

## THE DO-OVER

When Lauren got the news, she was watching a *Seinfeld* rerun. This was something she did every evening at 6, or 9:30 if she got home late. She had seen all the episodes so many times that she could repeat long sequences of dialogue word for word, and sometimes did, even when there was no one there to listen. When she asked herself why she continued to watch, the only answer she could come up with sounded so idiotic that she would never repeat it to anyone: She had come to think of Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer as her friends.

Now, in a coincidence that only struck her days later, it was the episode where Jerry fixes Elaine up with a comedian friend of his. When he asks her how the date went, Elaine pauses, then says, "He took it out."

Jerry: "What do you mean, he took it out?"

Elaine: "He took" -- long pause -- "it out!" Lauren thought, not for the first time, how Pinteresque *Seinfeld* was.

It was at this moment that Josh came out of his room. Josh: 23, 6-foot-2, good-looking, unmedicated ADHD sufferer, college dropout, fan of mountain bikes and Friday Night Smackdown, now working as a campaign assistant at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago after spending a few years taking random classes at community colleges and delivering pizza. A cousin of Lauren's had pulled some strings to get him this job. He had to wear a suit and tie to work for the first time in his life.

Lauren was hoping the job would be the beginning of a career as a Jewish communal professional, whatever that was exactly. Anyway she figured it was better than the Gap, where his two best friends had ended up.

He perched on the exercycle near the couch where Lauren was sitting but didn't pedal.

"... need to talk to you, Mom," he semi-muttered. Lauren inclined her head toward him.

"Uh, there was this girl I met," Josh said. "At that party when Scott's brother graduated? Remember when I went to that?"

He was probably going to ask her for money so he could take this girl somewhere, Lauren thought. It was true he didn't make much -- it was why he was still living at home -- and she was keeping her PR and marketing company afloat, even though when the economy went bad she had to let one of her three employees go and was now relying heavily on an unpaid and not highly competent intern. Josh didn't ask her for much. She could give him what he needed.

But Josh said, "Well, she's pregnant," his voice dropping as if he were afraid to be overheard. "And she says I'm the father."

A jolt ran through Lauren's body and at the same time as she was feeling like she had gotten an electric shock she was thinking what a cliché it was to feel like she had gotten an electric shock. She picked up the remote from the arm of the couch and pushed the mute button. Was this really happening?

"What?" she said. Brilliant, Lauren.

"She says she's pregnant, and the baby is mine."

“I heard you. I’m trying to think. Who is this girl? How long ago was that party? Did you see her again, or did she just get in touch with you out of the blue, or what?”

“Her name is Tami. With an ‘i.’ That’s what she always says. ‘Tami, one i, one m.’ Stupid.”

“So we know how she spells her name,” Lauren said. “Good start.”

“Mom.”

“OK, I’m sorry.” What did one do now? This might be easier if it were Josh’s sister who was pregnant, an eventuality every parent of a girl prepares for. But it was doubtful that would happen with Allison. She was a Ph.D. candidate in Gender Studies at NYU and the most together person Lauren knew. Lauren had tried to talk to her about birth control when Allison was a junior in high school, and she had said, “Mom, I know all about it. In fact I’ve already been to the gynecologist. Your gynecologist. She was very nice.” The subject never came up again.

Now Lauren turned the TV off entirely and said, “Well, I just don’t know what to say. Is this Tami -- is she, I mean, your girlfriend? Do you have a *relationship* with her, or --”

“*No*, she’s not my girlfriend,” Josh said, sounding offended. “I only saw her a couple of times.” Slept with her you mean, Lauren thought. Always a comfortable notion when it concerns your child.

Josh started pedaling the exercycle. “So, I mean, what are you going to do? What is *she* going to do?” Lauren said. God, what if he got married to this little Tami? They would live with her, in her two-bedroom condo, along with the smelly, noisy baby. Her

cat would hate the baby. Tami would work at McDonald's to help make ends meet.

Things like this had happened to some of her friends' children.

"How old is she?" Lauren asked. Then it came out of her mouth without her even willing it: "Is she Jewish?"

"God, you sound like Grammy," Josh said. Yes, she did, she knew she did. "I'm sure she's not Jewish, and I don't know how old she is. She's in college. Loyola."

Well, college, that was something, Lauren thought.

"She doesn't even know if she's going to have it or not," Josh said.

"How would you feel about that? If she didn't have it?"

"I don't know," Josh said. "What are you, my shrink? You sound like a shrink." He didn't have a shrink, although maybe he should.

"Did you tell your father about this?" Lauren's ex-husband lived in California, where he worked on an organic farm.

"No. Why would I tell him?" Josh got up with a disgusted look and went into the kitchen, then came back eating an apple and went into his room.

"Let me know what's happening!" Lauren called after him, hearing the note of desperation in her voice. "Communicate with me! Communicate!"

"Yeah," Josh called out from behind his closed door.

A week went by with no more said on the subject. Lauren was determined not to ask. Then Josh called her at work. The receptionist announced "Lauren, it's Josh" in her

annoying little-girl voice over the intercom, even though her desk was right outside Lauren's office.

Josh was walking to a Panera Bread for lunch. He said, "Hey Mom. Remember that girl I was telling you about? Tami?"

No, I've forgotten all about her. Lauren stifled the urge to say it.

"Well, she wants to have the baby. She goes to a Catholic school, even though she's not Catholic." His phone cut out momentarily before Lauren could comment on this piece of news. Then it came back.

"But she doesn't want to keep it. She wants to, like, give it to me. To us."

Lauren took a ruler from her desk drawer and pushed her office door closed with it, which she could do without getting up. "What?" This time she really didn't think she had heard him right.

"She wants to have it, but she doesn't want to keep it, because she says it would interfere with her career."

"What *is* her career?" And exactly what is the relevance of that, Lauren?

"I don't know. She's majoring in marketing or something. Hey, maybe she could work for you someday."

"Maybe." Supposed to be sarcasm, although Lauren didn't feel sure of anything any more.

Josh stopped talking; there was a fire engine wailing behind him. Lauren said, "So how would this work exactly? What do you mean, she would give the baby to you?"

"She thought maybe *you* would want it. Like, to raise. Because it would be your grandchild."

“Why would she think that? She doesn’t know anything about me.”

“She knows I have a mother,” Josh said. “Her mother is dead or something.”

“God, Josh, didn’t you use anything? Any protection?”

“She said *she* was.”

Lauren didn’t say anything, and finally Josh said he had to go, he was at the restaurant and wanted to order. Lauren didn’t open her office door but sat at her desk for a while, until she got another call. When she was done with it she decided she would not think about the baby thing right now. She wouldn’t tell anybody. She had a big job coming up for a client she had worked very hard to get and wanted to give it her undivided attention. Besides, Josh had told her Tami was only a few months along, wasn’t even showing yet (she had to explain to him what showing meant). There was time.

She managed to keep this resolve for the rest of the workday, but on the way home, on the El, she started feeling peculiar. It was one of those freakishly warm November days Chicago gets every once in a while. It felt like spring but it was already almost dark by five, and at six, when Lauren left the office, night had come full on. She thought it could be this dislocation of season and weather that was making her feel spacey as the Red Line clattered along, but by the time it stopped with a dispiriting sigh between stations, just before Addison, she realized she had felt this way once before.

A blaring metallic announcement came on --“Attention passengers. We are temporarily delayed waiting for signal clearance ahead. We will be moving again in just a few minutes” -- and she remembered when.

It was a surprise when Lauren found out she was pregnant with Allison. She and Evan weren't married yet but were living together. She was on the pill but sometimes forgot to take it when she was stoned. When the doctor told her she was pregnant (home pregnancy tests were just coming on the market and were unreliable) and gave her a prescription for prenatal vitamins she felt blank at first, numb -- the way she was feeling earlier today, in fact.

Then -- and 25 years later she could still feel the sensation in her body -- as she was going down in the elevator in her office building it hit her. She was going to have a baby. She could almost feel herself floating away. Waves of something she couldn't name -- joy? -- were bombarding her. She gave up smoking pot that day. She never had a minute of morning sickness.

Now, as the El got moving again, she had a sliver of the same transcendent sensation. A baby. Immediately she decided she needed to give herself a good talking-to: Are you crazy? What do you want with a *baby*, for God sake? Do you have any idea, yada, yada, yada? Yet by the time she got home it was inescapable. She wanted the child.

The first person she mentioned it to was Allison. Her reaction was predictable. Josh was an idiot for not using protection and (this in a scream) Lauren was a bigger one for even considering adopting the unfortunate result. Tami was the innocent victim, according to Allison. The sensible thing for her to do would be to have an abortion, only Josh and Lauren were being enablers by offering to take the baby. But then what could you expect in a patriarchal society?

When Lauren said that Tami had specifically said she didn't want an abortion, Allison exclaimed that that was obviously due to brainwashing at Loyola, which was

after all a Catholic school. They had probably gotten some priest to talk to her, and most priests were criminals as everyone knew.

Finally she asked Lauren, “What the hell do you want with a baby, anyway?”

Lauren already had an answer but she wasn’t sure she was going to share it with anyone. But when Allison asked her so directly, she blurted it out.

“I guess so I could raise a child without making all the mistakes I made with you kids.”

“What mistakes? You mean like having Josh?”

“Very funny.”

“What mistakes?” Allison pressed. But Lauren gave her a vague answer and hung up. Then she sat on the couch for a while thinking about the mistakes. There were so many of them. Not having enough money to send her kids to a private school, as her own parents had done, instead letting them go to the crappy local public schools. Giving them Kraft Macaroni & Cheese for too many meals. Allowing Allison to stop taking piano lessons just because she didn’t like to practice. Letting Josh have Captain Crunch for breakfast. Too much TV. Not reading to them enough.

There were even worse things. Once when Allison was a toddler, Josh not yet born, Lauren had just started a new job. Their baby sitter called one morning and said one of her own kids was sick. Desperate, Lauren had left the baby in the care of one of Evan’s musician friends -- she could just see him, long stringy hair, front teeth discolored by God knows what drugs. It had turned out all right, but it could just as well not have. She imagined one of those books with alternate endings -- readers, choose your favorite:



Allison is safe with dooper musician dude until parent picks her up; or dude kidnaps baby and neither is ever seen again.

There wouldn't be any of that with this child. Lauren had her own business now, Lauren Cohen Communications -- modest, but profitable enough. She owned a still-nice vintage (Chicagoese for old) condo in a decent neighborhood. She would make baby food from organic ingredients this time -- none of those crappy Gerber fakey-sweet peaches in a jar or pale, sickening baby hot dogs like miniature Vienna sausages.

She was a vegan now, had been for years, and the baby would be too, whether Josh -- who still indulged in pepperoni pizza -- liked it or not. The only problem was that she wouldn't be able to breast feed -- well, they would get around that some way. Did wet nurses still exist?

"So who will take care of it while you and Josh are at work?" Allison had asked, and Lauren didn't have an answer. But she was sure she'd come up with one. She could even afford to have a nanny if she cut back on some other expenses, like the pricey wine she enjoyed.

"We'll figure it out," she told Josh. He shrugged.

Tami came to dinner. She wasn't at all what Lauren had expected -- a small, pretty girl with long blond hair, a turned-up nose and a little birdlike voice. This Tami was big-boned, not heavy but sturdy, with russet hair in no particular style, a pinkish, freckled face and a wide mouth. She had what Lauren considered Irish looks, although

her last name sounded Polish and these days, of course, nobody asked anybody about their family's national origins. Throughout the evening she held a plastic cigarette, which she often put to her lips to mime the actions of inhaling and exhaling. She told Lauren she had been a heavy smoker but quit when she found out she was pregnant. She still missed it.

“Oh, I'm so glad you quit,” Lauren said in the hearty, reassuring voice she used with her clients. Josh shot her a cool-it- Mom look.

They sat down at the table and Lauren served dinner: tofu pockets stuffed with grilled greens, along with salad and crusty bread with flax seeds in it. No wine, since Tami couldn't have any. (Lauren had had a generous glass while she was cooking.) Tami ate heartily and said everything was delicious. Lauren had been looking for an opening to talk about the baby, and she saw one.

“Have you had any morning sickness or nausea or anything?” she asked.

Tami said she hadn't, she felt absolutely fine. Then she slumped down in her chair a little and said, “I really, you know, want to give you this baby. Now that I've met you and everything.” Lauren said Josh had already told her that, and she was fully prepared to raise the child.

“You and me, you mean,” Josh said in a sulky voice. Then he added, in a more grown-up tone, “We'll have to have DNA testing. To prove that it's really mine.”

Where he had heard about that, Lauren wondered. All he ever read was Sports Illustrated and skateboarding magazines. But of course, rap. Those rap stars were always getting paternity tests. She vaguely remembered hearing something about *Who's Your Daddy?* A TV show?

Tami's face turned pinker -- she had the kind of skin that did that -- but she spoke cheerfully.

"Oh, sure," she said. "I was already thinking about that. Getting the testing. Right after the baby is born."

"Yeah, you can't get it done beforehand," Josh said. "It could, like, hurt the baby or you could have a miscarriage or something."

Now Lauren was really amazed. "How did you find out about that?" she asked.

Josh shrugged. "I don't know. You can look it up online."

Tami finished her food and Lauren urged her to have more, which she did.

"My mom's a crazy vegan," Josh said.

"I think it's delicious," Tami said. "I'd like to get the recipe for this." They talked about tofu for a while -- Josh made a face every time either of them said the word -- then Lauren asked Tami about her courses at school, then she asked if she wanted to have contact with the baby as it was growing up or make a clean break.

She was hoping it was the latter, but Tami said she wasn't sure. She had plenty of time to make up her mind, they agreed. They discussed the necessity of getting a lawyer to oversee the adoption arrangements, and Josh said he could get a recommendation from somebody at work. Then they went into the living room to have non-caffeinated tea, and Mustard, Lauren's cat, jumped up into Tami's lap and sat there. Lauren thought that was a good sign.

For the next few months Lauren, according to her friends, went crazy. She started buying supplies for the baby and discovered a whole world that hadn't existed when her kids were little. She bought an organic cotton sleeper set and sleep cap; a movement sensor with sound monitor; a dozen BPA-free polypropylene bottles. She piled everything up in a corner of her bedroom.

"Maybe you should look for a bigger place," Josh said one night, eyeing the pile. He hadn't been home much; he was accompanying an older colleague on campaign solicitations. They visited wealthy people, trying to get them to give more to the charity than they had given last year. Josh was supposed to be learning how to do this, and his boss told him he thought he had a future in it.

"Well, you always were good at asking me for money," Lauren said. Josh grinned, but she thought he looked a little hurt.

Now he said, "Don't we, like, need a room for the baby or anything?"

Lauren hadn't thought about this. "Well, maybe eventually," she said. "I thought he or she would sleep in my room in the beginning." Tami didn't want to know the baby's gender beforehand, she said. Lauren approved. She thought knowing it was a girl or a boy might make Tami more inclined to want to keep it.

"Your room?" Josh said. "Why your room? Why not my room?"

"Look Josh," Lauren said. "It's very nice that you're taking an interest in this baby, but you know I'm the one who's going to be raising it. Him. Her. Whatever. You're 23 years old. You like to go to sports bars, go snowboarding. Stuff like that. You can't do that stuff with a baby." She waved her hands vaguely in the air.

Josh looked surly again. "It IS my baby," he said.

“Remember what happened with Snowball?” Lauren said. The family had always had cats, but Josh begged for a dog. Then, of course, it was Lauren who ended up taking care of Snowball, whom she had loved fiercely. She was the one who held him, sobbing, while the vet gave him the injection, when he was 14 and could no longer walk nor see.

“Mom, I was in high school.”

“I know, I know,” Lauren said. “But still. You know.”

Josh grabbed a banana from the kitchen counter and went back to his room with what Lauren thought was a sulky expression on his face.

“You’re in uncharted waters!” Lauren’s friend Christine kept saying whenever Lauren wondered out loud about certain things, such as whether she should throw a baby shower for Tami, or should her friends throw one for *her*? Christine saying that didn’t help a bit. Lauren knew she was in uncharted waters. Christine also told her she had read in the paper about a support group for grandparents raising their grandchildren, but that didn’t seem right for Lauren. She wasn’t raising anybody yet, and she certainly didn’t feel like a grandmother. She had her hair colored regularly so not one strand of gray ever showed; maybe people would mistake her for the baby’s mother, she thought.

Meanwhile Josh seemed to be having a growth spurt. That was how Lauren thought of it. She had noted what she called growth spurts all through both kids’ childhoods. Not physical ones -- they had those too, of course -- but rather something like moving from one mental/emotional plateau to another. It seemed to happen all at once.

One day watching *Barney*, the next thinking the big purple dinosaur was for babies. Going from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to chapter books. Why couldn't it happen once you were grown up too?

This time it had to do with work. Josh's boss had suggested that he help organize a fund-raising event for people of his own age. It wasn't strictly part of his job, but Josh knew it would raise his standing if he could do it. It was hard, he said, because kids his age didn't usually connect with the organized Jewish community, much less the stodgy Jewish Federation. But he had found an Israeli rap group that was performing in Chicago and asked if they would play the next night for free. That way all the ticket money could go towards the charity. The band members had agreed, and the concert was a big success.

Lauren told Josh several times how proud she was of him for pulling it off, but he asked her to PLEASE stop saying that.

"You make it sound like I'm a little kid," he said. "When really I'm going to be a father now." Lauren felt like saying, "Do you have to remind me?" but she only sighed.

In February, on a stingingly cold night with the feeling of snow in the air, their doorbell rang and it was Tami, already walking with a waddle even though she couldn't be more than six months along. With her was a young guy about her age, with short hair and pleasant, nondescript features. Tami's face was very pink, bordering on red. Lauren, who had been concentrating hard on some press releases she was writing, looked at them for a minute as if she didn't know who they were.

Tami said, “Hi, Mrs. Cohen,” then the three of them stood there looking at each other for a few seconds until Tami said, “This is Roger,” and Lauren asked them to come in.

She called Josh to come out of his room, where he was watching a basketball game, and asked Tami and Roger if they would have some tea. They said they would. Green? White? Rooibos? Green with acai?

“Just make some, Mom,” Josh said.

They all sat down, and when Lauren came back from the kitchen Tami said, “Well, we sort of came to tell you something.” Lauren began to have that is-this-really-happening feeling again. Tami didn’t say any more and Lauren, completely lost as to what the something could be, said, “You did?” Josh just sat there staring at them.

“This is hard,” Tami said. “Well, it’s, like, about the baby. I’m just going to say this now. I, like, don’t think you’re the father, Josh.”

Roger seemed to come to life. “I am,” he said.

Maury Povitch in my living room, Lauren thought, and almost said.

“The hell!” Josh said. “How do you know?”

The teakettle was whistling, and Lauren went into the kitchen. When she went to pour the tea she found her hands were shaking. Nobody said anything in her absence, but now it all poured forth from Tami, with Roger nodding his head or saying “uh-huh” every few seconds.

Tami said she was certain now that Josh wasn’t the baby’s father. She hadn’t actually thought so before either, but she and Roger had broken up, and she panicked, and

didn't want to have an abortion or give the baby away to a stranger, and Josh seemed nice, and so did Lauren.

"Are you sure we aren't on a reality show or something?" Lauren interrupted. Nobody laughed, and Tami went on. She and Roger had gotten back together, and they had decided to keep the baby. (Here Roger took her hand.) She was absolutely certain this was what she wanted. Somehow they would make ends meet and both finish college. Roger's parents were going to help them out. After the baby was born they could have a paternity test if Josh insisted, but she was almost sure it would show Roger as the father.

"That's all right," Josh said. "You don't have to."

"So that's my big news," Tami said. Everyone drank their tea. Mustard jumped up and sat on the arm of the couch, next to Tami.

"Well, that's some news," Lauren said. "I mean, I bought all this stuff. Just about everything except for a crib, and I was going to go look at those this weekend. It's all in my bedroom. If you want to look at it," she added, although she didn't know why they would.

"Maybe you could return it," Roger said. "Or maybe we could buy some of it from you. We could look at it another time, because we've got to get going now."

"We wanted to get home before it started snowing," Tami said.

"Where did you park?" Lauren asked, and it turned out that they had walked from their apartment, about a mile away, because Roger's car was in the shop. Lauren offered to give them a ride home, but they said they liked to walk. When she went to open the door for them she saw that the snow had already started, just a few flakes you could see swirling high up under the streetlights.



“Wow!” Lauren said to Josh as soon as she had closed the door. “That was really something, wasn’t it? How do you feel?”

“No so bad, I guess,” he said. “I mean, it would be cool to have a kid, but maybe a little later. I wasn’t really ready for it now.”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “God, that was crazy. I felt like I was on a daytime talk show.”

“Will you stop saying that?” Josh said.

Lauren cleared away the tea cups and saucers and Josh hung around the kitchen, eating an apple, as she put them away.

“Marvin” -- his boss -- “says I might be able to become an associate in the Young Adult Division,” he said. “That would be a promotion. I could be in charge of putting on some events and stuff. So I might have to work longer hours.”

“That’s good,” Lauren said. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m telling you now.” A pause. “So how do you feel about not getting to raise another baby? You know, that stuff you said about not making the same mistakes with this one as you did with us?”

Lauren didn’t know he had overheard her telling people that.

“I’m disappointed, but kind of relieved too,” she said without thinking about it, and realized it was true. “I’ll just have to be satisfied with the babies I’ve got, I guess.” She laughed and tried to put her arm around Josh, and he laughed a little too but ducked out of reach.

END

