This Is
The Story Of
How You Were Born

a Play At Home for families with babies
or families with children who used to be babies
or any families or any people together who want to remember
the story of how you were born

By Emma Goidel
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HOW TO USE THIS PLAY:
Read it out loud together passing the role of speaker from person to person.
Savor how it sounds and feels to tell a story as a family.
When you get to the end... follow the prompt. 😊
Go on! We want to hear it!

Little bug—
do you know the story of how you were born?

You don’t?
You have never heard it?
Your parents didn’t tell it to you a thousand times?
Well. We will have to tell it. You simply must know.
It is the story that all other stories come from.
It is basically a metaphor for everything you!
You can consult it again and again, like a lifelong horoscope—
there are celestial bodies, there are positions, there are conditions,
there is even the weather!

Little bug—
Do you know what is a horoscope?
Do you know what is the weather?

You’re right, you are only a baby so…

Do you know what is
a bathtub?

This is where the story of how you were born
begins.

The bathtub, you know the bathtub, you have been there before.
You go at bedtime to visit the water,
to move the film of the day from your skin to the drain.

But did you also know the bathtub has
a second purpose?

It is to remind us
how we felt before we were born.
To remind us what it was like to be floating and held, to have every need met before we knew it as a need. To return us to our first experience of peace, the one that leaves us with a lifelong pressing to feel again a stop to all the wanting, which we are normally wasting our time on.

But did you also know, little bug the bathtub has a third purpose?

It is the place a pregnant woman goes to have her partner shave her legs!

Yes, your mama was in the bathtub, though when I say in I mean she was wearing it like a tutu.

Do you know what is a tutu? Hm. Do you know what is… a hippo?

It is a pregnant woman in July trying to take a bath in a New York City bathtub.

And your Mo was there too with a razor and a shaving cream and she had been tasked with the summer ritual of shaving your mama’s legs. Do you know what this is, shaving? It’s like when we play the itsy bitsy spider and I tickle you from the tip of your toes up up up to your belly—except this spider has razors for teeth and a patriarchal appetite for body hair! Never mind.

I think you will inherit a different world, little bug. By the time you have hairs worth shaving this practice may be long forgotten.

But anyway Mo was there
attending to the ritual of assisting her pregnant wife
and your mama was there
experience the ritual of losing her independence.

This is how pregnant women prepare to care for a baby,
by becoming increasingly dependent on other people.

That’s okay, little bug, that is perfectly normal.
This is how parents learn to empathize with the baby’s situation,
which is
to want with desperation and not be able to get anything for yourself.

Do you know this word, desperation?
It is—how we love you!
It means, to be at the end of a feeling,
to think you cannot go further, but then you do.

So—your Mo was there with your mama,
and she had your mama’s left leg
up up up on the edge of the tub,
and she had just finished freeing it of hairs,
and she dropped the leg back down into the water,
and your mama raised her other leg
and then she felt a
POP!

Pop.

Like this,

pop.

Inside she felt a pop,
as if you had opened up your tiny hand
and plucked her like a harp.

Now did you know you were at the time inside
a sack in Mama’s belly?
A sack?

Yes, a sack, which is like a—
like the diaper bag, you know
a sack is, what is a sack, well
it is a nice place to live for a very small mammal.

And a magical property of the sack
is that on its own it knows when it is time to evict its tenant.
Do you know what is a tenant?
It is a small mammal in New York City biding its time before it moves into a better situation.
And how does the sack know when is time to say bye bye to its tenant?
I cannot say.
It is a medical mystery
which means either it’s uterine magic
or it just hasn’t been studied yet due to a patriarchal appetite for body hair.
Anyway—
Little bug—the sack is very famous
and when your mother felt the pop she immediately had an urge
to say the famous words she had heard in so many movies.
My water just broke.

MY WATER JUST BROKE.

Really?!

She stood up to prove it.

I can’t tell.
Because you’re covered in bath water.

I felt it go
pop!

It popped?
It pops?

Like this, pop.

Like—a water balloon?!

Have you ever seen a wet hippo climb
from the bathtub to the toilet
and try to observe whether water is dropping down from its outsides or from its insides?
Look.
Look in the toilet.
LOOK IN THE TOILET!

There it was, coming down in little handfuls, like you had, upstairs in your tiny apartment, left on a faucet and overflowed a sink and the water was only just now making its way down into the street.

In the movies, this is the first sign of labor.
In your story, it was the last.
For two weeks your mama had read her body: blood in her pants, milk in her bra, chills all over and belly rising and falling, every day it seemed you moved further down down down into her pelvis.

What does this mean?
What do you think this means?
Do you think it’s going to be today?
It didn’t happen today… Do you think it will be tomorrow?

Two weeks of signs
and then suddenly there was no more room for questions
because the contractions began immediately—
though they weren’t calling them that! Your mom and your Mo,
they were calling them surges because a surge means power,
and they wanted your mom to feel powerful and unafraid.
They were trying to reclaim the language of birthing!
What is this? It is the way the words we say change our thoughts, change our feelings and your parents planned to change the language of pain into sensation.

(They didn’t understand at the time how pain can be a doorway to strength, how the point of studying desperation is to discover when you’ve reached the end of a feeling you can still find a way to go on.)

Little bug, the thing about re-naming power is
it still bears down upon you
and under its weight your mama went into as they say “a trance.”
What is a trance?
It is a place you go to hear from things that do not speak in normal life.
The couch. How soft and sturdy it was, releasing words of comfort when she pressed against the cushions. The rug, its chorus of encouragement, all the different colors whispering to each other of strength. The counter. It had always beheld with such calm. It was cool now and it did not move once.

It would have been nice to stay in the apartment where all your parents’ things were rooting for the family.

Little bug—have you heard of this thing called a “birth plan?” It is basically a toilet paper. It is a white sheet with which you wipe the butthole of the American birthing system. Excuse me, I said butthole, but there is no anatomically correct phrase to describe what you have to do to confront the medicalization of American birth. You have to get very specific about the things you do and do not want to happen to your body. You have to practice the language you will use to shield yourself from the pressure on the hospital to mitigate risk. You have to demand the right to take your time, because if you’re slow, even if you’re healthy and steady but slow, emergency surgery may be suggested to address the problem that you live in New York City and there are too many women and not enough beds and did you hear the girl giving birth in the hallway and while you’ve been at it for hours trying to dial your cervix to the size of a bagel and it’s currently only the size of a donut hole, and if you consent now in just four minutes we can cut through your intestines and pull your baby out from a hole in your stomach.

So you have to make a plan so you know how to politely decline such offers. But the problem with making a plan is that it creates expectations and I don’t know if you know about expectations yet, little bug, but let me go ahead and tell you now so you can avoid a lifetime of pain:

nothing ever happens the way you think it will.

Nothing is ever what you think it’s going to be.

There, I’ve told you, you can live in peace knowing a gift of existence is its unrelenting tendency to surprise you.

Fools and pregnant women will take their preparations as a sign that they can somehow control the event for which they’ve been planning. And your mama had made a birth plan and emailed it to the hospital so she had the official feeling that it was sort of going to go like that.
Do you know what is email?
It is the professional way to send your wishes into the laughing mouth of the universe. Sometimes you a good line in response, but mostly it’s just people blowing raspberries.

You had a vision? You had a vision of your birth?
You thought you would walk slowly through Central Park leaning on trees for support?
You thought you would be naked on the yoga ball surrounded by candles?
You thought you would laugh the baby out of your vagina?
The midwife told you if you don’t want to do the drugs just wait until the last possible moment to go to the hospital, wait until you’re almost ready to push because once you’re there you’ll be like a hippo near water in July, you’ll be unable to resist taking a dip?

Raspberry, says the reply!
You tested positive for a bacteria that we prefer to annihilate in utero when labor begins. It’s probably NOT a bad bacteria but… one time it climbed from someone vagina into a baby’s brain? And you know what, it killed her.
And you don’t want your baby to die!
You’d rather she be flooded with antibiotics as she enters the world than that she die, right?

Alright so we’ll see you at the hospital as soon as you feel a contract-surrrrrge!

When you get there, slip into an elastic band the width of your torso. Slide under it two of the hockey pucks that vibrate when your take-out order is ready at a restaurant. Your skin is so sensitive you can’t bear to be touched? You can’t bear when your partner leans her weight on the hospital bed?
You can’t bear the feeling of plastic monitors strapped like a girdle to tell a computer when you’re having a contraction?
Bear it, the baby’s a little bit early and just in case we’d rather watch this play out on screen.
Bear it, the baby is sunny-side up.
Her skull is grinding against the nerves in your spine. She’s making her way down vertebra at a time, climbing the ladder of childhood back injuries old pains you were confident you’d healed from, she’ll need to lean on every place you’ve been hurt, you’ll need to learn to turn every hurt into strength, this is practice for parenting because healing doesn’t mean
you get to shed the pain like an old skin it means
you have to figure out how to carry it with you, figure out
how to make it feel included and accepted so it doesn’t kill you.
Figure out
how to say I can’t do this without the drugs.
Hold still, if you move this needle could paralyze you.
Hold still, you’re contracting and I’m slipping a cord into your spine.
There, it’s done. In minutes you won’t feel half your body.
Your feet are still there, your partner can promise you that.

A brief pause.

Your mama fell asleep.
(Can you believe it?
Asleep while laboring—that’s the gift of the drugs.)

And when she woke up
she rediscovered that
she could no longer move.
(That’s the curse of the drugs—asleep while laboring.)
And she felt something odd.
She felt something was…
tickling her.

She turned her head.
Mo was resting in the chair.

Mo, she said

(well not Mo exactly, because Mo wasn’t Mo back then.
Mo is only a Mo because that’s the name she took for you—)

Mo,
there is a wadded up hospital pad
stuck
in
my butthole.

What?

I need you to get it out.

What?

One of the cotton pads to catch the blood
is stuck in my butthole.
Can you get it?
Please. It’s really
bothering me.
But DON’T TOUCH ME don’t touch me.
And DON’T LEAN ON THE BED.

Mo went to her.

There’s
nothing
in your butthole.

Okay just move the sheet or whatever is touching me.

There’s nothing touching you.

It’s driving me insane!

Let me get the doula—
Doula, she says it feels like there’s a
cotton ball

A COTTON PAD
STUCK IN MY BUTTHOLE
PLEASE
What does that mean?

I haven’t heard that one before.
Let me get the midwife,
Midwife, she says—

SOMEONE PLEASE
I CAN’T FEEL MY LEGS
AND SOMETHING IS TOUCHING MY BUTTHOLE
MY BUTTHOLE IS GOING INSANE

Let’s see—yep, that’s the baby!

Are you ready to push?

Little bug—
if anyone ever asks you
are you ready to push
what they may mean is
are you ready to reach for the edge of the strength
you’ve built from every hard thing you’ve ever attempted?
Are you ready to reach that edge
and hang off of it for a long
long
time?

Doula take the left leg, Mo take the right
the unshaved one, the one that escaped the patriarchal appetite, the foot bracing the hand of the
not-mother-not-father-make-a-new-word-Mo, the Mo of the baby
Now the next time you feel a contraction
PUSH!
Baby, do you know what is an anti-climax?
It’s when everything slows down when you expect it to speed up.
The surprise is that the contractions can get nervous.
It’s now wonder: they have such a bad reputation and everyone’s trying to fix them.
Hurt less! Go faster! Find a better name!
This lack of acceptance can weaken their morale.
They should be coming every minute.
They’re coming every ten minutes?
Can you push like that for one hour?
Can you stay hanging off of the edge of your strength?

Rest again.
Take the second hour to breathe.
Let’s wait and see.

They’re still not coming?
Okay let’s do a drug.
Just one drop—and now we’re getting somewhere, look, look what the hockey pucks are saying!
A contraction every minute!
Push push! Use your legs! The epidural fog is clearing and you can feel them a little now and you can bear into your partner’s hand,
push push!

You have to give me more, says the midwife.

I can’t do it if you say that to me!
I need words of encouragement!
I need to feel like I’m doing it right!

You’re doing it right!
You’re doing amazing!
I can almost see her head!

Little bug,
do you know what is a U-bend?
It is an impossible that your mama did not know she had inside her.
It is an especially pointy tailbone and it is the place you got stuck.
It is the deepest pain that calls up the deepest strength, and look what you taught your mama: there are parts of her she has never met.
She is home to gifts that will only offer themselves up in a moment of need. You carry them too.
I can see the evidence.
I can see it on your neck.
That redness is the mark of three hours stuck in an impossible place, the mark of coming through.

The midwife tried to offer you her hand but you weren’t ready.
She came back with a bit of your hair.
*It’s brown,* she told your parents.
It scared your mama to know there was a person
*with a hair color*
who had gotten stuck inside her
who she was responsible for getting out.

*I can’t do it,*
she cried to your Mo,
pressing foreheads together.
*I really don’t think I can do it.*

She wept.
She hadn’t gone to the gym.
She had never taken to running.
She had never made up with her sister.
She had cowered from so many hard things when she should have been building her strength.

*Yes you can.*
*I know you can.*

Some words are famous for a reason.
And there was an involuntary opening, and she PUSHED beyond the feeling, beyond thought beyond language beyond desperation—
and she felt a

POP!

Just like that,
pop.

Your head
popped into the room.

Another breath—*don’t push, now cough*
and the rest of you came too.
Sunny side up.
And then you screamed!
And they practically threw you into your mama’s arms.

And you know what?

She didn’t know you.
She didn’t recognize your hair color.
She didn’t know your face.

*But she recognized your butt.*

Your butt!
Your little butt!
From when your mama was a hippo!
And your butt would stretch up up up in her belly toward her face!
She had rested her palm on that shape so many times.
Sitting down, out of breath.
Standing up, out of breath.
Smiling to herself in so many places, rubbing the top of the bulge that was you
which turned out specifically
was your butt.

And your mama held you.
And that is the story of how you were born.
That is how you were born.

Now…

do you know the story
of how little Ronya was born?
Ronya, your friend Ronya?
Well.
It started with
a piece of pizza.

And Tov Tov?
You know Tov Tov?
His story starts with a midnight phone call.

And what about
you?

Yes, you.

Hello! I’m speaking to you!

Do you know the story of how you were born?

Go on.
We want to hear it.
It started with a…