

Office Visit

by Deborah Oster Pannell

I was at the doctor's office, having my blood drawn. I was talking to the medical assistant. She was tying off my arm to tap my vein. She was almost 8 months pregnant with a girl, though her belly stuck out straight in front of her enough to be told she was having a boy. She was not even 30. She would probably be in labor for less than 8 hours, hardly a day's work. I did not tell her about my 39 hour ordeal at age almost 41. It was not a fair comparison, and I would never use words like rip or tear when talking to a future first time mom. She would find out soon enough, and yes, every story is different.

I looked down at the rubber stretched tied tight around my bicep. The skin looked bunched up like rice paper, or parchment. The hollow of my elbow seemed vulnerable. All those thoughts I'd been having recently of my son being injured came back to me - his 11-year-old limbs smashing between crushed metal, or shattered beneath boulders dropped off bridges. I tried to remember the last time I had sex. It seemed so far away. My skin was dry, thinning, and I noticed the long hairs that stood up on my forearms. They seemed to have grown longer and more crooked.

My body, below the waist seemed hollow now, no exertion required by me for the sake of pleasing a partner. I had become weak and soft, a pillow to my son's head if he needed comforting, a mirror of his sadness or a place of deflection for his anger. I wanted to tell this rounded young woman that her heart was going to be perforated by the unmet expectation that her child would do her bidding. All of that preparation and wondering if I was doing it right dissipated by his unpredictable choices. The culmination of so many years of good girl training was a sense of bewildered freedom, as I surveyed my options.

I couldn't tell you what part of the bell curve I've landed on. It would be as easy to slack off now as it would be to go for blue ribbons and gold medals. It doesn't really matter which way I

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choose, as long as I don't give myself an ulcer on the way there. Still every morning I wake up and wonder at what new challenges I've constructed for myself.

Natural or medicated. That was the choice as I have seen it. Women used to die regularly in childbirth. The medical assistant was scared about getting an epidural, that it would hurt. I told her that when it came time, if she had enough energy to be afraid of the needle, then she didn't need it. In my experience, when it's required, there is no other choice - the piercing of the needle is the least of your worries.

During my check up, I described various chronic complaints - a sore throat, swelling of the tongue, lingering low back and leg pain, little things growing on my face and my scalp. I was tired, stressed out. The truth is, nothing was about to fall off, or out. I needed to sit in front of a professional and have her tell me that I didn't have cancer. I needed to be held, stroked, loved from the inside out. I walked out with a prescription to see the dermatologist.

