

## Odin's Birth Story

by Alison Busch

*"Give me anything, and I'll turn it into a gift." –Fiona Apple, "Daredevil"*



On Sunday, September 2, I reached 37 weeks of pregnancy. I felt a great sense of relief because I knew that, if I went into labor, I wouldn't automatically have to go to the hospital and the midwives would allow me to have the baby at home. For most of my pregnancy, I'd assumed I'd go late because most first babies are born later rather than earlier. However, in the last few weeks, I'd started to feel like the baby might come early. I can't exactly explain where that feeling came from. But I had started to feel this energy from the baby, a sense of strength and power, as if it were on a mission to get big and strong really fast.

That Sunday, my coworker texted me to ask if I'd cover her waitressing shift on Tuesday. I was still scheduled for two more weeks of work, and I had been feeling—yes, tired—but overall good during the busy nine-hour shifts on my feet. My coworker's dad had just died and she was dealing with a lot, so I told her of course I'd take the shift. Later that day, however, I looked down at my belly and thought, Whoa, my belly looks so low. I also noticed an internal shift, as if the baby had dropped way down into my pelvis. The baby had been on my bladder pretty much the whole pregnancy, and I'd slept poorly for weeks because I had to pee so much at night. But this shift felt even more radical. It felt as if someone had put a bowling ball between my hip bones. My bladder shrunk to nothing and my inner hips started to ache from the opening. I'd heard of how the baby can "drop" in the later part of the pregnancy. So although I was feeling strange Sunday evening, I was still okay, so I didn't think too much of it and assumed this is what the "drop" felt like.

On Monday—Labor Day actually—I went to the beach with my partner, Charles, my mom, and my aunt, the latter of whom was visiting from out of town. Charles had off that day and was preparing to go to three job interviews the next day, so it felt nice to take some time with him and my family. During my third trimester, during the miserably and unusually hot and humid summer, the beach was pretty much the only place I felt comfortable. Every time I went to the beach, I'd just get in the water and float as long as I could stand the cold. Being in the water brought so much relief to my aching back and hips. Everyone who went with me would usually get out after ten or fifteen minutes, so I'd just float and swim in the water, alone with the baby, taking in the people on the beach and feeling the stones under my feet and the sun overhead. I felt like the baby really liked when I was in the water. It felt very peaceful, like we were alone in the world, and I'd rub my belly and think good thoughts about the baby.

After we left the beach, I was so hungry that I suggested we stop for Indian food. I ate a ton off the buffet. But after I ate, I started feeling strange, almost hot and sick. I thought I'd gotten too much sun. I remember saying, "I'm so hot. I'm so tired. We have to go." So we came home and I showered and just got in bed and took a nap. My body told me to rest in such a compelling way that there was no ignoring it.

That night while we were in bed, Charles and I talked about his upcoming interviews. I was so excited for him. I had this thought, over and over: The baby can come any day but tomorrow, just not tomorrow; this is so important. I was having a lot of trouble getting comfortable—even more than usual. After we turned out the lights, I kept shifting and getting up to pee. I started feeling crampy, and I was going to the bathroom every ten minutes or so to try to find some relief. I felt bad because I didn't want to wake Charles up. As time passed, I started getting worried about my shift the next day, which I had to start at 6:30 am. I just couldn't sleep. It felt like really bad period cramps. I was annoyed, and I thought, Of course this has to be the night when I experience false labor! I moved myself into the office that we have upstairs that has a futon in it. The cramps came in waves, and I looked at the clock a couple times. They were about 8-10 minutes apart, and they were definitely getting painful. But I thought, This is false labor, this is normal, my uterus is getting ready for the big event. I tried to comfort myself because I was getting so worried about waking Charles up and I was getting worried I'd have to text my coworker, who had so much on her plate, and tell her I might not be able to work.

Around 11:30 pm, I finally gave in and texted my coworker. I told her that something had shifted in my pelvis and that it was painful to be on my feet. I also mentioned that I was feeling crampy, but I think I told her that I was probably just experiencing false labor. But I said it was keeping me up and I was worried I wouldn't be able to work the next day. I knew she'd be asleep, but I asked her to let me know when she could if there was any way she could take her shift back.

I spent the next few hours alone in the office, breathing through the "cramps." They really were contractions, of course, and they were starting to hurt like hell, but in my mind I was still calling them cramps. I said to the baby: "Listen, baby. I'm supposed to work. Your dad has three interviews and we really need him to get a better job to take care of you. Your aunt is here on vacation from out of town. You need to stop causing so many problems!" Around 3:00 am, I heard back from my coworker. She told me that she herself was having trouble sleeping, which was understandable considering all she'd been going through the last week after losing her dad. She asked if I could reach out to another coworker. Sure, I told her.

Around this time, I finally decided to go downstairs and wake up my mom, who lives with us. I said, "I've been in false labor for a few hours, but it's getting really painful, so could you come sit with me to try to calm this down?" She came upstairs with me. After watching me go through a few "cramps," during which time I had to breathe deep and move my hips and moan, she said, "Alison, I think you're in labor." I shook my head. "Mom," I said. "It's too early. There's too much going on tomorrow. It's just false labor." Which I really did believe! The cramps were very painful, but I could make it through each one by breathing and moving. I assumed "real labor" would be much worse, so I didn't think this was it.

At 4:30 am, my "false" contractions were coming faster and faster. My mom asked if I'd been timing them. I hadn't, so I started to look at the clock each time one started. They were coming about five minutes apart. My mom said, "You need to call the midwives." I didn't want to, but I compromised and said I'd wait and then call them at 5:00 am. In my mind, I didn't want to bother anyone with what was clearly false labor. Ha! The power of denial.

At 5:00, I called the midwife on duty, and Lindsay answered. We spoke for about ten minutes and I described to her what was going on. At one point, Lindsay said, very calmly, “Alison, I think you might be in labor.” I asked why. “Well,” she said, “we’ve been on the phone for only about ten minutes and you’ve had three contractions.” I told her I didn’t think I was, but I did say I was in some pain and would love it if she could come out and tell me what was going on. She must have thought I was crazy! She said she’d be right over. I took one last moment to text my coworker to say I was sorry that I couldn’t be in charge of finding my own cover for the day, which is our restaurant’s policy and a rule I’d always been happy to follow. I felt so irresponsible!

I finally decided to wake Charles up after I hung up with Lindsay. I wanted him to know what was going on. I woke him up and said, “I’ve been up all night in false labor, and I’m kind of in a lot of pain, but Lindsay is on her way and she’s going to tell me what’s going on.” I think one of the first things he said was, “Should I cancel my job interviews?” I thought for a moment; I knew he had one at 7:30 am. “Maybe just the first one,” I said. I was hoping Lindsay would get there and tell me nothing was really happening and he could still make the other ones. Writing that now makes me laugh!

Lindsay arrived around 6:00 am. “Would you like me to check your cervix?” she asked. Of course I did because then she could tell me nothing was going on! I lay down on the bed, and when Lindsay checked me, she said, “Well, you’re at six, almost seven, centimeters.” I can’t remember exactly what I said, but I think it was something like, “Oh no” or “Shit.” “So I’m in labor?” I asked. Lindsay almost laughed. “Oh you’re definitely in labor. You’re going to have this baby.” I can’t remember if I said it out loud or if I just thought: This is really the worst possible time for this baby to come! She said Brenda was also on her way. When she said I was at six centimeters, I could tell Charles was surprised but excited. I had a ways to go before I could be excited—I was still too annoyed about the bad timing. Hell, we didn’t even have the birth tub yet because the baby was so early! We had no food in the house! We didn’t have the used sheets and towels my brother was going to send me for the labor!

After I realized that I was actually in labor—and I had to accept that it was happening—I kind of just let myself go. I had been breathing and moving through every contraction, and I just stayed in that flow. It took a moment, but I let go of the annoyance and the fact that I felt irresponsible. At some point, I think my body just resigned itself to the fact that it had a job to do, which was get this baby out. Around this time, I truly went into another world, which I had heard many women say about birth. I had always imagined myself having this really crunchy, Earth Mother kind of birth where there are candles burning and gentle music playing. I had imagined I’d want lots of soothing words and kind touches from Charles, my mom, and the midwives. But for the most part, I wanted nothing to do with anyone or anything! I didn’t want anyone to talk to me, and I certainly didn’t want to talk. I remember looking at Charles at one point, who was kind of sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. I felt bad for him for just a moment. We had taken a birth class and had made all these plans about what he would do during labor to comfort me and help me. But I mostly needed to be deep, deep in the zone. A few times, I did reach out to him for help, and his support got me through some of the harder moments. Many of the positions that felt good to me, like hands and knees or standing leaning with my hands against the wall, put pressure on my wrists. Between some contractions, I asked him, “Can you massage my wrists?” And he took my wrists in his hands and rubbed them, which felt so good. My mom was more in the background, getting things I or

the midwives needed, helping take care of all the details. I was so grateful she was there so I could finally stop worrying and thinking about things.

Most of the labor, in a way, flew by in a blur. I didn't look at a clock and I had no idea what time it was. My entire being—physical, emotional, mental—was focused on getting through each contraction. Between contractions, I did everything I could to breathe and relax my muscles. I was getting very tired because I hadn't slept the night before, but the midwives encouraged me to eat and drink. Lindsay even brought me a spoonful of honey. I took it little by little. There was also a moment when the labor seemed to slow down and I started getting worried I wouldn't have the strength to make it if it went on too long. I asked, "Is this normal? Is everything okay?" Lindsay and Brenda told me it was normal for labor to come in waves. "You're doing great. Everything is going so well," they told me. They checked the baby periodically on the fetal monitor. Each time they told me the heart sounded so good. I felt so comforted by their presence. I was confident that they knew exactly what they were doing, not only because they'd attended so many births, but also because they had both had their own babies at home. They knew exactly what to say to me each time doubt or fear crept in my mind. I couldn't have been in better hands.

I moved and moaned in ways I never would have expected. I circled my hips and rocked back and forth on my hands and knees. I never once thought about what I should do—there was, in a way, no question. My body just told me, and I listened. Moaning through each contraction helped make them more bearable. I remember thinking that I must have sounded like a scene out of *The Exorcist* or something! I hoped I wasn't scaring anyone because, even though I was making noise and I was in pain, I never once felt like I was sick or in danger or needed to go to the hospital. I felt like my body was doing exactly what it was designed to do.

I started feeling a light urge to push, so Lindsay checked me. She said there was still little way to go, a small lip of cervix that needed to pull away. I kept moving and moaning through the contractions, some time passed, and the urge to push got stronger. She checked me again, or maybe Brenda did this time, and they said the lip of cervix was still there and I should try not to push. They recommended that I lie on my side to take some of the pressure off my cervix, which would help me not push and would prevent my cervix from swelling. This was really the only part of the labor where I felt what I would describe as very awful pain or where I thought I might not be able to do what was best for the baby. Having to lie on my side was not what I wanted to do at all. I knew it would help the baby in the long run, but the contractions were very painful in this position. Lindsay encouraged me to moan or sing or blow air through my mouth, anything to get the energy moving away from pushing and out through my mouth. This was so, so hard. At one point, I was moaning deep "ohs" and "ahs" through each contractions, and Lindsay started joining in, softly, her voice carrying me through the most difficult moment of labor. She was on one side of me, holding one hand, and Charles was on the other, holding the other. My mom and Brenda were at the end of the bed, watching and encouraging.

I was mostly able to hold off the urge to push for maybe about an hour. But then each contraction brought on the urge so strong that no amount of breathing could get me to stop pushing. I moved onto my back, and suddenly during a contraction I heard a pop and saw a burst of water come out from between my legs like a water gun. "I can't stop pushing," I said. Lindsay said she could check me internally, but she was going to hold off because all signs were pointing to my body being

ready to deliver the baby. Hearing that I could go ahead and push was such a relief. My brain went into the most focused state I've ever been in. Even though I had always pictured giving birth in a water tub or squatting, or some other more "earthy" way, there I was right on my back with my knees bent in the bed, and hell if I was going to move! I was ready to get that baby out of me. With each push, I could feel the baby moving down and down, and then back a little between contractions. I got some pretty strong cramps in my hamstrings, and Charles and Lindsay massaged my thighs when I yelled that I was getting a cramp. I thought, I don't care how much this is going to hurt or even if it's going to rip me in two—I'm getting this baby out NOW. When the baby's head was about to crown, I felt an opening between my legs that is quite literally indescribable. It was painful, in a way, but more than anything, it just felt otherworldly. Like some creature was coming from another place or the Great Beyond to make its entrance into this world. My body was simply the vessel it needed for this to happen.

I only pushed for about fifteen minutes, and then his head was out. I looked down and in the dim light his head looked black—not like skin-color black, but black like paint. I remember thinking, How is that even possible? One more push and his body slid out. Someone, maybe Charles, said, "It's a boy!" I said, "Are you sure?" Not because I was disappointed or upset, but just because it being a boy meant that it really was a baby, that he was really here, and that seemed so impossible after everything I had just gone through. But a couple people said yes, it's a boy, and someone brought him to my chest and put him on me. He was covered in vernix and fluid, and I didn't care at all. I had never been so happy to have a wet little thing on my body. He started crying and moving and looking around right away, and I knew immediately that even though he was early he was healthy, alert, and strong. Someone asked what his name was. Charles and I, because we didn't know the sex, had chosen one name for each. We looked at each other, and I said, "Do you want to tell them?" Charles said, "Odin."



I asked, "What time is it?" And Brenda said, "12:12 pm." So he was born September 4, 2018, 12:12 pm. I had been in labor for about 12 hours, but only knew I was for about six. He was almost three weeks early, but we found out he was 20 inches long and weighed 7 pounds on the nose. He had come, in so many ways, at what I had thought was the worst time. But I suppose Charles and I might have brought that on ourselves by deciding to name him Odin, who was the god of many things, like wisdom, healing, poetry, war, death, divination, magic—and frenzy! And after he was in my arms, already so strong

and perfectly healthy, I understood the first lesson my son would teach me: All things come to us exactly when they need to come. Our purpose in life is to accept all the gifts.

