

## *Getting Ready*

When I finally told my parents I was pregnant, I wept.

Growing up with two strict, Catholic parents (an Italian Catholic on my dad's side and an Irish Catholic on my mom's; they were *hardcore*) I automatically assumed I would no longer be welcome at their dinner table. No 22-year-old daughter of theirs would dare conceive out of wedlock. So, no more lazy Sunday crock pot meals or Christmas feasts. Maybe I could find a cardboard box somewhere warm to raise my illegitimate child. If I hadn't already had a little mound forming, something growing more and more difficult to conceal under Notre Dame hoodies, I think I would have left them in the dark until labor. But it was February, I had conceived in September, and I had to tell them.

They surprised me.

"Are you pregnant?" my mom asked, after a few uncomfortable moments of watching me bawl. I didn't even get the words out, I had just crumpled into tears the moment we sat on my bed so I could "tell her something."

"Yes," I managed. She seemed thoughtful, unperturbed. My surprise almost halted the months of pent-up guilt now manifesting itself in salty droplets.

"Hmm...I thought you were looking a little paunchy." Thanks, Mom. I almost laughed.

"Do you hate me?"

"Hate you? What, did you think we were going to kick you out? Oh, Cara..." Then she put her arm around my shoulder and said, "Let's go tell your dad."

“Eh? Pregnant?” My dad muted the living room TV, leaned back in his rocking recliner.

“Yes. Pregnant,” my mom supplied.

“How far along?”

“Oh, um...” I prevaricated. “Four...four-ish. Months.”

“Ahh.” He appeared to consider it a moment – ramifications, perhaps, maybe statistics of some sort. And then he shrugged, shot me a half-smile and turned the volume back up.

\*

Far from feeling ready, at least now I felt armed. I had my parents’ vow not to disown me, had moved back into their house (it was not difficult to give up residence in a small, poky apartment on the other side of Edinboro, however much I enjoyed the libertine pleasure of coming and going at will) and was on the hunt for a stroller and infant car seat.

The baby’s father, my boyfriend at the time, a porcine binge-drinker still coddled by his mother, who wouldn’t tell *his* parents until a month later, scratched his head in wonder as we made our way up and down rows of over-sized, over-priced Jeep Liberty sport strollers and Graco Quattro Tour Deluxes.

*Go to Babies R Us and pick one out!* John’s mother and grandmother had instructed us. *And then let us know! Our gift to you two!*

We had only just escaped the confusing world of matching nursery décor, moved through nursing pads and lanolin, made a brief cameo in the child gate section.

“I am in Hell,” John said, cheerful. I nodded slowly. Too much. Too much...*shit*, for one little six-pound meatloaf. I fingered a price tag.

“I guess...this one isn’t so bad.”

I thought, *I guess this whole situation could be worse.*

\*

My mom’s best friends and work colleagues from the middle school threw me a beautiful baby shower in April. The snow had melted all away and the roads made my car stutter and gasp through pothole-peppered streets. I was due in less than two months and I could rest my elbows on the firm bubble of my stomach as I drove.

My shower had fallen on the same day as a girlfriend’s bridal shower; I would deliver five days before her wedding in June. She was a virgin bride, full of hope and expectation – marrying her high school sweetheart, moving their newly acquired things into an apartment together, looking forward to the autonomy of married life and adulthood. I tolerated John now and grew uneasy as his acceptance of parenthood progressed much slower than mine.

“Here’s the stroller you picked out!” John’s mom cooed the moment I set foot inside my mother’s friend’s house. It was already assembled, gleaming new and ready to use.

“Wow,” I said. “It’s great.”

“It’s the exact one you picked out!”

“It’s amazing, thank you,” I responded.

“We put it together this morning, oh, I so wanted it to be just there when you walked in!”

“Ah, I can’t wait to use it – ” She beamed and was about to go on, but I pawned her off on one of the few friends of mine whom I had invited. Racheal’s eyes glazed over as she was introduced to every minute working of the new stroller.

I looked around the living room, where the ladies sipped mock mimosas and nibbled on delicate croissant chicken salad sandwiches, twittering about in relaxed conversation. Three spaces, the living room, the dining room and the sun porch, had been arrayed with tables full of light finger foods and beverages, balloons, and blue gift wrapped presents. It was incredible, the most organized, pretty occasion to which I had ever been the guest of honor.

Over the next two or three hours we chatted and played games. Racheal looked relieved when another of our friends, Sarah, appeared while I was opening presents: onesies and bibs, picture books and rattles; afghans, throws, crib sheets and diaper cream. Sarah burst into the room, a stunner: cropped, chic hairstyle, knee-high boots, tight jeans. The teachers of the middle school appeared united in their immediate, ruffled dislike. When I opened her gift, a small box in vibrant wrapping paper, I oohed.

It was a pair of ultra-trendy chandelier earrings, so big they hung down to my collarbone. Sarah knew me to my fingertips; and she was the only person present who hadn't forgotten the woman carrying the child.

"Hmph. *Those* will look great on the baby," I heard someone mutter.

\*

On June 5, 2006, I went into St. Vincent hospital in Erie to induce labor. My most recent doctor's appointment, just four days prior, had shown me to be suitably dilated. At six a.m. a few nurses settled me into a hospital bed and my doctor manually broke my bag of waters with what looked like an elongated spatula (I can assure you, it was as horrific as it sounds). They started an IV drip in my left arm. Whatever was being pumped into my veins, it would eventually bring my squawking infant into the world. The doctor left and one nurse remained.

“Sign here,” she said. She held a pen to me, and a clipboard, three or four papers attached; I signed.

“And here,” she went on, turning the page up and over. I signed. Up and over.

“And the name on the birth certificate.”

I paused at the forest green sheet and the thin line near the top.

John was at my side suddenly, watching. I took the clipboard from the nurse and rested it on my stomach.

*William*, I scrawled. *Suppa*.

“I thought we talked about this,” John said. I looked at him, noticing the perspiration on his forehead. “We’re hyphenating his last name, right? You said you’d do the same with your last name when we...you know.”

As the weeks had gone on, his infantile nonchalance and his self-righteous boozing had painted a picture so bleak there were times I could barely look at him. “*I’m going out – I deserve it – this is my last hurrah before the baby!*” he’d said – over and over again, while I waited up for him, perusing the internet for name meanings and methods the ancients used to predict the sex of the baby. Our child had kicked for the first time when John was out drinking, but I hadn’t bothered to tell him. As the months went on, he’d only begun to sense my tension, chalking it up to hormones gone haywire; now he underestimated my resolve.

Still, I added a small dash and squeezed his last name onto the short line. It was the right thing to do – William should share his father’s surname. But I - I knew then, I would not.

For the next five hours I flipped through a book of crossword puzzles, skimmed over Sudoku. John looked at magazines, and my mom, who took off work, quietly concentrated on her counted cross-stitch. We waited. It was monotonous until about noon, when the contractions, which had been distant and vague, became stronger and harder.

*“Epidural,”* I screeched. *“Now.”* There was a flurry of activity as the nurses fetched the anesthesiologist.

“Hiya!” he said when he entered. He grinned, propped his foot up on a chair and read my chart. “I’m about to become your favorite person!”

I was hunched over as he the injected needles into my spine, like he was threading my tailbone. I barely felt them, but my mom, watching, looked as though she was going to throw up.

Hours later, as the pressure became intolerable, I could tell from the look on one of the nurse’s faces that it was almost time. Another doctor, a different one, checked my dilation.

“Oh,” she said. She looked up at me. “C-section, okay? Your baby’s head is *not* fitting. All right? We’re going to use your epidural site to get you nice and numbed up.”

*That’s not necessary,* I thought. I was completely unfeeling from the waist down as they wheeled me toward the OR.

A nurse gave me an encouraging smile. “You ready for this?”

I was dazed. “I don’t know.”

“Get ready,” she said.

*I’m trying,* I thought.