

# by Omar Mouallem



SPECIAL APPEARANCE FROM ORWELL "THE CAT" MOUALLEM



put the coffee on and prepared to prove myself the best birthing partner there ever was, or, at least, better than the one I was last time.



IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING, OMAR TAKES HIS COFFEE BLACK

illustration  
**Rachel Beyer**

# A mother, her husband and two aides walk into a bathroom...



Like only the most fortunate, I rediscovered the comfort of family and home in this pandemic. Being confined to a small house 24/7 didn't turn me against my wife, daughter and pets, *Big Brother*-style. Rather it brought us together, *Three's Company*-style, with our toddler playing the role of a clumsy, endearing and ever-amusing party animal. Sometimes I crashed beside Noe in her tiny bed, thinking to myself, there's no way I could love her more, only to be proven wrong in the morning.

The love parents feel for their child is unfathomable until they've felt it. It's like trying to describe the universe before the Big Bang, with all its infinite and rapidly expanding possibilities. Our little corner of galaxy was due for another stellar event in July. The combination of another baby due and sheltering in place propelled us into full nesting mode, as Janae and I put our entertainment budget toward fixing the house and replacing old furniture.

Shortly before her due date, I spent a night gleefully assembling IKEA office furniture, and, with the help of my barely physically abled wife, had it standing in place by 2:30 a.m. "Can we go to bed now?" asked Janae.

"Go ahead," I said, playing a mental game of *Tetris* with all the electronics, cords and books scattered around me. "I'm going to put the room together." She sauntered directly across the hallway into bed.

Janae looked a lot different the next time I saw her, as I zombied

# I felt lost in a labyrinthian nightmare, making every possible wrong turn.

to our bedroom at 5 a.m. She stood, wide-eyed, examining the floor.

"I think my water broke."  
"No," I replied feebly. "But I haven't slept. My back hurts."

It wasn't just that I threw my back out lugging one desk down the stairs and another one up. It's that I suffered my last back injury helping Janae birth our daughter. I know that's a ridiculous complaint, given that Janae nearly detached her retinas pushing out a baby, but I feared legitimate injury. What's more, we planned for a home birth in the living room, where I'd made a mess of things with packaging and junk furniture.

But when Janae said it was time, it was time. I put the coffee on and prepared to prove myself the best birthing partner there ever was, or, at least, better than the one I was last time.

The first 14 hours of Noe's birth were perfect. Janae laboured gradually at home, as Claire MacDonald, our doula and a pioneer of Alberta's natural births movement, coached us through double-hip squeezes and breathing techniques. When contractions were five minutes

apart, I drove us to the Lucina Midwives & Birth Centre with our birthing plan neatly folded in my pocket.

We'd rented a comfortable room eight months in advance, back when I still had my prejudices about natural births, fearing it was a slippery slope to living the *Goop* life. Janae stopped me from openly mocking the centre's supply of homeopathic remedies during an open house. I didn't know that midwives are medically trained professionals, nor fully understand the role and value of a doula.

I was a true believer by the time the puck dropped on November 11, 2017. By then, I'd learned to separate the "alternative" from the "holistic," in order to reap the benefits of safely experiencing a singular event in its fullness. The staff's open and steady communication made it feel like we were training for the Olympics, especially as we put those squats into practice. I held firm as Janae clasped her hands around my neck and, trance-like, bore her every atom down on a 10-centimetre target. (Hence, my back injury.)

Janae had been pushing four hours when, seemingly out of

nowhere, the assistant midwife said there was a problem — a "fitting issue" that might require an emergency room transfer. We both felt struck by lightning, but, whereas Janae combusted into an irrepressible firestorm, I turned to ash heap.

Claire helped me to a corner sofa, while the midwives helped Janae to the bed, allowing her to push four more times before activating plan B. Watching from the sidelines, my body felt positively electrocuted. My face looked bleached. For some reason, my fingers had frozen into a freakish gesture. A midwife offered me a bottle of "calming drops." I showed her my mangled talons — like, *woman, don't you know!* — and opened my mouth to have it administered to me like a baby bird.

The fourth push had failed, but Janae was determined to push that baby out on that bed. Whether by placebo or miracle, I jumped to my feet and pleaded with her to get to a hospital.

Had I stopped to read the room and ask questions, I'd have noticed a disagreement between the two practitioners, with our primary midwife, Jeneve, willing to let the process take its course, as long as baby's heartbeat stayed normal. Instead, I abandoned our birth plan, including my wish to catch our baby. Worst of all, I turned my back on Janae when she most needed my support and advocacy.

Thankfully, she had strong women on her side. Claire and Jeneve urged her to go with her body, as planned. Janae pushed so hard that fireworks flashed in her vision, and Noe shot into Jeneve's hands with a screech.

Complete disempowerment will bring out the worst in a man. It strips his lifetime of cladding and insulation, exposes his roughshod build and faulty wiring. What's worse, losing what he believes was rightfully his more often causes him to double down on his entitlement and scavenge for control. Two

years later, as our son's birth approached, I resolved to embrace every uncertainty and outcome as Janae's greatest ally.

My vow was tested from the moment her water broke. Her contractions progressed rapidly, and were two minutes apart when Corrie, our doula, arrived. She brought a replacement electric air pump for the inflatable pool because I overheated and broke the original trying to muffle the noise, fearing it would wake Noe up before her grandma could get her.

The primary midwife, Carly, got there while I struggled to connect a garden hose to a faucet. So while the ladies helped Janae labour in a four-by-eight-foot washroom, I juggled the roles of babysitter, plumber and custodian after flooding the kitchen.

I felt lost in a labyrinthian nightmare, making every possible wrong turn. Corrie took pity watching me pace the floor with a leaky hose. She helped me find my way around an assortment of adapters and tools, suggested connecting it to the shower head, and distracted Noe until grandma arrived.

Our tiny bathroom had never been busier. As I wrestled with plumbing, I overheard them discuss abandoning the pool for the bathtub in the upstairs bathroom, and sensed Janae's dread when they asked her to climb a flight of stairs, fully dilated.

"I got it!" I said, emerging victoriously from the shower while Janae hunched over the sink and Carly examined her from below. Only Corrie acknowledged me, as she rubbed a firm hand into my wife's lower back. "Should I fill the pool?" She shook her head slowly, mouthed "no," and stepped aside for me to get in position. He was coming.

Only minutes later, we were stunned into silence by the unmistakable screech of new life. I searched Carly's hands, the bathroom floor, and between



Janae's legs for its source. *Did I imagine it?* Then I realized, the lumpy purple and brown flesh protruding from my wife's backside was not some gory part of delivery — it was the delivery.

I'd been staring into my son's face without knowing it. But why wasn't he looking back? Crying anymore or moving?

I breathed through the trauma scrambling inside my head. I felt another panic attack rumbling in my chest when Carly jolted me to my senses with a question: "Are you going to catch him?"

*Here?* I thought. *On the bathroom floor, my wife starfished between the bathroom walls? Catch this bruised, muted baby?* But her smile reassured me that it was all in my head.

Nothing had gone as planned with this birth, but she gave me the power to change that. Carly guided my hands around his slimy, wrinkled head, and pulled away, leaving the illusion of his fate in my palms. It felt like touching a pulsating star. It was like Janae had pushed our family through another spectacular universe when Elias Blue dropped in my hands and looked at me with his big brown eyes. **ED**



"Should I fill the pool?"  
aside for me to get in

She shook her head slowly, mouthed "no," and stepped  
position. He was coming.