

## THE WAITING ROOM

(Vogue, 2006)

I have a good friend, a lovely and unfailingly optimistic woman some thirty years older than I am, who over lunch a few years ago quietly announced that she'd had seven pregnancies and two beautiful children. Her faint smile let me know that she wasn't complaining about her history – on the contrary, she considered herself blessed – while the flicker of calm outrage in her eyes attested to the fact that she would never forget the pain. I have no memory of my inadequate response, though I do remember being shocked. The numbers seven and two seemed to speak for themselves, the stark difference between them – that unspoken five – like a ledger of ghosts suddenly written on our lunch table. I'd had no idea that beyond her children, both grown into wonderful adults, there had been, in a time long before our friendship, a series of tragically unoccupied places in her family.

It was only when I got home that day and told my wife about the conversation that I became aware of my friend's generosity in speaking to me about her most private history. As my wife and I were just then beginning to discover for ourselves, crushed hope of such magnitude isn't the sort of thing one generally talks about outside the house, even to the best of friends.

At the time, we weren't far into it yet – I see that now, with a clarity made bearable only by subsequent happiness. I see the dining room in which I'd been standing a year or so before that lunch, and myself glancing at a section of the *Times*, thinking I don't know what – The start of baseball season? The pollen count? Whose turn it was to walk the dog? *Me, me, me* – when Aleksandra appeared in the doorway, a silly ecstatic terrified grin on her face.

“It's blue,” she said.

“What's blue?”

“The thing. I'm pregnant.”

Yes, just like a TV ad, a drugstore cliché. We stared at each other, laughing, panicked, thrilled, hardly more than children ourselves, though I was 36 and she was 31.

Aleksandra went to her ob-gyn for a proper test, and, as we suspected, the result was confirmed. Then we moved into high gear. She bought a “What to Expect...” book and brought it home. Poking around in the book, I found a section on what pregnant women are supposed to eat so their babies will be well nourished, brilliant and full of love and respect for their parents. Nuts, the book said, fruit. Fine. I went around the corner and came back with seven pounds of granola, a gallon of whole milk, a fat bunch of bananas. Wasn’t this what alpha silverback gorillas did? Aleksandra looked pleased, her gaze beaming wifely pride. In the space of a few hours I had been transformed by impending fatherhood into a hunter-gatherer extraordinaire. We lay on the bed passing the pregnancy book back and forth, the way I’d once done in boarding school with the *Kamasutra*. We took a leisurely stroll in the park. We were almost complete.

The feeling lasted four days. On the fifth day something unexpected developed, something not listed in the book under the headings “Nutrition” or, for that matter, “Living the Moment.” My wife had some cramping. There was a minor amount of bleeding. We called the doctor and were told that this was probably normal but still we should come in right away for an examination. In person, however, he seemed less sanguine. “Let’s wait for the blood test,” he told us with an unsmiling expression that we nonetheless chose to read as hopefully reassuring – a misinterpretation of the facts that we maintained until the blood test results came back two days later. The numbers, we were told, did not look good.

I am not going to sit here and say something to the effect that hope is an onion that gets peeled back layer by layer by the rough hands of experience, et cetera. I don’t know what hope is. I only know that it is a force whose meaning, like that of so many fundamental forces in life, is truly recognized and

appreciated only when it appears to be extinct. And I don't mean endangered, I mean extinct.

This past summer marked the fifteenth anniversary of Aleksandra's and my first date, and our ninth wedding anniversary. The six-year differential between these two figures roughly equals not only the length of time that Aleksandra and I were together before the subject of marriage ever arose in conversation (apart from indirect remarks about the marriages of our friends) but also, once we were finally husband and wife, the length of time it took us to get around to the even weightier subject of becoming parents. We were, in other words, not exactly in the passing lane when it came to the big issues of mature life. You could consider us slow developers (we are both writers, a famously hard-to-train species), or perhaps simply a couple who, having met early (she was 20 and I was 25), needed extra time to roam the world a bit, making the sorts of intrepid mistakes that are the solipsistic hallmark of two young people who are in love and unburdened by serious responsibilities.

And this we did for more than a decade. We spent long happy periods in France and Italy. We traveled to distant islands when we felt like it. We went out or invited friends over five or six nights a week. We buried ourselves in our respective literary projects for months, years at a time, to the detriment of our sanity, our health, and sometimes our bank accounts. We had no wills, health proxies, life insurance policies. We were not current on the rates of tuition inflation at the ten best private schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn. When we would visit with our friends who had children – and as the years went by, of course, more and more of our friends became parents – we would admire those children, and like them, and often see in them many of the qualities that we appreciated so much in our friends, but it is safe to say that we did not really understand those families, in the sense of not fully comprehending the aura of love, energy, constant giving, organizational maturity, exhaustion of emotional

and financial resources, and ecstatic connection to a procreative vision of the future that made their days fundamentally different from our own.

Here I should probably mention something that anyone who's ever hazarded a long car trip with Aleksandra and me has no doubt observed: we are both rather strong personalities, driven, at least privately, to a high degree of verbal articulation of our feelings. In other words, we know each other intimately in ways good and bad. Our avoidance for almost a dozen years of any talk of having children was certainly no accident – and, once we did finally begin to consider the subject, our deliberations progressed rapidly. We were by then well acquainted with what we wanted as a couple, which I suppose is another way of saying that we both knew instinctively what we were missing. And what we were missing was a third life that began and ended outside of ourselves. A life for which we alone would be responsible and that, by its very existence, would make us less selfish and more giving. What neither of us was prepared for – or, indeed, really had much training in – was the degree of failure that awaited us, and how that failure, persistent and toxic as a bad wind, would soon come to define our lives.

Though we are by nature a couple who talks things through, after that first pregnancy and several others equally though variously unsuccessful, we made a decision: we would move our grief and disappointment underground. Other than immediate family members and one or two friends, we would tell no one what was happening to us, or that we were even trying to have children. Perhaps this was a mistake, honestly I don't know. But we did not want to become people that others pitied or worried over. We did not want to lose the lives that we had – lives in which now and then we might go on acting out the roles of people who found enjoyment in friends and family, work and travel, the myriad varieties of hopeful living that we had been born to believe in as an inalienable right, and wanted to believe in still. Above all, we did not want to expose to the public gaze a pain that we ourselves could hardly bear to look at.

About two years into our ordeal, we were invited to a dinner hosted in our honor by a group of our friends in Los Angeles. Among the couples were five of Aleksandra's best friends. These women were remarkable for their beauty and intelligence alone – a more emotionally generous and culturally sophisticated group of women you could hardly hope to find – but, for Aleksandra and me that evening, most notable of all was the fact that four of them were pregnant with a second or third child, and the fifth had recently given birth.

All through the evening I kept stealing glances at my wife. She was brave, and she was good. Down the long table, in the romantic dim light, with so many of our closest friends gathered to celebrate us, I saw her smiling and even laughing, and I knew that neither her smiles nor her laughter were lies. No, not lies: secrets. I wanted to catch her eye, and once or twice I succeeded. I wanted her to know that the secrets were not hers to bear alone, that I shared them and would do everything I could, then and always, to relieve her of their burden.

But in bed that night – we were staying in the house of one of our pregnant friends, and through the closed door of our room could hear her youngest child crying out to be comforted and the sound of our friend's footsteps as she went to her – I said none of what I had been thinking during dinner. It felt literally unsayable. Lying together in the dark, holding hands but nothing more, we murmured comments about what a nice party it had been or how good X had looked (X being one of our pregnant friends, someone we loved). And we meant every word, and also understood how everything, every routine compliment and every pregnant woman we might run into on the street from now until the end of our lives, had become a pair of loaded dice unintentionally thrown at our feet. It wasn't anyone's fault. All we could do was ignore what the mounting negative numbers were telling us – we were fast approaching the five failed pregnancies of my older friend, though without the two beautiful children she had to show for her suffering – and keep going. We fell asleep that night in each other's arms.

One more thing about hope, and then I'm done: you kill it, bury it, write the epitaph; you go on doing something not because you believe it will lead to anything good but simply because you are an animal following your biological path, and each day is the same, in the sense of not being any better; and then, one day, for no reason that you can think of, there is a twitch of life, a pulse, a sign, and the thing that you buried without a eulogy comes back and stares at you in the mirror.

Two summers ago, we went to a small dinner party at a friend's house on Nantucket. It was something of an event for us; Aleksandra was then seven weeks into a pregnancy that seemed tenuously to be taking hold, and we had not been out in a while. The house sat on a bluff overlooking the ocean, and from the glassed-in room where we were having drinks before dinner we could see the orange sun slowly sinking into the water. I sat with a glass of white wine talking with two older writers (both of them fathers) about Iraq, or whether the blues were running that summer, or the prospects of the Yankees – to tell you the truth, I can't remember and I don't care. What I was really doing was looking at my wife across the room. She was smiling. The intensely colored sun had found her brown hair and one side of her face, and her unconscious happiness – she wasn't aware that I was looking at her – shone out of that light and became the brightest thing in the room.

When she left the room I couldn't say, but a little while later, as we were being called into dinner, I saw her emerging from the hall bathroom. Her face was ashen and her eyes wild with a terror that for me required no explanation, and for a few moments of almost obliterating despair I was paralyzed by the thought that our hearts could not survive what was happening to us.

I told her to go directly to the car and I would be out in a minute. I walked quickly to the dining room, where our friends were gathered. The table was set with silver, the candles burning. They were all good friends, and not one of them knew what we had endured these past years, or that Aleksandra was – or

had been, until this very minute – pregnant. “John, you’re over there,” our hostess said with a smile, pointing to an empty place, where I saw a card with my name on it.

“Excuse me,” I announced in a voice that was shaken but still loud enough to quiet the room; except for my expression, I suppose I could have been making a toast. Everyone stopped talking and turned to me, some half-smiling as though expecting a humorous remark. “Aleksandra seems to be having a miscarriage and I have to take her to the hospital,” I stumbled on. “I’m very sorry.” Then I said goodbye and walked out, leaving them astonished and stricken.

The car ride was hell. There is no other word for it. Nantucket is a small rich congested town over-run with enormous luxury SUVs, and we had to drive right through the center to get to the hospital. It took a long time. Two days later, I was still cleaning Aleksandra’s blood off the seats.

The emergency room doctor – it was Saturday night and there was only one on call – asked me to leave while she performed the examination. I went out reluctantly, past the abandoned reception desk, and into the empty waiting room, where the TV was showing an infomercial with the sound off. I thought about praying, but I have never been good at that sort of thing. I felt utterly helpless, and my helplessness was like a disease that I had caught a long time ago and that only now was proving fatal. I sat down on a chair as if I’d been pushed, and held my head in my hands.

I was called back in, and found Aleksandra sobbing. I will never forget the sight of her suffering. The examination room was littered with wadded-up absorbent pads heavy with her blood. A bean-shaped plastic dish contained forceps and what appeared to be large black clots of bloody tissue. The doctor was no longer there. When Aleksandra was able to speak, she told me that the examination had been brutally painful, and that the doctor had declared that she was having a miscarriage.

I held her hand. I told her I loved her and that it would be okay. I said *Breathe* – even as, dimly, I recognized the word as the staple of Lamaze technique, all those birthing classes we would never have to take.

And then, an hour later, standing behind a good-hearted radiology tech called in from a night hitting the bars, I watched a picture appear on the gray screen of the sonogram monitor. We were waiting, yet again, for confirmation of the end of a life that we had made from nothing but hope and desire. From her position on the exam table, Aleksandra couldn't see the monitor, but I could. There was some fumbling – by now she was sobbing so hard that the picture was shaking as if battered by a storm – before the image finally steadied, and through the tears of my disbelief I saw the tiny throbbing heroic pulse of our baby's still-beating heart.

I think back now; I always do. I can't help it. It is my tic, obsession, deepest pleasure and most elaborate haunting. I'm probably not by nature an optimist, and I know I'm not blind. Every morning on the way up to my third-floor office I stop in for a visit with my son, Garrick, who is eight months old. I do this just to remind myself; to pray at the altar; to take a whiff of his life. I think to myself: If any of the others had worked, we wouldn't have *him*. And I can imagine no one but him. I don't know God very well, but it's my belief that God can imagine no one but him. So every morning I stop in for a little one-on-one. It makes no difference that our grasp of each other's languages is still rudimentary; charades is a fine game for happy idiots like us. We have the smile thing down, and the leg kicks, his limbs like pale plump commas tossed up, Chinese-acrobat-style, to form spontaneous quotation marks bracketing his chosen expression of the day. He himself is that expression, a poem changing with each new hour, everything of meaning there is to say in the universe, as far as I'm concerned. Today his outfit says it all: a black-and-white-striped onesie in the style of old prison uniforms, the words SLEEP THIEF painted in big bright letters across the chest.

Score one for the kid.

I kiss his frog's belly, make a couple of embarrassing googly sounds, tell him to be good, and drag myself up to my office to begin another day of work: to try to find words for the radical effect of his arrival on our lives, how long it took him to get here, and how hard the journey was.

John Burnham Schwartz

October, 2006