

*The best pregnant lady
ever loses control.*

Super-Prego

BY JENNIFER H. SCHALLER

WHEN I WAS PREGNANT, I devoured books on pregnancy. I was worried about bringing a life into the world. What if I screwed the kid up in utero? I knew I'd eventually do something wrong, like all mothers, but I didn't want to ruin the kid before it had a chance to breathe on its own.

One book said I should get a minimum of sixty grams of protein a day; another book put the number at seventy-five. I shot for eighty grams. I was also supposed to get fifteen hundred milligrams of calcium a day. I took prenatal vitamins, then extra calcium, and supplemented the rest with milk and leafy greens.

I didn't just want to be a good mother. I wanted to be Super-Prego: the pregnant woman who creates a super-strong-prodigy-fetus.

My husband, Karl, and I had planned on trying to get pregnant in the late summer or early fall. I figured that since I was in my late twenties and Karl was in his early thirties, it would take a few months of planning. I got off the pill in May, and by July I was knocked up.

I was shocked the test came out positive. Karl had said it would be easy. He had so much confidence in his sperm. Meanwhile, I'd read up on ovulation and early pregnancy. I was ready to chart my cycles. I wondered how I'd never gotten pregnant before.

Karl wanted to have children years before I did. I always wanted to be a parent—when I was a kid, I pretended my little brother was my baby—but it had taken four years of marriage for me to finally feel ready to have a child.

Karl and I agreed we wouldn't tell many people we were pregnant, not until we were out of the first trimester. We were eating at a restaurant when my brother called me.

I said, "Guess who's going to be an uncle?"

Karl gasped. "We're not telling people."

"But it's my brother," I hissed back while covering the phone. "You're going to be an uncle!" I let out a squeal and said, "Now, don't tell anyone."

Two hours later my friend Lisa called. I had to tell her. After I hung up, Karl asked, "How many people are you going to tell?"

"Lisa was my maid of honor."

He rolled his eyes.

I couldn't stop. I knew one in five pregnancies ended in miscarriage, but I hoped telling people would work like Kryptonite against miscarriage. I reasoned, what had I done that would karmically warrant me losing a baby after telling lots of people?

My mother, of course, knew I was pregnant. I tell her everything. At six weeks, she called to check up on me. I was doing the dishes.

She said, "I found these creams that you can use to keep from getting stretch marks. I can order some if you like."

I was prone to stretch marks. "That sounds good," I said. I had the phone propped against one ear.

She said, "I found something else on a website that you'll want after the baby is born."

"Karl and I are not talking about *after the baby is born*."

"The baby will be fine. Online, I found these girdles that you can wear."

I threw a soapy sponge at the sink and shrieked, "A girdle! I thought you were talking about a crib!"

"Just let me finish. I wore a girdle after you and your brother were born."

"I don't want to hear this."

"It really helped me get everything back in place. I thought it was outdated, but people still wear them!"

"I can't talk to you right now. You are *not* to buy me anything for after the baby is born."

I slammed the phone down and yelled, "A girdle? A girdle!" After carrying a baby to term she wanted me to squish all my fat into a corset. I told Karl what she said.

"Maybe she was joking."

"That was not a joke. There's a rea-

son that women look haggard after having a baby. It's nature's repellent. It's my body telling your body to lay off."

"This wouldn't have happened if you waited to tell everyone you were pregnant."

"Whose side are you on?" I snapped.

At eight weeks I had told only my closest girlfriends I was pregnant—all ten of them. I'd also told all ten of them to tell no one. That didn't work. Alyssa told her parents and her sister. My mother told my stepfather who told one relative who told another relative, and eventually all fifty of them knew. Ami ended up telling one of Karl's friends.

Meanwhile, whom had Karl told? No one. Not even his mother.

"How can you not tell your mother?" I yelled a couple of times, because really, how can someone not tell his mother? I know that my mother and I argue, but still, a mother needs to know! My Super-Prego mind envisioned what it would be like to have my child keep something from me.

He said, "It's too early."

It wasn't too early to write about the pregnancy, I told myself. I wanted to will the child to life with my words. How could a child be taken away from someone if she wrote about it? With that logic, I submitted a draft to one of my writing workshops that included a frame narrative where I pondered becoming a mother. Five days later, I told my dissertation director. I was unstoppable.

Karl had no idea.

During the middle of the ninth week I went to my first prenatal visit. Karl had to work, so I went by myself.

In the waiting room, a nurse handed me a pregnancy folder with important phone numbers and symptoms of pregnancy complications. The folder was given to all pregnant women but I really wanted to use it. Stuffing my three-prong portfolio with pamphlets, diet regimens and checklists was supposed to communicate to the world how dedicated a mother I would be. At home I created a "first prenatal visit checklist" from pregnancy books. I placed it inside the folder. My checklist had convenient little bulleted boxes that I could mark off after my questions were answered. Creating the list made me feel miscarriage-proof and very Super-Prego. The questions were about things I had either never heard of or didn't completely understand. What was an episiotomy? What kinds of tests would I need: hemoglobin and hematocrit tests to check for possible Rh Factors, a cystic fibrosis screen, a rubella screen? I wanted to know if I should know what these words meant.

At the appointment, I told the midwife about my eating regimen—a shake in the morning, at least 80 grams of protein and 1500 mg of calcium. She was pleased with my precautions. But, she said, mostly a pregnant woman just needs to be healthy. Super-Prego didn't want to listen.

The midwife said she could do an ultrasound with a little machine on wheels. I was excited. She slimed up my belly with a clear gel and placed the receiver end on my stomach.

She tried zooming in on my uterus but couldn't find it.

"Sometimes this happens," she said, "especially with women who are thin like you. Your pubic bone is probably obstructing the view of the ultrasound machine. Let's try listening with a stethoscope."

She searched and said, "I don't hear

anything.”

I made a sad face at her.

“The fetus may just be younger than we think.”

The fetus couldn't be younger. I had been charting my menstrual cycles.

She continued, “Or, like I said, your pubic bone is making it hard for us to see or hear the fetus. I can call the ultrasound techs downstairs. They have a high-powered machine.”

“I'd like that.”

“You would be fine if you waited for an ultrasound at thirteen weeks. That's when you should schedule the next prenatal visit.”

“No. I need to see the heartbeat.” Super-Prego would never let the opportunity for a high-powered ultrasound slip by.

She called about appointment times, then said, “The only appointment they have is in two hours. Do you really want to wait?”

“Yes.” I needed to see him, the baby. I had even decided the baby was a him, but I felt apprehensive. I thought seeing him on an ultrasound would alleviate my anxiety.

The midwife scheduled the appointment. Meanwhile I walked over to a noodle place in the shopping center next to the hospital. I ate chicken lo mein and sucked down a large Sprite. I wasn't nervous, I told myself. I couldn't be. I kept thinking about the ultrasound, the artifact that would calm my Super-Prego nerves.

When I went back to the hospital to check in for my appointment, my bladder felt like it might rupture. I needed a full bladder to push my uterus up over my pubic bone. I kept reminding myself that Super-Prego could hold her urine. With a painfully full bladder, I hobbled into a room with a more advanced ultrasound machine. The tech zoomed in on my uterus. I could see an enlarged pinto bean.

The tech kept zooming and clicking her keyboard. I waited for her to say, “Here's your baby.”

Zoom-click, zoom-click. The tech said, “I need a doctor to look at this.”

The doctor walked in. I only saw her profile: tall, blonde with short hair cut into a bob. She didn't say a word to me and went straight to the computer. Zoom-click, zoom-click. I already knew what they were going to say. I strained for a clear look and then leaned back on a pillow. I looked up at the ceiling and braced myself.

“Your fetus has stopped developing.”

I said, “Oh,” and felt a dagger of heat pierce my chest.

The doctor said, “What did they tell you to do upstairs?”

“What do you mean?” I was dizzy.

“Are you supposed to meet with your doctor after this?”

“I was supposed to go home after this.”

The doctor said, “We're going to send you back upstairs so you can discuss your options with a doctor.”

The doctor never mentioned the words *death* or *die*. In the ultrasound room, she referred to what happened as “this.” Where are you going after “this”? I was supposed to go home after “this.” She couldn't say the words. I couldn't, either. But I wanted to be logical. Super-Prego knew the chances for miscarriage. Besides, I wasn't showing. I hadn't felt him move. I told myself I couldn't be bonded to the fetus yet. I couldn't cry.

The doctor and the tech left the room. I got dressed and went upstairs. I was angry at myself for half-believing I could will the child to life by blabbing about my pregnancy. Upstairs, an OB/GYN came in to see me. I don't remember her name. I only remember her hair, long, brown, and straight. She had a cold sore. I fixated on her

lip and that kept me from feeling.

She said, “Are you here alone?”

I nodded.

“You don't have to do this alone. You can come back with your partner or a friend.” I shook my head no. She explained that I could take some pills to force a miscarriage, let the miscarriage happen on its own, or have a D&C.

“What's the difference?”

The doctor started to explain and then said, “You don't have to decide today.”

“I need to. I don't want to come back here.”

She finished explaining, and I said, “I want the D&C. My friend saw the fetus come out of her. It fell in the toilet. She said it looked like a teeny baby. I can't see that.” Tears streamed down my face, but I couldn't feel them.

I wiped my nose and said, “Do most women have a D&C?”

“It depends on each woman. You need to do what feels right.”

The doctor left the room to schedule the surgery. I decided now would be the best time to tell everyone I had miscarried. I didn't want to run into people and have them reach for my empty belly. Besides, what if Karl was with me? He couldn't know how many people I told.

I traveled A to Z in my cell phone. I wanted to call Karl but couldn't get a hold of him at school. He didn't have a phone in his classroom. I could call the front office where the secretary would tell him, “It's an emergency.” He'd know what happened before calling me. Then he'd have to teach ornery eighth-graders for at least another hour.

First, I called my mom. Then I went up the cell phone list to dial the A's. Alyssa. I had to call Alyssa. I left a message. Then I was on to Ami. I told her what happened. She told me she'd

be right there. I told her she didn't have to come. Then C. I called Chad. D. I skipped down to L. I called Lisa. Somehow I was able to talk without shedding a single tear.

The doctor walked back into the room and said, "The earliest surgery appointment we have is Tuesday."

"I have to have my dead fetus inside me for five days?"

She nodded.

"Why can't they do it today?"

"We perform a lot of surgeries."

"What if the fetus comes out before then?"

"That probably won't happen, but call the hospital."

I didn't believe her. She handed me a rundown of co-pays, blood tests, and consultations. She handed me official-looking papers that I stuffed inside the same folder as my prenatal visit checklist. I got up and left.

While waiting for an elevator, a man stood next to me. I started to feel. I covered my face with my pregnancy folder and stifled sobs. The elevator doors opened. I walked in. He hesitated then stepped in with me. The man stared at the elevator exit, probably counting the floors. When the doors opened, I sobbed loudly and darted for the exit.

I ran through the parking lot, jumped into my car, and locked the doors. I screamed a loud guttural cry, the kind that I'd only heard come out of other people when horrible things happened, like when Anthony, my friend Sara's month-old baby, died. I was crying like Sara at her baby's funeral. She was dressed in black, standing over a little wooden bassinet that doubled as a coffin. I felt like a coffin.

I could hear myself screaming, but I felt outside of my crying, as if I were two people. There was the semi-logical half of me—the Super-Prego who

knew the facts, statistics and weighed her chances of miscarriage. Super-Prego hadn't grasped the reality of being a mother. She wanted to ponder existential issues while sorting through her feelings. She wanted to rationalize everything, just like Karl had wanted to rationalize why I shouldn't tell people.

For the first time during the entire pregnancy, I felt the primal half of me, the instinctive maternal side that contained my heart, my feelings, and my gut. The primal side knew I needed to grieve. Super-Prego couldn't cope with the loss. Super-Prego wanted to dissect my primal side whose uncontrollable cries sounded like a loud shrieking yowl.

The primal half of me took over and morphed into a red ball of sadness. The sadness ricocheted through my insides: contaminating me, yanking me down, forcing me to curl up in a ball and scream like an injured animal. I stayed inside my car too long in the summer sun: ten or fifteen minutes. I was hot and sticky. I needed to open the doors.

I calmed myself and walked back into the hospital. I began the rest of my paperwork with eyes so swollen they puffed beyond my eyelids. When I squinted, tears gushed out of my eyes, splashing the waivers and consent forms I signed.

As I paid the surgery co-pay, I looked behind me. Ami had poked her head inside every window and door on the first floor of the hospital until she found me. She walked into the office, hugged me, and helped me finish what I had started.

A couple of hours had passed, and I knew Karl would be home. I called him as I drove away from the hospital. I told him what happened. He said, "That sucks."

I wanted him to say something more. I wanted him to think of something uplifting to say, but he was just as crushed as I was. When I got home, I think he was glad I wasn't hysterical. I could tell he didn't want me to cry because that would have made him cry. He wasn't being cold. Like me, he just couldn't deal with what was going on. He had looked forward to having this baby as much as I had. That night, we held each other as we lay on the couch. Oddly enough, I felt sad but lucky.

The next day, before nine in the morning, two people had already called to see how I was doing. Throughout the day, more people called. I'd never felt so loved. My mother-in-law came over with flowers. (I had actually convinced Karl it was okay to tell people about it, and he had started telling his friends and family.) Lisa came over with pizza and a bottle of wine. My mother came by to check on me. Normally, I don't accept help from anyone, but having so many people reach out and offer help made me realize I'm not as independent as I thought. I let people visit me, no matter how shitty I felt. The phone calls I made to friends and the phone calls people made to me broke up the monotony of my grieving. If the phone was ringing, I couldn't sit on the floor of my bathtub crying my eyes out. I had to get up. I had to pull myself out of depression. The support I had gave me purpose. I started to realize that even though the miscarriage was a horribly sad event, I could learn from it.

I realized announcing the pregnancy wasn't a mistake. If I hadn't told Lisa, Dana, Ami, Alyssa, and Skye, who would have called to make sure I made it out of bed? Who would have told me they loved me? Karl told me

he loved me, but it wasn't enough. He was grieving, too, and couldn't carry me the way I needed.

One friend reacted the way Karl and I feared. When I told her about the miscarriage she said, "When did you fall?" She was pregnant at the time, making her statement even more unbelievable.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't know you fell."

"I didn't fall." I pulled the phone away from my head and stared into the receiver, trying not to tell her that she was a dumbass.

I continued, "Falling isn't the only way that people miscarry. It's the least likely cause. An unhealthy sperm or egg can make this happen." I was reciting all I learned from my books. I felt like I was talking to a pole. I hung up.

I wanted to yell at her—*Crackheads have babies! How could you think I hurt my fetus?* I know it's possible to fall and hurt the fetus, but that would have to be one big fall.

The primal half of me wanted to say, *Bitch, I bet you're not getting all your protein.*

How could a pregnant woman know so little? I realize the very word—miscarry—makes it sound as if I carried the child wrong.

Many people have mistaken perceptions of miscarriage. I used to as well.

When I was in my teens and early twenties I didn't know many women who had miscarried. The only real contact I'd had with miscarriage was in a couple of different movies. In each movie, the woman had long, flowing hair. She got out of bed and sensed something was wrong. She looked down at her white nightgown and noticed a large blood stain. She screamed. It was romantically tragic.

It was clean.

As I've gotten older, I've heard more stories from women I know. They said they were all awake when it happened. They were sitting on the toilet and there was enough tissue, clots, and blood to fill a water balloon. You can't sleep through a miscarriage. The women I've talked to said the pain was intense.

The woman in the nightgown is a myth. Whose idea of miscarriage is it? I don't know. Maybe it's a product of Hollywood. This pretend pregnant woman called her husband at work. She cried hysterically. He could barely understand her. He rushed home and carried her to the hospital where she was told what she already knew. She lost the baby. Not the baby stopped developing, not the fetus was unhealthy, but she lost it. Then she went home. She didn't come out of her house for weeks. No one could touch her.

I wasn't her. I went to work the day after I found out I had a miscarriage to teach a couple of classes. I wanted to be around people who would treat me as though this were any other day. My students complained about their homework. One student fell asleep while I lectured. I needed to be ordinary.

As I walked from my classroom to my car, I noticed every pregnant woman who walked by. I also noticed women with flat bellies going to and from classes. I wondered how many women, like me, were walking around with dead fetuses inside of them. It was surreal. I had always thought of a woman's body as a source of life. Now I know a woman's body is also a place for death, like a graveyard.

In the days leading up to the D&C, I didn't want to move. I didn't want to jostle my dead fetus or catapult him out of my body. I wanted him to stay

inside me, dead tissue and beginning of bone. I wanted to be his graveyard a little while longer.

What I didn't know before the miscarriage is that almost every woman in my family has had one. My mother never miscarried. I thought I would be like her.

She told me, "My mother had at least two miscarriages. I never knew. My mother didn't know either, until decades later. That's when she described what happened to someone and they told her she miscarried. She didn't know what was happening."

I said, "That's what I've been reading, too. Lots of women have miscarriages and don't even know it."

I think I'm lucky to know so much about the issue and about my body. Decades ago, I think there was more shame associated with miscarriage. I think on some levels, when women lost children they felt marked or cursed. I didn't feel either. My paternal grandmother also had a D&C just like me. In between her first and second children she had three miscarriages. I wonder how she felt about it, but I could never ask. I wonder if she felt like it was her fault.

My family probably believed that if you haven't gone through it you wouldn't understand. Maybe they feared telling. Maybe they thought I would be as callous as the woman who thought I fell. You really don't know how someone will react to tragedy until they try to console you. That's when you find out who your friends are. After the miscarriage, I felt like I had joined an elite club.

Karl took me to the hospital on the day of the D&C. Once connected to an IV, I couldn't go anywhere, even though I wanted to bolt, me and my dead fetus. When the doctor first told

me I'd have my dead fetus inside me for days, I was horrified. As the surgery grew close, I felt apprehensive. I had grown used to being a soft resting place. I didn't want my fetus to leave me.

A nurse assisting in the surgery skipped into the curtained area I was waiting in and asked the surgeon brightly, "Is this the vacuum D&C?" He nodded, and she skipped back through the curtain. I wanted to vacuum her face.

People in green masks wheeled me into a room and pumped anesthesia into the mask on my face. I opened my eyes and saw white lights illuminating a sea-foam-green operating room. I felt an arm toweling my leg off, roughly.

"Is it over?" I asked the surgeon. He said yes. That's when I started to cry, again. My fetus was little more than a blob of tragically flawed tissue. But I wanted to name him Griffin. Now I can never name anything Griffin, not another child, not a cat, not a car, not a houseplant.

The nurses wheeled me out of the operating room. I wondered if my fetus would be angry that my surgeon disposed of his body in a red hazardous trashcan. I wanted to see him. But I didn't want to see him in pieces, suctioned out of me like waste.

The doctor asked, "Are you crying because you're in pain or your heart hurts?"

I mumbled, "My heart."

In the recovery room, I was dizzy from the anesthesia and couldn't stand. I was also bleeding from the D&C, and I was afraid Karl would be uncomfortable seeing that.

I just had my uterus scraped out like a pumpkin and I was worried about Karl seeing my vagina bleed. Of course I was bleeding. It's one of

those hang-ups that I bought into, that men are afraid of tampons and bloody uterine lining. I told Karl to look away while I slid a clean pad on. I held his arm while I slid my pants on. He held me up while blood trickled down my legs.

What divides Karl from all my girlfriends is that he couldn't possibly know or imagine the emptiness I felt. Where I once held a life was now an empty tomb. My uterus was grieving. I felt like it was pumping blood and sadness through my torso. A couple of weeks before, I'd had a second heart inside me beating faster than a mouse.

I had no idea that after a D&C my uterus would feel so swollen. I understand that not every D&C will leave a woman bedridden like I was. I just wasn't prepared for it. Procedurally, a D&C is like an abortion. I had always heard that abortions were not very painful. Who made up that myth?

My doctor told me that after the surgery I would physically be well enough to go to a movie theater. I gave him an accusatory look that I hoped conveyed the statement, "Get off the drugs."

He said, "What I mean is, you would be physically well enough to sit through a movie, but you shouldn't. You need to let yourself heal emotionally."

A couple of days after the D&C, I felt overcome with a sense of peace. I woke up every night in tears, but during the day I started to feel unusually calm. While it took weeks before I could sit down without pain, in the meantime, my heart slowly healed. I like to think Griffin stuck around, somewhere inside the aura of grief surrounding me, just to make sure I was okay.

Fifteen months later, I sit here writing. My baby girl's sleepy head is propped up against my nursing pillow as I clack away at my keyboard. Every once in a while I think about Griffin. Sometimes I wish he were here, too, but if he were, my daughter wouldn't be. It seems like a cruel wish to make. And then Super-Prego reminds me of natural selection, survival of the fittest and that Griffin just wasn't healthy enough to live outside the womb. I couldn't will him to life, just like I couldn't will my daughter to life. Sure, I helped her along, but she is here because her cells could multiply and because she could flourish in my womb. No amount of vitamins or leafy greens could guarantee anything.

I was never in control of either pregnancy. I may have controlled when I got off the pill, I may have controlled when my husband and I started trying, but once that egg was fertilized, nobody, not me or any doctor or scientist, had any control over whether my zygote became a fetus and whether my fetus became a baby. When I first became pregnant, I knew being a mother meant that eventually I would have to give up control. I just had no idea how soon I would need to relinquish it.

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Ella was born just six months ago, and she's the strongest, funniest, sweetest little girl I've ever had the pleasure of getting to know. And yes, I'm completely biased. But I didn't talk about my second pregnancy in this essay because the two experiences are completely different. The first pregnancy needed to be a story on its own. Even though it was so short, it taught me about being a mother and letting go.