

Once Upon a Penis

The boy is obsessed.

“See how big it is, Mama?” he says all the time now.

He sits on the couch watching *Clifford* while fondling it.

When he whips it out in the crowded Lexington Town Common to pee on a tree, I laugh with the strangers and then remind him to keep it our little secret next time. “I’ll help you find a special spot,” I whisper.

He nods and runs away, one hand down his shorts.

Recently he came up with a theory for its sudden growth.

“Know how it gets big, Mommy?” he says.

‘Um, no, how?’

“It’s because I eat and then it grows!”

I smile. This is one of those parenting moments when you are faced with a choice: explain the truth to your child, or embellish the lie. I choose to embellish the lie.

“That’s right, buddy. And if you eat things like eggs and vegetables it will grow even bigger!”

His eyes light up. Then he leaves to play with a fire truck.

I tell my friend Melissa about Ethan’s new preoccupation. “This is normal at this age, right?”

“I think so,” she says. Melissa has a little girl. “Sophie always liked to touch herself too. I think it was around that age.”

Still, I need further confirmation. So I do a Google search on preschoolers and penises which directs me first to Ask Yahoo. The #1 answer to a question from a concerned mother reads, “Castration is the only cure.”

I scroll down in search of other, more serious answers. A response from a JoeJ starts off promising. He writes: *The Phallic stage usually spans from age 3 to 8...since your son has entered it at age 3, it means he has successfully passed the oral and anal phases.* Oh good! I think. Ethan’s advanced!

JoeJ continues: *This means he will probably be less likely to drink, smoke or be someone who talks too much. And he will probably be very neat and not procrastinate.*

OK. Maybe not.

Next, I find myself on a site called HealthCentral.com where a woman named Norma cries out for help for her three-year-old son who is “playing the privates game.” *Is this OK?* She asks.

A Dr. Dean responds: *Playing the privates game. That’s so cute.*

Touching just feels good so at this age both boys and girls will hump and rub themselves.

He goes on:

Even fetuses show sexual activity. I have a wonderful article on female fetuses masturbating to what some researchers propose is the point of orgasm.

“Gross!” I say out loud.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Ethan asks.

“Oh...Just something I read. Everything’s fine.”

“Can I watch the trains, Mommy?”

“Yes,” I say, relieved. “I quickly switch to YouTube while visions of fetuses masturbating dance in my head.

How did I get here? I sometimes wonder. When I found out I was pregnant for the first time three years ago, I automatically assumed it was a girl. Other sources confirmed this for me, such as an acupuncturist who, upon taking my pulses proclaimed, “Yep, girl.”

My boss at work also said girl. “I can just tell,” he said. “It’s the way you’re carrying.”

We believe what we need to believe. And so I began coming up with a list of favorite girl names.

I began imagining me and my daughter going to Itsy Bitsy Yoga together, and taking knitting classes like Melissa and Sophie.

When I went for an ultrasound at 13 weeks, I had no expectations of finding out the baby’s gender. The goal of this early ultrasound was only to assess my risk of having a Down syndrome baby, and, as far as I was concerned, my husband Ben and I still had five more weeks to have the “talk” and decide if we wanted to know the gender ahead of time, or not.

During that 13-week ultrasound I marveled at each image of what I just knew was my baby girl. “She’s beautiful,” I even said out loud at one point.

The technician remained quiet, saying only, “The doctor will be in soon,” and offering a half-smile as she walked out the door.

The doctor, a balding, spectacle-wearing character resembling Dr. Green from ER, soon arrived with the good news that our risk of having a Down syndrome baby was low. The doctor spent a little time examining the images on the monitor and then asked, “So, do you want to know the baby’s gender?”

I looked at Ben, then back at the doctor. “You can do that *now*?”

The doctor nodded. “I can tell. So do you want to know?”

“Yes!” I blurted out.

“Wait a minute,” Ben said. “I don’t want to know. I want to be surprised.”

“You do?” I said.

“I want to wait until the baby is born,” he said and crossed his arms.

“Well I want to know now,” I said. “And I’m the one who has to carry this baby for the next six months!”

There was an uncomfortable silence, when the doctor finally said, “Well, how about this... I’ll just type a letter on the screen and whoever doesn’t want to know the gender can close his or her eyes.”

“Fine!” Ben and I said at the same time.

Ben proceeded to put his head between his legs, like someone about to throw up. The doctor looked at some more images and then said, “Ready?”

I nodded.

He turned the monitor toward me and typed the letter B.

I sat up to take a closer look. “Are you sure?” I asked, trying to sound emotionally neutral.

He nodded and smirked, as though enjoying his power, as though enjoying giving me this life sentence.

That night I had a dream. I was at a party at Ozzy Osbourne’s house and I went into labor. My baby was born smoking a cigar and speaking in tongues.

“Ben?” I whispered. He didn’t move. “BEN!” I said louder.

He groaned. “What?”

“Can I tell you now?”

“Tell me what?”

“The sex of our baby?”

“I already told you I don’t want to know.” He went back to sleep while I stared at the ceiling until morning.

To understand my distress about having a boy, one must look at some of my earliest interactions with the gender, or lack thereof. First of all, I grew up with women. There was my mother, my two older sisters, and me. My dad was around, but he wasn’t what you would call your “typical” American male. For one, he wasn’t American, but Eastern European. On Sunday afternoons, while other fathers watched football, my dad watched Holocaust documentaries. He drank one light beer about twice annually. Although I longed for a brother who would introduce me to the habits and mysteries of boys, it was not to be. So I went out into the world completely unprepared for the typical American male, while at the same time, I wanted him. Badly.

In kindergarten, I created the Kissing Game. The rules were simple: Girls chase boys and try to kiss them. Boys run as if being chased by vicious Dobermans. We were playing this game on the school playground one morning when a bee stung me on the arm. I screamed and my teacher came running. As she carried me toward a bench, a swarm of boys gathered beneath a tree nearby to watch. I noticed that one of them—a pale, fleshy kid named Joey—had both hands down the front of his pants. This image distracted me so much that I missed what I now believe to be the important lesson of that moment—a lesson that might have saved me much future heartache: *Chase Boys. Get Stung.*

Throughout elementary school and high school, I had one boyfriend, Adam, in the fifth grade. We went to Playland, the local amusement park, together and our relationship lasted about ten days. In college, boys finally pursued me, but they never wanted a commitment. This

drawback might have sent some girls running, but not me. I was like a lost puppy, insecure and loyal, waiting until each guy dumped me before moving on. Interestingly, they all claimed innocence; each of them apparently at the mercy of the all-powerful penis. ‘I can’t help it...I’m just horny’ was their collective mantra. I didn’t buy it. Didn’t they need to be in the mood, like me? Somehow, I managed to get married and pregnant before resolving the majority of my confusing beliefs about boys. Hence, the sting of learning my parental fate.

Still, for the next three months as my anxieties about our impending baby boy skyrocketed, I managed to keep the baby’s gender a secret. Then, over dinner one night, Ben said, “Hypothetically speaking, if we have a boy, I want him to be circumcised.”

Are you kidding me? I thought. Here my husband wanted me to keep the gender a secret but at the same time, he wanted to lay ground rules about things like circumcision and expect me not to react?

I nodded, trying to remain stone-faced while fighting the urge to chuck a chicken wing at his head.

I Googled “circumcision” first thing the next morning. I had no idea, even from an aesthetic standpoint, what distinguished a circumcised from an uncircumcised penis and after looking at online images of each type, I ruled them equally unattractive. With that criterion out of the way, I considered religion, but only for a moment. I was too disconnected from my Jewish roots to make that my argument. The decision, then, lay solely on which option I thought was best for my child’s health and after hours of more research, the result was a tie.

So I would honor Ben’s wishes for an uncircumcised child. But only after he first honored *my* wishes and let me tell him the gender.

“Is it really that bad?” Ben asked when I told him how I needed to be able to talk freely about our baby.

“It’s bad,” I said, nodding. “I’m a bit of a mess.”

We snuggled on the couch and he agreed to let me break the news before dinner that evening. In the afternoon, I rushed to Old Navy and tried not to look at the colorful baby girls section as I grabbed a striped light-blue onesie from the dull selection of boys’ items. I put the onesie in a shirt box, wrapped it, and attached a card that read: “Dear Daddy, I can’t wait to meet you. Love, your son.”

Ben was thrilled.

Ten months after Ethan was born, to my surprise, I was pregnant again. Again, I hoped for a girl, but not out of fear. I was hoping for a girl because I knew two children was my absolute limit. This was my last chance for a daughter.

At the ultrasound, there was no mistaking the gender of this baby, however, who exposed himself like a drunken office worker sitting naked on a copy machine.

“At least we won’t have to buy new clothes,” Ben said.

“What if they turn out to be like the Menendez brothers?” I said. We laughed nervously.

These days, I don’t have time to let such absurd fears get the best of me. These days, it’s all about the obsession. Just yesterday, Ethan came to me with a new dilemma crying, “Mommy, I don’t want it to be big!”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Well, try not to touch it then,” I suggested.

“But it hurts...”

“Ben! Can you come here?” I shouted toward the laundry room. “Ethan doesn’t want it to be big!”

Ben sat down next to Ethan as though about to have his first, serious father-son chat. But then Ethan’s eyes widened as he heard something from the other room. “Curious George!” he shouted, and just like that, he’d moved on.

This is pretty much how it goes with my boys, who flit like caffeinated butterflies from one thing to the next, including their emotions. One moment they’re wrestling like bear cubs, biting and pinching with an aggression I cannot comprehend, and the next they’re comforting each other, giving up the coveted truck or finding the missing pacifier to ease the other’s pain.

And when my friend Melissa says to me, as she did the other day, “You know, I can’t imagine you *without* boys,” I have to admit, I can’t either. When I try to imagine life without my younger son trying to hump his brother in the bath tub, I grow weepy.

I’ve come a long way.