

Two

Their home in Healdsburg came complete with a deer trail, a fox den, and the occasional bobcat. They immediately decided against putting a fence around the property to encourage nature to trespass. In Pasadena, Kevin would put walnuts out for the squirrels; in Healdsburg, Kevin planted fruit trees for the deer. On occasion, Modra spied him dropping figs or pears on the ground for the deer as he picked the ripe fruit for the table. Since their move they had both taken to working shorter days, taking long walks, gardening, and enjoying nightly cocktails on their porch. They had, by then, decided they would live their lives like free birds until the end of their pact, which would come either in the form of a baby or by the date of Modra's thirty-eighth birthday—whichever came first.

Everything changed for them twelve years ago when Kevin stood across the kitchen island from Modra with a presumed required proposition: It was time to have a baby. Though they had never taken precautions at preventing pregnancy, except for Modra's poor attempts at the rhythm method, they had always assumed it would just happen when it was meant to happen. Parenthood was given no extra effort and would have continued to receive none if it hadn't been "the next step", according to everyone around them.

During their first year of “trying”, they had naively assumed that sex on a more regular basis would do the trick. After the fruitless, or fruitful, first year, depending on who you asked and if he or she answered honestly, they began taking Modra’s temperature and consulting ovulation kits—gleefully provided by Modra’s mother. It took an entire year of Modra’s mother calling month after month to ask if she had missed a period, before they decided it was time for the professionals to weigh in.

On a recent occasion Modra privately admitted to Julie that she couldn’t recall a time when she truly wanted children, which is probably why she had waited so long after getting married to see a fertility specialist and that if it hadn’t been for Elena, she most likely never would have bothered. She had already known something was wrong because they never used protection and they had never become pregnant.

Dr. Wexman, Modra’s OBG, and Dr. Weidman, a reproductive endocrinologist, who looked like the product of Dr. Phil and Carrot Top (creepy and funny-looking all in one), met with Kevin and Modra for their initial consultation and preliminary exam. Follow-up exams were scheduled for blood samples to be taken, eggs to be counted, Kevin to make a sperm deposit, and Modra to have an ultrasound. They went back and forth for months, appointment after appointment. The uncertainty was painful, stressful, and very draining for both of them. Luckily, Kevin, an area sales manager, kept his daily calendar laden with appointments and late work nights, and

Modra, a wholesale representative for a large national bank, kept herself busy traveling from the most southern point of Orange County to the most northern point of Los Angeles County, checking in with clients and returning home just in time to meet Kevin at a local coffee house and scout out a quick bite for dinner.

Without a busy work life to keep them occupied in between doctor appointments, they might have gone insane. Work allowed them to focus on other things and encouraged denial: Both of them were going through the motion doing what needed to be done to take that “next step” without ever checking with each other and determining whether they were ready for, or the least bit interested in, parenthood.

The doctor visits were kept under the radar from both sides of the family and all their friends. The last thing they wanted or needed during that time was to explain over and over to everyone they knew that they might be unable to have children. They didn't want friends or family to feel as though they had to continuously apologize because they didn't know what else to say to their infertile friends who, understandably, they assumed really wanted children. Modra didn't want a barrage of Hispanics or Germans offering home concoctions for becoming pregnant. Although, thinking back now, Modra would give her mother the gold medal. Elena actually coerced her with guilt into submitting to a painful abdominal massage. Modra swore her uterus was going to shoot out of her vagina from the pressure

that the short, squat Mexican woman placed on her when she took the rolling pin to her abdomen. This, of course, needed to be done because according to Elena, “Sometimes a uterus needs to be coaxed into working.” Modra was unable to walk straight for close to an entire week after.

For the first time ever, Dr. Wexman’s office felt cold and sterile. The shades were drawn, but there was no sunlight coming through the windows, and Modra could smell the sterilizers. The white walls felt too white and her office felt too small. Kevin tried to relax as he held Modra’s hand and prepared her for what he thought would be the worst news of her life, while with the same breath, assuring her that everything would be fine.

Dr. Wexman arrived with her perfectly straight shoulder-length hair and brown almond-shaped eyes. She was fumbling as though she had forgotten something, but Modra was too preoccupied to notice. She could still vividly remember the way she had sat in her chair wanting to cry the entire time. She had been heavily burdened with indecision; she wasn’t sure which outcome she prayed for more, and the entire time poor Kevin thought Modra was losing sleep because she was afraid of being infertile.

“Dr. Wexman,” Kevin said, clearing his throat.

“Lina, please call me Lina,” she offered in her small, soft voice.

“Okay, Lina, can we please get straight to it? This is hard enough already.”

Modra had squeezed his hand gratefully.

Hesitant, Lina agreed. She put on a smile as though she were adding an accessory. “I don’t want you to get discouraged.” She began.

As soon as Lina’s warning was translated by Modra’s brain as a signal of confirmed infertility, an unexpected surge of happiness fluttered within her, but was short lived as an avalanche of guilt crushed it. Modra bit her bottom lip, unsure of how to interpret her involuntary response.

“I have some good news and some bad news. We’ll start with the bad so we can end with the good. Is that okay?” Kevin and Mod both gave a slight nod in agreement but said nothing, allowing her to continue. “Well, after carefully taking a look at everything, it seems that you are part of the ten percent of American couples who exhibit what we call unexplained infertility.”

Kevin placed a protective arm around Modra, “So does this mean we can’t have children?”

“Well, not exactly. That’s where the good news comes in.” Lina said, not realizing that Modra’s emotions dived into the deepest depth of anxiety with her response. She would rather Lina had left it at: unexplained infertility and no, you cannot have children.

Despite their misgivings over becoming parents, Kevin and Modra had sat and listened to Dr. Wexman as she explained the expected process (normal) couples who are truly committed to

parenthood could expect to undergo; of course, Lina had no way of knowing that Kevin and Modra were not a “normal” couple. She informed them that additional specific testing would need to be completed in order to try and better pinpoint the cause of the infertility. The good news she had saved for last was that they still had just over a thirty percent chance of becoming pregnant on their own within the next few years; of course, those odds would diminish with every passing year. They were both young, she had pointed out as if it were a compensating factor in the process, and from the looks of everything, they were perfectly healthy so they shouldn’t worry and should keep trying. Once more testing was complete, and more information regarding their “condition” was available, they would discuss looking at fertility drugs, and down the road, if necessary, in-vitro fertilization. Lina had been warm and supportive as she provided them with the raw facts of their situation, and then wrapped it all up by providing them with pamphlets, contact information for infertility counselors, support group websites, made future appointments for Modra, and received a big hug from Lina before they left her office. She had obviously done that many times before.

Modra’s body shivered as she realized that her thoughts had taken her back to Lina’s office and that awful day of self-doubt and internal chaos. She closed her eyes and leaned back rocking herself back and forth in her rocker, allowing herself a moment

to marvel at how well her twenty-seven-year-old self had performed that day.

Through the surprise of feeling relieved and the overpowering feeling of being inadequate, she had kept herself perfectly composed throughout the entire time that it had taken Lina to go over every test result and then explain what each meant and how they had arrived at the diagnosis. At the time, Modra's mind had been lost in a fog of confusion. Everything she had read to prepare for that meeting said to be prepared with questions about the next step, but her mind had gone blank. She couldn't think of a single question nor had she been able to remember half of what Lina said by the time they had reached the car. At the time, all Modra could lock in on was the fact that she and Kevin had at best a thirty percent chance of being parents, and what had devastated her the most, was the fact that she wasn't sure how she felt about that thirty percent chance. She had been hoping for a clear cut- you're infertile- diagnosis, not unexplained infertility, which left the ball back in her court.

Oh, and the drive home after the appointment had been so painfully slow. She recalled, poor Kevin, he had been as emotionally confused as I was. If I had only known then that he felt the same, we could have spared each other the misery of pretending. A bit of a smile exposed itself as she recalled his poor attempts at being positive and optimistic for her sake.

During the early period of their marriage, both Kevin and Modra had failed miserably at being completely honest with

each other in regards to their private wish of remaining childless. Each kept their secret from the other for different reasons; however, one they shared was the fact that they both entered into their marriage with the understanding that the other wanted children. It would be egregious for one to change the terms of their marriage on the other after the fact. The reality of the situation was that having children had been an implied fact, not an actual agreed upon fact, regardless, each believed that unlike wanting children, not wanting to have them was something that should be mutually agreed upon before marriage, not after.

Their failure towards full disclosure with one another forced them to go through the motions of false pretense, as they drove away from Dr. Wexman's office eleven years ago.

“Look on the bright side, Dr. Wexman didn't say we can't get pregnant, a thirty percent chance still leaves the door open” he said with a tone that at the time Modra had taken as wanting to be sensitive, but was now sure had been weariness. “And don't forget, Like Dr. Wexman said, we can always look into other options to see what's available to us down the road.” From the day Dr. Wexman had first proposed it, Kevin had absolutely disliked the idea of having sex on a schedule, but he was committed to their marriage and would do so because he believed that it was important to his wife, though he didn't see the point since they had been having unprotected sex for almost five years and so far nothing had happened.

It was still baffling and sometimes very discomfoting to know that Kevin had tried to give her a baby because he thought she wanted one, not because he did, and that she had attempted to do the same for him. She wondered how many couples have gone through the same process, but actually had the kids. Or, she thought, maybe we're just not a normal couple.

The feeling of guilt for not wanting children that had plagued her on that day still plagues her today. How in the hell does a wife tell her husband- honey I adore you and would do anything you asked, but I'd rather you didn't ask me to give you children, she wondered. She glanced over to see how Kevin was doing. He looked relaxed and comfortable in his rocker as he stared off into the distant hillsides, probably lost in his own thoughts of the past as well.

In hindsight, it was obvious that he had been struggling with his own internal conflict on the subject of parenthood. It all made so much more sense now that ten years had passed and, not to mention, that they both now knew how the other truly felt. But ten years ago, it had been impossible for her to know that he had felt obligated to her. She recently learned from Kevin that he had known how he felt about children before they got married but never found the courage to tell her. Last year, when he finally came clean and owned up to not wanting children, she asked him why he hadn't told her before. His response had been, "Well, when you agreed to marry me, there were no asterisks, conditions, or restrictions. I wasn't about to change the rules on

you half way just because I had failed to give you a full disclosure.”

Armed with his confession and with a more careful dissection of the memory of that day, she could now see that everything that had come out of his mouth on the drive home from Dr. Wexman’s office had been for her benefit only. The words he chose were not always those of a man who wanted or desired to become a father—that should have been her first indicator of his true feelings:

“Mod,” he said as he griped the wheel and looked ahead, “I know how important children are in your family, but don’t you think we really should look at our life, and you know . . . figure out what’s important? I mean, for us and not everyone else?”

Shouldn’t a light have flipped on when he said that? Maybe I didn’t pick up on any of it because I agreed with him. I remember feeling the same way.

Kevin’s loving look had brought Modra to tears that day. The poor guy probably thought that she was mourning her possible infertility, when in reality, she had been mourning the indecisiveness of the diagnosis; she had been looking forward to a resolute infertile diagnosis.

She remembered how handsome he looked as he drove them home that day. He had picked her up right after work wearing a crisp white shirt, black slacks, and a gold and black patterned tie. His sleeves were rolled up, his thick brown hair was mussed up, and a perfectly groomed goat-tee gave him that

look that still keeps her interested today. “OH babe, please don’t cry.” He pulled off the road and reached across to her. With his hand under her chin he said, “I love you more than you know and I am here for you. I don’t want you to let this consume you. It will happen when it’s meant to happen.”

Well, now we know that he too had been praying for it never to happen. It has only been a few months since Kevin actually admitted that when Lina was going through the motion of explaining what unexplained infertility meant to them, that he wondered if he should be feeling some sort of a loss, at least for her sake. He has also since acknowledged that he spent a few days after their diagnosis considering whether his reaction was normal among most men or if something was wrong with him. With all of his own mixed feelings on the subject, Modra had to admire him for his support and his willingness to contradict his own wants and needs to do what he felt would make her happy and she was relieved that he didn’t have to. She thought of his genuineness when he had offered to consider alternatives:

“We can look at IVF, hormones, and if we have to, eventually, even adoption. But first we need to decide whether having children is the end all for us.” His knuckles had turned an ash white as he gripped the wheel and got them back onto the freeway to get them home.

Modra now wondered how much that statement cost him. Years later he conceded that deep inside, he hoped that children were not the end all. When Modra finally found the courage to

tell Kevin she didn't want to go through any of the artificial process to have children, Kevin probed her until she admitted that she didn't want to be a mom. He grew quiet for a few minutes before he picked her up, spun her around, and kissed her. He even mused, "Wow. We dodged a bullet. I am so relieved you weren't fertile."

Modra pretended to take offense, "Hey, I was at least semi-fertile according to Dr. Wexman."

"Ok, semi-fertile is still a heck of a lot better than being fertile myrtle." He laughed, "After all, you are a Catholic of Hispanic descent. You," he said pinching her nose, "should be as fertile as all get out." Then he took her and completely wrapped her in his arms and kissed her forehead. It Kevin took a few days after Modra to come out and tell her that he had been feeling the same way for quite some time. He had only wanted to make sure that she wasn't just saying she didn't want children and then took it back.

Before they were totally honest with each other, when neither knew how the other felt, Modra had been an even greater emotional disaster than she is today. On the drive home from Dr. Lina's office, she sat in the passenger seat, absent mindedly watching the cars as they passed. She was devastated by the guilt, because on the way home she was actually angry that they still had a thirty percent chance. She was angry that god left the responsibility of deciding up to her. She was angry because she didn't want the responsibility of options or alternatives. Tears

rolled down her cheeks, they were just told she may not be able to have children without the help of science, and the pressure of her sprawling Catholic and Hispanic family was already caving in on her. She tortured herself the entire drive home with wild thoughts: Can I just keep praying and not tell Kevin or my family that I don't want kids? How do I justify not using science? Will Kevin leave me if I don't at least try? Great, I'm the one that's going to break mom and dad's heart. The disappointment is going to be pasted on their face every time I see them. They are never going to let me live it down if I don't give them grandchildren. She stared out the window feeling numb, unable to speak. Her body was stiff from tension and her head pounded with every thought. Her childhood priest came to her thoughts as he stood at the pulpit and preached about the miracles of birth, the purpose of life, and declared that marriage was for the sole purpose of procreating.

That "unexplained infertility" diagnosis had brought on the most difficult and self-contradicting period of her life. She truly wanted to be grateful for what she had. She didn't want to take anything for granted, but the recurring guilt and fear of disappointing her family kept her from accepting her life as it was. She couldn't accept her possible infertility even though it was exactly what she had prayed for. There was guilt for every prayer she had said praying not to be pregnant. There was guilt for there never being "a right time" to start a family. And, she conceded, there is still guilt for giving up so easily, so

conveniently, as mom has so kindly phrased it—over and over again.

At least we went through the motions, Modra thought recalling the ridiculous process they put themselves through to appease her conscience. Six months after they met with Dr. Wexman for the official diagnosis, they were encouraged to look into “other” alternatives. Although they hadn't been gung-ho on the idea of using science and technology, they decided it would be best to, at the very least, entertain the notion. They dove into extensive research on hormones, IVF, intrauterine insemination, and any other form of medical assistance. They had networked with other struggling couples that were at different stages of fertility (some well on their way to becoming parents), who encouraged Kevin and Modra to follow them down their path. For the most part, the women seemed thrilled to finally be pregnant even as they explained in detail the drawn-out process of giving oneself hormone shots, sudden mood swings, excessive weight gain, and so on, and so on. Modra recalled listening to the women and thinking it all sounded miserable. Kevin was also affected after his visits with other aspiring parents. He worried that some of the husbands seemed demoralized as if castrated by their wives. “Sweetie, Ben actually swore that those shots have seriously messed with Becky’s hormone levels to the point that she is actually idling at just under bitchy every day.” He seemed to be mortified when he thought that Modra was actually considering the process.

At some point someone had been kind enough to provide them with information on India and facilities where they could rent a uterus. Kevin and Modra spent entire evenings on the India option, but could not get comfortable with the idea and killed it immediately. Russia also made the consideration list for its low-cost approach to IVF while couples vacation, but like with India, the idea of conceiving in a Petri dish did not appeal to either of them.

They spent week after week weighing their options. She remembered wondering how necessary it all was before they finally waived the surrender flag and completely ruled out, along with adoption, any form of medical assistance to conceive. By the end of February 2000, it all boiled down to a mutual agreement. The agreement stated that, if they could not get pregnant "naturally" it must be for a good reason. They had no way of knowing what life had planned down the road and they were not going to change the hand of fate, even if Modra's childhood priest was tormenting her in her dreams.

Their decision was encouraged by the situation of Dennis and Holly Scholtz, a happy young couple they met in one of the groups. The group had been dubbed "Working for Children" by Dennis himself. This spry young couple had to mortgage their home to pay for the IVF process, not once, but twice before it took. Dennis was so stressed financially, that at one point Kevin actually stopped golfing with him, refusing to become depressed with their financial situation. Holly baffled Kevin when she

confided that she preferred not to work when the baby was born, but had no choice. Kevin guessed the happy couple never thought about the overall expense of raising a child, not to mention mortgaging your home, twice, just to conceive. He likened it to people who buy more home than they can afford without a thought to property taxes, insurance, and just the everyday living expenses that come with a bigger home. The difference is that you can't walk away from a child when you can't afford it. Kevin and Modra later learned that Dennis and Holly filed for divorce a year after their baby was born.

“Never saw that one coming,” Kevin remarked sarcastically when he'd heard about their divorce.