



The Strangest Thing

WRITER: KATIE MCDONOUGH
EDITOR: RACHEL HURN

The strangest thing is that you get used to it, the movement inside your body, like fireworks going off inside a Jell-O mold. The first time you feel it, it takes your breath away. Literally, you stop breathing. You pull up your shirt and stare at your newly rounded belly, wondering if it was real or imagined, maybe just a digestive twist of the most ordinary variety. But no—that wasn't you; it was him. You're sure now. You stare at yourself, trying to see him, until your vision starts to blur.

Before long the movement becomes regular, expected. Sometimes you don't even acknowledge it. You are busy, working, preparing. Then there is a big one, a swift kick or punch to your insides. "Whoa," you say aloud. "What's going on, man?" You've started talking to him like he's there, which he is. There is no doubt anymore.

You try to decide what you feel. Is he energetic? Frustrated? Or is the movement involuntary, spasmodic? Your book says the cartilage is turning to bone. He can hear you now. If you poked him he might respond, but you don't want to poke him.

The movement becomes so frequent that you can't remember what it was like not to have a burgeoning person inside you.

You go about your business, that muted fireworks display going off at all hours. You picture a beach at night, empty except for the waves rolling up and retreating. Above them the sky explodes again and again, the earth itself the only spectator.

You are the earth, the environment in which he lives. You worry about polluting that space, but you can't stop yourself from eating whole boxes of macaroni and cheese standing up in the kitchen, the warm bowl in the palm of your hand. You buy the healthy kind, with no artificial flavors, colors, or preservatives, and sometimes you pay the extra dollar for organic, although you're not sure how much of a difference that makes when it's pasta and powdered cheese.

You are never alone now, but sometimes you feel more alone than you've ever felt in your life. Even friends who've been through this can't relate. They've moved past where you are, on to birthday parties and preschool. No one else is with you in this exact space—not your partner, not the grandparents, not even him. Already the two of you are diverging, even while he's still inside. You can sense the weight of it, of being his mother. You think of your own mother and you know it's true. You will never again not feel that weight.

I knew he was a boy before they told me because I had a hunch followed by a dream. This is atypical for me; my hunches usually prove incorrect and my dreams are never prophetic. They often feel real, but I wake up knowing they're not. This dream, however, was different. Up until that point in my pregnancy I'd been incredibly anxious. I was constantly worried that something I was doing might hurt the baby—drinking tap water, sleeping on my stomach, breathing in car fumes as I walked down the street. I was excited to be pregnant, but I wasn't handling it well. Half the time it felt like a trick. The test had been positive and the doctor had confirmed it, but I wasn't showing yet. What if there was no baby in there at all? I longed for some evidence of my child, some connection to this person my husband and I had made. I lay awake, my hands on my still-flat belly, and asked, "Are you there?"

Then, somewhere around 8–10 weeks and not long after the first ultrasound, I dreamt I was standing in the kitchen holding the baby to my chest. I leaned him away from me so I could look at him. He was just an infant swaddled in a blanket, so there weren't any gender-identifying signs; in the dream I just knew he was a boy. He opened his eyes and we looked at each other. Then I heard him say, "You know who I am." I woke the next morning feeling rested and calm for the first time in weeks. A friend called it a visitation, and I had to admit it felt like that—as if I'd been with him. At the second ultrasound a couple of months later when they told us it was a boy, I had to stop myself from saying, "I know."

The movement you wished for in the beginning starts to annoy you. Just as you are drifting off to sleep he does a flip and you feel his head bulging at your side. You can tell when it's the head now—round and hard—or is that his bottom? Either way, it feels like he's using it to try to bore his way out. "Sorry, dude," you say. "You've got to stay in there a bit longer, and that's not the way out anyway." As the words leave your mouth you start to worry about the actual way out. Terms like *dilate* and *crowning* take on new meanings in reference to your own flesh. This baby inside you is going to emerge, and no matter how many people tell you it's "natural" you can't help but wonder if they're all out of their minds. You dig an old wooden ruler out of your desk drawer and look at the distance to 10 centimeters. It is so much bigger than you thought.

All my life my mother has waxed poetic about pregnancy and childbirth. When speaking on this topic, she often uses the word *magical*. She calls and asks how her grandson is doing. I tell her about the baby's near-constant movement. "Isn't it magical?" she asks, and I can hear the look on her face—blissed-out grandmother-to-be. I know I should just say yes, it is magical, but I can't. The word doesn't fit somehow. "It's crazy," I say. "It's absolutely insane." We go back and forth about semantics. She sighs into the phone; I have exasperated her yet again. Finally, she says, "I think we're saying the same thing, just using different words."

She's right, but sometimes that crazy feeling threatens to take over. My brain cannot handle what is happening. I look at my belly and then I look at the new crib that we have just set up. I think of the baby inside me and try to imagine him lying there in that crib—a sleeping infant, then a standing toddler, then a boy, then a man. How is it that I am in the process of creating a man?

You become so accustomed to being pregnant that it begins to feel like a permanent state. This is your body now; this is your slow, heavy gait, legs a bit too far apart—a waddle, for sure, but you hate that word. You try to walk normally, you try to keep your legs closer together, but your belly will not permit it. It needs a wider base.

The word *belly* doesn't do it justice. It looks like you swallowed a globe. You have never in your life weighed as much as you do now. You have never been this old. You have never slept so little. You have never been more in awe of anything than you are of your current state. You wonder if awe is the right word. You look it up. *Awe: A feeling of respect or reverence mixed with dread and wonder, often inspired by something majestic or powerful. Yes, you think, that's pretty much it.*

The movement is still happening, but it has changed. He is filling up the space now, so instead of wild flutters there are slow, sweeping moves—an elbow bending or a leg stretching long. You know this means you are near the end. Your due date is still a few weeks out, but really he could come anytime. Your book says to stay within an hour of the hospital, just in case.

My mind is ablaze. During the day it is easier to focus on the tangibles—the baby products and the doctor's appointments. But at night, when I can't sleep, I get lost in wider questions: Who will he be? Will we understand each other? How will I inevitably hurt him?

The weight of him pulls at me; it settles in my heels and the small of my back. My son moves inside me and I feel things shift. I place my hand there and he pushes against it.

I have begun to worry in earnest about the pain of giving birth. I do not know if I can get through it, having never been tested in this way. I have never even broken a bone. But I just keep repeating to myself the words of other women: *Yes, it will hurt, but you can do it. Your body will know what to do.*

I imagine he will have my husband's humor and weird toes. It's harder to guess what he will get of mine—perhaps my eyes, my oversensitivity. I imagine seeing him for the first time and the pain receding and the sounds around us going quiet. I imagine a knowing I've never known as I reach out my arms and say his name.