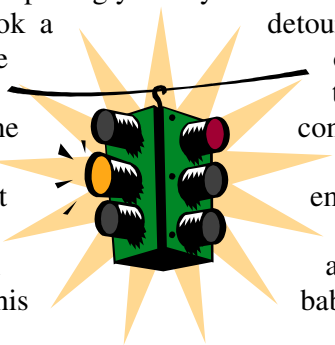
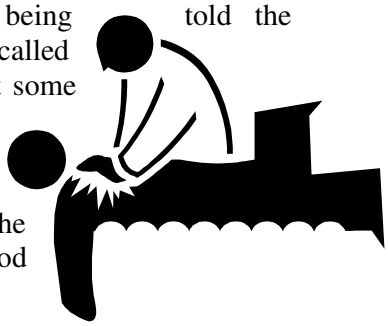
MY NEMESIS: LIFE-AT WHAT PRICE?

Continued from the September issue of Magna

…I was doing my breathing technique to handle the contractions. We arrived in central London. The contractions had slightly subsided – a little. I told Jason to take the route around the central London Christmas lights so that I could enjoy them before my whole world changed forever. The traffic was surprisingly heavy in central London, so I only saw the Knightsbridge lights, before we took a detour to escape the traffic. We were met at the hospital by a couple of very helpful midwives who monitored me. Was it going to be a Christmas baby? It was all very exciting. The contractions subsided and I was back at square one. Why was this happening? Later we discovered that my bladder wasn't emptying properly and was restricting the contraction of my womb, hence the stop and start of the contractions which Jason and I felt would last forever. Jason exclaimed he wondered if this baby was ever going to come out!



The week prior to my due date, I went in for a check-up at the hospital and was admitted due to the lie of the baby who had disengaged its head and was lying transverse which, as I understood, was dangerous as the umbilical could potentially detach. I was taken in overnight for observation and can remember feeling dreadful on being told the news. I was gutted and was afraid that the baby could be lost. I called Jason who left work early to collect my overnight bag and brought some food to me at the hospital. I called my best friend in the mean time. I just broke down in tears. I mumbled to her on the phone amongst choked sniffles how I thought I was going to lose the baby. She comforted me and told me to call her if I needed anything and that she would be round to see me. Jason arrived with my bags and food provisions. The hospital food was far from amicable.

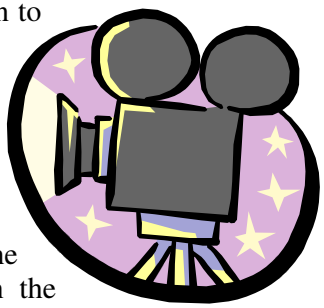


It was tough being in the hospital alone without Jason. Jason had been my rock of constancy throughout the pregnancy. He did virtually everything for me. He cooked, cleaned, shopped, massaged my aches and pains, soothed me with calming words and even bathed me. I was so large and I was clumsy and unstable on my feet and lost my balance easily, so he would help me into and out of the bath and help me turn over and manoeuvre my hippo proportioned body in the water. Baths had become a daily ritual. He would run them for me just before we went to bed, with my frankincense and rose salt crystals that smelt divine. Even a simple thing such as bathing exhausted me and he would help towel me dry and massage me with oil to tame the massive stretch marks that I had developed.

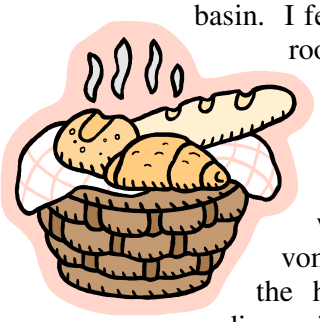
Towards the end of the pregnancy, alone in the house, I had to crawl up the stairs in my hands and feet. Standing upright was too taxing. And so being alone in hospital that night was harrowing. I couldn't bath myself so I just sat on the edge of the bath and flannelled where I could easily reach and combed my knotted afro hair as best as I could and looked forward to Jason coming to help me get clean. Feeling unclean tended to make me feel uneasy and skanky. The good news was that I was discharged later that day. Baby had re-engaged her head. I missed Jason and looked forward to going home to my own bed, even though I had been cared for very well in the hospital on that occasion. This was a stark contrast to my previous stay in a different hospital during my pregnancy in June.

I was about 6 weeks pregnant and though the first fortnight of pregnancy had been very happy and fun and exciting, things started to deteriorate from the fourth week.
I first realised that I was pregnant when I was clumsily knocking objects over and bumping into things. When I saw the positive pregnancy kit, I was elated, relieved and excited. The idea of having a mini addition to our home was thrilling. Jason was eagerly and apprehensively waiting in the bedroom awaiting the news. Was it going to be disappointment again like the previous few occasions or had ignoring the scientific timings and methods and doing things our own instinctive way resulted in success? Jason had suspected I might have successfully conceived because I had been clumsy in the prior fortnight - one of the classic signs.

We went out looking at baby shops and enjoying the thought of the future. We bet with each other on how the baby would look and enjoyed things we might not be able to do after the birth, like a trip to the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden and dining out. This was great until about four weeks into the pregnancy when I started to feel tired and we thought this was perfectly normal, so I stopped my long hikes to the shopping centre and started eating extra nourishing food. The first cravings began with Ghanaian food. I had a small appetite in the mornings and a veracious one in the evenings. My taste buds began to reject certain foods. Some foods began to taste very sweet or very salty or acquired an unusually unpleasant taste. My first morning sickness was I thought purely my own fault. The film The Da Vinci Code had been released and we were offered the one minute past midnight time (first showing after release) at the cinema. Whey hey, this is better than a premier, I thought let's seize the night and so we were at the cinema until the early hours of the morning and stayed up discussing the film until around four in the morning – something we had not done for a couple of years since moving home. It was fun, but I suffered the next day. My hormones were out of balance and my body clock complained. I was a little tired.



We walked to the shops to buy my favourite food 'fixes'. On our return, I took one swig of a slightly fizzy drink and as a gas bubble ascended my throat the contents of my stomach was brought out onto our dining room floor. Poor Jason had to duck out of range of the projectile. Thankfully he calmly cleaned up for me as I was leaning over the downstairs basin. I felt shaken and, I guess, somewhat shocked. I returned to the dining room exhausted, but hungry and Jason cooked us dinner and I enjoyed my meal. Not even being sick will get between me and good food, I thought. How wrong I was. Halfway through chomping, I was sick again. Jason wrapped me in a blanket and helped me up to bed. – 'Nurse Jason's orders' to conserve my energy. The last thing we wanted was a miscarriage. That unfortunately was the first of many vomits for the next eight to nine months. We'd decided not to announce the happy news until three months into the pregnancy in case of disappointment – we preferred private grief.

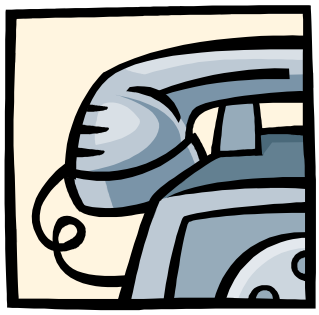


Week seven - I had indigestion, trapped gas, nausea, bloating. The indigestion was quite bad at night. Strong acid travelled up burning my oesophagus, making swallowing painful. I slept with stacks of pillows to encourage the acid to stay down.

The nausea and tiredness was quite bad over the next couple of weeks along with strange cravings. Lying down was uncomfortable. Week eight - I felt low, exhausted,

breathless, constantly anxious and vomited a lot. Week nine - I was still low, anxious, felt starving, still being sick. My skin had become bumpy, and I felt very hot. I remember speaking to Jason while he was on his lunch breaks and asking him to bring home food to satisfy my latest cravings. I felt exhausted and stayed in bed. The traffic outside seemed twice as loud and colours were vivid as though I was in the tropics. My senses were heightening. It reminded me of the scene in the novel The Moon and Sixpence when the artist Paul Gauguin is dying and there is a description of the vividness of his senses – the colours and sounds in his South Pacific hut.

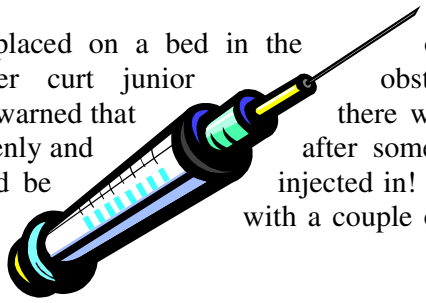
We moved to the back bedroom which was quieter, and yellow was easier on my eyes than pink. I'd been sick several times since the Da Vinci incident, and I still can't stand the thought of sushi after seeing it spewed over my duvet cover. Then one evening I was sick twice in a short space of time and went to bed, and the next day was unable to eat without vomiting. So I drank instead and hoped for redemption the following day. The following day, Jason left for work on the early shift and I lay in bed petrified waiting for the next episode of vomiting. It arrived shortly after lunchtime when I tried to eat, but this time I couldn't drink either. Eating and drinking – things we take for granted – normal bodily functions vital for living and I couldn't do either. I felt dreadful, destitute and afraid. I sloped back into bed. Exhausted, upset, miserable, hungry, thirsty, but unable to eat or drink anything without vomiting. I had also developed a strange viscousy consistency of saliva that continually swelled in my mouth which made me vomit when I tried to swallow. This made speaking difficult as my mouth was full.



I was lying in bed alone in the house - too tired and feeling faint after vomiting from trying to drink some water, and I felt totally helpless. I dialled Jason and left a message on his mobile asking him to come home quickly, that I couldn't drink anything and was thirsty and I could barely move my limbs from exhaustion. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Jason called me back soon after and left work immediately. He arrived about an hour later dressed me and drove me to the GP.

I felt like I'd had all my life drained from me and I was quite upset. Why me? Why do some women go through blissfully through pregnancy and I couldn't cope with it? I sat in the surgery waiting area feeling miserable, disoriented and tearful.

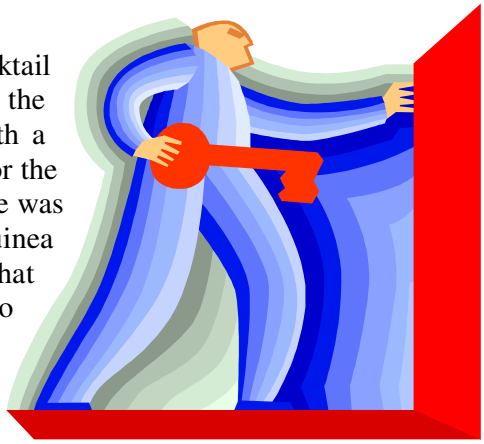
Thankfully, the GP was very knowledgeable and diagnosed me quickly. I was referred to hospital A&E promptly with a letter. I had ketones in my urine and had hyperemesis gravidas -a severe form of morning sickness. My throat had become hypersensitive and my hormones had made me more nauseous. My body had begun to starve and digest itself and was breaking down fats (ketones) in my body. This was potentially dangerous for the baby and me. I cried. I worried about the baby and couldn't think clearly. My mind was blanking out and my memory was poor, so I found answering many of the queries a strain. This was the beginning I guess of the so-called 'maternal amnesia'.



At the hospital I was placed on a bed in the observation area for a while before seeing a rather curt junior obstetrician. I was given an injection in the buttock and was warned that there was risk of temporary leg paralysis if I were to move suddenly and after some thought I changed my mind as to the buttock I should be injected in! Thankfully I still had my sense of humour and joked with a couple of the A&E nurses about the injection.

Later that night, I was moved to a rather small and crowded ward room where I received an intravenous drip which (as the nurse had warned me) made me feel dizzy, disorientated and very peculiar. It was like a rush and tingling through my veins all over my body. This made me acutely aware that I was a living organism as opposed to a conscience disconnected from my body. I was later moved into a room in the acute ward and helped into a much more comfortable bed. Jason stayed as long as he was allowed and then I was alone.

It will all be alright in the end; you will look back and think it was all worth it. This was the general gist of what the nurse at my hospital bedside on my first night in the acute ward said to me again and again. So why do I still wish that I'd hire a surrogate mother. I don't think she could even begin to imagine what I was feeling and experiencing in those moments. I lay there staring at the ceiling unable to think of a reply, because despite this being my first pregnancy, I somehow couldn't believe her as he stood by my bedside standing proud with her bulbous pregnant stomach (that seemed to be constantly in my face) looking energetic despite it being her nightshift and without signs of morning sickness or pregnancy related ailments. So how could this woman possibly empathise with me and stand there telling me not to worry.



I had what seemed to be an intravenous cocktail drip consisting of I'm still not sure what. It all had the air of one of my school chemistry experiments with a pipette. I was the beaker - drip, drip, drip waiting for the chemicals in the beaker to change colour except there was no equilibrium point! Stop the experiment; the guinea pig wants to get out! I just did not feel safe in that place. This was a public building full of strangers who could enter my room freely and where I was to sleep for the night. I wanted to be back home in my 'fortress' with my husband where I could lock the doors and windows with my own keys.

Each time the drip was topped up, and more drugs cocktail was released into my bloodstream, I'd have 'pins and needles, and awful rush to my head and through my body and feeling the cold running through my veins and a freefalling sensation of weightlessness. This for me was the stuff of Frankenstein. Why in heavens name was I here? All I wanted was a baby - a perfectly natural request. I had no energy or fight left in me so I just lay there for most of the time staring into the air and observing the mundane clinical surroundings and oddities, such as the scuffs on the floor, the brown splatter markings on the walls, the dust on the ventilator – I thought they could tell a story – maybe of what happened to the previous occupant(s) or of comings and goings of other people.

I kept disbelievingly questioning myself how did I find myself in this condition. I couldn't eat and I couldn't drink and my mouth was continuously swelling with copious amounts of saliva, which I couldn't swallow. At times it felt like having tasteless, bitty, dirty dishwater in my mouth. Layered onto this was the constant feeling of nausea made worse by certain smells and flavours. I had this for about two thirds of my pregnancy.

To be continued in the November issue of Magna

Deli Vinyo Buckley-Keogh