

How to Make a Baby

By Robert Levin

I was, I suppose you could say, in a prepartum depression.

It started when my wife, Connie, decided it was time to have a baby. I was thirty-one and she was twenty-eight, a circumstance which I reminded her in my argument against the idea, was no cause for alarm. But after she'd voiced her ambition—and thereby made it real to herself—the achievement of motherhood became an obsession for her and she would not leave me alone about it. Finally, after several months, my reluctance to enlist in her project compelled her to resort to a not so veiled threat: "Steven," she said. "Either we have a baby now or I'm going to leave you."

All right, I told her, get off the fucking Ovril then.

Now it wasn't that I never wanted a baby, and not that when I had one I didn't want it to be with Connie. Strong of character and will, nurturing, quick-witted and sometimes astonishingly perceptive (not to mention pretty), Connie was a terrific wife and more than qualified to be an exceptional mother. The notion of one day having a family with her was hardly repugnant to me.

No. What troubled me when the prospect became imminent—what troubled me immensely—was a consequence inherent in the making of a baby, a consequence that I could not stop recognizing. Fathering a child would tie me into the hideous plan that Creation has devised for everything corporeal. I would be, and by my own hand, replacing myself. Once the deed was done, once I had accomplished the only thing we know with any certainty Creation wants of us, I would be, in Creation's estimation, expendable.

If Connie, born Catholic but now earnestly New Age in her faiths and sentiments, mollified her fear of death by believing in reincarnation, I was a secular Jew and so had only the void to anticipate. And if I'd always been keenly tuned to the price of existence, and lived in a perpetual state of medium-grade anxiety as a result, my heightened appreciation of my mortality destroyed any semblance of internal equilibrium I could claim. With Connie's demand the sinister underside of nature had turned itself toward me and it wouldn't turn away. Indeed, my now hyper-consciousness of what it ultimately meant to be alive made any vista of extravagant pullulation, albeit as manicured as Central Park, grotesque to me. On the most festive of occasions I would see what William James saw—"the skull grinning in at the banquet." And I understood as well what Burroughs meant by "Naked Lunch." When I ate I saw exactly what it was—the flesh—on the end of my fork.

I was also, much of the time, in a small rage about the new burden I'd be taking on. I'm referring not to the responsibility of child raising per se, but to the fact that no matter how large was the contempt I'd developed for humanity over the years, having a child would force me to care about what the world might be like after I died.

Thoroughly upended, I even began to think about homosexuality; about, that is, the solution it afforded to the problem of getting your rocks off without spinning what Kerouac called the "wheel of the quivering meat conception." Though a less than appealing option for me, there were hours when, oddly and perversely, I could not help but feel . . . well . . . titillated by the concept of having sex that was unencumbered by procreative implications.

In the petrifying absence of contraception I found myself avoiding sex with Connie. And when I could not avoid it my performance was impeded by occlusions in my circuits that would leave the both of us in a condition of considerable frustration. Worse, my very biology joined in the protest forcing me to suffer the embarrassment of a sperm count that a lab I visited at Connie's insistence twice reported was "virtually negligible."

Compounding these miseries, locking me deeper into paralysis as it increased my sense of urgency, was Connie's evident disappointment in me; a disappointment that was evolving into disdain. Terms of endearment like "honey" and "sugar," for example, were routinely being replaced by "washout" and "loser." In my timorousness I'd become, in her eyes, something less than a man. Recalling her admission to me once that she'd believed that all Jewish men were extraordinary providers and natural born fathers—and having long before disabused her of the former assumption—I knew that I had no choice now but to keep the latter one alive.

Then, reasoning that a change of scene might turn the trick, Connie came up with the idea of spending a few days in the country together. When I agreed, she arranged for us to stay with our friend Betsy who ran a little print shop out of her ramshackle house in a Catskill town not far from Kingston.

With Connie's patience rapidly dissolving it was, I knew, something like now or never for me and I geared myself as best I could. Scrupulously adhering to a plan we devised—a month of wholesome foods and regimented exercise; no masturbation for a fortnight—I made ready to win a war with myself.

But arriving upstate, I felt like a German soldier must have felt upon arriving at the Russian front. It was the middle of winter, the sky was low and gray, the snowdrifts were thigh-high and the temperature was near to zero. This was not exactly an atmosphere conducive to a successful completion of the undertaking at hand—especially not when in the back bedroom to which Betsy assigned us (and which

she used to store old printing equipment and bound stacks of yellowing posters and flyers), you could see your breath and needed to wear a coat.

But as inopportune and unlikely as the setting may have been, it was on our second afternoon there that a child was conceived.

I should say, first of all, that I was feeling physically ill—and it wasn't only that I was on the edge of a cold. If, having lived all of my life in city apartments, heating oil prices were never a concern for me, they were for Betsy and she usually made that very clear. On this day, however, in a generous but woefully misguided demonstration of support, she had pumped the thermostat up to steam bath levels. The oppressive heat, coupled with an effluvium of musty furniture and nasty chemical compounds, threatened my ability to both keep my lunch and remain conscious..

In any case, with Betsy at work out front, Connie, after giving me a thumbs up sign, took off her clothes and arranged them carefully over a chair. Deliberately presenting her bottom to me as she bent to the bed to pull away the quilts, she followed this maneuver by abruptly turning around and flopping onto the bed on her back. Then, reaching for a pillow, she propped it under her buttocks and spread her legs.

"Stevie, do you feel it too? It's as though there's a spirit hovering near us waiting to be born again."

"Great," I said, removing my pants. "I hope it's the spirit of a heavy-duty bond trader who happened to have a coronary while he was up here for a weekend. Please don't let it be one of the local yahoos who ran his pickup into a tree."

I entered her immediately—it had, after all, been two weeks. But just as quickly I knew I was going to wither. My deprived penis's rote reaction to a welcoming vagina notwithstanding, the gravity of the occasion continued to undermine me. Still, I'd made a compact which I had to honor and I began to leaf through bodies, shuffle through poses, postures and configurations in my personal mental Kama Sutra file—then, beginning to panic and sweating obnoxiously—to ransack my memory and imagination. But no one and no thing I could remember or think to want would keep me up, let alone elicit the participation of my gonads. I tried, with my hand, to stuff it in. I would happily have settled for a premature orgasm.

"Stop," Connie said. She squeezed out from under me and, her hair trailing along my chest and stomach, ran her tongue down the length of my torso to the numb thing between my legs.

A determined virgin into her early twenties—she had not permitted a man inside her until she was twenty-three—Connie'd had more than a little experience keeping boyfriends with her mouth. In

seconds, my mental state notwithstanding, she got it half way up and we tried again. But once more I evacuated her ignominiously and she was obliged to root in me again. Ten minutes must have passed before she raised her head. I was expecting an expression of scorn. Look, I was prepared to say, I'm sorry. This is really out of my hands. But Connie was grinning at me. Crawling backwards a little, she reached her arm under my legs and lifted them until they were almost perpendicular to the bed. Then, holding my haunches up and steady with both of her hands, she lowered her head to my starkly exposed ass and drove her tongue as deep as she could into my rectum. Lingering there for a while, she finally came out from under me and, brushing it against my nostrils en route, brought her mouth to my ear.

"You little Jew bastard," she whispered. "I wish you'd be the lesbian you are right now because what I really want to do is eat your pussy."

Score one for Connie's acumen and her resourcefulness in an emergency. "Harder," she was instructing me after no more than a minute had elapsed. "Go deeper. Yeah! Oh! Splash."

Cody was born nine months later, almost to the day. Nature being oblivious to human expectations of justice and symmetry, he had, contrary to the circumstances of his conception, both a proper allotment of toes and fingers and a countenance that was amazingly genuine in its sweetness and innocence. I mean there was nothing unhealthy or freakish about him, nothing that was even remotely Damien-ish. By every measure he was a wonderful specimen.

And me? Well, I was worn by then to a physical as well as emotional nub—I lost fifteen pounds during Connie's pregnancy that I didn't need to lose. But not dropping dead with Cody's arrival had a salutary effect on my nerves that was almost immediate. I was still filled with trepidation, of course, but—my panic significantly less clamorous and debilitating, my not so quiet desperation much quieter—it was, relatively speaking, a manageable trepidation.

Just days after his birth I was, in fact, as close as I get to all right again.

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