

Pregnant Moments

EDEN COLLINSWORTH CONSIDERS FAMILY AND OTHER PERILS.

Twenty years have passed since I announced my pregnancy at a dinner party and was warned by a guest about the perils of reproducing: "If you described parenthood as a job, no one would take it."

The comment, itself pregnant and decades old, has lost none of its currency. Still, it seemed incongruous coming from a woman known by all assembled to be a capable and loving mother. Of the eight gathered at the table, her husband was the most taken aback by her assertion. "What a discouraging thing to tell someone who's just announced she's expecting!" he said.

Choosing to ignore him, his wife intoned to me, "You're a business person, Eden...If you were to list the pros and cons of a theoretical job, being a mother, would there be any takers?"

"Well," I began. But her equanimity snapped like a dry tree branch, and she interrupted.

"Even at a six-figure salary, you'd be insane to take the job!"

The unsparing assessment illicitly a universal and uneasy quiet.

Well, I tried again before she cut me off a second time.

"It starts with nine uncomfortable months," her bleak forecast began. "Each month its own separate and awful reminder you've lost control of your body. Then there's the back-breaking labor and the tearing pain of delivery."

Her evenly spaced words produced the staccato of a deranged storyteller. And, as her diatribe became progressively emphatic and less nuanced by irony, my guests' collective expression became one of obvious discomfort.

"That's just the beginning," she continued in a monotone undaunted by our reaction. "You bring home this complete stranger who nurses away whatever strength you have left. By the end of the first month the novelty has worn thin, just in time to realize your baby isn't an item you've bought and can return. You begin to lose your mind, you're so tired, and you think, Well, alright, if they institutionalize me, at least I can sleep. But you don't get to lose your mind. Do you know why?" she asked rhetorically. "Because Nature won't allow it...because just when you're ready to leave your baby on the side of the road, he learns to smile. And, then, when your IQ goes because he's what you have all day long, he miraculously learns to say mama. It's Nature's bait-and-switch strategy...doling out a single endearing benchmark at a time, making sure you don't pull the self-preservation ripcord and bail."

By now, we had stopped eating, and she was the only one at the table holding a piece of cutlery: a knife. No one, not even her husband, dared interrupt.

"You can be sure of one thing," came her final and dire warning. "No matter what you do or how you do it, you know...you just know...that in twenty years he'll be sitting in a psychiatrist's office blaming you for something...some small thing, some inconsequential thing you couldn't remember if someone put a gun to your head."

Palpable silence from our other guests failed to camouflage their horror. At the opposite end of the table, my husband's face was telegraphing a wordless plea for intervention.

"So, Cleveland, tell us what you're up to these days," I asked in a transparent bid to redirect the conversation.

Cleveland Amory was a curmudgeon who'd long given up on humans to devote himself to animal rights. The author of *Who Killed Society?*, he was the appointed chronicler of WASP behavior and a rumpled centerpiece of what was left of that culture. To the immediate point, he was someone who had been to enough dinner parties to understand that he was being prevailed upon by a desperate hostess.

"You know how I feel about making fur coats from baby white seals..." was his lead-in.

"Yes...?" I said, grateful that he had taken my cue.

"Well, I'm working with the Greenpeace people, and—the really good news is—we plan to sink a Canadian trawler next week."

The transition to another topic was more abrupt than I might have liked.

"Isn't that dangerous for someone?" I asked.

My husband leaned forward in his chair. His keen interest pushed aside my concern about safety in favor of the pyrotechnical details. "How do you sink something that size? What does it take?" he asked.

His was a question only a man would ask, and other men would appreciate. I was surprised when the one sitting to my left—Robert, who was both a close friend and our lawyer—stood up suddenly, excused himself and left the table.

Cleveland continued to detail his plan. He would implement his scheme at night, deliberately timed when a skeleton crew would be onboard; the boat would be anchored in shallow waters; explosives were limited to a small detonating device in the boiler room.

Robert had been in the bathroom for what I thought was an overly long period of time. After clearing his plate from the table, I discretely inquired of his wife if she thought her husband was alright.

“That’s just the beginning,” she continued in a monotone undaunted by our reaction. “You bring home this complete stranger who nurses away whatever strength you have left. By the end of the first month the novelty has worn thin, just in time to realize your baby isn’t an item you’ve bought and can return.”

“He’ll come back after the subject changes,” she said obliquely.

I tapped on the bathroom door. “Bob?”

“Is he finished?”

“Do you mean Cleveland?”

“Yes.”

“With what?”

“With what he was saying.”

“I don’t know...why does it matter?”

“Because I can’t be witness to a future crime.”

“Well, why didn’t you say something?”

“It was easier to leave.”

“What have you been doing in there all this time?”

“I found my briefcase in the hallway on the way in.”

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized. “It never occurred to me.”

“Is the woman alright?” asked Bob.

“She seems to be...but I don’t think her marriage will ever be the same.”

There was a concerned pause before Bob said, “I hope it doesn’t make you nervous about motherhood.”

“Are you kidding? I have more than enough reasons of my own to be frightened,” I admitted.

“Why?” asked Bob.

I leaned against the door. That it was between us provided sufficient anonymity for me to confess freely. “Let’s start with the gene pool...at best, it’s iffy,” I told him. “And then there’s the fact I’ve never once held a baby.”

Bob opened the door so that he could look me straight in the face. “You’ll be a good mother,” he reassured me. “Don’t worry about it.”

But I did. I worried.

Pregnancy did indeed hijack my body, reducing me to toothpick arms and legs attached to a giant belly. “You look like something in a cheesy Japanese science-fiction movie made in the fifties,” said a friend, “Like *The Tomato That Ate Pittsburgh*.”

Circumstances were then complicated by a last-minute substitution of my doctor by one I didn’t know. Not particularly encouraging was that his name translated from German to English as “Dr. Death.”

More disturbing than the Ingmar Bergman-like specter was the unidentified man who accompanied him, better suited to be a bouncer than an attendee in a delivery room. His role became apparent when I heard the doctor’s deliberately uncomplicated instructions to him. “Try not to break her ribs,” he told the man who pushed down on my belly with massive strength.

How difficult could this be? I thought to myself the first morning I was alone with my son. The next day, and the next and the next, when I was absolutely sure it couldn’t get worse, it did, but in different ways. The only common denominator was the baby’s irregular sleep patterns that dominated the nights and pushed my emotions to extremes.

After my son’s christening, there was a reception at our apartment. Exhausted by his ceremonial duties, the baby fell asleep. I joined my friends in the front room. One of them was locked in a heated debate. So animated was he that his cake fork lifted off the side of his plate and waved dangerously in the air. He lashed out as he was making an impassioned point and tore the veiled hat of a woman whose back was to him.

“Make amends and offer to replace her hat,” I insisted after the damage was inflicted.

“I’ve done her a favor,” he insisted. “She looked like a beekeeper.”

When I pointed out that the woman was the editor of a fashion magazine, he suggested her choice of millinery was even less excusable. “She has experts at her disposal. Surely one of them could have told her how absurd the hat made her look. And, by the way, I’m the least of your problems...you should check out what’s happening in the kitchen.”

I turned my attention to our small kitchen and realized it was emitting sobs. One guest had pulled another aside to report that her unfaithful husband was cheating with a spectacular range of other women.

After everyone finally left, my father observed: “I’ve never met more self-absorbed people.” I would not have argued his point.

In a metaphorical sea of self-involvement, it is true that my friends, piled into one room, evoke the chaos of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*. But, with family—and among friends—there is an irrational trust that gives rise to optimism in the face of disaster. BG