

## Beautiful Weeds

Summer 2013 flowed with joyful family time—backyard obstacle courses, movie nights, golden beach days, and Sunday brunches. I didn't expect it to end in a hospital, with my sister Deena laying unresponsive in shavasana (the only yoga pose I enjoy), and me fixated on the slow rise and fall of her chest. While insistent voices page doctors, medical devices beep and whir, an unsettled feeling vibrates through my body. Tears slip quickly down my face as I realize the terror gluing me to my sister's bedside mimics the fear that enveloped my third, very unplanned pregnancy.

Thirty-eight days after my fortieth birthday, poised to brush my teeth with my eyes closed like every morning, a raw, rumbling spasm bubbled up in my throat, and I knew I was pregnant. With knees matching the shudder of my electric toothbrush, I leaned close to the bathroom mirror and studied myself as if expecting to find evidence of conception tattooed somewhere on my body. A blizzard of toothpaste sprayed my panicked reflection, and I whispered—*omigod, omigod, omigod*.

My dad, an avid gardener and self-proclaimed optimist, preaches that seeds sprout where they land—whether they grow into flowers or weeds is a matter of perspective. I didn't know how I felt about the tiny seed germinating inside me, but I was sure my husband Zach would want to yank it from its roots with a firm hand.

On our eighth date, a blue-sky-eyed toddler, head full of untamed platinum spirals, stood in the booth attached to ours and peered at me with staring contest intensity rather than at his chaotic family behind him. A sullen older boy, head barely above the tabletop, faced me as well. With arms folded across his chest he turned away from the chicken finger his mother offered

with one hand, while her other patted the back of a wailing infant squiggling under a pink flowered blanket. I focused a casual gaze over Zach's head, as part of the mother's left breast spilled out from a bra that seemed designed for military action with its panels, straps, snaps, and flaps.

Yay for them, I thought, two boys and a girl—the perfect family.

With ketchup smeared like war paint on each cherubic cheek, and french fries squeezed into one fist, “our” toddler rocked against the back of the booth. Zach shifted in his seat, trying not to rock along with our little intruder. When the father turned around and chastised his son to sit still and use “restaurant manners,” he offered Zach a tired, apologetic smile, which Zach returned with a grimace, although a kind one.

Brushing a fallen fry from his shoulder, Zach's face lit up as he espoused the merits of one-child families. “I loved it,” he said, “sandwiched between my parents, all the attention on me, I was the sun to their universe. No one ever pushed me towards the “kid's table.” My parents took me everywhere, and we were, still are, a powerful team of three.”

Then it was my turn to grimace, and I didn't do it kindly. I couldn't imagine my life without my sister. I told him a one-child family was a deal-breaker for me. To his credit, as I listed all the benefits inherent in my sibling relationship (best friend, confidant, partner, someone who understood me with instincts only a person who grew alongside me could have), he teased, “Isn't that the job of a significant other?”

While I entertained the impulse to run from the restaurant and end our burgeoning relationship right there, Zach reached over the detritus of our shared chicken nachos, his fingers drew soft circles on the top of my hand, and I melted.

“Okay,” he said, “two kids, but I draw the line there. And no cats—selfish sneaky

beasts—plus, I’m allergic, so that’s *my* deal breaker.”

Soon after our wedding, dreaming of miniature humans, each a miraculous mix of our genes, I tucked my birth control pills into a drawer and vowed never to swallow one again. After bringing a healthy baby boy and then a girl into our world, when anyone asked if we were “done,” Zach responded, “abso-fucking-lutely” (unless it was our parents asking).

There was no mistaking the nervous fear in Zach’s eyes in that restaurant years ago as we watched that raucous family of five leave with their messy mountain of child “stuff” (double stroller, bulky animal print cover for the highchair the toddler never used, strappy baby carrier the father wore, totes with diapers peeking out the tops that I imagined also contained a host of magical items meant to distract until food arrived).

I saw their mess as they crowded by our table in a tangle of exhaustion, but I also saw strength and beauty in the way they belonged to each other. The toddler’s greasy fingers disappeared in his dad’s enormous hand, their matching dimples, his brother wrapped around his mom’s waist, with her palm gliding over his head as she smoothed his hair.

Although Zach loved our two children, loved our family in fierce ways he never thought he could, I knew he couldn’t imagine adding to it. In my pregnancy with our daughter, I developed placenta previa, and since I would most likely need a c-section, Zach suggested I get my tubes tied. “You’ll be right there on the operating table anyway,” he argued. But it was something I couldn’t consider.

At thirty-four and a half, I had barely avoided the label “geriatric pregnancy” when I had our son, Sam. Two years later, when Lily was born, despite the advance pregnancy classification gracing my medical chart, I didn’t feel old. I felt blessed. Too many of our friends struggled to conceive, or suffered miscarriages, IVF, or the pot-holed filled road to adoption or surrogacy.

Some nights, when I tucked my children in bed like tightly rolled burritos, I contemplated having another child. It was a guilty pleasure, something I didn't expect to happen. I knew Zach didn't want more children, and he is my partner. Partners compromise. He already had.

Tubal ligation, though, was not part of any compromise I could make. *That* would tempt fate. The ember of fear hiding in the dark corners of my mind wouldn't allow it. What if something happened to Sam or Lily? Of course, it's not like getting a puppy after the family dog heads to the rainbow bridge, but if, God forbid, I lost a child, I thought I might want another one. No permanent sterilization for me, thanks.

So, Zach and I made a deal. We would be careful. I didn't want unnecessary hormones coursing through my body, so I refused to go back on birth control pills. Zach had benign, but chronic testicular pain that made him a poor candidate for a vasectomy (he put me on the phone with the doctor, so I would believe him), so that wasn't an option. Our deal was a gamble we were both willing to make, a compromise. We used contraceptive film and condoms, and then as I got closer to forty, we went "old school," and Zach pulled out. Sometimes, I wished he would forget. He never did. He tracked my period and the "safest" times of the month better than I did.

The other part of our deal, the part that fueled my dream of expanding our family, was that if I got pregnant before forty, we would keep the baby. If I got pregnant after forty, we would—not. And we *were* careful.

Standing at my bathroom sink with legs trembling under the weight of the third child my female sixth sense confirmed had already gotten comfortable in my uterus, I sat down on the cold tile, pressed my back against a cabinet, grabbed my cell phone and called my sister. When her voice hit my ear, tears rushed down my cheeks.

"Deena, I'm pregnant," I croaked through snot bubbling from my nose.

“It’s a little early for anger, Sarah. What are you so pissed off at?”

“Pregnant, pregnant...I’m pregnant!”

She cackled so loudly I had to push the phone away from my face. When her giggles subsided, I spoke into the phone again.

“Deena, I’m serious.”

“I thought you said ‘indignant.’ I was ready to tease you for spouting SAT vocab words. Wait...pregnant, really?”

I told her about the toothbrush, always a first sign of pregnancy for me, and reminded her of my deal with Zach.

“I’m forty!” I screamed.

“Calm down. Where is everyone? Did you take a test? Go pee on a stick and call me back.”

“I don’t have a test. Obviously, I wasn’t expecting this. Zach’s at work and the kids are watching TV. I don’t need a test. I know I’m pregnant. Omigod, how am I going to tell Zach?”

“Okay. You’re probably not pregnant. Everything changes when you’re forty. I’ve told you that. I’ll pick up a test and be over in thirty minutes.”

Thirty-three minutes later, two familiar pink lines blurred into focus and leered at me through the test window—I was pregnant. We must have conceived during the month-long celebration prior to my fortieth birthday—a month filled with lunches, girl’s nights, family dinners and, of course, a private lunch and night out with my sister. The weekend *before* my birthday, Zach surprised me and left our kids with my parents. We spent forty-eight blissful and evidently careless hours alone in a hotel room by the beach. Zach was going to be disappointed in his menstruation record keeping skills.

Deena put her hand on mine and exhaled a long breath. “Hmmm. You know your body, don’t you? Okay, let’s take a minute.”

She closed her eyes, so I closed mine. She sat up very straight and took another breath, in through her nose and out through her mouth. I did the same. She squeezed my hand, “yoga breaths help, right? Wanna try some?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fiiiiine.”

Deena loves yoga. I hate it. Everything that she likes about it, I hate. The slowness of the movements, the breathing, the poses. When Deena got addicted to hot yoga, I tried it and nearly fainted. I couldn’t understand how people twisted themselves into elegant positions as I choked and gasped for air.

That morning, though, with the blaring pink lines of a positive pregnancy test emblazoned on my brain, I needed to bury my emotions and feel something else. So, we got up off the bed and right there in my bedroom, following Deena’s movements, I did me some yoga.

“Can we raise the air?” Deena asked.

I smirked. “Don’t push it.”

I’m not sure how long it was, but when Lily walked in the room, dragging her raggedy “baby stella” doll behind her, we were bent forward, butts high in the air, heads face down aligned with our arms, and our bodies forming an upside-down letter “V.”

“Mama lose something under bed? Aunt Deena helping? I help?” Lily asked us.

I collapsed onto the billowy cloud comfort of my duvet and laughed. “No sweetie, Aunt Deena and I are exercising.”

“Downward-facing dog, Lily, wanna try?” Deena grabbed Lily and lifted her up to the ceiling, swirling her around. Lily didn’t know what we were laughing about, and suddenly only

my daughter's electric smile and my sister's childlike giggles seemed to matter. I wanted to wrap myself up in that bubble of joy forever.

Deena stayed for a few hours. We cuddled up on the couch with Sam and Lily and lost ourselves in their newest television obsession, *Blues Clues*. I often woke up singing, "You know, with me and you, and my dog Blue, we can do anything that we wanna do." Right then, I didn't know what I wanted to do.

It took me three days to tell Zach.

The first day, I imagined what it would be like if I chose not to have the baby, if I had an abortion. I had friends who'd had them. One told me, since her doctor didn't do the procedure in his office, she had to go to a clinic and walk past protestors, which made an already stressful situation unnerving and humiliating. And that was 2003, not 1963. Would I have to walk through a picket line? And with a baby, part me/part Zach, could I extinguish it as easily as I thought?

The next day, I considered having the baby. Visions of tiny fingers and toes and miniature pajamas and socks turned my mouth up into giddy smiles. When Lily was born, I savored every moment with her, crying with irrational emotion at every milestone she met because I was sure she was my last. What would it be like to carry a child inside me again? Nauseous, swollen, a lost sense of balance—I hadn't liked it much the first two times. Would this be different? Would my age affect the pregnancy? Questions buzzed around in my brain.

Then, on the third day after the pregnancy test, when my eyes pooled every time I laid a hand on my belly, I realized I wanted the baby. He or she had squeaked by my self-imposed deadline. I had *conceived* before I turned forty. I wanted this baby and the thought of telling my husband forced everything in my stomach to creep up towards my throat in slow waves of nausea.

When I found out I was pregnant with Sam, I made Zach's favorite dinner (Eggplant Parmesan) and his favorite dessert (peach cobbler with homemade vanilla ice cream with a hint of cinnamon) and as he dragged a spoonful of sugary-spiced warm fruit through melting ice cream, I dangled a gift bag in front of my heart.

"What's that?" he asked. "It's not my birthday."

"Who says it's for you? Just open it."

His playful snicker reminded me of how well we knew each other. He was thinking I had once again bought him something he didn't need. This is a guy who still wore fifteen-year-old raggedy college fraternity t-shirts, not just to wash the car or work in the garage. And, when I suggest he puts on a "good" t-shirt before we head out for dinner, he thinks those *are* his good t-shirts. "Good" t-shirts do not have graphics on them. So, his favorite dinner, a back massage, spontaneous sex—things that did not fit inside a gift bag—those were Zach's gifts of choice.

The night I told him I was pregnant with Sam, he opened the gift bag and pulled out a newborn onesie with "Little Steelers Fan" printed across the chest.

"Cute...um, who's having a boy?" he asked.

"What makes you assume that's for a boy? I hope you don't plan on slapping gender stereotypes on *our* baby if it's a girl. I mean really, I'm surprised at you, girls are football fans too..."

"Like you wouldn't dress a baby girl in pink and smack bows on her bald head as soon as she came out. I'm just saying...wait, what? Are you? Are we? Honey, get over here!"

I curled up in his lap, and we held each other. My jack-hammering heart slowed as Zach started a conversation with the gathering cells in my uterus. "Helloooooo in there," he bellowed. We called my parents and his parents, and then Deena and her husband, Joel.



Then, when I found out I was pregnant with Lily, I got my boys matching “Best Brother in the Universe” and “Best Dad in the Universe” t-shirts and gave them their shirts after a make your own pizza night, Sam’s favorite. Again, together, we called my parents and Zach’s parents and Deena and Joel. Sharing good news satisfied like a dark chocolate peanut butter cup melting on my tongue. Content. Exciting. Delicious.

An unplanned pregnancy did not seem as celebratory. A t-shirt wouldn’t suffice. Maybe I could tell him in a greeting card. I had the perfect one tucked away in a drawer. It pictured a mom and a dad sleeping in a king-sized bed, a toddler between them, a bassinet pushed up against the mattress and a dog asleep at the foot of the bed. The dad’s leg hung off the side as he squished to the very edge and a sleepy child stood tugging at her Daddy’s sleeve. The thought bubble above her head read: “Is there room for one more?” But leaving a card on Zach’s desk wasn’t right. If it was nearer to Halloween, I thought about stuffing a pillow under a t-shirt with “OOPS” written on it and gauging his reaction.

That night, with zero courage to say the words aloud, I waited until Zach was brushing his teeth. I sidled over to my side of the bathroom, took a deep breath, loaded my toothbrush, and shoved it into my mouth. I gagged three times before he noticed.

He turned from his sink to mine, still with his mouth full of toothpaste and, in a language I immediately understood, he asked, “gid gu gus gag on gor goothgush?” Yes. I had just gagged on my toothbrush. After lifting a handful of water to my mouth, gargling, and rinsing, I gave him a tiny smile and a, “maybe?”

Zach wiped his mouth on a towel. “Fuck, are you serious? Are you ok? Oh my god, you’re forty.” He sat on the steps leading to our roman bathtub and hung his head in his hands. I’m not sure he realized I was next to him until I nudged his knee with mine.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Took a test.”

“When?”

“Three days ago, I, I...didn’t know how to tell you. I haven’t seen a doctor yet.”

“But the test was positive?”

“Yup.”

“And you’ve been gagging when you brush your teeth for the past three days?”

“Yup.”

Zach’s head fell back into his hands. He alternated between looking down at his feet and back at me. Too afraid to ask what he was thinking, I returned his stare with an innocuous look of my own. It seemed like hours, but after a few minutes, he took my hand.

“Make a doctor’s appointment. Let’s see what Dr. Levine says before we talk about what we want. Okay?” He gave me a small smile. “You’re old...we don’t want it to have two heads, right?”

Zach was three years younger than me and never let me forget it. His joke calmed the raging river inside me to a tranquil, albeit not still, lake. We would have some waves to manage, but if Dr. Levine said I was healthy, and the risks were manageable, maybe we would have our third child in the spring.

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I feigned ambivalence as I reclined on the exam table in my gynecologist’s office, but betrayed by my body, sweat dotted my forehead and droplets gathered insolently at the base of my neck.

Dr. Levine said I was five weeks pregnant and, because I was forty, she recommended we have an amniocentesis. Zach and I had fought about having that test when I was pregnant with Lily. The risk of miscarriage terrified me, and we didn't do it. Over the next few days, Zach and I repeated the same heated arguments from years earlier.

“Sarah, I know the risks. I don't care. If there's a way to make sure we can bring a healthy baby into this world, I'd like to do it.”

Every word stung.

“Are you saying you couldn't love a baby with Down's Syndrome? That's ridiculous. Deena had Becca at forty, she didn't have an amnio. Everything was fine. If there were other risk factors, maybe...but it's just my age. I don't even know if I could...”

“I'm saying we have a choice, and I want to take it. Deena and Joel both agreed not to have the amnio, they never even considered it. And it's not just Down's they test for. I know this is hard for you. It's not easy for me either, but Sarah, I want us to take the test and think about terminating the pregnancy if the fetus shows major abnormalities.”

Ouch. When Zach called our baby a “fetus,” I knew I was in trouble. I wanted the baby more than Zach did. And I get it, I was forty. It was a high-risk pregnancy. Although riddled with anger, fear, and disappointment, I took the test—I didn't know what I would do with the results.

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Classical music played softly in the exam room as they used a large needle to withdraw amniotic fluid from my fourteen-week-pregnant belly. I held my breath. Zach held my hand. Knowing how strongly my sister would be against it, I swore our mom to secrecy, and she kept Sam and Lily with her for the day. When we got home, as Zach settled me in for doctor prescribed bed rest, I needed to hear my sister's voice. She picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, how was your doctor's appointment? Is it a boy or girl? Why didn't you call me on the way home? I'm dying over here.”

After a deep inhale, I exhaled and blurted out, “I had an amnio. We're waiting for the test results before we find out the gender.”

Her sharp breath blew in my ear. “I'm coming over.”

Forty-five minutes later, she stood at the door to my bedroom with my second favorite grilled cheese sandwich, cheddar-apple-mustard on pumpernickel (my top choice of brie-apple-fig was not an option during pregnancy). Hot deliciousness wafted through the greasy bag as she held it out to me.

“Early lunch?” Deena asked lightly.

I snatched the bag from her, stuck my head in, and inhaled. Deena stared at me with a satisfied smile. After my first bite, with cheese stretching out like taffy, she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Mmmm,” I replied with my mouth full.

“I can't believe you kept this from me. I thought we could tell each other anything...even if we don't agree. We're sisters. I support you, no matter what. Don't you know that?”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as Deena handed me a napkin.

“I know that, theoretically. But this was a hard decision. One I know you don't agree with and one we needed to make on our own. Honestly, I was afraid you would talk me out of it. And I'm ok, really—Zach and I have been back and forth over this for weeks. We are ready to deal with the results, no matter what they are.”

“Yeah, I don't know if I believe that,” Deena said, her face tinted with worry. But then, with a smile in her eyes and lips pursed together, for me, she put the thought of anyone aborting

a pregnancy momentarily out of her mind. “I *can* be pretty persuasive. Listen, while you wait for the results, talk to me, okay? Whatever happens, I’m here for you. Did it hurt? How long do you have to rest?”

After I answered her questions, we snuggled under the covers and watched *Friends* reruns. I fell asleep and when I woke, a vase of fresh daisies brightened my room. Deena was gone. Although strongly opposed to having an amniocentesis or an abortion, my sister would love and support me, anyway.

A few days before the test results came back, with a worried, clenched jaw, I sat in my favorite Adirondack chair under a tree in our backyard and watched our dog Spence sniff around the yard for the perfect place to poop. My hand warmed against a stomach that felt impossibly swollen and when Spence finally chose a spot, I spied a vine with delicate yellow flowers and bright orange prickly, bulbous fruit growing along our fence. Not having seen it before, I took a picture with my phone and texted it to my dad: *this is pretty what is it?* My dad wrote back: *its an invasive weed get rid of it.*

The thought of ripping it from where it grew so successfully immediately sent my hand back to my stomach. As I stared at that beautiful, vibrant weed artfully weaving its way through most of my fence, in that second, like a goldfish moving against the side of a bagful of water, a swish of movement erupted in my belly. With that “invasive weed” (the balsam pear) blooming in my yard and the beginning of life squirming inside me, a new sense that everything was just as it was supposed to be rippled through me.

I never cut down that vine—it helped me think of the baby inside me as a beautiful weed. When the test results came in, we learned we were expecting a boy with more than a ninety-nine percent chance of not having genetic or chromosomal abnormalities. He was unplanned. We

were unprepared. I struggled with choices I believed were my right to make and from the second he was born, I couldn't imagine our lives without the little boy we named Caleb.

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Now, almost five years later, with my sister in the hospital recovering from emergency brain surgery, I'm reminded of the hurricane of anxiety that swirled inside me when my toothbrush revealed the pregnancy and as we waited for the amniocentesis results. Fear, vulnerable, powerless—everything I felt since I answered my phone this morning and heard: “Deena had a stroke. We almost lost her.”

I am fidgety and exhausted and breathless. I arrive home from the hospital, zombi-like, shout hello to my family, and go upstairs to change. Caleb finds me, sniffing and curled up in my grandmother's yellow, velvet, curved swivel chair. Half-dressed, wearing a t-shirt and underwear, I stare out the window. He climbs into my lap and lays his head against my chest. “I brought you a hug, and my night-vision binoculars. Who are you spying on?” he asks.

“Um, fire-flies sweetie. I'd love that hug. Thank you.” I wipe tears away with quick fingers and hold Caleb longer than he usually lets me. We sit for a few minutes, me gaining strength from his touch and enjoying the sweet smell of his coconut shampoo, Caleb searching the inky night for fireflies. The growl of my stomach breaks the deliciousness of the silence.

“Why don't we go have dinner with everyone?”

“I already ate. Can I have an ice cream sammich?”

“Sure.”

Caleb asks for an ice cream sandwich every day. After such an abnormal day, the normalcy of his question makes me smile. I shimmy into a pair of black leggings. My “mom uniform,” according to Lily. Caleb holds my hand, and we walk downstairs.

“Daddy says Aunt Deena is sick, and an ambulance took her to the doctor. Is she better now? It probably went really, really fast. I want to ride in an ambulance and hear the siren. I don’t like loud noises, but I could do it. I’m very brave.”

“Yes, sweetie, you are brave. Aunt Deena has wonderful doctors. I think she’s...”

Before I finish my thought, we are downstairs. Caleb lets go of my hand and runs to Zach to request his ice cream sandwich.

I unwrap the plate of food Zach kept warm for me and think about the meaning of Caleb’s name: whole-hearted, brave, bold, and faithful. At four years old, he is all those things, things I’m not sure I can be.

Deena warns me I too often try to carry the weight of the world, that I need to remember I only have two hands. She’s wrong. With her by my side, I had four, and together we tackled obstacles and accomplished everything we ever wanted. Now, drowning in fear, I am lost without her counsel, encouragement, and warm hand in mine.

Everyone tiptoes past me as I sit at our kitchen table. Zach’s firm hand squeezes my shoulder before he heads to the den, where our extended family gathers to support each other. I hear the hushed voices of Deena’s kids playing with mine. I push food around my plate, chew and swallow, because I know I need to, not because I can taste it.

What would Deena say? When I told her I thought of Caleb like that vibrant weed growing freely along my fence, she said she’d rather be a ragwort weed swaying its bright yellow flowers in a field off the side of a road, than a rose fenced inside a manicured garden.

I close my eyes and listen for the sound of her voice. *Accept reality. Move forward. Focus on what you can do.* Okay, Deena, I hear you. I can’t control what happened, but I can choose to take deep breaths and learn and grow while I do everything possible to help you

recover and become whatever beautiful weed you're meant to be. That is my choice. Deena would say, "Be grateful you get to make it."

I am.