

Alma James Wisner's Birth Story by Sean Wisner

The room is dark and the midwife and I stand in the corner watching Clara grunt and strain on the other side of the room. She is squatting and breathing and appears to be in a deep trance. "Let her do her thing," the midwife says to me. Moments later a baby pops out onto the floor. Her skin is blue and she lays there on the floor several feet away from Clara. We pick her up and hold her, and slowly the blue fades away and her skin takes on a healthy flesh color.

I wake up at 4:30 am and Clara is sitting up next to me in bed on her phone. "I think my water broke," she says. She wasn't sure. It wasn't much but she woke up feeling like she either wet the bed or her water had broken. She'd been up googling what it meant. I took out my phone and googled it as well. It seemed pretty clear that it probably had, but also wasn't an urgent situation, so we decided to wait until 7:30 to call the midwife. I stay up with her for a bit and then manage to go back to sleep for a while, thinking I might need it for the day that lies ahead.

I wake up again at 7:30 to Clara dialing Kayla (our midwife). Clara explains what's been happening and Kayla responds, "Yea, that sounds like a pretty convincing water-breaking story. Sounds like you're going to have a baby today. Try to get some more sleep and eat some food and call me back around 11:30, unless you need to call earlier. Happy Birthday!"

I look at my phone and see a couple emails from our realtor. My brother had put in an offer the day before on a house just up the road from us yesterday, and it's been accepted. They'll be moving from Colorado to just up the road from us in a matter of weeks. It's going to be a big day. I call my brother, then my Dad. My Mom is sleeping, so we Facetime with her later. Clara calls her family.

Clara and I both are still in a state of denial. It's 2 and a half weeks before the due date, and while we are about as prepared as anyone can be, neither of us expected her to come so soon. There's still a lack of urgency. Kayla asked us to call her back in four hours. We had read and heard plenty about how long labor is and to try to stay home for as much of it as possible. Clara has barely noticed a contraction.

I volunteer to start getting things ready. We had planned on doing more preparation, preparing more food, writing a birth plan, reviewing our books and other materials. But generally everything was ready: lists were made, important items were in our possession, car seat was installed. I ask Clara what she wants to eat and she begrudgingly agrees to eat a waffle. I make us waffles as I start to pack a cooler and bags for the birth center and our air bnb afterwards. The birth center is an hour away in Bozeman and we'll have to stay in town for a 24 and 72-hour checkup.

Around 10:30 Clara says in the middle of a contraction, "I think if this gets any worse, the car ride is going to suck". The metric the midwife gave us for coming in was when the contractions get to the point where if they get any worse the car ride is really going to suck. I suggest either

going in now or calling Kayla sooner. The contraction passes and we wait until a little after 11:00 to call. We call Kayla and give her an update. A contraction comes and goes while we are on the phone. Clara is silent through it, bending over the bed and breathing. Kayla advises us to try to eat as much as possible and call her back afterwards and see how Clara is feeling.

I talk her into macaroni and cheese and go make her a bowl as I start to pack the car, knowing it's about time to leave. I bring a bowl up to the room to give her. She's in the bathroom, coping with her waves. There doesn't seem to be nearly enough break to have any chance of getting her to eat. So I shift gears and start telling her we need to get in the car the next break she gets. It takes a while, but eventually we get downstairs into the car. Clara puts the front seat down and gets in on all fours with her head toward the back seat, audibly coping with her waves. Ooli (our dog) gives us a very troubled look as we get in the car and drive away at 11:50 am.

A few minutes into the drive, I grab Clara's phone to call Kayla and let her know "it was apparent we needed to leave" and that we would be there in 45-50 minutes. I call Whitney (our doula) and tell her the same. She suggests letting Clara in the back seat to move around more comfortably. A few minutes later Clara asks me to pull over. She gets out of the car and throws up on the side of the county road. A white pickup truck passes. She gets in the back seat on all fours and resumes some of her breathing, moaning and grunting. I start driving again and get stuck behind the white pickup. He's going too slow, so I pass him. A couple minutes later Clara needs to stop again. I pull over and she throws up on the side of the road. The white truck passes again.

We get back in the car and get on the interstate. Clara is on all fours in the backseat alternating rapidly between different coping mechanisms: grunting, horse lips, cussing loudly. I'm passing semis, trying not to go too fast around corners, but trying to get there ASAP. There doesn't seem to be much rest between waves. Twenty seconds of rest are followed by another 30 seconds of coping noises, and back and forth through the first forty minutes of the one-hour drive.

Twenty minutes from the birth center I give her an update, "20 minutes away, Bear, you're doing awesome". I've been trying to reassure or cheer her on throughout the drive, unsure of what to say, what is going on, or how to convey any real confidence. She sits up a little and gasps "Oh shit!". The kind of "Oh shit" you might say if you start to crap your pants on the way to the bathroom. "15 minutes, we're almost there," I say. She's lost her robe by now and is half naked on all fours cursing as I pass more cars on the interstate on the way into Bozeman.

We pull into the parking lot of the birth center. Clara stumbles in ahead of me and back towards the birthing room. Kayla comes out with a smile on her face, "you made it in." Clara walks right by her, maybe muttering something I didn't hear. "It was a tough drive," I tell Kayla, not knowing what else to say. Clara goes in and bends over in front of the toilet. Kayla runs to get gloves, now with a more serious facial expression, and takes a look. "Oooh. This is going to be interesting," she says before going to her cell phone to call someone in.

She starts a tub and starts preparing the room, as I clumsily shift back and forth between trying to comfort Clara and trying to bring in and unpack the bags of totally irrelevant birthing amenities (speaker, essential oil diffuser, homeopathic remedies) we had packed to have during the birth. Clara gets in the tub and Kayla starts giving her instructions, breathing, visualizations, etc. I try to take cues from her, put pressure on her lower back, hold her hand through waves.

Moments later Clara is reclined in the tub. Though we've only been there for 15 minutes, I've managed to deduce that the baby is at the door, ready to come any moment. Kayla gives me a quick rundown of how to "help" catch. There is one wave, one push. Kayla comments on the head of dark hair. Clara remembers our joke that Alma was going to come out Mexican, laughs and repeats it to me. A second push, and the head comes out. I ready my hands around her head. Kayla coaches her into her third push, and as Clara's yell gets more high pitched than it had been, Kayla helps me grab little Alma as she comes out, spinning her around and passing her to Clara. Clara looks at her and looks at us with the widest eyes and mouth. A look of overwhelming joy, shock and relief. Clara holds Alma on her chest and starts crying. I start crying. Laughing and crying.

I run out to the car to get my phone and take a picture. When I leave the room I run into Whitney. She had just arrived and waited outside as she could hear what was going on when she got there and didn't want to interrupt. I give her the biggest hug I think I've ever given anyone. I was overflowing with joy. She said she had a camera, so I forgot about the phone and went back inside. I went back by Clara's side, and sat with her as they got acclimated and checked some vitals. Alma's skin looked a dark purple and she was covered in vernix. Moments later, I'm cutting the umbilical cord. They pass Alma to me for some skin to skin contact. I sit on the bed with her in my arms and look down at her as her skin slowly turns from the dark purple to a healthy flesh color.

