

"The Question, The Answer"

By Lindsey Swoboda

"Would you rather be pregnant alone or have the baby alone?" Ryan asks. I dig my pale white toes next to his in the sand. The Hawaiian trade winds are fierce today, whipping the waves into an unwelcoming froth. He reaches for the coffee tumbler we're sharing, and I place it in his hand. He sips, then passes it back.

My fingertips graze his, but we keep our eyes focused on the ocean. Maybe it has the answers we seek.

I shift my feet over his and lean my body into his side. I look at his clean, shaven face, his tight haircut and his strong arms. This is not a normal question you ask your wife. My eyes beg for him to meet mine, but he keeps them on the waves, his jaw set.

Reveille blasts from a nearby speaker. The base owns this portion of the beach; the military touches us, even here. The bugle slices through the air, and ready or not, the day has begun. My husband digs our cup into the sand, rises and turns to salute the flag. Even in his civilian clothing he stands rigid like he is in a formation with thousands of other U.S. Marines. There is no respite from duty.

I dust my shorts off and stand next to him, although I push into one hip, slouch a little, and shade my eyes. When it ends, the spell of us on the beach alone together is broken. I can see his mind sorting out what orders he needs to carry out today. He snatches the cup from the sand and starts to head back up to the car.

I catch his hand. He grabs mine, pulling me along. I pull him back, stopping him.

"I'd rather be pregnant alone."

He leaves on the Friday before Mother's Day. We stand at the bus, and I hold onto him, breathing in his scent, soaking him in. I can feel him tense. His body and mind have already left.

"You're going to be okay," he breathes into my hair, "you've done this before." I bury my face further into him, wishing my weight could anchor him here. I clear the lump from my throat and reply,

"Yeah. I will. I'll-I'll let you know okay?" He pulls back from me and smiles.

"Could be—this time," he says. He was the one who bought the last round of pregnancy tests.

"Yeah. Could be." I kiss him one last time and force myself to release him.

I grip the steering wheel to drive home but I have to pause before backing out. I let the tears go. I let my heart feel the new ache. Unlike our goodbye, the pain of deployment will not be fast and over. I let it wash over me, the fresh waves of want, the months of longing ahead. Seven this time.

Four days later, I stand in the bathroom at 5:30 a.m. The pregnancy test is nestled on a little piece of toilet paper, my first morning urine soaking into it, the final Hail Mary pass. We can always try again when he gets back, I think. But wouldn't it be fantastic—if—I glance down at the test. I pick it up to be sure.

A plus sign.

I set the test down and look at myself in the mirror. I tilt my body to the side and run a hand over my belly, checking for change. I tilt the other way. My breasts feel slightly heavier, but maybe I just want them to. As I take stock of my body, I can see the hand towel behind me in the mirror. It hangs rumpled and wet from drying my hands earlier. There is a dried whirl of



white and blue in the sink, toothpaste from last night. Three hair ties and blonde bobby pins are scattered across the bathroom countertop. Everything is as it was yesterday, except for inside of me.

I pick up the test again and meet my eyes in the mirror. You're going to be a mother. I press my palm to my belly, and my eyes crinkle. Hello, you. Hello! I swipe the bobby pins and hair ties aside, rip off a clean piece of toilet paper, and place the test in the little white nest of bathroom tissue. I can't throw away proof.

I walk into our bedroom and grab my phone. I lift it up to call, to text, but I realize he's still enroute. I lay down, gripping the phone. I flip to my email, but I close it. We did not get this far in our preparation. How do I tell him? How can I tell him? Shouldn't he be the first to know? It could still be a few days before I can reach him. I lift the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" Katie, my best friend, answers. I can hear a siren go off in the distance, cars honking, people talking. The great news about life in Hawaii means that New York City has already been up for hours.

"Hi. I'm—I think I'm pregnant," I say.

"Wait—what? I couldn't hear that. Can you say it again?" She says, and I can hear her breath, rushed. I imagine her crossing a street.

"I'm pregnant!" I shout this time. I imagine her feet stopping on the sidewalk.

"Ommmgosh Lindsay!" she says.

"I know! I mean I haven't gone to the doctor or anything but—" I trail off, and realize maybe I'm excited too soon.

"Okay. Right. But—I'm sure it's something. Let's celebrate anyway. Okay?"

"Okay," I say.

"Let's just dance up and down for a minute," she says. I get out of bed. I imagine holding her hands on that sidewalk and she counts down for us: "In 3-2-1-go!" We both hoot and dance our feet in place, like we did in college when we got something we had been hoping for. I let my joy for this new life pulse around me.

I'm in the bathroom two days later, and when I wipe, there is blood on the toilet paper. It fans out in the shape of a rose petal, like the ones from our wedding. I still have not heard from Ryan. I dial the nurse line at my OBGYN. The nurse tells me her name is Delia. She sounds kind. I tell her about the blood. I tell her that the pregnancy test on my bathroom countertop is positive. She reminds me that my bloodwork is scheduled for Friday, and today is Wednesday.

"It could be implantation," she says. I ask her what that means. She explains that my uterus is already changing, and tells me, "It's best not to worry. If you don't soak a pad, we'll just see you Friday."

"And what if it's a miscarriage?" I ask.

"There's not anything you or I can do hun," she answers. I hang up and crawl onto the couch. I hold my phone in my hand, willing Ryan to call me. My mom calls instead.

I stare down at her name and consider my options. I want to tell Ryan our news, whatever it is, and I want to share this moment with him. But I can't reach him right now. My parents will arrive on the island tomorrow, and if I'm miscarrying—they need to know what they are about to come into. I call them instead, and we share a short and emotional phone conversation. I float an email out to Ryan.

As I wash my face for bed, I hear my phone vibrate. It figures. This is the one time I've not been within arms reach of it all day. I run into our bedroom and snatch it. The number shows up as Unknown. I sigh relief.

"Ryan?" I say.

"Yeah babe. Hi, how are you? We're just getting a break here to check in." I wonder the best way to tell him, but I know he doesn't have long. I blurt out, "I'm pregnant!" and lean my hip into the side of the bed.



“That’s amazing news,” he says. “How are you feeling?”

I tell him about the blood and the nurse, about my parents and the test scheduled in two days. He tells me not to worry.

“I love you,” he says, and then he’s gone.

It isn’t what I pictured in my head, revealing the pregnancy. I imagined a cute moment with an ultrasound, his arms around me, us telling our parents together. I go to bed with my arm tucked around my stomach, willing the human within to stay.

My mom sits with me at my first appointment. We go into the examining room together. The technician explains she will have to do a transvaginal ultrasound because I’m not far enough along for the standard goo-on-tummy ultrasound. She turns the screen toward her, and the hunt begins.

She keeps her face blank. I reach up for my mom’s hand. It’s warm and rough. Mine is cold and clammy. My mom rubs her thumb along my thumb, a comforting gesture she does absentmindedly, but I remember it from childhood. I suck in my bottom lip and bite down.

“There. There—want to see?” The tech breaks into a smile. “You have a little gummy bear baby right now.” She turns the screen and I see it: a small square with nubbin arms and legs, and the flicker of a heartbeat. I breathe out and look up at my mom. There’s a tear on her cheek. I reach up to find mine wet too.

At the twenty-week ultrasound I sit in a dim room, alone. The door opens and the doctor enters.

“So if the baby plays along with us today we’ll know the gender,” he says. “Do you want to know?”

I tell him our plan. “We do want to know. I have my phone here—can you text my husband first?” I don’t have to explain to the doctor that I’ve been to the rest of the appointments myself, that my husband is deployed. Since my mom and dad’s visit, it has always been me. Alone. Like I wanted, I suppose?

The doctor grins. “Sure. That’s a nice idea.”

I walk around for three hours with our baby’s gender on my phone. I buy a smoothie and do some work at a cafe. I have to push the phone to the bottom of my purse. Now, I’m walking around a department store when finally, it rings.

“Hi,” I breathe.

“Hey,” he says. He sounds tired. “You ready?” he asks.

“Of course!” I say.

“It’s a girl,” he says

“Are you sure?” I look at the text. Girl.

“Is it still Madelyn?” I ask. We picked out girl and boys names already.

“I still like Madelyn,” he says, “so, yes.”

“Okay!” I say. I wait for more. I wait for confetti from the ceiling, or nearby shoppers to realize my big life moment. But it is just us on the phone together, connected and apart.

“Well hun, I gotta head out. Love you. Glad we did this.” he says.

“Me too. Bye babe.” I turn and head to the girls department of the store. I don’t get to have a big public gender reveal moment, but I get to have my girl. I’m buying her something to celebrate.

The aisles of Babies ‘R’ Us are a confusing array of baby gadgets. I stroke my protruding belly and pick up one of the many pacifier options. I only have a month left before Ryan gets home. My mother-in-law hands over the scanner and it beeps several times as I grab one of everything. Nook and Mam and Dr. Brown slide under the red laser beam.

We pass the strollers and I shake my head. “We’re going to do that together, Mom. When he gets back.” She nods but heads to the car seats.

“You might want to get a car seat at least. That way if—”

“No, Mom. No!” I toss the scanner onto a shelf. I want to throw it against the white brick wall and watch it shatter next to all the baby socks and teething toys.



I turn and waddle away. I'm a giant beach ball, I can't hide. I stumble into a happy couple registering for all their newborn gear. They glance at me sideways and hustle out of the way while I release sobs into a baby swing.

I thought I could do all of this without him. I can do it without him. I am doing it without him. But I don't want to. I feel like a child with a child within me, pouting and crying, desperate to control something, anything.

My mother-in-law finds me and rubs my back. She doesn't breathe a word. She simply circles her hand around and around until I sniffle and turn to her, with bleary eyes. I want to believe I am all alone in this. But here she is. She flew thousands of miles to be here with me, to make meals while I lay on our couch, to help set up our registry and turn the spare bedroom into a nursery. She can't be him, but she is here.

I take the scanner from the shelf and we start again.

The deployment stretches as I do. At 36 weeks into growing a human, he is home. He strides out of the airport terminal with day-old scruff and a blue t-shirt. Not all homecomings are glamorous with hand made signs, photographers, and fanfare; sometimes it's just a grey baggage claim and a lot of suppressed adrenaline. The purple dress I'm in is light but I'm still sweaty. The curl in my hair is already flat from humidity. He gathers me in his arms the best he can, but the belly bumps into him from every angle.

"Wow," is all he can manage. When he left, I looked like me. Now we don't have many days left as just the two of us.

In the dark of our bedroom that night I can hear his silent breathing. He lays flat on his back, his ankles and arms crossed. I know he'll be like this for a month or two—we call it the "surfboard-pose" and it usually happens for a while after deployment. His whole body is contained in one long line. It comes from him having to sleep whenever and wherever he can. I stroke his rough cheek. I know that we are both different from our time apart.

I turn and curl my legs around my body pillow and feel her. I grin. My daughter and I lay together every night in this empty bed while he was gone. She grew out into his hollow space beside me. When she started kicking I was not so alone in the dark. He rustles in the bed next to us. I place my hand on her and whisper in the night, "Daddy's home."

I hear the screen door open downstairs as I am folding fresh washed onesies. "I'm up here!" I call down. My belly grazes the drawers in front of me as I work to arrange the pile of tiny clothing inside the dresser. It has been a month since Ryan has been home and I'm due any day. I hear his feet on the stairs, and soon he is kissing the back of my neck. I lean into him.

"Hey," he says, and I feel it in one word.

"What?" I say. My hands pull in another onesie to fold. This one has a pale pink tutu attached. He grips my shoulders and turns me toward him.

"We're heading out again in three—"

"In three what?" My heart begins to pound. I look up at his eyes and in them, I see sadness.

"Three months," he says.

"For how long?" I ask.

"Six, maybe seven months again," he says.

I shrug his hands off my shoulders and turn away. I look down and find the pink tulle is damp in my hand. The delicate fabric is crumpled. I toss it to the top of the dresser.

"I'm going for a walk," I say.

"Do you want company?" He asks.

"No."

I walk the streets of our neighborhood and feel nothing and everything. My thoughts counter each other. Why did you get your hopes up? Of course he's leaving again. The Marine Corps doesn't care what you've got going on. This is how it is. At least he'll be here for the birth. What am I going to do? You will figure it out.



I think of every holiday in the coming year. All of Madelyn's firsts. I close my eyes and I imagine our family. I picture Madelyn in my mind, in the pink tutu onesie, and me holding her. I move Ryan out of the frame. I push him to the edge of the photo and then, I push him off it completely.

Madelyn nuzzles her fuzzy head under my chin. At three months old she has retained soft brown wisps of hair that stick up like a miniature rooster. We will send daddy away tomorrow. Tonight we watch him pack his bags. Each one is stuffed with gear. More items wait to go in and are spewed across the floor. Goodbye vomit in shades of camo.

I step across a stack of green t-shirts and boot socks and cradle Madelyn. Ryan's arm stretches and stuffs items into a backpack. His brow furrows as he examines two pairs of boots. He picks both. We stay up too late, getting everything together. When the time to sleep comes, I lay in exhausted alertness. I don't want to miss a moment of him. I reach for his hand while he sleeps.

Pregnant alone or baby alone? Now I get to do both.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the essay gain by beginning with a question?
2. "I dust my shorts off and stand next to him, although I push into one hip, slouch a little, and shade my eyes." Why do you think the author compares her husband's position to her own during this moment?
3. The piece deals with what we expect of our life, versus what it's actually like. Can you point to a few places, including the ending, where her expectations don't match her reality?

