

Genealogy

By Holly Schechter

There are seven embryos cryogenically frozen in a lab in midtown Manhattan, and some of those embryos will one day be our children. There were ten embryos when we started this process.

The first one resulted in a pregnancy that was unstable from the beginning—like a first-time water skier trying to get up, teetering back and forth, and finally realizing that the safest choice is to just let go of the rope.

The second one didn't survive the thaw.

The third one resulted in another pregnancy, an off-the-charts positive pregnancy, before crashing into the wake.

The fertility problem feels like the universe laughing at me. The miscarriages are the universe giving me the finger.

I'm thinking of my mom this morning, while I am at the fertility clinic, quietly, shamefully wiping away tears before they mix into my coffee. My mother suffered more than one miscarriage, one of them very late term; her mother suffered some, too, and a stillborn baby, and she lost her youngest daughter, my mom's little sister Holly, for whom I am named, when she was four years old.

"I have a great vein," I hear myself telling the nurse this morning as she pushes up my sleeve to draw blood, to confirm that my HCG levels are still dropping. "Just like my mom. She donated blood every month for years. My dad used to joke that the vampires were on the phone whenever she'd receive a call to schedule her next blood donation. She's donated platelets too, and white blood cells! But then she turned sixty and decided her blood is for her now." The nurse laughs, and she swabs my arm, and I stare at faces of other people's children tacked to a corkboard barrier that separates me from the other girls in the room. This is a story I will tell my children about their Bubbie: that she donated blood, that the vampires would call our house each month, that she had a great vein.

Their Bubbie is my mother, and my Bubbie was hers. She passed away when I was twenty; I called her from college every week from the bathtub and we'd talk until my fingers pruned.

My mom tells me that when I was first born, she cried and cried when she had to leave her mother, my Bubbie, in Cleveland to go home to Chicago. She wanted her husband, her daughter, and her mother all under one roof. "When you were a baby, we'd fly to Cleveland all the time. It was the only place I slept peacefully," she recalls. As our family grew, my Bubbie would come stay at our house for a month at a time. My sister Melissa and I would fight over who got to use the Bubbie Pillow after she'd left; it retained the smell of her Trésor perfume

for weeks, and we'd cry when mom would finally insist that the pillow case needed to be washed.

I have a photo on my bedside table of myself as a baby, curled toward my Bubbie. We are both laying on our sides, my small head in the crook of her left elbow, her right hand on my stomach. She is smiling gently. It looks like it was taken early in the morning; the lighting is rose-tinted, and she's in a nightgown. She's younger in that photo than my mother is now.

I never knew my paternal grandfather—*Zeidi* is what my dad says I would have called him. I only know *Zeidi* as myth, as a smattering of facts and sentences, and a small black and white photo that sits on my father's bedside table. It's strange to think that I never met him; I've never entertained the thought of our children not meeting my father.

I say *our children* so naturally. I say *our children* as something definitively, concretely in our future, not just my optimistic imagination. I say *our children* as if they aren't frozen in a lab in Midtown Manhattan, waiting to be defrosted like my chicken for tomorrow's dinner.

The myth of my *Zeidi*: he emigrated from Hungary. He was a self-made man. He owned a grocery store in Whitsett, Pennsylvania. He was forty-five when my dad was born. He used to let my mother fill her pockets with candy when she would visit the store. My dad was his favorite child, and my dad's mother and sister were both envious of those affections.

Zeidi died the day before my parents were married. In Judaism, you don't postpone a *simcha*, a joyous occasion; my dad woke up, buried his father in Pittsburgh, and married my mother in Cleveland, all in the same day.

That's certainly one story I'd tell my children about my dad. I'd also tell them how, when I was fifteen, he offered me one hundred dollars to stop biting my nails—ten dollars a nail—plus a manicure. It's such a strange memory, so inconsistent with the things my dad values, but I think he didn't have the tolerance for my teenage angst, and he thought pretty hands would make me feel pretty. It also must have made him nauseous to look at me gnaw my bloody cuticles.

My dad has spent the bulk of his adult life on an airplane, and he doesn't believe in jet lag. He wakes up at an ungodly hour every morning because, like his immigrant father, he doesn't believe in sitting idly. My father and I talk every morning at seven o'clock, as I make my way into school and he eats his oatmeal after the gym. When he gets angry, my father has a vein on his forehead that pulses, and Melissa and I used to fear it might explode all over the dinner table: "We're sorry! Please don't be angry, we won't do it again, just please calm down Dad, so the vein goes away." These are the stories I will tell my children.

I stare at images of other people's children on a corkboard in the fertility clinic in the midst of my second miscarriage as the nurse puts a Band-Aid in the crook of my elbow. My mother is sixty. My father is sixty-one. They are still young. They are still healthy. But my Bubbie died at seventy-four, my maternal grandfather at seventy-six, *Zeidi* before I was even born, and as I'm staring at the corkboard, I'm doing the math, and I'm fearing all of the moments that my parents will miss in my children's lives. Every cycle that passes and fails is a reminder not only that I am getting older, but that my parents are, too. I want to capture my mother in her nightgown with my child curled together in the early morning light and frame it for my bedside table.

"It'll be okay," the nurse tells me as I pull down my sweatshirt sleeve over my fingers to wipe tears that have slid to my chin. She smiles sympathetically and I nod, not making eye contact. It isn't just *this*, I want to tell her—it isn't only my age; it isn't only the life that was inside each embryo that bled its way out of my system. It's that I can't bear the thought that

our children—who already exist in frozen form, in a way that scares me to think about, causes the hairs on my neck to stand up and my stomach to turn—those children might not know their grandparents’ veins as anything more than myth.

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