Sex Talks to Girls
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Five years after my first war story I’d thoroughly drilled myself in various ancient childbirth practices resurrected by women in the ’60s and ’70s, and had been triple warned about the still rampant American birthing machine by La Leche League, Monsieur Lamaze, and the Venus of Willendorf. I was armed for anything that might throw me off course, ready to tai chi with Western medicine, and about as in my own shoes as anyone could be, given my bulk and heartburn.

Harper had tied a decent load on that evening and snored loudly upstairs while I sat in the den absently watching late night TV and timing contractions. I half-watched *The Bob Newhart Show* and then I quarter-watched *Easy Rider*, and after all that humor and violence I decided to name the baby Emily if it was a girl (after Suzanne Pleshette’s character on *Newhart*), and Dennis if it was a boy (after
Hopper). We’d changed names so often nothing sounded interesting anymore, and these names, I thought, would work just fine.

At five minutes apart I called my neighbor to come over and watch Clio (we’d prearranged), then woke an instantly panicked Harper to take me to the hospital. I’d decided to wait until after midnight to give Harper the opportunity to sleep off his scotch neat and to give myself as little time as possible to labor in fluorescence. I was using my breath techniques and doing well, impressed by the regular contractions that tightened my stomach into a volleyball then eased away like the tail end of a foghorn. I felt energized and I was determined to have my second child without anesthesia.

Harper was slightly slurry and lopsided but in adequate control of the station wagon as we crawled along icy roads to Phelps Memorial in North Tarrytown, which has since been renamed Sleepy Hollow in honor of Ichabod Crane, who lost his head, apparently, between the hospital and the country club. I was busy timing the waves, and the baby, I liked to believe, was gearing up for his/her descent into life as we know it.

Since H. had attended the Lamaze classes too, he was invited into the labor room with me. But since he was still slightly ripped and hadn’t gotten into the whole thing enthusiastically to begin with, I like to believe that the Willendorf Venus (although at that moment I’m sure I was thanking the usual male gods) chose to send me Willa, a woman I knew from the neighborhood who happened to be the nurse on duty that night. Willa threw her arms around me, gave H. a nod, and companioned me humorously through the first stage and into transition.

Transition: Who has ever made this trip, raise your hands.

Men: Think Bunker Hill or some such skirmish lasting one to four hours.

Or skip to page _____. I won’t be offended.
Transition is when a human being is forced against its will through the neck of its mother’s womb, which up until that moment has been holding the whole works inside so s/he wouldn’t fall out, and which (this cervix/neck/formerly bolted door of the Alamo) is not known for its elasticity, unlike the vagina, which, everyone knows, is made of spandex.

The poor head, inching its way through the silently howling cervix, needs a dozen or so strong squeezes to complete the journey (I like to think of transition as the Twelve Labors of Hercules), but the new mother will not remember this manageable statistic, as she has entered the Battle of the Amazons in the Forest of Amnesia, and if she dies during this rarefied time, she will mercifully remember nothing.

I could see Willa darkly and I couldn’t place Harper (he may have left for the coffee machine, having sobered up sufficiently to recognize amniotic fluid on his slippers), but suddenly I was ten centimeters and someone was throwing me and Suzanne Pleshette onto a gurney and shipping us down the hallway to the delivery room. It was like I lost my paddle over the side of my boat, and I was speeding through some kind of wormhole in the universe with pain controlling me like the giant pain in the ass it was rumored to be. What the fuck, I might have thought if it was a few years in the profane future—still, I was having my first inkling of what it felt like to be furious.

*Push,* said the doctor, no sooner had I landed in the delivery room. (When had he arrived? What was his name again? Who cared. Redundant prick.) (You may think this was the pain talking, if you wish.)

And, sure enough, my body pushed, not because I wanted it to, but because he’d said the “P” word and I’d salivated in response. Now *there* was a pain I could remember—a ripping apart of any
pleasurable sexual experience I’d ever had (in a former life, perhaps), as my vagina filled with Dennis Hopper’s head and almost burst.

Stop, I suddenly heard myself demand. I could feel the steam coming out of my Medusa hair and I was vaguely aware that my good girl image was at stake, but I’d been on top of this Herculean business for eight or nine hours now and no one was going to wreck it for me at the finish line.

I got ready quickly, before the next wave set upon me: Sit up, I said to myself (not Lie down, Dr. Divot). Okay, wait. Okay, now!

I thought, I’m totally conscious and this part doesn’t even hurt, which is what I’d been told at Lamaze, which is what I never would have believed if I hadn’t felt it myself and I never would have experienced if I’d turned my body over to the hired expert, who was waiting eagerly with a scalpel.

My baby crowned and I eased her out without an episiotomy, and, bless him then for this one small important thing, he laid her on my belly, glowing and bloody, tired and tiny.

A new name filled my mouth, nothing I’d previously considered, one she herself had obviously invented on her way to the planet.

Hello, Sophie, I said, to the wise child who, without a word, would inspire me through the first revolution of my life.