

## Heroine

It was an ordinary shoebox orange and white, with a Nike swish emblazoned on the side. It rested snugly on her lap, and she carefully adjusted its weight every time the taxi swerved from side to side. The driver was dodging in and out of traffic, swapping lanes to avoid being stuck behind slow moving vehicles. She watched silently as the red brick facade of Edendale Hospital disappeared slowly from sight. The relief was palpable, and yet still her fear clutched at her emptying her of her pain and grief. She knew she was a criminal; she knew she was a thief.

She had not been afraid three days ago, when the pains had started. It was night time, dark and quiet, and she heard only the sounds of her little one breathing, and the gentle rain on the thatch of the hut. She lay for a while, listening. Soon she heard a low bellow, as one of the cattle called for its calf, and a scratching sound as an insect moved across her grass mat. She could just make out snatches of music, carried over the hills on gusts of wind. The local shebeen was still in business, catering to the needs of the restless youth.

She tried to lie still as the pain came again. She felt her belly tighten like a child's ball pumped full with air. As the contraction eased, there was a sharp stab under her left ribs, and she smiled. A little soccer player in the making, the baby was objecting to his increasingly cramped quarters. Not long now, she thought. Not long now, and she would caress his face, cradle his body in her arms, feel the tentative tug of his lips at her breast.

She knew she needed to get up. The doctors had had to cut her first baby out of her, and they had told her they would need to do the same for this little one. It seemed her hips were not big enough to allow a baby free passage to a new world. Her hut was high on the slopes of a grassy hill outside Pietermaritzburg, a full hours walk from the nearest clinic. A neighbour had a cell phone, but she knew from experience that the ambulance would take many hours to come, and may struggle to find her in the dark. She would need to walk.

She rose awkwardly to her knees and then to her feet. Inhaling deeply, she enjoyed the smell of last night's fire, intermingled with the freshness of the rain and the approaching dawn. Wrapping herself in a blanket, she picked up the Checkers bag with her few possessions, and the long stick her grandfather had fashioned for her from a wattle which grew behind their kraal. After a last look at her sleeping daughter, she stepped outside, allowing her eyes to adjust the faint skein of light. It was early dawn, the time when the horns of the cattle are just visible against the inky blue of the lightening sky.

As she walked, she sang. This was partly to keep herself company, and partly to distract her from the Pain and the rain. Occasionally she had to stop, bend over, as a contraction came and went. And then she would continue, eyes fixed on the sheet metal roofs she could see down in the valley below. Although she knew they were not her final destination, there she could lie down, and await the ambulance from the hospital where the operation would be done. She thought happy thoughts, about the baby, and about the name chosen for this long awaited son.

When she reached the clinic, the pains were closer together. The nurses examined her green clinic card, asked her some questions, then settled her onto an examination couch. They tut-tutted a little as they took her blood pressure, and she thought she saw concern as they repeatedly prodded her abdomen, and pushed a funnel-shaped object against her cramping belly. But she was tired and excited and tried not to concern herself with things she did not understand.

After some hours the ambulance came. The paramedics said she needed oxygen, but the cylinder was empty, so she had to do without. The ride in the hospital lift was not as terrifying as the last time, and she chuckled at the memory of how she had refused to enter the metal cage. She knew now this small room was just a way of getting up to the third floor, to the big room where the babies were born.

When she arrived the doctor came quickly. How could this little girl be a doctor, the one to bring her baby into this world? It amazed her that someone so young had been given such responsibility. And her clothes! She was wearing men's clothes, green, frayed at the sleeves and with a hole in the buttock seam. This "doctor" poked and prodded, listening with the thing they all hung around their necks. Then she put a wet gel on her abdomen, and a round rubber bung, attached to a machine. "Nothing", the doctor kept saying. "Nothing at all. Why do they always come so late?"

It was only when another doctor was called, that she started to become afraid. By now the pain was severe, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. The new doctor was older, looked tired and rushed. He wheeled in a new machine, used more cold gel, told her to lie on her back, to lie still. Not once did he look at her, and she could not read the expression on his face. "Nothing" he echoed. And as he left, "Prep her for theatre. I guess we will still have to do the C-Section to get it out."

Her dead baby was delivered an hour later. It was the young girl doctor who had finally told her. "Sorry, Mama" she said. "There is no heartbeat. You have to sign here. We still need to cut you and close the tubes. You cannot risk having another child." She was stunned, flabbergasted, bewildered, confused. As she finally understood she heard a wail, and looked around to find its source. It took her time to realize she was making that awful, desperate, keening sound.

When it was over and she was wheeled from the theatre, everything looked the same. But it could not be. Her baby was dead! She was taken to the ward, a ward full of mothers snuggling their newborns. "Where is my baby?" she asked a nurse. "I want to hold my baby." "Phepisa, Ma, I am sorry" was the only reply, "Your baby is already gone"

She was not sure how the next day passed. She only remembered tears that would not stop and a hollow agonizing emptiness. The pain of her wound reminded her every moment of what she had lost. She listened to the babies, and gasped at the raw agony that threatened to overwhelm her. All she could think of was leaving that place.

The second day, when the drip was out, a man approached her bed. He said he was from the mortuary. He wanted to know if she had insurance, and again she didn't understand. But he

explained. Explained what it would cost to take her baby home. If he was alive, it would be easy. She would carry him in her arms. But a dead baby! Special arrangements had to be made. Money was required. Money she did not have. Money she could not get.

And so it was that this proud good woman committed a courageous crime. In the early hours of the morning, hardly thinking, only hurting, she crept into the mortuary, with an old shoe box. There was a guard at the desk, but he was dozing, and she managed to ease past him. The small body was not hard to find; she wrapped it gently in a stolen towel, and trembling, laid it in the box. And then, almost paralyzed with fear and guilt, she shuffled out the hospital door, and took her baby home, to his final resting place