

DONALD SUTHERLAND

CHILDBIRTH IS NOT FOR MOTHERS ONLY

Photographs by Mary Ellen Mark

It was the most incredible, wonderful, terrifically joyful, sexual, sensual, loving time of our lives. It was so intensely personal that it's hard to believe we didn't discover it all by ourselves. But it is as common as dying, or making love, or being born. It's what the hospitals categorize as "normal childbirth," and it was extraordinary for us because we did it together. Because we planned and studied to overcome the established obstructions that would prevent us from doing it together, all three of us. Because, despite the assurances that babies are crying just to breathe—to make their lungs work—it has to be a sad, uncomfortable journey, and we wanted to try and make it as good as it could be.

We chose Robert A. Bradley's "Husband-Coached Childbirth" method because it seemed to insure our mutual participation more than any other. We took classes together for three months; we exercised together every day. We found a doctor, a hospital, and a truly dedicated nursing staff that eagerly supported both Bradley and ourselves. They assured us certain freedoms: there would be no medication, no shaving of the pubic hair, no legs in stirrups, no tied-down wrists, no premature breaking of the bag of waters. We would be able to conduct privately, in a darkened room, the first stage of labor; work together with the staff in a quiet delivery room during the second stage; and while



Francine was still on the delivery table, I would be able to place our newborn child on her breast for the first feeding. And then, when everybody was dressed, all three of us would go home.

The final obstacle was work. Filming "The Day of the Locust" with John Schlesinger would extend through Francine's term, so this clause was agreed to and placed in my contract: "On or about the first of February, the actor will be unable to present himself for reasons of family."

Working on the premise that most discomfort is created by tension, Francine totally relaxed through each contraction, breathing from her diaphragm. I monitored this and the tension in her body, telling her each 10 or 15 seconds, the elapsed time of the contrac-

tion. As they intensified, we darkened the room; she lay on her side in a sleeping position while I stood in front of her and rubbed the tension out of her back. Working this way, we did not deal with the overall time of labor; we dealt only with each individual contraction as it came along.

The photograph above shows a contraction in the early stage of labor, about four in the morning. The baby was born at 9:51. And the only pitfall of working together was laughing, which, when it occurred during the contraction, caused Francine her only discomfort throughout the birth. As she put it, "Quite literally, it only hurt when I laughed."

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Transition. Francine's cervix was dilated more than nine centimeters. The bag of waters burst, and we started to push. It was 8:30. Francine would clear her lungs, take a breath, push for about a minute—head down, knees up, squatting on her back (*opposite*). Then,

between contractions, she would sleep. In the delivery room (*above*), I cooled her face with crushed ice; she pushed again; we watched in the overhead mirror as the head began to crown. Then she was crying and said, "On my stomach. . . ." I turned and saw the baby.



He was a boy. And we couldn't stop saying how beautiful he was, and counting his fingers and toes. When the blood stopped pumping through his umbilical cord, the cord was cut, and I put him on Francine's breast; he heard the voice which he had been hearing for the past few months and started to suck, not milk but antibodies and vitamins to protect him from this change of state.

The nurses took him to the nursery because hospital regulations insist that a pediatrician check him out before he leaves. We drank a glass of orange juice in the delivery room; we went down the hall, looked at him through the glass and waited.

When he was ready, we left for home, and stopped for some gas on the way. The attendant, looking through the window he was wiping, said, "That's a cute little baby. How old is he?" And we said, "Four hours," and started to laugh and cry at the same time.