

Life's Balancing Scale

Six pounds, 2 ounces. My daughter is born during a blizzard six days before Christmas. I wrestle with a breech delivery for eighteen agonizing hours while measurable snow piles in drifts out the hospital window. Our relationship will be stormy throughout life, although I have no clue other than her imposing grand entry into the world crying a mile a minute.

A maternity room nurse places the tiny baby on the cream scale and jiggles the weights slightly back and forth with her forefinger and thumb to get the exact calculations. She scribbles amounts in her notes, and it gets transferred to a birth certificate properly penned by a hospital volunteer in a flourishing script framed by a light pink border, which I receive in the mail months later. The weekly newspaper gives out details of the birth along with that of six other families, none having been born on the same day. The vital statistics are telephoned to the town clerk after the lines are operating once the weather decreases, and the snowplows put away.

My newborn is neither premature nor, is she anything other than average in size. Nursing poses a problem, and my duct glands don't supply enough milk, and it makes it easier for me to reject breastfeeding altogether. My breasts are so small - flat, really - and I am uncomfortable with anything to do with my physical body. When my daughter is preparing to have a child years later, I can't do more than gloss over the subject when the topic arises.

14 pounds 13 ounces. Struggling with the isolation of new motherhood and keeping ahead of housework at the end of World War II in an upstairs cold-water apartment, I begin a detailed record of my life in a lined, hardbound book with deep red reinforced edges. The pages start to fill with basic facts - weight, height, and milestones - and frequently, bursts of humor that I release gently in my voice, giving a unique personality to my story. One day after the baby had cried for several hours, I phoned the doctor and asked him what I should do and taking this in his stride, and in his inimitable way, said, "Maybe she has an ugly disposition." I didn't think much of this, but he laughed and said that he was only fooling. Looking back after several weeks, this period of crying has passed, and I have nearly forgotten it.

32 pounds 2 ounces. The journal entry for June 12th says, Her father and grandparents were in attendance, but "her mother" was too sick to attend. Included is a mimeographed bulletin taped to the page.

On children's Sunday at church, the youngest ones recite poems before the congregation in a rite of passage. I outfit Kay in a pale blue organdy dress with a huge silk bow around her waist that I purchased at Macy's in the city. Before she leaves for church, she poses for a photo holding a large red rose freshly clipped that morning from my father's garden. When I snap the shutter, I remind her to keep the petals away from her stiffly starched outfit and take the scowl off her face. The flower fits the poem, a simple rhyme - Here's a rose with a smile so gay. Here is a kiss for Children's Day.

The week prior, I stand in the golden glow of a late afternoon at the ironing board with the water sprinkler in one hand and the iron in the other pressing this dress until it is perfect amidst intermittent mutterings that barely make sense to myself. It is a chore standing on my aching feet for any length of time, and somehow that dampens my mood. I notice Kay retreating behind the lace curtain watching. She's always observing every little thing. I don't recall rehearsing her lines with her. I can see that I am raising a daughter who is quite self-possessed and confident in front of an audience. At least that's what her father tells me from her debut. I don't mention it to her.

72 pounds. Kay was in a class play dressed as a Pilgrim. She plays a piano piece in between acts, but through a mistake of a boy who pulled the curtain open, she had to leave the piano bench and take her place on the stage for the next act.

That same fall, Kay has her long brown hair cut off to ear-length, and it takes off a pound at least. Her father cries when he sees all her natural curls sheared.

84 pounds. One of the two times that I permit my daughter to record anything in my journal is when she weighs each family member - dad, 160 pounds; mom, 124 pounds, her younger sister, 50 pounds. She averages our weight to 104 pounds and one-quarter pounds. Her script is in newly-formed cursive letters with a forced slant to the right with much effort for a left-hander.

114 pounds. By high school Kay is writing for the school newspaper and starting her own neighborhood one, too, honing her style as a fledgling journalist. She measures her paragraphs by the inch while I adjust cups and pints of peeled apples in the kitchen, perfecting my pie-making skills. I spend a lot of time that year on the living room couch with dizzy spells and an ulcer, and it makes it convenient for me to avoid her teenage ups and downs. Her father can manage her moods, and they develop a bond right from the beginning.

124 pounds. At one point after a failed first marriage, my daughter thinks about coming back home to teach nearby, and I give her a rude awakening when I inform her in no uncertain terms. "You can stay with me for several months, but we definitely can't live together any longer than that." I record the single fact that she divorced on a such-and-such date in my journal, and I remove any wedding pictures from the living room.

Six pounds, 2 ounces. My daughter gives birth to her child in under three hours naturally. The baby's birth weight and length are identical to her own mother's. Frankly, I relish being a grandmother better than a parent, although I will never be a "hands-on" one. Parenting seems to agree with my daughter, and with Doctor Spock's assistance, she is making her way.
October 11th -I visit my new grandchild. She has blond hair and blue eyes, looking nothing like her dark-haired mother. She has a pleasant personality.