



Alexandra

Alexandra Wigley
26 – 31 March 2000

Marina and Charles are English expatriates who have lived in Singapore for four years. It was while living in Australia that they conceived their first child, Alexandra. It was a normal, healthy pregnancy and they were happily looking forward to becoming parents for the first time. But things started to go wrong during Alexandra's delivery—she suffered distress and meconium aspiration—and then lived for only five days in Intensive Care. Marina recounts their tragic journey.

Written by Marina Parker, Alexandra's mother

I will never, ever forget the last appointment I had with my obstetrician—four days short of my 40-week due date. After examining the baby and declaring that all was well (as it had been for the entire duration of the pregnancy) and in place for birth, he jokingly turned to me and said, “Try not to have the baby this weekend as I am going away on a golfing weekend”. Words that will haunt me for as long as I live.

Exactly four days later, on Sunday morning, I went into labour. Contractions were slow and infrequent and so I was told to stay at home until they were less than five minutes apart. My husband and I spent the day in a mood of great excitement mixed with nerves and worry about the birth.

Eventually, at about 5.00 pm, when the contractions were coming thick and fast, we decided to go to the hospital. On the advice of many friends, we had chosen one of the most exclusive, private maternity hospitals in the city, but when we arrived it seemed unnervingly quiet and dark. It turned out that not many women were in labour that

night and because my obstetrician was still away, the locum would be delivering my baby. The whole maternity unit felt as if it was operating on half steam.

We were admitted to the delivery room where I was told to make myself comfortable. Contractions were still about five minutes apart, painful but manageable. The midwife examined me and told me I was about three centimetres dilated. We were then left for a considerable amount of time just to labour on alone. Contractions became increasingly more painful, and finally I was offered pethidine, which I took without hesitation. I had to lie down for this and again time seemed to pass endlessly while I was breathing in the gas and dealing with the pain. The midwife eventually put me on the heart monitor and started to trace the baby's heartbeat. My husband and I thought nothing of this machine strapped to my tummy and again, a lot of time seemed to pass with nothing really happening.

The midwife came in and out to check the trace and then the last time she read it, some two or so hours into labour, panic came across her face. "This doesn't look right" she said and told us she was going to call the doctor in straight away—he was at home at the time.

When the stand-in obstetrician arrived, he looked at the trace silently and then checked to see how dilated I was—still he said nothing. I sensed that something might be wrong but was still at the mercy of the professionals to tell me what was happening. Naively, of course, I assumed that in their hands, all would be well. The doctor told the midwife (not me) that I was eight centimetres dilated, the trace was a bit flat but to keep me labouring. He further ordered that I be given an epidural to speed things along. Not too long after he left, the midwife looked really concerned and she blurted out, "I am over-ruling him. This baby needs to come out. We need to do a C-section straight away" and she ran out of the room.

Alone with my husband, we both began to panic. What was happening? Was it going to be ok? He kept holding my hand, reassuring me and I remember staring blankly up at the ceiling, breathing in gas as a strange sense of foreboding crept over me. The midwife and several others rushed back in and explained that I had to have an emergency caesarian. However, we would have to wait for the anaesthetist to come and administer an epidural (he was busy with another operation) and that they had contacted my obstetrician who was racing back from his golfing weekend. At this point, I knew something was terribly wrong but again assumed that they would deliver the baby without trouble. It seemed like an age before the anaesthetist eventually arrived and then it was all go—in a haze of voices, action, needles, I was prepared for a C-section and rushed along corridors and down to surgery.

My obstetrician appeared, gowned up, and he performed the C-section. He didn't say a word to me. The anaesthetist was holding one of my hands and stroking me saying, "It's all right, it's all right." Charles was holding my other hand with a look of sheer terror on his face. The quiet was unnerving and after much tugging and pulling in my stomach,

the obstetrician held up a grey, lifeless baby declaring, "It's a girl." We heard no crying, no sound whatsoever. She was taken away immediately to be resuscitated and that was the last we saw of our new daughter for the next twelve hours.

The obstetrician finished the surgery and said that someone would come and see us very soon to tell us what was happening. He explained that Alexandra was very sick and had to go to special care. The midwife asked us what her name was and stroked my head in sympathy. Charles and I were simply in total shock.

Silently, I was wheeled away to my room on the maternity ward where Charles and I were left alone to cry and scream. I could hear newborn babies in the adjacent rooms and the pain was no less than if someone just came and put a knife in my heart. A midwife intermittently came to tell us that someone would come soon to see us but we couldn't go and see our baby.

Eventually, a team of professionals arrived in our room and gathered round my bed. The obstetrician just looked forlorn and lost and said very little. The pediatrician explained very matter of factly that Alexandra was very, very sick. She had lost a lot of oxygen during the birth, had got into distress and swallowed meconium into her lungs and stomach. They had pumped as much as possible out but she was in a critical condition and had most certainly suffered brain damage, the extent of which they could not tell us. But the pediatrician reiterated that it was very serious indeed. The next blow was to hear that she urgently needed to go to a better intensive care unit but no place could be found for her in the city hospitals. At this point they would have to helicopter her to a hospital about two hours out of town.

The nightmare continued into the night as we listened to the newborn babies variously crying and waited for news of ours. A crib had finally been found for her in one of the major public hospitals in the city and they were to transfer her that night. We were only allowed to follow the next day because I had had a caesarian. One tiny moment of kindness came when the same midwife who had realised that something was wrong during labour came and gave me a Polaroid picture of our beautiful baby girl that she had taken. I clung on to it all night looking at my little girl with her olive skin and dark mop of hair, attached to a hundred tubes and wires. We cried and howled all night at what had happened and that we didn't have our little girl with us.

For the following week, we were placed in a private room at the public hospital and spent our days in intensive care willing our little girl to live. If by some miracle she did survive, we were facing the fact that she would be severely handicapped. No one told us during that time what the real prognosis was and we faced setback after setback as she began to have fits, was unable to pass urine on her own and then finally gave up drinking the milk that I had been expressing for her. My family came immediately from the UK and sat with us day and night. Friends did not know whether to congratulate us on the birth of our daughter or commiserate. Few except the very brave dared come and see us.

On Thursday 30th March the results of Alexandra's brain scan came back. We were

asked to meet with the pediatrician in our room. His face said it all. She was completely brain-dead and would never be able to breathe without a ventilator. He recommended that we take her out of intensive care and let her die. We prepared for this the next day. A truly horrific, unbelievable thing for any parent to go through.

On Friday 31st March, 2000, our five-day-old baby daughter was taken out of intensive care. She spent eight amazing but also devastating hours with us alive as we just held her and kissed her and said our goodbyes. She took her last breath in my arms and I watched her die. My beautiful angel girl. We spent the entire night with her under the guidance of one of the nurses. Together we bathed her, took her footprints, handprints and lock of hair, put her in her special little dress, wrapped her in a beautiful muslin wrap, gave her a teddy and sent her on to heaven. For that night I am truly grateful.

The six months after Alexandra died were the most horrific of my entire life. With her death, I had lost all sense of purpose and truly felt that I no longer wanted to go on. Four weeks after her funeral, I finally gave up the strength to carry on and entered the first stage of what professionals called post traumatic stress disorder—a full-on nervous breakdown. I spent the following six weeks in a psychiatric hospital drugged up to the eyeballs with anti-depressants and sedatives. Thanks to my darling, darling husband, my parents, an amazing grief counsellor and some incredible friends, I eventually got out of there, came off the drugs completely, left our old life far behind us and started a new one—just the two of us.

Four and a half years later I gave birth to Felix and Luca—Alexandra's twin brothers.

Dreamland (excerpt)

She cannot see the grain
Ripening on hill and plain;
She cannot feel the rain
Upon her hand.
Rest, rest, for evermore
Upon a mossy shore;
Rest, rest at the heart's core
Till time shall cease:
Sleep that no pain shall wake;
Night that no morn shall break
Till joy shall overtake
Her perfect peace.

– Christina Rossetti