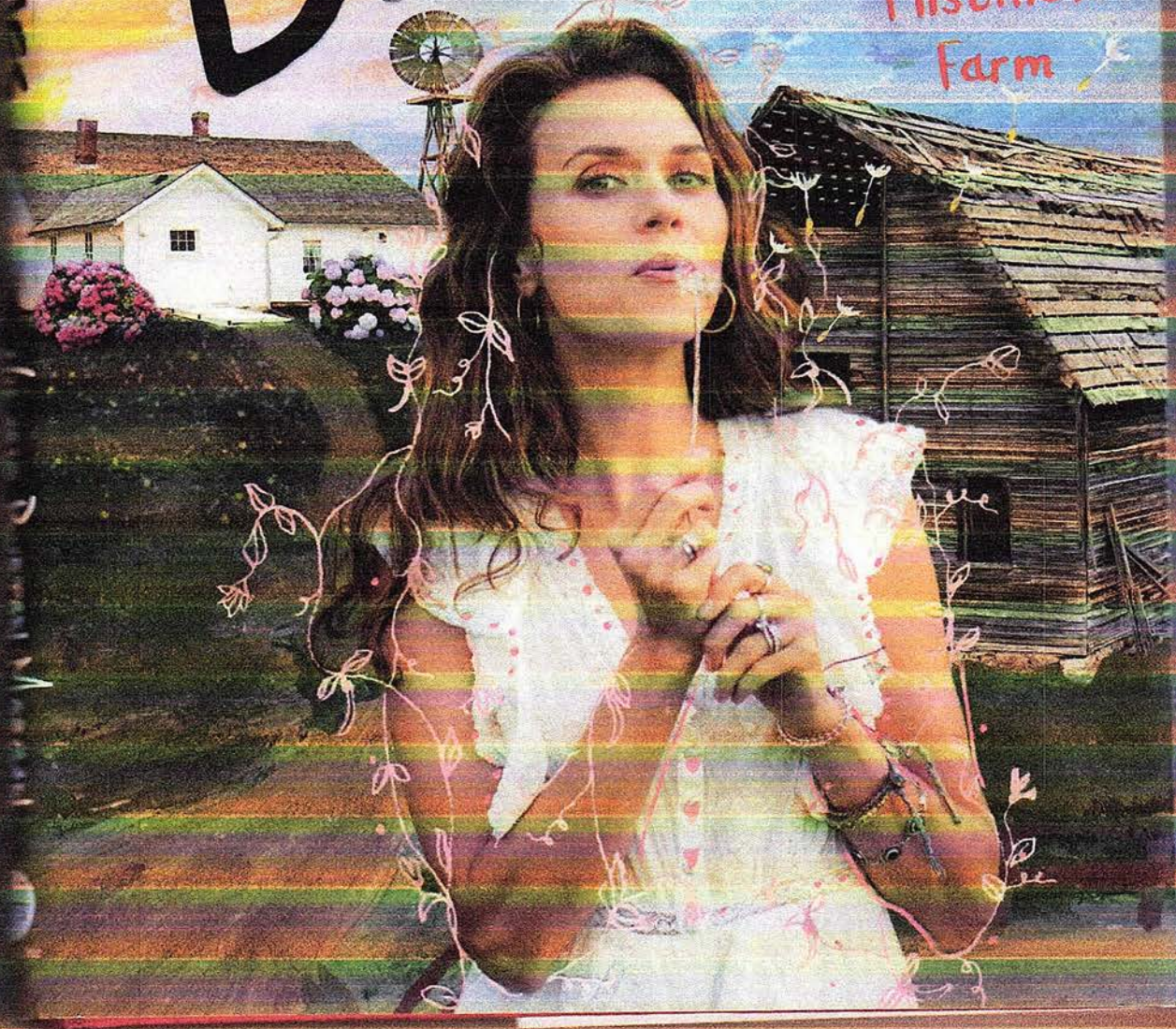


HILARIE BURTON MORGAN

THE RURAL DIARIES

Love,
Livestock,
and Big Life
Lessons
Down on
Mischief
Farm



Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for
anybody to realize you.

—Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*

George was a hyperactive baby, even in the womb. For all my wishing that I could get pregnant, actually being pregnant was much harder than I remembered. I was also almost a decade older. But that girl jumped and kicked and danced with such fervor that Gus would watch my rolling belly in horror. "Is that normal?" he'd ask.

I was convinced she was coming early. I began having Braxton-Hicks contractions toward the end of January. Sharagim had helped me find a wonderful midwife who worked through the hospital, so just like when I had Gus, I would have all the safety nets of a hospital at my disposal but the personal empowerment of natural birth. Nancey Rosensweig, an Ivy League-educated midwife with children of her own, brought a great deal of compassion to my healthcare. We met in my home, where she nursed the whole of me and looked after my mental health and my worries about having a healthy baby. She gave great advice regarding Gus and how to keep him involved and a priority. She brought me food and natural

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homeopathic remedies to ease my aches and pains and heartburn. Oh Lord, never in my life had I experienced such heartburn.

As we neared February, she told me, "The head is very low. I can feel it."

"She's coming soon, right?"

"It seems that way." Shit. Jeff had killed himself over the past year, working crazy hours and coming home from Georgia every chance he got. It was a heroic show of endurance and commitment to our family and farm, but we'd decided that once George was born, he'd take some time off. That meant knocking out as much work as possible before her arrival. He was headed on a cruise for *The Walking Dead*, a convention that thousands of fans were attending partly based on the assurance that he would be there. Right after that he was booked for another convention on the other side of the planet in Australia. "Honey, I'll be home by the sixth," he told me. "Baby isn't coming till the eleventh."

"You know that's not written in stone, right?" I countered. "She could come any day! I can feel her head now!" I was antsy and worried. I wanted to move around like the cows do out in the field when they're getting ready to go into labor.

Throwing on my boots and an old military surplus coat, I walked the perimeter of the farm. I labored under my own weight and against the eight or so inches of snow I trudged through. It felt good. *Be like a cow* was my mantra.

Only this cow overdid it and twisted her ankle.

When Jeff came home from the cruise, we had to have a serious talk about the Australia trip. "Babe, she's coming early," I fretted. "I'm dilating already."

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"But I'll be there and back days before the due date."

"I. Am. Freaking. Out." There was no other way to say it. I needed him. In the last days of what I knew would be my last pregnancy ever, I needed him to lie in bed with me and make me feel safe, and no other person on the planet could fill that role.

He stayed.

The weekend of the Australia trip flew by. I was having continual contractions, but nothing was kicking into high gear. My mother had come up weeks before, stocking the fridge and freezer with food. My dad had taken the week of the eleventh off work so he could drive up and be here for the birth. Each day, Gus, my parents, and Jeffrey sat around staring at me.

"Today?" They'd ask.

"Maybe."

This kid had been killing me. She clearly wanted out. But she was toying with me.

My mom's birthday, February 7, came and went. I was big as a house, but we took her to dinner at Le Petit Bistro in town. That place is the *Cheers* of Rhinebeck. Everyone we know goes there, so of course we ran into various friends, who all noted, "You haven't given birth yet?"

No. Not yet.

The eleventh came and went. Nancey continued to check me out. "She's still just hanging out. Very low. And you're still 2 centimeters dilated. I can't believe you can walk!"

I took a peek at the journal Gus had started keeping. Day after day he wrote the same thing: "Still Prignit." Yep, still pregnant.

The week dragged on. On Valentine's Day, Jeff presented me with

beautiful amethyst earrings, a ring, and a necklace. I was dripping in our daughter's birthstone. Bruce over at the jewelry store had outdone himself. "It was gonna be a baby present," he said. "But she's taking her sweet time."

I was mortified. I'd been so convinced that our girl was coming early. She was clearly as bullheaded as her mother.

My dad was going to have to leave that weekend, and I was so sad at the idea of his missing George's birth. Lord knows he wanted nothing to do with the delivery room. But my dad loves his grandbabies, and a twelve-hour drive to the farm and back was nothing to him—but so very much to me.

Five days after my due date, I lay in bed with Gus and Jeff. In the quiet of the morning, the rising sun caught the snow on the ground and filled our bedroom with bright white light. My boys glowed. I turned to throw an arm over the both of them, and felt an odd sensation. Like I had to pee, but different.

Tossing off the covers, I stood up, took two steps, and my water broke.

"Oh my gosh!" I yelled. My water hadn't broken with Gus. This was alien territory. I grabbed towels and started cleaning up the mess, but every time I moved it just kept coming—like an oily saline solution. I was doused and needed help.

"You okay?" Jeff mumbled from bed.

"Um, I might need your help."

I called Nancey. "Are you having contractions?"

"Not yet."

"Okay. Meet me at 11 at the hospital, okay? I'll bring some homeopathic aides."

Jeffrey loaded my bag into the truck and drove my mother and

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me over to the Neugarten Family Birth Center at the hospital. It was a cheery space, dedicated to bringing life into the world. I marched in with a huge smile on my face. The ladies at reception said, "How can we help you today, ma'am?"

"I'm here to have a baby," I declared.

Far from the wide open pastures where our creatures just drop their babies in fields, the hospital had all sorts of implements to help get you through labor. Nancey set me rocking on a large exercise ball and had little homeopathic tablets that she told me to put on my tongue every so many minutes.

"Why? What is it?"

"They'll make your contractions successful."

I didn't know what that meant, but they kicked in very quickly. Every single contraction was doing a lot of work. I rocked and rocked and rocked, and when the rocking didn't help anymore, I moved over to the shower, where hot water pounded onto my lower back and I rocked standing up. *Be a cow.*

Jeffrey was in his Carhartt farming gear, snow boots, and a baseball cap. He played music with his phone that he knew our girl would like. I braced myself on his arm as Stevie Nicks and Journey powered through the speakers. Then something shifted deep down in my guts and I just knew. I yelled out, "She's coming!"

All hands on deck, I was led to the bed. Back at Christmastime my mother and sisters-in-law had conducted a blessing ceremony for my pregnancy, gifting me with a necklace they had made of various stones to empower me during delivery. My mother stood next to me holding it and patting my back. Focusing on those stones, I prepped myself to push. But Nancey coached me to avoid the pain I'd felt with Gus. "Let the contraction do its job. And then

bear down in between the contractions to push her down the canal." Well that went against everything I'd ever heard, but I trusted her and listened. She held warm towels against me to protect my body and give it a point to push against.

"I'd like a time estimate!" I yelled. "How long do you think?" There was a clock directly across from me. It was 4:50 p.m.

"Soon," the nurse up by my head said.

"But like five minutes soon or thirty? I gotta know how to pace myself."

My mother looked over at her and said, "She's very goal oriented."

Nancey and the nurse took a look. "By 5 o'clock" the nurse said. Ten more minutes. I could do that.

Any woman who has ever had a baby will tell you that those last few minutes are outrageous. The thoughts racing through your mind are insane. *Why am I doing this without drugs? Who is this person inside of me? Did I put the clothes in the dryer?*

Jeffrey kept up the encouragement. "You're so pretty. You're doing so good babe!" This time he had fully committed to being down where the action was, excited to catch our daughter. At 4:58, I had the contraction that set our girl free—she gently popped her head out, and Jeff gasped as he took her into his hands.

Cradling her head, he kept saying, "She's so beautiful, mama. She's so, so beautiful." Then he brought her up to meet me. She was dark, with full lips and a head of thick black hair. She was perfect. After all those months, I could finally breathe.

My dad and Gus arrived to meet our new family member, and I was literally up and walking around minutes after giving birth. I felt no pain.

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George arrived on February 16, five days past her due date. She shares a birthday with my brother Billy and with Meg, my manager.

Jeff left after a while to get me a proper dinner. He must have made a parade around Rhinebeck, because everyone in town knew George had arrived. He bought a huge bouquet at the grocery store and picked up sushi at Osaka, spreading the word. Everyone at Samuel's heard the good news. Bruce. Ed. Mari Bird. All our Astor friends. Other shop owners in town. The outpouring of support and congratulations from this community of people who had allowed us in moved me.

After I gave birth to Gus, I'd been so lonely. All these years later, to bring a child into this circle of warmth and kindness was everything I had ever wanted. A snowstorm kicked up, guests left our room, and Jeffrey settled in to sleep in a reclining chair. In the wee hours of the morning, a young nurse started her rotation.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"You know what? It's weird. I feel perfectly fine. Like I didn't even have a baby." It was true. There was no swelling. No pain. I felt perfectly normal for the first time in months.

"Did you have Nancey?" she asked.

I nodded. "How'd you know?"

"Her nickname around here is the Vagina Whisperer. She's the best."

The Vagina Whisperer? Nancey had been underselling herself. She needed to lead with that in her sales pitch! She's certainly earned the moniker.

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