

Episode 119: Ashley's baby couldn't breathe

I want you to take a moment, and think about the concept of trust.

Often, trust is based on experience. When you go to a restaurant you really like, and you order your favorite dish, you trust that the ingredients they use aren't outdated and spoiled. This is an easy thing, because you've done it hundreds of times before, at lots of different restaurants.

When I need to have some work done on my car, I'm fortunate to have a mechanic who I can trust. I need to know that not only the repair was done properly, but that the car is also safe to drive when I get it back.

And one of the places where we all have to place our trust is in our healthcare professionals. Whether you're at your doctor for an annual checkup, or in the Emergency Room for something more serious, you have to trust that the doctors, and nurses, and the other medical people know what they're doing.

My guest today is Ashley. She went to the hospital one day, because she was about to give birth to her first child. She and her husband, Alden, were very excited about becoming parents. And when things started happening that were outside the norm, they trusted that the people in charge could figure it out.

That's not what happened.

Scott

Was this pregnancy planned or was it kind of a surprise?

Ashley

No, it was very much planned. My husband, Alden and I had gone to a baby shower for his best friend. It was there that we, kind of, decided, "Maybe we should do this too." So, I went home that night, threw out my birth control pills, and we started trying. I wasn't planning on having her when I did. It just kind of worked out the way it did. We managed to get pregnant pretty quickly. We were kind of expecting it to take a little bit longer because coming off of hormonal birth control can sometimes do some wacky things. But yeah, it just turned out that we were pregnant within the second month.

Scott

Was there anything unusual about the pregnancy?

Ashley

Nothing at all was unusual. It was a really amazing pregnancy. I didn't have any morning sickness. I had a little bit of discomfort towards the end - just regular pregnancy aches and pains - but, overall, it really was like a perfect pregnancy.

Scott

Did you know the sex ahead of time?

Ashley

Yeah, we did. As soon as we hit that 20-week mark and we were able to get the ultrasound to find out the gender, we did.

Scott

I know some people like to be surprised.

Ashley

I wanted to know and I would have found out sooner if I could have

Scott

Okay. Had you decided on a name?

Ashley

We did. This name just, kind of, came to me in a dream and we went with it. Alden liked it. So, we decided on Autumn as her first name and Marie as her middle name. So, Autumn Marie is her name.

Scott

Knowing that it's going to be a girl, I assume you were able to decorate— what was involved with that?

Ashley

I went a little overboard. It was our first. I had decided on cloth diapers. By the time the birth came around, I had amassed well over 100 cloth diapers. We had our stroller picked out. We had the nursery painted and set up. My mother had repurposed this beautiful dresser for her - it was pink and it was white. Alden had done some really unique paintings on the wall. It was just the perfect nursery for our little girl.

Scott

Alden is your husband. Is he an artist?

Ashley

He is not. Well, he likes to think he is sometimes, but no. He just got he got a little bit creative. Because her name is Autumn, he had drawn, like, some falling leaves actually on the wall.

Scott

This was your first pregnancy. Were you nervous about anything about how it might go since you've never experienced it before?

Ashley

I was. At the same time, I was pretty confident that it was all gonna go according to plan. I think I was maybe a little bit overconfident. I mean, I didn't do any childbirth prep. I had decided to go with a midwife to get a little bit more of, like, a natural birth experience - although we had still decided to birth in the hospital with the midwife. We had the opportunity to get a doula on a sliding scale but decided not to. I didn't think I would need the support of a doula. I just went into the pregnancy and into the birth feeling really confident like I had this and it was all gonna go according to plan.

Scott

Are you an optimist by nature?

Ashley

I think so, yeah. Maybe a little bit too much.

Scott

Where were you when you went into labor?

Ashley

I just came home from seeing a friend. I dropped him off at the subway station and I drove home. I just started to feel a little bit of contraction pain on a Thursday night and it continued throughout the night. It wasn't too bad. I was able to sleep. By the morning, I knew that the birth was starting to happen. Having said that, though, I did send Alden to work that morning. I just knew that it was our first and it was probably going to be a while before it was actually time.

Scott

Was he okay going to work knowing that you're about to go into labor?

Ashley

He was okay with it. Yeah, he was on board with that. I knew it was gonna be a long time. It was still early labor. I mean, that morning, I actually went to Costco, kind of walked around, and picked up some food - like some pre-made meals. I had a few contractions while I was there, but I was able to walk and talk through them. They weren't happening very often. By that afternoon, things were starting to pick up a little bit and I had actually started to bleed quite a bit, so I called my midwife and explained what was happening. She said, "Why don't you come in? I'm here at the hospital now. Why don't you come in and we'll just see what's going on?"

So I drove myself to the hospital in labor in rush-hour traffic in Toronto. This hospital is not at all close to me. We had probably at least 2 hospitals that were closer to us. We had picked this hospital because it was the only one in the entire Toronto area that allowed for waterbirth at that time. At the other hospitals, you were able to labor in the water but you weren't allowed to actually give birth in the water. So, I had chosen this hospital because I wanted to try giving birth in the water. It was about a good 30-40 minute drive away from me. I got there - it probably took me an hour in traffic. Alden met me there. My mother also met me there.

They hooked me up to the monitors and triage. There was definitely some concern. Her heart was decelerating and it just wasn't what they like to see. The midwife did consult with the OB that was on call and they said, "Well, let's get you something to eat" - because it had been quite a while since I had eaten something - "Then, we'll monitor you for another hour and we'll see what happens. If we don't see an improvement, then we're going to have to talk about induction happening tonight."

Being very Canadian, I got something from Tim Hortons in the hospital lobby. It was all sugar. I had that to eat and they monitored me for another hour and things looked good. So they said, "Okay, well, you still have the option for induction if you want it, or you could go home and continue to labor at home because it was still too early to be admitted." I made the decision to go home. We went home. I got home at about 9 o'clock at night and tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep because things were starting to pick up. I ended up in the bath at one point. It was around 2-3 o'clock in the morning when I said to Alden, "I think it's time to go in because this is just getting to be a little bit too much now. I don't think I can handle this on my own anymore." We

drove to the hospital. He called the midwife. She said, "Well, I'll meet you there." He called my mother. She met us there as well.

Scott

At least there won't be as much traffic this time.

Ashley

No, not at 3 o'clock in the morning. It is Toronto, so you never know what you're gonna run into. We got to the hospital. We got admitted. Everything looked good. I was ready for the tub. My midwife goes to get the tub ready and then realizes that it hasn't been cleaned from the last time it was used. There's one tub on the entire labor and delivery floor, and it's kind of across the hall. So, it's not in the room - it's across the hall. She got it cleaned. Then, she went to fill it and realize that there was no hot water, so waterbirth is now out. It was at that point that I opted for the epidural because I was not coping well. Having not done any preparation at all for childbirth because I was so confident that I had it, I was not coping well. The waterbirth was the only thing I was hanging my hat on to get through labor naturally. So, I opted for the epidural. I slept for a couple of hours, which was nice. It numbs the pain enough that I was able to sleep and get some rest.

Scott

Does an epidural normally cause drowsiness or cause you to sleep?

Ashley

It didn't cause drowsiness. It just allowed me to relax enough that I was able to sleep because I had been up all night. I wasn't able to sleep at all the night before. I got the epidural around at around 8 o'clock. We arrived at the hospital at around 4. So, it was 4 hours before I got the epidural. Then, I just slept until 1-2 o'clock in the afternoon.

Scott

You were so tired that even the excitement of giving birth wasn't enough to keep you awake.

Ashley

I was just so tired. When I say sleep - it's in a hospital - you're kind of in and out. At one point, I remember looking over at my midwife and just saying like, "Do you want me to get you something to eat, or do you want Alden to get you something to eat?" because she had also been up all night as well. Everybody was very tired. Two o'clock in the afternoon rolled around on that Saturday and it was time to push. I was ready. What had happened was, at some point, my water had broken and there had been some meconium stains in the water, which is fairly common but is sometimes a cause for concern. Meconium is basically the baby's first poop. Sometimes, when babies are stressed - or just because - they might poop before they're born. As a matter of protocol, my midwife had to call the pediatric NICU team into the room right before the birth just in case there was any concerns post birth. They would be there to kind of take care of things - that was the thought anyway. I pushed for about an hour and I remember my midwife saying to me, "Just before you're ready to give birth, I'm going to call the pediatric team in." So, I was waiting for that moment because I knew, like, I was going to give birth as soon as she called them and as soon as they walked in the door. That hour was one of the most challenging hours physically and emotionally because the epidural had worn off - I could feel everything and that shit hurts, like, next level. At one point, I think I almost kicked my midwife in the face. She was trying to massage something and it just hurt. I said, "If you don't stop that, I'm

literally going to kick you. I'm going to be sorry later, but I'm not going to be sorry now." It was quite the experience.

Scott

Can they not give you a second epidural?

Ashley

I was pressing that damn button. For the epidural, there is a little button that you get. If you need to top up, you can press this button and it will increase the dose momentarily. When I was pressing that button, it wasn't hitting anything. It literally, like, just stopped working. So I felt everything. Autumn was finally born. I remember saying, "THANK GOD! I'm never doing this again," because that was the hardest thing that I had ever done up to that point.

When she was born, she came out, and the midwife kind of held her up. She cried momentarily. The midwife put her on my chest. She was looking around and it wasn't very long before there was just some concern that she wasn't crying enough or she wasn't pinkening up enough. They like to say, "She was still just a little bit gray and blue," so she wasn't getting the oxygen circulation that they wanted to see. So being the pediatric team, they took her over to the warmer, which was on the other side of the room, and give her some oxygen to see if they could get her to respond the way that they wanted her to respond.

Scott

And this was all still in the delivery room?

Ashley

It was all still in the delivery room, yep. At that point, I was probably delivering the placenta - I don't remember doing that at all. I know, at some point, they realized that it was possible that the oxygen machine on the wall wasn't working properly, so they decided to take her to the NICU. I had to stay behind, obviously. I was in post. This was, like, maybe 10-minutes post-childbirth. I still had to get cleaned up, stitched up, and all that stuff, so Alden went with Autumn to the NICU.

Alden

So they took her to the NICU and I was right behind them.

Scott

Ashley's husband, Alden—

Alden

I think there were a few mothers there. The babies were there. It was one open room with, like, no privacy - not sectioned up or anything. It was just one open room with everyone seeing everything that was taking place. They put her on a table and they tried to put a tube inside the tube inside of her throat. I guess they were trying to figure out if there was, like, meconium or something. I think what they were trying to figure out was if there was, like, meconium. When that came up empty, they went into a panic instantly. They're basically saying to themselves, "What? No! There was no meconium? What's going to be next?" Nothing was happening. Basically, everything was moving so slowly. They tried to take blood and run tests. She was hooked up to several machines - I had no clue what they were for or what they were doing. Basically, it was just all these wires running from her to these various machines.

It seems like, to be honest, the professionalism of these nurses and doctors was just lacking because it was the first time they had actually seen something like this - like, they had never come across something like this before and, like, they don't know what they were doing. I'm assuming that they didn't know what they were doing. Based on my experience and what I saw, there was a lot of chaos. They were running back and forth. There was one point in time when they asked for a bag of blood and one of the nurses spilled the blood under the chair. I was like, "Please just save my daughter. Please just save my daughter."

Ashley

I got cleaned up and I was just waiting for, like, somebody to come back and tell me what's going on. It was probably half an hour after they had gone when the midwife who was, kind of, taking care of Autumn— so what typically happens in Ontario is there's a midwife who, kind of, watches and takes care of mom or the birthing person and there's a midwife who comes in at the end just before birth who will take care of the baby. So, you've got two midwives - one for each. At that time, I also had a student midwife, so I was lucky enough to have 3 midwives at my birth. I had my primary one, the student midwife, and then the midwife that came for the baby. The midwife that was meant for Autumn had gone with her and Alden to the NICU. About half an hour after they had gone, she came back and just kind of said, "We're not really sure what's going on, but I wanted to come to give you an update. They are calling the SickKids ambulatory team to come to the hospital to check her out and possibly transfer her. We don't know what's going on."

So I quickly moved things along and got dressed. They put me in a wheelchair because, as a matter of protocol, I wasn't allowed to walk even though the epidural had completely worn off by that time and I was able to stand, walk, and all that good stuff. So, they wheeled me down to the NICU. It was just chaos. Autumn was on the warmer under this big light and the pediatric doctor was kind of managing things. There were nurses who were running around and doing different things. They just kind of sat me there. Alden was standing there. We just waited for the SickKids team to get there. It felt like forever and it was awful because it was pretty clear that there was something wrong and the team who was looking after her didn't know how to manage it. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know what was wrong. When the SickKids team got there and came into the room - there were two of them - the entire energy changed and it became much more calm. It felt like somebody was in control.

Scott

Did that lower your level of concern?

Ashley

It did. I mean, I was thinking, "Okay, well, they're here now. They're going to stabilize her and do whatever they need to do." In my head, I was thinking about the logistics of going to the SickKids Hospital. Who's going to drive the truck there? Will Alden or I go in the ambulance? Do I have to stay at this hospital for any other reason? Can I just leave with her? I have to call my father and my sisters. I was going through all of the logistical things in my head.

Then, my midwife asked the SickKids lead, "Can mom and dad come up and see her?" She said yes. so we went over and I kind of got to touch her and just be closer to her. It was at that point when the SickKids lead had been on the phone with the doctors down at the SickKids hospital. She got off the phone. She turned around and said, "We don't think she's going to make it." To say I was shocked would be an understatement because I had not run through that outcome in my head at all. I came to find out after the fact that it was already too late by the time

I got to the NICU, which was about an hour after she had been born. She had lost too much oxygen to her brain. She had gone into cardiac arrest and there was just no coming back from it. So, they were keeping her alive but she was no longer there. She was brain-dead.

Scott

Is this a direct result of the oxygen not working properly in the delivery room?

Ashley

I don't have an answer to that. I don't know. You can go without oxygen to your brain for a good 6 minutes before your brain starts to deteriorate. So, she had obviously been without oxygen for longer than that.

Scott

Wow. So you and Alden were there and you got this news. I can't even imagine how you would react to that.

Ashley

Luckily for me, I was still sitting in this wheelchair. I felt like the floor just kind of opened up. Somehow, I kept breathing and living. I was just like, "How can you say to me that my child is going to die and yet I still have to live?" Alden, unfortunately, was not sitting when we got the news. I think the shock of it just puts him on the floor and he passed out.

Alden

Instantly, something came over me and I fell to the ground. I just collapsed onto the ground because, in my mind, I was like, "I can't lose my daughter. I actually cannot lose my daughter." They called for a code blue at the time - I didn't know what a code blue was. By the time the nurses and doctors got there, I was up and shaking. I was so nervous. I was shaking. I had to leave the room.

Ashley

I was still facing the SickKids lead when Alden passed out on the floor behind me. I remember saying to the SickKids lead, "Can you please turn me around?" because I was still in this damn wheelchair. Then, at some point, somebody wheeled me out of the room. I ended up in the hall and the intercom was going off across the entire hospital, "Code blue to the NICU. Code Blue to NICU." Then, people started coming out of nowhere. They were running towards the NICU with this equipment. All I could think about was, "I just need to get back to Alden. How did I end up in the fucking hall?" Being the good Canadian, I stayed in my wheelchair and I just tried to frantically, like, wheel myself back into the NICU. Of course, the door that I had come out through was blocked from the inside, so I couldn't just go straight back to him. I had to go all the way around to the other door back through the NICU and back past all the other families that were in the NICU with their very sick babies only to find - by the time I got back to where Alden was - that he was up and he was looking for me. So, we went back to our room and tried to collect ourselves.

Scott

Is this back in the delivery room?

Ashley

Yeah. Back in our delivery room. I remember my midwife coming in at one point with some resources on things you don't think you need to think about - whether to get an autopsy, funeral

arrangements, and stuff like that. I remember saying to her like, "What am I supposed to do? My mom is gonna come in and I don't have a baby to feed." Alden was ready to leave. I think he had just the shock and trauma because he had also witnessed everything in the NICU. He had seen everything that I had missed. He had been there for the entire thing and he was ready to leave. I also remember my mother. Thank God she was there. She turned to him and said, "Ashley can't leave yet. Autumn's not dead yet. Ashley needs to say goodbye." So I went back to the NICU with my mother. By that time, my father was there. I went back with my parents and Alden stayed. Alden stayed behind in the hallway with my stepfather and my stepmother. Thank God that they were there.

Alden

I could not bear to see my daughter. They hooked her up to this machine and she was basically there. She was like gasping for air. She was trying to breathe but she could not. She was gasping for air. I saw her chest going up and down so frantically. She wanted to take in a breath but she couldn't hold it in and release it. I could not bear the sight of that. I could not just stand there and watch my daughter struggling to breathe. That was one of the hardest things I've ever gone through in my life - losing someone that is so close to you even though I didn't know her deeply but she was a part of me that we created. To lose her in that fashion was so sad. It was heartbreaking for me.

Ashley

I was led into what was essentially, like, a little storage closet right off the NICU. There was, like, a table you would find in a board room, a bookcase with some medical books, and a couple of chairs. By that time, the doctor from SickKids had arrived and he brought Autumn to me. She was wrapped up in a blanket. She still had the little catheter thing hanging out over her mouth or the intubation. He handed her to me and he said, "You can expect to hear a few little gasps or sighs before she passes." Then, I just held her. My mother and my father held her. Then, she passed in my arms - I don't know exactly when, but I just know it was 7.05 PM on that Saturday. I said to the pediatric doctor, "I think she's gone now." She came over with her stethoscope and checked, and said "Yes, she is."

I think I held her for a little bit longer. She was starting to change color, so I gave her back to my midwife. My midwife said, "Are you sure you don't want more time with her?" I said, "I don't want to remember it like this." I gave her back and went into the hallway where Alden was. We packed up our stuff and we went home. It was surreal leaving the hospital. You don't expect to leave the hospital empty-handed. This was a pretty small hospital. It was very quiet. It was almost eerily quiet leaving. We got in the car. I remember trying not to look in the backseat because that's where the car seat was. Of course, there's no baby in the car seat.

Scott

This was how long of a drive?

Ashley

It was a good 30-minute drive at night with no traffic.

Scott

What was the conversation like between you and Alden on that ride home?

Ashley

I couldn't tell you. I don't remember if we talked at all.

Scott

There's nothing to say.

Ashley

Yeah, I really don't remember. We got home. The first thing that we saw as we came in the door was the baby swing which was already set up in the living room. Upstairs, I had set the playpen up beside our bed because that's where she was supposed to sleep - that was the first thing I saw when I walked into the bedroom. I think it was at that point that I really lost it. I remember Alden just grabbing that playpen and literally just throwing it into the nursery, and closing the door. That door stayed closed for months. I don't know how the swing got in there. I don't know at what point that happened. All the baby stuff in the house made its way into that nursery and the door just stayed closed.

I had a shower. Then, we got into bed. There's no, like, manual on what you're supposed to do after your child dies. So, we just laid there and watched a movie - we watched "Scream." I don't think either of us really watched it - it was just on. At some point. The coroner called. We had just missed him at the hospital. So it was just, again, a matter of protocol. The coroner's called to come interview everybody. He called and asked the standard questions about pregnancy like, "Did you smoke? Did you drink during the pregnancy?" and stuff like that. "Hell no." We had opted to do the autopsy because we wanted to know why this had happened because it made no sense. It literally made no sense. It was a picture-perfect pregnancy and standard birth. There was just there was no reason. None of it made any sense.

Scott

Yeah. When you think of the term "Complications in childbirth", you didn't have any complications other than the meconium, but that's fairly routine, isn't it?

Ashley

It's fairly common. I had also consulted with 2 OB during my pregnancy because I have epilepsy. My midwife had never taken on a patient that had epilepsy before so, just to be safe, she had consulted with 2 OB - 1 OB and 1 maternal-fetal medicine specialist - so I had good care. I had amazing care throughout my pregnancy. We didn't know what had happened, so we opted to do the autopsy even though we were told, "There's a good chance you won't ever have a reason. Like, you won't ever know. It could take a year or longer to get the results back."

Scott

Why so long?

Ashley

I think part of it is they have to do toxicology, but I don't know if that really should take longer than a few weeks or months.

Scott

Yeah, a year seems excessively long.

Ashley

Yeah. That's what we were told, so that's what we were expecting.

Scott

Did the autopsy reveal anything?

Ashley

The autopsy did suggest that, at some point, prior to her birth, she had lost oxygen, which had caused kind of a cascading effect after birth. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I'm also I'm not a doctor. We got pregnant fairly soon after about three months. I thought I went to the best hospital in the city and I had an amazing team. They dealt with subsequent pregnancies. One of the things that my OB did was he reviewed everything from my midwives, from the hospital, from SickKids, and all of the reports. I remember going in for an appointment with him when I was probably 6 months pregnant at that time. He just turned to me and said, "I don't think that I don't think Autumn should have died. Whatever issue should have been managed better by the care team to have prevented the oxygen loss to her brain that resulted in the brain damage that she suffered." That's basically what he said to us. So we decided that we're absolutely going to be birthing at this hospital, which has a level three NICU - you can't get any better. They deal with the sickest babies so that if something did happen again, at least, you would be in the absolute best place for any type of emergency.

Scott

Did you decide to pursue legal action against the hospital?

Ashley

We thought about it. We decided not to because it's incredibly difficult, at least, in Ontario to sue a doctor or hospital. They have a lot of money and really good lawyers. If you can find a lawyer that will even take on a medical malpractice suit, it can drag on for years or decades. At the end of the day, you might not get anything anyway except more trauma.

Scott

Yeah, it's just dragging out the experience and you want to get over it - not that you'll ever get over it but—

Ashley

No. I channeled my grief and my anger into a 5-page letter that I sent to the hospital. I looked up their board of directors and I just sent a copy of this letter to everybody there. I explained in my letter like, "This is what happened and this is how the care we received really, really traumatized us. This is how you can improve." They listened. I will definitely give them that. They listened and somebody reached out to me within a couple of days of me sending the letter and took our recommendations into consideration. A few months later, I got another call saying, "This is what they have put in place to prevent the same type of experience from happening to somebody else."

One of the big things was there were other families in the NICU when we were there and there was just no privacy, so everybody in the NICU witnessed our tragedy. I didn't even realize it at the time. I was so focused on what was happening with Autumn. I can't imagine how traumatizing that could have been for somebody who's already overwhelmed and stressed with a baby sick enough to have to be in the NICU and then witness this unfold. The other issue was that there was nowhere really appropriate to say goodbye. I mean, I said goodbye to my daughter in a storage closet off of the NICU. The other thing was there are services where a professional photographer will come and take photos and we weren't offered that, so I have one photo of her that my mother took on her cell phone. That's all we have. I would give anything to have more photos of her.

Scott

This just seems so wrong. Her whole life ahead of her just ended because of people just making mistakes.

Ashley

Yeah, it came down to incompetence - I can say that with certainty. I spoke to a lot of people after the fact. I mean, I was very lucky. We had the amazing OB that we had with our subsequent, who was very experienced and a pioneer in a lot of ways in labor and delivery in the city. I had the opportunity to meet with the doctors from SickKids who had worked on the case who had been on the other end of the line and who had actually come to the hospital. They assured me that none of the medications I was on would have caused this. There was nothing that I had done. There was just nothing that the midwives had done. It was never explicitly stated by anybody, but there was definitely a sense of frustration on the SickKids' side by the pediatric team's level of competence that they encountered at the hospital.

Scott

You mentioned that you got pregnant fairly quickly after this happened. Was that intentional?

Ashley

Yeah, it was intentional. No, I don't recommend it, but I just felt so empty and there was nothing that was going to fill that void. The closest I could get was to try and have another baby, and we made that decision. By the time we were pregnant, we still didn't have the autopsy report back, so we really didn't know if it was something that was likely to repeat or not. My subsequent daughter— it just happened that we got pregnant a year later - it was off by, like, a year and a week. So, her due date was quite literally a week beyond what Autumn's had been. So there was that to deal with because I was basically reliving the pregnancy just a year later.

Scott

How worried were you if the same thing might happen again?

Ashley

Extreme, extremely worried. That's why we did things so differently. I had gone from really wanting a natural birth with midwives - if I could have birth at home with Autumn, I would have - and went to a high-tech hospital. I was followed by a high-risk team and I was also followed by a regular OB team. So I was being followed by multiple doctors. One of the great things about this subsequent pregnancy program was that they made it much easier. When you're pregnant after a loss, it's a completely different ballgame. There are so many triggers. So, they try and eliminate that as much as possible. For anybody who has been pregnant, every time you go in for an ultrasound and you get a different tech, you have to kind of explain everything all over again. So, they would offer the same ultrasound tech for every ultrasound, and I had an ultrasound every appointment if I wanted it. I could drop in anytime if I had any concerns. They would see me. I was offered induction and I was offered an elective cesarean.

Ultimately, I chose to have an elective cesarean before the date that we lost Autumn, so she was born at 38 weeks and 6 days. And I don't know, there's just something in my head that said, I don't want to be pregnant with this pregnancy at 38 weeks and six days. I need this baby to come out sooner. The doctor accommodated that. By the time the birth came around, we already had the autopsy report back. It took about 3-4 months, so it's a lot better than the year that they had told us initially. We knew that it likely wasn't going to happen again and it was just

a freak thing. We were at the best possible hospital. We had the best possible team. I opted for this area.

So we went in that morning. It was a very stressful morning because it's a high-tech hospital and a high-risk hospital. I was having an elective cesarean. I did get bumped so my initial caesarian that was supposed to happen at 10 didn't happen until 6. So, it was a long day at the hospital, but they wheeled me into the room and put the spinal in. Then, they cut her - my subsequent daughter - out of me. At first, she didn't cry. I know this now but back then I didn't know that, sometimes, when babies are born by cesarean, they don't always cry right away. So, she didn't cry and it felt like the longest couple minutes of my life. Then, she started crying and I knew, "Okay, I think she's going to be okay now." She is an amazing almost 6-year-old.

Scott

This experience has led you to want to help other people. Is that why you became a doula? What exactly is a doula?

Ashley

A doula is a support person for the birthing person, their partner, and their family. We provide physical, emotional, and educational support. We're different from a midwife in that we don't do anything medical. They handle all the surgical checks, all the blood pressure checks, and all of that stuff. We're just there to provide support in whatever way we're needed throughout the pregnancy, during the birth, and also after birth for usually about 6 weeks. My experience with Autumn and then with my subsequent pregnancy did definitely propel me into supporting other families, so I became a doula with a focus on loss and on subsequent pregnancies because, like I said before, it's a whole different ballgame when you're subsequently pregnant and it's hard to understand unless you've been through it.

Scott

You can definitely identify with people who are going through something similar and they must appreciate having you relating to them.

Ashley

Absolutely. And I find it really fulfilling as well to be able to support people going through some of the hardest times in their life in a way that I can really relate to.

Scott

Yeah, there's got to be something gratifying about that.

Ashley

Yeah, there is. I'm very lucky to have met the people that I have.

Scott

What's your motivation for wanting to get this story out there for people to hear it?

Ashley

I think it's just another way to honor Autumn - I think it just comes down to that. I mean, I've supported other people going through loss and through subsequent pregnancies to honor her. I was a peer counselor for a loss group for a little while until I got pregnant again. That was, again, a way to honor her. Because she's not here, it's a way that I can kind of keep her alive and to keep her memory alive.

Scott

You have mentioned to me that if anyone wants to contact you, they can do that. We'll have your email on the website in the show notes for this episode. They can visit your website, which is Ashleyharrison.net, and they can get in touch with you if they want to.

Ashley

Yes, absolutely.

Scott

All right. Well, Ashley, I'm so sorry about Autumn. Thanks for sharing your story.

Ashley

Thank you very much, Scott.

Scott

October is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month. By telling her story here, Ashley wants to help raise awareness and love for anyone who has lost a child to stillbirth, miscarriage, SIDS, or any other cause at any point during pregnancy or infancy.

And now, like we often do at the end of each episode, a couple of things I wanted to let you know about.

First, I just released a new Raw Audio episode. If you're new to the show, Raw Audio is a whole other series of episodes – currently there are 27 episodes, all available to binge. With each one, you'll hear a 911 call that was made, and the story about what happened. All of those episodes are available to anyone who signs up to support the podcast for \$5 a month, at WhatWasThatLike.com/support. And you also get all the new What Was That Like episodes ad-free.

In Raw Audio 27, you'll hear about a woman who's followed home by her ex-boyfriend –

Man 1

They're arguing very loudly. He has a gun.

911 Operator

The police are on the way. I'm talking to you as they are en route, okay? So you don't need to be yelling at me.

Scott

Police confront a man who's holding a machete –

Woman 2

He was just sitting there smoking so we didn't think much of it. I tried to go outside to lock the gate with a lock but my mom was saying, like, "He was sitting there with a machete."

Scott

And a young man has what feels like a therapy session with the 911 dispatcher –

911 Operator

Is there any reason that you were so angry with your mother and your sister?

Man 2

I wasn't. It's weird. I wasn't even really angry with them. It just kind of happened. I've been planning on killing for a while now.

911 Operator

The two of them or just anybody?

Man 2

Pretty much anybody.

Scott

You can get all 27 episodes immediately by becoming a supporter of the show at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/support).

Scott

And I wanted to follow up on the Listener Story in a recent episode. If you recall, episode 116 from back in September was two New York City 9/11 stories. And the listener story at the end of that episode was from a man who thought his father had died, but through a DNA test, discovered that a different man was actually his biological father, and he was still alive. His father's name is Leroy, and so far, Leroy does not want to make contact with his son.

And after that episode went live, there were some podcast listeners who responded to that story. One was Nikki, and this is the message she sent me:

And that's all?? Scott!! We need to hear more from Leroy's son!! Ancestry DNA and 23 and Me are stirring families up like crazy, right? Nonetheless, I really hope Leroy decides to get to know and enjoy his son. Life is short.

Well, the son, whose voice you heard in the Listener Story, is Patrick Jones. I passed that message on to him, and he said that he, too, hopes that Leroy decides to have some communication with him at some point. And if that happens, Patrick will let me know and we'll give you an update here.

And incidentally, there's a chance you may have heard or seen Patrick. He's an actor, and a producer, and a podcast host. His podcast is called Why I'll Never Make it, and it he talks with other actors about the setbacks and struggles of being in the performing arts. If you want to see some of his performances, Patrick's website is pojones.com – there's a clip on there where he was in the TV show Blue Bloods, and he had a scene with Tom Selleck. I'll have those links in the show notes.

And now, we have this week's Listener Story, which is how we end every episode. If you have a story that you can tell in about 5 minutes, record it on your phone and send it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This week, we're hearing from Molly.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in 2 weeks.

(Listener story)

Molly

Hi, Scott. I'd love an opportunity to tell you about my pregnancy in 2018. It was our first wedding anniversary when my husband and I found out that we were pregnant. We were thrilled. Unfortunately, our excitement didn't last. At our 18-week anatomy scan, we learned that we were having a boy and that something was wrong. Our baby was measuring, like, way too small. At 21 weeks, I developed a potentially life-threatening maternal complication. So in order to continue the pregnancy, I would have to remain hospitalized until delivery.

A few days into my hospitalization, a resident doctor walked into my room with the paperwork necessary to obtain an abortion. She explained to me that, in our state, there was a 24-hour waiting period between filing this paperwork and obtaining the abortion. Due to the nature of my condition, I could go from stable to unstable very quickly. My doctor didn't want any red tape delaying my treatment, so it was best to have this paperwork on hand in the event that we needed it. Of course, I did not want an abortion. I wanted a baby. But I also knew that it was important for my doctor to practice medicine within the confines of the law. So I begrudgingly signed the paperwork in tears. The resident then told me that she was also required by law to show me a booklet meant to educate me on normal fetal development. Of course, the baby in my body was not developing normally. She very mercifully held the booklet out in front of me, flipped through it as quickly as one of those animated flipbooks, said "There. I showed it to you", threw the booklet in the trash, and walked out of the room.

One morning, about 5 weeks into my hospitalization. I was taken from my room for an ultrasound, which I had been doing bi-weekly throughout my hospitalization. This ultrasound was different. In the middle of it, the ultrasound tech put down her wand and said, "I'm gonna go call your doctor. I'll be right back." I knew that couldn't be good. I still had no idea what was going on when the door to my hospital room opened and my husband walked in after less than an hour. My husband was in his first year of an internal medicine residency at a hospital across town, so I hardly saw him at all. Nonetheless, at 9 AM on a weekday, just a few minutes later, the door opened again, and a pack of about 10 people walked in - many of whom I had never seen before. One of them was my maternal fetal medicine (MFM) doctor. She told us that our baby had developed an additional complication in utero. This complication was exceedingly dangerous for the pregnant person and it was no longer reasonable to continue the pregnancy. It was time for the pregnancy to end.

A man from the group then introduced himself to us as the hospital's neonatologist. He explained that, because our son was so growth-restricted and so small, they didn't have instruments small enough to perform the procedures on him that would be necessary in order to save his life. They didn't have breathing tools that are small enough for his windpipe. They didn't have IVs small enough for his blood vessels. Trying and shove a tube down his throat that was too big for his throat would be akin to torture. Due to this new complication, his chances of survival were very slim even in the best of circumstances. With him being so small, he stood no chance. He would not and could not resuscitate the baby. The NICU team then left the room and we were left to absorb the information that all hope for our son was lost.

My MFM then explained to us that my baby was likely too weak to survive labor. So, in order to avoid an "abortion", she would need to deliver the baby via cesarean. That way, she could pull the baby out alive. After the baby came out alive, they would give the baby comfort care and

allow the baby to die on the outside while I was being sewn up on the operating table. This plan was appalling to me. It was incredibly invasive and unnecessarily dramatic for both me and my son, but I thought I had no choice. I was 26 weeks pregnant in a state where, at that time, my choice has ended a few weeks earlier. Now, it's much earlier. So I took a shower and washed with a special soap intended to disinfect my belly before a planned cesarean.

As I stepped out of the shower, I decided that there was no way that this was how it was going to go down. I wanted to be induced. Well, obviously, what I wanted was a healthy baby and a healthy pregnancy. Given my circumstances, I wanted to be induced and deliver my baby vaginally even if that meant he came out dead, even if that was against the law, even if it meant putting my very wonderful MFM medical license at risk. I wanted my son to have as peaceful of a death as possible. I wanted him to be warm, to hear my beating heart, and to be held inside of me as his little life slipped away. He was my son and I was his mother. If this was my one and only chance to protect him, so be it.

I told my OB that I refused a cesarean. She agreed that a caesarian was not medically necessary and that, ultimately, the outcome for my son would be the same. Many hours of brainstorming, pleading and phone calls followed. I was on my hospital bed. Eventually, the hospital agreed that if my case was reviewed by another MFM from a separate practice - I was interviewed by another doctor - and the doctors agreed, I could be permitted the induction. 14 hours after that morning's ultrasound, the induction began. I quickly had to change my mindset, from fighting with the bureaucracy to preparing myself mentally and emotionally to do what I was about to do. I just prayed and prayed and prayed that I would be brave enough to do it. I labored for 26 hours and he came out dead. He was so incredible to look at. I was just overwhelmed with this duality of meeting my baby for the first time he was finally here but he was also gone.

I kept his body in my hospital room with me for 2 nights. On the third day, when the funeral director came to pick him up, I had to hand him over to him. It was honestly one of the most painful experiences of my life. Much of what happened to me and to my son was nobody's fault. God's will is a mystery and Mother Nature can be cruel, but it was made so much worse by the politics that surround pregnancy. My son's name was Alex. He was so wanted and so loved. Being his mother is one of the greatest honors of my life, and I will mourn him until the day I die.