

The Birth

by Denise Irby

Denise wrote this story at a time when almost all of the girls who attended her workshop each week were incarcerated mothers like herself. During her incarceration, the story was shared among juvenile justice reform advocates, first in Harlem at a reading organized by New York State's Coalition for Women Prisoners, and later at the 14th Annual Conference: Prepared and Proactive—Laws, Policies and Practices in Youth Violence and Gang Prevention, which took place on November 17, 2011 at Hofstra University. Denise grew up in Manhasset, NY and currently resides in West Hempstead, where she is now raising her daughter. She enjoys reading and writing and playing sports. Her goals for life are to raise her daughter, giving her the life she never had, and going back to school to become the veterinarian she's always wanted to be. Poignantly, she illuminates the conditions of incarcerated teens forced to give birth in conditions that most of us cannot even imagine.



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"What time is it?"

"6:35"

"What time is it?"

"6:40."

"What time is it?"

"6:45."

It's Thursday, June 9, 2011. Here I am at Nassau County Correctional Facility, nine months pregnant, 2 cm dilated and four days away from my due date.

"Why do you keep asking the time?" Kera asks me.

"Because I think I'm having contractions."

"What do you mean you THINK?!" She says with emphasis on the "think."

"I'm feeling pressure and tightness, it goes away and then comes back, I'm tryna time it."

"Well you keep asking the time every 5 minutes, yes its contractions."

"Oh," I say.

Next thing I know the whole dorm starts going crazy.

"She's going into labor! The baby's coming. Officer! Officer! It's time!" the inmates are screaming.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," I say nonchalantly as if nothing's going on.

"No, no, no, you have to sit; you're not suppose to use the bathroom."

"I gotta get in the shower," I say heading for my cell.

"No, you have to sit."

"Well I gotta get my shirt and ID," I say getting up from the chair.

"No, I will get it," Mrs. Pat says.

"Can you grab me a bag of chips while you're at it?"

"No! You can't eat anything."

Great! I think to myself. I have to pee, I'm hungry as hell, I want to shower, and apparently I'm not allowed to do anything but sit and wait, wait and sit.

"I'ma call your mom and Justin and let them know you're going into labor."

Unfortunately, neither of them will be allowed to see me or be in the delivery room for the birth. In fact, I won't be allowed to contact anyone till after the baby is born.

"Irby, don't have the baby yet, medical is on the way," the officer says over the loud speaker. The entire dorm starts laughing.

"The baby gonna be here before medical," Mrs. Pat jokes. "Fuck a bullshit medical. I need an ambulance," I say. 15 minutes passes by before medical comes running into the dorm, asking stupid questions such as "What's going on, how are you feeling, and are you okay?" I'm wanting to slap the living shit outta them.

I remain calm, answering "I'm going into labor, and yes, I'm okay."

Duh is the only thing I can think.

After repeatedly telling the nurses that the contractions are five minutes apart and having my vitals taken, I am wheeled down to medical. There I am faced with the stupidest questions I have ever been asked.

"How far along are you?"

It takes all my might not to yell back, "Obviously if I'm going into labor I'm full term!"

I just simply say, "I'm nine months, I'm due June 13th." "Oh my God! Are you sure you're that far along?" Obviously, you dumb ass, I think to myself. This new medical shit is pathetic.



I didn't get to the hospital until after eight dealing with these simple motherfuckers. By then my contractions were three minutes apart. After being rushed through the hospital hallways, handcuffed, escorted by two officers and the public looking on, I was hooked up to some machine that monitored my contractions as well as the baby's heartbeat. I was bum-rushed with more questions and papers needing my signature.

After answering the questions, signing the papers, and two hours later the doctor approaches me.

"Ms. Irby we are gonna need you to walk around for a while to induce your labor."

"Um, okay," I reply. At the moment I feel something wet.

"Um, excuse me," I say. "I'm leaking and I don't know what it is."

The doctor comes over to me, sticks two fingers inside, then says to the nurse, "Her membrane has been ruptured. She's about 30% . . . wait . . . yea, 30 over 100." She pulls out and I see the blood-covered glove.

"What does that mean?" I ask nervously, scared to hear the answer.

"It means that your water broke and you're about 3 cm dilated." "What about the blood, is that normal?" I ask immediately.

"Yes, everything is just fine," she assures me. "I guess you really didn't want to walk!" she says jokingly.

I laugh. Truth is she was right. I wasn't looking forward to walking around the maternity ward handcuffed and shackled, I guess Kylie wasn't either. They move me to my own room where they continued to monitor me.

"Would you like an epidural?" the nurse asks.

"No, not right now. I'm not feeling any pain," I say with my eyes glued to the TV. I was watching the Heat vs. Mavericks finals game four, of course going for Miami. In the middle of the third quarter, with Miami in the lead, it hit me. The excruciating pain was un- bearable.

"Oh nurse, I would like the epidural now," I say, holding onto the bedrail, ready to tear it off.

"She's 50 over 100," the doctor says sticking her fingers inside me.

After another 20 minutes and four pain-filled contractions, I finally get the epidural. I slowly start to nod off, only to be awakened by loud beeping noises. Nurses start running into the room, checking the monitor. I'm startled.

"What's going on?" I ask.

“The baby’s heart rate is dropping.”

Now I’m intent. Looking at the monitor I see the numbers slowly dropping down from 100 to 90 to 80.

“Lay on your right side,” the nurses tell me, so I comply.’

“Switch to your left,” she says again, so I do so,

“Is she okay?”

“Yes,” she replies, as she watches the numbers on the monitor start to go back up. I drift off to sleep, only to be awakened by loud beeping noises. I’m alert, immediately fearing for my baby girl. The nurses come pouring back into the room. I see the numbers on the screen dropping again.

“Is she OK?” I ask nervously.

The doctor sticks her fingers inside, wiggles them and then tells me to lay on my left side. The numbers slowly start to increase again. The nurses leave and I’m off to sleep, only to be awakened by the loud beeping noises once again. The nurses return.

“It’s happening again?” I say to the nurse.

“Yes,” she says back to me.

“That’s bad, isn’t it?” I say commenting and asking at the same time.

“It’s not healthy for the baby,” she says. “This is the third time this has happened, a baby’s heart rate isn’t supposed to drop no lower than 100. It could be very critical for the baby if it does.”

I look at the monitor—it displays 76. I start to panic.

“We have one more option, but if this happens again we would have to prepare you for a C-section,” she tells me, and then tells another nurse to please bring her amniotic fluid. At that point I start to beg God and my baby girl.

“What is that for?” I ask curiously.

“It’s amniotic fluids. It’s gonna help the baby feel more comfortable being that there’s no more fluid inside you. She’s being squished by the contracting muscles, which is causing her a little stress . . . this should help.”

“Is that why her heart rate keeps dropping?” I ask.

“Yes, that, and mostly because she won’t move, she’s very lazy, it seems as if she’s going to sleep.”

“I see you’re taking after your momma already,” I say to my stomach.

I laugh, so does the officer. The officer. I almost forgot she was here. A silence comes over me. I closed my eyes and lay quietly in the bed, as if I was sleeping, but I wasn’t. All I could think about was how my boyfriend wasn’t here. I won’t be holding his hand during the delivery. He won’t be here for

the birth of our princess, his first child—no cutting the umbilical cord, no holding her. How could I hurt him this way? Because of me he couldn't take part in the birth of his first child, because of me he couldn't cut the umbilical cord of his baby girl, because of me he couldn't hold her, he couldn't be there the way he wanted to, everything he was looking forward to doing he couldn't, because of me. It was my fault. I felt like shit. It wasn't fair to him, he didn't have a say in it. I felt like dying.

The doctor walks in and snaps me outta my thoughts.

"Push" she says. I give it my all. "Push" she says. I go at it again.

"You have to push!" she says again. "I am."

"No you're not," she says.

"I'm not? I thought I was."

We all laugh as I try again.

"There you go," she says, "now you're pushing."

They start to push me to the delivery room with the officer following.

I push. She counts to ten. I stop.

"She's coming!" I hear her yell, "keep pushing." I do. She counts to ten. I stop.

“Ok, one more time.”

I push. Out comes the baby.

“6:43 A.M., it’s a girl,” the doctor announces. I hear her cry. My eyes tear up.

“You did a good job, she’s beautiful,” I hear a voice say. I look up and all I see is blue and gray. It’s the officer.

“Thanks,” I say softly, wishing to myself that it was Justin’s voice I was hearing.



I hold her for the first time, my child, my baby girl, my daughter and then it hits me; I’m a mother now. I glance down at her, “Kylie Nicole-Lynn Thurmond,” I whisper to her. She smiles. I thank God for such a beautiful gift. They take me back to my room, shortly after Kylie returns. I hold her. I feed her. I burp her. I can’t put her down or take my eyes off her. I’m amazed by her beauty. She’s precious. Delicate like a flower or an angel. My flower. My angel.

I whisper sweet nothings in her ear. “Mommy loves you, your Daddy loves you, sorry Daddy couldn’t be here; you’re so beautiful, so precious.”

I see her smile, I smile. She opens her eyes, it’s like I’m staring back at my own. She’s so innocent.

Her father arrives, but he's not allowed to see me. Being that I'm still in the custody of the jail, he must follow the jail's visiting hours and has to check in with the jail first. He spends time at the nursery with Kylie and tells me he will be back later because he left his ID at home, rushing out the door to get to the hospital. The officers tell him the last visit is at 7 P.M.

My parents make it to the hospital around 6:30.

"Whose little Chinese baby is that?" my mom jokes immediately taking the baby out of my arms.

"You sure you wasn't with a Chinese man?" my dad continues.

"I'm sure," I say laughing.

I look at my parents taking turns kissing and holding their grandchild. For my dad it's his fifth, for my mom, her first. I can see the excitement in her eyes. Kylie is quiet. They stay for an hour and then leave.

My boyfriend comes back—it's ten after seven. He tells me that he can't stay.

"Why?" I ask him.

"They say I got back too late."

"What time did you get here?"

"Five to seven, but they said I had to be here before 6:45 to make the last visit." He kisses me and then Kylie.

"I love you both," he says and then disappears.

I call him later and he tells me that he will visit me on Monday since there's no visits for the jail on weekends, but he is definitely coming to see his daughter first thing tomorrow.

We sit on the phone for hours.

"I can't wait to have both of my girls at home and in my arms."

"I know . . . I can't either."

"Let me speak to the babz."

I put the phone to her ear. I think back to how he used to talk to my stomach, and how I used to put the phone to my stomach so he could talk to her when we was apart. I can't wait until all three of us is together as a family.



I continued to talk to Justin, watch TV, feed, change, and hold Kylie. The next three days were the exact same.



Sunday comes around, and now I must do the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Today is the day that me and Kylie have to go our separate ways.

“Normally we discharge at 9 A.M., but because of your circumstances you will be discharged at a later time,” the nurse informs me. I’m thankful for the extra hours. I spend the whole day apologizing to her.

“I’m sorry, Babz. Mommy loves you. You mean the world to me. You’re my everything. Don’t you ever forget that, don’t forget about me,” I say repeatedly into her ear.

For the remainder of the day I talk on the phone with Justin, watching Kylie. Watching her smile, watching her open her eyes, watching her sleep. She looks like him. Cheeks, nose and ears— they’re all his.

“You’re my heart,” I say to her. The time is drawing near and reality is starting to hit me. It’s 6 P.M. I call Justin crying.

“Mama, what’s wrong?”

“It’s almost time.”

“Don’t worry, baby. Everything is okay. She’s gonna be fine. Just try to stay strong for her.”

“I’m trying but I can’t, I need you, Daddy.”

“Babe, just stay calm. Talk to me.”

We continue to talk until 6:45.

“Babe, I gotta go now.”

“No, please don’t hang up!” I beg him

"I have to so I can meet your mom at her house when she gets back with Babz."

"Okay," I sniffle. Two minutes later the nurse comes into the room.

"I have to get the baby ready to go. Your mother is here," she says. I look at the clock. It's 6:50. I have ten minutes. It's just like my mother to be early. The tears start to fall from my eyes and onto Kylie as I say my final goodbyes. When she takes Kylie from my arms I break down. My tears fall down like rain. There's nothing in the world that's more painful than a child being taken from its mother's arms. That's just another dagger in my heart. I'm crying uncontrollably. After about ten minutes of crying nonstop the officer walks in.

"I'ma allow your mother to come in, two minutes and no touching." I don't respond, just keep crying.

"Niocy . . ." I hear a shaky voice say my name. I turn around to see my mother. She's crying too. My tears fall even harder.

"Don't worry, honey, you know she's in good hands," I hear her say.

"I know but it's too hard, I don't wanna let her go." I cry back. I think to myself if this is how my mother felt when she had to give me up. I wonder if this reminds her of that day. I look at her; I can tell in her eyes that it does.

"Thank you," I say.

"Anytime," she replies.

I never imagined I would be like my mother. I always told myself I never would. First, my mother having to give me up and go to a drug program, and then me having to give my daughter up to return to jail.

"I'm a bad mother," I whisper to myself and continue to cry.