

borne

Eleven birth accounts
from the time of Corona,
shared online between
Bristol, Falmouth, London,
New York and Reading
during February 2021

Belle

I'm at a friend's house... weird being at someone's house. We're doing a childcare bubble. It's great. Literally I just changed her and she's done a massive poo. Can you hear it? Can we take five minutes?

My birth was amazing. It was what I dreamed of really... which was to be at home, with my sister and my boyfriend and a doula. It just felt that wouldn't happen because of Covid. It was what I envisaged and it happened. So I'm just really grateful to the midwives for being supportive and going with the flow in the moment. I kept not fitting in the boxes so I had to keep being poked and prodded. I think that did me well actually because by the end I was like, right I've just got to focus on what I want. I was quite open, home birth wasn't my first choice. Originally I was thinking I'd like to be in the birthing centre because I'm a water baby and I just loved the idea of being in water as pain relief. It just seemed it would be easier to be there for that than to have that at home. It just felt like it would be a palaver. So I started with that but it was Covid really that pushed me to home. Then the more I read about birth, the more I felt like right I just need to be really relaxed and where am I going to be most relaxed: at home. That was my thought process really, and then the added benefits of not having to engage... I was totally isolating.

I got pregnant in December and was already taking it very seriously, so not having to engage with Covid in the hospital and there were restrictions at that point. That was very motivating. For checkups I was going to the clinic and I'm a single parent by choice so I didn't have a partner to go with me to the appointments anyway and just everything's masks. So to this day I would not recognise... the midwife who was with me at the birth I would recognise... but none of the midwives from the appointments. I had the same midwife throughout the pregnancy and I never saw her without a mask on!

I've got a couple of friends who are doulas so I knew about the concept. I wanted my sister to be my birth partner. She's never had a baby. So just the idea of having somebody with me who had been through it and more so having the continuity to the birth then I would have the support after as a single parent. Then it was hard to find a doula in Covid, because you're having Zoom meetings with people – having a 20-minute conversation on Zoom – and be like 'oh right, do you wanna be at my birth?'. So I was struggling to find a doula because it didn't feel right and then I found out someone I already knew had just finished her training, so I thought thank god for that! Luckily the team here are really supportive of home birth and have not wavered throughout the pandemic, which has been amazing. So that was really empowering. It was lovely to know that not only were they carrying on but that they do it all the time. It's a huge part of the practice down here. The rates are really low here, so I don't know if that would be different if Covid was more prevalent.

I was really conscious because I was 41 when she was born, so your whole pregnancy they're calling you a geriatric and there's that line of 'okay, we want you to be induced' so I really knew that I didn't want that. She actually came two weeks early, which was great. So my waters broke at three in the morning and I just had that 'oh – okay' and had the realisation that even though I wasn't in labour, the baby's coming whether I like it or not because of that timeframe of that 24-hour window that they give you after your waters break. So I was waiting, waiting, waiting, for as long as I could before I let the midwives know because I wasn't in labour. So I waited until about 10 in the morning and then phoned them. When I woke up in the night and my waters had broken I got up and did all kinds of crazy things: 'quick put the laundry on' and went into a panic and after about an hour of that I thought I should just go back to bed, now. I just felt normal but it was obvious that the waters had gone. It wasn't like a rush, but just a lot of liquid. I didn't want to phone the midwives straight away and then I was waiting for everyone else to wake up.

So it was... clock's ticking! She was two weeks early so I wasn't ready in terms of... we were planning to experiment with the birthing pool that day I think. It was kind of good because I had the morning where I was just fine, to get the house sorted. I didn't even have food in... arghhh. So we cleared the living room and got the pool set up, got some food and that took us to midday. Then I had a nap until about three and when I woke up we did an ankle massage with clary sage [Belle is a herbalist] and I went straight into labour. It was pretty quick. I went from zero to actual labour. It was like, boom! and then we started timing contractions and I was in active labour. I thought 'err okay'.

So that took us to 5pm and I phoned our doula and my baby was born at three in the morning. I was just so grateful for that birthing pool. When labour started and I was leaning over the chair, I was putting the contractions into my phone and I looked at my phone and it said 'you're in active labour' and it was like 'no shit Sherlock!'. Then I did just have that moment of 'oh my god, what have I signed up for? it was a great idea Belle, but now you've signed up for this with no pain relief – you nut job'. I did have a bit of a panic and I was like 'well there's nothing you can do about it now!'. When I got in the water it felt like 'okay I can deal with this now: it's gonna be alright'. Without the water... I was probably in the water by seven and then the contractions got into a kind of rhythm so I'd have two gentler ones and then one strong one. I mean gentler – they were still full on. That was quite nice, I was able to... just the waves of it, I was able between contractions it felt like I was getting a little break. It was like being in two worlds, so then I could sit up and talk to people and then 'NOBODY SAY A WORD! I'm in the zone, leave me alone'.

Because I imagined having a long pre-labour where I'd be hanging out and maybe eating some food or whatever, I had a dinner planned to cook. So my boyfriend started cooking: the smell of onions! He came in and I said 'oh no, oh no – stop cooking!'. I realised how much I swear, that was very apparent. I was swearing more than normal.

At one point the midwife said 'they're not going to come out if you talk to them like that!', because I was swearing so much. I was using horsey mouth – 'brrrrrr', that kind of thing – was how I got through. It took all of me to get through each contraction, so I said nobody talk, don't talk to me. Then I was doing horse lips. Then after transition, at the end, the wave of 'wow, on top of the contractions I also have to push? what? I've got to do some work now?'. At that point I thought 'right, horsey lips isn't going to do it'. I definitely had spaces between the contractions where I could be thinking. Also, I'd talked it through with my doula, and another friend had described it to me, so I knew it was time for the animal to come out now.

Actually it was amazing because my boyfriend – I don't know what he said, but he just stood next to me and started talking Spanish. He was with me in the change of key. I'd started growling basically... it was just that sensation of I need this to be low and anything high up is just losing energy and actually I've got to channel it all down now. I'm pretty sure that mine was a growling, a real growl, but I was also conscious obviously when it started it had its own life. It was a conscious choice, because I had a period of time where labour slowed a bit and I consciously knew if I don't change the gear, we're going to be in this bit for ages. I was thinking I don't want to get tired I just want it to be done.

I definitely knew what was going on the whole time because my doula had talked about the 'ring of fire' and she said when we get there I'm gonna come and breathe really gently on your cheek and that's your reminder to slow down and go easy so you don't tear. We talked about it in detail, so I had that and I was thinking about where I was. So I had that ring of fire and the midwife was helping get her out by stretching me which I found so helpful because I thought now I know where she [the baby] is and where I need to push and I'd talked through the whole of that bit of the birth but then when the baby arrived... that's the bit you can't imagine. I didn't even know if she was going to be a boy or a girl. It just was so abstract and then the moment when they say 'pick your baby up?... you can pick

I knew it was time for the animal to come out now

them up. So I picked her up and I saw that she was a girl and it was the most amazing... because I'd convinced myself she was going to be a boy. I really wanted her to be a girl and I didn't want to be disappointed. She was just there.

She wasn't breathing. When she was first born she let out a cry, so I'd heard her, then I was holding her and I knew something wasn't right and then the midwife clocked it and so then the midwife really took over and said 'who's cutting the cord? cut the cord' and they had to resuscitate her and so that was quite intense. So I was sitting down and they took her, maybe four feet away but they were having to really use the resuscitator. I was high... but because I'd heard her I was thinking she's here, she's here, she's here. It was five minutes. So 'she's here, she's gonna be okay' was alright but then there's the point where it was 'ohhh this is still going on'. You know?

But then she came round. So in that time we were on the phone to the paramedics... my doula was and the midwives were resuscitating and so even though we'd had that dream birth I had to go straight to hospital. It was really interesting but then it got more surreal because I had the paramedics arrive and they were these big guys and I was in my birth bubble and I had to birth the placenta. So basically they were waiting for me to birth the placenta so that we could go in the ambulance, so then I had to do that with these guys watching. They weren't watching but they were there. I just obviously wanted to lie on the sofa and then I had to get up and get dressed and go. Are you kidding me?! My baby was with me and my sister got a cuddle and my boyfriend. So then walking out of the house... I was just laughing and thinking this is like being on some seriously strong drugs because I had to walk up the steps and I was like 'where's the ground?'. I'm not so hot on my biology to know what the hormones are.

Then I was in the ambulance with her and trying to get her to feed and it was only then – because the midwife was with me in the ambulance – bless her she was having her adrenalin dump, come

down from that experience because for her she'd had to resuscitate a baby. So she was talking a mile a minute at the paramedics, just processing it all, kind of 'and then I did this and then I...'. I think just reassuring herself that she'd done all the right things. She was so amazing and cool and collected when she did it, she was just on it. They did all the right things and it was fine, but it was only then I realised she must have been absolutely terrified. So I will forever be grateful. She was an older woman who had retired and then got bored and a job came up and they scooped her up, because there are loads of young midwives but not so many with a life of experience. She had been a midwife in London and come home again. That helped so much, she was so relaxed and she didn't have the need to check me all the time. I mean at one point I said 'do you need to check?' and she said 'no, you're text book'. So she was checking the baby's heart rate but no exams. So afterwards the young midwife – because there was a second midwife part-way through – when I was leaving and getting in the ambulance, she said 'thanks so much, we never get to see births like this'. The main midwife was hilarious because she couldn't believe it was my first birth, that I was handling it with 'such control!'. 'Such control!' she kept saying... 'and it's her first birth!' So at one point I was like 'that's really nice of you, but can you just stop talking about it!'.

When my sister had arrived I had said 'I love you, but I need you to go into the kitchen.' Every ounce of me needed to be focussed. I was conscious that I just didn't want any more people, energy, in the mix at that moment, even though I wanted her to be there and see it all. It was interesting because there was a point at which I said to my boyfriend 'I love you... I'm sorry but I need my doula: it's a woman's thing'. She was so intuitive and so gentle and just there with me, next to me pouring water on my back, giving me a massage... I don't even remember but her presence was just like unification rather than me having to think there's someone else there. I think that's a women's thing – just knowing. Then before the birth I had a vision that I wanted my boyfriend to be there for his strength and being able to hold onto him and that actually happened. I knew that if

I stayed in the pool I would be too relaxed and gravity was really helping. So I got out and he was helping... I was hanging on his shoulders. It speeded things along massively so it was clear when I needed different energies. I knew when I needed to do something else but I didn't know what that was. Then my doula would say 'what about this or that?'. It was amazing, it was amazing. Now to have the 'oh look, there's the corner you were born in'... a corner of the living room.

I had to go in for 12 hours to start with, so my sister came with me and it wasn't good. It was like the opposite. Not from the individuals, but the collective... for example they said you've got to go to hospital and my world had just exploded and I asked if someone could come with me. They said yeah, so my sister came with me. By this point I hadn't slept or anything. Got to the hospital and basically I fell asleep and 10 minutes later they came in and kicked my sister out. So a) they'd woken me up and b) they'd taken away my comfort and c) you're not giving me any time to process this in any way. My sister didn't have a car, she'd just been dropped off, so then she had to get a taxi or bus and wait outside.

It was so weird. The contrast... so I didn't get to sleep and she wouldn't latch on the left boob and the right was really painful. I was there for twelve hours and came home but then her umbilical cord was coming away and bleeding. So I phoned the midwife and I was just a zombie.

The best things I had... three friends, one said I can not talk about this if you want and I said 'no, no tell me' and so she said it's the most intense thing you're ever going to experience and you've just got to go through it. So I knew that. That's probably the best thing anybody has ever said to me and that's how I was able to ride it. So very early on, because she'd said that I just knew, if I lose control and give in to the pain, if I scream or anything that's high, or high energy or high losing control... floating off up here, I'm gonna lose it. So I just had to stay down, down and I guess that's where the

control and being in my body: that was the choice. The other tip that also helped was my friend said she counted backwards through the contractions and I didn't do that but she said the point of it was so you would remember it's got an end. So no matter how bad it gets you'd get a rough idea of when it would get better. I didn't need to count, but just the concept of 'oh yeah each one of these has an end' then also helped me to focus, I think.

Imogen and Salma

Imogen

I think it's strange, on the surface for most people yeah it doesn't come up – isn't talked about, but I've certainly found since looking into it, since considering it further the kind of intense pockets of home birth community or positive birth community that you come across. That's probably been one of the most important things for me through my pregnancy and since then has been connecting with other people to talk about it. So it was first through a podcast that I listen to... I must have just I don't know typed into the search bar 'home birth' cos it was kind of in my head, you know almost like pregnancy test in hand, it was my second baby and I wanted to know more. I went on to find a local home birth community I connected with, which then all went virtual, obviously, with the pandemic. Yeah, it's funny, it is a niche subject but if you find those pockets it's an intensity of community and a closeness that I don't know if it exists in the same way because it's such personal stuff and yet when you find those people to connect with it's amazing.

Salma

I have to admit with my second I said right straight away 'I'm pregnant, we're having a home birth'. It was the decision I wanted and I actually have a couple of friends that had home births and really positive experiences and it wasn't that I didn't have a positive experience first time around: it was my plan, so to speak, in terms of when I first gave birth. It was in a midwife-led unit and I think that's what kind of led me to think okay if we do have another baby it's going to be a home birth. It was more kind of having the conversations with my two friends who'd had the home births that really kind of formalised that decision for me. It's really funny, other people I spoke to who were asking 'what's your plan?' and things like

that, when I said I was having a home birth they were so surprised. Not necessarily me saying I wanted a home birth, I think they were just surprised that it was a thing really, that you give birth at home. It's a bit old-fashioned isn't it, it's a bit reminiscent of maybe our grandparents or that era where people did do that a bit more at home rather than being in a hospital. When I did pregnancy yoga I was in a class of twelve of us and I was the only person when she was asking what our options were or where we were looking to give birth locally, I was the only person who said I was going to have a home birth. Which again, I was a little surprised about. I dunno I thought there would have been one or two other people in there given most of us were second or third timers. I think when you come across people who've done it it's really positive, but I think in the wider pregnancy forum so to speak, it is still quite niche I guess in that sense.

Imogen

Having already given birth once, maybe I romanticised being at home a little bit more. Kind of discussing it with my husband and where we were going to have our baby and thinking about how I was in my first labour... it was like well we'll probably be in the kitchen because that was where I was quite a lot last time and the space and the mess – you know it's easy to clean up. I kind of saw myself, in my first labour I walked around the kitchen quite a lot and was bent over the kitchen chair and breathing through contractions and stuff. Actually, this time when I had my little boy at home, we were in the living room... we had something funny on the TV in the background because I just knew I needed something that was... I dunno I was just adamant I needed something that was going to make me laugh through stuff, just to take my mind off things. So I guess I wasn't necessarily aware I'd planned but I guess that's the thing with labour: it doesn't always end up how you plan. It was relaxed and actually the midwife, she kind of kept her distance a little bit, not in a bad way, but she let us get on with it and intervened when she needed to. Which they were like in the midwife unit, but there were

two of them – and there were two when I was at home as well – but they seemed to just check on me a bit more. I don't know if it was because it was my first time? They kind of intervened a bit more and checked on the baby a bit more.

I think in a way you don't have control. I didn't try to have control. I guess I'd expected that although I'd be at home I'd expected it to follow a similar progression and I know that having heard lots of birth stories, I know that every birth is different but I suppose we can only imagine through the lens of what we know and I guess having done it once, I thought there'd at least be similarities. So my first was fairly quick, like five hours of labour or something. Water birth, on a midwifery-led unit and the whole thing was probably relaxing like people talk about. It was at night time, it was soft, it was dark, I was left alone. All that kind of thing. I was thinking 'wow, I'm going to have the levelled-up version of that – I'm going to have that, but with no car ride and no hospital stuff around'. I feel I'd kind of done all the right things to prep for that. You know I'd got a pool, I'd updated our playlist that we used last time, I'd got all the battery-operated candles... but it just didn't go down like that at all. It was not at night, which I was so sure it would be. I went into labour as I woke up in the morning and I think because I'd just woken up I didn't even really connect that I was in serious labour – it was kind of serious from the get-go. Which is quite interesting, so I think right from the moment labour started I wasn't in control any more, I didn't even really mentally follow what was happening. I didn't call my midwife. I called my mum, who is a midwife, who came. Then a really intense two hours later the baby had been born and I hadn't ever got to the relaxed zone. It was wonderful in its own way and kind of wild and empowering and all of that.

I had a contraction timer... although I could see on that, wow, my contractions are two or three minutes apart – that kind of thing – my brain had not caught up with the reality in the slightest. I wasn't scared of having the baby or... I wanted it to happen, but for some reason my brain just didn't think it was happening. It wasn't until

I wasn't
making them
be born.
It was led
by them.

after an hour and a half – you know I'd spent most of that time on my hands and knees really intensely labouring – it wasn't until then that I thought... this is probably it. I haven't got anything out, called the midwife. I haven't even woken up my husband. I was with my mum but he was asleep and our daughter, our toddler was asleep in bed next to him and I just thought 'oh I'll let them sleep'. It was then my waters broke and I thought aw we really need to call the midwife and then yeah foetal ejection reflex kicked in. My husband and toddler came downstairs and a few minutes later the baby was out and my brain kind of never even got there. Which was quite strange.

Salma

So my experience was so opposite, well it wasn't long, not compared to my first. My first was really long... like 40 hours from start to finish. So he did feel really quick in comparison, but nothing like yours. So mine started in a similar kind of way in the sense that I had my daughter in the early hours of the morning so I assumed it would be similar but actually I woke up on the day we had our little boy with contractions that were just starting and I thought okay I think something's happening here. Because it had been such a long protracted process with my daughter I thought 'it's gonna be long with him'. It was Easter weekend, so we actually did an Easter egg hunt with my daughter in the morning and I was wandering around the garden trying to breathe through stuff and my in-laws arrived and picked her up. So I did have him that day, but I had him at eight o'clock in the evening. In comparison it was much quicker than last time but it did feel more intense the second time around and I don't know if that was because it was a quicker labour or if I just knew what to expect and I felt the second time around kind of with my breathing and everything I made sure I did it just as I did with my first, but it felt different in the sense of waiting... you kind of just knew something was gonna happen. Expectation in my mind of 'okay I've got to go through another contraction'. I don't know if sometimes it's better the devil you know or not. When's this gonna kind of pick up a notch to when we can call the midwife, and making sure my

husband was clued up, which he was, as to when we needed to do the next stage.

I kind of zoned out the first time and I thought I remembered everything really well... having a conversation with my husband a few weeks later actually there were things that happened 'oh no they moved you here' or 'they got you to do this' and I was like 'really? did they?'. I think I just completely zoned out from where I was and was just really concentrated on what I had to do. It was really funny, because I wanted a water birth, we had the candles, we had the playlist and actually when it came to it I didn't get in the pool. When I was contracting at home I had a few baths and it really slowed things down so when I got there and they offered it to me, I said 'no, no... I'm ready... I don't want to slow this down'. I had this stuff in my hospital bag that we didn't even get out in the end. For want of a better phrase, I kind of forgot where I was and concentrated on what I needed to do. I kind of was like that the second time, but we didn't call the midwife... well she came over when my daughter left and checked me when I was two centimetres and she said okay call us when you get to this stage and we left it a bit longer than we needed to. So when the midwife turned up, within about five minutes of her turning up, my waters broke because they broke at the very end. She was only there for about 40 minutes before I had my baby. So in that sense it felt more personal.

I had some trouble feeding with my first. We were actually in hospital for three or four days and that was also part of my reason for wanting a home birth because even if I was going to go through a bit of a sticky situation I had mentally prepared myself for that the second time around and actually he was the opposite, he was absolutely fine. I kind of just wanted to be at home anyway and get the support if I needed it. That was actually one of the really nice things about the midwives, they were there for about an hour and a half afterwards making sure everything was fine and doing everything they had to do. Then they were gone and I was able to get in my own shower, get into my own bed. I think in all honestly, for me it was the

after bit that was the biggest difference. I didn't need to be away for such a long time in hospital.

Imogen

I think I didn't realise this until I reflected on it... maybe as much as a month later, the actual birth of the baby – the labour and the actual birth were so intense with my second and so fast that good job it happened at home because I wouldn't have made it anywhere else, but I almost could have been anywhere. The environment didn't actually mean anything to me but it was immediately after the baby was born you kind of come back to your senses and you're like 'oh okay, I'm here... I've had the baby – I'd kind of forgotten I was going to have a baby'. Then to be in my own environment from that point, so I'd really wanted to do the whole golden hour of skin to skin. I'd had a physiological third stage for the placenta with my first in hospital, but it had been a bit more complicated cos the cord had snapped as soon as she was born which was fine but it had changed things. Then I got out of the pool and I'd held her... my husband had and it was all great at the time but it was quite broken up and my dream was just to hold my baby and sit still and absorb it all in and I got to do that in such an amazing way because I was home. It was then that I really appreciated my environment, whereas when I'd lost my head in labour and wasn't communicating and was just in the zone it didn't really mean much where I was.

Salma

It's nice as well because when you're in hospital you have people checking on you, checking on the baby and they're doing their job: they wanna make sure you're okay but obviously there's a lot of intervention and interrupting those moments even when you've got that first bit of holding the baby after birth there's all this going on around you that you're in hospital and you're put in a wheelchair and you're put in another room then you're put onto a ward. I was in a ward with three other mums and at some point there's a baby crying and someone's trying to feed whereas when you're home

there's none of that. My daughter came back with my in-laws the next day so we had that first night alone, just the three of us and it was just really nice being able to have our own bit of space and enjoy particularly those first 24 hours and then when my daughter met him for the first time that was really nice. We were just all in our own space together. It did feel very different in the most positive way possible. I think I would always say to a friend if they wanted to consider it, to look into having a home birth if they wanted to because I had such a positive, positive experience and I probably am romanticising it a bit in my head now but you can't help but look back and feel like it was a good experience.

My husband was very much 'this is your labour and where you want to be and I'll stand by that' but he did have some concerns and more for the whole safety element around it. What would happen if there were complications or if things didn't quite go to plan? My first labour went how I wanted it to, I was in the unit I wanted to be but you've got the back up of being in hospital if anything does happen. What was reassuring was that first home visit we had with the midwife, she talked him through all of that to alleviate his concerns, but she always said 'if at any point you change your mind... if you decide to go to hospital you can go to hospital. This isn't like you're having a home birth and this is the option you've got'. So I would always say to people: have the conversation. Just know that anything can happen in labour anyway. Don't become too wedded to an idea either, because that will always lead to disappointment I think. A couple of my friends who had their births at the same time as me, their births didn't go quite how they wanted them to go and they were really upset. That's the biggest thing you need to remember: anything can happen. It's all about making sure you and the baby are safe. They say it tends to be one of the safest ways of giving birth and I think that's because you are in your own home, you're probably naturally without even realising it, feeling more relaxed.

Imogen

At any point you could choose to transfer. It could be that you need to or... I think I heard that in one of the Scandinavian countries their policy is you assume you'll give birth at home and then if something pops up: either a reason in your pregnancy that you might be high risk or during labour or you want different pain relief then you can choose to go to hospital but the basic standard is you'd be at home. The other thing is I'm a real statistics person. I'm an accountant so maybe that's why and I'm not a gambler at all, but I do find it interesting to look at the statistics and if you want to play the statistics game and you want to avoid an episiotomy or a caesarean or even the later complications like delayed breastfeeding... actually by going right back to the beginning and starting at home you drastically improve your odds. There was a recent study and it said if you choose to or have to be transferred in during labour, you still have a much higher chance of a vaginal delivery than someone who is low risk but starts out in hospital.

Salma

It's almost like, because you're there and they've got the means there, it's like maybe the decisions are made a bit quicker to intervene. When you're at home they probably wait it out a bit more and know that things will actually just rectify themselves and be okay, whereas when you're in hospital and they've got the tools to 'help' then they probably do that much quicker.

Imogen

I think that's the whole thing though with the cascade of interventions, because of course once you've been induced you are in a lot more pain so you are more likely to want an epidural and an epidural often makes you immobile so no wonder you can't get into certain positions and you might need an episiotomy or whatever. So you see how, but I think that's another thing that's not really talked about and so you get the people who are kind of down that slippery

slope and are really distressed by it or disappointed and no one warned them or told them that there can be consequences to the earlier things that get suggested.

I think it often puts me in a hard spot because what else can you do other than share your experiences in the hope that it might be encouraging to someone or useful that they might be able to identify things that they like or didn't like. It's hard because I think if you've had a fairly positive experience of birth I almost feel like you get shouted down and even within family or quite close people, they will be like 'oh don't talk to Imogen about birth cos she had a great time'. Whereas when you're pregnant, people are desperate to share their horror stories. Their story is equally as important and valid but I feel people get swept up in the cultural... and you see it on TV as well, the kind of births you see on media are the same and I feel if you've had a positive experience it's almost invalidated 'oh that doesn't actually happen... it might have happened to you but that's not how it works' and you're thinking: 'it can work like that... it is possible'.

Salma

Do you feel like you can't talk to people about your experience? I have friends who've had babies and they've had c-sections or been induced. Or even if they've given birth naturally they've used gas and air or pethidine or things like that and I was really fortunate with both mine, I didn't feel I had to and I know not everyone has that experience but it's like people don't even want to talk to me about it. 'You didn't use pain relief, you didn't do that?': it's almost like your or our birth experience is undermined a bit because we haven't gone through the stress of labour or the dramatics that might be involved in labour. It's not that it isn't stressful or dramatic in its own way, it was just much more straightforward for us. We almost feel embarrassed about it. My sister-in-law doesn't have children. I remember being somewhere with her – perhaps at a family party or something – and it was just after I'd had my daughter and she said 'oh yes Salma didn't have any pain relief – can you imagine?'

I stood there and said 'heh, yeah' and I felt really embarrassed about it because... I don't know, I can't explain it... which is awful isn't it? Saying you're embarrassed about your birth experience because it was straightforward? 'No story there', kind of thing.

Imogen

I do feel really passionate about getting that story out there and getting the narrative that birth can be really positive and it's not something to be unnecessarily medicalised or shut away. Had it not been a Covid-era birth, I would probably have wanted to be even more open in terms of who was around because I feel we've got birth to such an unnatural stage and you could say that about death. You could have the same types of conversations about ways that we talk about these life experiences. Birth and death are medicalised, not talked about, shut away. I struggle because I don't know how to get those positive, normal narratives out there.

Salma

It's difficult isn't it because for every positive birth story there's a difficult or challenging one and they're the ones I guess that tend to get the more focus and it doesn't have to be that way. The way it's become unnaturally so... we've got friends who live in America and most women have c-sections: more than any other country in the world, because that's how they do it there. For me that was the last thing I wanted. That was literally... it was one of my worst nightmares to have my labour end up in that way. Yet over there it is so normal: to do that rather than go through labour. I just couldn't imagine anything worse, you've got all that recovery time, you've got a baby you can't really look after... whereas our bodies are made to give birth. It's the most natural thing you can do and your body's so amazing that it can recover from this process. It doesn't happen over night, it takes a bit of time, but our bodies have been built to recover from this.

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Imogen

A side note that America's maternal death statistics are horrific. It's so scary that that goes on in the world and on one... I can't see a direction changing that. Similar with induction and our cousin's in America and my sister-in-law was past her due date... my cousin was texting and saying when's the due date? We said 'still cooking! it will come when it's ready!'. It's very different what hospital you're with because they all have separate policies and rules and it's weird for me because I have a lot of home birth and midwife connections in America. So I know their perspective. Our cousin said 'our hospital would not let us go past our due date' and that was such a shocking thing and of course she's had one baby, now she's pregnant and her perspective of how her birth went down was all orchestrated by her doctor, by her OB. He said 'right first, we'll induce you on this day, at this time and you can have an epidural at this time and then if the baby's not out by this time I'll start doing x, y, z...'. I guess coming from a perspective where that isn't normal, it's odd to think of it like that. It is hard not knowing when your baby is going to come. You've been thinking about this moment for either months, years or your whole life... the day your baby will be in your arms. It was like, with your first it was like knowing it was going to be your wedding day but not what day it is. You've been preparing for this moment and every day you're thinking 'is it today? is it tomorrow?' You go to sleep, you wake up and you think 'I'm still here, still pregnant'. Which is frustrating at times, that uncertainty, but I think once your baby arrives I always thought 'oh, they came at the perfect time'.

Salma

It is one of life's surprises... and if you don't know the sex of your baby either. It's probably one of the only life surprises left now... you know you've got everything on your phone and people become so wedded to a due date. So when we found out we were pregnant, and we had the dating scan and they gave us the date... I didn't tell people the date, I just said 'baby's due in early April'. That's all

I kept saying to people because if I gave a date, it's going to come up to that date and it probably hasn't arrived and babies don't tend to arrive on their due dates and I'll just be bombarded by messages from people until they arrive saying 'is baby here yet?'. I thought, I don't want to go through that so I didn't give a specific date, other than to parents. Because it doesn't make any difference, the baby will get here when it gets here. I'll do everything I can to help that along – I went for my daily walks, eating pineapple... and I guess in some ways that is quite a nice thing that they choose to arrive when they want to arrive.

Imogen

In a weird way it does take the pressure off you. You're not choosing when they're born, which is a step of faith and an unknown. I quite liked that. I wasn't making them be born. It was led by them. Maybe that links to what I said about my brain checking out of the whole labour thing. Actually I didn't need to make any decisions. I just had to let my body and baby take over because mentally if everything goes to plan you're not having to make decisions and choose.

Salma

My husband was my birth partner in both circumstances and each time I made sure he knew what I was happy or not happy to do... if I wasn't able to answer because I was taken over by a contraction or the situation or whatever I just made sure. I was very firm with him 'I'm not doing this', 'I want to do that', he was basically my voice for me when I can't speak. I said to him if I lose myself in the moment and let the pain take over I need you to help me stop that from happening and help me concentrate on my breathing and he was really good at that. It's almost like you need someone on your side, going back to being in hospital and our friends and family in America where the interference seems more normal, it's really important to have someone on your side who's sure of the choices you want to make and the decisions that are happening for you. I think it's quite easy, if you don't know, to be led down a path in terms of what

happens and the decisions that are made for you in that sense, because you've got no one else helping you make the right decisions for you and your baby.

I moved around – cos I did pregnancy yoga – the teacher that we had, it was mostly yoga-focussed but we did a lot of hypnobirthing breathing techniques and visualisations as well. That was what I used while I was in labour to help me through the contractions and manage and help relax your body and not become taken over because then as soon as you become anxious, you stop relaxing. She said move around if you can and try different positions. We went to NCT with our first pregnancy too and she said 'if you don't have to lie down on a bed, do not lie down on a bed! keep moving... be on your hands and knees, squat, lean over something, lean on your partner, lean over a ball, sit on a ball...' that kind of thing. I feel we had some really good advice on how to manage that part of the labour and in all honestly I don't think I could have laid on a bed or sat down. I was up all the time and even with my first, getting in the car – it sound really dangerous – but I couldn't physically sit. So I ended up, it sounds really dangerous, but I ended up in the back of the car. My husband pulled the passenger front seat as far as he could and I was on my hands and knees over the back seat because of the pressure I was feeling... I dread to think how painful it would feel if you had to lie down, or sit down. That would feel horrendous.

It's quite animalistic, isn't it? The kind of noises and the grunting that take over when you're in that moment and it's funny because I can't imagine any other moment in my life when I'd feel that way. Or need to deal with that situation in that way. It really strips you back to your core I guess.

Imogen

I remember before my first, people saying when you're in labour and giving birth, people would say 'oh you have no dignity' and people psyched me up that I would feel like that. In labour and birth both times I didn't feel like I had no dignity. It's not that I have no dignity,

it's that I'm in that natural state. What is there to be ashamed of? I'm just doing this process. I remember being really surprised after my first birth that I didn't feel it was a negative thing... I don't know how to word that.

Salma

I didn't feel undignified but I remember people saying 'everyone sees everything' and you've got strangers and that was not my experience. It's funny that that's what people say.

Imogen

I suppose maybe if you're having a more medicalised birth it is more like that. If you've had a lot of drugs and pain relief so you're mentally with it and I obviously don't know how it feels to have those things, but my understanding is if you have an epidural you can't feel stuff, but you're aware and in the room. So maybe it comes from that, because if your body is half incapacitated but you're aware of what's going on, maybe it does feel more like that?

Salma

I've just remembered a conversation with my husband's grandad, after our first and he said to my husband 'so you were there in the room were you?' and my husband said 'yeah, of course, I was Salma's partner'. and he said 'oh gosh in my day you waited out in the hallway and they came out and told you the baby had arrived safely and mum was okay and you just weren't involved in the process'. You were made to stay outside, even if you wanted to go in. I don't know if it comes from that, undignified... it would be absolutely awful to have your husband in there!

Imogen

My dad wasn't there when my brother or I were born. My mum both times it was her and her twin were each other's birth partners. My dad was like 'not my scene'. He turned up afterwards both times.

Bit strange. I mean he's married to a midwife, you'd think he'd know. I think it's a really interesting conversation about birth partners and husbands and births because in lots of ways I think it's important to be there and involved. They're probably the person who you find most supportive to be around and you've chosen to spend your life with and it's their baby and the awe of seeing your wife bring your baby into the world I think must be amazing. Something about birth... particularly the way I was at my home birth... my midwife never made it so my mum delivered my baby. It was me and her, and my daughter did come downstairs and she was two and three-quarters at the time and my husband was certainly focussed on her. The way my labour was going I didn't feel I needed him. Not in an unkind way, because he was really helpful the first time, but my body was just doing it and I was really glad he was there. It made me think a lot about when people have... my friends in America tend to do this... they might have their husband or partner or whoever there but they make it quite like a female environment. Particularly the friends I know who are midwives: if one of the midwives in their tribe is having a baby they all gather and it's a real, intense sisterhood community thing. Which I haven't really experienced and maybe next time when we're not in a pandemic and I can have who I want there, maybe I'll do more of that kind of thing. The balance of yes, important for the baby's dad to be there but they have their own perspective on the experience kind of out of it. In itself, it's quite like a woman experience... I'm not very sure where I sit on that but I think it's interesting.

Salma

Both times... how empowered and strong I felt afterwards, knowing I could go through something like that. I didn't feel at any point I couldn't get myself through it I just felt so strong. I felt like I could take on the world a little bit. You're on this positive high, going through this process and you're like 'I've birthed a human, and I did this myself'. Maybe I wasn't expecting to feel this way, so part of me was a little bit scared that I may end up with postnatal depression

and not to feel like that, and to feel strong and positive and powerful was such a nice feeling.

Imogen

Those things aren't necessarily mutually exclusive... I didn't have anything severe with my first but I did have the low a few days after with my hormones, but if you say to me 'on what days of your life you felt the most amazing?', the days that I've given birth to my babies. If I could bottle up that: I guess it's a combination of the hormones and the relief and the fact that you've done it. My mum always says you don't get any medals when you're giving birth, but I kind of felt like I did. I was like yes! because it wasn't exactly to plan but the big things I wanted I got and actually that meant a lot to me. I think I said once – it's a really cringey quote – 'when I gave birth that day I felt afterwards like a cross between Wonder Woman and Kate Middleton'. After the birth we had to film a little segment to show to our church as part of the online service. So I had a shower, I did my make-up, put on clothes, held my baby and I was like, wow, I can do it all. I can conquer the world. Sure you hit reality and there are tricky bits and you're tired and all of that... maybe it's how people feel after they're run a marathon, but you really feel you've achieved something. What your body has done... that is just the most amazing feeling.

Caroline, Kate and Kerrie

Caroline

Well, the reason we went for a home birth really, was we went to a hypnobirthing class and they told us a story of a lovely birth and making your nest and being really comfortable and it all sounded so perfect and then they said at the end it was a story about a cat. So in the car on the way home, my husband just said 'why not have it at home?'. It really took me by surprise. I was about six months at the time and the pandemic was just kicking off and that really tipped us over the edge. We thought we might go in... I know hospitals now are such a safe place to be. I think with hindsight I would have been less worried, but this was the start of lockdown one when everyone was panicking and so at that time we thought we'd really rather be somewhere we feel safe. I very much thought I couldn't do a home birth until I did it, and then I realised I could. It was so good to be at home, there were just so many things I didn't have to worry about. I spent most of the time leaning over the sofa... I'm not very good at breathing at the right time and I didn't really plan things like that. I just didn't really think about it that much. I was saying 'I can't do it!' and the midwife said 'yes, you can, I've seen all the affirmations on your fridge'.

Kate

I don't think I ever thought I couldn't do it. You know my training as a vet just showed me you might get some problems and I kind of thought maybe we're just particularly bad at it, but really we're not. Standard labour is 24 hours for any mammal really for a first birth...

The comic timing of farmers should not be underestimated. Some of them work alone and some are waiting for the audience, for that right moment when somebody's there to hear the joke they've been

polishing for the last 10 years. I was a vet student, I was 20 and I was out working with a vet and we were called to a farm where there was a heifer – so that's a first-calving cow – having difficulty getting the calf out. The basic interventions are exactly the same as they are for people, so we would do an equivalent of the forceps delivery for this one. The piece of equipment we used, instead of those two spooky-looking blades, because they are coming out foot-first, is you put something around their 'wrists' and join in with the pulling. So it's incredibly similar to a forceps delivery.

She was a heifer, there was a bit of a size mismatch – she wasn't big, the calf was huge. So the vets got the chains on the four limbs of the calf and he's right in there up to his armpits. He's struggling away and depending on the weather you'll find that vets either end up covered in waterproofs or stripped to the waist. It's a highly comic enterprise. So it was hot: he was stripped to the waist. Everything's everywhere and this cow is making very classic birthing noises and she's bellowing away and he's bellowing away and the farmer at this moment turns to me and says 'so do you want kids?'. It was great. Of course at the time it made me laugh and I was like 'what do you say?'... but it's not totally dissimilar, it isn't.

I feel like my whole approach to birth and mothering is very much influenced by my work. It's not dissimilar, it really isn't. I found rubbish sheep are one of the most comforting things when it comes to having new babies. When sheep have their first babies, you expect 5% more of them to die because they're rubbish. They just don't know how to do it, they can't persuade them to have milk, they can't keep them warm, they lose track of them, they forget which one is theirs and start looking for someone else's. I don't think I'm at risk of that but it's quite nice to know that mothering is learnt in all species. It's not something that comes naturally. This is something that many mammals are so bad at. I find that a comforting thing when you're laying awake at night and can't get them to feed or whatever. It's learnt, it's not magic. It doesn't happen by itself. What mammals are good at is learning things.

Kerrie

With my first birth, I had stayed really calm, really controlled and I was concentrating on my breath, but when the pushing stage came, I did start mooing and in between the contractions I would say 'oh I'm sorry I don't know why I'm mooing' and then I guess it was the adrenalin or a realisation and then another contraction would come and I'd moo again. I just had no control over it.

Kate

Yes it turns out most mammals make very similar sounds.

Kerrie

Whereas with this birth with my daughter I just breathed her out and I just stayed really quiet and just focussed on the breath. I guess I've done a lot of yoga and meditation, but I didn't feel it was particularly that. I just went with it. She even... the contractions stopped for a while and she was just edging down very gently by herself and I was just breathing very calmly and it was very quiet and very peaceful. I think I just turned off. I was feeling quite intuitive about it all. I think having had a baby before, I didn't really remember specific details of labour with my son: I think that's a common thing isn't it? You forget. When I was in labour with my daughter I remember thinking 'it's all coming back to me now'. You think I know what's going on here, I know what's going on here. I just felt... I knew she was coming, I knew I was pushing. I knew that my body was doing it all and that I could trust that, so I was just very calm and just breathing deeply and just breathed her out.

Caroline

I had lots of things prepared that I thought I'd want, but actually I didn't need them. I didn't need anything really. I had the tea lights ready but I didn't even get them out of the box. I had a TENS machine, but it was just hanging off me by the end, I'd forgotten all about it.

I very much
thought I
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a home birth
until I did it,
and then
I realised
I could.

Kate

I can remember having the bed in the spare room covered in waterproof sheets, so you know there was a waterproof sheet, then sheet and waterproof sheet and sheet, so you could just whip off a layer and know you're good to go again. I remember thinking 'that's done, now I'm ready'. I can remember really getting into making cups of tea and toast and enjoying that. Every time I'd make a cup of tea I'd forget and then think 'ooh, maybe I'll have a cup of tea', so I got in this funny tea-making cycle. I can remember slamming the door of the microwave very forcefully.

Caroline

I felt really proud of doing it without the pain relief. I'm still proud of giving birth in hospital, I still obviously did have my part – I did my bit in that – but it's just so different and I'm really glad I got to experience the home birth. In hospital you're so used to them being in charge whereas at home it's on your terms.

Kate

I think when I had been in hospital I hadn't thought I'd mind whether or not anyone was there, but given my own house it turned out I did. You know generally when things are coming out of you you're in the bathroom by yourself with the door closed. It turned out this was sort of my preference for this too. Probably one of my most productive hours of labour was by myself in the loo with the door closed. It was one of those strange things because of course the midwife very politely knocked on the door after about 20 minutes – because you know, they want to check – they said 'are you okay Kate?' and I said 'FIIIIINE!'. I think she took that as a sign I was fine and left. It was nice to be genuinely unobserved, have a door that was mine, that I was allowed to close. Cos often where I was when I was in hospital I don't think they even had a door... I'm trying to remember... but it was not really yours. It wasn't that I wanted to lock them out or anything, but actually I find in full-on second stage

pushing you're not having to think it's all happening as it's happening, but there are times when trying to think about the fact that you frankly look bonkers is a whole topic of conversation. You close the door and no one's even aware and I found that really helpful.

Wanting to be by yourself... as I always do, bringing in other mammals to this conversation: that's the early sign of labour in most mammals is that they're finding a space by themselves. So you're looking for your group of cattle in the calving paddock, the one that separated herself from the group. She's standing by herself. It's the only time you see... it's not like other mammals do much privacy-seeking. If they're social, they're social. If they're not, they're not. Giving birth is that time and we tend to phrase it as 'to hide from predators', but it's very well conserved behaviour [the behaviour of an animal as its defence against a changing environment]. I think we're just wanting privacy from predators too. I mean I doubt that they're feeling self-conscious.

You know interestingly with social species where they've really got to do this very active mothering, one of the things you're hiding from – and it's not totally dissimilar to, for example, our mothers... the other cows because they are all there about to give birth. Their maternal behaviours which are really a defined set of behaviours, can be stimulated to turn on. They're all right there and so they all come and lick each others' calves and part of why they're separating is because the other cattle come and I notice that's not a dissimilar thing with everybody wanting to hold your brand new baby and actually you want to say no... I think some of that privacy is about needing to establish that bond and have that first skin-to-skin contact and all that... that's a kind of separate motivation isn't it? It's seeking safety, it is seeking privacy, that insularity to introduce yourself to each other.

Kerrie

I was in the birth centre for my first birth and it was almost like a medicalised hotel room. It didn't feel like a hospital at all, it had

a bed and a sofa and a birthing pool and I had a midwife who had been a midwife for I think 30 or 40 years and she had a lot of home birth experience. She really liked doing home births... and she just kind of left us to it. We went in and she looked in on us maybe once or twice and at the time I was like 'oh I'm not getting any attention in here and what's going on' kind of thing. With hindsight I realise that she could see I was calm and in control and I didn't really need her, because of her experience I guess – she just left us to it. Which was really nice and private. That went really well and so we thought home birth might be even better.

Because of the pandemic, we were originally on the towpath, where we were supposed to be moored. As there were masses of people using the canal as their exercise area, it became quite crowded, so a friend asked a farmer if we could moor on his land which was on the opposite side of the canal: on the offside on private land. People don't normally moor there. We moored there with our friend because she was going to stay next to us in case we wanted anyone to have my son, and just for support. So we were on the offside and I was worried they wouldn't let me have a home birth because parking was difficult and we had to pull our boat over to the towpath side of the canal, get the midwives on and then pull it back over to the farmer's land and tie it up. We were just worried that they wouldn't let that happen, but they were just really supportive of everything we wanted and they just said 'we want you to have the birth that you want and we'll do anything to make that happen'.

For them to find us I had to draw up a map and a really extensive set of instructions and all of the midwife team were briefed on where we were and how it would go. Unfortunately on the night they were called away on a different birth and they weren't around. So when my husband phoned and said I was in labour and they needed to come, they sent a different team and they couldn't find us. Which ended up... I can't remember how many hours it was, but we were without a midwife for most of the birth. Then, like buses, two teams turned up at once because they'd heard there was a lady labouring

without any help. Then they all piled on, so I went from having no midwives to having five on our tiny narrowboat. I was fine. It was my second labour, so I knew what was going on: I was quite calm. My husband Charlie was trying to keep me calm by not telling me that they weren't coming, but I was aware... I knew what was going on. As soon as I heard him say on the phone 'we're on a boat...' I knew that it had gone wrong. I knew what was going on, I was pretty sure I knew what stage I was at. I'd been prepared to birth without a midwife because another friend on a boat had basically had to do that because they didn't find her. So I knew it was a possibility and I was calm... I was really confident that my body knew what to do and I was really confident that I would just instinctively know what to do. I wasn't worried.

Kate

I think it's a big event, most people want to talk about it. I think for the kind of person who ends up having babies at home you rarely have the most exciting birth story. You know, I went into labour, did some labour, had a baby. Which is perfectly normal and also an event. You know it's this major transition in your life and you can use lots of words like liminal, on the edge of being a mother and not a mother. Frankly there's everyone else who's got 37 billion stories about their emergency c-sections and the forceps and the this and the that... I find myself trying really hard to talk to people who are younger women or women who are pregnant and say 'I quite liked birth, it was fun... I quite liked it, it wasn't bad'. There's irritating people who say they like running marathons and it's not like every mile is comfortable, but as a process do it again. It's an important experience but it's not an awful one.

Caroline

There's this little cult group of home birth families and if you meet one you know you can just talk about it. Everyone wants to know everything, swap birth stories and you've just got that in common even if you don't have anything else in common. We had a picnic

last summer with quite a few home birth families and because a lot of people are similar, there's a lot of common themes. Eco-friendly mums, cloth nappies, breastfeeding: tend to go along with the home birth parents. In other ways people will be quite different, but you've got that one thing in common, home birth, that ties you all together. Friends and Facebook were ways I found out about it.

Kerrie

The thing I think is, if you'd had really good labour experiences sometimes it's quite hard to share that in a way, because there are so many people that have had other experiences. I remember going to baby groups and everyone talks about their labour experience with people they don't know and I think it's a natural part of the process where you're trying to process what's happened to you and get it off your chest. I always stayed quite quiet because sometimes I felt like I couldn't really say 'I had a really lovely, beautiful experience'. I felt a bit like it wasn't appropriate at times. Some people had really bared some things that they really had to get off their chest and I felt it would come across badly or something. Whereas, when I speak to people who are pregnant and they've never been through it before, I'm very evangelical. I very much want to tell my story so they know that it can be absolutely amazing. Particularly if you speak to someone with medical training I found, obstetricians I've spoken to in the past, just at parties... they've had some really bad experiences I guess, because they go in with the fear of all of this knowledge that they have and the statistics. Whereas I went in blissfully ignorant, but trusting my body.

Kate

I saw a really interesting thing that there's some cultures where women are encouraged to push... on-purpose push all the way right through labour. In my first labour they gathered around saying 'an anterior cervical lip' which is what you find when you have a look, in that early transitional bit. It was really interesting to me that you mustn't push. I end up slightly seeing the both sides of it at least in

mammals as a whole, in that this thing's got in a tangle and I need to stop you pushing so I've got space to untangle it and then we can get it out. So for example you can imagine scenarios where you can have a straight arm, for example. In that example you've got a very specific issue where the pushing is part of the issue: it's never coming through exactly like that. We'll have to reposition before we get it through. So at that point not pushing is a medical intervention, but I think that 'ooh don't push yet' stuff in what's probably a fine and normal birth... it's extrapolating out the 1% situation to be something we apply to everyone all the time.

Kerrie

I suppose the sensations can be quite intense, but you know with every sensation that it's just one step closer to them coming and it's such a magical thing that you can't experience any other time. So I'm glad that I've done it and it's just lovely. I don't know... I'm not doing it again though! Our boat is not big enough. A friend told me that... and I think friends had told her that when you feel that you're gonna die, that's when it's nearly over. I remember holding off on the gas and air and waiting for that feeling to arrive so I'd have a bit of something else in my armour to get over it and I never got to that point because I never felt like that at all during my labour. I never felt like I was gonna die. Luckily.

I don't feel like people telling me stuff like that... I don't think it's helpful because you're thinking of that. I feel like I'm quite kind of strong of mind, but you could see how that would influence you: thinking like that... 'oh I'm waiting until I feel like I'm gonna die'. It's not really a very positive thing to visualise. With my daughter, I was having contractions in a pub garden! Can you believe it? It was because we were just outside lockdown and we were allowed to go to a pub garden. It was a lovely day and it was a lovely boater's pub on the canal so a lot of my friends were there and one of my friends said to me... I was having contractions at the pub, but I didn't want to make a big scene so I didn't really mention it to anybody, but one

of my friends I think she knew. She said to me 'you know Kerrie, just remember it's not gonna last forever, these feelings, she'll be here in a minute' and I kept thinking that in my labour and it did really help. You know, thinking 'well it's not going to go on forever and she'll be in my arms in a minute'. That's what I kept thinking and I did message her as soon as my daughter came and said 'thank you, I don't know if you realise, but that was really useful, what you said'. I know some people are in labour for days but still in the grand scheme of your life it's really a short thing for this amazing person you're going to have in your life.

Caroline

I remember at one point the midwife offering me an examination and saying 'shall I check how far along you are?' and I replied 'yes': I was really up for it. I wanted a kind of idea of how long I had left, so she said 'pop on the sofa and lie down' and I just couldn't: I couldn't move. It was like I was frozen, I could just do what I was doing. She looked at me and she was like 'I don't need to examine you... I know how far along... I know it's going well'. So it got to about 11.30 at night and the midwife said she had one question, which was whether the baby would be born today or tomorrow and I remember thinking 'what?! it might be born in the next half hour?'. My previous labours had been so long and it was just such a relief to know this had an end. I think I just found that so useful, giving me that relief that it was moving on.

Kate

Nearly all of life you're perpetually early or late for something or other. There's this sort of constant stream of people and work and children and places to go and chores... and it's almost never where there's nobody who's gonna argue that you should be doing anything other than what you're doing exactly this second. When you do get past that bit where you do feel you need to say 'hello' to the midwife or whatever, and you're actually in it... settled, it's just gonna happen and it's a process out of time. It's going to take as long as takes.

I was just
very calm
and just
breathing
deeply and
just breathed
her out.

There was part of me that thought maybe my second labour would rush through, turns out that's not me. It's a process, it takes time. I'm not sure I regret that time. I didn't need it to take half the time or anything, but it was outside of all those normal requirements. You're not having to think about the places you need to be or the things you ought to be doing. It's one of the few times where there is literally a single thing you're meant to be doing and you are currently doing it. It's almost involuntary: it's happening, it's just existing and that's enough all by itself. You don't have to do anything else. I'm not sure I can think of anything else that's quite like that where you're just allowed to be doing the thing you're doing.

Those flow states... surgery perhaps? Good surgeons are well known for being used in these flow state experiments, being able to really calmly focus and concentrate. I think lots of people feel that way when they're doing crafts and gardening and stuff but generally you're stealing bits of time from the other bits of your life.

Kerrie

It was so... magical... so beautiful. So she was born on the boat and it was just what I had in mind of the perfect birth for me – and I'd discussed it with friends – what I wanted. I ended up getting exactly what I hoped for and that was for my son to stay asleep in bed and to have my daughter at home and for him to wake up as soon as she came out. He did stay asleep for the whole time I was in labour, amazingly, because the midwives kept coming past his head: walking back and forth. She literally came out, put her on my chest, sat down and my son woke up and came and got in the bed with us. We all cuddled and it was so beautiful. Then I had to birth the placenta, while he was there. I prepared him for that because I'd hoped he'd be there as soon as she came out. So I had shown him videos of people birthing placentas, but in the run up for some reason he decided he was quite squeamish about it, which was fair enough. So I had to discreetly birth the placenta without him noticing. Which we

managed to do! It was beautiful, it was exactly to a T. Everything I hoped it would be.

I had my first birth in a birthing pool, in a birth centre, with my son, and I wanted to have my daughter in the water but when I was talking to the midwife, it was basically 'you can have a water birth or a home birth'. We tried all kinds of weird and wonderful ways of paddling pools and different things – trying to make it work – building hot tubs on the farmer's land, but in the end it was kind of: if we're going to do it then I think I'll forget about the water birth because it just made everything more complicated. With water and hot water and the boat. It's hard enough having a shower. We've got a tiny bath, it's literally a hip bath. You can have your legs in it or your upper body and put your legs up the wall! So I thought, okay I'll have a bath and got in the bath during labour. I did spend quite a long time in the bath, but I did realise when my first contraction came that it was too small. I had originally hoped to have her in the bath but there was literally no space. I got quite vocal about that, sort of 'it's too small!'. It was soothing to be in the water. Warm water is such a lovely feeling – to be cradled by it – and the boat was in the water but I wasn't thinking about that at that point: the water around me.

I feel very proud, particularly that I did it at home. I feel very proud. I feel even more proud that I managed it on a boat, against all odds. I feel really strong and do call upon it at times when I feel I need to be strong and think 'well I've birthed a baby at home: I'm very powerful for being able to do that' and it does give me confidence in other things that may be difficult or challenging. It just makes me think that you can rely on yourself and your intuition and your body to do amazing things. I did feel so privileged that I was able to do it. So lucky and just, I dunno, it was just such a magical thing. There's nothing else like it and I just feel so, so grateful that I could do it.

Kate

Given the choice, I absolutely sought out isolation, not just a quiet, calm environment but a door to close. In both births I really did want the midwives there. I wouldn't be a freebirther, that wouldn't be the way I would go. What I found interesting was at home it was a little bit like when the boiler man shows up, when you need them to fix your boiler or whatever they're doing but you've also got to fix them cups of tea and be polite and say 'oh yes it's just over here behind the cupboard door' and make conversation. Cos actually I knew the midwife, I'd met her several times before, but it is your house and you're sort of hosting. It was a very odd feeling being in active labour... it's 12 hours and when she came I couldn't possibly talk in contractions. They were coming thick and fast, I was really busy and really focussed on what I was doing and yet I still had this sense of 'should I ask about her weekend?' or something. You know sometimes there are points that become oppositional, but it wasn't like that. I remember my daughter was back to back and I knew she wasn't moving and the midwife was saying 'you're getting on well' and I was thinking 'no I'm not'. Then after a while she said 'you're right', so she asked me to just do this side leg position and then said 'why not have a little snooze now... for maybe 20 minutes'. That was lovely and I could definitely feel her move then.

Kerrie

My daughter was back to back, so it was a bit more uncomfortable because I was labouring a bit more in my back with her. My husband spent a long time trying to spin her with a sarong. There's that South American technique, 'rebozo', where you cradle the bump with the sarong. I was on all fours and he was trying to spin her using the sarong, but it didn't seem to work and that was worrying me a bit, when the midwife hadn't come and we couldn't seem to turn her ourselves. I decided to get in the bath and just try and relax and just keep calm and focus on the breath and she ended up turning herself. In the bath I felt her turn and I knew she had. At that moment my

waters broke and things really ramped up. So it was really just because I relaxed that it happened, I think. I gave myself a talking to because... on all fours I was uncomfortable when he was using the sarong and I thought 'okay just go and listen to some music and relax... and breathe' and that's what I did and then it all went a lot better after I did that. Relax and breathe. That's all we gotta do.

I spoke to a close friend but she lives in Australia. She was a little bit ahead of me and had her ideal birth at home a couple of months before I gave birth and she had had a difficult birth first so that gave me a lot of insight, a lot of confidence, but other than that I think there are a lot more resources than there ever have been before... with obviously the internet and all of the midwives I spoke to were very pro home birth and I didn't find that so much with my first... I don't if that's times are changing or...?

Kate

I think that might be a first and second birth thing cos I had the same experience here where I was originally supposed to have a home birth and I went so late she was in hospital anyway so she was born in hospital. So I think they want you to have done it once and this time around when I had a birth it was all fine they were like 'oh yeah that's fine' and I think that for midwives that makes a big difference and I realise that yeah I think from my perspective of doing the other side of it I... you know the heifers are completely different from the cows... it's a whole other thing.

Caroline

See interestingly my midwife really didn't push it at all but I think that was because my first two weren't straightforward so my first being induced and my second required going to the special care unit and he had meconium in his waters and he needed breathing support. So I think when I went into my third-time midwife appointment, I talked about those straight away, I think they were like 'oh well try for the birthing centre then?', but they never really

talked to me about home birth. So it was only when I brought it up that actually none of those things that had happened in the first two were likely to happen again and maybe that was why I was very much like 'I can transfer if I need to' because I'd seen the circumstances in which you might need to transfer: neither of those births would have happened at home. The midwife wasn't at all pushy. She didn't kind of encourage it, it was only when I brought it up.

Kate

I'm gay and it's a bit like when you always have people... you always need to correct people, so I rarely come across anyone who's difficult about anything, like 'oh, what does your husband do?', 'well it's my wife actually'. Similarly I find where they're going 'well I suppose it would have been convenient – you're right by a hospital?', 'no I was at home actually'. You spend your life correcting people. Nobody would have ever assumed and I find it quite a similar experience.

Caroline

Well I loved it, one of my son's best friends had a baby brother recently and I said 'oh did you ask him about his little brother?' and he said 'I asked him if he was born at home or at the hospital' and I imagine his friend would have been like 'at the hospital obviously' because for most kids that's what they presume and I love that my little boy thought equally he might have had a little baby in the hospital like his younger brother, or at home like his younger sister. So I love that normalising of it.

Kerrie

Just to go back to the support thing, the people on the boat, there are a lot of people who have had boat births so I drew on that. I wasn't sure they would let me basically and I was really nervous because they had to do a practice run and it was really hard to park nearby and there's all these lanes and farms and the boat wasn't near where you can park the car. There was a lot of problems and

I was just telling everyone that I knew, can you not park here? Just make it go smoothly, so that they don't say you're not allowed to have it, but actually I don't know if it is the same with every midwife team but with this team it's not 'can I have this birth' it's 'I want this birth – you make that happen for me'. That's how they described it. Which I didn't expect, but they were so supportive.

Caroline

That's brilliant. I know that should be the norm, but you hear so many things of 'I wasn't allowed to do this...'; so it was good they were so supportive.

Kerrie

Yeah I agree. I was really shocked by it, really grateful. I thought they'd say 'no you're not allowed, too dangerous'.

Kate

I very much experienced that 'it's not allowed thing' the first time around when I was so late. Cos I declined induction and was having extra monitoring and then had kind of agreed a date that I would have induction that would be a bit later on and was in and it all got very 'well you'd have to go home against medical advice'. It got very... I wasn't going to sign a form saying I was having this baby against medical advice, that feels a bit much. It was all fine. I felt like it was alright. It was a pleasantly uneventful birth just like the second one. They were very similar: 12 hours over night. Born lunchtime the next day. We didn't see a doctor, it was fine. I could have been at home. There was no need for me to be there. It was strange at the time, 'ooh you'd have to do it against medical advice'. I think particularly as I was only living a mile from the hospital at the time. What did they think was going to happen in that intervening mile?

Kerrie

Yeah the induction thing... there's a lot of pressure I think but both births... both of mine were two weeks overdue and both times I had a lot of pressure. The first time they said if you're not in here by midnight, you're not allowed to come here – the birthing centre. You have to go straight to the hospital. Then with my second, the home birth, my midwife was very supportive. She said stand strong and you know if you say you want a home birth, you know you're not going to phone up and no one's going to come... they're not just going to leave you in labour and say 'well you didn't get induced so, you know, you're on your own'. So she was very supportive, but I was getting phone calls from the hospital saying 'do you know the statistics? it's very dangerous and you need to come in and be induced'.

Kate

Second time around. I gave myself four days extra. Never told a soul. It was so good! Just say at week eight, when they ask the first day of your last period, you're like 'it was then'. It made my whole life so much better. They only re-date you if you're more than a week out and I didn't give myself a whole week, I just gave myself a few days. I knew I wasn't that likely to have an early birth. So he was technically one week old and my whole life was better and they said 'he came very promptly' and I said 'yes, he did, didn't he'.

Kerrie

I think that for me was the real stressful part, you know, they were putting pressure on and I was saying I know I'm going against your advice. I think I know better and then they just sort of keep coming at you with statistics to try and sway you. I'm glad I didn't... This time around I was only 12 days over and I think they started up at 10 days when they started pressuring me. I don't know I felt like I had a feeling I'd make it before the 14 days, before the pressure got really bad. With the first they started with the pressure at 12 days I think

I'm always
happy to
talk about it
because it's
good to hear
the normal.

so that by 14 days you're ready with a plan rather than going over and over and then coming up with a plan.

Caroline

I think their procedures are so strict. The home birth midwife said 'you're fine, you don't need to be induced, but I still have to call up and book you in for your induction'. So I was booked in for my induction and she said 'it's okay, we'll tell them you're not going in'. The induction diary was so busy they had to book me in at 10 days over instead of the normal 12. It was like 'if it's so busy why are you putting me in there, and someone who actually wants to be induced will miss out on the slot and have to wait longer?'. It seems insane and my daughter did come by herself, but the first time I didn't know any better and I was induced at 12 days over and I swore never to be induced again.

Kate

I realised that these numbers... I know that occasionally there's a stillbirth and the problem of course of being a doctor is that you see all the problems. As a vet I remember at one point talking to someone about their Westie – you know a white, fluffy dog? I said 'oh they've probably got terrible skin' and they said 'what are you talking about?', because I'd only obviously see the ones with problems. I'd never see the normal ones. Similarly for the doctors they see the disasters, don't they? I feel like when they went in and did the extra monitoring and they were saying 'she's average size, good presentation, good fluid depth, good blood flow...'. I was like 'great, so now what's my risk? what decision am I making now?'. She wasn't big, she was seven pound six, you know 3.4 kilos: whatever number you prefer. She was average size, everything about her was average except apparently I cook babies for 42 weeks, not 40. It felt like nobody had any information once they'd done this investigation they brought the same statistics and I thought 'really? I'm tall, my family has late babies: she looks fine'. They were still saying that's the risk. The global, general average.

Kerrie

I think it's about the placenta too isn't it? They're worried about how long that will last and with my second the midwife said it was really good, condition, like a 37-week. There wasn't any graininess or anything. I could have gone for another two or three weeks, she said, but you just don't know until you see the placenta.

Caroline

With my first they moved my dates and I'm convinced they shouldn't have done that because I knew by my period dates but they induced me, but when he was born the midwife said nothing about him looking like an over-two-week baby. It's not an exact science is it?

Kate

During my pregnancy I was rushing around, my eldest had just started reception, my partner was ill. You know, but at least I had the birth I wanted. On the day I gave birth my partner went into hospital the same day. She had a bad cut on her leg, she fell off her bike, it got infected, she got severe cellulitis and the baby was born at three and she was at A&E by 5pm. He came out a bit sleepy and he didn't immediately feed and it wasn't easy peasy. My partner was being rushed to hospital, she was really quite unwell. She was in hospital for a week on IV antibiotics, came back having been more ill than any of us had ever been... proper ill, and so it took several weeks before she was well, before she could stand up and hang out a load of washing. Which is a fairly crucial activity. So it was really tricky. He lost weight, the GPs wouldn't see us. We ended up in A&E at one point and I was drowning in milk, there was so much milk I could have bathed him in it. He just refused to swallow it. So I ended up at one point syringing it in a millilitre at a time: expressed milk. My first was such a strong little feeder. She came out, she could just do this thing: it was really easy. Really easy in that I was up all night and up all day but that's the way it's supposed to be.

It was interesting how little lockdown came into our conversation actually... It made such a huge difference afterwards. Absolute lack of support. He didn't want to feed, he was just sleepy. So he lost a lot of weight and we just couldn't get any medical help for him early on. So it was really hard looking after a baby who needed help. Usually we would have seen the midwives and been in the breast-feeding clinic and the health visitors and all that kind of stuff. That was impossible to access, but in the throes of labour it turns out it's an activity out of time. Midwife comes and it's quite similar. Didn't make that much difference. I'm always happy to talk about it because it's good to hear the normal.

Amanda

I've always been fascinated with birthing, when I was 15 my aunt invited me to attend her birth. It was a medicalised birth and I didn't know anything about it, but that was my first glimpse of witnessing the whole experience. I became a personal trainer in my late teens. I worked with many, many pregnant women and after doing training with them and yoga, I thought wouldn't it be nice to become a doula and stay with them through the process. So I attended a lot of births before I had my own children, so I really saw the range of hospital birth, home birth... the different approaches: OB versus a midwife and I just knew way back when that I wanted to have my babies at home. That was obvious to me. When my husband and I started thinking about it, I said 'I'm just letting you know we're having our babies at home' and he was on board and he loved the idea. He comes from a family of doctors, so there was a little bit of conflict there because they accused us of being irresponsible and 'it's dangerous'... We stood in our truth and said 'you don't have to agree with us, but this is what we're doing'.

When I was pregnant with my daughter I saw a midwife and opted out of what I thought was a lot but still went along with a lot of the routine... the anatomy scan, the gestational diabetes test, the GBS strep test. Only one sonogram [ultrasound], but I engaged with the system and I felt really great with my midwives. Her birth was 70 hours long, over three days and the midwives were saying 'this is normal, everything's fine, everything's good: you're fine, baby's fine' and I never felt afraid or nervous or anything. It was a really intense experience because of how long it was, but I felt so amazing after because I had done it and I felt respected and received and cared for. So I had a doula at that birth and it was amazing... it was so amazing. My daughter was about two and a half when I got pregnant and I started to learn about freebirth. Prior to that I had

not known this was a thing or an option, even through all my work of being a doula. So I was really experimenting with it and trying it on. I had already contacted the midwife who was here with me for my first child and I was very open with her. I said 'I'm thinking about a freebirth and I don't know: I'm just not sure'. She was amazing, she engaged me in conversation. Every appointment that we had I said 'okay if this happens or that happen what do I do?'. Talk about not having an ego, she was like 'I trust you if you want to do it that way... I could be waiting outside in my car, I could FaceTime you, I could show up after'. So she really gave me the space to have the freedom and the flexibility.

So of course it was during the pandemic and this time around I opted out of all of the routine tests. So I didn't have any sonograms, I had no GBS, gestational diabetes: nothing, nothing. I went past my due date one week and then as we were approaching week two the midwife said 'look I have no problem staying with you and letting you go for as long as this pregnancy goes, but I want you to do a sonogram': because of her liability reasons... and I really didn't want to. I had a whole body... I didn't want to engage with the system at this point. Especially because I was now 42 weeks and I know they're looking for something to be wrong and I didn't want them to tell me anything. So I asked her 'hey can we just wait two more days? I have a feeling this baby's coming, can you just give me two more days? I really want to avoid this'. Cos she said 'I will not be able to provide your care if you do not do this'. I get it, she's still engaged in the medical system and she still has to cover herself. But sure enough I went into labour and because my first experience was so long and drawn out I kind of thought it would be similar – maybe not three days – but when my labour started it was full on. So my husband called the midwife, thinking she would come over and then leave, but by the time she came over I was IN IT. However, she basically stayed in my living room and I stayed in my bedroom and so I really navigated the experience myself and she would pop in occasionally and check in, but I feel like she really respected that I wanted it to be on my own.

So he was born in seven hours. It was actually harder than my first birth because of the intensity. He was also two pounds bigger. He was just a big, big baby... and I did it and it was wonderful. I didn't have a doula this time around, because I was thinking freebirth, so the less people the better, but I was really glad actually the midwife was here and we were able to come to a mutual understanding of her role. I never felt like she enforced anything or I consented to everything. So it was sort of like the freebirth I wanted without having to sacrifice a wise woman being present. I did feel like the freebirth was really enticing, but there was a part of me that was not totally sure. So the fact that I was able to find a midwife who was able to be flexible and accommodating... I love the fact that she said 'I'll wait in my car if you want, or I'll FaceTime you if you want or have the baby and I'll come right after'... she really was so open and I know it's not the norm. It was a relief because now two weeks – and I know due dates are not real – but you have this idea in your head and I thought I was going to go early and then every day that passed it was pushing me and pushing me... so there was a sense of relief when it actually did happen. There was a sense of relief that I did it at home. We also didn't know gender and my husband really wanted a boy . During my labour I said 'I'm never doing this again, I don't care what it is, I'm never doing this again' so I was relieved it was a son.

I did it and I navigated and I made it happen again. This was also without the sonogram, this was also without someone on the outside telling me my baby was okay, so relief that yes: I leaned into the mystery, I leaned into the unknown, I didn't put myself or my baby under surveillance and he's perfect. There were points in my pregnancy... 'am I crazy?' or 'am I doing the right thing? am I making the right choice? what if something is wrong?'. So I feel like the biggest word I had was relief. The midwife was still with us here after. He took a little time to adjust, he had something called transient tachypnea, which is just a high respiration rate and he was making a noise like 'erh, erh, erh' for several hours and so I was so glad the midwife was here to check on me, check on him. She stayed and it was just we had an intense birth and he needed a little time

to settle. I was so glad she was here for the postpartum experience, cos it is a whirlwind. I went through this insane experience and if it had just been me and my husband I'm sure we would have been fine but to have her wisdom, to have her holding space, to have her walk me to the shower and stay with me in the bathroom, right? and just usher me in. I feel like... priceless. So worth it.

There's two of the midwives: they work together. In my first pregnancy they alternated for prenatal visits. So I was either going to get midwife a or midwife b. I was okay with that because at least I had rapport with both of them. The second midwife got breast cancer, so my midwife... I knew I was getting her and only her. I liked that very much and when I was pregnant with my daughter I kind of wanted that too and I got her and it was nice to know she saw me in one of my births and then she was able to see me in a subsequent birth. We already had the rapport, we already had the respect, we already had the trust. It was really good, because a lot of my prenatal appointments were virtual. So if I had just met her, I wonder how I would have felt, because there's something about having a midwife or a wise woman come and touch your belly and look you in the eyes and touch your skin... you know? That matters. I work with women and I was talking with one of my clients last night and she is with an OB. The OB goes and delivers, but in the practice there are six other doctors who deliver and I said 'are you comfortable with that? you have a one in six chance of getting any one of these OBs that you have no relationship with... they're never even seen you... they don't know anything about you... and maybe that's okay for you: maybe you don't care?'. For me relationships and intimacy are so important, especially around birth that I can't imagine walking into an environment and having a stranger usher me into motherhood.

He was born on a Tuesday night and I started to get some signs on Sunday and a little bit into Monday and I knew that it was coming. I felt that my belly was tightening and I knew we were approaching the gate. Then I was very thrown off by how quickly I went from... I was cooking breakfast and thinking, I was like 'I think today's the

day' and it just took me. That's when my husband called the midwife, because I think he was also surprised that I went from being totally fine to in my room not wanting to talk... being really thrown into it. I remember even then being able to hold conversations and my daughter was here so I was worried about her... because we were possibly having a freebirth he kept running from our room to downstairs to check on her and I couldn't totally surrender. I was so concerned 'did she eat? did she pee? is she okay?'. So we decided also to call my mom and have my mom come... and once my mom arrived to be with her then I felt I was able to let go and fully immerse into the experience. I remember when my mom came I ran out and I was crying and my mom looked afraid. I said 'No mom, I'm okay'. I remember saying 'this is just really hard and really intense'. Once she went downstairs with my daughter and I knew they were playing and she would be here, that's when I feel it really took over. I surrendered, I let my body move all these different ways... squatting, one leg up, hands and knees...

At a certain point I had this instinct: I need to get in the shower. Went in the shower, lights were off, hot water and then getting out of the shower I had this strong instinct to lay down. I fell into like a sleep. I was still having contractions and I remember not giving into the contractions because I was so tired and then as I was coming out of that sleeping state my water broke, which was also a relief. That was a sign that this was really happening and not long after that I was ready to push. The midwife did suggest 'would you sit on the birth stool?'. I think she knew that the baby was very big. I think she knew that I pushed for three and a half hours with my daughter. My pelvic outlet is on the narrow side, so I think she had the insight to suggest this position and it was definitely terrifying. I remember sitting on the stool and feeling exposed, vulnerable, weird... going into the fire, you know? At one point I said 'no, no, no, I'm going to lay down' and I tried to lie down but it was so excruciating. I think because I was trying to temper the sensation. Then I ended up giving birth on the stool and it was great. I didn't feel this way with my daughter, but I felt a moment of terror: of this is so intense and this

is so overwhelming. Not that I was afraid of the experience, but 'I think I might die. I think this is it', because I could not even fathom how he was going to come out. I was in a lot of sacrum pain. This particular birth felt really in my bones. Whereas with my daughter it felt much more muscular. I went for cranial sacral after he was born and the woman was like 'oh do you know your tailbone is a bit fractured? what happened?' I thought 'oh!'. It gave me so much insight because no one had really seen or validated me up to that point. No one said 'you went through something hard and there's evidence in your body'. She said that was why it might have been so painful, because there might be a little fracture.

First birth I was flat on my back pushing, after three days I was exhausted. A lot of coaching, a lot of manipulation to get her out and my midwife also knew the more hands-off the better... less intervening. We talked about it in advance. So I was able to reach down... and he was so slippery that she helped me because I felt like I would drop him. That was a really cool experience to be the first one... as opposed to them doing it to me and placing the baby on me.

I wasn't afraid... the word that comes to mind is terror. There was a terror of 'I have no choice but to go through this now' I am literally at the gate: baby is crowning. There's no option here. The only way out is through. Being on the birth stool still felt so open in a way... I think it was one of the only ways he would have come out. Once he was out and knowing the size of my pelvis the midwife said 'you probably would have ended up with a c-section in the hospital because you were moving with freedom and authority and intuition'. I wasn't thinking 'right I'm going to put my leg up now', it was sort of like I was just moving in all of these ways, that was my inner wisdom. So I wonder in the hospital, would I have been able to get on the floor? Would I have been able to put one leg up? I was so thankful too that I didn't do that final sonogram because they would have noticed he was a big baby. I was thinking I was having the same-sized baby as my daughter, maybe slightly bigger. I didn't expect a two pound

difference. It wasn't in my head 'I'm having a big baby, am I going to be able to do this?'. So when they weighed him and we saw it go to nine pounds, two ounces, I was stunned. I thought 'oh that's why it was so hard...that's why my belly was so big... that's why this was so intense'. I know for so many women they go for the sonogram: oh you're having a big baby... of course that's going to induce fear. Of course that's going to make women doubt their ability. So I was really thankful I stuck to my guns about that... I don't wanna open Pandora's box in the final moments of this pregnancy – where I avoided all of it – for them to tell me you're having a big baby or your fluid's low or whatever pathology they would have given me for that moment.

Oh my goodness, so many sounds. Interesting, with my daughter I was really quiet, I was more reserved. I think in a way I was trying to control it and that's why it was so long. I wasn't unleashed, I wasn't primal. I was still trying to yoga my way through it. With all the pictures... they look like there's a peace to it. With his birth there were moments I was screaming. I was so loud: it helped transcend the pain, because it was so much more intense than with her that I had no choice but be vocal. To help dissipate some of that and howling really. Much more vocal and I think because I felt more freedom this time around – from giving birth to her, to him – I've evolved, I've grown. I think with her too I was a little bit more self-conscious. Also, we were in a very small apartment for her birth, so there was me, my husband, the midwife, the midwife assistant, the doula in about a 500 square foot space. So it wasn't a conscious holding back, but I do feel like I did. I did. I think at that point in my life I was still trying to control, still trying to hold back. Whereas this time around I couldn't, even if I wanted to I couldn't because it took me to a new level of intensity. Everyone was like 'oh it's not going to be like your first birth, it'll be easier... second babies – they're easier'. It was not easier. So less giving an f really and also because I was in my room alone for most of it and feeling the privacy, feeling the respect, feeling the space. It was also interesting, because my mom was here and my mom and I are close but not that close, but even

that didn't cause me to tone it down. So I was proud of myself for that: that even with her presence, I wasn't afraid to really go full primal.

I think it carries over, because I couldn't personally walk through that portal, have that experience and go back to being the same woman. I felt that way with my daughter too, that though there were a lot of people and I didn't totally unleash, I still did it. In a way, yes, I did give over and I endured for 70 hours without a single pain medication, without anything to numb me, without any fear. So I'm really proud of that too and I came out of that a different woman too. This time it's even more so. So, no, I don't think it was a singular experience and I can't compartmentalise it to just that. It's changed my cellular make-up. Right? It's changed my biology. I feel more courageous and confident and solid and robust and just really clear on who I am and what I know to be true, especially around birth.

Most women I know give birth in hospitals and because I'm tapped into the Free Birth Society – that's sort of my crew of radical women – I don't know many of them personally and a lot of them don't live in New York. Most women in New York are giving birth in the hospital and so I'm just more clear now that I... as a doula prior to giving birth to him, I would attend births in hospitals and I would support women and now I'm pretty clear that I will not step foot in the system. That if they want to, kind of in a way, use me virtually: if they're in the hospital and they need someone to call and run something by or ask for a second opinion, that's fine. It just became clear to me, maybe a week ago that I could no longer pretend that that's a safe environment. That's hard because I'm going to turn away a lot of business, but I also hope to attract the women who say wow, that says something if she's not even willing to step foot in that kind of environment... because I know the truth about birth and the hospital doesn't support the truth about birth. I think after she was born, I was still acquiescing... 'okay women I'll come with you and be with you and I'll give you a false sense of security that I can protect you or advocate for you or do anything for you, when in reality it's so

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stacked against you that I can't. I think at this point I'll only attend freebirths or home births and own that and stand by that. They don't even know that they're being passive, they don't know that they're not consenting, they don't know that they're being abused. They don't know that it's violence, right?

The other night I hosted a village pre-natal: it's a women's circle where we honour the pregnant women and we say share your dream birth and then share your fears and here's a safe space. I did it with a good friend of mine – she co-hosted – and when women were given the opportunity to speak their dream birth they spoke for like one minute and the bar was so low. After it was over, my friend and I debriefed together and she said these women are basically saying the mantra 'healthy mom, health baby'. Which is code for you guys survive it: you come out alive. There was no richness of their imagination. It was like they were afraid to want to have a good experience. It's like 'oh whatever they say or whatever I need to do...'. The first woman who went, spoke for a minute and so she set the tone and in women's circles you don't really interrupt: everyone takes responsibility and for lack of a better word I was a little disappointed. She said 'I want to stay at home for as long as possible and I want to try and have it naturally, but you know...' and I felt 'ohh... want more for yourself! want for for your baby, want more from this experience'. So I'm rebranding to use this language of: Your birth matters. The experience matters. You have to raise the bar. You have to become the authority. You have to become an active participant. This is reclaiming birth. We need to reclaim birth.

Before he was born I was still doing personal training, I was still teaching yoga and I was doing a little bit of birth work and now I'm not going back to the fitness industry. I'll teach yoga here and there but no, I need to remind women of their power and their intuition and their wisdom. So even if they choose to birth in a hospital at least they're doing it from a point of awareness and not control, but they have a say. I did a session with a woman last week and she wanted me to help her make a birth plan. We went through all the

choices and she said 'I can't believe I could choose these things!' and I was like 'that's the point! that's the point – what do you want to do when your baby comes out? what do you want to do with your placenta? do you want to be hooked up? do you want to be tethered? do you want freedom of movement?'. I said 'I hate to use this but what are you "allowed" to do? you need to know before you step foot what you're signing up for'. I said to this woman 'you can make this beautiful plan... and backtracking, that's when you sign up with a provider you want to make sure there's an alignment': I think women don't even realise that. Do they share the same philosophy about birth? What's their read of natural physiologic birth? I'm working with another woman and I had her ask her provider these questions... the epidural rate is 95%. So I said 'let's just back up for a second: that means they almost never see normal, natural physiologic birth... now if you know you want an epidural and you're cool with that, fine, but if you're trying for a natural birth would you go to a place where you have a 5% chance of actually achieving that?'. 'They have a 25% c-section rate, one in four women who go through that practice are going to get a c-section: are you okay with those odds? are you okay with those statistics?'. So I think she was shocked. She was like 'I chose this provider because someone recommended it and it's convenient to my house'. So it's more revealing how disconnected women are in this experience.

So one of the easiest things I tell them is 'start following birth accounts on Instagram, start normalising birth and start looking out for it, start seeing it'. I think women don't see birth... the internet, you could see plenty of women giving birth in the woods or at home, in tubs... 'Start sensitising yourself to what this actually looks like.' Then I have sessions with them where I tell them 'okay, let's say you want an epidural, let's engage with what that looks like: you're tethered, you can't move, constant foetal monitoring, IV... it's not so simple as "oh I just want an epidural", all of a sudden the whole picture changes...'

'Let's take out the epidural: you're moving around, you're walking, you're squatting... you could go into the back room for privacy.' 'Maybe you're not hooked up, maybe you're not tethered... what's important for you? what's your intuition?'. Women feel it, they are just so afraid. They are just so afraid. We live in a time where we look outside of ourselves for authority, we look outside of ourselves for permission, we want someone to tell us that it's all okay, we want someone to assure us that we're safe. So I'm trying to remind women: that's a false sense of security. That's not real. All these interventions and we still have some of the worst outcomes in the industrialised world. So now it's more woman to woman, more grassroots. But I just went back to work two weeks ago. I really want to speak on a larger platform about this idea of reclaiming and rewilding birth. Even if you still want a birth in the system, to do it from a more conscious place. It's brutal work: it's not gonna touch everybody.

I'm trying to tell women, how you birth matters because it's imprinted on your cells, it's imprinted on your biology and on your babies. It can be the primal wound. Do you want your baby's first interaction with the world to be violent, aggressive, drugged, numb? Then we wonder why women are suffering in postpartum and depression. I try to also tell them that birth trauma is normalised, but it's not normal. Again the bar is so low – well if you survived it you shouldn't really care how it happened. If you walk out of the hospital with a baby, who cares how the baby got here? I'm trying to say no, that's incorrect. I have a lot of work cut out for me. For example I love Free Birth Society and I love being in a group of radical women who own their experiences, but it's too much of a jump for most women. To go from the indoctrination of the allopathic system and 'I'm going to give birth in a hospital' to 'I'm going to freebirth'. Even for me that was a jump and I had a home birth. So I really want to speak to the women who are still in the system who maybe have a curiosity or pull or a wondering, but they're too afraid. I want to sort of be the bridge for women either to own their birth to the degree that's possible in the hospital, or say there's another way

and this way's totally valid and safe. They don't believe that home births are safe and I don't believe hospital births are safe, so that's where I feel my target audience will be.

Unfortunately – especially in America – we're owned by pharma, we're owned by the medical system and you deviate and you're shunned or you're labelled crazy. When we told my in-laws that we were going to have a home birth with my daughter, they accused me of endangering the life of me and my baby. They were like 'home births are for people who live in villages, not people who live in cities' and we told them at 38 and a half weeks, because we knew that it wasn't going to be received well. It was the first time, you know and I was trying to protect my mentality and what I knew to be true. When you're pregnant you're very sensitive to others' opinions and their stories. Second time around they knew from the beginning we were doing this. As the days passed where he wasn't coming, they were like 'at what point are you going to go to the hospital, what point are you going to give yourself over to the system and induce...?'. We said 'we're not, we will wait for when this baby is coming'. Awful... and I know people have good intentions but every day getting text messages 'did the baby come?' and feeling almost in a way some externalised pressure. Thinking I was going to go early and then week after week passing and then people are wondering are you okay and they start getting worried and they start getting afraid. It was just really hard to stay rooted and know this is my path and this is right and I appreciate people's good wishes. At some point I had to stop answering because I was getting sucked into the despair of 'what's wrong, why isn't the baby here?'. Every day waking up and 'no, no'.

The hardest part about pregnancy I feel is the days after your due date. With my daughter I went into labour on my due date, even though she was born three days later. I never had to experience the post due date waiting and wondering and not giving over to the fear or the deep questioning of 'is this right?'. I'm so glad I really stayed anchored. I was very happy I had friends in the Free Birth Society, that I could post a question 'I'm 41 and 7' or whatever, and them

normalising and embracing it and several of my friends too who feel faith and trust and belief in me. My husband, who never once doubted or never once said I think we should seek outside help. The midwife gave me a tremendous amount of confidence, because when I was trying on this idea of freebirth she said 'look, I believe in you, I trust you – if that's what you want to do: you do it, I have no doubt you'll be able to do it' and so having her have my back – this medical professional, trained, licensed midwife – saying 'yes, have your freebirth if you want your freebirth'. She saw me in the first birth and said 'you have mental reserves most women don't have... to be able to go 70 hours without wavering – I know that you have the internal fortitude to do this – I'm not worried about that for you'. I agreed, 'yeah'.

In my former life I used to be a competitive boxer and I spent since I was 14 years old exercising, working out: so I'm no stranger to body sensations, I'm no stranger to physicality and endurance and stamina and being pushed and burning. Stepping into the ring required a tremendous amount of mental fortitude and determination and toughness. So I feel like in my 20s I didn't know that that experience would prepare me and now it's oh so obvious. Of course that experience of boxing gave me skills... of tremendous belief in myself: going toe to toe with myself, learning how to be present, learning how get knocked down and get back up. So many things that have infused... and even into motherhood. I'm an advocate of preparing, exercising, strengthening yourself, meditation, visualisation, mantras, making birth boards, affirmations. You're about to go into the marathon of your life. So many women think 'oh I'll just show up'. You don't have to exercise to be able to give birth, but will it help you? Will it help your recovery? Will it help you manage a little bit better? Yeah, for sure.

I think with my daughter I had a hard time letting go and with him I had no choice but to let go. I spoke to my mom in detail about her two births – back then they didn't offer epidurals – you went in and you had your baby and I was like 'if my mom did this... my mom is

not weak but she doesn't like being uncomfortable in any way'. If my mom was able to birth two babies unmedicated, in a hospital and come out of it saying she had good... I asked her 'did you feel like you were heard, seen, did you feel like you were respected?'. She said 'yeah'. She has no birth trauma whatsoever. If my mom was able to do that without drugs, I definitely could. I think more women need to be reminded of this. Our moms did it. No pain, no drugs. My mom said 'I don't even think I got a sonogram'. You went to the hospital and you had a doctor and her doctor was a male, but she was like 'I just don't remember this fearful, high risk, all of these tests... it was so straight forward'.

I feel hopeful. I feel like there's a tremendous amount of work to be done. I feel like New York women are like alpha women and they're strong and powerful in some respects, but they've lost connection to the feminine. They've lost connection to this power. They're still seeking authority and they are devoted to the medical system. They don't believe in themselves. They don't believe they can do this. I think most hospitals have a 95% epidural rate, so how many women are numb to the experience? So I'm hopeful, but I also know: huge task in hand. Right now my work is largely one-on-one, but if I could shift a handful of women. If we could start to change some minds... and hopefully as I start to get into my work more, because I've only really been doing this two weeks... I cannot go back to personal training. I cannot go back to working with men. This is it. Reclaiming birth is where I have to go. I hope to write a book or start a podcast: get it out there more, because I'm only one person. How many more people can I reach? So I'm figuring out a larger platform to... all I want to do is remind them. It's inside of you. We're here because women freebirth. We're here because women home birth. We're here because babies were born outside of the system before the system took over.

Normal, natural, physiologic birth gives you the peak of oxytocin that you will ever have in your life. Love is hormonal! Love is biology. You're getting these vast peaks of these bonding love hormones,

so as simple as that. For some women who are given epidurals or given drugs, who don't have the oxytocin have a harder time with so many things: breastfeeding, bonding, connecting. It's no surprise that women are experiencing depression and anxiety and rage and even post-traumatic stress. They have a traumatic birth and then they're handed this babe and like: good luck! I also strongly believe that how you birth informs how you mother. I went into mothering both times really confident, really solid, really in charge: because I was the authority on my birth. I knew that I knew my baby best, that I was fully capable of this because I had the birth that I had. So it was easy to bond with them, easy to love them because the whole time we're linked. With him, I didn't have any proof on the outside that he was okay, so I had to keep tuning in and connecting... yes, we're safe, we're connected. So it started even before he was born. It's also reclaiming your power not just in regards to birth but in regards to the whole arc. I love talking about birth and I don't think women really get to speak about their birth stories. Every time I share it, it's like there's a new nugget of wisdom or something that becomes clear to me. I keep pulling from these experiences: there's so much wisdom to be harvested. He's only five months, I'm still newly postpartum.

Emily and Catherine

Emily

I had my little girl in May last year, so she was a lockdown baby. I remember really vividly being on a Zoom call with lots of my family and feeling really miserable because I was part of an NCT group that had gone crazy that day. Everyone was going into panic about the fact that the midwife-led unit was closing and that birth partners might not be allowed on the ward. There was all this negativity going around and I was still very much at work and busy at that time and I had to hide my phone because the WhatsApps were just going out of control. I looked at them with sort of half an eye and then went on this first ever big family Zoom call and just was being really negative with everyone saying 'oh it's going to be awful... my husband is not going to be able to be there'. Everyone in my family just thought 'there goes Emily', I think. I'm known for being a bit of an exaggerator. Like lots of us, at the beginning we thought lockdown wasn't going to last very long, but in lots of ways I think lockdown actually helped me to probably have a much more positive birth experience than I may have done.

I live in a terraced house and I remember that first – way before lockdown – appointment with the midwife. She said when she was filling in all those forms 'would you consider a home birth?'. Me and my husband Bob just laughed and said 'no!': we live in a terraced house and couldn't imagine putting the neighbours through that. Once there was that slight doubt that my partner might not be able to be at the hospital with me... I'm really lucky, I've never had to be in hospital for operations or things. So to me they are places I am a bit nervous of and I started to think I really don't want to be in hospital if I don't need to be. I'd been lucky, my pregnancy had gone very smoothly. So I phoned to make – what I told Bob – was an enquiry and about 10 minutes later I'd been transferred over to the

home birth team. I was very lucky that it all then aligned, especially as a first-time mum: that I was able to have that home birth.

On the 19th of May I saw my mum for a socially-distanced walk and we were stood outside our house by our wheelie bins and I was saying '20th May: that would be a nice date of birth' and the baby was due on the 30th. It was really hot then and we'd gone on a ridiculous walk around Forbury Gardens. I'd walked way too far and that night I did have really bad back pain but I have a bit of a dodgy back anyway and didn't think anything of it. As far as my husband was concerned there had already been quite a few 'oh, is this it?' moments. He'd given me a bit of a back massage and then suddenly I was leaking something, but again new to it all 'is this my waters breaking? it's not dramatic like the movies'. It wasn't for me, I know it can be for some women. Anyway, we did ring the home birth team at that point. They were lovely, but very relaxed and very much said 'go to bed, try to get some rest' and I did pregnancy yoga and my yoga teacher always used this phrase 'rest and nest' as if that period of time can be very long. I got in bed and lay there... honestly – I know time goes out the window – five minutes, maybe 15 minutes. No way! I was in agony. So I got up and I went and sat in what is now the baby's nursery – with a book, which was a bit ambitious – and I managed to download a contractions timer app because I couldn't even focus enough on timings.

So that was maybe 11 o'clock and I then went and woke Bob up at two. I was like 'no, no this really is happening' and he still didn't really believe me. He's one of those laid-back, almost horizontal, people. He did phone the midwife back for me and was being very slow on the phone, saying 'yes, Emily does still seem to be having contractions and yeah... they're getting a bit faster'. I was looking at him and in the end he gave the phone to me. The midwife came out eventually after several 'they need to be closer together': it was about four o'clock in the morning when she came out. I think she really thought she was coming out to say it's going to be hours and hours. She did appear to move in with all her stuff before she

gave me an examination and she was hugely respectful of my desire to have the lights off even though it must have been much more tricky for her. I suppose that is the thing for me about having a home birth is that it puts you in so much control. I think perhaps particularly for a birth partner – if your birth partner is your husband and it's their home too or the person that you live with... Whereas in hospital I think Bob would have felt very much like a spare part in that very clinical environment, at home the midwife was very much looking to him to get towels and bedsheets and because the baby arrived early and although everything was ready upstairs, it wasn't quite in place as it might have been. She arrived and did various checks of heartbeats and things and then offered to do an internal examination, which she did. At which point, much to all of our shock and delight, I was at eight centimetres dilated. So she said, 'well, yes you are having this baby at home' and it then all moved quite quickly and the second midwife was called.

My daughter was born about a metre and half from where I am sat at the moment, in our living room. It could have been really different. I think at home they give you two hours of the real pushing stage and I'd got to about an hour and a quarter and nothing was really happening. They said 'you know Emily, we're going to give this another half an hour and they used the phrase 'you will have to be blue lighted into hospital'. I think for me I needed that bit of team talk and 'this is what's going to happen and if you don't want that to happen then you need to dig deep and find some extra energy'. I'd had a salad for tea and a really pathetic salad at that, so I was sort of running out of energy and I think like lots of women, didn't really want to eat as much as they were encouraging me to. The only thing I could face eating was some Percy Pigs that we randomly had in the cupboard. There was the main midwife and then there was the second – I think she was called a healthcare assistant. Whereas that first midwife had been wonderful but very gentle, very quiet – really leaving me and my husband to get on with things – this second midwife sort of took hold of me by the shoulders and I was standing up at this point and gave me a pep talk as if I was going into a battle

or a sports match. I think that was also really helpful because it helped me to understand what I had to do with my body and then my husband ended up repeating it all back to me. It just put me in a different mindset and then she was born at 7:46. What was so amazing was then just being able to stay at home.

Unfortunately all the other NCT mums of my group of about seven of us, had largely very traumatic birth experiences. Lots of emergency c-sections and forced deliveries... I think a lot of them, when we did an NCT talk, they still feel they had a positive birth experience. What they don't feel, particularly at this time, is that they then had a positive experience afterwards. They were stuck in hospital, no one could visit them. Leaving the hospital: they all seemed to be discharged at ridiculous times at night. For me the fact that I was very much in my own space – getting upstairs after having the baby, that was hard work, but then I was just in the bedroom with our baby and the bathroom and I didn't have to do anything else. We did have to pop into the hospital about four days later because her jaundice reading was a bit high and just walking those hospital corridors: I thought 'oh goodness imagine... baby in normal times, baby in lockdown'. Just leaving hospital the first thing you have to do is potentially walk through these corridors and then a multi-storey car park. That's really tough. I just feel I was in this bubble of loveliness and because it was lockdown and no one could visit, it really was this little sanctuary of us becoming a family and it felt very, very special.

For me I think I needed that input from the second midwife, because it was all very softly, softly, lovely, lovely and I think at that point I was really tired: partially just from not having eaten enough and from being up all night. So there was that side as well as the physical exhaustion of pushing. Where I was really feeling it was in my hips. I thought I can't do it and there was 'you can do it', but I needed a bit more. Also just really specific instructions: so what you're trying to do with your body. I think there's a lot of education... things particularly like pregnancy yoga, about the breathing in those early

stages, but when it comes to push it's very different. Either I'd not been listening in yoga or NCT, or it had passed me by, but I didn't understand what I needed my body to do. I think also when you're tired, that information wasn't going in. So they were telling it to me – and I was in another little place just here – and that physical thing of, perhaps particularly because it was lockdown and no one was really holding you. Suddenly someone saying actually I'm going to get hold of you and I'm going to look at you in the face and I'm going to tell you what you need to do. It just connected: it clicked. For me it worked.

I like to think she knew that was the kind of person I was and that somebody else, they would be different with. She brought new energy. Our living room isn't massive, so it was quite crowded in here. She came in at 6am or something and was still very calm. For a little while she was sat back here, I was over there. I really wasn't aware of her. There seemed to be so much paperwork: they're constantly monitoring aren't they? So she just seemed to be filling in paperwork and then she just stepped in and it was new energy. Then just amazing care afterwards, you know? Made us a cup of tea and they tried to clean our carpet, they actually failed. We now have a rug because the stains can't be removed. Despite getting professional carpet-cleaners in. It was really lovely and very special.

Catherine

I've had three home births. I've had three children and all three have been home births. That sounds quite similar to my first, except that that second person took the power away from me. I felt in my first birth that's where I lost it. Just like you I was exhausted, but I think I was still in control and I knew where things were going. When the second midwife came, I don't know what she did, but in my memory she just kind of started doing things like saying 'oh the water's too cold...' and completely ruining... whereas the first midwife sat there, observed, saw what was going on and didn't really interfere. The second one ruined the flow. My first birth was still a home birth,

but I ended up having an episiotomy and my recovery afterwards was long and painful. Being at home was amazing, but the recovery element and everything was really hard work. I think that shaped the way I then went forward with my second and third home births. My mother-in-law used to be a midwife and my mum had all her kids, except me, at home. She was too old when she had me. So I certainly from both sides of the family had a very positive home birth experience.

Because my mother-in-law was a midwife, she knows people who are interested in midwifery and I'd actually talked through my birth story a bit with somebody beforehand. Talking through it had made me think about things and already I'd started to think about theft, that the midwives being present had taken away some of the control away from me and in some sense had changed the birth experience... I'm trying to use positive words. I'm trying not to say that it was a negative thing: it changed the experience. Certainly the second time around – there might be a lot of post hoc rationalisation going on – but with my second I said to my husband Sam, you can be in charge of when to call the midwives because I thought to myself I don't want to be the one doing that. With the kind of recollection, the thought that he might not be particularly good at knowing what was going on, perhaps: he might not necessarily call them that soon. I was right. So he made me a wonderful dinner, he looked at me and I was bouncing on the ball and I looked alright and thought 'okay she's getting on with it' and then before we knew what was happening I was in the pool and I was pushing and I was saying: his phrase that he keeps on using, 'look, we've got a baby in the bag' and I was like 'he's still in the membranes'. He said 'what do you mean?' and I said 'well, he's here', like this... I don't know if I said 'he' actually: we didn't know what sex he was until he came out, but I thought he was a he.

So the midwives were aware I was having a baby but they didn't come until after he was born and certainly I found that a much more positive experience. Again, that flavoured my third birth. It was

always planned as a home birth. We had a birth pool: we set it up in the front room and it was the 25th of May, so talk about it being hot and my due date was the 15th. I was so grumpy. I was adamant I was gonna have the baby early. I was adamant that she was going to come really early and she didn't, she actually came 10 days late and I was the grumpiest woman ever. Again it was a day time thing, I went to bed at night and thought to myself hopefully something will happen tomorrow, for goodness sakes. This is 10 days, this is ridiculous. I remember thinking I don't really want to have the baby in the night, because we've got two boys and I didn't really want to be getting them and taking them somewhere else in the middle of the night. I said to my body 'let's have a baby tomorrow'. So I got up in the morning and it was a bank holiday and I said to my husband 'please...' even though it was lockdown we'd made an agreement with his sister to have the kids. I said 'please just get the kids out of the house, I need a bit of space... I need to get on with whatever this is'.

On the due date I'd had a day where I thought I'd had some contractions and I thought I was having a baby, so we'd already had a false alarm, the kids had already gone to my sister-in-law's and hung out for a night or whatever. So I was like I think it's happening right now for real, so please get the kids. We had a lovely day: had a nice walk in the park and just got on with it. My husband always talks about the fact that he always feels a bit redundant: 'you were walking in the park and every time you had a contraction you'd grab a tree and hug a tree' but he was saying 'would you hug me?' and I said 'no, leave me alone'. I just didn't want to be touched. He said 'can I rub your back?' and I said 'no, no, no: just leave me alone, I'm getting on with this'. It was a lovely day. I had a massive pasta meal with the second, so this time when it came to lunch time I said 'please make me lots of food' because as you said, you need your strength. So I don't remember what I ate... a large sandwich, something big, lots of crisps. I knew I needed something to distract me. We had a birth ball: I bounced on that. My husband said shall we watch a film and I said sure and he said 'what about The Wolf of Wall Street?'. I said 'yeah, why not? I can really get myself into that'.

I think I'd seen it before and I knew it was something that I could focus on. So, yeah, there I was bouncing up and down on the ball. We'd been with the home birth team, pre-lockdown we'd had people come into the house and do the visits at home, but then during the lockdown period we'd had to go to a local children's centre to have all our antenatal stuff. That really irritated me because I really liked having people come to the house, so it was all a bit... anyway, they'd just eased the restrictions which meant the home birth team were actually going to come to the house. Up to that point, when lockdown was on, I had basically said 'I don't care if they won't come, I'm not going to hospital – I'm not leaving my house to have a baby: that's ridiculous, I'm having it at home'. My husband was a bit like 'oh, really? that puts a lot of pressure on me' and I said 'don't worry, you can leave the house too if you like – I'll have this baby on my own in the front room if I have to, I'm not going to hospital'.

So lunch, bouncing on the ball, Wolf of Wall Street. I was saying to my husband 'you call the midwives when you need someone else here who isn't me... I'm just gonna get on with it'. He was saying 'you look a bit uncomfortable: why don't you get in the pool?' and I always think you don't want to get in the pool too early because then you know, it's a really nice felling getting into the pool, having all that weight released off you. Anyway, I got in the pool and about 10 minutes later I had a baby. I remember getting into the pool and he was on the phone saying 'we're calling you early this time', because the midwife knew us and had said 'we know about you... we know you had your last one before we came – we're on our way right now!'. When they walked through the door, I was sitting on the sofa hugging her and they kind of tiptoed up the steps and said 'do you need the gas and air?' and he said 'I don't think so, look: there's the baby'. I was like 'hello, sorry I did it again'.

So they hung out... We lived in a carpeted house for our first baby and there was a stain on the carpet that we scrubbed. It was rented as well. I think he managed to scrub it out in the end: I hope he did. We got our deposit back. This time we live on wooden floors,

It really was
this little
sanctuary of
us becoming
a family and
it felt very,
very special.

so there was just kind of plastic everywhere: plastic all over the stuff and actually this time they didn't do much cleaning up. Second time they did. They cleaned everything, they helped us deflate the pool. These guys just sat there and did their paperwork, but I didn't mind: it was Covid times, they were having to wear masks and everything and it was all very different. It wasn't hugs and congratulations, it was all very clinical in comparison. It's amazing to be in your own house. Not to have to share a toilet with somebody. There's blood everywhere: you don't want to be sharing facilities. You just want to be able to go to your own bathroom and lie in the bath if you want to.

Then, having two other kids meant at some point they had to be collected, so before I knew it... I had her at about three o'clock and by five o'clock there was a two-year-old sitting on me and a four-year-old sitting on the end of the sofa. She is a noisy baby – she literally came out and screamed. So we've got nice photographs of both the kids with their hands over their ears because she was so noisy. Two hours old, literally screaming.

Talking about control: I feel very relaxed and at home in my house. I felt like I was in control of everything and it was me saying to my husband 'I think the head's coming, will you look?'. Doing the classic screaming you do, you know when you do the yelling. I won't say the phrase I said, it was very rude. Yeah I was certainly screaming and our downstairs neighbours – we live in a terraced house as well but in a maisonette – so we actually have people downstairs from us as well. Last time, when my son was born it was about 20 to midnight maybe and our neighbour downstairs said 'oh!' the next day: 'you had the baby... 20 to midnight.' I said 'yeah, could you hear? sorry'. This time I remember thinking, because it was such a hot day we had all the windows open, I thought 'everyone's going to know we've had our baby'. Sam was like 'yeah, who cares? it was thirty seconds of screaming, less than, and it was all over'.

Thinking about where the control came from: certainly the labour itself – minute to minute – is about getting through that second. Again, I'm talking about watching Wolf of Wall Street, because I would just focus on each word. If I was having a contraction, I would be repeating the words in my mind as if I was trying to learn them for an exam or something. Just thinking to myself 'this will be over and in a moment, you'll get a bit of a break, and you can do this'. In the down time, thinking 'you can do this: it's gonna be fine'. Bouncing on the ball as well, the kind of rhythm of bouncing on the ball... just something to focus on. Then the switch of control: my husband saying 'I think you should get in the pool' and me having a moment in my mind thinking 'is this the right time? is this not the right time?'. Then thinking 'I'd quite like that feeling, I'd quite like to get in the pool and just feel the weight lifted off me'. So getting into the pool and then that moment is when your body takes over.

I've thought before and remembered before about the experience of kind of mooing like a cow and then realising it's you that's mooing like a cow. So absolutely this guttural sound coming out of you and there's no control over that: it just comes from nowhere. Then the intense pain of transition, the overwhelming body-wrenching. Whatever comes out of your mouth to try and describe that... I don't know what I'm trying to do with that. The words just come out. Then that calm bit I found afterwards, where I was thinking 'oh, where are we at now? what's going on?' and because there's no one else there – there wasn't a midwife there to say I want to examine you – it was me putting my hands down and feeling to see if I could feel a head. 'Should I be pushing now? what should I be doing?' Vividly aware that in the back of my mind, having spoken to my mother-in-law before, that her two pieces of advice for me and my husband were: 'call the midwives early', which I failed to follow and 'blow, don't push'. So she wanted me to protect my perineum. She wanted to protect me. So there was me feeling and thinking right, okay when that feeling comes I need to be blowing. I remember in the second birth, testing that out. Thinking well it's going to take for ever if I just keep blowing now and kind of giving a bit of a push and thinking

okay there is a next level of the stretching and now is the blowing time. With the third, everything is a bit more relaxed. So you get to the blowing and suddenly you have a baby. I remember being very cognisant in that stage there, that I was the one calling the shots. I would say to my husband 'look – see what you can see': and it must have been a minute or something, it can't have been a long time but it felt like I was planning logically all those bits. 'Am I blowing? am I pushing? what's next?' Then that overwhelming relief when the baby comes out and 'yes! this is over, I can have a sit down'.

Certainly for me it's worked and I don't know if my first experience... it's obviously shaped other experiences. I don't know whether if things had been more straightforward the first first time around, whether I wouldn't have learnt... who knows? You can only guess.

Emily

I think I was quite quiet, because our neighbours next door only knew something was happening because they heard the midwife arrive. Our neighbours this side didn't know for about two days that the baby had arrived. I went out to the NHS clap with the baby. I was like 'hello!'. The thing I remember about the control side was the breathing and I just clung to breathing in a really controlled way right throughout, to be honest, until it got right to the crunch pushing time – I'm sorry I can't remember all the key proper words you're supposed to use for all the proper stages.

I did some pregnancy yoga and I also did some hypnobirthing and the teacher in the classes she talked a lot about either breathing in with numbers – you could do it with 'in for four' or 'out for six' or whatever – or some sort of affirmation. Like 'I am strong, I am relaxed'. I used to always think with those affirmations 'what a load of bleurgh', but numbers: got numbers. Totally do numbers. She also used to do this analogy of a boat tied to a harbour wall and the water's coming in and out and you're really strong and your anchor's down. Again in the yoga classes, which I did a mixture of in-person and then on Zoom once lockdown happened: I used to just lie on the

floor going 'I'll just stick to my numbers, thanks'. Then, come being in labour, I was that boat clinging to the anchor wall. It was such a strong visual image and I found it absolutely amazing. I think I had my eyes closed a lot of the time, which is generally how I deal with pain at the dentist and things. I never keep my eyes open. I just sort of blocked out everything going on around me and just thought if I just keep breathing, it will be okay. I think it was a point at which I was sat here actually and the midwife was saying 'you can't give birth sitting down' and I was saying 'my hips, my hips'. She said, we have to move you and they were putting tarpaulin and stuff down on the floor around me and they wanted to move me to the other side of the room. At that point I think I felt very out of control, because I didn't really understand why they wanted to move me, I didn't want to move. I was tired, I was in pain. The thought of it was like an exercise class: get on all fours... I said 'no, no, no'.

I didn't have a pool: our house isn't really big enough and I'm not really a bath person so I couldn't quite see how it was going to work for me. That's why the lady appearing with such a clear plan, because she gave me such clear instructions, put the control back on me. I remember with the final bit of pushing, feeling really calm and I ended up giving birth standing up, which probably wasn't a great idea as I did then tear and I did have to have stitches. I remember my daughter's head was hanging out of me and then the midwife saying – maybe this is normal, I don't know as I've just had one baby – 'now stop pushing, you've got to wait for the next contraction'. I was like 'oh my god I can feel this head!' and we didn't know what we were having either so there was all this excitement, but I remember feeling that was totally okay. Now I think back and if I described it to someone it feels like it's so weird, an entire head just, you know? I think it's strange also in those first few weeks afterwards when I obviously spoke to my mum and family and did recount the story a bit, but in different levels of detail depending on... with my brother perhaps not so much detail as my best friend, but there weren't loads of people and I guess because it was lockdown and I just haven't had so much contact. My husband went

back to work and all his colleagues were asking and he was telling them all in great detail. I thought 'cor, actually you're getting so much more opportunity to tell this birth story'. I'm really lucky, I've had a really easy birth story. I've got friends who I made through baby groups, who had really, really traumatic times and I think they do really need to talk about it. They haven't had – because it's so much easier to do in person – that necessarily in an online setting, feels more formal than if you're just with a friend.

Catherine

I certainly haven't talked about this birth experience as much as with my others. For me it's probably more about it being a third baby. People aren't so fussed any more with me... they're like 'oh you had the third baby did you? at home? okay right... did the midwives come? no, that's typical'. What I found interesting in what you said, is being in a class and thinking 'this is all nonsense'. I didn't do any classes with my first, but my sister-in-law did a hypnobirthing course or something with her first and I was working right up to 39, 40 weeks with my first. I said to her 'just give me a summary of what it was' and she said something about it's not pain, it's pressure and it won't last and I thought okay fine: yeah that's nonsense. I read this book and I remember it being very wishy washy: with cartoons and 'I am woman... hear me roar' and I thought 'that's nonsense'. But the moment I started having a baby I thought 'yes, I am woman... hear me roar'. In that moment, I was the person. I think there was imagery of being a bit like a ship anchored but with waves. More like being in a sea with waves washing over you and sometimes you feel them washing and going back and other times they wash over you and you're stuck inside or whatever. All of it came back to me and I stuck to that being in the moment: you have to get through that one bit, then move on to the next bit and not think about the journey. Even now if someone were to say to me 'did I really think that during the birth?', but if I put myself back into the moment and really think about being in the moment of being in labour: yes, I was literally

focussing from second to second. Thinking 'I can do this... I have the power... I'm there'. All very weird life-coachy type stuff.

Emily

I think that's maybe why teachers say the same things week in, week out. I used to think yes, we know: you said this last week... 'if you can move, the baby can move' – 'I get it, I get it'. You have to keep saying it because then it's in that moment when you're 'oh yeah, I have to move because that's what's going to help baby move down as well'. That repetition, because at the crunch point you're not functioning in your normal self at all.

Catherine

There was something else about imagining your cervix opening and I remember thinking 'how am I going to do that? I've never even seen my own cervix... I know what a cervix looks like and I know what it's supposed to do'. Just that visualisation, that every moment of pressure was actually moving towards something was the cervix opening a teeny tiny bit so that soon everything would be over. I remember, in the moment, that being a really positive thing and sometimes you let it wash over you. Sometimes you're not in control: your body is in control and it's about going with it and realising that we are designed to do that.

Emily

When the midwife said do you want an internal examination, I said 'yeah, okay'. Actually when she said I was eight centimetres dilated, that was an amazing amount of control back to me. Oh, I've done all of that on a paracetamol! I can do this if I'm already that far gone. Whereas for other people, that level of invasiveness would feel like it's taking the control away from them. It is so personal. I think that's what I've learnt through this whole process. What works for one person is someone else's idea of absolute horrendousness. It was funny, my husband was so against the idea of cutting the cord. When the midwife came he was next door reading Adam Kay's This is Going

to Hurt. Is that an appropriate book to be reading? No. When it came to it and the midwife said 'would you like to cut the cord?' and I said 'go on' – he'd absolutely been so much a part of this birth. I think he is really glad that he did. I think you've got to know your ideas can change.

Catherine

I've got lots of friends who say to me 'do you go around telling everyone to have a home birth?'. I would say 'no, no: my message to people is you need to be in a place where you feel comfortable to have your baby because if you want to know there's a doctor in the next room then you need to be in a hospital... if you want to know that there's going to be a midwife checking on you repeatedly, you need to be in a midwife-led centre – you need to be somewhere you feel comfortable, so that you can get on with what you need to do... for me, that's being at home'. Weirdly, conversely, what I haven't said is I'm a doctor and my husband is a doctor. We're both training to be GPs, so he's hopefully going to be a GP, qualified in a couple of months' time and I've probably got three years to go because I've had three maternity leaves. I really don't like hospitals. I work in hospital and I'm happy to work in hospital, but as a patient I don't like to go to hospital. So for me, hospitals are not a place I feel comfortable or in control. Whereas in my own home, absolutely.

Coming from the history of having a mother-in-law who is a midwife, so my husband has grown up around home birth and midwifery. She used to run postnatal groups and antenatal groups in their house, so he would often meet people... that was just his life. For me, having a mum who was denied her third home birth because they said you're 40, you're not allowed to. It was the 80s: they said you must go to hospital. I've obviously grown up with this impression that home birth is natural and normal. It's where we're designed to have our babies. For my mum, this narrative around her being denied her third home birth because she was too old... again it's a control thing right? The control was taken away from her by the professionals.

I can't imagine stepping through the doors of a hospital. You kind of go down the route of someone saying to you 'what would you do if someone said it was dangerous, you need to go to hospital now?' I think someone would have to probably really convince me a lot that I'd need to go to hospital, but I'd like to think that I'd see sense obviously.

I like the idea of your partner being next door, reading a book. He sounds like a doula figure himself.

Emily

He went a bit old school 'Call the Midwife' style, and thought we needed privacy and space – which I do understand – but I just needed to hold his hand very tightly. I remember I left it five minutes thinking what the hell is he doing? Then shouted 'get in here now!'. Then he didn't really leave my side. He was very, very good at interpreting... I think you do need a champion. Whether that's a birth partner... somebody who is listening and on it and can interpret and talk to you. Sort of in your own language really, because that person is going to know you best.

I think with your experience, it's different with having the home births because you've had them before lockdown as well. I think because I wasn't really going out in lockdown, I think I really did hunker down in that first lockdown one. When it was so much the instruction and pregnant women were seen as being in this high risk group. I love my home anyway and when I was working in London, our weekends were really busy. Home just felt like such a lovely place because we were hardly here. Suddenly I was here all the time and then it just became such a sanctuary, so I think already it's a really safe space but suddenly why on earth would you want to leave this absolute little cocoon where you've been all the time.

It's all about oxytocin isn't it, giving birth? So you want to be in the place where you feel lots of love and warmth and safety. For us going into hospital, with bright lights and machines and beeps and noises.

Also with the choices of... I never even thought about which room I'd give birth in. I thought I might give birth in our bathroom because it's the room that's least likely to be overheard but actually it ended up I was downstairs in the lounge because I thought it was night time and everyone else is going to be asleep and they'll be upstairs: less likely to disturb people. I did have the choice. I could have moved at any point, whereas if you're in hospital then: this is the room, like it or lump it. This is where you're going to have to try and get on with it. I think that requires an amazing level of mindset to block out what's going on around you. If you're at home, it's a lot easier.

Catherine

Certainly the midwife-led units, the rooms that are in there are very much home from home and if you go in a room there's a bathroom, a bed, a weird birthing chair-seat thing. There's a birth pool. If you can get there with a certain amount of time on your hands you can probably make it feel like your own and get on with things and feel that sense of contentment in that space. Labour ward, as a doctor having gone there and worked there, my experience of labour ward was very much there are the midwives and the doctors are in charge. You're in this sterile room and they're like 'get on your back – do this, do that'. It's not conducive to a natural labour. It basically puts you down a path of intervention before you've even started because you're not somewhere where your body is going to feel comfortable to get on with things in the way that it normally would, is my experience. I'm sure lots of people have had lovely experiences in labour wards. Again, you talking about your NCT crew, it's very common what you're saying. Within an NCT group, one person will have had maybe a positive midwife-led unit experience, one person may have had a home birth if you're lucky but very rare and then most people will have various levels of 'oh I started in the midwife-led unit but I had to go here for an intervention, or I had to go up and have an emergency c-section'. It is very rare for people to talk about a positive, natural birth, but very common for people to have

that as their desire, obviously. Why would you not want to have a natural birth?

Emily

I was really shocked at quite how horrendous people's experiences seemed to have been, because I suppose generally the mind's an amazing thing, right? You forget quite a lot of the pain, that's perhaps how you got to have three children. If you remembered it, maybe you wouldn't? People who've had those horrendous experiences, they go on to have more children because they manage to 'mind over matter' it I suppose.

Catherine

We forget a lot of things. We forget about feeding a child for every two hours for however long it is, now we've got nine-month-olds. It seems like a completely different world, as in I can remember the crazy nights and now it just seems like a world away. We can forget a lot for sure. You were saying you couldn't believe how horrendous some people's experiences had been?

Emily

Yes, we did an NCT talk like this and the NCT coordinator got all the dads to first recount their experience and then the partners could chip in with extra bits. I remember my husband and I muted ourselves and he was saying how can I make our experience sound worse? I was almost in tears listening to these women. I said 'no, don't... it's circumstances, and if we have another one that could be us next time... we were so lucky that the stars aligned'. Sometimes it doesn't, but it's really important I think that as much as people talk about the negatives – miscarriages I think don't get spoken about enough – and how many challenges... so many people don't have an easy time getting pregnant. Lots of us don't talk about that. Equally, it is important that we also talk about the positive stories, to let people know you can have a positive birth. Part of the problem I think maybe, is if you go into labour thinking 'oh my god, this is

going to be absolutely horrendous', if that's what you're expecting, it's not going to help your body. I've grown up with a mum who really struggled to have me and my brother, but therefore talks about pregnancy and giving birth as the best thing ever and is so positive about it. I think that really helped me because I then thought 'it's going to be great!' Maybe it helped – that mindset – a little bit.

Catherine

I really think it does. I don't think my mum ever talked about it being great, she's not a very emotional person, but she certainly talked about it in a very matter-of-fact way. She'd say 'oh, I had your sisters at home and then I was forced to have you in hospital'. I think she said 'you interrupted the rugby' or something. So very rude of me. Very matter-of-fact. If you're going to have your baby, then you have your baby and carry on. There was no idea that there would be a big drama in my mind. If all went well and I think we're both lucky to have had relatively easy pregnancies, ticked all the boxes, nothing went wrong. If you've had that you think 'well, here we go... we'll get the baby out and then we'll get on with things'.

Emily talks a lot about feeling lucky and I think that I was quite lucky to have experienced all these things and I always think those other experiences could have been me. With my first it might not have been an episiotomy. They might have said I had to go to hospital and who knows what would have happened? Would I have kicked back and made a fuss? Who knows? There's certainly a sense of achievement. I really like being pregnant: it's one of my favourite things to be. People are nice to you and then you have a baby and people actually aren't that nice to you. They say 'get out of my way' – not during lockdown – but in real times they say 'your baby is crying etc'. So a sense of achievement in that it's nice being pregnant, it's nice having a baby and enjoying that. I don't really like exercise: I don't do a lot of exercise in my life but I like to think my body's achieved something. I've given birth to three babies. So I might not be able to run a marathon, but that's my expression of my

... when
people say
'who delivered
the baby?'...
me...
I delivered
my baby.
It was me.

physicality in life. I'm okay at having babies. I certainly don't feel like I'm a wonderful mother. It's not like I was great at giving birth and I'm great at looking after my kids. It certainly hasn't gone that way. I find, going back to work, being a doctor: it helps when people come to you with queries and questions about kids, it gives you a sense of strength, because I've been there and have the logical information I can give people. Also I get to say 'yeah they never sleep when they're tiny, what is it? it drives you crazy', that kind of... connect with people.

Emily

I did feel incredibly proud of myself and I was phoning my mum and in-laws: we didn't want one to know ages before the other one, so we didn't tell anyone until six o'clock at night. Which meant we had this wonderful secret for a day and then phoning them – because she arrived early – and being able to share this news. That it had all just worked and everyone thought it probably really wouldn't work. Some of them were quite nervous about me having a home birth and thought 'she'll end up in hospital'. They also know I'm headstrong enough that there's no point in trying to challenge and stop me. We live very close to the hospital, so it wasn't a great worry from that perspective. I do feel like, despite the times we're living in, I feel optimistic, I've got lots of energy and I think I've turned a corner recently. People said to me 'oh Emily you'll lose your baby weight really quickly' and I didn't feel that I did, felt quite self-conscious of my body and went through a spending spree at Christmas. I just had to buy all these baggy jumpers because I just didn't look the same... I've started doing yoga again and pilates and actually lockdown has enabled that because I can do it on Zoom. I can put my daughter to bed and five minutes later I can be on the mat. Those are little things but you know once you have a baby they feel like an achievement. If you get an hour to yourself, then it makes a massive difference.

Catherine

I had a shower today. Everyone was out of the house. I had a shower that was uninterrupted. I wonder whether... so in my life I'm the kind of person who doesn't generally do things until I think I will achieve them. My husband finds me very irritating: I won't play a board game unless I think I'll win it. If I think I have a chance I'll have a go at it. I wonder whether it's because I'm the kind of person who only has a go at things they think they'll achieve that I have done that? You know, getting into med school... and maybe it's then I put all my strength into it and my efforts into it so I do achieve it. I don't really know how that translates into a good labour though, because I don't think I had a lot of control in how it went, at any point it could have done differently. I wonder for me if that's what it is? I signed up to having a baby and I thought I'm going to do this. I'm going to have this baby and have it at home, that's the way it's going to work.

Emily

If you decide you're going to do it, you just have to absolutely commit to it and it will happen, right? I remember another example from many years ago, of taking my driving test. I got through three driving instructors but blow me if I wasn't going to pass that test on the first time. I waited quite a long time. I had quite a lot of lessons, but when I took the test I was gonna pass it. Whereas Bob – I won't tell you how many times it took him to pass – but I remember him telling me on the test he passed 'I just realised I'm in control of whether or not I pass... I don't just get behind the wheel and see what happens with the car... I can really focus and I can pass it... I know how to drive'. Instead of that panic taking over, if you just channel your adrenalin and that energy into 'I'm going to utilise all of this' to succeed at it. It is that isn't it: fight or flight.

Catherine

I like the idea that he thought it was all in the lap of the gods or something? I'm very similar and I did lots of lessons... so similar

to having a baby: having a driving test. Lots of people talk about in a driving test, when something happens that you think has made you fail, so you just give up and drive. I went through an almost red light and thought 'oh dear, that's me failed so I'm just going to drive now'. So I just drove and did it and I passed. I wonder if that has something to do with it. Or something in the labours... something happened and you think 'that's it let's just get on with it now'. I don't know if there's a switch. I keep thinking about your birth being the same as my first experience, because when the midwife came she said 'can I examine you and I said yes, fine'. She said you're fully dilated and I thought if she hadn't said that I probably would have punched her, because I was ready to push.

Emily

Yes, I was talking about this with Bob and he said 'what if she'd said you were a centimetre dilated and she was going to come back the next day or something?'. I said 'but she couldn't because I couldn't take any more'. In circumstances where you really shouldn't get irate, I get irate and when it comes to the crunch I can stay ridiculously calm.

Catherine

If you do start to focus on how much pain you're in that's when you do start to get overwhelmed and when people go downhill. I was like 'yes I will let her examine me', because there was a moment when I thought 'do I want her to? I don't know'. I thought 'I'll let her examine me but she is going to be saying I'm ready to push... there is nothing else that can be happening now'. Sam always talks about the fact that I looked like I was on drugs. He said through the first one especially, because it was at night time. Started in the evening, waters broke at about eight, overnight. Had a baby at eight in the morning. Very dark, winter, November. Very dark, so heating on inside, dark. We had one light on in the corner but it was really, really dark and that was it. I remember he said you just went into this zone, like you couldn't really communicate. You kind of just were there and

every so often you'd surface out of it and say 'get me water' or 'bring me squash' or something and then just go back into this zone. It probably seemed less intense the second and third times because it was day, light and we'd done it once together before. He knew what was going on. I certainly remember feeling like I was in a different place. Going into this mindset of I'm focussing but I'm not focussed on the pain. I'm focussing living these moments and then something will happen.

Emily

I know I did some quite strange behaviour and things I would never normally do. Like with these Percy Pigs just taking a mouthful and chucking the rest on the floor. I would never do that, but that's what overtakes you.

Catherine

Like me with the squash thing. My mother-in-law has this trick where the midwife should always come with a straw because when you're having a baby you can't always drink by moving your head back. So we always have very non-recycling-friendly plastic straws in the house. I'd be like 'bring the squash with the straw!' and take one sip and say 'that's enough!' and back into this crazy place. Wolf of Wall Street, why did we pick that? It was brilliant, this man going completely crazy on the screen: taking all the drugs... it was completely different. The sun was shining, it was midday and I was in that zone, watching that film. It was funny because after it all when we collected the kids, my husband said 'can we watch the end of the film now?' and I said 'no I'm going to bed'. I wasn't really watching it.

I think having a strong partner is good as in having that relationship where you know each other. Having an advocate: someone who can be an intermediary. I remember in the first one the midwife saying something about the water and him saying 'well if you think it should be warmer go to the kitchen and get a kettle of water... we're here...' and sitting down.

Emily

They've got to be completely brought into it with you. My husband had his doubts. He didn't want me to write a birth plan initially 'why would you do that? just trust the medical professionals... if they think this needs to happen, it needs to happen... if you need to have an emergency cesarean, why should I be in the room? it's a medical environment'. I said 'I need you there! particularly if it's an emergency and you're going to have to be the first one to hold the baby because I'm not going to be able to and I don't want it to be handed into the hands of a random doctor'. So I'm really grateful that he's probably much less stubborn than I am and he was open to coming round to a different way of thinking. Embracing home birth. In the end, it's much harder for the guys. It's not their bodies, they don't know what we're feeling. I'd find it much harder being on the other side, than when it's happening to you. So I think home birth enabled him to get some control back and feel quite important. I think it set him up – not having been a dad before – it set him up feeling really confident and ready for it. In a way that if we'd been in hospital, particularly in lockdown, he would have then got kicked out. I would have been there overnight minimum. Then all that initial bonding, that special time at the beginning he would have been stuck at home, so isolated. As it was, all together.

Catherine

As it should be. That's what we're saying.

Emily

I feel we've had this throwback to the past, because we're really close with our neighbours, through lockdown. They are also pregnant, second baby. Whilst I would never go out of my way to encourage someone to have a home birth because I know it can go so differently, they saw our experience and decided they would like one too. So lovely that they also had a baby born at home in the middle of the night with the same midwife team. We just feel this amazing

connection. They're amazing cooks and we got this message 'let us know what you want for dinner' and we were given options, and over the fence these beautiful bowls of risotto. So we sat on our beds eating this really fancy risotto just looking at our baby. Thinking life has changed forever and so much in the space of a few hours.

Catherine

I think here too in London there is one home birth team and so with my friends they would have the same people. Someone saying 'I'm not sure about her' and me saying 'she's lovely, she came to my birth'. It's nice to have that sense of community, which you don't get in hospital.

Emily

It would be one of the biggest reasons why I don't want to leave this house. We need to move... my husband is also working from home. There's just not space, but I will always feel such an attachment to this house because of what was created here really. It's been the highlight of lockdown and one of the proudest things I've ever done.

Catherine

Yeah at some point we'll have to leave here and it will be a bit weird because we've had two babies: in front of the TV. So whenever I watch TV, I think this is where the babies were. My husband is also from this area and the house where he was has his placenta planted outside with a vine over it. Actually some of our friends have just moved into the same road, opposite it. So we were saying 'you do realise when you're looking at that vine...'. Our kids placentas are all in my in-laws garden. People say you must be a real hippy and I say no, it's just sensible. I put it in the garden, it'll fertilise a nice rose bush and I get to see beautiful roses and my mother-in-law loves her garden so why not have a piece of the kids in the garden. That reminds me, I have no idea where my daughter's placenta is. I presume it's in their freezer waiting to be planted. I've seen programmes where they leave it to detach naturally... lotus birth?

When I say I've got a placenta planted under a rose bush, people say 'oh did you carry it around in a muslin for three months with herbs and spices?'. I say 'no, I didn't do that'. I feel like on the scale, I'm quite tame. You don't really hear about it and even though I work in a hospital, I think after they've checked it they just incinerate it.

Definitely Emily I would say if you go for a second home birth, it would be even more joyful.

Emily

Yes, although the first one was pretty quick. I have a good friend who ended up giving birth at the side of the motorway because they didn't get to the hospital in time and her husband just delivered the baby.

Catherine

Unless you're an obstetrician you don't know anything about birth and you certainly don't know anything about natural birth because that's one thing you do not see in hospital. When I think about it I think it's the family experiences we have had growing up that has enabled us to have successful home births that have worked for us. Yeah, when people say 'who delivered the baby?'... me, I delivered the baby... it came out. The first time I guess there was a midwife catching it but the other two times I delivered my baby. It was me.

Emily

There's a phrase here in the midwife team: 'we're not here to deliver your baby'. They're saying they are here to support you. What an amazing privilege for them too, to have the opportunity to come into so many homes, so many different family setups. They never know what they'll walk into. We were so in awe of our midwife: what she did as her profession. Bringing life into the world: day in, day out.

Debbie and Katy

Katy

Mine is... god nearly nine months, so I had him in June last year, beginning of June. Um so yours, four months...

Debbie

Beginning of November.

Katy

Oh, so the start of lockdown two.

Debbie

Whichever, yeah. Part of another lockdown. I think the timing was not bad, because although I had him at home, I did go into hospital after for various post-birth checks. I had gestational diabetes, and I am rhesus negative so they needed to test his blood to see how he was. Whether we have the same blood type or whether he needed injections. And I felt okay about going into hospital at that point, but I think if it had been right in the middle of the kind of worst patch of this winter I'd have felt quite nervous about going into a hospital setting. I've heard of so many people who have contracted Covid in hospital, because there was so much of it in the hospital. And yours was as things were opening up...

Katy

The day you could go into other people's gardens. So we went to my aunt and uncle's and had a lovely barbecue, the most relaxing day. It was lovely. And then, that was probably what led to me going into labour, because I was just so happy... and so relaxed. So yeah, but up

until that... Were you always going to have a home birth, or did Covid change things for you?

Debbie

This is my second baby, and I decided to have a home birth part-way through the pregnancy. And it wasn't really Covid that pushed me into it. It was more that I didn't want to have to go back to hospital again because I didn't have a great experience the first time round. So I liked the idea of not going into hospital, and then the pandemic was kind of an extra push to say well actually if you can avoid being in hospital it's probably better for you and a tiny baby. So it was an extra incentive I suppose.

I started working with a doula because my first birth experience wasn't what I wanted it to be. So I thought I would just do a bit of birth preparation with a doula to help me get into a better frame of mind for the second time round. Because it was only as I went through my pregnancy, I got kind of half way through and I started crying at all my antenatal appointments and I realised how much of the last experience I was still carrying with me even though it was two, two and a half years later. So I thought I'd better sort this out because I feel like there's a lot of fear and that's not a good basis for a positive second experience, if I go into it feeling afraid. And then it was through doing that, and doing reading about the evidence around home birth, that it's actually a safer setting for second time mums.

And then I also spoke to somebody locally, just by chance. I bought a baby carrier off somebody locally and I went to collect it, and she said 'well, where are you planning to have the baby?' and I was 'well at the moment I'm booked to go into hospital, I'm hoping for the birth centre, I didn't have that with the first one'. And she was like 'well, my advice would be make sure that your partner is good at catching... I had a long and traumatic birth with my first in hospital, and then my second was born as the paramedics arrived at the house... that would be my advice'. And she's like 'if it's going too

fast, head down bottom up, that should slow things down'. And that just got me thinking, maybe I should have as a sort of... you know... If you're in the home birth system you can always go to hospital, if you're not you've got no choice to have it at home. So that was what really decided me, the kind of birth preparation work, and then talking to this lady who said 'even if it's taken a long time first time round, it really can happen quite fast second time round'.

Katy

Yeah, so I got pregnant pre-Covid, and my first birth was in hospital but I'd done 11 hours of it at home. And when I got to the hospital they checked me and they were like 'oh, you're about to give birth then'. And it was 20 minutes later my daughter arrived. So, I loved that bit at home. I loved the experience of doing what I wanted. No one was bothering me. I was in my nice little cocoon, it was dark, I had the bath... I felt like I was in control, and I think I really liked that element of it. So when I came to getting pregnant with number 2, I sort of said to my husband 'I think actually I want to have a home birth'. And it was the midwives – you know, your booking in appointment – and she said 'and how was your first experience? and I sort of explained and she was 'oh, well you'd be a good candidate for home birth, are you considering it?'. And I was 'not up until this point' and that prompted me to start thinking 'this could be something I look into'. And my husband was really against it to begin with. He was like 'well if something goes wrong, you need to be in the hospital' and I was like 'yeah, but all of the research suggests that... my first birth was quite uncomplicated, I'm quite low risk...'. So I had to persuade him quite a bit and it wasn't until he met the midwife at the 16-week appointment – they came to our house, all my appointments were at home, even pre-Covid, and then during Covid as well, they'd turn up with all PPE on – and I think that reassured him at that point that it was really something that we could do. And then I was really glad when Covid hit that I didn't have to go to hospital. So it was nice knowing that... hopefully, obviously you don't know do you, cos there's always the chance that you might

have to go to hospital, you don't know. But the idea was that I could be at home, and not have to go near hospital, and not have to worry about it, about my husband not being allowed in at certain times, or not being able to visit afterwards. I felt like – because a lot of my friends have had babies as well recently, particularly first time mums – and they've been so worked up about going to hospital, partners not being able to go at certain times and what have you that it felt really nice, last June, to know that that wasn't going to be hopefully an issue for me.

Debbie

And how was it, in the end, how was your second birth experience?

Katy

Amazing! You just said you had it pretty hard doing number 1, and I'm one of these women, I feel incredibly lucky, cos I've had two very straightforward births. And my second one, my son Tom, his at home was just... I was so... I beam every time I talk about it cos it was so positive. I had back ache all day, and I kept going to my auntie 'can I have some paracetamol because my back's really bad at the moment'. And I think that was really early labour. And then my waters went at 11. Midwives came about one. They checked me, they were 'oh! eight centimetres, brilliant, we'll stick around then'. And then he arrived at just before four, in the pool. We had a water pool. Did you have a pool or was it bath, or... ?

Debbie

We did have a pool, but we didn't have time to use it.

Katy

You were quick! Yes, so it was just an amazing experience. And then you're at home, aren't you, with a baby, you're in your shower, you sit on your sofa, and it's just so lovely isn't it... afterwards when you don't have to transfer to a ward? And you're in an alien place with

lots of other people making lots of noise around you. It was so quiet. It was lovely. How quick were you?

Debbie

Err, so it was two hours, start to finish.

Katy

Two hours...!

Debbie

I think it was... I don't know... I'm still not really sure whether... so, we were in a bit of a funny situation in that my first child was two weeks late, and it was kind of induction and sort of being shoved down a particular route that caused a lot of the issues. So I had held off the induction thing as long as possible, and then the day before she was two weeks overdue, or 42 weeks, I went in. I was 'okay fine, I know that the risk does start to go up after 42 weeks'. So I agreed to go in for induction. You do get quite pressurised as well, by the medical system. I was like, I wouldn't want it on my conscience if there was something going wrong. You know, that kind of fear – they play on, I think – that something might be wrong, and it would be your fault for having, you know, put your foot down and gone for what you wanted rather than...

Katy

Nagging in your head all the time, isn't it, that voice.

Debbie

So I went in for induction and they said 'oh, you're three to four centimetres dilated already, we can't induce you'. So I didn't have an induction in the end. But then I was stuck in the antenatal ward, cos they were 'you're not going home, either'. And so that made the whole... stress of being in a quite public place, because it's all four-

bed wards. I couldn't relax and it made the whole thing very long and drawn out.

Anyway... so I was expecting my second one to be late, I was really late with the first, I wouldn't be surprised if the second was late. My mum was late with her both... her second as well, 10 days late with my brother... So we were pottering along, coming up to the due date and I was very relaxed, doing a bit of extra work and thinking 'I've still got time, it'll be fine'. And then my daughter got sent home from nursery with a fever. So they were like 'she needs to come home and she needs a negative Covid test before she can come back. So then of course we were all into self isolation until we'd proven whether or not we had it in the household. And I called the home birth midwife and said 'look I just wanted to let you know of the situation'– this was the day before my due date – 'because we might not be able to have you'. And she was like 'no, you won't, until you have those test results to say that you're clear we can't come, and you'll have to go to labour ward and be treated in the same way as a Covid patient, so you'll have your own room, and there'll be PPE and stuff...'

So we went to get tests and we hadn't got the results and it was on my due date I was bathing my daughter in the evening. And I was just drying her on the mat, and I was like wibble wobbling her legs to make her giggle: 'wibble wobble, wibble wobble' and she was 'again, again'. And I was doing it again, again. And then my waters went, and that was it.

I was like 'oh! oh no, oh god...!'. And then immediately I called my other half who was downstairs. 'Simon, Si-mon-n-n-n...'. Sat on the toilet in the bathroom having abandoned a naked daughter on the bath mat, who was like 'what's going on? we were playing games, where have you gone?'. And he was like 'GREAT' and I was like 'no, not great because now we have to go to labour ward and I don't want to go to labour ward, errrr...!'. So I phoned the doula and explained to her what was happening, and she was like 'look, don't panic, have you got any contractions yet, any niggles, anything?'. I was like 'no,

nothing at all!. And she was like ‘okay, well either things are going to progress fairly quickly, and in half an hour to an hour you’ll be able to tell me you’ve got some pretty strong sensations but something’s happening – or it will build slowly, in which case you can have a bit of food, go to bed with a hot water bottle, try and get some rest, because chances are something will happen before morning but maybe not right away... don’t panic’. And I was crying on the phone ‘I don’t want to go to labour ward’ and she also said ‘well you don’t have to go if you don’t want to... you can have a freebirth, you can just stay at home if you really don’t want to go that badly you can stay at home’. And I was ‘errrrr [crying]’.

Anyway, I didn’t necessarily intend to have a freebirth. But that’s what happened because everything progressed so quickly. So at eight my waters went, I spoke to my doula at half eight, at nine it was apparent that things were starting, so I was like ‘okay, I need to call the midwives and let them know’ because the home birth team still comes to see you, even if you’ve... they would PPE and come into the labour ward to see you there, cos you’re on their case load. So I was like ‘okay I should call them and let them know that things are definitely happening. So I spoke to her at nine, the midwife in the team, I was talking to her and she was like ‘okay, how are you feeling, what are you feeling?’, and I was sort of pausing, for the contractions I guess. They weren’t particularly strong. And talking to her in between, and making a lot of sense, and she was like ‘okay I think you sound like you’re doing fine at the moment and home is the best place for you... wait until you’re getting contractions coming a couple of minutes apart for a good hour, then give us a call back’. And I was like ‘okay’. And then we had the doula back on the phone again, and I was feeling myself feeling quite stressed. I was standing at the mantelpiece holding onto it, trying to plait my hair out of the way, because somebody had said to me ‘make sure you get your hair out the way, it’ll be really annoying stuck to your face’. So I was trying to plait my hair and pausing for contractions.

Katy

... funny what goes through your head at that time...

Debbie

Then plaiting my hair a bit more and then pausing for contractions. I was like ‘these must be quite close together’ because it took me about four contractions to plait my hair. And I was ‘okay, I need to relax, I need to relax, I need to stop panicking about this... everything’s starting for sure – it’s quite intense – but...’. So I lay down on the sofa to try and just chill and let my body just... and then within a couple of contractions I was like ‘no-no I need space’. I was lifting my leg in the air like a dog doing a pee on a lamp post, going ‘I need space, I need space, I need to be on the floor’. And Simon my partner said ‘well get on the floor then, I’ll help you’. And I was like ‘no’ and the doula was on the phone on speakerphone and she was like ‘wait for a break between the contractions’. ‘There is no breaaaaak’. And then eventually Simon was in the other room: the doula had said ‘okay, well take me into the kitchen Simon and we’ll have a chat and we’ll make a plan’. Which I think is code for ‘we’re going to talk about stuff that she doesn’t necessarily need to be worrying about’. And while he was out I managed to get myself on the floor. And he was still talking to her, and they were still discussing, like ‘what to we do?’. And she was saying to him ‘Simon I don’t think you’ve got time to go anywhere, you’re going to have to deliver this baby... it doesn’t sound to me like you’ve got time to go anywhere’. And he was like ‘WHAT?’.

Katy

And had your husband been prepared for that possibility? At all...?

Debbie

Not really... I mean, no. He didn’t think he’d need to. You don’t think you’d need to... So he was in the other room having a conversation and I was knelt in front of the sofa, leaning down. And then I really

I just kind
of rode...
'I've just got
to try and
melt into it'

remember him coming in and going 'yep, yep, it's bulging', and then going away again, and coming back, and basically the doula was telling him 'when she's finished her contraction, just leave her to it, she seems fine, go and have a look and see what's happening'. And he came back again and he was like 'yeah, I can see hair'. Then he went away again, and he came back and said 'I can see eyes, nose and a mouth'. And then one more contraction and the baby was out.

It just kind of... I didn't push... my body did it, I didn't even really engage... I just kind of rode... it sounds like a cliché that they say, but I did kind of ride what my body was doing. I was like 'I've got no control over this whatsoever, I've just got to try and melt into it and not tense up too much. And then it was just, it's not a very nice analogy but it was kind of like being sick, you know, it's just my body just went: wheuh, wheuh, WHEUH, and that was it. And I still to this day... speaking to the doula afterwards, she said 'sometimes if you're quite stressed, that kind of really rapid foetal ejection happens when you've got a lot of adrenaline in your system as well', so she was saying 'well if you were stressed about the idea of going to labour ward then maybe your body just went right, let's just do it before anyone has a chance to do anything about it'. So out he popped.

I wouldn't describe it as serene and calm in the labour itself, it was quite fast. But then afterwards it was just, as soon as he was out, it was quiet for a second and then he cried, and then we found out he was a boy because we didn't know he was a boy. And then he went straight to my breast, and then everything was quiet and I had that kind of fuzzy, tingly feeling in my body like you get when you've been exposed to loud noise for a long time and then it goes quiet. And my whole body was like 'what's going on? it's so quiet'. And we just like sat on the living room floor and went 'woww', 'what just happened?'. You know... 'it's done... what? we haven't...?'

Simon had half spoken to the paramedics and they were deciding what to do, and they were going to send an ambulance to get me into hospital. But then he called them back and said 'actually it's a

baby now, not a woman in labour any more' and they arrived about half... 20... I can't remember any more... a few minutes after he was born I think. And then my mum arrived about 20 minutes after that. So yeah, it was very lovely in the afterglow.

Katy

Yeah. I loved... that was my lovely bit really... wasn't it?

Debbie

Nobody takes the baby away, nobody pokes you, you just...

Katy

You just sit... I was in the water pool for about an hour before giving birth. And I had seven... I remember counting them, so I had seven contractions. And then I had that transition bit, where you suddenly go really hot, um, like something's changing. And at that point they were like 'oh yes, you're going to give birth now, so let's start thinking about pushing out, getting the baby through'. But they left me to do it. I wasn't sort of told when to push or anything. It was really nice being... they were sort of behind me, and they were checking, those two midwives but they weren't telling me what to do in any way. So it was very much left to me, which was lovely.

And then afterwards I held him, I pulled him up out of the water so it was mine... it was my moment which was lovely. And then we... I just looked at him and he didn't cry cos he'd come out of the water, and he just looked at me, and blinked at me. And it's just this amazing moment of us just looking at each other. And I was saying 'why isn't he crying?' and they were like 'oh, well he doesn't quite realise yet that he's here'. And he just looked at me, and I just looked at him and my husband was 'oh my god, he's here'... he was having a little cry. And I was just beaming, I wasn't particularly emotional in that sense but I was so happy that my little boy was here.

So we sat in the pool for a while, and then they helped me out, gave the baby to my husband, got me out onto the sofa which was covered in towels, incontinence pads, things like that... shower curtain... And then I just sat there and like you said, I just got him, fed him, he just latched straight away which hadn't happened with my first daughter – that had been quite hard. But with my son, he just latched, and it was so stressless, it was just so comfortable... and then the two midwives just did their notes at the table whilst me and my husband just sat with the baby, beaming. And they just let us be... and it was so peaceful. It was what, I don't know, five o'clock in the morning by then. My daughter had gone to the in-laws. It was just us. It was June, so we opened all the windows, because it was quite hot at that point. My cat sat and just watched the entire labour from the sofa. And so he wandered over and sniffed the baby for a little while then wandered back again. It was so... I can't, I can't... it was just so lovely. And I hear about some of my friends' traumatic experiences in hospital, rushing into emergency c-sections and things like that and I feel SO lucky that it happened at home, in this very kind of peaceful manner. I do think that's one of the reasons why, for both of my labours, that's why they were so straightforward – because I was at home. And I hadn't had to be induced, because for both of them my waters went naturally. It was my body was in control, and I was in control because I was at home, I was in my space. When I was doing a bit of – like you said – birth preparation, hypnobirthing, stuff like that. And so much of it was about being in your own space and feeling safe, so that your body could let go. And I think so much of it was to do with that, that's why I've been so lucky because I felt so safe and so comfortable where I was. So it was such a positive experience.

That idea that you feel comfortable and in control. And I don't think enough is paid... we don't get told that at NCT or whatever as a first-time mum. I don't think that message comes across clear enough. I think there's so much about pain relief, or breastfeeding, or...

Debbie

... labour, the physiological stages of labour. I don't need to know that, you know... I don't want to see the diagram, thanks.

Katy

The one where they show you how the cervix dilates. And that your body will... if you trust it... it's pretty good your body. Like you... your body just did it, in that second at home. And that's amazing. It has the capacity to just do it. And you just had to let it happen.

Debbie

Yeah. One of the most compelling things I read for home birth, or the body's ability to birth a baby quite naturally and by itself was the simple idea that your body knew how to grow that baby, all by itself. You didn't do anything. You maybe took some antenatal vitamins, but you really didn't do anything, apart from conceive. It just happened. So your body is going to get that baby out, it's not going to grow a baby that it can't get out. And I was like 'do you know what, that's so simple, but that makes such a lot of sense'. Overthinking things, and wanting to know how things will go so we can measure and mark and know where we are on the path... I think there's a lot of fear around the idea of childbirth as being this traumatic experience.

There are a lot of people who will tell you about their traumatic birth experiences or you watch the television shows and it all looks like, pretty intense. And yeah, I'd agree, and privacy is important. So being comfortable and safe, a big part of that for me I think is privacy. Because I'm quite a private person in general, in life, and...

Katy

So that ward you were put on first time around, that must have been horrendous.

Debbie

Yeah. And we did ask them if there was a side room that we could go into, because it was night time and everyone else was bedded down for the night. They were there for observations rather than because they were in labour. And I was like 'I just want a bit more space to move around, and I really want to make some noise'. So we asked if there was somewhere else where we could go. And they just said 'this is a labour ward, this is what we do'. And then the lady in the bed next door was like 'yeah, don't worry about it'. And I was like 'well... this is what I mean, I've got no privacy, no space'. So I ended up at the end of the corridor by the lift shaft because it was the middle of the night so there weren't many people coming and going. So I ended up spending a lot of time down there, leaning on a window sill and gazing out of the window. Yeah, but I'm sure that's what made things take such a long time for me, is that I just couldn't relax. Because I didn't feel safe... I didn't feel listened to, I didn't feel supported, I didn't feel I had privacy. And so my body went urrrrrgh.

Katy

It holds on a bit, it stops.

Debbie

Yeah. And interestingly once they did take me down to labour ward, which was in the early hours of the next morning, and they settled me in and the new midwife introduced herself, my other half was like 'well, I might go and get some breakfast and coffee, and I need to try and get some sleep'. And the midwife said 'well maybe you should try and get a bit of rest'. And as soon as I rested, just as I was about to drop off to sleep, everything started happening. And I think that was a sign that my body needed to be at a certain state of relaxation before it could get on with the things it was wanting to do.

Yeah, I think privacy, safety, security and support are really important. Like you said: dark, comfortable, cosy...

Katy

Both times my waters broke at night, while I was in bed. Both of them it was as if I had just got into bed, settled down, just started to relax, and then I turned over and... both times... And I think it's because I was in my safe zone. I was comfy, it was like my body went 'right, we can go now, we're ready, off you go!'. So I think there's a lot to be said for feeling safe in labour. For the body to relax. And to be about to give birth naturally without lots of – and obviously there will be women who need assistance and so on for various reasons – but if you can have that kind of safe environment, it must... that's what they say second... if you have a home birth, or a birth at home you're much (sorry! my words! I've got an eight-month who isn't sleeping at the moment) [Debbie: 'oh yeah, we're both at that sleep regression age, aren't we'] Yeah! Four months...

They say you don't tear so much at home. You don't have to have as many... people helping you to give birth because you're at home, you're more comfortable, things just... your body just does it. That was one of the things that appealed to me, that I would be less likely to tear, definitely, I was like 'yeah, that's a winning point for me really that I'm less likely, if I'm at home rather than in hospital'.

Debbie

Yeah. And I think for me the recovery afterwards was much easier as well, much quicker. Both mentally – it's difficult to compare, because first baby versus second baby – but...

Katy

It's a shock I think, the first time, isn't it? Whereas the second time the baby has to slot in a bit more, and you know what to expect, and it's quite different. Yeah, that first time is quite shocking, so the recovery is a bit different, isn't it.

Debbie

Yeah... But physically, so for my first baby I had an episiotomy and a forceps delivery and it was a day and a half from start to finish, so it was quite long.

Katy

That's really long.

Debbie

And then I had an epidural before we went to theatre for the forceps. They were like 'we're prepping you for theatre, that could be forceps, that could be a c-section'. So I was 'fine, give me the – um, the aah... what's it called, the injection in your back? – give it to me now then, fine if I'm signing away for having a c-section'. And so physically, I remember walking five minutes to the local shop the third day after I'd had the baby and that was a really big deal, I was exhausted afterwards. And I had to inject myself in my stomach with the anticoagulant clotting thing every day for seven or 10 days afterwards which I didn't really like doing. I couldn't really sit down, because of the stitches. I had to have my stitches examined, you know, and things. And there was a bit of concern at one point, that they got a bit infected... you know, so physically there was a lot more that my body needed to do to repair itself, the first time round with all the interventions that I'd had. And this time I was up and around straight away afterwards, really, and felt less battered and less bruised... and mentally as well, less battered and bruised than I had with the first one.

The first one... I tried to be as informed as possible as I was pregnant. I read those AIMS guides, and a book by Emily Oster called Expecting Better which sets out the evidence behind various decisions you might have to make as a pregnant woman. So I felt like I was fairly well informed for the choices that I might have to make. But I had more than I might have expected of 'white coat syndrome' where I was like 'well I've read this, so I think I'm informed, and

I think I know the questions I need to ask' but you still feel like you're going against medical advice and wisdom and this collective thinking. So I felt as though my choices weren't really 100% free choices, if that makes sense. So, I had a choice, but really I was being pointed, with lots of kind of emotion tied to it. Though I'm not saying that anybody was trying to make me scared, or trying to – you know – railroad me down a certain path, but as they present even the facts to you they're quite terrifying. So yeah, I felt like on the face of it I had a choice but I didn't feel personally like I actually had that much choice.

And then with the forms and things, the other thing that's really hard about labour and making decisions is that by the time I was signing the consent forms for theatre I was just exhausted. And I just wanted to do whatever it took for the whole experience to come to its conclusion, and for there to be a baby. I have to say, I didn't feel at any point like my baby inside me was at any risk, I didn't have a sense that there was anything wrong, at all. Other than that it was taking ages. But at that point I just wanted a baby out, so you're in quite a vulnerable state of mind I think, when you're having to make those kind of choices. And it's almost like there's no choice left, in a way, cos you're like 'well this baby has to get out and we've been trying for quite a while now, and the doctors are telling me that maybe there's a reason this baby isn't coming, and actually they think that the safest thing for me and the baby is to now go to theatre'. And then at that point you're 'well I've just got to sign, and hope for the best'.

And then at home, I didn't really have time to make any choices. It went so fast there weren't really any choices that I had to make. I guess I had to make a choice about the placenta, cos that didn't come immediately. So I sat down with the baby and he was feeding, and that was lovely and it was wonderful and I had a cup of camomile tea. And my partner had called labour ward to say we might be coming in for the postnatal checks, 'just wanted to have a conversation with you about coming in, and where we should go

and things'. And they said 'has the placenta arrived?' and he said 'no'. And they were like 'haah – ooh, it's been quite a while...'. 'We think you should get in here as soon as possible, basically, if the placenta hasn't arrived you need to get in here because of risk of postpartum bleeding, etc'. And then we spoke to the doula again and she said 'have you tried just being on your knees, or adopting one of the positions you were in when you were giving birth to him? try getting on your knees, wiggle your hips around, relax, carry on feeding him because that will help... hold him...'. And I did, and it just popped out. So yeah, I supposed that was a choice that I had to make: do we just go into hospital, or do we give it a little bit longer at home? And out it popped, all by itself. And I felt like I had a step removed between me and the people at labour ward because it was my partner saying this. So that was helpful because I didn't have to say it directly to anyone 'no I'm not doing what you say, I'm going to stay here for a bit longer'. But also I think having this doula on the phone gave me an incredible amount of reassurance because there was another professional – not a medically trained professional but somebody who is in the business of birthing and has seen loads and loads and loads and loads of people give birth. And she wasn't there, but she just had that kind of experience to say 'well just get on your knees and wiggle your hips around a bit' and 'don't panic just yet, give it five or 10 more minutes and you might find a change in position helps', and it did. And that was really reassuring to me and empowered me to make that decision, that I had somebody that I felt I trusted. I think there's a big trust there. So, yeah. But other than that I didn't have to make any choices in labour.

Katy

I had two midwives. My home birth team... there's six midwives and you get one for all your appointments leading up to the birth. Or you should have the same midwife, and I did. She was lovely. You obviously can't see her very well because she's wearing PPE, a mask all the time. But she had really nice eyes. So I trusted, I felt very calm in her presence, she was lovely.

Then it is pot luck who you get when you give birth. You know, if they're at another birth, or if they are even on shift. And it just happened that when I rang, she was at another birth, across town. So they said 'oh, we'll send out a community midwife from the hospital'. So she came round, and she was lovely. And she was the one that first examined me and said 'yeah, we'll stick around, I'll call for another midwife now'. And it happened that my midwife had then finished the birth in town, and was able to come across. And so she got there an hour before I gave birth. So I had her at my birth, and there was a point when I panicked a little bit at the transition bit where you're really hot and sweaty, and you think 'right, I need to start pushing now'. And I remember that bit from my first birth as being really, really painful, like the ring of fire bit. And I looked at her and I was like 'I can't do this bit, this hurts, I can't do this'. And I just remember her bending down to my level in the water and going 'you can... you will be okay, trust yourself'. And I remember that being so calming, at that point. And because I'd built that relationship up with her, I did... I trusted her and I got on with it.

The other midwife was a bit older and a bit more stern. And she was 'come on, get on with it'. And I think that response would have made me feel a bit like 'okaaay...'. Whereas her, because we had that relationship, because she was down on my level looking me in the eye, I think that really helped calm me at that point. And it did calm me, and I got on with it.

My midwife was the one who did all of the postnatal checks as well. So she did come to the house again, check the weight, all the rest of it, check how I was doing. So I was so lucky that I had the same midwife, to have that continuity of care – which I hadn't had in my first pregnancy at all. I'd had different midwives at every single appointment, which I hated because... six weeks into getting pregnant with my first child, my father had died. Very quickly from cancer. And so I was really struggling. My first pregnancy... I was really down. So every time they said to me 'how's your mental state, how are you feeling?'. I'd go 'I'm feeling really sad'. And they'd be like

'oh'. And I'd have to explain every single time the story again, and I found that really hard. Because they didn't know, and there wasn't that continuity, every single appointment was different. I think that was probably another factor in choosing a home birth, was that we'd have the same midwife – ideally you have the same midwife. Because after my first experience that really appealed to me. And so I was just very lucky on my labour to have her again. So, yeah, that really appealed to me, that was one of the things I really liked about a home birth was that there was that continuity all of the way through. Because again, I think it goes back to the idea of being quite safe, and feeling really comfortable because I knew who was in my house, I'd met her before. I think that really helps.

Debbie

I had a similar experience at the transition point, and I was sweating and I could feel the sweat trickling down my neck, and I was 'I'm so hot'. I was like 'I can't do this, I can't do this – I can't move, I can't move'. And the doula was on speakerphone at the time and my partner was beside me but I think it wouldn't have mattered necessarily what he said, because this was the second birth he'd experienced. And in the nicest way I would have been 'what do you know? you're just saying what you think I need to hear' kind of thing. Which would have been what he was doing. But the doula said to me... she was very kind of calm, her voice, she said 'Debbie listen to me, listen... you just need to be with your body... don't worry about any of that, don't think about that, you need to be with your body and with your baby, that's where your concentration needs to be at the moment'. 'And don't worry about moving, you don't have to go on with that, just be with your body'. And it's such a simple thing, isn't it. But it's really powerful. And just somebody to quell that fear, to put a calming hand on that bit of doubt and fear that pops up at that intense point in the labour, just makes such a difference. And I remember just going 'yeah, okay, yeah, fine, I will then – there's no choice at this point, right I will, I'll go back inside myself and stop thinking about it all'. Yeah, and... you need to trust that person who's

I held him,
I pulled him
up out of the
water so it
was mine...
it was my
moment

giving you that calming, steadying hand whether it's a metaphorical one or a physical one.

Katy

Yeah. If it's another woman I think, sometimes helps as well. Yeah, my husband was great, but he doesn't understand as a woman what it's like to carry a child, and all the rest of it. So it was very reassuring, having that sort of voice, isn't it?

Debbie

Yeah... yeah. There is a male midwife in our home birth team, who wasn't my assigned midwife. But he is my friend's assigned midwife for her baby, and she's considering having a home birth at the moment, early April. It's really interesting because he came and did my day one visit and he's absolutely lovely. Really nice guy. I hadn't met him during my prenatal care. And she was saying 'I was quite shocked, I just assumed it would be a lady and then I met him... and then I was quite shocked, and then I realised – you know – I'm a feminist, like equal opportunities, you can't have it both ways'. And she was 'yeah, I'm gonna embrace this, it will be good, this is going to be an interesting experience'. Yeah, but it's not common to have men midwives or doulas or anything like that.

Katy

I messaged someone on Facebook, a friend of a friend who'd had a home birth with the same home birth team. Sort of just asked her opinion about how it had all gone. And she was lovely, and really positive about it. And she was the only person I knew who'd had a baby at home. There was a bit of family resistance, particularly from my in-laws who just couldn't understand why I would want to do such a thing. 'Surely hospital would be a much safer place?' So I had to bring out some research, and they like a bit of research, they are both ex teachers. I'm a teacher as well. So they like having the facts in front of them. So that helped. My sister-in-law was like 'why are you doing THAT? it's really unsafe...'. And I had to again, show some

statistics to show it's actually okay. Yeah, then I just read... did some reading online. Had to persuade my husband with the reading as well.

Debbie

I didn't really speak to many people, I have to say. And that's because I didn't really want to put too much pressure on it, on the idea of a home birth. Especially given my first experience... so it was just something that I was like 'let's prepare for, and have as an option, and then I hope it will be, but I don't want to feel the expectation from anybody'. And I was worried that my family... we didn't even tell my family that we were planning a home birth... the grand parents. Because I was worried that they were going to have that same reaction, and then I wouldn't have it as a choice anymore... if that makes sense? Because if they were against it, I would be worried as it's their grandchild as well, about going for it and something going wrong and then blaming me for something going wrong, kind of thing.

As it turned out, after the event, my mum was 'you could have told me'. And I think I always thought my mum would be more understanding and supportive, and she would listen to me saying 'look, these are the facts, and this is why I want to do it', and respect my decision. But I didn't feel I could tell her, and not the other grandparents cos that seemed... do you know what I mean? So they'd feel it was kept from just them... I dunno... And actually it was the doula who said 'you don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to, you don't have to explain yourself to everybody, it's your decision, it's your body, it's your baby... you don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to'. And I was like 'it might be simpler if I just don't'.

Anyway, I didn't talk to many people about it. But the doula that we had, giving us the birth preparation had a kind of mother group. [Baby has been chatting behind this conversation... Debbie pauses to talk to him 'it was my birth... I want to tell them about it... I enjoyed it, I got to eat solidly for the next 16 weeks'] Anyway there were people on there who were second time home birth, or even third time home

birth people. So that was a nice kind of community to talk to about how does it work. So it was a yoga class for an hour, and then half an hour of virtual sit around having a cup of tea together kind of thing. So those were the people I talked to about it. And then the lady who had the accidental home birth with the second, then had a third – and she told me about this when I met her – that she chose to have at home and she said that was the best out of all of them because, it was what happened with the second, but less panicked, basically. I did do a lot of reading as well, just some nice books which are supportive of home birth, and laid out the advantages as well as the facts as well.

And we thought we were going to have to go into hospital, because of the Covid question mark. And I was kind of prepared for that, in a way. Like emotionally I wasn't, but in a sort of thinking brain part I was 'well okay, we did our best to have a home birth and we never set our hearts on that as being the only way, we just put everything we could in place to have a home birth if that was what we wanted on the day, at the time, and that's not possible so I just need to accept that'. Emotionally I was like 'werrrrgh... NO... no hospital'.

I know there's a kind of middle ground, a kind of midwife-led hospital setting, which is what I wanted first time round because that was my appetite for risk versus knowing that I needed to have a calm situation to make birth go smoothly, but having the reassurance of being somewhere where there was medical help if we needed it. And if somebody had said to me 'you can definitely have your baby in the birth centre' with the second one, I possibly wouldn't have gone with the home birth team, because I would have felt comfortable with that as a kind of in-between option. Because I wasn't quite 42 weeks – at 42 weeks the birth centre won't take you any more because you're categorised as high risk – but because I'd gone in in the morning to be induced, the day before I turned 42 weeks, I was asking them on the antenatal ward 'as my labour started spontaneously, can I go down to the birth centre now?'. And they were like 'no, because you need to be in active labour, which is four

centimetres dilated'. And I was 'but, you just told me I was three to four centimetres dilated'. Anyway, so I tried and they were like 'well we can ask, but probably not.'. But I don't think they ever did ask. I think they just went 'no, it's not possible'.

So, I would have been open to that middle ground, but it wasn't available to me the first time. And then the second time I was 'I don't want to end up in the same situation' where I go in thinking 'birth centre lovely...', 'relaxing but hospital security', if that makes sense... I didn't want to end up thinking I was going for that, and getting stuck on labour ward again and ending up down an intervention pathway that I didn't want to...'. But yeah, I know there is a middle ground and I've got some friends who've had lovely, lovely birth experiences in the midwife-led unit in our local hospital, which has got a really good reputation. And I'd have been really happy with that but it wasn't to be the first time, and then the second time I was a bit more wary about getting into the hospital system and then not getting – you were asking about choices, you know – and then not having the choice. Just being 'well now you're in hospital...'

When I went in for the induction and they said 'we can't induce you because it's already started' I said 'well can I go home then?' and they said 'no'. And it was 'well why not?' and I said 'please...', because I was expecting to have an outpatient induction so I hadn't brought my bag or anything. And they were 'no, no, no you're staying here now'. And I was 'well I haven't got anything with me, can I at least go and collect my bag and get my lunch and come back? go for a walk in the park in the sun?'. And they were 'okay, but we're keeping your notes'. And that was the beginning of the experience, set the tone for this kind of like 'now you're in the system, and this is the order in which things happen'.

And I remember having a conversation with the midwife, one of the young midwives on the antenatal ward, and I was asking about the birth centre. I was like 'please could you talk to them and see if they would have me down there?'. And she was like 'well you'll be

transferred at midnight to labour ward so I don't think they're going to let you in, because then you're high risk'. And then she said to me 'I don't know why you don't want to go to labour ward, you can have a perfectly nice birth on labour ward'. She was like, you know 'if there were things that you want on your birth plan – I haven't read your birth plan – but if there were things that you want I'm sure they can make them happen on labour ward'. And there was just this whole sense that I felt like nobody was listening to me, and nobody was answering my questions about the process. I was asking quite direct questions and they were not answering them directly, they were just saying 'well, we'll do this'. 'Well... that doesn't answer my question'.

Katy

So you must have come out of your first birth feeling like the choice was taken, you weren't listened to. These are like big things, aren't they. Were they the main things that you felt, that upset you? You were talking about afterwards you did extra preparation for number two. Were they the things you worked on?

Debbie

Yeah, it was lack of control and lack of choice. And then afterwards as well, there was definitely a sense that I'd had this hope of a very natural... you know, I was keen on not having pain relief. And I got all the way to full dilation without pain relief, but then had this epidural for the theatre. And I felt like I'd failed my baby in some way. And I felt... feel a sense of guilt that it hadn't been a calm, serene entry into the world. And that I had her as soon as she was out, but then quite quickly she was off, and then in a nappy, and then while they were doing my stitches she was out in the recovery room with my partner not with me. And it wasn't what I wanted for her first minutes, hours. You know, being born into the theatre in bright lights and then being like whisked away fairly quickly and then rubbed down...

So it was really lovely this time to have those moments afterwards where nobody was trying to poke at anybody, I was just holding... [Katy 'or take the baby'] It was almost like there was no threats in the room, in the building, you know... there was nobody who could come, in any way. And that made that moment of holding him and introducing ourselves to him very relaxed, because we could. Until the paramedics turned up, there was nobody that was going to come and interrupt us... and if we didn't answer the front door, even the paramedics... y'know? Like, it was just us, for as long as we wanted, in a way. Which was lovely. It was really nice. Yeah. And very calm, and, yeah... And I felt like, this time, the real difference between the two experiences was I felt this time very much like I had birthed my baby. Like I had done it. I'd achieved... it was a personal achievement. That he was out, all by himself, you know... we'd done it... and my body had done it, and I COULD do it.

Cos there was a definite sort of undermining of confidence from the first birth experience, you know. I felt like I had done everything I could in the run up to it, as a first-time mum, to be as prepared as I could be. I'd spoken to friends about their birth experience, I'd read, I'd done yoga, I'd done meditation, hypnobirthing, breathing... And I felt like I did everything I could to prepare, I should have been in a good place. And it didn't go as expected, and that really undermined my confidence. And that felt good, the second time – the first time I didn't feel I'd given birth to my daughter, I felt she was yanked out of me – which was essentially what happened. And this time I felt like I'd done it, and I felt a huge sense of accomplishment, and healing, and yeah, like pride I suppose, that we'd done it...

Katy

Yeah! I felt SO PROUD! I felt like Super Woman, for a good two weeks after... well – the baby blues here, at one point, but... I think for five or six days I was flyyying, because I was so proud that I'd done it at home, on my own, you know? yeah, that's exactly it.

Debbie

Especially when you feel like the odds are sometimes against you, you know. Like the system wants you to... well I think it's getting better, there's a good home birth team, but you know like the normal is going to hospital, and you're like 'I did what's not normal, and I did it by myself, I did it at home'. Yeah...

I do feel that parenthood in general, all of it from the being pregnant, giving birth – but also the raising of the child, and the challenges that brings, puts a bit of perspective on the rest of life. I went back to work in between having children with... like...sweating the small stuff less, if that makes sense. Like, cutting out some of the noise and just being... just what being a parent makes you do. You have to multitask, you have to be very good at listening, and trying to get to the essence of an issue with a child, with a toddler. Definitely being a parent has given me skills that have helped in wider life. And I do feel like some of my self confidence has been restored by a positive home birth experience. Yeah, some of my confidence has been restored, by being able to do it, if that makes sense.

Katy

I really encourage my friends to consider a home birth. Even if they don't want to do it, for a lot of my friends they are first-time mums at the moment. And it's completely their choice obviously, but I sort of say 'well consider it, because it is such a different experience when you are in your own home'. So I'm trying to be really encouraging of it, I think I'm trying to... I guess promote it, in a way, as an option. Because although our home birth team has grown loads, and looking at their statistics they've never had so many home births as in previous years – they're doing amazingly – I still don't think that it's really well known, particularly. So I'm trying to be as positive and encouraging about it, to say to my friends 'think about it next time' or 'have you ever considered... would it be something you'd think about?' You know... So, I think it is important that they

... your body is capable of growing a baby, so it's capable of birthing a baby. Trust yourself, don't overthink it. Put yourself in a comfortable, safe situation, and with the support around you... And your body can just do it. You don't need to do it, you don't need to overthink it, when it comes to it.

For me it was really difficult to believe that, having had the first experience... I found it difficult to believe in my body's capability to birth a baby, but it can... Your body can do it, trust it.

have that option – even if they decide against it – that they might think about it. So I try and promote it as much as I can.

Debbie

I would also encourage anybody to consider it, with their own personal circumstances, and preferences and appetite for risk and things... I think it's also important, in considering it, to talk to people who've done it. And also find some good information sources, particularly if you're a kind of thinking... I'm a scientist by training and I needed that evidence base for the research. Because there's an awful lot of material out there that's really reassuring, if you're an undecided person. So talking to people who've done it, but also arming yourself or reassuring yourself with some of the good evidence there is out there for the benefits of home birth. I found that was really important for me, to feel comfortable with the idea.

And the other thing I think I've learnt is that... that idea that your body is capable of growing a baby, so it's capable of birthing a baby. Trust yourself, don't overthink it. Put yourself in a comfortable, safe situation, and with the support around you – I think that was another key element for me – it was important that I trusted. And your body can just do it. You don't need to do it, you don't need to overthink it, when it comes to it. For me it was really difficult to believe that, in a way, in advance, having had the first experience. I was like 'maybe my body can't do it, and that's why I ended up in... maybe there's something, you know... about me physiologically... why does it end up like that, when I felt like I was quite well prepared?'. So I found it difficult to believe in my body's capability to birth a baby, but it can. So that would be my other message: your body can do it, trust it.

Katy

It's been really nice talking about it, actually. I've had very few opportunities to talk about it. So it's been a really nice experience. Specially talking to somebody else who's also had a child at home as well, it's been really really nice. So thank you.

Afterbirth

These conversations were punctuated with laughter. Uplifting episodes of recognition and triumphant realisation, despite being amongst complete strangers. Stepping between absolute clarity of emotion and grasping at vocabulary for sensations unexpressed. Families responded to my call out for birth stories – gathering for an hour – balanced between the needs of babies and siblings. I am grateful to them all for sharing their resolve and joy. We send these insights on to fortify and enthuse those who wonder about home birth.

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borne

- 1 to have carried the weight of, stood up to, endured
- 2 to be carried along by

Belle Benfield
Imogen Forsaith
Salma Steadman
Caroline Basden
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Kerrie Clark
Amanda Alappat
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Katy Headland



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