Freebirth

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ABSTRACT

This column is a literary, personal essay about the author's spouse and her experience with unassisted birth.

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Do you have a birth story that illustrates the power of childbirth and encourages women to give birth with confidence? We invite you to submit your story for possible publication in The Journal of Perinatal Education (JPE). Please send your story or query to Judith Lothian, Associate Editor (Jalothian@aol.com).

Last night, my spouse and I had an argument about her dissertation.

“Are you still planning on sending it out?”

“You asked me that yesterday. Why do you think today would be any different?”

“I’m not trying to criticize.”

“ ‘Course you weren’t.”

That was about it, which was tense for us. Under our curt responses was a difference in opinion about the work the other was doing. Rixa, between birthing our two children, had composed a brilliant dissertation—a work that her committee said was the strongest they had read for several years. One offered to put her in touch with her agent; another already had an editor in mind. But Rixa demurred, convinced that the work wasn’t accessible enough, that the field had already shifted since she had formulated and proven her thesis. And her intended audience had changed as well. In some ways, the whole process felt like a game; what she really wanted to do was start effecting changes in the ways that women perceived birth. The dissertation itself was, in her words, too academic. It had its own purpose in looking at current alternative birth practices, particularly unassisted birth, and dissecting the various sociocultural forces that pushed women toward this choice.

But the language and conclusions were so far from her visceral experience of birth and her understanding of her own body that the words felt dry, perfunctory, like the words of someone who had long ago given up caring about the actual physiological process of birth. And the physiological process was the narrative that was most important to her. She wanted to tell the story of her body, of birthing our children, in a way that would show an empowered woman in a comfortable environment. That was the narrative worth telling.

Births in most Hollywood movies generally fall in one of two places: at the beginning or the end. At the beginning, they’re introducing someone (or something) new, near the end of the first act or in the first 20 min of the film. Any movie with a pregnant woman in the cast of characters relies on birth as the climax. A spate of recent films follow this trend; for example, *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, *Junebug*, *Waitress*, *Baby Mama*, *The Back-up Plan*, and *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. The birth clock is inextricably linked to plot. Without a birthing woman, the film doesn’t deliver (ha, a pun). She’s the gun under a pillow, the bomb in the trunk of a car. What’s also interesting, disturbing even, is how most of these films are also feel-good comedies. There’s the flurry of activity as

a flustered nurse wheels the screaming woman down a busy hospital corridor, or the hormonal woman swearing at her partner, begging for drugs. It's a combination of elements culled from so many familiar stories about women giving birth in a hospital, attended by physicians, nurses, hospital staff, parents, and partners. In Hollywood, birth is a community affair with a prosthetic pregnant belly at the center of it all like a burning pyre at some pagan ritual.

Our daughter Zari's birth was nothing like this. It's an experience better told without words. The lexicon of birth is truly visceral; it's a scene, a paragraph, a sentence composed of grunts and swaying hips and breaths and blood. As a man, I can never truly speak this language. How do I describe the poetry of my wife's birthing body? Rixa birthed our child in our bathroom, on the gray, gelid tiles where I'd daub my body after a shower. She was kneeling, one leg at a right angle and her hand instinctively holding our child's head as it slid into the world. And she was alone.

It's this last detail that intensifies the experience for me. Nothing measured labor except Rixa's own cries and pains and dips into the tub. My attempted insertions into her time and space were petty and peripheral. I walked our dog (very briskly) and got Rixa towels or juice when she asked. I canceled my classes. Every so often, Rixa vocalized like she was coughing up phlegm in one, drawn out, gravelly moan. It was a sound I'd never heard from her before, although I'd heard similar sounds from various births she'd shown me on DVDs. When I walked into the room, I stood in the doorway and Rixa was submerged in the tub, her eyes closed, and breaths coming audibly through her nostrils as her head lolled from side to side. Or she was at the sink, gripping the edge of the vanity with both hands, her hips undulating with the frequency of rolling waves. She was naked and steamy. Her body glistened and her stretch marks were like a network of tiny fingers reaching to her belly. When a contraction hit, her hips continued their rhythmic undulation and she threw her head back and let her trachea open up. Deep moaning erupted from her constricted lungs.

I cannot describe the moment of birth except to show the contours: the shapes of my wife's body and the slick newborn between her legs. My wife gave birth kneeling with one leg up in a Captain Morgan position, the swell of her belly, a full nodule where her leg met the stem. Below her were clean towels

to catch blood and fluid. There was a sudden silence at the crowning. If her birth was a poem, here was the caesura. Rixa's grunts and otherworldly moans ceased and her right hand moved under the thatch of hair between her legs. This was a place of veneration and mystery; a place now shared with the vernix-covered head of my daughter. We didn't know this yet, couldn't know, having not prepared for a daughter, not even procured a name in the event that there would be one. Another push of Rixa's body in that silent moment and our nameless child was free. She blinked in the morning sun, and I held her briefly before placing her high on her mother's chest. "A daughter, a daughter," my wife's only words, punctuated by my little girl's frog-like cries.

This moment will be the heart of my essay, its aesthetic and formal center. I don't want the birth mistaken for the moment you've all been waiting for: Mother gives birth to healthy baby girl, 7 lb, 1 oz, 11:34 a.m. It is neither end nor beginning, this still point, but the meeting place where the organic molecules of parts of my wife and me and the DNA of generations coalesce into this new iteration of life. If there was any end to the birth, it would be the final chapter of my wife's thesis project, a joke really, one we're fond of telling at dinner parties with other academics: Zari's birth was the practicum for Rixa's dissertation. It's a joke that has some currency. Rixa is a prolific blogger, 50,000 hits or more a month. She has won awards for her blog, connected with birth practitioners and educators and mothers-to-be for the past several years. *Marie Claire* magazine in Australia did an article about Zari's birth, and the *People*-like rag of the United Kingdom, *Grazia*, wrote a first-person narrative of Rixa's "out-of-hospital" experience. But the birth reached its biggest audience through a 5-minute TV spot on the GMTV's *Lorraine Kelly Show*, the somewhat trashy British equivalent of *Good Morning America*.

This last story, the most glamorous, is also about shame. The buildup to the TV spot involved several rounds of interviews with GMTV staffers, hour-long conversations with both Rixa and me individually about her "freebirth," the term the U.K. media machine had latched on to describe Zari's entrance into the world. Originally, the TV show was going to have us interviewed via satellite in the United States. They wanted, I think, an image of the mortgage-laden Americans in their plastic, suburban house. Instead, we had already traveled to France as part of our summer job directing a study abroad program

Rixa Freeze's blog, *Stand and Deliver: Reflections on Pregnancy, Birth, and Mothering*, can be accessed at <http://rixarixa.blogspot.com/>

for teenagers. We were in Hyères, a popular French domestic tourist destination with miles of sandy beaches and excellent sailing and snorkeling. When Lorraine's GMTV team found out, they agreed to fly us to London and interview us live the next day.

Some of the details about the interview may seem self-centered. I remember that they gave us guidelines with specifics about what to wear, including an injunction against anything striped. I had packed only one dress shirt, a fitted, thin-striped Xoos shirt with a wide European collar with double buttons at the neck. I wore it even though I was self-conscious the whole time and wondered whether or not they would make me change or if the stripes would somehow cause the cameras to short circuit. We dressed Zari in a purple linen dress, and Rixa wore a V-neck white cotton blouse showing just a hint of cleavage. After 30 min of makeup, they put us in the green room with a newlywed couple who met each other over the Internet. They also had been featured in *Grazia*, and they talked to us like they were doing a warm-up interview: "There's not as much stigma about the Internet as there used to be. For us, it was a normal way to meet." They recounted the virtual courtship that gradually led to their marriage.

Rixa Ann Spencer Freeze nursing Zari on the Presqu'île de Giens near Hyères, France, 2 days before her interview with GMTV in London.

They asked us why we were there, and I told them about Rixa, the unassisted birth, but I didn't have time to explain what this meant. We were up next, and one of the production assistants escorted us to the wings where a tall movie-star-looking doctor extended us a greeting. "Dr. Hilary Jones," he said. He wore designer jeans and a black blazer over a white dress shirt. And shoes that tapered to points. I remember the last detail especially as he crossed his legs throughout the interview and the shoes pointed up at us accusingly.

During the prep interviews over the phone, the production assistants had emphasized Lorraine's nonconfrontational style. "She just wants to have a conversation." They took great pains to make sure that we weren't ideologues, that we weren't going to excoriate all women who chose to birth the "normal" way—sedated and lying on their backs for the ease of a doctor's (usually a male's) prodding and penetration. No, we said, we're from the Midwest, harmless as American apple pie. We're academics, we understand the need for discourse. Everyone was so nice. Over the phone, we could hear the soft staccato tap of computer keys.

In the actual interview, Lorraine started by letting Rixa say just a couple sentences about her birth experience. Then she asked, "Isn't what you did a lot like wiring your house by just reading a couple books about electricity?" And the doctor: "History shows us," he said,

the danger of what this woman has done. In Africa, every year people die of childbirth because they don't have the proper medical care. Just look at the statistics. It's lucky that it ended up this way. Your baby is healthy, but things could very well have turned out differently.

Near the end of the interview, they asked what Rixa thought. She said, "I refuse to live in a paradigm of fear."

I smiled, the supportive husband, and bounced Zari on my knee.

We left the 5-min interview dazed and humiliated. Neither the host nor the general practitioner doctor who had distorted hundreds of years of medical history let Rixa or me talk for more than a couple seconds. Instead, we were like the imported poster children for what not to do if you wanted to birth a healthy baby, made all the more horrifying and ironic by our bubbly and beautiful 9-month-old daughter.

Do you see what Americans will do to their offspring? Put this golden baby at risk? American individualism, selfishness, is limitless and here is the proof (never mind that I'm Canadian, not American). The happy family, lucky as winning the lottery. She could have been killed. Both of them. Shame on you for wanting to give birth to your baby without institutional support.

In the green room after the interview, the Internet couple said, "You guys were fantastic."

That afternoon, we sat with Zari on a patch of grass outside Buckingham Palace. For the whole trip, we had been blown over by the luxury of it all: the four-star hotel, the 100-dollar meals, the taxis back and forth everywhere we needed to go. And now we were here, the moment of fame over, sitting in a park with our daughter who had smiled and laughed under the white glare of the lights. Then we composed arguments.

I said, "If I could do it over, I would've said that I was a skeptic too, that I asked you for reams of data and support before agreeing with your decision. And if viewers had any questions, they could go to your blog to look at the studies."

Rixa said,

I would've said that a woman's body isn't like electrical work. Women know their bodies. And I had done more than read just a few books. Try 200 books and scores of articles and studies and years of research and practical work as a midwife's assistant and a doula. Certainly more than some GP citing research from the 1950s.

Drs. Eric Freeze and Rixa Ann Spencer Freeze and their children: Dio Spencer, Zari Rose, and Inga Marie. All three children were born safely at home.

—Photo by Allison Mayer

I would've said that the reason children died in Africa was because of wealthy nations not giving the most crucial form of aid: education and food. The statistics are largely there because of sanitation, because the women giving birth are often malnourished, or are under-aged, or have high-risk pregnancies. Often it's all of the above. None of the examples he used were ones that compared low-risk groups in excellent conditions.

"And it's not like we didn't have a midwife. Bernice would've come if we needed her."

"And it's not like we didn't live two blocks from a hospital."

"The eventualities that he cites are less than one percent of natural births, and all of those you could arrange with a hospital or a birth center."

"All his evidence was anecdotal."

"Yeah, and we were another anecdote."

"Look at what not to do. I think they got their message across."

We said many other things. But what resonates most with me now, 4 years later, the memory that doesn't fade, that I didn't have to look up or consult with my spouse about, is our silence. That while Lorraine and the doctor berated us for our choices, erected straw men only to knock them down, Rixa and I were meek, polite, and silent.

We carried that silence with us. On that afternoon in London, we sat on that immaculate lawn and played with our daughter in the grass. It was sun after rain, a clean sun, bright and new. We walked and rode the Tube and snapped pictures and took turns carrying Zari in a sling. We kept our voices low, not wanting our North American diphthongs and expressions to unmask us, to reveal our linguistic difference. All around us was the chatter of tourists as they made their way to the various London landmarks, the voices of protestors outside Parliament, the sound of the Thames where just days earlier I'd watched a UFO in a *Doctor Who* TV episode plunge into its depths. Through everything, we kept silent and smiled.

ERIC FREEZE is an assistant professor of English at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He has published stories, translations, and essays in various periodicals including *Boston Review*, *Harvard Review*, and *The Southern Review*. His first book, a collection of stories entitled *Dominant Traits*, was published in April 2012 by *Dufour Editions*.