

Hearing the words "you're only 1 cm dilated", my heart sunk. If I was only in very early labour, why did it hurt so much? Why wasn't the pain going away at all and instead just getting worse? Why couldn't I get comfortable at all? And why did I feel the need to push already? I think I will always remember the look of understanding and compassion on my midwife's face when I clutched her hand and said "something's wrong". The next 20 minutes were a whirlwind of medical jargon I struggled to follow, signing complicated forms and being whisked into theatre for an emergency c-section.

Henry was my 3rd pregnancy, but my first to make it past 11 weeks. When he arrived into the light just over 2 weeks early I wasn't really ready. I don't think I ever could've been, no matter how many books I read or people I spoke to or videos I watched. He was born unresponsive and a team of wonderful NHS staff worked for over 25 minutes to get him breathing. I know now I was within seconds of becoming a bereaved mother. I shall forever be thankful for their commitment to keeping my boy alive.

Whilst I was recovering, Henry was whisked off to the neonatal unit where a tube was inserted into his throat & lungs to help him breathe. When I was woken a few hours later, I met doctors who were ready to transport him from Lincoln to Nottingham City Hospital. Words like 'lack of oxygen to the brain' and 'severely poorly' and 'unknown outcome' washed over me. Here I was, fresh out of a general anaesthetic listening to strangers who were asking me to trust them with my son's life. Forms were signed, a hasty baptism ceremony was performed and he was gone. The first time I had seen my beautiful baby boy was through the plastic side of a transport incubator which came with it's own medication trailer and had to be plugged into the electric. It looked like a spaceship. I got less than 15 minutes with him, barely enough time to touch.

Knowing the journey would be long for someone so small (6lbs 8oz), I insisted his father travel with him. I could be alone, he could not.

Plans of transferring me to Nottingham that evening were thwarted when I fell gravely ill. Although I had shown individual signs of pre-eclampsia during the last months of my pregnancy, nothing was of any concern until the end. My liver and kidneys shut down, my blood pressure and heartrate dropped so low machines struggled to record anything. My parents' hearts broke as they watched a team of doctors and nurses work tirelessly to keep me alive. The following day I was diagnosed with HELLP Syndrome, a severe form of pre-eclampsia. 4 units of blood later I was transferred to be with my son. 58 hours after he was born.

At Nottingham, Henry was diagnosed with stage 3 HIE (Hypoxic Ischemic Encephalopathy); a form of brain damage caused by lack of oxygen, often during birth. The cooling of his little body, which had started at Lincoln, was sustained by science beyond my understanding. He was wrapped in bubble wrap and chilled for 72 hours in total. It took just 8 hours to warm him up again. An MRI at 4 days old told us he had brain damage; at 7 days old his ventilator was removed before he ripped it out himself. I collapsed when I heard him squeak out a cry for the first time. Within days we were in a routine of hand washing and sanitising, breast pumping and tube feeding, choosing doctor's rounds over meal times.

Whilst there I witnessed the heartbreaking loss of 2 very early babies as well as the joy of thriving preemies. Pumped with medication which made him retain water, my boy looked huge, twice the size of the others in his bay. I felt an awful lot of guilt that he was there, taking up space needed by poorly babies. Until I was reminded by a wonderful family liaison nurse that he was one of those very poorly babies. 50% of NICU babies are full term, born after 37 weeks gestation.

My partner was able to stay in the hospital's hotel whilst I was on the maternity ward. Being in a room of my own gave little comfort when pregnant women were having their perfect births outside the door and caring for their healthy babies afterwards. I learned to time my arrival back on the ward at night with the medication trolley visiting my room so I could close the door and hopefully drown out any noises with music in my earphones.

Being transferred back to Lincoln at 9 days old was a massive turning point. And relief. Henry wasn't in need of such high dependency care any more. I cried hard down the phone to the wonderful lady at St Andrew's Children's Hospice, Grimsby, telling her that their services were no longer needed. My boy was alive!

The nurses at Lincoln all took time to introduce themselves and welcome us back to where it all began. Henry still had the annoying feeding tube and oxygen pipe, but was soon weaned off of both. I was often frustrated by scheduled feeds and measured amounts. Every instinct raged at me to just feed my baby. Just like I would if he were at home and we'd had a normal birth. Every step of the way, we were nurtured and guided. As a family, it meant so much to us. We were lucky enough to be able to stay in one of the parent rooms for the whole of Henry's stay on Nocton Ward. If I woke in the middle of the night, I could be with him if I wanted to.

Henry was 26 days old when he came home. That night I read him the first chapter of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. The Boy Who Lived.

Henry is now 9 months old and eats anything (and everything) he can. His smile lights up a room and his giggle leaves everyone with a warm fuzzy feeling. Although he has partial hearing loss and needs to wear hearing aids, he is just like any other baby boy. I understood the severity of his birth right at the beginning. I understood that my boy was fighting for his life, I just refused to believe he would do anything but win that fight. We still do not know how Henry's birth may affect him later in life. But, for now, it is clear he has circumnavigated the troubled waters.

Although I do not currently suffer flashbacks to our time on NICUs, I take comfort from something I recently read by Sesame Street writer Emily Perl Kingsley, *Welcome to Holland*. Kingsley writes about preparing for a trip to Italy including reading all the guidebooks and learning a bit of local lingo, just for the plane to actually arrive in Holland with no way of you now visiting Italy. Much the same as preparing for a trip somewhere, we plan the outcome of our pregnancy. For that to suddenly change, for the plane to arrive in Holland (or the NICU), is disconcerting and jarring. But, new guidebooks are bought and new lingo is learnt. And as you settle into your new destination, you begin to see that Holland is just as good (if not better) than Italy after all.