

Conception

Nearly everyone knows stories about their actual birth day. The statistics are recorded in minute detail in hospital records and personal diaries. Some families even have videos of the event. But what do we know of conception, of the day we were actually created? For most of us, very little.

For me, today is that day.

My mother-to-be doesn't know she will become pregnant today, but I am certain of it. From where future-me hovers in the shadows I can see it clearly. It is four o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, February 13, 1942. Valentine's Day Eve. My mother is at home alone, sitting in the kitchen and gazing out at the street expectantly from a chair next to the window of the tiny ground floor Bronx apartment where the family has lived since before the war began. The January thaw has come later than usual this year and it is surprisingly warm, hovering above freezing; the window is slightly ajar. A light snow has been forecast for later this evening. A Pall Mall cigarette dangles forgetfully between her fingertips. Each time she takes a puff and exhales the smoke is caught up in the draught and expelled through the window like a mini-tornado, suffusing the late afternoon light with a grey cloud, much like her mood.

My future father, a clerk at a plumbing supply warehouse on Long Island, has been working overtime. At this very moment he is completing the day's paperwork. Soon, he will gather his belongings from his locker, change out of his uniform and prepare to leave work. He will be home before seven sporting an over-sized heart-shaped box containing an array of Valentine chocolates, a tradition he has maintained almost without exception for the 22 years he and my mother have been married. Twice, during the depression, there was so little money he was forced to abandon his routine, replacing the candy heart with a heart-shaped Hallmark greeting card. Even now, the candy is an extravagance he can

ill afford; they both know it, but it's one of the few remaining declarations of affection that pass between them and he is loath to give it up.

Because Valentine's Day falls on a Saturday this year, it means there will be a chance to sleep in, and for my future father more opportunity for sex, which is the reason for my mother's mood. There are already too many mouths to feed on her husband's meager income, and while she has just turned forty and the chance of becoming pregnant is slim, it is the middle of her monthly cycle; avoiding sex will be impossible. She is terrified.

Her reverie is broken when the outer door of the apartment swings open and footsteps can be heard racing between the hallway and the front door. It flies open and my sister-to-be tears into the kitchen. She is eight years old and already the flecks of paint that will become her hallmark in years to come streak her skirt and blouse and hands. She is a favorite of the teachers because of how well she draws and she is often asked to paint posters and flyers for school programs. It is hard to paint without soiling your clothes though, and while my mother knows this, her own pallet darkens with the fading light.

"Again?" she says, crushing the cigarette into an ashtray and getting up from the chair. "What did I tell you the last time? I can't afford to keep buying you clothes." She grabs my sister by an ear and pulls her toward the bathroom.

"Ow! You're hurting me!" my sister yells.

"Wash your clothes now!" my mother orders her. "And if the paint doesn't come out, you're going to have to wear them anyway. Understand?" She lets go of her ear at the door to the bathroom and goes back to the kitchen. It's time to prepare dinner.

She knows she needs to be in a better mood before my father comes home. He will be expecting her to be romantic. And she would like to be. Really. But how can she be in a good mood when every day she has to make dinner for four (soon to be five) on the money he brings home. The kitchen is tiny, with barely room for all of them to sit around the table. It's so small that years from now, when I am an actual child, I will have to eat dinner sitting in a chair squeezed into the space beneath a cupboard that serves as a pantry. Plus, she is not a very good cook. Not that she isn't capable; she just hates the tediousness of it. She has a few specialties: potato latkes, borscht, chopped chicken liver, matzoh balls. But these are for occasions when there's company. The rest of the time, she can't be bothered. What will it be tonight? Something my father will like that's easy to prepare. Liver and bacon. One of his favorites. Canned peas for greens, instant rice for grain.

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On that February day in 1942, nine months before my birth, my mother was just shy of 40, well into middle age for a woman of that era. She had borne three children, one of whom was married and living in an apartment upstairs (and who, though she didn't yet know it, was pregnant with *her* first child); the other two, a boy 15 and a girl 8, were still in her charge.

Despite the toll that rearing three children took on her inner emotional life, outwardly she looked remarkably good for her age. Her thick blonde hair which, in its natural state, showed streaks of grey, required periodic coloring, an all-day event she engaged in with her sisters over the kitchen sink, and involved much stink; but when she wasn't surrounded by a cloud of smoke from her cigarette habit (which she continued until she was nearly 90 years old), you would have said she was an attractive woman, probably beautiful once.

Unfortunately, the melancholy that overtook her after the birth of her third child was now full-on depression. She smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, stayed in bed until 10 every morning, ignoring

her children as they dressed and went off to school. She papered the floor with newspaper to avoid walking the dog and spent hours sitting by the kitchen window alone or with her sisters wondering how she got to this place.

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My sister comes in to the kitchen wearing her hat and coat.

"Where are you going?" my mother demands.

"To Thea's," she says.

"Be back in time for dinner."

"I'm having dinner at her house."

My mother says nothing but takes a long drag on her cigarette. My sister waits for a response, but hearing none she leaves.

The telephone rings. It is my aunt. They saw each other only an hour ago, but they talk several times a day. The telephone is one of the extravagances for which my mother is known. They chat for several minutes until there is a knock on the hall door. Most likely it is someone who has an appointment with the dentist next door. The entrance is identical to ours, and since our door is never locked, they usually just walk in. It's probably a new patient.

My mother goes to the door and is surprised to see Mr. Axelrod standing in the outer vestibule. Mr. Axelrod is an insurance salesman and he has been servicing our family for years. These are the days when life insurance premiums are collected weekly by agents who fan out across the country.

"Mr. Axelrod, what are you doing here? Today's not your day. Are we behind in our payments?" she asks, nervously.

"No, no," he answers shyly, "I was in the neighborhood and just thought I'd stop by to say hello."

"You know you're always welcome," she says, all smiles, a little too flirtatiously. "Come in. I'll put some water on for tea."

My mother has always had a soft spot for Mr. Axelrod, who is about her age and handsome in a way my father is not. More to the point, he gives off an air of success. He dresses in a jacket and tie, which my father does not. He is educated, which my father is not.

Mr. Axelrod sits down at the kitchen table while my mother puts the kettle on the stove. I can see that she is nervous. She is not accustomed to being alone with a man in the house. She fusses with her hair and adjusts her house dress repeatedly. She is afraid to face him.

"Jean," he says, standing. Jean is what all her friends call her, but the familiarity is unexpected. "I won't beat around the bush," he goes on. "I came because I've been wanting to be alone with you for a long time; since we first met, actually."

"I... I don't understand," my mother says, genuinely confused. She forgets herself and turns toward him.

Mr. Axelrod takes a step closer, putting them inches apart. With the intensity of his gaze and his incredibly good looks that's all it takes for my mother to swoon, and in that instant Mr. Axelrod grabs her around the waist and kisses her. At first, my mother tries to push him away, but her resistance is only momentary and soon she is giving in to him and to her own urges.

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I don't think I have to tell you what happens next. I will only say that my mother did indeed have sex with Mr. Axelrod in her marriage bed on that fateful afternoon, as well as with my supposed father later that night. She became pregnant and gave birth to me, her fourth child, nine months later. A

Scorpio. Apt, under the circumstances, don't you think? She never told my father what happened -- nor did I. But to this day, I don't know who my real father was.

The father I grew up with continued to bring a Valentine candy heart home with him every year until he retired, and to the best of my knowledge my parents continued to have sex, though infrequently. Mr. Axelrod continued his weekly visits until he was reassigned to another neighborhood when I was four or five. I don't know if there was a repeat of that February day, as my incursions into her personal life ended when she became pregnant.

According to my oldest sister -- the one who was pregnant at the time with my future niece -- my mother became bitter after I was born. To her credit, she avoided taking it out on me by passing me off to my siblings as much as possible. But it was inevitable that I felt her disdain. Before she became pregnant with me, she was only a few years away from being childless once again (no worry about empty nest syndrome for her). Then suddenly, there I was, and 18 more years with a dependent. It was my father (one of them anyway) who bore the brunt of her hostility.

Some years after my father died, I was rummaging through some old boxes in the basement of our house (we had long since moved from an apartment in the Bronx) and came across a bundle of letters addressed to my mother and tied together with a string. There was no return address on the envelopes. At first, I was reluctant to look at them and put the package aside, but eventually curiosity got the better of me. It turned out they were love letters from an adoring admirer. I took one from its envelope and started to read it, but it was too painful. I don't know who it was from. There was no signature. The closing words were, "I adore you. Love." I returned the letter to its envelope, retied the stack, replaced it in the box from which it came, and for the second time in my life, I kept my mother's secret.