



## Trying

by Cullen Curtiss

We told no one that we were trying. I wanted this to be between me and my husband only. Having children in your mid-to-late 30s is definitely a topic grabbing headlines, but this wasn't about what everyone else was doing. I didn't want to bond with other couples over the issue. I didn't want getting pregnant to be an issue. I wanted it to be a natural part of what happened to me and my husband as a result of being together.

Perhaps it was an innate memory of my distant ancestors conceiving

that had me rapt. Without trying or ceremony or help, pregnancy slipped under the woman's flesh like a secret and made her rounder by the day. She'd still gather water from the river, and cook wild rabbit over an open fire, and keep the cave warm. Of course, her growing secret represented another mouth to feed, but it also meant there would soon be another pair of hands – either way, it was the result of what we're all here to do.

Soon the months became too many for my age made me anxious, and our lack of success made me feel like I should do some reading to get ahead. I bought a book called *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*, and devoured it. That the secret would just slip under my skin was perhaps a fantasy, but still we were hopeful.

I kept telling myself: Conception happens in a tangle in the dirt when the flames of your rock-ringed fire have become embers, right? It's just you and your loved one doing what you do, right? What could be easier? We were born to do this.

People all around me were getting pregnant or trying to get pregnant and I could always feel the question before it was asked: "When are you going to pop one out?" To them, it seemed natural to ask as I was approaching the bewitching age of 35 and happily married. To me, it was as if they were peering into our cave or sitting on the edge of our bed.

Taking advantage of the modern world's powers of investigation, we decided a semen analysis would at least rule out any problems. Fortunately, it revealed my husband was extraordinary. He joked about sharing his count with the world. The headline would read, "Over 75 million per ejaculation!" The image? My Hercules with his shirt off and my arms wrapped around him as I looked adorably up into his face. But we kept our mouths shut while I charted my temperature, modified my alcohol and caffeine intake, and timed intercourse.

After nearly a year of trying, we moved to a new city and I found myself telling a fellow classmate in a gardening course about our situation. I didn't even know his last name and I had transported him to our tangle in the dirt. What I hoped to achieve, I don't know, but it turned out that his wife was studying acupuncture and claimed that it helped. I started going immediately. This Chinese approach was permissible – a subtle enough, ancient, seemingly outside of the hoopla Western medicine was making of reproductive techniques. The first session lasted for over an hour. The second-year acupuncture student dressed in her doctorly

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whites was very sweet and apologized every few minutes for the invasion of my privacy. On the contrary, I was compelled to tell her all of the details – about our sexual habits, the length of my cycle, what I ate for breakfast, and how I felt when someone cut me off in traffic. I let her and her supervisor into the cave, but lied to everyone else.

the loud and cheery nurse practitioner, “let’s get started on a regimen of Clomid and intrauterine inseminations.”

Her white coat did not calm me, did not make me want to share, and neither did the clinic’s environment. If nothing was wrong we weren’t going to voluntarily join all of the other couples in the waiting room. Avoiding their glances

my neck. When people asked about the significance, clearly reacting to the boldness of it, I told them I thought it was pretty. I also paid strangers to look into my past, my future, and my energy. Without realizing it, I was assembling an army.

The Vedic Astrologer identified that I needed to chill out – I was too

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Three hours of acupuncture a week were required to help me adjust to the altitude, I said.

The diagnosis: blood deficiency. This seemed reasonable – I wasn’t getting pregnant because I didn’t have enough blood. In addition to the tea that smelled like the ocean, there were herbs in pill form. Also prescribed were lots of roasted beets, cups of warm milk at night, and fewer mountain climbs.

Then we traveled back to Berkeley, our former home of 10-plus years, and stayed with a woman I knew had had problems conceiving. I was afraid to be alone with her as I knew she’d ask.

While her beautiful towheaded toddler ran around the house, she asked, and I fell apart. She urged me to go to a fertility specialist, and if her tone wasn’t enough, she described her trying experiences. We bonded that weekday afternoon, and I felt strangely stronger, more optimistic, and galvanized.

The battery of tests, involving too much blood, fluid, and probing with cold, sharp instruments, revealed nothing but normality. This was encouraging, but the Western approach seemed aggressive: “Now that we’ve diagnosed you with unspecified infertility,” said

once was enough to last a lifetime. We were going back to the cave.

We started having sex every other day, which was not as nice as one might imagine. With spontaneity so remote, we fought. I began to think that the experts knew nothing more than I did. I began to want a baby more than anything – more than publishing a novel, more than traveling the world. My unborn child had become like a rare item, a hard-to-get commodity, something I had to jockey for, or negotiate with the border patrol to obtain.

Finally, I had nothing else going on in my life but this pursuit. That the secret would just slip under my skin was indeed a fantasy. I couldn’t help but begin to tell friends. The “Relax, it’ll happen” line was just as bad, if not worse than the “You’ve just got to be Zen” one. Everyone wanted to know what was happening, but no one had any clue what to do with the information. We’d been right to keep it to ourselves.

After deciding that acupuncture wasn’t working, I bought a milagro (meaning miracle, this is a Mexican charm that represents a wish) of a pregnant torso and wore it around

high-powered. August or September might be good months for conception (it was May). Really, though, the answer lay in my needing more beauty in my life and in forgiving myself for the abortion I’d had eight years earlier. Also, I should always wear the emerald ring that my husband gave me when he proposed because green is the color of fertility.

In that same month, a healing touch practitioner put me in a trance by asking me to visualize my baby. Miraculously, I went somewhere. In a haze I saw my very own living room, where I held my baby, could smell it, and kiss its feet. My husband was there, too, and upon seeing our child in his hands, I jumped off the table and out of the trance. According to the practitioner, this meant that it would happen – I just had to relax.

So I relaxed. I let more friends in. I’m relaxing, I said. It’s my new approach. Perhaps it was the one thing I hadn’t tried. I stopped thinking about what my body felt like or what I ate and drank; we stopped thinking about when to have sex and just had it. The intimacy between us came back and sometimes I could feel the warmth from the dying embers and smell the

I began reading the section of *Taking Charge of Your Fertility* that discussed reproductive medicine. Those who had had their children naturally said that medical intervention wasn't bad: "It works, and if you want a baby, why does it matter how you get it?" Just when I thought I'd heard it all, a friend offered her husband's sperm. So we were publicly, officially trying. I felt like a charity case, imagining that, on occasion, we were the sad topic of our friends' conversations. Back at the reproductive medicine clinic, the cherry nurse practitioner from eight months earlier was out on maternity leave, so we spoke with the lead doctor, who was reluctant to promise anything. We began visiting that office, an hour's drive from our home, on a regular basis. We had a new army and we were completely dependent on them.

All who knew, the total number of which now rivaled that of a small village, kept tabs and prayed. The details made for good reportage: Two doses of Letrozole on Days 5-9; begin peeing on an ovulation stick Days 12-16. If no indication of ovulation by Day 16, call the doctor and go in for an ultrasound, take more Letrozole, and go back in several days; before you go, shoot yourself in the stomach with hormones to ensure ovulation. On the big day, get the sperm sample washed, culling the good from the bad. Wait in the waiting room with the other hopefuls. Get inseminated while starting up at a ceiling decorated with cutouts of baby pictures. Two weeks later, take a blood test regardless of whether or not you get your period. With a negative pregnancy blood test, request another prescription of Letrozole to begin the whole damn process all over again.

Our cave was nowhere to be found. In our second round, I conceived, and we told only family. We didn't

view into the cave — with that privilege, they still offered nothing.

I imagined my face on the cover of some tabloid in a mess of teas and unwashed hair. Inside there would be pictures of us leaving the doctor's office, huddling over lattes, and walking on the beach hand-in-hand while we digested the news.

My husband reached out to men who had had similar problems and were now fathers. One of them invited us to join his wife, adopted child, and miracle baby for dinner. We all discussed our fertility issues over pasta. They told us to start adoption proceedings immediately because they were expensive and bound to take forever. At the time, I said I would never have a dinner like that ever again. I felt as if I was sitting at the

cadre of experts whom I had allowed a sperm analysis.

I urged my husband to get another as well as my own.

I had to manage their disappointment to friends — talking about it meant I forced myself to return phone calls, ice plant at night. During these times, I drop to my knees and close up like an clear that my cycle was beginning, I'd cool dirt. Still, though, when it was

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Those who had had their children naturally said that medical intervention wasn't bad: "It works, and if you want a baby, why does it matter how you get it?" Just when I thought I'd heard it all, a friend offered her husband's sperm.



even share the news with a couple who had finally conceived after five years. Why would they need to hear our story? They had their own.

Ten weeks later, I learned our baby was dead. Slowly, I told many people. I initially thought I did so because I owed them something for their support, but looking back, I know it was because I needed them. In fact, I began to need anyone who would listen and this triggered a memory of a tarot card that turned up in a session with one of my oldest, dearest friends years earlier. At the time, I was conflicted about getting pregnant and about moving to my husband's hometown. The question posed was: Should I get pregnant?

Among the cards that appeared from the Motherpeace deck was the "Ten of Discs." In it, a woman is giving birth surrounded by 12 other women, all of whom look like confident warriors with their colorful shields and rooted stances. My reaction was disgust. "Why would I want to give birth in front of all those people? Birth should be private!"

My friend said it was one of her favorite cards – it gave her an enormous feeling of support and love.

I knew then that her reaction was the healthier of the two and I know it still, though that didn't make it any easier to change. Nor did the truth that my husband and I could not conceive without lots of help.

However, in anticipation of our third round, I found myself hoping the 12 warrior women would show up.

My wish came true. And it seems that since then, the 12 warrior women have not left my side – through the twice-daily Heparin shots designed to thin my blood; through the twice-daily doses of progesterone designed to augment my body's own production; through a bleeding episode and early contractions that landed me in the emergency room; through upwards of 25 ultrasounds, and countless decisions about which way to turn.

Those who said it wouldn't matter how I conceived were absolutely right, however righteous at the time. Morning, noon, and night, my burgeoning belly pulses and squirms and ripples with a life so many people have helped along. I hold it in my hands and my heart fills.

We have a village to thank for our forthcoming Aquarius and this makes me feel proud, cared for, and loved in ways I could never have imagined. ❧

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