

In the Beginning

(draft -- in process)

When I came home from the hospital in 1964, my infant wrist was adorned with a pink beaded bracelet that named me -- (XX) -- in tiny black letters on tiny white blocks. But by 2003, when my son was born, a computerized printout nylon tag marked him as mine. So much has changed between my own birth and my son's. My father wasn't allowed near the delivery room when his first five children were born, yet my husband accompanied me to each obstetric appointment. My mother had no companionship through her pregnancies and I had no privacy through mine.

Privacy is a luxury that stepmothers like me can rarely find. Elizabeth was 7 when I became pregnant, and Todd wanted her to be a part of everything. I wanted to please him, and I wanted to be a good stepmother, so I never thought to consider how I really felt about it myself. We brought her with us to the ultrasound where the three of us learned that he was a boy. She told him stories through my tummy because she wanted him to recognize his sister's voice after he was born. One night, we got her out of bed to watch the bumps of his elbows and knees poking beneath my skin as I lay in the bathtub. "He's swimming!" she squealed. "I think he's waving at you," Todd replied, eager to include her in my womb's activities. One thunderstorm night, too excited to sleep, she asked if I would lay in bed to keep her company until she nodded off.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she told me that night, as I lumbered my pregnant self into the twin bed that I'd outfitted for her in pink and white gingham. I reported her comment to Todd later that night, and he beamed with pride, as I knew he would. His admiration made me happy, and kept my growing discomfort at bay.

"I don't know what I'd do without you either, Kath," he said. "You make it all happen." I felt this as a moment of feminist triumph at the time, and I smiled. What I didn't allow myself to feel back then, much less to recognize, was the weight of it all, an impossible burden far heavier than my pregnancy, with no due date in sight.