

## Suitemates

By Bob Chikos

The night my son Martin was born, I had the emotions most new fathers likely have, but few will admit: 1% joy and 99% sheer panic.

I remember my thoughts:

*I don't know anything about this person and he's going to live with us for a loooong time.*

*What if I accidentally break him?*

*How can I possibly pay for college on my salary?*

*What if he ends up hating the name I gave him, and then hates me for giving it to him?*

*What have I gotten myself into?*

We had put on a Lou Rawls CD during the birthing process. After Martin was born, the first music he heard was,

*Well if I don't love you, baby,*

*Grits ain't groc'ries*

*Eggs ain't poultry*

*And Mona Lisa was a man.*

While the nurse tended to the screaming Martin, cleaned him and suctioned goo out of his mouth, I called my mom.

“Hello?” my mom answered.

“It’s a b.....aby!”

“Haha, very funny. A baby what?”

“A baby boy.”

“Awww.”

“Can you hear him screaming? Your grandson’s got a good set of lungs!”

The next day was exhausting. I slept only a few hours, but I continued my grandfather’s tradition by bringing in a dozen glazed doughnuts to the hospital. Whenever he had a son or grandson, he’d bring long john doughnuts to work. For a daughter or granddaughter, he’d bring in regular, circle doughnuts.

Throughout the day, we were bombarded by visitors: family, co-workers, and friends.

My wife Aileen’s suitemate was in the bed by the window. This was her second child and her husband came through the room to her bed, leading their toddler son by the hand.

“Caleb, meet Brian.” I heard the dad say to the toddler. “He’s your new brother.”

We heard laughter. Caleb must’ve made a funny face.

Dad spoke up again. “Caleb, do what I told you to do. Give Brian a kiss on the cheek.”

More laughing, then, “Awww,” followed by cameras clicking.

An older, beaming man peeked out from his side of the separating curtain. “Could we borrow a chair? My wife needs to sit.”

“Sure,” Aileen and I said in unison.

These people were strangers, but we had an instant bond. We both just brought in Earth’s newest residents.

The doctor said we could anticipate a discharge Saturday, the next day.

The next morning, Aileen called me at home and said she had been moved to a new room.

I came to the hospital, after my first full night’s sleep in days (and my last one for the next several months). I walked through the maternity ward with a scrap of paper bearing the room number.

*There it is.*

I walked into the dimly-lit room. In my mind, Aileen would be in the bed closer to the door, just like the previous day. Instead, I saw another woman sleeping in the bed.

I stopped in my tracks.

The woman appeared to be in her 40s, maybe older. She slept on an inclined bed, with her mouth agape. She reminded me of a terminally ill patient, who has the weary look of despair, before the peaceful look of acceptance, although she wasn’t hooked up to a machine or IV bag.

I crept back to the door, then compared my handwritten note to the room number. It was the same.

“Bob?” I heard Aileen’s loud whisper from the far end of the room. “I’m in the bed by the window.”

I snuck past the older woman, then saw Aileen. I sat and we talked, keeping our voices low.

I didn’t ask Aileen, but I surmised that there had been a bed shortage in other units and this lady had been placed here.

“I just have to get clearance from the doctor,” Aileen said. “We should be able to go home this afternoon.”

I put my glasses on Martin’s face, then took a picture. *This will be a good one at his high school graduation party, someday.*

From the other side of the curtain, I heard a voice from the room’s entrance. “Sheila?”

“Mmmm.” I heard the suitemate respond.

“I’m sorry to wake you. My name’s Stephanie. I’m the hospital’s social worker.”

“Yeah,” Sheila said, slowly coming out of her sleep.

“First, congratulations on the delivery. The doctor said you did great. How did you think it went?”

“OK.”

I stopped taking pictures. Aileen and I smiled awkwardly at each other.

Each side of their conversation was slow. The social worker seemed to be choosing her words carefully, while the mother seemed to be putting effort into her thoughts.

“Does this baby have a name yet?” Stephanie asked.

Sheila sighed. “No. I hadn't thought of one yet.”

I faintly heard papers flip over a clipboard.

“I see here that you have seven kids. Is that right?” Stephanie asked.

“Six. I mean, I had seven, but one died.”

“Oh, I'm sorry.”

“That's OK.”

“Do you have a relationship with the father of this one?”

“No, he's not in the picture at all.”

“What about the other kids?”

“They all have different fathers. I mean, two of them had the same father. And two had another father, and the other three had different fathers. I mean, they each had a different father.”

“Do any of the kids have a relationship with their father?”

“No.”

I heard Stephanie leaf through a few more papers. “Can you tell me about life at home?”

“We live in the upstairs of a house in Waukegan. It’s got two bedrooms. The oldest two are out of high school.”

“Did they graduate?”

“No. The next one is in eighth grade. No, that’s not right. Tenth grade. No, what do you call it when you first get in high school?”

“Freshman, that’s ninth grade.”

“Freshman then. I don’t know. I don’t feel well from the birth, still.”

“I understand.” Then I heard Stephanie whisper to Sheila, although I couldn’t hear what she said.

“I’ll be honest.” Sheila responded, tersely, “I have, but I didn’t when I was pregnant with her.”

“That’s good,” Stephanie responded. “It’s really important that you don’t. Not just for your health, but for your kids, too. And it’s really important that you don’t if you breastfeed.”

“Why’s that?”

“It can be passed to the baby through breast milk.”

“Oh, OK.”

“I only have a few more questions, then I’ll leave so you can get some rest.”

“OK.”

“Before the delivery you mentioned you’d consider putting this one up for adoption, right?”

Sheila sighed. “I know I said that, but when she was born I looked at her face and she was so beautiful, I just don’t know if I can let her go.”

There was a long pause by the social worker while Aileen and I looked at each other, listening while this kid’s fate was determined.

“You know,” Stephanie continued, “there’s a family that can take great care of her. They’ll be able to give her access to so many things in life. And it won’t be so hard for you, with the other kids you already have.”

“Yeah.”

“And there’s also open adoption. You could still have a relationship with her.”

After a silence of ten or more seconds, Sheila responded, “Naw. If I give her up, I don’t want to see her again.”

“Well, you don’t have to make a decision right now. I know this is all very overwhelming. I’ll leave you with some information that you can read at your leisure. How about if I come by tomorrow, same time, and we can have another discussion.”

“OK.”

After Stephanie left, Aileen and I didn't talk. We knew a conversation by us, after minutes of silence, would indicate to Sheila that we had been eavesdropping. We looked at each other and shrugged our faces.

I stood and walked to Martin's bassinet. I picked up his delicate body, careful to hold his head *just so*, as to not break him. I eased back into my chair, gazed at his angelic smiling face, and wondered what he could possibly be dreaming about.

I leaned in to get a whiff of new baby smell, leaned back, closed my eyes, and said a prayer for the girl next door.