

CHAPTER 1

The journey begins

My journey to motherhood began with a siren-blaring, lights-flashing ride to the emergency room of a specialist hospital.

Within a day, everything I had imagined for the birth of my child changed.

Except for one early scare, my pregnancy had been uneventful. I had refused the three-month scan, thinking it unnecessary, or maybe not understanding what it was. I chose instead to do the AFP test at four months. The AFP is a blood test that detects potential abnormalities in the fetus. I remember asking the nurse how I would get the results and she said, "I'll call you. The doctor will only call if there's a problem."

Less than a week later, the doctor called. I was driving back from work on the highway when I saw her number show up on the caller id. I frowned, and then picked up.

"Mrs. Olu this is Dr. Shelby - is this a good time?" she asked

"Yes, this is fine" I replied remembering the nurse's words and getting nervous.

"This may and sometimes is just a false alarm, but your blood levels came back with some results we'd like to check further. It showed an elevation for certain markers"

"What markers?" I asked as I drove, switching to the slow lane.

"It shows an elevation for Down's syndrome".

The news was stunning. I listened to her explain that they would do further tests to be sure and after that I could “decide” what I wanted to do. I hung up and called Chris, my husband of five years, right away.

“Are they sure?” he asked

“Not yet, which is why they want to do further tests.”

We were both baffled, not knowing how to feel or react.

Whatever happened, we encouraged ourselves we would give our baby the best care and love it deserved. Later, on the doctor’s advice, we arranged to have a level 3 ultrasound which was capable of picking up even the small fetal abnormalities.

Chris and I went together, with me clutching a list of questions from my Internet research about what to check for on the ultrasound -the length of the arms and legs, the measurement of the back of the neck and most importantly, any signs of heart defects. The doctor was patient and gentle in answering all of them, assuring me he knew what to look for. Ultimately, the ultrasound determined that I was actually earlier in the pregnancy than was previously calculated which skewed the test results. Our baby did not have Down’s syndrome, and I was given a new due date of Friday, August 13, 2004. The unluckiness of the date didn’t escape me, but I soon forgot about the scare.

The timing of my pregnancy was perfect, Chris and I had known each other for twelve years, and we’d been married for

five. A year after we started dating, Chris had travelled out of Nigeria where we're from, to study in England, then onto America. I stayed behind working, and we had an on-off long distance relationship until finally we got married and I migrated to the States to join him. Chris was like an old soul, wise, humorous, very steady, very focused. He encouraged me in every new idea I had about school or work. He was just always there, always supportive. He helped me settle down in my new environment and soon it was like I'd always lived in the States. Due to the fact that the majority of our relationship had been spent apart, we decided to wait to have children. We were both working professionals and both back in school for masters' degrees. It was an exciting time, but also very busy. The plan was that I would finish school, have a bit of time to do some shopping and relax, and then have the baby. Our families back home in Nigeria had been patient with us, but soon they began asking questions. Typically a couple was expected to have children within the first two years, after that talk was rife and people to wonder out loud if the couple was having problems. Thankfully, as soon as we were ready, we were able to get pregnant right away.

I counted the weeks and days of my pregnancy diligently. I read pregnancy books, making sure to read only the chapter relating to the stage of my pregnancy, and not skipping ahead so I wouldn't jinx myself.

At twenty-seven weeks, I went to see my doctor, feeling a little tired, but nothing, I was sure a good nap couldn't cure.

The doctor realized that my glucose test had not been ordered, so I made an appointment for the following week, a Saturday. My blood pressure was a little elevated and I was told to take things easy though there was nothing to worry about. I remember the doctor being paged and having to run off to a delivery. I left for home.

On Saturday, with a number of errands to do after the appointment, I drove the twenty minutes to the doctor's office. Chris was downtown, about another 45 minutes away attending a class. I went up the elevator to the office, registered, waited for my name to be called, took the routine trip to the bathroom to give a urine sample, and then followed the waiting nurse to the assigned examination room.

"How are you feeling?" she greeted me cheerfully. She was very young, with dark hair—probably still in nursing school and working part-time, I thought.

"Tired," I laughed as she folded back my sleeve for the blood pressure cuff.

"Yeah, I know. Lots of kicks, huh?" The cuff tightened against my arm and then relaxed. I saw a small frown cross her brows. I felt the squeeze of the cuff again as she reread the blood pressure. Again the frown as the cuff relaxed.

"What's wrong?"

“Hmm, a little...well, much higher than we would expect. Let me take it one more time on the other arm.” We changed hands.

“So what is it?”

“Looks like 160/100. I’m checking again, so hang on.” Again the squeeze of the blood pressure cuff, and now a small shake of the head. “You know what, lie down on your left side and I’ll get the doctor.”

Here we go again, I remember thinking. They’re going to ask me to take a couple of days off to rest, but I really want to take time off for the baby, not now with my school projects due.

The doctor came into the room.

“Hi,” she smiled, walking briskly to my side. “What’s going on?” Before I could answer she grabbed the cuff.

“I don’t know. The nurse said my blood pressure is high,” I said.

She checked once, then again, then again. “It’s a lot higher than we’d like.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We don’t know yet. Do you have any headaches, blurry vision, stars darting across your eyes?”

I shook my head.

“Your feet are a little swollen, but you’ve complained about that all along. Yours aren’t typical symptoms, but I’m suspecting you might be developing preeclampsia.” She explained that this was pregnancy-induced high blood pressure. On the other

hand, I might just need a little rest. She asked me to stay on my left side while she checked on my urine test.

“Okay.” I lay back down. I was not alarmed. Comfortable enough on my left side, I flipped through a magazine that was lying on the counter in the room. I remember thinking *if the nurse comes back it’s okay, but if the doctor calls or comes in, it’s probably not.*

There was a brief knock and the doctor entered the room.

The look in her eyes was slightly uncomfortable. “Mrs. Olu you are indeed developing preeclampsia. Your urine came back +3 for protein, and your blood pressure keeps going up. The protein level for a normal pregnancy is zero to +1 at the worst. Higher than that, we begin to get concerned.”

During the times I had read my pregnancy books at home, I had flipped through the pages about preeclampsia; I had felt great and had no reason to be concerned. I was excited to read about the baby’s development. I had never felt better, aside from a little fatigue here and there and sometimes swollen feet, which I was told was common.

“So what does that mean?” I sat up, my heart thudding. I was too busy for this.

“We don’t know yet. I’m going to send you to labor and delivery to rest while we do more tests and consult with our high-risk group. We’ll work off their recommendations. You may need to be put on strict bed rest.”

All I heard was bed rest. My thoughts raced to a school project due, a work project about to launch, maternity clothes that had to be exchanged, grocery, all the errands I'd planned for that day. How could I be ill? I felt normal, I felt fine. "Can I take the tests and come back for the results?"

"I don't think so. We need to have you lie down for now and try and get that blood pressure down..."

"Oh no."

I thought I saw her exchange a strange, rather helpless look with the nurse.

"We need to think of the baby and what might be best for it at this point."

"I want what's best for my baby." I protested. "I just don't want to stay in the hospital."

"Let's get you to labor and delivery now and wait for the results. Okay?"

I followed the directions to the labor and delivery ward. I was alone as I rode up to the ward in the elevator; I stared at my reflection in the mirrored walls. I cupped my maternity blouse to reveal the shape of my tummy. My tummy wasn't even big.

What was going on? "Please baby, be OK in there, just give us some more time in there" I had read that the tummy did not get really big until after the 30th week, and was looking forward to that. What does bed rest mean, would I still be able to do all my homework and study? I had only about three weeks left to

graduate. I was confused and upset but I wasn't scared, I felt it was all a false alarm again and the tests would be fine and I would go home. A cheerful young nurse met me as I got off the elevator, leading me to a small room. She helped me get undressed and changed into a hospital gown, then prepared me for the needle to take my blood for the ordered tests. A monitor would check my blood pressure every thirty minutes, and another would check the baby's heart rate. She helped me lie down on my left side and dimmed the lights as she went to submit the blood vials for the tests.

I lay in the dark room and I guess I was in a daze, still not understanding how a routine glucose test would lead to where I was right now, lying down so ill and going through the battery of tests. I realized that almost three hours had passed. It was time to call Chris. I got his voice-mail, paged him, and then called again with another message to call the doctor's office.

Finally he phoned and was transferred to me. "What's up? Someone said you're in labor and delivery. What are you doing there?" he asked in amusement.

"They're holding me here. My blood pressure's up and they're running tests. I think you should come."

"I'll be there," he said and then he was gone.

My eyes kept straying to the blood pressure monitor. The numbers looked alarming, and they kept climbing. I had never seen such high numbers – 182/102, 185/97. The baby was not

helping. It kept moving around and when the heart monitor lost track, I'd panic and ring for the nurse. She had to keep adjusting the monitor and assuring me the baby was not in danger.

The doctor ordered magnesium sulfate for me to help control the blood pressure and ensure that I did not go into seizures.

Exhausted and now beginning to get afraid, I drifted in and out of a fitful sleep.

Finally I heard my husband's voice talking to the nurse outside. Chris came into the room with the nurse and sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you okay?" I nodded and shrugged. He examined the numbers on the monitor then turned to the nurse in alarm. "Is that her blood pressure?"

"Yes. Actually, it's one of the better ones." The monitor was showing 176/100.

"This is serious."

"Yes," she agreed.

I filled Chris in on my last several hours and explained that I was waiting for the results of the final blood test. A short time later the doctor came in, said hello, then sat in front of us on a rolling doctor's chair.

"As we discussed earlier, you do have preeclampsia. You are still very early in your pregnancy and we're not equipped to handle such early deliveries. We have a unit for those who are thirty weeks pregnant and beyond, but you're not there yet.

We're going to transfer you to a specialty hospital better

prepared to deal with high-risk births.”

“What? Is she going to be put on bed rest?” Chris asked.

The doctor seemed to choose her words carefully. “This is a little outside our area. We’ll leave the final recommendation up to them. Bed rest possibly, but I’m inclined to say your wife is not going to be pregnant much longer.” She looked at me. “A normal platelet count is about 120,000. Yours is down to 81,000. Not good.” She showed me the test result, and next to platelets, she had circled *81* and scribbled *preeclampsia*.

Not going to be pregnant much longer, I thought to myself.

Maybe some weeks until I reach about thirty-four to thirty-five weeks.

I took a deep breath as preparations began for my transfer.

They gave me a shot of steroids to help mature the baby’s lungs and informed me that I would get the next dose after twenty-four hours.

“Can I take her now?” Chris looked dazed.

“Oh no, she’s too sick. We’ve arranged for an ambulance, and we’re just waiting for a nurse to monitor your wife during the transfer. She is really sick so we put in that request as well,” she explained, touching Chris’s arm. He looked scared now. I felt he was thinking, *Ambulance? She just came for an appointment, and I was just in class downtown, how come we’re transferring her in an ambulance? That wasn’t part of the plan, was it?*

The ambulance arrived. The nurse helped me onto a gurney,