

Family Planning

The Trials of Infertility

Patrick Hicks

I've been having a lot of sex lately. Back when I was randy teenager this would have seemed like an impossible dream-come-true, but now that I'm thirty-seven—and my wife and I are still trying to fill our empty nursery—it's a bit soul-crushing. Where is our first child, the one that throws cereal on the floor and cries at night and gets excited about opening Christmas presents? Where is this little phantom that my wife and I have imagined for so many years?

It never occurred to me that I couldn't be a father. I just assumed that it was a rite of passage that I would embrace when my life was ready for it. Back when I was going through puberty, fatherhood was something that I wanted to avoid until I had a career and other grown-up accessories like a red sports car, but I never dreamed that becoming a father would be denied me. The nuns in my Catholic school made it seem like I only had to unhook a woman's bra and then my wandering sinful fingers would do the rest. Sperm was powerful stuff that should be locked away where it belonged. According to these nuns, getting a girl pregnant was dangerously easy. But they lied to me. It's not easy at all.

There are 6 million couples in the United States who have trouble conceiving. Infertility, which has been on the rise over the past several decades, is generally defined as the inability to conceive after twelve months of unprotected sex. My wife and I have been trying now for forty-two months, and we get tight-lipped whenever we see advertisements for diapers or toys or family vacations. We notice when the rabbits in our backyard have produced yet another crop of bunnies.

Tania and I met in our late twenties. We both led bohemian lifestyles and spent our postcollege years wandering the planet and living in several exotic countries. We met on a busy street in England, started talking to each other, and de-

cidated to grab a sandwich at a café. Since that day we have been devoted to each other. It was love at first sight, just like a sappy romantic comedy where love blossoms between an American and an Englishwoman. That chance meeting in July tugged us toward a new adventure in Barcelona, and we were later married in England. My bride packed her suitcase, moved to the United States, and we set about the business of having children. The nursery was ready and so were we.

Giving a sperm sample is a surreal experience. You stand in a cramped doctor's office, nurses flit outside your door talking to each other, and there is a stack of porn on the counter. You stare at the slender glass jar in your hands, triple-check that you've locked the door, and then you unzip your pants. I remember staring at the ceiling and shaking my head. How had it come to this?

After years of trying, we decided to have our reproductive



OPHELIAPAYNE.WORDPRESS.COM

Patrick Hicks teaches creative writing at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

organs checked out. We had already cut down on wine and caffeine. I was working out again. Tania took prenatal vitamins and was charting the rhythm of her ovulation. We had relations—as our self-help book called it—at the right time of the month, but still nothing. Month after month of nothing. I began to feel inadequate, that I was letting Tania down. I'd see ads with strong men flexing their biceps and I'd wonder if, as the popular saying goes, I was shooting blanks. How would I feel if one of the trademarks of being a man in Western society was denied me? As I looked at the ceiling in the doctor's office I tried to imagine the microscopic world that hid deep inside my body. In the warm darkness of my epididymis, sperm carried the blueprint of the future, and I hoped that they were healthy enough, that they moved quickly enough. I imagined the long journey they would have to make toward their destination. When I was finished with the glass jar, I washed my hands and went back to work.

I had it easy. I might have blushed from embarrassment as I sat in the waiting room for the Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility Department, but at least I didn't have tubes and metal instruments inserted into me. Our doctor, a Texan not much older than we are, recommended that Tania have something called a hysterosalpingogram. This meant that a mildly radioactive dye would be injected through her cervix so that her uterus and fallopian tubes could be viewed. Any blockage or deformity could easily be spotted and, if everything checked out, we could proceed to in vitro fertilization.

Tania held my hand as our doctor performed the procedure. Even though it was all strictly medical, it was still strange watching another man touch my wife. He grabbed a tube that he earlier described as being "very thin" but it was really the size of my pinky finger. Iodine splashed onto everything. The red disinfectant made the table and instruments look so bloody that, if I didn't know better, I would swear that Tania had just given birth to twins.

The doctor was chatty and pleasant, and to my male eyes the procedure didn't seem too painful. Tania squeezed my hand whenever there was a jolt of pain. We smiled at that because it was easy to imagine that we might be doing it for real in ten or eleven months. We both looked at her belly and I thought about taking Lamaze classes. Push, I wanted to say. You're doing fine. Breathe.

When the dye was finally injected into Tania's body, the x-ray made her uterus and fallopian tubes look black. All three of us looked at the monitor as if we were watching a moon landing.

"Your uterus, that's this thing here," the doctor said, "looks just fine. Same for your tubes. I don't see any leakage or blockage."

He spoke in a secret code of numbers to a nurse while Tania and I continued to stare at the monitor. There, in black-and-white, was a tiny sack of flesh no bigger than a matchbox. And yet, if we were lucky enough to have a child, that's where it would grow, that's where it would stretch the cellular wall,

I'm not sure how everything will unfold, but I know this much: We're ready to love a child.

that's where a tiny brain and spine would weave together. Tania squeezed my hand again, and we went home that night to enjoy a candlelit dinner.

I'd like to say that we got pregnant and walked into the sunset with a child, but that would be a lie. Each month we still keep trying, and each month our little world collapses when tiny spots of menstrual blood appear. Tania gets depressed. I get depressed. And then her cycle begins again and we try harder and we hope that maybe this time things will be different and then just when it looks like we might become parents—

It's very hard to stay positive after three years of failed baby-making, especially when we've spent thousands of dollars just to learn that our bodies work perfectly. There is no biological reason why we can't have children, and, statistically speaking, we should already be parents by now. This actually makes things worse because if we knew that we couldn't have our own children, we would accept that and move on. Instead we're stuck in the limbo of nonpregnancy. Maybe it will happen next month, or the month after that, or maybe the month after that.

I used to think that I'd be happy to know that my seminal vesicles and vas deferens and all the other machinery works as it should, but that's not the case. It makes everything more frustrating because that big question—why can't we have kids?—hangs over us now in a way that it never did before we were poked and prodded by fertility specialists. We're both thirty-seven, and even if we got pregnant tomorrow the doctors would say we had a "geriatric pregnancy." I feel like I'm letting my family lineage down, and I know that Tania wonders if she will ever experience a life growing inside her. We both deal with our emotions of gender and expectation by

