

A Woman's Mutation

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing and Poetics

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Abstract

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A Woman's Mutation is a collection of essays and fragments about becoming a mother in the United States as a French woman in the middle of a pandemic. It touches on the subjects of mental health, motherhood doubts, legacy, life as a woman, the difference between France and the USA when it comes to pregnancy, rules to follow for a healthy baby, and more.

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First Month, Fruit Baby

Week 2, baby is the size of a poppy seed, or a grain of sugar, or a water bear, or invisible ink, or Elsa's magic power.

Week 3, baby is the size of a poppy seed, or a grain of sugar, or a vanilla bean seed, or a water bear, or a fleck of Pixy Stix dust, or a crystal from Mary Poppins' spoon full of sugar.

Week 4, baby is the size of a poppy seed, or a sesame seed, or a round sprinkle, or an ant, or a tiny crumb from Cookie Monster's cookie.

Rule #1

Don't drink caffeine.

No worries, I don't like coffee.

Wait! There is caffeine in black tea, green tea, and even white tea.

Well, herbal tea it is.

Stop! Most herbal teas should be avoided.

So, what can I drink in the morning?? Juices?

No, no, no, you can only drink pasteurized juices. Even freshly squeezed juices are a no-go.

Are juices pasteurized? I thought it was only milky products. It's getting too complicated. I will just drink water for the next nine months.

Baby Fever

Dear Little One,

I got the baby fever three years before you grew into a pumpkin in my stretched belly. It was the middle of winter. We visited the holiday party of our friends' family, who feels like our family. There was a little boy, a boy who was in his mother's belly a few months before when they visited your grandparents in France. Just like you, he was the first grandchild and was loved by everybody.

Our friend handed him to me. His tiny hands clutched at the collar of my beige knitted dress; his warm skin was soft on my cleavage; he fell asleep while I was standing and talking. Our friends suggested that my breast and soothing French accent made him feel comfortable. I didn't want to disturb the little one, so I sat down on a blue chair, blue like my hair at the time, and let him sleep comfortably. I became a statue to freeze the moment. Love filled my heart, and I dreamed about what it would feel like to have my own child sleep in my arms.

Love,

Mama

Not A Covid Baby

At the beginning of the quarantine, people speculated that there would be a rise in childbirths, and the term “Covid Baby” became popular. Did you know that in reality, the data estimates 300,000 fewer childbirths in the U.S.?

Here’s the story of how we became pregnant in the middle of the pandemic.

Step 1: The Fertility-Friendly Lubricant

Our first buy to become pregnant was a lubricant. A magical liquid to help the swimmers make their way to the divine egg. Not a Faberge Egg yet of similar worth for people wanting to grow their family. In our quest for the magical liquid, we discovered that one brand dominated the market, Pre-Seed. We followed the masses and got our hands on it.

Using a fertility-friendly lubricant removed the word sexy from sexy time. The lubricant had to be injected inside my body with an applicator like the ones around tampons.

Step 2: The Ovulation Kit

After a few months of trying, we did some research and found out that tracking menstruation on an app is not accurate enough to find out the ovulation time frame. So, we got the Easy@Home ovulation kit from Amazon to make sure that we had the precise fertility window.

You cannot use the ovulation test strip first thing in the morning or too late in the evening. The prime time is when you are in the office, and of course, trying to get pregnant can hurt your career. So, you need to play hide and seek with your coworkers and manager.

When the time comes, you have to conceal the strip into your pockets to go to the bathroom. In the morning, don't forget to select an outfit to hide your desire to become a mother.

Then, you need to find the perfect location to be discreet. In my situation, I had two choices:

1. The women's bathroom with no privacy, thanks to the American-style stalls with holes between the doors and the dividers. Also, someone could see me grab a disposable mouthwash cup needed to dip the strip, which I am thankful that my workplace had because I know that most don't.
2. The all-gender individual bathrooms on a different floor so that my teammate wouldn't see me going. The one on our floor was right in front of our office.

Women must become ghosts so that nobody finds out about this secret: the wish of wanting life.

Step 3: The Ava Bracelet

When you are tired of transforming into a ghost every afternoon for months, you are willing to do anything. Thanks to your search history, you will be spammed with ads for any kind of fertility product.

This was when I discovered the Ava Fertility Tracker, a bracelet to wear only at night to record data and figure out the fertility window. No more ghosting to pee in a damn cup in exchange for \$259 for a bracelet.

TAKE MY MONEY

I wore the bracelet every night for more than a year with no success.

Step 4: The Blood Test

After trying to conceive for a year and a half, time to go to the OBGYN to talk about infertility.

The same day of the appointment, I had to go to two places to get my blood drawn. A recent policy change let the OBGYN office get only the blood for one of the two tests because it had to be transported to another location to be tested. I ended the day with a Band-Aids on each arm.

Step 5: The Tubes Test

On top of blood tests, the OBGYN requested a couple of infertility tests at the Seattle Reproductive Medicine.

For once, my husband was the one to put some specimen in a cup while I had a date with a scorpion to look at my fallopian tubes.

The machine was big and curved like the tail of the predatory arachnids. The technician injected transparent ink inside my lower body for the imagery to work. The machine took snapshots to show the journey of the venom, bringing more and more pressure inside my body.

Step 6: The Mosie Baby Kit

After the results from all the tests, Seattle Reproductive Medicine recommended IUI, a.k.a Intrauterine Insemination, where a technician takes the semen, cleans it, and inserts it in the uterus. The cost: \$300 for the consultation, then \$600 per cycle. Seattle Reproductive Medicine recommended doing it at least four times before trying another more expensive intervention.

The cost was a bit too much for us. After some research, my husband learned about ICI, a.k.a Intracervical Insemination, which can be done at home. All you need is a kit, and there's not much difference between the success rate of the two. My husband found the Mosie Baby kit that consists of two insemination syringes and a cup. The bundle with the ovulation predictor kit and the pregnancy test kit was only \$119.

By the time we received the kit, I worked from home due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Kirkland, so I decided to try the whole pee in the cup thing again. It turned out that the Ava bracelet was not synchronized with my ovulation time. Here goes the money spent on gadgets marketed to desperate women wanting to become mothers.

The first cycle didn't work out. Instead of buying new syringes for each cycle, we decided to clean the same kit right after using it to save money and the environment. So, we tried the same thing again the following month. And it worked!

Two weeks later, we had a positive pregnancy test. We didn't believe it, so we did two more tests a few days later from different brands, and they were all positive. It was the beginning of August, and we were finally starting our journey to become parents after two years of trying.

Item	Quantity	Unit Cost	Total
Pre-Seed	12	\$19.99	\$239.88
Easy@Home	2	\$19.99	\$39.98
Ava Fertility Tracker	1	\$259	\$259
OBGYN	1	\$42.68	\$42.68
Blood test #1	1	\$69.55	\$69.55
Blood test #2 Collection + Analysis	1	\$75.13 + \$42.76	\$117.89
Husband Collection + Analysis	1	\$15.93 + \$125.00	\$140.93
Scorpion Date	1	\$233.23	\$233.23
IUI Consultation	0	\$300	\$0
IUI	0	\$600	\$0
Mosie Baby Kit	1	\$119	\$119
Dream of becoming Mama TOTAL			\$1,262.14

The French Know Best

A few years ago, my friends had a Halloween/housewarming party. During the party, someone told me that he was reading a book with his wife about raising kids like French people. Then he asked me how French people do it. I looked at him with big eyes. Yes, I am French, but at the time, I was not pregnant and never raised a kid. Weird enough, this was not the first time this had happened.

Now that I am pregnant, I can see that there are many differences between France and the U.S. when it comes to having a child. Most of my friends with kids are in France, so they are my go-to source of information. But then, I have to translate the information. Regulations, standardized sizes, social behaviors, official guidelines, even available products are different.

Rule #2

Make a baby budget so you know what you need and don't overspend.

But good luck budgeting your hospital bill. Neither the insurance nor the hospital will give you a clear answer, and you will probably have surprises added to the invoice at the end.

Second Month, Fruit Baby

Week 5, baby is the size of a sesame seed, or a grain of rice, or an orange seed, or a smarties, or a ladybird, or a pop rocks crystal, or a bead from a letter bracelet, or a fly caught in chopsticks in *The Karate Kid*.

Week 6, baby is the size of a lentil, or a blueberry, or a sweet pea, or a jellybean, or a honeybee, or a tiny chiclet gum, or a pearl from Audrey Hepburn's necklace in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Week 7, baby is the size of a blueberry, or a raspberry, or a gummy bear, or a silkworm cocoon, or a Sweethearts candy, or a Lemonhead candy, or the red pill from *The Matrix*.

Week 8, baby is the size of a kidney bean, or a raspberry, or a grape, or a cola bottle candy, or a gummy bear, or a snail, or a bike spoke bead, or the emerald engagement ring in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Rule #3

Don't eat charcuterie.

You know I am French, right? How can I stay away from jambon, saucisson, pâté, rillettes, terrine, salami, rosette, coppa, mortadella, chiffonnade, confit, foie gras, pancetta, bacon, and prosciutto?

It's too dangerous for the baby so stay away from deli meats and pâtés.

But -

Also, don't eat fish high in mercury, but you need to eat two to three servings of fish a week.

So, what can I eat?

Shrimp, pollack, cod, tilapia, trout, salmon. But no smoked salmon, even if it's delicious.

Zoloft Mama

The last time I felt like a zombie was when my doctor increased my Zoloft daily dose from 50 mg to 100 mg. The new dose turned me into a Zoloft zombie again, same as when I first started to take the magical blue pill. I remembered how my brain was constantly foggy and the lack of energy, but it eventually went away within two weeks. It did not stop when I was taking 100 mg daily. After two months of zombie-ing through life, I decided to break my pills in two and go back to 50 mg. The irony in this is that when I went to see the doctor, I wanted to stop taking the magical pill because I heard that it was not suitable to be on antidepressants when pregnant, and we were actively trying.

My doctor said if a woman already has depression and anxiety, it's better to keep her on the magical pill when pregnant. Not all antidepressants are safe, but Zoloft is one of the safest, and because I take the lowest dose, my psychiatrist said that I would have a healthier and safer pregnancy on it. On top of that, I did not want to go through withdrawal while dealing with pregnancy symptoms such as nausea, headache, and insomnia.

My friends and family in France are not aware that I am still on antidepressants. Back in 2016, I shared with them that I needed help to balance the chemicals in my brain. Their response was dismissive and argumentative. Mental health is taboo in France, and people think that antidepressants are overprescribed. I felt that way too. Living with a mental health counselor, and talking about it with my American family, has helped acknowledge and address my depression.

My work environment had been toxic for years, between bullying colleagues, overbearing managers, and the insane commute. I often cried when I got home and spent my weekends lying on the sofa,

watching Netflix, and sometimes simply waiting for time to pass, lacking the mental energy to even follow a show.

It all changed the day I spent two hours stuck in traffic to realize that I forgot my laptop at home when I parked at work. It only took me 20 minutes to go back home on the same road but in the other way. I broke down at the thought of driving another two hours to the office, and I called in sick. I cried a lot that day and finally admitted to my husband that I needed help. I couldn't continue living like I was. We made an appointment the following week to talk to the doctor, and I was prescribed Zoloft.

The problem is that I was diagnosed with what used to be known as melancholia, now named dysthymia or persistent depressive disorder.

Even if I feel better, it is still there in the background. In the end, I prefer to trust the words of my psychiatrist and not risk getting off antidepressants while pregnant. I am a Zoloft mama, but I am no longer a Zoloft zombie.

~

During the first trimester, I always felt tired, but I was refreshed after a nap for a few hours.

During the second trimester, I had insomnia. I couldn't sleep until early in the morning. Even if I slept more than eight hours, when I woke up, my brain was foggy. I had to take a nap in the afternoon,

even if I woke up at noon. As soon as the sky turned dark, my brain was fully awake. The moon was chasing away the fog in my brain.

I became a vampire.

Pandemic Metamorphosis

a zombie creating life.

turning my eyes away from my body.

worried about my weight, gaining too much and not enough.

home yesterday, today, tomorrow, for a year, maybe two.

sitting all day and every day.

no longer wearing a bra or makeup.

masked up with gloves to go outside.

a cat lady turning into a mama bear.

a butterfly.

To Bra or Not to Bra

Before I became pregnant, like many women, the first thing I did when I got home from work was to remove my bra. Unlike many women, I then screamed or sang “Free the boobs” under the bewildered eyes of my kitties. Removing my bra was being able to move and breathe without pressure around the body. When COVID started to spread in the U.S., I began working from home, which allowed me to only wear sports bras from the time I woke up to the time I worked out. On days filled with meetings, I wore a bralette, which was much more comfortable but didn’t give the same shape and support, because - you know - SOCIETY.

For example, I would always wear a shirt on top of my sports bra and long yoga pants at the gym. At home, I simply wear my sports bra with shorts.

As a woman, I am expected to wear a bra in the office. Failing to do so runs the risk of stares and a potential warning for dress-code violation. After all, the slightest hint of a nipple may shine through. Men’s nipples, on the other hand, are given little attention. Nobody cares about their nipples. They can be shirtless at the office gym, while women must stay carefully concealed. Never mind the fact that we are all at the same place to sweat.

Working from home meant that I could wear comfortable clothes and just put on a nice top for meetings without worrying about judgments or being called by HR for a too-deep V-neck button-up shirt. This happened during one of my first jobs.

March was the beginning of the free-the-boobs home revolution, and it was so comfortable.

Once I began reading up on pregnancy online, the algorithms immediately began bombarding me with articles—one provided tips on how to avoid having saggy breasts after pregnancy:

1. Check if your mother has saggy breasts. No thanks. This was not an image that I wanted in my head. The authors' theory, which was not scientifically proven, was that if your mother has saggy breasts, you are more likely to have them too.
2. Wear a bra as much as possible during and after the pregnancy because breasts become bigger and heavier. Gravity does its magic on them.

At that time, my body was already changing, and I was going crazy about finding comfortable underwear that fit me. I tried ordering online and had to send everything back. My body was morphing, but not enough to warrant maternity clothing. But then again, when is the right time to start wearing maternity clothes? When pregnancy apps and books tell you to? And what size would I need anyways? I mentioned these concerns to my friend in Montreal. At the time, the Canadian city was no longer on lockdown, so she recommended going to the store to try some clothes. Unfortunately, clothing stores in Seattle weren't allowing customers to try anything on. So, no matter what, clothes had to be brought home to try them on and returned if they didn't fit. The first pregnancy clothes that I bought were a couple of nursing bras.

When I started to look online for nursing bras, mainly at Amazon and Target, I became overwhelmed by the number of options and vast differences in prices. Cheap bras were not unheard of on Amazon, but do they have good support to avoid saggy boobs? The reviews were not that great. Even if they did have good reviews, my work experience in the tech industry left me skeptical of their authenticity. I brought up the subject to my best friend and his wife. She recommended the Bravado Designs Body Silk Seamless Maternity/Nursing Bra, which I was happy to find in the U.S. until I saw the price: \$50 for a bralette.

I realized that maternity and baby industries, like the wedding industry, use the event's significance to increase their prices. I paid \$35 for simple maternity leggings at Target... \$35! Hello pink tax, I see you.

Luckily, I found the Bravado Designs bras on sale online at Nordstrom, so I ordered one black and one beige. Classic colors to stay safe. My friend was right. It had good support, but I was not ready to say goodbye to my free-the-boobs home revolution.

Here is the thing about living in today's society: we are accustomed to getting instant gratification. Wearing a bra today to possibly avoid having saggy breasts in the future is hard to decide on. Did I want to be comfortable at home, or did I want to potentially not have saggy breasts in the future? To bra or not to bra?

9-Week Ultrasound

Dear Little One,

Your dad is waiting in the hospital's parking lot. He cannot come inside because of the pandemic. I am scared to go on my own. I have been avoiding hospitals for most of my life. I was hospitalized only three times. First, when I was one year old and had toxoplasma because of my nanny's cats; I still wear the scar under my left armpit. In 2013, when we had our car accident in France three days before our wedding; I still wear the scar above my right eyebrow. The third time was when I lived in Mexico and partied too much. I only remember the nurse getting mad for carrying the IV when going to the bathroom. Today is different. We will find out if you exist and if you are alive.

The white room is cold, but the gel on my belly is warm. I am lying on the bed, trying to understand what I see. The screen is black and white with images like *The Outer Limits* intro until a peanut appears in a black bubble. This is the first time I see you, and warmth fills my heart. The technician says that you are moving, but the only movement I see is the line going up and down at the bottom of the screen. I recognize it from many shows and movies: the line of life. You have a heartbeat. You are alive.

Then, the technician informs me that we need to do a transvaginal ultrasound to get a better view. At first, I am nervous, but I remember that I had to do a biopsy a few years before after a positive pap smear. Don't worry, it turned out negative. Lucky for you, you are a boy, so you won't have to experience these torture instruments. Turns out that the camera is so small that I don't feel it much.

From this angle, I see your head, your body, and your tail like a tadpole. You look like a baby. You are my baby. I feel sad that your dad cannot be with us. He would be in awe.

The technician walks me to the exit, and I take this opportunity to ask if you are okay. Unfortunately, she cannot share anything or could be in legal trouble. She informs me that the doctor will call with the results or talk about them during my next appointment. You see, your mom is a ball of anxiety. When I had the positive pap smear, the doctor called me instead of sending the results by email, so hearing that the doctor will share the results in person scares me. I freak out when I meet your dad in the car, but he is good at calming me down, and the doctor informs us that nothing is wrong with the ultrasound a day later.

I give the two printed pictures to your father. He smiles, and we both realize that you are about to change our lives. We are excited and scared at the same time, but we can't wait to meet you.

Love,

Mama

Rule #4

Don't eat unpasteurized cheese.

Basically, all the French goodness...

You can still have the processed ones.

Well, I guess it's better than nothing, right?

Third Month, Fruit Baby

Week 9, baby is the size of a grape, or a green olive, or a date, or a piece of chocolate, or a butterfly, or a Hershey's Kiss, or a jack, or a thimble from Peter Pan.

Week 10, baby is the size of a kumquat, or a prune, or a fig, or a fortune cookie, or a dragonfly, or an original Polly Pocket, or a Tootsie Pop candy, or the Heart of the Ocean blue diamond from Titanic.

Week 11, baby is the size of a fig, or a plum, or a large strawberry, or a macaron, or a hummingbird, or a LEGO man, or a Hot Wheels car, or Groucho Marx's mustache.

Week 12, baby is the size of a lime, or a kiwi, or a cupcake, or a chick, or a roll of film, or a Hacky Sack, or the Jurassic Park amber cane handle.

Week 13, baby is the size of a peapod, or a lemon, or a peach, or a piece of brownie, or a duckling, or a Tamagotchi, or a Pokémon trading card, or the stopwatch from *The Polar Express*.

Rule #5

Drink three glasses of milk a day, but not while eating, or you will have heartburns and only pasteurized milk. The best you can get is nonfat pasteurized milk.

Do you mean cold raw milk?

You can do hot cocoa.

No thanks, my stomach has a hard time digesting hot milk. So cold milk it is, but when am I supposed to drink it if

I can't drink it while eating and digesting?

The Announcement

For eight years, my grandmother asked when we would have a baby. I am her oldest grandchild and the only married one. Since our wedding almost ten years ago, many people commented about when we would grow our family, but nobody as often as my grandmother.

I wanted her to be one of the firsts to know that we were expecting, but I also wanted to wait until the end of the first trimester. It was difficult to not say a word, especially on the day of her birthday. My aunts, uncles, and cousins celebrated at her home, so I called one of them on WhatsApp to wish a happy birthday to my grandmother. The temptation to share the big secret was hard to resist.

The weekend of our twelfth week in the pregnancy, we woke up early because of the nine hours of the time difference in France to share the big news.

My grandmother doesn't have the internet. My mother got her a cellphone for Christmas, but she can only call and text with it. So, I had to add credits to Google Voice to call from my laptop to her landline.

Grandma: "Allo?"

Me: "C'est moi, mamie!"

Grandma: "C'est qui?"

Me: "Julie"

Grandma: "Ahhh, ma grande!"

I love that every phone conversation starts the same way. Even if I am the smallest of my cousins, she still calls me “ma grande” since I’m the oldest one.

There were some noises in the background, and my grandma screamed, “c’est Julie!” Turned out that two of my uncles, one of my aunts, and two of my cousins were at her house, so we switched to a WhatsApp video call.

When the time came, I couldn’t say a word because it was still hard to believe that we were pregnant after two years of trying. Instead, I told them that I had something to show them and held the ultrasound picture in front of the camera.

Grandma: “c’est pas vrai”

Eight years that she had been waiting. She couldn’t believe it. Everybody laughed because she didn’t realize that she was graduating to the status of great-grandmother.

After sharing the good news, we added my parents, brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins to the call. Everybody was so excited since this baby is the first one of the next generation, and it was fun to see my grandmother interact on the screen.

12-Week Ultrasound

Dear Little One,

This is the first time your father is allowed to come inside the hospital. Today we are doing genetic screening to make sure that you are okay. The first part of the test is an ultrasound for the nuchal translucency measurement. This will let us know if you have a chance to have a trisomy. We are told that the ultrasound is 70% accurate.

This is the second time I see you on the screen. You no longer look like a tadpole. We can see your head, your body, your legs, your hand, even your little fingers. This time I see you moving, and this is magical.

We look at you turn on the screen, and it's hard to believe that this is currently happening in my belly. I don't feel anything, but I see it happening.

Your father is smiling. He is so happy to see you.

You move your hands above your head like you are clapping. Then all your little fingers go down except for the middle one. So young and already rebelling against your father. Of course, your bird flip isn't for me. I am keeping you warm and feeding you to help you grow. I stopped eating French cheeses. I stopped eating charcuterie. I stopped drinking my morning tea. I changed my beauty routine—all for you.

The midwife tells us that the ultrasound is fine and now informs us about the different screenings we can do to ensure that you are okay. The first one looks at your chromosomes in my blood. It has a 90% accuracy. We can even find out if you have two X chromosomes or one X and one Y.

The second one is for your dad and mama to get tested to know if we carry the same genes that you could receive and make you sick. This one only gives you a 25% chance to be sick if both of your parents are carriers. I tell the midwife that I am from France and my husband from the U.S., so the likelihood of the two of us carrying the same genes is smaller than people from the same country. This is the reason I give, but in reality, your mama is freaking out. Even if there's only a 25% chance for you to get sick if we both have the same gene, I will go crazy. So, we decide that this is not worth doing.

A couple of weeks later, we find out that you have a 99% chance of not having a trisomy, and you are a boy. But honestly, you can be whoever you want. We want you to be you.

When I tell my friends and family in France that you are a boy, they are surprised at how early we found out. They also laugh at the fact that the technician wrote head and body on the ultrasound. At this point, it's straightforward. Look at this little nose.

Love,

Mama

Genetic Screening

In the U.S., genetic screening consists of an ultrasound to measure the nuchal thickness to know the baby's risk of having Down syndrome, trisomy 18, or heart problems. The nuchal translucency test is only 70% accurate, so the nurses also offered other genetic screenings by blood analysis. We opted for the NIPS test that looks at chromosomes 13, 18, 21, which is 99% accurate. Also, we can look at the X and Y chromosomes to know the sex of the baby.

Apparently, when they look at the chromosomes for the trisomy in France, they don't look at the X and Y chromosomes. You have to wait until the 20-week ultrasound to see the sex of the baby. And sometimes, they get it wrong. I have seen a few funny videos on Instagram with people having a gender reveal party and ending up with a baby of the opposite sex.

I also mentioned the carrier screening test to my friends in France. They had never heard of it. This test investigates the father and mother's blood to see if they have the same genetic condition. If it's the case, the baby has a 25% chance of getting it. This seemed too stressful for a low probability of the baby to be affected, so we decided to skip it. It's probably why it is not offered in France.

It was surprising to see the difference in genetic screening in France.

Being Pregnant

Being pregnant is weird.

When there's no pain but comfort, worry fills the body.

Is my baby okay?

Was the bath from last night too hot?

Did I eat something bad?

When your companions are headaches and breathlessness,

you turn into a roasting chicken at night,

and become a crab when you get out of bed,

worry fades away.

Rule #6

Don't eat raw eggs.

Who eats raw eggs? It's disgusting.

Raw eggs can be found in raw cookie dough, cake batter, eggnog, ice cream, custard, chocolate mousse, hollandaise sauce, bearnaise sauce, mayonnaise, and Caesar salad dressing.

So, you're telling me that I need to say goodbye to sauces and desserts?

No, you just need to be careful. Also, only eat boiled eggs. Forget about sunny side up or runny scrambled eggs. And don't forget that they have to be pasteurized too.

Fourth Month, Fruit Baby

Week 14, baby is the size of a lemon, or a peach, or a pear, or a navel orange, or a moon cake, or a hamster, or a bagel bite, or a Bubble Tape bubble gum, or the baseball from *The Sandlot*.

Week 15, baby is the size of an apple, or a navel orange, or an avocado, or a pear, or a doughnut, or a Pekin bantam chick, or a ring pop, or a Cootie Catcher, or Homer Simpson's donut.

Week 16, baby is the size of an avocado, or a navel orange, or a Belgian waffle, or a serinus canary, or a hacky sack, or a Polly Pocket necklace, or the music box from *Anastasia*.

Week 17, baby is the size of a turnip, or a grapefruit, or a pomegranate, or a large onion, or a slice of cake, or a baby hedgehog, or a cassette tape, or a Pop-Tart, or Clark Kent's glasses.

Rule #7

Take prenatal vitamins and make sure that they have 400mg of folate or folic acid.

What's the difference between folate and folic acid?

One is natural, one is chemical, but they are both good for you. Also, take calcium and magnesium supplements to ensure that the baby and your teeth are healthy. And we will do a blood test later to see if you need iron with vitamin C.

The Bola

One of my most precious gifts to celebrate our pregnancy came from France in the form of a pendant.

In France, there's a trend. Women wear a pregnancy bola. It's a chime pendant worn low to make music when you move for the baby. The idea is that the baby gets used to the sound during the pregnancy, and the sound can then be used to soothe the baby when they are crying.

I remember my best friend and his wife showing me their bola and explaining the meaning of it a year earlier. He was playing with the bola on top of her belly while talking about it. I loved the idea so much that I tried to find one when we found out that we were expecting, but there were only a couple on Etsy and Bloomingdale's at the time. And they were too expensive. I didn't tell anybody about it.

A couple of weeks after sharing that we were expecting to my friends, we received a package. It included a maternity sweater, a maternity plant, and a bola customized with our initials J and J.

La Liste

taille naissance:

2 body

2 pyjamas velour

1 mois:

8 body manche longue

4 pyjamas velour

2 pyjamas jersey

3-4 mois:

6 body manches longues

6 body manches courtes

3 pyjamas velour

5 pyjamas jersey

2 turbulettes

2 gilets taille 1-3 mois

Top important:

3-4 bonnets idéal taille naissance extensible

Les langes: 15 grands + 10 petits

Mutation

My body is not like in magazines.

My belly doesn't look like a basketball, but a man's beer belly with a giant blue line making way to my navel.

My thighs are itchy. Red stretch marks are growing on top of my skin.

My nipples are larger, darker, and became a moles' nest. They are surrounded by blue veins making their way under a red web.

My brain is alive without functioning.

My lower back is aching when I stand up after well-deserved rest. I walk like a crab.

My upper back is aching when I sit down for too long.

My hair is growing too fast. I can't get a haircut because of quarantine. Call me Rapunzel.

Cousins

I spent all my summers in the south of France with my cousins when I was a kid. We went to the beach and played in the sand. One of my favorite things was to play photographer. I did their hair, put makeup on them, and took pictures. I guess I always loved photography.

I have spent most of my Christmas in the south of France with my cousins and family. When the youngest no longer believed in Santa, we started this tradition of beginning the festivities on Christmas Eve. As the oldest, I would do my cousins' hair, put some makeup on them, and we dressed up for the evening. We had dinner at one of my aunts and opened presents after midnight. The next day we had lunch at my grandparents and opened presents, then we had a drink at my other aunt and opened presents, and the following day we had a drink at my uncle and opened presents. It was three days spent with my family having good food. Since I moved to the U.S. in 2011, I haven't been able to join them for one Christmas, and every year I am having a hard time being away from them.

Moving across the globe did not change my relationship with my cousins. One of them even surprised me and came to my wedding in the U.S. Even today, we still chat regularly while we live so far away.

I am worried that my son will not be close to his cousins.

As of today, his youngest American cousin is almost ten years old, and the oldest one got married during the quarantine on Zoom. Because of the age difference, my son will probably not be able to play with them.

I am sad because my husband's brother will have a daughter only a few weeks before our son's due date. But my husband's brother is not close to his family because of mental and behavioral issues. The family tried to help him several times with no success. So, my son will have an American cousin only a few weeks older and might never meet her.

My brother, who is two years younger, doesn't have children yet, but I believe he will soon. However, my brother lives in France while we live in the Pacific Northwest. Since I moved almost ten years ago, we could only afford to go to France twice, and my brother only visited once. If we don't find a way to get together more often, I am scared my son will not get to know his French cousins.

I have a close relationship with my cousins, and I am afraid that it will be difficult for my son to be close to his.

Rule #8

Continue your Zoloft. You already have depression and anxiety. Things are likely to get worse, and that can be dangerous for the baby.

But I heard that antidepressants were bad for the baby.

Studies have shown that with Zoloft, there is only a 2% risk. You are on the lower dose. Don't worry about it. Also, postpartum depression can start as early as the third trimester.

You're right. My psychiatrist just said the same. Plus, I really don't want to go through withdrawal during pregnancy.

It must be a nightmare. I guess I will continue taking the magical blue pill.

Fifth Month, Fruit Baby

Week 18, baby is the size of a bell pepper, or a sweet potato, or a grapefruit, or a cucumber, or an ice cream cone, or an Atlantic puffin, or a Nintendo NES classic controller, or a disposable camera, or a red stapler from Office Space.

Week 19, baby is the size of an heirloom tomato, or a mango, or a pancake, or a guinea pig, or a magic 8-ball, or a View-Master, or an alien in the claw machine from *Toy Story*.

Week 20, baby is the size of a banana, or a cantaloupe melon, or a sweet potato, or a large popcorn, or a kitten, or a troll doll, or a Beanie Baby, or the “World’s Best Boss” coffee cup from *The Office*.

Week 21, baby is the size of a carrot, or an artichoke, or an eggplant, or a fruit pie, or a large banana, or a Maltese puppy, or a My Little Pony, or a Kool-Aid Burst, or the rose from *Beauty and the Beast*.

Week 22, baby is the size of a spaghetti squash, or a mango, or an eggplant, or a red bell pepper, or a fruit pie, or a Maltese puppy, or a classic Game Boy, or an Astronaut Ice Cream package, or a Wonka Exceptionals Scrumdiddlyumptious Chocolate Bar.

Rule #9

Don't use beauty products with benzoyl peroxide, Fragrance, BPA, hydroquinone, formaldehyde, parabens, phthalates, retinoids, oral salicylic acid, thioglycolic acid, chemical sunscreens, botulinum toxin, sodium lauryl sulfate, Diazolidinyl urea, stearic acid.

What the heck are all these things?

I don't know, but they are bad for you and the baby, and they are in everything in your bathroom. To make it simple, throw away all your beauty products, cream, toothpaste, makeup, shampoo, conditioner, soap.

Wait, do you know how expensive all of this is?

Remember, it's for your baby.

What do I get instead? I still need to clean myself.

Well, good luck finding something without anything on the list. Just go on the WholeFood website and order the one with the most extended list the product doesn't have and keep your beauty routine simple. Anyway, you are working from home. Who cares if you wear makeup or not? Just get the bare necessity: shampoo, conditioner, hydrating cream, and baby bump oil. Also, drink a lot of water; it's supposed to help hydrate your skin.

20-Week Ultrasound

Dear Little One,

Today we are excited to see you again. After seeing your little hands move during the last ultrasound, we can't wait to watch you moving. Now, I feel you dancing, and so does your daddy when he puts his hand on my belly.

But today you yawn on the screen.

I have a hard time understanding the technician doing the ultrasound. It might be the loud AC purifying the air in the room. It might be because we are all wearing masks to avoid the spread of the virus. Or she is someone who speaks low like me. I turn to your father when I cannot understand her and when she cannot understand me.

She spends a lot of time looking at your heart, and because of my anxiety, I worry. The screen shows your blood in red and blue. It has different shades of red to look at different layers of the heart.

The next step is the brain. The technician spends less time on the brain, so I continue worrying about your heart. I want you to be okay.

When she zooms in on your face, I recognize your father's nose. You are going to be very cute, and I can't wait to meet you.

Then she zooms in on all parts of your body. Your little hands. Your little feet. Your little butt and what's between your legs. You are definitely a boy.

Five minutes after the technician leaves, the doctor comes in.

“Everything is perfect.”

My anxiety just fades away.

He says that you are a very cute fetus, which makes me wonder if he says that to every parent-to-be.

He says that you were well behaved and cooperative, for now. And starts joking that hopefully, you will stay that way when you grow up.

I hope so too.

Love,

Mama

Meditation

I can't sleep, so I listen to guided sleep meditations again, and I must tell you that it is different when you are pregnant.

First, I find it sooo hard to take a deep breath. I mean, my little human moved all my organs up, and they are all crushing each other, so there is not much room for extra air in there. But still, I try not to think about the struggle and focus on the voice of the narrator.

One of the weirdest things is trying to do a body scan, meaning that you focus on each part of your body up or down. At first, nothing has changed but then comes the time when you have to focus on your belly to relax, and oh my, this is an entirely different sensation. Most of the time, I feel my little one kicking, so I disconnect from the meditation. Then, I start thinking that there is another body in my belly, so I cannot do a full-body scan, right? I have sensations in there that are not created by my body but my son's body. We are connected with a cord, which he enjoys kicking close to my belly button. I know I am lucky since my friend told me that her girl is kicking her in the bladder. Anyway, it feels a bit disturbing to focus on your belly when there's a human being moving inside. And he is moving every time because when I struggle to take deep breaths, my son thinks it's time to do Zumba. Still, I am not giving up on sleep meditation. The meditations are helpful, especially since I cannot drink the night tea I used to get in the evening or take melatonin.

The Car Seat

The first big debate about what we needed was car seats. So, I asked my best friend and his wife since they welcomed their baby boy a few months prior. He recommended looking at a German site with ratings for all car seats. None of us speak German, but thanks to Google, it was all translated into English or French.

We decide to go with a car seat that rotates to make it easier to put the baby in the car, especially since I already have back problems. My best friend has the Dualfix by Britax, but it's not sold in the U.S. The only rotating car seat sold in the U.S. is the Cybex Sirona S, which happens to be the one that another friend of ours got for his son in France, and he really likes it. So, we are happy to finally select a car seat, that is, until we learn that we also need an infant one.

The thing is that the Cybex Sirona S is marketed as a car seat that can be used from newborn to almost four years old in the U.S. In France, the same car seat is marketed to be used after six months old, probably because of the differences in regulation between the two countries.

This is so confusing that I keep talking about it with my husband and my best friend. I don't know what to do. In some ways, I trust the safety legislation in France more than in the U.S. After all, when I got my driving license in the U.S. I was shocked at how easily they gave the permit compared to France. But then my best friend says that they only used the infant car seat twice. The main reason why they wanted one was to set the baby in the car seat in the hospital when they brought him home to make it easier, but because he was born during the pandemic, they couldn't bring in the car seat in the hospital. So, this made me think that maybe we don't need to spend an extra \$200.

When I was waiting at the hospital to get some blood work done during the first trimester, I saw a few parents going to their newborn's well-visit carrying the baby in car seats. It made me wonder if, because of COVID, strollers were not allowed in the hospital. When I asked, the midwife told me that people prefer carrying their newborn in the car seat instead of the stroller. However, in France, they don't recommend leaving babies in car seats for too long, while in the U.S., it's common to put car seats on strollers.

In the end, we decide to put the infant car seat on our baby registry.

Zombie Mama

I am anemic. Again.

The last time was four years ago when I wanted to get my feminine body ready for the summer at the beach. At the time, cleanses were hot, and so was the book: *10-Day Green Smoothie Cleanse* by JJ Smith. It is still selling well on Amazon with its 4.5 stars for 23,899 ratings. After a trip to the grocery store to get all my veggies, I started the journey to metamorphose into a beautiful skinny mermaid.

I became a zombie.

Only one day in the cleanse, my body started to lack essential nutrients. All I wanted was to have less fat in my body. Instead, my brain became foggy. Still, I had work to do and drove to the office. My body was present in meetings, my brain not operating. All that mattered was to clock in my hours. It would pass if I ate normally. I didn't have an extra \$200 to visit the doctor.

The zombie was growing in me.

After a week in Zombieland, I gave up and made an appointment. Time would not get me back to normal. The doctor became a necessity. When my blood result came back, I was prescribed the red pill to go back to reality. Iron was all I needed.

I became a pregnant zombie.

Fatigue and fogginess. I know the symptoms but have trouble sleeping and blame insomnia. For weeks I complain about my sleep. For weeks I am zombie-ing in my quarantined quarters. Get out of bed, eat, go back to bed, try to sleep, get out of bed, eat, go back to bed, try to sleep. Nothing changed. Spending more time in bed doesn't help with fatigue and fogginess.

I got a blood test.

Between week 26 and 28 of pregnancy, women need to take a couple of blood tests. The first one for diabetes. The second one for anemia, among other things.

I drank the drink.

The bottle looks like an ordinary bottle of water. The liquid is transparent. The label is full of medical terms and symbols that I don't understand. It is not expired. "You have five minutes to drink it." I am not sure if I should remove my mask. I cannot drink with the mask on, so I drop it below my chin and bring the bottle to my lips. At first, it's okay, a bit sweet. I take one sip after another, and the drink turns bittersweet. Still, I force myself to finish. I am a grown woman. I can do it.

I waited.

Other women with a growing body within their bodies are waiting in the waiting room. We spend about an hour together without sharing a word. We all have the same white and blue mask that was given at check-in. It's not easy to breathe, and the chairs are too hard and straight. Kindle in hand, I learn how to become a mother. The women leave one after the other, and then I hear my name—time to get my blood drowned. There's a timer ringing in the little white room. The timer was telling that it's been one hour since I drank the drink.

I waited again.

My father is diabetic, so I feared getting gestational diabetes. All I could think about was -- will I have to stop eating chocolate? I cannot survive without chocolate. Plus, I am eating dark chocolate, you know, the good one.

The results came back. I don't have diabetes. I am anemic.

Hello little red pill, I am ready to come back to reality. It's starting to get complicated with all the drugs I need for my baby. Iron cannot be taken with prenatal pills because it can cancel its effect. Iron should be taken on an empty stomach. Iron should be taken with vitamin C. So many rules to finally say goodbye to Zombieland. My husband sets reminders on my phone. He is worried that I will forget.

Pregnancy brain is no joke. I almost put the butter in the pantry several times. I forget things, anything, anytime.

Morning:

- Iron
- Vitamin C

Lunch:

- Sertraline a.k.a. Zoloft
- Prenatal vitamin
- Calcium / Magnesium / Zinc

Evening:

- Iron
- Vitamin C

I am no longer a pregnant zombie.

The red pill does its magic pretty quick. It only takes a couple of days to chase away the foggiest. I need another blood test two weeks later to make sure that it is working, and my body is not suppressing the iron. Still, one question keeps coming to mind: how long will I have to take all these pills?

Rule #10

Don't take hot baths.

I only take showers. It's faster and cleaner.

Wait until you are too tired, and your body is aching from carrying the extra weight in your belly. A bath will become a blissful moment. It can also help you with insomnia.

How hot is too hot?

When it's too hot.

Sixth Month, Fruit Baby

Week 23, baby is the size of a large mango, or a small squash, or an eggplant, or a grapefruit, or a fruit pie, or a Maltese puppy, or Cher's cell phone in *Clueless*, or a Furby, or the magnifying glass from *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*.

Week 24, baby is the size of an ear of corn, or a papaya, or a pomegranate, or a chocolate cake, or a bunny, or a Mr. Potato Head, or a Sega Game Gear, or an order of cheese fries from *Mean Girls*.

Week 25, baby is the size of a rutabaga, or a papaya, or an eggplant, or a chocolate cake, or a bunny, or TI-89 calculator, or a Zack Morris brick, or a shaving cream can from *Jurassic Park*.

Week 26, baby is the size of a scallion, or a red cabbage, or a papaya, or an acorn squash, or a chocolate cake, or a bunny, or a VHS tape case, or a Walkman, or the magic lamp from *Aladdin*.

Week 27, baby is the size of a head of cauliflower, or a papaya, or a cabbage, or a chocolate cake, or a bunny, or a Barbie, or kids jelly shoes, or the hamburger phone from *Juno*.

Rule #11

Get a lot of sleep but good luck with that. Between the constant travel to the bathroom and finding a comfortable position, baby kicking, heartburns, and hormones, this will not be easy.

Well, thanks for the encouragement ... Any tips to make it easier?

Get a pregnancy pillow as soon as possible. It's life changing. Also, sleep on your left side, but it's okay if you sleep on your right side too. It's just better on the left for the blood to circulate through your body and to the baby.

Who are you?

Dear Little One,

Who are you? Are you blond like both of your parents when they were young? Do you have your father's rare grey eyes or your mother's common brown eyes? Will you be taller than your mother by the time you become a teenager? I already know the answer.

Will you be an artist, a sportif, a scientist, a scholar, or all the above?

Will you have depression like your mother, father, grandfather, aunts, and cousins? Will you avoid the curse of alcoholism that runs in the family? Will you have ADHD or become bipolar? So many curses that you will have to avoid triggering. We will do our best to protect you.

Your last name will be your father's, but will you want to know the story behind the name that belonged to your mother for twenty-five years?

Will you consider yourself French? American? Both? Will you learn how to speak French if we live all your life in the U.S.? Will you have a French accent like your mother? Will your English be better than hers?

Love,

Mama

In My Father's Wallet

My father has had a picture in his wallet for close to thirty years. I am around three, at my grandparents during the winter holidays. I wear a big smile surrounded by two pigtails. I am showing off my colorful plastic jewelry and a red sweater with a black dog similar to the French kid brand Chipie. My aunt made it, and for years, it was one of my favorites. She also made one with Ariel from the *Little Mermaid*, the first movie I saw in the theater.

During his last trip to Seattle with my mother and my godmother, my father showed this photo to my husband.

My father doesn't share his feelings, but actions speak louder than words. Carrying this photo of his daughter for so many years, showing it proudly to her husband, reveals the love that he cannot say with words.

My husband's French is very limited. My father's English is very limited. Still, they shared a moment of tenderness through this picture.

When my son is born, I plan to print a picture for my father to keep in his wallet next to mine to see his first grandson anytime, even if we are on the other side of the globe.

I Want to Be

a different person. happy. me.

done with depression and anxiety. on no medication.

a good mother who listens and guides.

kind to my son, to read him stories every night.

teaching him how to be a good man in a world ruled by patriarchy.

the mother of a man who respects others no matter their gender.

My Son's Body

Becoming a mother means making life-changing decisions for my son. I was surprised to learn that we needed to decide if we wanted to circumcise him. This topic is very popular in the U.S. I first heard about it in books about giving birth, then with the pediatrician who visited our online centering group. We are the only couple in the group having a boy, so his question was directed to me, making me feel uncomfortable.

Shouldn't my son decide what to do with his body? As his mother, do I have the right to mutilate him out of my own belief or societal pressure? I have been dealing with body hate since my teenage years because of society. Would this decision have the same effect on my son? Will he feel like he doesn't belong because he has too much or not enough skin? As a woman who didn't grow up in the U.S. like my son will, I don't feel comfortable making this decision.

The book *Crib Sheet* by Emily Oster breaks down the myths around circumcision, and in the end, there is not much change when it comes to health and hygiene. It's only a question of aesthetics. The author says that 50% of men in the U.S. are circumcised, but when I look at France's data from 2008, only 14% of men are circumcised.

When I brought this up to the midwife, she told me that the circumcision rate in the U.S. is going down. The procedure is no longer covered by Medicaid or insurance, which might explain it.

In the end, my husband made the decision. Even if I do have some feelings about it, I don't know how it is for a teenage boy to live in the U.S. Still, I was happy to hear that my husband feels like me.

Rule #12

Workout, but be careful about it. Don't do any heavy lifting.

Do you know how tired I am? I don't have any energy left.

You can skip it in the first trimester and on days when you are too tired, but it is good to exercise at least thirty minutes a day. Pilates, yoga, and barre are good for you. Only do prenatal workouts. You can also go on walks, but don't forget to wear a mask if you are going to a place with many people.

Does shopping count as a workout?

Yes, but remember to stay safe.

Seventh Month, Fruit Baby

Week 28, baby is the size of a large eggplant, or a winter squash, or a head of lettuce, or a chocolate box, or a puppy, or a Kit-Kat Klock, or a clear landline phone, or Dorothy's ruby slippers from the *Wizard of Oz*.

Week 29, baby is the size of a butternut squash, or a winter squash, or a head of cauliflower, or a chocolate box, or a puppy, or a fanny pack, or a Mr. Potato Head, or the Mad Hatter's teapot from *Alice in Wonderland*.

Week 30, baby is the size of a large cabbage, or a bunch of celery, or a winter squash or a bunch of broccoli, or a chocolate box, or a puppy, or a bike helmet, or a Slinky Dog, or the raccoon hat from *Moonrise Kingdom*.

Week 31, baby is the size of a coconut, or a winter squash, or a chocolate box, or a puppy, or a 1/2 gallon of SunnyD, or a fanny pack, or a crystal ball from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Rule #13

Don't eat for two. It will be hard to lose weight after pregnancy. But eat enough to gain between 15 to 25 pounds during the nine months to ensure that the baby gets the nutrients he needs to thrive.

I am not gaining much, but I am eating normally. Should I worry about it?

You'll gain most of the weight in the third trimester, so don't worry too much about it for now.

Fear

becoming a mother. giving birth.

not being able to lose the pregnancy weight.

breastfeeding pain and that my breasts will forever be hanging.

stress. postpartum depression.

raising my son wrong.

his family history with too much wine.

he doesn't speak French.

Zoom Baby Shower

At the beginning of quarantine, I attended my niece's wedding on Zoom. About 60 groups of people watched on their screen—some prepared cards to show encouraging words during the ceremony. I was supposed to be the photographer. Instead, I took screenshots. Still, it was better than nothing, and it was good to be part of a positive event in the middle of the pandemic.

For years, one of my Seattle friends said she would organize a baby shower in her beautiful home when I would be pregnant. Well, I finally got pregnant, but it was in the middle of the pandemic. Instead, she joined hands with another friend to host the baby shower online. One of them was French, the other Polish. My circle of friends in Seattle is very international.

Since it was online, I decided to invite my friends and family from France. I couldn't have had a baby shower with them without the pandemic. Until then, baby showers were in person, but moving them online changed how we do it.

We decided to have three Zoom baby showers for one hour, one after the other, because of the language barrier and the number of people.

First was the Frenchies because of the 9-hour time difference. It was 9 am in Seattle and 6 pm in France. It was like a small reunion from our French wedding seven years prior, with the addition of a few small faces. While I was the first to get married, I am the last one to have a kid. It was fun to see my family interact with my friends and their kids after so long. They have known some of them since I was in high school and spent a couple of summers with me in the south of France. The hosts

prepared a game with baby pictures of everybody, and we had to guess who was who. Some of them were very easy, especially my cousins since I've seen them grow up.

The following group was my husband's family. This time the game was a trivia about baby facts. And oh my, we learned a lot.

The last one was with our friends from Seattle. The game was about questions about my husband and me to know who knows us best. It was fun to hang out with all of them, and the ones who have kids shared a few tips.

I wish that we could have met in person for the baby shower, but on the other hand, I am happy that the pandemic changed the way they are hosted because I wouldn't have one with my friends and family in France during a normal time.

My Favorite Thing

My favorite thing is to feel him kicking.
My belly comes to life,
An alien egg when he stretches his legs.
It shivers from hiccups,
Stiffens with his body against my distorted abs.

I enjoy every disturbance.
Sleepless nights,
Pain from his legs against my ribcage,
He knocks into his father's face.

The Name

- ☒ One that we both like
- ☒ Unisex or boy name
- ☒ No negative association
- ☒ Not used by close friends or family
- ☒ Doesn't mean something weird in French or English
- ☒ Not in the top 15 in France (28) and in the U.S. (65)
- ☒ Not too unusual
- ☒ Pronounced the same way in French and in English

NOLAN

Rule #14

Don't clean the litter box.

Finally, an excellent rule. My husband will take care of it.

Eighth Month, Fruit Baby

Week 32, baby is the size of a jicama, or a bunch of kale, or a honeydew melon, or a cantaloupe, or a cotton candy, or a lion cub, or a Care Bear, or a Polly Pocket Adventure Playset, or the volleyball from *Top Gun*.

Week 33, baby is the size of a pineapple, or a honeydew melon, or a butternut squash, or a cotton candy, or a lion cub, or a lunch box, or a Windows 95 box, or Forrest Gump's box of chocolates.

Week 34, baby is the size of a cantaloupe, or a honeydew melon, or a pineapple, or a cotton candy, or a lion cub, or a Tickle Me Elmo, or a Moon Boot, or an Eggo waffle box from *Stranger Things*.

Week 35, baby is the size of a honeydew melon, or a spaghetti squash, or a cotton candy, or a lion cub, or a George Foreman Grill, or a game of Jenga, or the plate of spaghetti from *Lady and the Tramp*.

Rule #15

Get the flu shot. Your immune system is not working at its best, so better be safe than sorry.

But I did get the flu shot a few years ago and got the flu three days later.

That's because it takes two weeks to take effect, so the sooner you do it, the better, especially in the middle of a pandemic. Also, **get the Tdap vaccine.**

But I got it a couple of years ago, and I am supposed to be good for ten years.

It's not for you; it's for the baby. Whooping cough is deadly for a newborn.

My Father's Name

I wore my father's name for twenty-five years. Unlike my brother's future children, my son will not inherit the name of my family. He will wear the name of a mountain instead of the name of a small Belgian town.

My father's name has history. Taught to children carrying its legacy. It's the name of a town. A name carried by lords. Will my son be interested in learning this history since his name will not be the same?

When we were children, my father took us to Belgium to visit the small town. Because we were descendants, we could visit the castle that housed my ancestors. These will also be my son's ancestors, but he will not carry their names. Will he have access to this history?

My family flew from Belgium during World War II. The whole family was packed into three cars following each other on small roads to go to the north of France safely, which was not at war yet. Only one car made it through.

The other two were bombarded by German planes near Tongrinne in Belgium. Since then, my family has been buried in Tongrinne, even if they were born in France. My grandfather is in the cemetery of Tongrinne, and my father and mother want to join the family grave when the time comes. I think my grandmother is there too, but I never met her since she died when my father was a child.

The only legacy I now have from my family is a gold necklace that my grandfather bought in Spain for my grandmother. Should I keep it for my son and his legacy?

Soon

meeting and feeling your soft skin against mine.

your smiles. kisses.

holding your tiny feet. your first steps.

reading stories to help you dream. looking at you sleep.

playing and spending time with you.

hearing your voice calling me mom.

seeing your face when you will first try lemon.

seeing the love in your father's eyes when he holds you.

The French Mermaids

In France, mothers become mermaids when they breastfeed their baby. They wear nursing nacre seashells to heal their cracked nipples. The motherly milk naturally reacts to the mother of pearl to give it the power of healing the skin. With the seashell, there's no need for nipple cream and other products marketed to women.

Unfortunately, I cannot become a mermaid in the U.S. since these seashells are not for sale on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

When French women don't want to become mermaids, they use silver nursing cups, which I was happy to find online. They work similarly to the nacre seashell. The motherly milk reacts with the sterling silver to heal and prevent cuts, wounds, cracks, soreness, and infections.

I will not be a mermaid, but my nipples will heal.

My House is a Mess

When I was working full time, working on my MFA, and being pregnant for the first time in my life, my house was a mess. I told my husband that I would help him clean once I no longer worked since we knew that the end of my contract was coming.

I am no longer working, but I am having issues sleeping. My house is still a mess. Once in a while, I clean it, but the next day it's a mess again. I think we are at a point where it's better to start decluttering so that we don't have to be constantly cleaning. But what should we do with the things that we are going to let go of? At the beginning of the pandemic, many people went crazy with decluttering to the point that Goodwill had cars lined up for hours when they reopened. They also became pickier. I guess the saying "Someone's garbage is someone else's treasure" is no longer working in the middle of a pandemic when everybody is going crazy at home.

When I come back from the hospital with my newborn, I will have to feed him every two to three hours, even in the middle of the night. With the lack of sleep and the worry of taking care of a fragile human being in the first weeks, I know that my home will be a mess.

Rule #16

Don't paint the nursery. The fumes are toxic and harmful to the baby.

But I don't like the color of the room.

Ask someone else to do it for you.

Sounds good to me. Another thing that my husband will do for the baby.

Ninth Month, Fruit Baby

Week 36, baby is the size of a head of romaine lettuce, or a bunch of kale, or a watermelon, or a wedding cake, or a lamb, or a bag of Bugles, or a Tickle Me Elmos, or a Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story*.

Week 37, baby is the size of a bunch of Swiss chard, or a watermelon, or a canary melon, or a wedding cake, or a lamb, or a Pound Puppy, or a Doc Martens boot, or a Winnie the Pooh's jar of honey.

Week 38, baby is the size of a leek, or a mini-watermelon, or a wedding cake, or a lamb, or a bowling pin, or a Speak and Spell, or Princess Buttercup's crown in the *Princess Bride*.

Week 39, baby is the size of a mini-watermelon, or a honeydew melon, or a wedding cake, or a lamb, or a Cabbage Patch Kid doll, or a McDonald's Happy Meal from the '80s, or Bruiser from *Legally Blonde*.

Week 40, baby is the size of a small pumpkin, or a mylar balloon, or a Build-A-Bear, or Rocky's boxing gloves.

Week 41, baby is the size of a stalk of Brussels sprouts, or a pumpkin, or an Easy-Bake Oven, or a Kermit the Frog, or a basketball Michael Jordan used in *Space Jam*.

Week 42, baby is the size of a watermelon, or a Cabbage Patch Kids doll, or a pizza from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Rule #17

Avoid the following herbs: Milenrama, Yarrow, Black cohosh, Maidenhair fern, Aloe vera, Lady's mantle, Angélica, Chinese angelica, Roman chamomile, Wormwood, Shepherd's purse, Sacred bark, Blue cohosh, squaw root, Gotu kola, Centella, Cassia, Cinnamon, Ergot, stramonium, moonflower, Wild yam, Male fern, Wormseed, Mexican tea, Fennel, Devil's claw, Hops, GoldenSeal, St. John's Wort, Juniper berry, Motherwort, Bugleweed, German chamomile, Pennyroyal, Zoapatle, Tobacco, Basil, Oregano, Korean ginseng, American ginseng, Passionflower, Yohimbe, Boldo, Kava kava, Buckthorn, Rhubarb, Castor oil, Rosemary, Rue, Saw palmetto, Comfrey, Pau d' arco, Feverfew, Clover, Fenugreek, Damiana, Cat's claw, and Corn smut.

What is all of that? I only know a few of these...

Just check the ingredients when you: drink tea, take a supplement, use essential oils, eat food, or use organic beauty products.

The Warning Label

“This is the best thing we bought for our boy,” said my best friend when sending me a picture of the BabyBjörn Bouncer.

It is the number one bouncer in the U.S. too, but recently they moved the warning label next to the baby’s head. Probably because of some regulations. The label is a big white rectangle with the word WARNING highlighted in bright orange followed by four bullet points. Its location is ruining the quality of the product, especially for something so expensive. It was interesting to read the comments and how upset people are about it. Just because of it, they send it back. I see many pictures of this bouncer on Instagram, but people hide the label with a blanket or a swaddle.

I showed the pictures to my best friend. His answer: “WTF, it’s so ugly.” It turns out that the label is not there in France. So, he recommended me to get another cover from Amazon France and have it delivered to the U.S.

First, I looked at other bouncers in the US market, but they either have reviews warning about safety or are rockers instead of bouncers. So, I ordered the BabyBjörn Bouncer on Amazon US and a summer cover on Amazon France.

The Plans

Birth plan:

Give me the drugs.

Housekeeping plan:

Let it be.

Meals plan:

Frozen food and delivery.

Caring for the baby plan:

Hubby and me.

Time for relationship plan:

Will we have time for this in the first months?

Going back to work plan:

I need to find a job.

The Visitors Commandments

- I. You shall be fully vaccinated 2 weeks before your visit
- II. You shall wear a mask
- III. You shall wash your hands right away
- IV. You shall congregate in the backyard

Rule #18

Know the signs of labor: regular contractions not going away, water breaking, but this doesn't happen as often as in the movies.

So, should I go to the hospital when I get contractions?

Well, you need to wait before going.

Wait for what? If I am in labor, shouldn't I go?

Labor can last for a very long time. The hospital will usually not take you in until you reach the 5-1-1 rule.

What's that?

A new contraction every five minutes, for one minute, during an hour. Ideally, you should be between four and six centimeters by the time of admission. Still, you should call at the beginning to check with the hospital if other labor symptoms, like the water breaking, require medical assistance sooner.

The Contract

On our wedding day, my mother-in-law informed me that she was coming to our honeymoon, and it was decided that we were going to Disneyland. Apparently, my husband invited her when he was five years old.

Now, my mother-in-law shared this photo to let us know that she will frame it and give it to our son for his thirteenth birthday.



Becoming Mama

Dear Little One,

It's 5 am, I jump in bed. My right hand clenches your father's arm. I think I woke myself up by snoring too loud again.

I was wrong.

I am rolling on the pregnancy ball, phone in hand to time the contractions. They are already every five minutes and last around one minute, we need to wait one hour to follow the 5-1-1 rule. Your dad runs all over the house to finish up the hospital bag and prepares the food for the neighbors to feed the kitties. In the meantime, I run to the bathroom to purge the half madeleine that I ate a few minutes prior. After a quick Google search, I learn that it's normal during labor.

It's 7 am, we arrive at triage. We are the only people there and get the bed next to the entrance. I proudly tell the nurse that I already emptied my stomach so I should be good now.

How innocent of me.

Contractions are stronger and stronger. I am in so much pain that I empty my already empty stomach again and again. My mouth tastes like metal. I scream "Fuck", "Shit", "I am not doing this again," and feel bad for the people coming to triage. I am probably scaring them. All I am thinking about is the epidural. When can I get it? Your dad is trying to help by putting a wet towel on my head. It feels

good. I am crushing his hand. The nurse is asking me to avoid moving too much for the next 20 minutes to get a good reading of your heartbeat. I try. I fail and try again.

It's 10 am, we are moving to the delivery room. I am so weak I can't walk. Before leaving, the nurse pierces my left arm with an intravenous to stop the nonstop gagging. It feels so much better if you don't take into consideration the contractions.

At last, it's time for the epidural. The anesthetist asks me to lay on my side while he pierces my back. It doesn't feel that bad. Your dad holds my hands and distracts me. Once the tube is in place, the anesthetist adds the bolus with the magical liquid. It all goes to hell.

CODE RED. CODE RED.

The room quickly fills with people. I am asked to get on all fours. An oxygen mask is placed on my face. All I can hear is your heartbeat slowing down. Warm and salty tears slide down my cheeks. We don't know what is going on. Your father is scared for my life. I only think about your life. The midwives and nurses are moving so fast. I don't know what happens in the room, the only thing I notice is that a nurse adds a different bolus in the intravenous. Your heartbeat is stabilizing, and so is my blood pressure. The midwife wants a better reading for your heartbeat, so she connects the machine to the top of your head inside my body. During the procedure, she pierces the placenta letting out a green liquid. More bad news. NICU will have to empty your stomach right after birth to help you breathe.

The epidural is working. I forget about the contraction pain so I tell your father that I can do this again.

The epidural is no longer working. My butt hurts at every contraction. The nurse increases the drop flow from the intravenous with no luck. I complain about it again and again. I change my mind; this is the first and last time I am giving birth. After a while, the anesthetist comes to check on my pain. He says that it's normal. I try not to roll my eyes. My arms are numb. My boobs are numb. But my butt hurts. Still, he gives me another bolus.

CODE RED. CODE RED.

Once again, the room fills with nurses and midwives. This time I stay on my back while they add medicine in the intravenous. I try not to cry at the sound of your heartbeat slowing down. I ugly cry. Like the first time, everything returns to normal quickly.

The epidural is working. Yes, I can definitely do this again. I teach the nurse some French.

The epidural is no longer working. My butt hurts again. I am not doing this again. The nurse thinks there's a problem with the epidural and calls for another anesthetist. As soon as she hears about the symptoms, she knows what the problem is: the epidural is too high for my size. My back is pierced for the second time. They are prepared before injecting the bolus and add medicine to control my blood pressure.

The epidural is working again. I forget about the pain.

It's 9 pm, the midwife checks my cervix. We are almost ready. She will come back in half an hour.

It's time to push. I can't. I feel pain in my lower right pelvis. Even with the epidural, I can feel contractions and I wonder how women can give birth without it. Nope, I am not doing this another time. The nurse calls for the anesthetists to administer another bolus, but both are busy. We have to wait an hour; it seems like forever. In the meantime, you slowly make your way down my belly. I realize that the pain in my lower right side is because you are pushing against my pelvic bone. Little one, you need to go under it. And can you please stop using my stomach as a trampoline?

Once the bolus is in, I have no more excuses to delay the pushing. I am scared. The nurse tells me that at the next contraction, I need to take a deep breath, hold it, push while breathing out, and repeat until the end of the contraction. It actually feels good. I should have done it sooner.

Breathe in. Hold. Push.

Breathe in. Hold. Push.

Breathe in. Hold. Push.

Everybody in the room is excited at the sight of your blond hair. Even your dad who said that he would not watch, can't help himself. The top of your head is going out and in of my body at every push. I surprise myself by saying yes when the nurse asks if I want a mirror. Afterall, I am the only one not looking at your grand entrance. We do this dance for an hour, but the midwife assures me that you are making progress.

It's 12:24 am, your head slides out followed by your body. The midwife quickly takes you. I am reassured when we hear your first cry. NICU empty your lungs before putting your little body on my belly. "My boy. My baby." I can't stop crying. I don't want to let you go but they have more evaluations to do. Your dad is by your side, tears in his eyes. In the meantime, the midwife stitches back the tear you made on your way out.

Sex: male

Weight: 6 lb 10.7 oz (3025 g)

Height: 19.5"

Head circumference: 33 cm

Finally, it's skin-to-skin time. The nurse lays you on my belly and you growl like a zombie. Your head follows the smell of milk and makes its way to ~~my~~ your booby. With a full belly, you fall asleep. I can't believe that you are my son. My precious little boy. I can't believe that I am your Mama.

In the end, maybe I can do this again.

Love,

Mama