A New Season

JENNA

It was mid-April in New York, cool but with canopies of new leaves and flowering trees, signs that winter had finally departed for good. On days like this, Manhattanites are overeager to move on to the next season: They sit wrapped in parkas at sidewalk cafés or run alongside the Hudson River tightly zipped into fleece.

I felt a bit of that same spring fever as I climbed out of bed in a room with barely enough space for our king frame and two tiny nightstands. But at eight months pregnant, I needed the strength of both arms to hoist myself up and over the side of the mattress. I was continually surprised by my size. I had reverse body dysmorphia; I couldn’t tell how massive I had become except for the enormous effort that it took to do simple tasks.

In a cycling class that morning, a man who sat in front of me commented as I shimmied between the handle bars to get to my bike: “Girl, you are having that baby today...be careful or...
we will have to carry you out like a Trojan horse.” I laughed. “The baby isn’t coming for a few more weeks,” I assured him.

Afterward, I squeezed into a bright-marigold-yellow dress, which, because of my protruding stomach, was short. Too short, really, for a grown pregnant woman. (During my next pregnancy, I wore that same dress on the Today Show and someone tweeted that I looked like Big Bird.) But I was tired of dark winter colors and thick, insulated tights. I was going to wear the yellow dress. I didn’t even ask Henry for his opinion before we left the apartment. But on the sidewalk, I stood behind him, slightly embarrassed and afraid what might be revealed in the sunlight. As I hailed a cab, I kept tugging at the hem, wishing the dress would miraculously stretch and become a few inches longer. I was on my way to my baby shower, planned with meticulous detail by Barbara and many of my dearest friends.

I arrived to a room decorated with baby bottles filled with tiny blue and pink M&M’s and cookies in the shapes of rattles. I usually love a good party, but as I entered, I didn’t want to be there. I felt uncomfortable and anxious and kept fiddling with my dress. I avoided the center of the room, preferring to cluster in a corner of the apartment. When Barbara walked over, I grabbed her arm. “Stay here with me,” I told her. “I can’t talk to anyone else.”

Barbara laughed. She reminded me that I was among friends. “Come on,” she added, propelling me forward.

I still lagged behind. I felt an almost primal urge to hide, and I clung to the one who knew me from before I was born.

The caterer came by, but nothing looked appealing. I turned down a favorite food, a donut. When we got to the gift opening, the hostess clapped her hands and gathered us all together into
a semicircle. I was ushered to the seat of honor in the center of the group, my temporary throne a lovely pink chair.

I opened pastel-paper-wrapped boxes filled with baby onesies and bottle warmers. I looked at the packaging, wondering, \textit{How does a bottle warmer even work? Why does the baby even need warm milk?} Then came the bigger questions: \textit{What type of mother will I be? Can I do this? Can I really protect this little person?}

The pile of discarded wrapping paper grew and we began to play a game: Each gift-giver made a prediction about the baby’s gender (we had decided to be surprised) and the name.

“Boy! Harold Hager!” came one guess. I opened a set of yellow and white burp cloths.

“Boy! Rodrigo Hager,” another friend chimed in.

I felt a shift in my stomach…it hurt. My friends sitting across from me on a matching pink-patterned couch laughed; the tight yellow dress showed everything. They could see what I felt.

“What was that?” someone asked. “Jenna, your water may break right here!”

I gave a halfhearted laugh and then tried to discreetly wipe a few small beads of sweat from my upper lip and pull down my hem again, before I opened a long rectangular box. Inside was a tiny turquoise-and-white polka-dot guitar. I loved it; I imagined a toddler strumming chords, singing nursery rhymes, creating songs, his or her voice a new sound track for our lives.

“I love that miniature guitar!” My sister said exactly what I thought, and not for the first time. “Pass it to me!”

Barbara tried to find the chords to the only song she remembered how to play, a Stone Temple Pilots piece she learned in seventh grade when she took guitar lessons twice a week. This was during the phase when she pierced her own belly button while listening to Led Zeppelin’s “Tangerine” on repeat.
“Here it is... C... D,” she said, laughing as the tiny guitar sounded the chords we had last heard in middle school. And I started to laugh, to really laugh.

Right when Barbara was getting to the chorus, I felt it: Out of my short dress came an explosion of water, like a tidal wave. It poured out through the dress, onto the chair, and all over the floor. The doctors had told me that my baby was breech—her head was up near my heart, which meant there was nothing to hold back the water except for her two tiny feet. So this definitely wasn’t your typical water-breaking-at-a-baby-shower moment.

The next few minutes were an out-of-body experience, the way at moments of maximum panic your life might take on the quality of an old film, where you feel as if you are watching it all unfurl frame by frame. I watched my friends’ mouths open in total shock; some burst into laughter, some screamed, jumping up and backing away as if in fear of being poisoned by my embryonic fluid. Another pregnant woman stared at me, horrified. Then tears started streaming down her face and she bolted into the powder room to avoid watching. The only male present—the caterer—threw a paper towel roll at me and abruptly walked out of the apartment, trays of artfully arranged hors d’oeuvres left behind, never to be eaten.

I started to laugh hysterically and then I cried.

“What do I do now?” I said, to everyone and no one.

Part of the joyful, nervous tears were because I had never fully believed that I would make it to this moment. The women in my mom’s family are strong, but all the way back to my great-grandmother, the one thing that has proven very difficult for them was having children. Both my mother and my grandmother are only children, but not by choice. My great-grandmother, who
could mix her own mortar and lay her own brick, buried at least two babies in the hot El Paso, Texas, ground, both of whom were “born too soon.” My grandmother laid three children to rest after my mom, two boys and another little girl. One, named John Edward Welch, struggled for two days in Midland, Texas’s primitive Western Clinic, wrapped in blankets and fed with an eyedropper.

My mom’s earliest memory as a toddler is of being held up to the thick observation glass in her father’s strong arms so she could see her brother, swaddled between life and death. After his two days on earth, he was called a “late miscarriage” and buried in a tiny coffin in an unmarked grave. Newnie Ellis, Midland’s undertaker, placed him in the part of the cemetery reserved for the babies who had come ever so briefly into the world. A girl, Sarah Elizabeth, would join him some five years later, and then another premature boy whom they must have found too difficult to name.

My own mom had wanted a houseful of children, but it was not to be.

She and my dad struggled to get pregnant. They had put their names in with an adoption agency and were finally approved as candidates on the day that my mom found out she was expecting Barbara and me. At barely seven months along she almost lost us to preeclampsia, a condition of dangerously high blood pressure during pregnancy, which can lead to kidney failure and even death for the mother. She was flown out of Midland and put on bed rest for three weeks at Baylor Hospital in Dallas before we were born by Cesarean section. As we grew, she kept our cribs and baby furniture for years, still hoping. “My heart,” she wrote, “was deep enough for more.”

Growing up, Barbara and I always knew how very much we were wanted, that we had been the answer to our parents’ prayers.
This baby wasn’t my first baby either. There had been another one before. Henry and I hadn’t even really been trying. I was working a lot. I had flown out to California to interview the actor Jake Gyllenhaal and I felt sick. Really sick. I called Henry at 4 a.m. and he told me to take a pregnancy test. So I did. I walked down to a drugstore near the hotel. I was nervous even going into the store to buy a pregnancy test; I didn’t want anyone to recognize me and see what I was buying. I tried to camouflage it amid a water bottle, a pack of gum, and a tube of mascara. Back in the hotel bathroom, I laid the stick out on the counter and waited; the mark was positive. I was thrilled; it felt unbelievable because I knew how hard it had been for the women who came before me. I did the math and realized that I was almost eight weeks—two months—along.

I flew back to New York feeling as if I had a powerful secret inside me. Yet I was nervous, overwhelmingly nervous, with a sudden sense that this was too good to be true. I called my doctor. She was out of town, but she offered to drive in. I felt badly and said, “Well, no, don’t do that. It’s just that I’ve never done this before. I don’t know anything. I don’t know what I’m supposed to eat or what I’m supposed to do.”

Still, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. She must have heard my hesitation because she said that she needed to come in to run an errand and could easily stop by her office to do an ultrasound. I felt a small wave of relief. I thanked her, adding that I was traveling a lot for work, and “it would really be great to see the baby.”

Henry was out of town in Norfolk, Virginia, so I went to the appointment by myself. I had told him that he didn’t need to be there because it was just the first sonogram. I hadn’t told
anyone else, except a good friend from work, and even then, all I revealed was the very noncommittal “I might be pregnant.”

I took a cab to the doctor’s office. They did some blood work, and then I went into the exam room. The doctor, a lovely woman with a friendly face, walked in. She’s Indian American, and in a comforting bit of symmetry, it was a female Indian American doctor who did the first sonogram of Barbara and me. The doctor smiled; she said that according to the blood test, “You’re pregnant.”

I thought, Oh, thank goodness. I was so relieved. She put some cool gel on my stomach and began running the ultrasound probe over my abdomen, where the baby was supposed to be. But there was nothing there. She kept circling the probe, and she asked, “You haven’t had any fertility drugs, have you?” And I said no.

She said okay, but it was one of those slightly clipped “okay”s that really mean nothing is okay. Slowly, she slid the probe in another direction. That’s when she found the baby, growing inside my fallopian tube. It was, she informed me, an ectopic pregnancy. I didn’t know what the words meant. She explained that the baby was growing not in my uterus, but in the fallopian tube, which delivers the egg. And because it was so far along, I had to go straight into emergency surgery. The tube could rupture at any moment, causing life-threatening internal bleeding.

“You have an angel on your shoulder,” she said to me.

It was crushing. I called Henry and told him to rush to the airport and back home. The next thing I knew, I was lying on a gurney with an IV in my arm being wheeled into surgery and feeling totally alone.

After I got home, I was still having a bad reaction to the anesthesia and felt horrible. I was up all night. And I cried. I cried for this loss. I lay in that bed thinking about my grand-
mother and my great-grandmother. I thought, *How could they have done this? How could they have survived this time after time?*

Barbara grabbed my hand. “It will be okay,” she said calmly. She had no idea whether it would be or not; neither one of us had ever given birth, but I saw the steadiness in her eyes and I believed her. She and an older cousin and another friend who both already had children and had been through this several times sprang into action.

“*Call the Uber!*”

“*Call HENRY! Ask him to grab the overnight bag. NOW!*”

“*Someone pack up the donuts! They might get hungry at the hospital.*”

Barbara led me to the shower, away from the laughter and chaos of the living room, still adorned with bouquets of light-colored balloons.

While I was showering, Barbara called Henry. He was at a local rooftop restaurant, celebrating over beers with the boyfriends and husbands of the women at the shower. As Barbara spoke, all he heard in the background were the sounds of women talking and their laughter.

“*Henry!*” Barbara exclaimed. “We have to get to the hospital. Now. Jenna’s water broke. It’s time. Go home now, and throw some things into a bag: toothbrush—”

“*Oh come on!*” he said back. “We were at the doctor yesterday. She said it would be weeks. This isn’t funny. You and Jenna have to stop with the practical jokes. This one isn’t funny.” And he hung up.

Years of April Fool’s pranks, one of my favorite days of the year, and playing endless jokes on our parents and friends, as well as on the most unsuspecting of our subjects, Henry, came floating back, biting us in the ass.
“Henry doesn’t believe us,” Barbara told me as I stepped into the borrowed sweatpants and sweatshirt that belonged to my friend’s husband and lined my pants with a towel. “What are we going to do?” I asked. “Call him again.” The call went to voice mail. Henry wasn’t answering.

Leaving the apartment was like leaving the scene of a crime. Many of the guests had already departed. Those who had stayed were picking up shreds of wrapping paper and placing them into a giant trash bag; someone else was mopping. The pink chair that I had been sitting in had already mercifully disappeared.

As I got into the Uber headed to the hospital to give birth—something that I still think of as a unique, New York City thing—I felt so far from home. Where was my mother? Where was my husband? My mind was racing with scenarios, until I looked over and saw Barbara, calmly riding with me, a box of donuts balanced on her lap.

After a friend of mine called her husband in a panic to tell him the mess that she had just witnessed, Henry finally rushed home to grab a bag. Barbara and I were capable of a lot of mischievous pranks, but he had realized that if someone else was claiming that my water broke, she must be telling the truth.

Henry arrived in the delivery room, and an hour later our darling daughter Margaret Laura (who we would come to call Mila), named after both of our mothers just as Barbara and I were, was born.

I still feel like the circle of women who just hours earlier had been so sure that Mila was a boy made her decide to stand up and announce herself: “Wait, world, here I come, and I am not a boy! I am woman; hear me roar!”
The first person to meet Mila, minus Henry and me of course, was Barbara. She held her so naturally, seemingly not worried about her fragile six-pound body. When it was time to take a picture of our new family of three, Barbara was appalled by the hospital’s fluorescent lighting and the shadows it created on my already exhausted face, so she wheeled my hospital bed to the window, where the sun was shining.

“Let’s use some of that natural light,” she said. Henry thought we were insane. The nurses and doctors walking in must have thought the same.

But that first picture of me holding my baby, taken by my sister, the person who was born alongside me, was perfect and perfectly warmed by the light of a new season.

Continuing the sister photo tradition: Jenna and Henry’s first photo with Poppy, taken by Barbara with sunlight and love on lucky August 13, 2015.