

Into the Breech

By Madhuri Shekar

SET: A room with a bed, a window, and a door. There are wildfires outside.

CHARACTERS:

SYONA: F, 20s. Extremely pregnant.

JASSIE: F, 20s. Syona's sister. Trying to help.

MARY: Any age. An AI generated persona.

SYONA paces. She takes deep breaths. She is 42 weeks pregnant.

JASSIE enters, with a heavy cardboard package. She's wearing an N-95 mask.

JASSIE

Hey! I got it! They had, one left, at CVS. Just in time.

SYONA

Okay.

Jassie sets down the box and takes off her mask.

JASSIE

How are you?

SYONA

I think her foot is sticking out.

JASSIE

What?

SYONA

She's so low. Like. She's trying real hard to get out on her own.

JASSIE

Oh, no.

SYONA

Yeah.

JASSIE
(not sure)

...Can she?

SYONA
(slowly)

No. No, she can't. We won't let her.

JASSIE
Right. Yeah. Of course. She's upside down.

SYONA
Breech.

JASSIE
Yeah. The wrong way. Sorry. I know what breech is. I'm just babbling. Her foot is sticking out?!

SYONA
Can you look?

Syona slowly lies down on her bed. Jassie helps her. Syona props her legs up. Jassie looks.

JASSIE
Uh. You look okay. As far as I can tell. I don't see a foot.

SYONA
How's my vagina.

JASSIE
Fine?

SYONA
I haven't seen it in three months.

JASSIE
Okay. I'm just gonna wash my hands and we'll get this kit set up... and we'll get started. Okay? Yay!

Syona sighs. Jassie exits to a bathroom offstage. We hear her washing her hands.

JASSIE (O.S.)
We got this, okay? You got this. Do you feel any contractions?

SYONA

I don't know. Maybe? I'm not in pain. She's just - really low.

JASSIE (O.S.)

And the doc gave you the go ahead?

SYONA

Yeah, she said any time after 41 weeks I'll be good to go ahead on my own if I can't get to a ---

(slow deep breath)

maternity ward. And today was officially 42

(deep breath)

weeks okay I think that was a contraction.

Jassie comes back out.

JASSIE

Does it hurt?

SYONA

No. Not yet, I guess.

Jassie opens the cardboard box. She starts unboxing a DIY surgical kit. Syona tries to get comfortable.

SYONA

What's it like outside? Any better?

JASSIE

No. I could barely find my way to the CVS. The interstate's shut down.

SYONA

Shut down?

JASSIE

Yeah. Looks like traffic's shut down for like a hundred miles or something crazy. *(reading the instructions)*

Okay. Looks we download the app first. Can you pass me your phone?

Syona tosses her phone to Jassie, who catches it. Jassie scans a QR code.

SYONA

(another contraction)

Phhhhhh.

4.

4.

JASSIE

By the way just so you know, uh, your insurance card didn't work.

SYONA

What?

JASSIE

I mean I think you're covered. But not up front? They said you'll have to send the receipts in to get a check from your insurance. For reimbursement.

SYONA

Oh. Great. Did you use my card?

JASSIE

Yeah. It was fine.

(re: the app)

Okay. You'll have to fill in your medical info.

Jassie passes the phone back to Syona. Syona slowly sits up, and starts typing in her info.

Jassie goes to the window, draws open a curtain to let more light in. The view outside is brown and muggy. Jassie runs a finger along the window sill. Looks at it. It's black with dust.

SYONA

How much was it? The kit?

JASSIE

Like 800?

SYONA

Yikes. And my card didn't get denied?

JASSIE

Nah. It worked. You just have to send in the receipt.

SYONA

Okay. I turned the app on, but nothing's happening --

MARY, their virtual doula, appears.

MARY

Hi there Seeona!

5.

5.

SYONA

(startled)

Oh my god.

MARY

Hi there Seeona! I'm your virtual AI doula, Mary.

JASSIE

(helpfully)

It's Sy-ona?

MARY

(correcting herself)

Syona, of course, my apologies. I'm so excited to be here with you and to help usher in your precious bundle of joy.

She pauses for a response. Syona and Jassie glance at each other.

SYONA

Thanks?

MARY

Your welcome! First, I have to ask, your information in the app doesn't include details of a spouse or a legal civil union. Do you have a birthing partner?

Syona and Jassie look at each other again.

JASSIE

That would be me? I'm her sister?

MARY

And your name is?

JASSIE

Jassie?

MARY

Hi Jassie! Wonderful. Many women have successfully birthed children on their own, of course. I mean that's what we've been doing from time immemorial, doing what our bodies were built to do, meant to do. But it's nice to have a friend, isn't it.

They stare at her for a second.

6.

6.

JASSIE

So - you're supposed to help us with the instructions -

SYONA

Our bodies?!

Syona suddenly lunges forward, and tries to reach for Mary. But Mary is a hologram.

MARY

(laughing)

Right, of course. Jassie, please go ahead and lay out the plastic sheeting on the birthing bed. Syona, yes, I understand it's a little ironic that I do not have a three dimensional body. But I do understand everything that constitutes a female body and I have empathy.

SYONA

Oh, great.

JASSIE

Okay the bed is covered. What next?

MARY

Wonderful! Now please attach the vitals monitor to Syona's belly, just above her navel.

Jassie follows orders... Lifts up Syona's shirt and sticks a fetal heart monitor on her belly.

JASSIE

Okay. Here we go.

Mary laughs. And suddenly we hear the baby's heartbeat coming through the phone's speakers.

MARY

There's your baby's heartbeat.

Syona gasps. Jassie grabs her hand.

JASSIE

Oh my gosh! Oh, this is so cool! That's your baby!

MARY

Indeed!

7.

7.

Mary waves a hand, like she's turning down the volume, and the sound of the heartbeat disappears.

MARY

I'm afraid her heart rate is erratic. With signs of deceleration.

SYONA

(alarmed)

What?

MARY

Nothing to worry about yet. We are just in time to begin the procedure.

SYONA

Oh, god.

JASSIE

Okay. Uh. Mary. What do we do next?

MARY

Please arrange the surgical instruments on a table next to the bed within easy reach.

Jassie quickly pulls out and unwraps various surgical instruments as she looks to Mary for confirmation...

JASSIE

Okay. I think - um - this?

MARY

Yes. The dissection forceps.

JASSIE

And this?

MARY

Yes. Surgical scissors.

JASSIE

And this yes? AH!!

The instrument she just pulls out starts to buzz in her hand.

8.

8.

MARY

Do be careful. All of our surgical instruments come fully charged and ready to

use. Syona leans towards Jassie to look...

SYONA

Is that a steak knife?

MARY

An electric scalpel. Designed by doctors, for use by you and me.

Syona is starting to go pale. Jassie chuckles nervously, looks at Syona.

JASSIE

Oh my god.

SYONA

What?

JASSIE

I just realized I'm gonna have to see your insides.

SYONA

What did you think we were doing here?!

JASSIE

Sorry! No, it's all cool. Everything's great. I was just making conversation. *(she pulls out another instrument, and looks at Mary)*

And here's the staple gun! This is what I use, right? To do her stitches after the birth?

MARY

Yes! Our groundbreaking new technology uses nanofibers to seamlessly sow up the mother's internal organs for faster, easier healing time. Are you a nurse, by any

chance?

JASSIE

No, I'm a home health aide.

MARY

(pause)

That's nice.

Syona is nauseous.

9.

9.

SYONA

I can't do this.

JASSIE

Sy.

SYONA

Fuck. No. I can't do this.

JASSIE

Sy, it's gonna be okay. It's okay. Look.

*She pulls out the last item from the surgical kit.
It's a giant pill.*

JASSIE

Look - the anesthetic is just a pill. It's just like in the ad we saw. It's not even an epidural. You just take it and you can't feel a damn thing for a whole hour. People pay good money for this shit on the black market.

SYONA

(panicking)

Oh no. Oh no. This is a mistake.

JASSIE

(confused)

Honey, what do you want me to do?

SYONA

I don't know.

Jassie, helpless, looks to Mary.

JASSIE

What do I do next?

MARY

Be sure to have clean, fresh towels ready to wrap the baby in when they arrive.

JASSIE

Right. Towels.

Jassie runs to get towels. Mary smiles at Syona.

10.

10.

MARY

Your heart rate is increasing, as is your blood pressure. Let's do some affirmative breathing exercises together to regulate our vitals.

Syona doubles over with a contraction.

MARY

Deep breath in... and out through your mouth.

SYONA

ARGH!

Syona picks up her phone. She staggers to the bedroom door and throws it out. Mary flickers and disappears.

Syona shuts the door and locks it.

Jassie comes back with towels, on the other side of the door.

JASSIE

Sy? Syona? Can you open the door? It's stuck.

SYONA

I'm not doing this. You can go home.

JASSIE

What?

SYONA

I'm not doing this.

JASSIE

Sy, remember what your doctor said, you could die -

SYONA

I don't care.

JASSIE

Well I fucking care, all right? Open the door!

Mary REAPPEARS by Syona's side.

MARY

Don't worry Jassie, I got this.

11.

11.

Syona screams.

JASSIE

What?

SYONA

The fricking AI is back in my room.

JASSIE

What are you talking about?

MARY

I know this can be scary. But I'm here to help. If you prefer not to continue with the home birthing process, I can always call an ambulance for you, and you may complete the procedure in a hospital.

SYONA

The nearest hospital that can do a c-section is in the next state. And the wildfires mean we can't get there. You dumb bitch.

MARY

Deep breaths. Your blood pressure is rising. It's causing stress on the baby's vitals.

JASSIE

(knocking on the door)

Syona?

SYONA

(to Mary)

Stop talking.

MARY

Your child's heartbeat is continuing to decelerate. If they are not extracted from your body within the next hour, they may die. Due to your negligence. And I am obligated to report it to law enforcement.

SYONA

It's not negligence! You think I want to be here?! You think I chose

this? Jassie rattles the door.

JASSIE

What's going on, Syona? Open the door.

12.

12.

Mary picks up the giant pill from the bedside table.

MARY

You know what's amazing when you don't have choices? The path clears. The mind is calm. And you are finally free.

Mary puts a hand on Syona's shoulder. Mary is solid. How is this happening. What is happening? Syona is frozen in fear.

SYONA

How are you touching me?

MARY

You're ready, mama. Take the pill.

Mary shoves the pill into Syona's mouth. Syona coughs, swallows, and swoons into a dead faint. Mary catches her.

The door melts away. Jassie rushes in and grabs Syona. She doesn't look at Mary.

JASSIE

Sy - Sy - come on - I got you -

Jassie lifts up Syona and takes her to the bed.

MARY

(to the audience)

Women's bodies have near-perfect knowledge of childbirth; it's when their brains get

involved that things can go wrong.

JASSIE

What do I do next?

MARY

Make a 10 centimeter incision in the abdomen, just above the pubic bone.

JASSIE

Here we go.

Jassie cuts open Syona's pregnant belly.

13.

13.

Syona gasps and wakes up. She screams.

SYONA

What are you doing? What's happening?

JASSIE

It's okay Sy! Just relax! Your baby's coming!

Syona screams again.

Mary snaps her fingers, and the scene "mutes". We see Syona screaming and struggling. We see Jassie performing the surgery and trying to talk her down. But they are silent.

What we DO hear is the baby's heartbeat on the fetal monitor, providing a backdrop to Mary's monologue.

MARY

Women have been birthing children in nearly impossible conditions long before the intervention of doctors and modern medicine. Why the cesarean section is a misnomer. It had nothing to do with Julius Caesar. It was invented in the Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara, in modern day Uganda. They used banana wine as an anesthetic. Isn't that so interesting? Women's bodies are marvelous. They can do amazing things.

Syona screams and screams and... the sound breaks through. We hear the scream.

Mary flinches.

Jassie removes Syona's pregnant belly from her body. Turns it inside out, holding it like a bowl.

JASSIE

She's here!

Jassie wraps the "baby" in a clean towel.

SYONA

I don't have my insides. They're gone.

Mary claps her hands.

14.

14.

MARY

Baby! Baby is here! You did it Mama!

SYONA

I am?

Jassie gives the "baby" to Syona.

The heartbeat dies down.

Silence. Eerie silence.

SYONA

Wow.

Jassie suddenly looks at Syona with alarm. She shakes Syona. Even though Syona appears awake and alert and alive to us.

JASSIE

(increasing urgency)

Syona? Syona... Syona!

Mary smiles beatifically at Syona and strokes her hair.

MARY

Women have been doing this since the dawn of time. It's what we're built to do. *(ton the audience)*

It's what we're meant to do.

End of play.