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## Transition

I'm stuck, but I don't want them to know that I'm scared. Now my opponent has come back to tie the score 5-5. The contractions pull at my cervix over and over. Hours have passed, and each time Maria checks my cervix it's not opening any wider. I'm dreading a repeat of Luke's birth. Steam from the tub fogs the corners of the windows. Our bed is stripped of everything but the bottom white sheet.

My quiet apartment with Christmas lights framing the windows is the perfect place to have my baby. *I'm going to do this*, I tell myself.

Abigail's replacement, Sue, has arrived and is relaxing in the living room.

I didn't set up a phone tree to notify everyone when I went into labor this time like I did with Luke's birth. I don't want the pressure of people waiting for me. There were seven people reading magazines in the hospital waiting room at Luke's birth. Jake's dad called Jake's sister to tell her to hurry over because "it was happening." There was panic and arguing between the nurses. I didn't have my baby until seven hours after the phone tree was notified.

From the clear, still water of the birth tub, I look out into our sunny backyard and watch Luke digging in our dirt pile with the neighbor kids. I close my eyes and sway back and forth in the water.

During one of my sessions with Sophia, she asked me if I had ever been sexually abused. She said she was only asking because women who have suffered trauma have a similar labor pattern. They get stuck at the end.

I have never been abused, but maybe my unresolved trauma around my mother is stalling me. I've never quite felt like my own person—have always felt like part of me is missing. This birth will give me the acknowledgment of my own strength that I need in order to become my own person. If I can successfully get to the other side of this birth, it will have a ripple effect on the rest of my life.

I picture my cervix opening. Jake is now in the backyard, too, laughing with the kids. He is such a gentle father.

I love being alone in the tub. It's my own little space where no one can get to me.

What happens to me in the rest of my life depends on this moment. I want this home birth so badly. Before each contraction, I say to myself, *This won't last forever; there's an end; it's going to end.* Then I rest my head on a towel draped over the blue wall of the birth tub and somehow drift off to sleep for a few minutes.

The sun is bright and sharp, like it knows it only has a short period of time to really shine. The morning fog has burned off, and the late-afternoon fog hasn't rolled in. It's the hottest part of the day in the backyard.

Karen sits quietly on the orange-and-brown-striped couch against the farthest wall. She's reading something on her iPhone. She senses my eyes, looks up, and smiles. "She's in a good rhythm," she whispers to Maria, who's sitting outside the door.

Karen moves closer to me and sits in the empty wood chair next to the tub. "Your birth is beautiful," she says. "It is going just how it should, and it is perfect."

I laugh a little, but decide to try and believe her. It may look perfect from the outside, but on the inside, I've got a major mountain to climb.

Jake is back in the room now, and he kneels next to the tub. I hang over his shoulders and nuzzle my nose into his neck.

I turn away during my next contraction so they can't see me bearing down. I am excited but worried that it's like last time, when the urge to push came before my cervix was completely open, and so I don't say anything and try to conceal my gentle pushing.

Lynne, Jake's cousin, arrives to take Luke to the park. From outside the bathroom, Luke stops to look at me through the tunnel of doors—my open bedroom door and the sunroom door. I wave him closer, but he runs away.

Karen catches me scrunching up my face and signals to Maria, who comes into the room.

"Thais, let's get you on the bed for a vaginal exam," Maria says.

I shuffle the few steps to the bed and roll myself onto my back. I watch the sheer drapes balloon gently from the breeze coming in through the open window. I am still eight centimeters.

"Your bag of waters is in front of the baby's head," she says. "Let's see what happens to the opening during a contraction."

With her fingers inside of me, my next contraction pinches fiercely. She is manipulating my cervix. My eyes roll back into my head, and I hope that I won't pass out.

"Your cervix opens to nine centimeters with a uterine contraction. It's complete on one side and very soft on the other," she says.

During my three-minute rest, I look at Maria between my legs, and although this seems like good news, she isn't smiling. She is looking at me but kind of beyond me, like people do when they're thinking.

"Am I going to be able to do this?" I ask her.

Her deep brown eyes fix trustfully into my clear blue ones.

"I don't know, Thais. You need to get to ten centimeters before this baby comes out," Maria answers.