feeling I couldn't feel much of. I mean I was totally aware that she was my baby and I loved her and I wanted to hold her but I felt so sick I couldn't react to *anything* by then. I could hardly believe that she'd come out of me.

SHARON WARRINGTON, 21, audiotypist. Labour 18½ hours, epidural: It was six o'clock on the twenty-third and I got backache, not a bad backache, but it was annoying. It went on all night and I woke up at four in the morning. It got worse, but not that bad. I didn't know, I'm not ignorant, but I just didn't know: I got up, and started pottering around. I didn't know what was going on really. My Mum said I don't want to frighten you, but I think you've started labour, and I don't want to frighten you, but I think you've started labour, and I laughed. She said, right: you wait and see. She said my face was so flushed. I didn't think I was in labour, I expected it to be painful. It was right at the bottom of my spine, as though someone had got their knuckles into it. My Mum got up and sat making tea and coffee and seven o'clock came and I felt tired, so I got back into bed about seven fifteen. I just moved in bed and as I moved I got a terrible thud in the back, and the waters broke. So up I jumped, ran from the bed into the kitchen, gets to the toilet, and finds what's happened. I told Mum

and said I was on my way. I said to Alan, would you get up, and he looked at me out of one eye and said why, what's wrong? He didn't know what I meant. So I said my waters have broke and the baby could come at any time, and he said you are joking, and I said I am not; he thought I was joking. And within five minutes we were off. He didn't even have a wash.

Got to the hospital and from the reception they took me up to the admission place. I was upset: I cried when I said goodbye to my Mum. I was alright going in the car, but once you are in that delivery room and you see all these things . . . I was thinking oh God, if when the baby is born it has to go on that machine or this has to be done . . . then I got a little bit scared. I got examined and then I went straight into the delivery room because I'd already started to dilate. Then the doctor came in and then the pain started really to come about lunchtime and I wanted that epidural so I had it done, and it didn't work. Alan went out for his lunch and he said what time did they think the baby was going to be born, so they said about four. Anyway up comes four and I am still there, so they gave me an epidural again, and it still didn't work, so I gave up. They examined me quite a few hours after I was admitted and I was still only about three and a half to four centimetres, and then they examined me about five, and it was seven centimetres, and then they examined me again about half nine and it was completely open. . . . When they examine you they write in the file and give a special stamp and I asked her what it was and she said I can't tell you. She said all I can tell you is that you are progressing. She said what is written in the file is strictly confidential.

He had this thing on his head [an electrode to record the baby's heart-rate]. I was worried in case it could harm him, and they don't ask your permission to do it which I think is all wrong. But when it came off - it took long enough to be put on, and it darn well hurt, because the girl who had done it hadn't before, and it took quite half

an hour to get it properly in place, anyway, within half an hour of being put on it fell off, because you have got about four tubes going inside and they keep turning you from side to side and each time you turn you pull, you can't help it, and I said I don't want it again, because I said it might damage his head when he is born, and they said it doesn't harm him, they said if you look at this, this records his heart, this records your contractions. So, well, you can't really say no

He was the only baby born at Christmas. The only one, all Christmas Eve day and all Christmas Eve night, and all Christmas day and night. There was only me, and this other woman having a race. About half nine they said that I was ready to push, so the nurses and all that come in. I started pushing about nine forty five and he was born at twenty past ten, it was all over. I was propped up, but you've got your legs on the table and you have a foot on each nurse's shoulder, so you have to rick your neck to look down and you can't do it, because you are trying to breathe at the same time. Alan see it. When the actual birth came, they went and got him from the room and they brought everything in and got all ready and I started to push and push and push and his head sort of got stuck, it just wouldn't come out.

You feel like your whole bottom half is going to split, literally, you can feel this bulge and as they say the urge to push is terrible. They say don't push, don't push, and they tell you when to push. I always thought you could push when you wanted to push, but you don't; you have to wait for their command. They feel your tummy and your face is all crinkled up with agony and they say oh you've got a pain, you can push now, and you push and then you relax.

Anyway the sister who was on duty came in and said how was I doing sort of thing, and I didn't know what they was doing, but they got this big blue sterile pad and I knew she had something in her hand, because she kept her hand down there, but Alan could see, because she was on the same side as him and she said right push, push really hard. And as I pushed I hear snip, snip and Alan went white, and they cut me down and across like a hot cross bun, and then his head was born and another push about a minute later and he was completely out, and Alan was half way up the corridor, gone. It was a darn shame that he had to go, but if he hadn't have gone, he would have been out on the floor. He saw the head, it was about half out, and he said that all he could see was like the back of his head, and then he said they cut you and I said to him, how did you know, and he said, well I see didn't I? And the nurse ran after him and got him and he came straight back in again, and the baby was just lying in between my legs at the bottom of the bed. They wrapped him up and put him in his crib and Alan just went straight over to him. He didn't want to know what

I could do it. I think some people have that just for the sake of having it. Ninety per cent before their pains even start have it, and even a couple of days after I was so pleased to say I had it but it didn't work, that I took the full brunt of it, whereas these people who had had it said that they couldn't feel a thing. Well to me that isn't having a baby. What's the point? I said it was awful. But it's not awful really. What you suffer for an hour or two is all gone. What you suffered for the whole nine months and the last few hours is sheer hell really. But it is all worth it, once they give you the baby, it's absolutely marvellous.

I held him for a couple of minutes and they asked Alan if he wanted to hold him and he said no, and that upset me. Then not long after a nurse from the ward came up and took him down, and that was all I saw of him . . . I would have liked him exactly as he was born, for them to have cut the cord and given him to me. But they've held him first, that's the way I look at it. You are not the first. I think a mother should be the first one to hold it. A couple of days after we was talking about it in the ward and one of the women was saying that she didn't hold hers for about twenty minutes and they were mucking around with it and that, and I said I had him about five minutes after, so she said I don't think it is fair. I think you should have them raw sort of thing, just as they are, and I said yes. He was such a sweet little thing, he was wide awake with his eyes open looking at me, and looking at Alan, and although they can't see, he was staring all the time, he didn't blink once. They commented about that; he still does it now, he still stares.

I had thirty stitches, I had thirteen inside and all the rest were outside. It was about one o'clock before he came along, he was singing to me 'God rest ye merry gentlemen'. It was Christmas Eve. It was funny, as the contractions were getting bad they came in and they turned all the lights off and I thought what on earth are they doing? And they moved me and all these machines and everything into the door and I got this pain and I'll never forget it as long as I live. I was swearing under my breath and there was this whole mob of doctors and nurses singing 'Away in a manger' and I'll never forget that as long as I live. I cried my eyes out. I hadn't cried all the way through, I'd bitten my lip, but that really broke my heart.

LOUISE THOMPSON, 30, law student. Labour 4½ hours.

every five minutes or so. I phoned the hospital and they said oh don't worry; it's your first child, it'll take twenty hours or something. Eat dinner, stay calm, and come in, you know, tomorrow morning. So I actually was cooking dinner – it was about seven – but they just got, they didn't hurt that much, they were just coming very often. And I said well you know, maybe I should pack my suitcase. But we'll stay calm: right? Oh and also we were moving that Monday so the flat was such a mess. Then at seven thirty I was starting bleeding, like a period, and I said I'd better phone the hospital. And they said, yes, you'd better come in. But if I hadn't started bleeding I surely would have had her at home. Because I got there at eight fifteen and then I had her at ten to eleven. When I came in, after they examined me, I was put into the labour room. I was five to six fingers dilated. But it didn't even hurt at all – not at all – until right before I was in the second stage of labour. I tell you, if I hadn't started bleeding I would have waited till the pains got really bad and it would have been half an hour. They got quite bad at the end of the first stage. I mean I didn't have any drugs or anything. It wasn't terrible.

When they said oh it's a girl, I said oh good, I am so happy! . . . I held her after a while. Actually she fed right away. Oliver said – let her feed, let her feed.

It was just amazing. It was like a miracle. It could be a religious experience. Now I know it's superior to be a woman.

PAULINE DIGGORY, 25, market researcher. Labour 12 hours, epidural, forceps delivery:

A few days before I had the baby we had friends round and we were talking about the epidural. And this friend said, you know it's ridiculous, in the Middle Ages it was excruciatingly painful to have a leg off, and it was excruciatingly painful to have a child. He said these days it's only excruciatingly painful to have a child: why should it be so? I said for the joy at the end. He said oh balls. Which is very true.

So I had this epidural and I felt guilty. I felt I should feel cowardly about it. But the amount of women who felt cowardly about it made me annoyed. There was this woman in the bed next to me and she was an intelligent woman and she said if you do the breathing exercises you can cope. I said well, why should I bloody have to cope? She was all for having it naturally. I think that's disgraceful, you know. I've

I had the epidural after the first hour. I came very fast you see. Wednesday night I started getting period pain type contractions very slow and they built up and they were coming very very fast but very irregularly. And then I had a show and Jeff said I'm not having you like this all night; this was about one o'clock. She said come in, stay the night, and we'll see what the doctor says at nine o'clock. Whether to send you back home again or... So Jeff went back home again which was good, because I wouldn't have slept, I would have kept him awake at home because I was just writhing all night, you see. That was the worst part really, all on my own. They asked me if I wanted sleeping pills and I said no I don't want anything — and they put me in this ward with three other women. And at seven o'clock in the morning when the new staff came on they decided to break my waters, the new sister did, and she said it was four centimetres, and they started to wheel me away to the labour room and I started every two minutes which I think was quite quick. Oh it was dreadful! And that awful gas! I made me sick! I tried it, but I knew I wouldn't like it... so I had the epidural, and it has to be topped up every hour, so at the end of the hour I was going come on, come on! I thought it was dreadful, I thought it was so bad, I thought if it was a question of having the baby or stopping the pain I would stop the pain. Honest to God! It just takes over your whole nervous system, doesn't it, really. I mean it's not like a *pain* pain, it's not like period type contractions... I just said I think it's a disgrace, no other operation in the world does one have to go through so much pain! And they were going yes, but it's not so bad if you learn how to breathe — learn how to breathe! Can you imagine my Murn — eight, and a pair of twins! I think about that now. I look at women all differently now if I know they've had kids.

They do tend to make very casual conversation over you. Like when my epidural was due, this man came round with his students. That was the worst thing. Some doctor. What do you think of this one? He did talk to you as though you weren't there. And also his students seemed pretty dopey. He said shortly after lunch she should have it, and I said that's good: what time do you have your lunch? He was right — seven minutes past twelve.

You see, it wasn't very long — only four hours. I had a bath at seven and she broke my waters at half past seven. From eight o'clock till twelve I'd say the labour was, really.

monitor the heart. Well it took them half an hour to work it. And then they lost the heartbeat. And I'm sure, because all the way through my antenatal they'd all said how strong her heartbeat was, and I'm sure it was their machine rather than her. They lost it, she was virtually out, but they had to whip her out quick. They sent Jeff out — why did they send him out? They lost the heart and then they all started looking at each other and pretending it was alright. Well really, quite honestly, I didn't think anything was wrong. They started fiddling with the knobs, but they were always fiddling with the knobs — that machine's terrible. I had no confidence in it.

They said oh it's a little girl — like in the films. They gave her to me: I felt bewildered. She was looking at me — I was looking at her. She looked very bewildered herself really.

I wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed the night at home and hadn't gone in. I wish my waters broke like everyone else's seemed to. That would have been quicker than lying in bed all that night with that pain.

I thought it was very unpleasant. No wonder women died in the Middle Ages. I'd have an epidural again... I mean it is a disgrace you know! They wouldn't cut off your leg and say sorry we don't have any anaesthetic in this hospital: you'll have to put up with it. I mean they wouldn't, would they? I think women ought to be told that it's painful. I suppose if I recall all those films of women in labour — which I didn't at the time recall until it happened to me — holding onto the bedstead and all this sort of thing — I suppose if I'd recalled that... I don't think about it much now, it's fading a bit. But the first two weeks I did, definitely. I remember telling a girl in the shop who hasn't had a baby yet and who asked me. And I told her: I said it's very painful. And she was really shocked. And I thought well I'm sorry you're shocked but I wish somebody had told me if I'd asked them, because I said it really is painful, it's terrible in fact. No wonder women die in it. She went: my God, really? What kills you — the sheer pain?

VERA ABBATT, 28, canteen worker. Labour 16 hours, epidural, forceps delivery.

Well, it was a Sunday, we were just sitting here and I had pains in my stomach.

MOTHER-IN-LAW: She always laid about, didn't do anything, just laid

said I'm alright, I'm alright. He said shall I make up a bed for you over there? She did lay on a bed. This was the day time.

VERA: No, it was night time, six o'clock.

MOTHER-IN-LAW: This went on all day, this palaver with her. About seven she goes upstairs and she tells him she's had a show. He called me upstairs and when I saw their bed, straight away I said phone for the ambulance, it had been there all day.

VERA: I lost it during the night, and I didn't realise it. And yet I went up and I went to the toilet and I had a show then and I called Frank and I said—because his cousin was running us up—I said you'd better go and get Dave, I think we have a bit of a problem here. Anyway I was taken to hospital. But when we got up there we didn't have any problem—they took me right into the labour ward. Then they took me into another ward and they gave me two sleeping tablets. Because apparently they thought I was going to go on till next morning. And just as she gave me the tablets she said she was going to test the contractions, and as soon as she put her hand on my tummy she said oh never mind the tablets. By this time I'd taken them. She said get her down to the delivery room. So I was in there about eleven o'clock and he was born at half past four.

I mean I was all that time in labour, all day, and I didn't know anything about it. I felt pains in me stomach but it didn't dawn on me that's what it was. I thought it was wind actually. That's what it felt like to me. I thought I was full of wind. . . . It was about an hour after we got to the hospital it started to get really bad. And then they gave me the epidural for the birth. So I felt nothing during the birth at all. In fact I slept during most of the delivery. It was terrific.

I had a forceps delivery. He was stuck in the neck of the womb, he got stuck coming round the corner. They told me that. And of course as soon as they told me they were going to have to do a forceps delivery I was up in arms again: what's wrong with him? She said there's nothing wrong with him, he's just stuck. It was a bit degrading. But I didn't feel it so it didn't really make much difference. I was alright until they put my feet up in those slings that they use. . . . it was a female doctor, which wasn't too bad.

I didn't even know he was out—he was crying his eyes out and I thought—there was another lady in the next room having a baby—and I thought it was hers. I didn't know he was out! She picked him

was over, that was it. I couldn't think of anything else.

JULIET MORLEY, 28, rebate officer. Labour 9½ hours:

I woke up at seven o'clock in the morning not feeling sure about it and I had him at half past four in the afternoon. I wasn't even sure I was in labour for the first four hours. I was awake at seven, and I had, you know, a few twinges of backache, and I was expecting to get something every half an hour; it wasn't a textbook labour at all. If I'd gone on what they told me I would have had him here, because I didn't have any of the things they tell you to wait for. In the afternoon I rang them because I was having sort of much stronger twinges round the back, then I started having some that came round the front, so I rang them up about twelve. No show—no waters breaking, and no regularity; don't come in. I rang them at two—I'd just had a very little bit of a show—oh don't come yet! I said I'm coming in. . . . My contractions had no regularity at all. I had one at the top of the stairs and one at the bottom sort of thing, so I suppose they were about every couple of minutes at the end. But none of this every half an hour building up to every ten minutes. . . . I mean labour was nothing like I expected.

When I got there the sister came into the admissions room and I was sort of leaning on the bed having a contraction, standing up, and she put me down and had a look and said you're nearly fully dilated, and got me whizzed along on a trolley at top speed. I've never known anything happen so fast. They said I was too late for an epidural. And virtually too late for pethidine. But I didn't want them anyway. I had a bit of gas and air to help me over that stage when they were wanting me to lie down. . . . Standing up and leaning on the wall I was perfectly alright. As long as I was sitting up I was alright. I sat up on the delivery bed for the last few really strong ones and I was perfectly alright. But when I had to lie down, that was useless—you couldn't concentrate. I didn't feel much pain really; with back rubbing it was quite alright.

About three thirty I just said I wanted to push and the pupil midwife said right, carry on. It wasn't nearly as strong as I'd been led to expect from all the books and from what people had told me. And also the pushing was quite different from what I'd expected. It just felt like passing an enormous motion—the pushing. I was expecting to

similar to the feeling you get during orgasm, that it's a sort of bearing down feeling similar to that. At the relaxation classes they tell you to push down from the top but the midwives tell you to push down into your bottom which is a very silly way of putting it. If they said what they meant you'd know what to do.

I had to have an episiotomy. I saw him waving this syringe around and I said what's that? Because they just do these things without telling you, you know. The pupil midwife I was quite happy with, she said I wouldn't have pethidine and I wouldn't have the epidural and she'd get me some gas and air in case I wanted it. So I wasn't worried about that. But I saw this syringe and I said what's that? And I'm sure they were just going to give me the local and the episiotomy without telling me. And he said what it was for and I said do I have to have it? And he said well, in case we have to cut you. And I said do you think you're going to have to? And he said yes. So I had it then. Because I've never had stitches or cuts or anything: I didn't know what it was going to be like. And then I heard the pupil say something that I didn't catch and then he said something – he said lengthen the episiotomy; it must have been something like the heart's going down which she said quietly, I think. Afterwards she said the baby's heart was going down and they had to get him out *very* quickly. And if they hadn't done that it would have had to have been forceps and I think it was because his head didn't engage and it had the extra distance to travel . . . and I think he must have just got tired because he's a big strong baby. I did feel it was rushed, I'd rather have done it without the episiotomy and I think I could have done it if I'd had more time to think about it and relax.

I opened my eyes just in time to see the head come out. That looked just like the pictures in the books actually. When he was sort of lying there somehow he looked exactly like the baby in a book. It was funny. They said it's a boy. I hadn't looked actually; I was sort of looking at the whole baby rather than the sex. I hadn't noticed it was a boy until they said. I kept on about holding him, so I got him. I think they got the placenta out first and then I held him.

I felt – you know – just, I don't know – over the world. I couldn't believe it. It was a feeling of exhilaration, that's the best description I think. The baby himself didn't really enter into it. I wasn't thinking of him as an individual. I think it wasn't till I got him in the ward that I

strongly an individual. . . . Having carried him for nine months as part of yourself you don't expect – I mean it's almost as if he could have been *any* baby.

ELIZABETH FARRELL, 28, publisher's assistant. Labour 3 hours.

It was unpleasant. I felt more pain than I've ever felt in my life before. I really know now that I was expecting it to be virtually painless; I think I was. And oh my goodness it wasn't.

Afterwards I thought about it a lot. I mean I remember thinking I wonder if I shall ever want another baby. I wrote it all down: here it is: 'It was like Richard or Edward II – I can't ever remember which it is – they wanted to kill him without it looking like murder, so they stuffed a red hot poker up his rectum and the screams could be heard all over Gloucestershire!'

It woke me up from a deep sleep – such a sudden, strong pain. Robert and I had just had an awful row, that was another thing; that was the only reason he stayed, I'm sure. I went to sleep in tears. We hadn't made it up and so when I woke up I had these great swollen eyes from crying. I woke up at 2 a.m. and she was here by five. I woke up with a stabbing pain as the waters broke and from then on the contractions were more or less continuous. I could hardly get dressed. In fact the way I woke up *shocked* me, I was suffering from shock after it and I didn't really know what to do in spite of all the preparation. So of course I mechanically thought I should have a bath. But I couldn't move. I was standing in a plastic bowl dribbling, so I woke Robert up and he said wake me up when it's all over, and I said no, you'll have to get up and put some newspaper on the floor from here to the bathroom. So he did that and I had a bath which was completely pointless, because I was still dribbling away. Got dressed and put on endless disposable nappies and sanitary towels and two pairs of knickers. And it came all the way through all these disposable nappies I had on to my dress. And Robert took me in and they examined me and I think it was two fingers dilated when they first examined me, and so they wheeled me straight into the delivery room.

My goodness, that was a struggle: when I said I don't want anything [i.e. no analgesia] the midwife, she got, well, not exasperated with me, but I could read what was going through her mind. She thought I was stupid. And I hate to inconvenience people and have

and I said no, I don't think I will. I suppose that must have been a gap between contractions: I definitely decided *no*. And then I mean I didn't get a chance to get into the breathing rhythm at all. It seemed to be meaningless – I didn't have enough time to think myself into it. The contractions weren't, the build up wasn't *gentle* enough, they were just too sudden. I mean I've never had a baby before so I don't know whether they were exceptionally strong and violent contractions.

Time meant nothing. It could have been one hour or twenty-four hours, I don't know. And then there was that awful stage when they were telling me not to push and I couldn't. You can't prevent yourself. One minute they're telling you that your uterus is an involuntary muscle and the next minute they're telling you not to push. I don't know whether you push with your uterus, I don't suppose you do. To me if the uterus is pushing, it's nature working properly. I don't know *how* you can damage your cervix. I wonder whether that's not a fashion as well.

I couldn't help it; I couldn't *believe* how strong they were. And well they'd given me that enema thing and I hadn't been to the lavatory – I hadn't had a chance. And that was another thing I now realise – that was sort of coming out along with everything else, which must have been awful for everyone else. I didn't feel embarrassed at the time – I couldn't think of anything else except the contractions! And I do like to be helpful and co-operative and do what they say and it really distressed me at the time that I couldn't prevent myself from pushing.

And during the transition stage they put me on my side and at the breathing classes for the transition stage I was told to pant and sit up and so that flummoxed me – I couldn't do the rhythm. And they kept telling me to breathe deeply, and we'd been told to pant, in stage D. And so that was awry. And then when they said I could push they rolled me over onto my back and sat me up and I had no desire whatsoever to push then, and anyway we'd been told to push down at the front and they said push down towards your bottom as though you've got a large motion. So there was something wrong there. I felt like going back to the lady at the breathing classes and saying so because her reasoning was that if you pushed as though you'd got a giant turd to get rid of that closed up your vagina. We tried it and felt it and were convinced that it did close up your vagina. I didn't push

it really was a huge cut, I'm certain. It goes all the way to my back passage and there's a little lump by my back passage . . . I do think they gave me much too big a cut, I mean I know she had a big head.

From the researcher's notes:

ELIZABETH: What's the time?

PUPIL MIDWIFE: I don't think you'll be long.

ROBERT TO ELIZABETH: Is it painful?

E: I can't describe it. . . . Can I have some water?

PMW: Can I listen to the baby, please?

E: How much longer till I can push?

PMW: I don't think you'll be very much longer now. Right, over on your back, let's see if I can see the baby's head.

E: No, no [she's in the middle of a contraction]. No, not yet . . . I'm sorry.

PMW: That's alright. You're doing very well.

E: Am I in the transition stage?

PMW: Yes, you are, that's why it's so difficult.

E TO R: I'd like you to stay, but if you don't feel you want to . . .

E TO PMW: Keep shouting at me, it helps me to remember what I'm supposed to be doing.

PMW: Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?

E: I don't mind.

PMW: Don't push.

E: You've no idea how hard it is, it just happens, I can't control it.

PMW: I just want to have a look, lift your leg up.

E: Am I making progress?

PMW: Yes, I think I'll get staff, I can just see a few strands of hair.

[Elizabeth is propped up ready for pushing.]

PMW: There's going to be a time when I tell you not to push, just to pant, alright?

STAFF MIDWIFE TO R: Are you going to stay?

R: Yes, alright.

SMW: Can you sign this form please?

PMW: Now, push down towards your back passage.

E: At the classes, they said push down towards your stomach.

SMW: No, that's wrong, you want to push down into your back passage, as if you're constipated and you're dying to go to the loo.

give some longer pushes, short ones are no good. . . . If you give us some nice long pushes, it'll be out in half the time. . . . That's it, a nice long push. Down to your bottom.

E: Is that right?

SMW: Yes, yes. Another deep breath . . . that was better.

E: I'm beginning to get the hang of it. Can you touch it yet? Is its head on the outside?

SMW: Yes, it's got lots of dark hair. . . . No, put your bottom on the bed, love. That's it, push. . . . We're just doing a little injection now, alright?

E: Oh I want to push.

SMW: Okay, push, put your bottom on the bed.

E: Are you going to cut me?

PMW: We're going to have to give you a little cut – you shouldn't feel it too much because we'll do it during a contraction and you've had an injection. [Episiotomy done.] Now push, push. . . . Keep your pushing up now, nice and long – with the next contraction the head'll be out.

E: Really?

SMW: Okay, stop pushing now. . . . Just a small push, a little one again. . . . I'm just feeling for the cord, right there's no cord. . . . there we are: the baby's head is out.

E: What do I do?

SMW: Push down.

PMW: It's a little girl.

E: Gosh.

PMW: [Looking at clock] Not bad: from two till five, just three hours in labour.

E: It's long enough. [Watching PMW and SMW handling baby.] What are you doing to my little girl? What are you doing to it? [Is handed baby.]

E: Oh Robert she's huge. . . . Do you want to hold her?

R: No, I don't think so.

E: Oh Robert, I'm sorry you haven't got a son. . . . [to PMW] You'd better wash my bosom [undoes delivery gown, puts baby to breast, baby very mucousy, won't suck].

PMW: Don't be disappointed, Mrs Farrell, if the baby doesn't suck – she will later.

Birth is a trauma in every sense of the word. Physical lacerations ensue, but the mind and the emotions are wounded as well by the immensity of the physical sensations felt and by their meaning: another human being. 'Shock', a word used by Elizabeth Farrell, appears over and over again.

I was in a state of shock. . . . time had stopped.

It is a state of shock. I was unaware – I mean I'd like to have another one, just to be aware of what's going on.

I woke up in the middle of the night and I couldn't believe that I'd actually delivered him. It was such a shock. . . .

He was so big . . . nine pounds six . . . I was absolutely shocked out of my mind.

I felt it was lovely holding her and everything but I didn't really feel anything . . . because I was shocked.

I felt depressed in hospital. It was partly shock really, and being away from home. . . .

Asking women to summarise their feelings about birth reduces these images to a standardised response. But it is useful to see how the individual fits into the general picture:

42 per cent of women said the birth was better than they expected.

47 per cent of women said the birth was worse than they expected.

49 per cent of women said they felt more pain than they expected.

34 per cent of women said they felt less pain than they expected.

Picking out the highlights and the moments of agony adds substance to this outline.

What were the best aspects of the labour and birth from your point of view? And the worst?

There weren't any best bits at all. It was just no fun. It was a right drag from start to finish: a smelly horrible experience in a smelly horrible room. (*Kate Prince*)

A nice feeling was him coming out. I took it that I'd passed the head and now it was the body twisting round. I thought: that's nice. The worst bit was all the time I was shivering and being sick. I was like jelly all the time. And me husband come in: he said what's the matter, try and relax – I couldn't, couldn't keep calm. I put it down really to me being nervous. (*Michelle Craige*)

just the pain of it all I suppose. The first hour before I had the epidural. (*Pauline Digory*)

The best bit was when he was born really. The worst bit was the bit after, just waiting to be stitched up. That was the most boring. (*June Hatchard*)

When she was born and when they cut me. (*Ellen George*)

There were no best bits. That catheter was horrible. I think I could feel it. She said you won't feel it, but I'm sure I could feel something, and then the bloke coming round to stitch me up and *that's* embarrassing. That's more embarrassing than having a baby as well. (*Anne Bloomfield*)

Whereas an episiotomy is rarely experienced as pain at the time (the perineum is anaesthetised both naturally and by the injection of a pain-killing agent) the ritual of stitching can be most unpleasant. Like a big baby, a lot of stitches become a hook to hang the account of birth on: look at the enormity of what I have suffered. (It is pedastrian to have had only some stitches, but no stitches at all warrant a different kind of pride.) But it isn't only the symbolic importance or the pain: the act of stitching brings the doctor into the closest confrontation yet with the mother's perineum. Inches apart, he sears in silence, regretting his last sleep or pondering on the next day's work, like the lady who knitted through the French Revolution.

I: Stitches, how many did you have?

MANDY GREEN: About half a million. I don't think they counted after the first, but it was a lot. It seemed like an endless time. The doctor passed me over to his second because he had to go somewhere else for an interview, but he said you finish off, I've done this and that and he told the other doctor, a trainee, where he had got up to more or less. And this doctor seemed to be stitching for ages and I asked him, no I think I cried then, I had just about passed out by then, and I couldn't feel my legs because they were still strung up, oh it was terrible, and he said it's alright, I'm on my last inch, and I thought Christ almighty if he's on his last inch, how many inches has he done?

SHARON WARRINGTON:

They helped him put on his sterile gown and then they put them up. And that to me, when they take that bottom piece away and your legs are up in the air, and the doctor sits there, is more embarrassing than anything I can remember. I mean he is about that much *over* from

I: Did you feel that at the time?

SHARON: Yes, and he knew it.

I: Did he, what did he say?

SHARON: He just kept singing. I started counting and because I could feel them, the nurse was holding my hand and I'd look at her and go oh, and she'd look at him and he'd go like this [gestures], and I'd think oh my God, it seemed to go on for hours.

The details of what happened coalesce into a memory. Part of this memory is weighing images versus reality.

In general, was having the baby anything like you expected it to be?

No. I mean yes. No, it wasn't really. I'd never imagined it like that. You read things about what it's going to be like but words can't convey what birth is like; it's just something completely different from anything you've ever done before. (*Jo Ingram*)

Well, I knew it was going to be pretty painful, but in fact I think it was worse than I thought it was going to be, I don't think that I've experienced anything quite like it. It was quite incredible. (*Clare Dawson*)

It wasn't as easy as I thought. It was tougher on you, you had a rough time. But it wasn't bad or anything. Nothing to put you off . . . it was longer, it was more tiring than I'd expected, and there was more pain than I thought . . . and there were so many things that you don't even think about that they do to you, like examinations and everything. You don't even think of them. You just think you go in, you lie down, you have your labour pains every now and then and out it comes. And that's it. But there's a lot more to it. Breaking the waters and all this, and all the monitors they stick on you and all the drips and everything. You know I didn't even know you had a drip. . . . (*Felicity Chambers*)

No. I don't know – quicker. I don't know, you can't *imagine* having a baby. My friends say to me – a lot of my friends are still single and they all come round to see her and they all think she's beautiful and that. . . . And they come round and they say what's it like, having a baby? And I say you can't explain it. You can't, can you? I just said it's foul. (*Anne Bloomfield*)

friend, she has a child, two years old. And she had a forceps delivery. It was very painful, and she had about a thirty-hour labour. She said: Yeah, you have a natural childbirth – you have it once, and you'll see, ha ha. (*Louise Thompson*)

It was what I expected really, I mean it was what I'd been waiting for, for nine months. Because when you see this baby, if you were cut all over you wouldn't think about it. (*Dawn O'Hara*)

Well I thought it'd be worse. Having the epidural as well I didn't feel a lot. Well, I didn't feel anything really. So I don't really know what the real thing's like. (*Janette Watson*)

AFTER BIRTH

One aspect of birth that is often omitted from antenatal education is the placenta: the organ that nourishes the baby in the womb and grows to about a sixth of the baby's weight. (Some women go into labour ignorant of its existence.) Many of the world's cultures treat the placenta with special care, even regarding it as the baby's twin, but in our industrialised society the attitude is strictly clinical. Under half the sample mothers saw their placentas.

CHRISTINA LYNCH:

I saw it afterwards in a plastic bag. It was quite revolting. I said what on earth are you going to do with that? She said we're going to put it in the fridge for a little while. I thought what on earth for? She said to test it, test the blood, make sure that it's all there. It did look funny: a mass of red and this knotted cord.

MARY ROSEN:

My husband was absolutely fascinated by the afterbirth. He couldn't believe it. He really sat up when he saw that. It was absolutely enormous. He tells people – you know they put it in a bowl, a kidney shaped bowl – he tells people the way it flopped out because it was so huge. And he tells people more in detail about that than about the baby!

DERDRE JAMES:

It didn't hit me straight away what it was. It was on the side in a

Birth is evaluated, can only be evaluated, in the light of images absorbed beforehand. In this sense, expecting the worst is the best guarantee of a positive experience. And of course the opposite is true.

KATE PRINCE:

I'm disillusioned about it being so wonderful to give birth, and I'd be breathing my way through it. It just didn't work for me at all. And I thought I was quite tough, could put up with pain, and so on. That's obviously not true, I learnt quite a lot about myself. I'm a coward – no pain threshold at all when it really comes to pain. I thought the pain was excruciating. Don't you think? What did you think about it? I really thought this is absolutely awful. I was trying to think how to describe it, and I think it's like when somebody twists your arm up your back – have you ever had that done to you? Such agony. It's like having that done time and time again. But all over me. There's no way you can get out of it.

I think I had all these illusions because all these friends of mine had such an easy time. . . . I thought I don't want to hear people like my mother who said it's like nothing on earth. If people had said it's either going to kill you or it's not and you won't know till it happens. . . .

Now I just recount it, I say that it was awful and that I'm disillusioned, but then – a couple of days afterwards – I felt I'd been tricked, actually tricked, by the health visitor, by the books I'd read – by the Gordon Bourne book, because he says that the word 'pain' should not be applied to labour contractions. And somebody had said well it's not like it is in the films or something. And I thought well it's exactly like 'Come with the Wind' – it's exactly like those old movies when they're all writhing about in agony, that's exactly what I was doing.

The whole mental thing, the whole physical bit: the lot in fact has been completely different. They all lied to me! I mean all these myths that it's like shelling peas – our family's never had any difficulty, that sort of thing has been shattered. Our family has had difficulty, even if I'm the only one. These books, they should say: right girls, it can either go well or badly.

All that sort of silly nonsense, rubbish, forget it. Don't write things like that to people because it did a power of bad for me. Everybody said you'll forget terribly quickly what it's like, in a week's time you'll say oh it was okay. That's supposed to be the thing about childbirth. But

Do women forget the pain of childbirth? That is one of the legends, passed down from mother to daughter. But this is the fate of women in our culture: they are imprisoned, labelled, disposed of within stereotypes, and this is how the labour of women in childbirth is disposed of – the suffering, for suffering it must be, is forgotten:

KATE PRINCE, four months later:

I think that it isn't a question of women forgetting about the pain of having a baby. I think that you forget about the actual sensation of any pain. You can't describe pain because I mean if I pinch myself now, I know it bloody hurts. But then I've forgotten about it; that's all there is to it.

How much do you think about the actual labour and delivery now? [five weeks afterwards]

LOUISE THOMPSON:

Not much. Afterwards I discussed it with this friend, the pregnant one. I don't re-live it; maybe if it's a bad experience you do.

JANET STREETER:

I do think about it. I often do. I thought one would forget about it. But I often find myself – in fact I dreamt about it the night before last. Really horrible, worse than it was: I kept re-running it. I sit in the bath; I always think in the bath, and I find myself thinking about it without meaning to. I just find myself going through it again.

JOSÉ BRYCE:

I did have nightmares afterwards about having her, about the forceps. I had quite a few nightmares, horrible dreams about these forceps. I kept thinking. I don't know, it was just horrible, you know: a jumbled nightmare, and always at the end a baby was dead or something was wrong with her. Never anything clear-cut. Just a horrible bit about the forceps. I just thought you'd be pushing away and it would just sort of lever it out and you wouldn't feel it. But it felt like a huge suction – as though everything had come out: as though I was all empty. Like everything had come out with it. I certainly think my brain was born at the same time. I said to Nick for days I was like a lunatic.

was coming to wash me down. I remember thinking gosh I don't want to go through this again in a hurry. But now, six weeks later, I look back on it with interest. You forget the unpleasant bits: well, you don't forget them, but I think the thrill of giving birth to a baby and everything doesn't strike you at the time, but now it does.

GILLIAN HARTLEY:

I try to push the birth out of my mind. It's over and it's done with, and I don't think it's the be all and end all of . . . I mean he's growing now and he's smiling and he's doing things – the fact that he was born, I mean he obviously *was*, but I'm not going to hold it against him that he tore me or anything like that: that would be ridiculous. No, the birth wasn't this great emotional experience.

SARAH MOORE:

When I think about it I think about them actually giving the baby to me and then Keith nursing it. . . . But as far as thinking about the pain, no I don't: I've forgotten the pain. I look back on it with – nostalgia is not the word, but I feel quite sentimental about the birth. The scenes that I remember are pleasant scenes.

JANETTE WATSON:

No, I don't think about it at all really. Well, I was smiling all day long so it couldn't have been bad, really. I kept myself cheerful, it'd be silly sitting there crying your eyes out.

SANDY WRIGHT:

No, not now. I thought about it in respect of – I thought about having the epidural rather than the actual labour. I thought, should I have persevered, and so on. I think that was almost slight guilt feelings because I'd promised myself I wasn't going to need it, I wasn't going to have it, and then I did have it.

CLARE DAWSON:

Suddenly to see her there and to see her head coming screaming out, you know it was super. . . . In a way I wish I could do it again. If I could sort of watch it again, or do it again, and really take notice of what – remember it detail by detail. It fades away, you don't quite remember all you would want to remember.

As these extracts suggest, there may be many reasons why a woman re-lives the

have happened. A bad experience can be received time and time again in a search for meaning: why did it happen; what went wrong? Regret and guilt are both spurs to thought; a birth marred by dissatisfaction seems to be an enduring blow to a woman's self-esteem.

But, finally, the most pernicious memory a mother may be left with is that she simply was not there: she missed the experience, and was a mere spectator during one of the most important dramas of her life. This feeling is only present when drugs and technology intervene in the relationship between the mother and her experience of birth. Epidurals act by removing sensation from the waist down; pethidine can blur the mind so that a mental absence counteracts the physical presence. Any kind of medical 'assistance' (induction or acceleration of labour, forceps or ventouse delivery) runs the risk of turning the mother into passive object rather than active subject.

KATE PRINCE, epidural, pethidine, forceps delivery:

When I think about it now, it wasn't me having the baby. I was looking at it all through – in a daze almost. I was so tired and in such pain, just not with it at all. In a perverse kind of way I'm looking forward to the next experience because I think I missed out a lot last time. I'd like to take more part in it next time.

MANDY GREEN, epidural, pethidine, forceps delivery:

I didn't really feel anything very much at all. When I became a bit more conscious it was an experience, but I wish I'd had more of that experience. I was never sufficiently aware of myself, my surroundings or anything right from the beginning because I was stupid with the pethidine, absolutely knocked out.

There was nothing best about the birth – you couldn't sort of pat yourself on the back and say haven't I done well because you haven't really . . . there was no feeling, there was just I think nothing really. Just something I had to go through and I went through and that was it. If I'd been more compos mentis, yes I would have liked to have seen the whole thing and be aware of what was happening . . . I would have kept my eyes peeled. I think it would have been very interesting. *I wish I had been there to see it all.*

CHAPTER 6

Mother and Baby

I couldn't believe it was over, it took so long to really click that he had been born . . . I had to keep reminding myself that I had given birth.

Depression, mood changes or fits of crying occur for no reason. Everything is going well, but suddenly the patient bursts into a sobbing fit, and after the episode feels better. She knows that she is being silly . . .

In a sense, a woman's relationship with her baby begins not only before birth but before conception; it has roots in her own babyhood, in the way she herself was 'mothered'. Also important are the messages sent and received throughout childhood and adolescence that, decoded, read: women need babies, babies need mothers. Myth, fantasy and the economics of reproduction under capitalism are all jumbled up, but the effect is powerful. Most women by the time they achieve motherhood have, from these various sources, some idea about how mothers do (or should) feel about their babies.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Bloody, messy, screaming, demanding, the emergence of the baby throws cold water on old ideas. A mother's first opportunity to confront the reality of the baby occurs as he or she comes out of the vagina.

Did you see the baby being born?

CLARE DAWSON: Mary, 6lbs 12ozs

There was a head there one minute and the next minute – one minute