“August 24th, 2010”

Written by Mama Irene, on August 31st, 2010

At this very moment, a week ago, active labor started. Nine days after his due date, on the hottest day of the summer thus far, our son decided to make his long-awaited entrance into the world. A series of thunderstorms knocked power out on the 23rd, very rare around here, so we were extra hot and grumpy and stressed as Monday night wore on. We’d gone to a friend’s place nearby to sleep (the AC-less heat in our place was too much) and woke up at 7:30 a.m. after a restless night, still contraction-less. Morgan had cramping feelings deep in her gut, but these weren’t new, so she didn’t know whether to take them as true labor signs or not. We drove home to prep for our ultrasound appointment, which our midwife had had us make in case there was a fluid issue or positional problem. It was sunny and humid already; the heat index was supposed to hit 109 degrees.

About 8:15 a.m., Morgan sat down and said, “I think I’m having contractions.” The menstrual-esque cramps she’d been having suddenly had a steady pattern. I timed them and they were between 5 and 8 minutes apart. We were nervous, excited, pacing. Called the midwife and Amanda, our doula, both of whom said to continue timing, to alternate rest with activity, and to check back in later. All of our birth reading/classes had told us that early labor would last quite a while, so we didn’t have any plans to jump in the car soon. Instead, we had breakfast, watched a movie, and when contractions slowed and lessened in intensity, decided to take a walk. I drove us to a shady, tree-lined neighborhood just south; we strolled slowly beneath the live oak trees, both coated in sweat. I was checking in with Amanda, who was encouraging. At about 1:30 p.m., Morgan put a hand on my arm to stop me. “I can’t walk,” she said, and we rocked together on the street, shifting our weight from side to side until the contraction was up. We walked another couple of blocks like that, and it was obvious to me that her contractions had gone up several notches. She was quiet, focused, and dying to get back in the car.

Back at home, she ate a sandwich and laid down in the bedroom, wanting to see if the contractions would lessen with rest. I went to get the stopwatch; when I got back into the room, she was curled up on her side, and she grabbed my hand. “Don’t leave,” she said, and she put her other hand over her face. The energy had changed completely. These were hard work. She was struggling to stay on top of them. She seemed a little scared. My mom came in to rub her back; I called our doula and asked her to please, come over. My heart was in my mouth, pounding, and I was telling myself: “be calm, be strong for her.” I was startled to discover that the contractions were a minute long and only a minute or so apart. When I told our midwife this, she said, “what are you waiting for? Get down here!” Morgan was still able to walk around normally between contractions, so she got some water, Mom and I loaded the car, and our doula arrived in time to coach Morgan with moaning techniques as quiet deep breathing was no longer helping. I was hesitant to approach her as Amanda pressed into her hips and talked her through breathing – but as soon as we got in the car, Morgan reached out and seized my free hand, and I knew from then on I wouldn’t step an inch away from her.

We hit the road at 3 p.m., which meant we barely beat rush hour. The route from our apartment to the birth center is notorious for bad traffic, so I was relieved that we’d missed it; it requires fairly intense freeway driving no matter the time of day, however, so I had to focus even as Morgan moaned through her contractions. They were coming steadily and were clearly more intense. She didn’t yell, scream, cry, or swear; the rising intensity was marked only by her deepened moaning. She rested between, gripping the seatbelt with her other hand. My mom, usually a huge talker, was quiet in the back seat. Even then I think we felt the sacredness of what was happening, the utter importance of the moment. Strip malls and car dealerships flashed by; after we exited, it seemed like we hit every single red light.

At the birth center, Morgan was already 7 centimeters and 100% effaced. The midwife ran us a tub (water birth was our plan…), Amanda kept coaching and massaging, and my mom unloaded the car. I had to make a couple phone calls I now wish I’d made earlier or not at all. Then I sat with Morgan. First she semi-reclined in the tub, but she was restless, limbs shaking. She tried squatting in it, gripping my hands as I knelt in front of her, but wasn’t comfortable. At Amanda’s suggestion, we moved to the birth stool. Morgan sat on it, facing and leaning into me; I was on a low couch, pillows in my lap. She gripped my hands, I whispered encouragement in her ear. Between contractions, she rested her head on my lap. No matter how intense they got, she was always able to recover between them and talk or smile a bit (key word – a bit).

At that point, time blurs. Her good friend arrived; my mom, Amanda, and the friend sat on floor behind us, massaging Morgan’s back and hips. But the world had narrowed to she and I. The room was lit only by the late afternoon light and no one talked much; outside, thunder rumbled. I whispered in her ear, my hair falling over her face; she squeezed my hands and moaned. The contractions were closer together than ever. The midwife occasionally checked Judah’s heart rate, which never dipped, not even during contractions. As a particularly intense one passed, Morgan said into my lap, “no touch.” And so I told everyone to stop with the massage. She said later that’s because her pelvis suddenly felt like a raw, exposed nerve. I felt the contractions slow a bit, and our doula suggested that she get up to pee. She rose slowly, shakily, my mom and Amanda supporting her to the small bathroom opposite. I stayed on the couch for a moment because the midwife told me it’d be crowded in the bathroom. I felt anxious, bereft about it. I wish now I’d gone in right away. However, as soon as I heard Morgan’s voice change, I ran in.

She was not moaning, had ceased with the rhythmic breathing altogether. She was crying, high-pitched for a moment, clinging to our doula, who knelt in front of her. “Get where I am,” Amanda said to me, standing up. “Just come quick!” Morgan shouted. I knelt down and she flung her arms around my neck as if for dear life. Mind you, she was on the toilet. She says that when she stood up to walk, gravity hit her like a freight train. Her water broke in one sharp contraction and she felt such intense pressure, she couldn’t think clearly anymore. Once on the toilet, she peed like a racehorse – I heard it and was amazed! – and then her water came out. At that point, she says it felt like someone was forcibly removing a basketball from inside her. She didn’t push, didn’t have any voluntary actions at all. She was holding onto me tightly, and I squeezed her back. From the other room she heard the midwife say, “this is normal,” and she says that felt encouraging but also bizarre – incompatible with the intensity of the sensations she was having. Our doula raced out of the room to get the midwife, the only one of us who realized what was about to happen. Meanwhile, the thunderstorm got louder and the power went out, all at once. I am not making this up.

And so, only Morgan and I were in the room. She shouted, “WHAT is happening?!”, squeezing me again before half-standing, reaching down, shouting again (I don’t know what she said, maybe, “he’s coming”) and pulling out our baby. She says if she hadn’t stood, he would’ve fallen into the toilet. Talk about a water birth! I reached out blindly and it was like a baby had fallen from the sky. He was blue, slimy, bloody, howling. She clutched at him and I stroked him and we both said, “hi, baby, hi Judah, oh, god, hi.” I think we were both in shock. Morgan says she felt complete, utter relief. The midwife flew in with a towel and pressed it to his body, taking a moment to remove the single loop of cord around his neck. He wailed, staring around with his giant eyes. My mom, Morgan’s friend, and our doula were crowded above us in the bathroom, staring down at him, exclaiming over the speed of his entry. I had no idea what time it was or how much time had passed, but as it turns out, Judah Nathaniel was born at 4:58 p.m., exactly one hour and ten minutes after we arrived at the birth center.

We waddled to the bed together afterwards, Morgan clinging to Judah, me holding her around the shoulders, her placenta still inside and the cord hanging out. On the bed we just stared and stared at him. Other things happened, but it’s a haze. Eventually, I cut the cord, he was weighed and measured, Morgan took a bath, her parents arrived, she got stitched up, friends came and brought us pizza… And the whole time, my heart was in my throat. I almost couldn’t breathe. Morgan was quiet, wide-eyed. So was Judah. We went home at 9:30 pm. I have never driven so slowly on the freeway in all my life.

For the rapid birth, I am grateful, if stunned. She had no complications, Judah is as healthy as could be, and we LOVE that we birthed him ourselves. We laugh that we get to tell him he almost fell into the toilet. He roared into the world, and now his calm, wise demeanor amuses and amazes us every day. He has been alert, snuggly, and a champion eater from day one. I don’t want to do anything but stare at him. Okay, and nap.