

Short Fiction Books from Saint Mary's Press

Waking Up Bees

STORIES OF LIVING LIFE'S QUESTIONS

Mountains of the Moon

STORIES ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Centurion and the Songbird

STORIES ABOUT THE GOSPELS

THE  
CENTURION  
AND THE  
SONGBIRD

STORIES  
ABOUT  
THE  
GOSPELS

BY  
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## THE MIDWIFE

Oh, you young women so often need an old woman like me! It isn't many who live to be as old as fifty-six, and them that do don't always see so many babies born. Why, half this village I helped deliver! I even helped deliver your own mother. So, young women come by to ask certain things, thinking perhaps I have some wisdom on the topic that their own mothers and sisters don't. And indeed I do, but only because the Lord God, may he be praised, gave me such a long life. If you live to be so old as me, you'll be wise too, mark my words.

That first baby makes you nervous, doesn't it, Joanna? Oh, but you look fine. Your own mother probably told you as much, and you didn't believe her, did you? Let me see your belly. You're carrying low, which means probably a boy, but then you never can tell in *your* family. Your mother always carried low, and she had—how many?—four girls! Yes. Can't always trust your eyes.

What else do you want to know? What is the pain like? Well, first it starts out like a low ache. For a long time, you don't notice it much. Then you feel more real hurting, as if

your flesh were being pulled and squeezed. The pains come and go—that much you must have seen, just from watching your sisters or cousins. Yes, well, just think of those fields out to the east of town, when the grain is tall and golden. When the wind comes up in great gusts, the wheat bends in waves, and then returns to its normal place, all calm again. Then another gust, and the wheat flows back in waves, great waves. I'm told it's like what the water on the great sea to the west looks like, though I've never seen it myself. This is how the pain comes and goes. Imagine the wind getting stronger and stronger, the wheat bending more and more. That's what most of it is like. That's the hardest for some women, that wind getting stronger, and you thinking: it can't get any stronger than this! And then it does, even stronger.

Then there comes the change, and everything speeds up. The last part, the birthing, you generally needn't fear. Although it does feel like a burn or a bad scrape, it doesn't last long. You're healthy and young, and you will have plenty of strength to push that baby right out.

Truly now, Joanna, most births are fine ones, and not so many are miserable. Let me tell you too: Most of the firstborn babies I've birthed have lived to see daylight. Most! I'm sure that the Gentile midwives can't say as

much. Yes, most firstborns in Bethlehem have lived, and not only that, but most have been boys.

Ah, you don't believe me, but just look around the village for a moment. Many families have been blessed with boys first off. In fact, one time my sister-in-law said to me, she said, "Tamar, you have a knack for bringing boys into the world!" This was after the double birth, both boys, of the Jephtha clan. You've heard that story. The mothers were twin sisters, and the fathers were brothers, and those firstborn boy cousins came on the same day, and I delivered them both! Hoo, what an ordeal that was. I think I was more tired after that one than either of the two sisters. They labored in the same room, since that was the only room in their house not occupied by animals. Yes, there they were, spitting and shrieking at each other so loudly that it was hard to know which was worse for them—that they were giving birth or that they had to do it together.

Oh, and speaking of animals, I once helped a woman who wasn't even from here to deliver her firstborn boy, and this all happened in a donkey stall over at Jude's on the edge of town. That's right. This girl, probably about fourteen—your age—had traveled several days when she should have been safe at home with her mother. When I got there, the

whole inn was overflowing with travelers for the census. You could barely get across the courtyard, so many people were sleeping there. Anyway, Jude's boy, Zadok, who runs the inn now, he led me right up to the stall. Inside I found the woman leaning on her husband's neck, the big burly husband leaning against their donkey, and a lamb at their feet. Yes, and do you know, the only one of them that even moved when I came in was the donkey!

True to say, I could not get either the husband or the lamb to go away. "It's no good for men to be at childbed, sir," says I.

"I must stay," says this fool, and when I look to the girl for help I see that she is *much* farther along than usual. She'd gone and done most of it herself. Well, we walked her about but it was really too late for it—you'll understand better after you have your own—and finally I had to shove the lamb aside and tell the man to get out of the way. He did, though he didn't leave. Kept right close, moving his lips, praying, something.

And she worked and worked. It was harder than most. But for someone away from home, with no mother or sisters to help her and an oddball husband who insisted on staying put, that girl was certainly calm. She had no fear, like some I've seen, although pain enough. Right at the end, just as it was

hardest—now, don't mind what I just said, Joanna, it'll all go well for you—that lamb budged its way back in and started licking her toes as if they were in need of a good cleaning! She let out a cry, but then started to laugh, and suddenly here was her firstborn boy, bellowing like an outraged ox. She lay back and laughed, and the lamb started bleating like anything, and then the donkey started braying because of all the racket. That set the neighboring donkeys going, and all down the stalls, every animal in the place began braying and lowing and clucking. Soon the people in the courtyard had all woken and were yelling at the animals. It was like nothing you ever heard. Well, the noisier it got, the more she laughed, and the husband and I both cried from laughing so hard.

What a birth. I'll bet you that baby boy, wherever he is now, remembers being born. How could he not? And you see, my dear, that even with a lonely, difficult birth such as that one, and in a strange place, that girl was able to laugh. You will surely do well with yours. Just imagine yourself in a bed of smelly old straw far from home, with your husband seeing you at your worst, an idiotic donkey not three feet away, and a little lamb giving your feet a good lick. I guarantee, that firstborn boy of yours will be there before you know it. You might even laugh too.