

Well Baby Check

Category: Stories

written by Joanne Wilkinson | April 13, 2008

I get to clinic early today, undaunted by the double- and triple-bookings in my schedule. "We have a baby coming today," I tell the medical assistant. "A new baby. Six pounds. Born yesterday. Bring him right back when he comes."

I miss seeing newborns in the office; I had a lot of babies in my practice as a resident. Now I see a patient population that is half hardscrabble Spanish-speaking diabetics with back pain, and half blonde twenty-three-year-old medical students on the pill. I haven't seen a newborn in two years. But last year, one of the medical students had the kind of textbook pregnancy that twenty-four-year-olds can have sometimes. It was a marked contrast from the medicated, bed-resting, amniocentesis-punctuated pregnancies my forty-year-old friends have endured this year, and I am eager to see her, and her baby boy.

This fall my husband and I decided to adopt. We had discovered, through "pre-conception" blood work, the presence of a factor that could increase my risk for blood clots. That alone might not have deterred me, but there were other, scarier factors: My mother's early death from a heart attack when I was nine. The fact that I have hypertension, just as she did. The likelihood that her heart attack was caused by a similar blood clot, and the fact that I am exactly the same age that she was when she died. In the end, we decided not to tempt fate, and bought a book about China instead.

The torrent of unwanted advice we received from our peers was astounding. Co-workers and acquaintances who barely knew my husband's name nevertheless felt free to offer their opinions. I would "regret" not having "my own," I was told. I simply couldn't imagine, they said, how wonderful it felt to have "your own." I would always wonder what if, they told me, then made the ominous Adoption Pronouncement: "You just don't know what you're getting that way." I would watch these people's mouths move as they spoke, recalling my tenth year, when teachers and grown-ups would tell me that surely my mother couldn't be dead. "Oh, you mean your grandmother," more than one said when I tried to explain. I would blink silently back, amazed at the conviction of a person who could tell a ten-year-old that she was mistaken about whether her parents were alive.

I stopped trying to explain myself to these people, but I knew they inhabited a different reality than mine. In their world, the sun shone brightly and little girls sometimes get confused about why their mother hadn't contributed to the bake sale. I know the people trying to tell me when and how I should become a mother are in a parallel universe, wondering why my planet can't get with the program and join their orbit. I can't explain to them that I link becoming a mother with dying, that I would rather never have children than have a child like me, left alone as a little girl. I know what I know, but still they are able to make me feel bad, and when they open their mouths to give the advice, I feel myself shrink inside.

I can't find the strength to deal with these people, but I can tell others to do it: Megan, the medical student, and her husband e-mailed me last month about circumcising their baby. They had thought about it and decided they were interested, but the midwife at their birthing center had spent fifteen minutes telling them how unnatural it was, and now they were unsure. I told them what I always tell my new parents. "This is your kid. You get to decide. You're the mommy and daddy now. Don't let anyone give you any shit." As I press send, I realize that I am going to be a mommy someday, and I need to start listening to my own advice.

Here come the mommy and daddy now. Their six-pound day-old infant looks like a compact burrito with a head of wild dark hair. He's calm, and sucks my pinky finger furiously when I listen to his lungs. His little legs bicycle aimlessly in the air as I examine his tummy. I have been gradually preparing myself for what my childbirth will be like—not the drumbeat of the fetal monitor, nor the pushing, the crying, the new life slick with blood and fluid, but instead the paperwork, the plane flight, the strange country smelling of spices we don't use, and the weight in my arms of a six-month-old, a nine-month-old, a bigger kid who doesn't look like me. I think of my child, my future abstract baby, and already feel sad that I will not have the chance to hold her during the first day in the world. I cup my hands behind this baby's fragile skull, glad for the chance, at least, to hold this one. Then I hand Megan's little bundle back to her and tell her what she already knows, that he is perfect.