

Introduction: Why Am I Writing This Book?

Early on in my second pregnancy, I announced to my obstetrician that I had started to throw up every day and was feeling downright subhuman. I felt unable to work, incapable of caring for my little girl, and though all thoughts of food made me ill, all I wanted to do was to eat. The dreaded “morning sickness” had taken hold. On hearing my bad news, my doctor smiled and chirped “*Mazel Tov!*” Now, I love my obstetrician, but I confess I *did* want to kill him at that moment. As I sat there glumly steeling myself for three to four months of the worst kind of nausea and vomiting and abject misery, he was merrily congratulating me.

That juxtaposition of feelings captured the paradox of morning sickness for me: few people ever really dwell on the trauma of it, because it is the famous first sign of a glorious occasion to come—the birth of a child.

In fact, most if not all doctors consider morning sickness the sign of a healthy pregnancy, a tangible indication that an embryo has firmly implanted itself in the uterine lining and is set to go! So the accompanying sickness is brushed aside. “It’ll pass,” they all say. “It’s just a temporary and necessary evil of pregnancy,” others chime in. “You’ll forget all about it when the baby comes.”

All of those things are true. But there is another truth about morning sickness that is rarely discussed with as much enthusiasm. For those of us who suffer through it, it can be positively debilitating, depressing, and alienating. Baby or no baby.

For four solid months during my second pregnancy, I was as sick and miserable as I have ever been in my life. At home, I practically wore out a spot on the rug in front of the toilet as I knelt there, sometimes throwing up over and over again, sometimes wishing I could throw up over and over again. At one point, my three-year-old daughter Noelle got so concerned about seeing me there that she came into the bathroom, rubbed my back, and in an attempt to comfort me, said, “Don’t worry, Mommy. Everyone has problems!”

Boy, did I have problems. Anything could make me sick at any time of day or night. My husband Jon helplessly asked day after day if there was anything he could do to make it go away, and the exasperating, devastating answer was “NO.”

I would drag myself in to work relieved that I had even been able to shower and dress, only to shut myself in my office, where I would throw up in my wastebasket and collapse on my couch. Thank God I had a couch.

When I felt I could eat, I ate like an animal, stealthily wolfing down meals I scarcely tasted. For weeks, I ate all alone, avoiding meals with friends because eating had become such a bizarre combination of obsession, chore, and treatment. I ate the same bland, comfort foods over and over again, hoping they would bring relief. For one week, it was white rice and peas. Another week, it was canned pears. If I didn't get my turkey-and-cheese sandwich from the Blimpie around the corner at the very *dot* of noon, I would start to shake. I ate an entire container of pineapple in the grocery store even before paying for it, and inhaled graham crackers as though they were oxygen itself. Yet the woman who loves salads, tofu, and healthy fresh produce couldn't even look at a vegetable. I was a mess.

Then there was work.

As a television journalist, my job involves going out in the field to interview people, getting on planes, and meeting deadlines. All of these tasks that I had been doing for years became the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest barefoot. I threw up in the middle of interviews, suddenly ripping off my microphone and running out of the room. I had to tell camera crews they had five minutes to light and shoot my "on-camera" stand-up because I knew I was going to get sick. Sure enough, as soon as I was done, I would bolt to the nearest bathroom with not a moment to spare. I wanted to do it after being on-camera because throwing up made my eyes water, my makeup run, and my

nose turn red. So glamorous! I dreaded being far away from my office, my wastebasket, and my couch, and of course I was filled with the added anxiety of not performing my job to the best of my ability. Stomachache on top of stomachache!

My purse, once full of newspapers and notebooks, was now stuffed with crackers, warm cans of Coke, and hard candy because I was afraid to be without them. I felt like a freak and came to dread the simplest tasks because I felt so weary and vulnerable. Let's face it: no matter how understanding other people may be, throwing up in public is humiliating.

Friends were sympathetic; some had been through it themselves. But I discovered that despite all the sympathy, feeling nauseous twenty-four hours a day for weeks on end is an utterly lonely, dehumanizing, and desperate experience. Having to look good and put-together on-camera for a living made it all the worse.

For comfort, I turned to books, and to my profound disappointment, I found that the dizzying array of pregnancy guides at the bookstore gave the subject short shrift. I would find at most two pages, usually one paragraph, and always the same maddening refrain:

EAT CRACKERS

EAT SMALL MEALS

EAT CARBOHYDRATES BEFORE GOING TO SLEEP

AVOID GREASY FOODS

TRY POWDERED GINGER

In her 430-page book *The Complete Guide to Pregnancy*, Sheila Kitzinger offers two meager paragraphs on morning sickness, saying:

If you suffer from morning sickness, a cup of tea and a few crackers or dry toast on waking may prevent it, or crackers alone may be better.

Not to single out Sheila, but I had to wonder, was she kidding? Had any of these people pushing crackers and toast—and ginger, of all things—ever actually spoken to a woman suffering with morning sickness? A woman who can barely ingest toast, let alone something as potent and strong-tasting as ginger?

And my favorite bit of useless advice the books offer over and over again is this: “Be sure to take good care of your teeth, visit the dentist, brush and floss regularly, because if you’re throwing up, all that stomach acid could harm your teeth.” Now, I’m all for white, shiny teeth, but during my bout with morning sickness, I could barely put a toothbrush in my mouth, and the *last* thing on my mind was, “Gee, I better get to the dentist!”

I felt like *screaming* when I read these books. Why wasn’t anybody addressing the emotional and physical toll morning sickness takes? Why wasn’t anybody writing about how hard it is to work or to care for a small child when you’re on the verge of throwing up all day long? Why

doesn't anyone share first-person accounts of what they've eaten or the crazy things they've tried just to make themselves feel better? Wasn't there anything more to say than . . . *crackers*?

Since crackers obviously weren't doing the trick for me, I was hungry for some other support system and found none . . . and the idea for this book was born. Actually, the idea was born at my prenatal exercise class, where I met a woman who confided in me that she couldn't brush her teeth because of her morning sickness. Eureka! I had the same problem! Every time I put a toothbrush in my mouth, I had an instant gag reflex. I tried to brush anyway because, well, it's a slippery slope toward becoming a complete social outcast when you give up toothbrushing. But it was a daily struggle, and I felt depressed and embarrassed about it. But when I met someone who had the same struggle and we could talk, and *laugh* about it, I instantly felt better.

Since there is no great body of scientific literature or knowledge out there about morning sickness, other women and their experiences, I discovered, are the finest remedy available for the desperation and loneliness accompanying this travail. Talking to other women made me realize that, yes, it is hard to get through the day, *no one* eats the perfect diet, *no one* gains the requisite twenty-five pounds, and it's *all* about survival. The sooner you eat what you want, I learned, the sooner you'll feel better. My sister-in-law Christine popped a Lean Cuisine frozen entrée into the microwave at ten o'clock every morning because a full, hot meal was the only thing that could carry her from breakfast to lunch. My best friend Mary Jane ate a Whopper with cheese every single day for six months because it made her

feel better. Another lived on mashed potatoes. Another on fresh-squeezed orange juice. And I, contrary to conventional wisdom, couldn't stand the thought of ginger ale and opted instead for gallons and gallons of icy-cold skim milk. In the neurotic delirium that pregnancy can evoke, I felt compelled to interrogate my doctor about the potential for calcium poisoning. He smiled politely and said not to worry.

Speaking of doctors, you will read three words often in this book: ASK YOUR DOCTOR. That's because there is little proof, little evidence, and no years and years of scientific research behind any of the remedies for morning sickness. There's been no randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study of the effect of crackers on nausea. So much of what we know or believe works is anecdotal, and when it comes to protecting your safety and the safety of your baby, it's best just to be sure that your doctor knows and approves of what you're doing.

My point in this book is to impart what little knowledge there is on the subject and to combine it with the experiences and experiments of other women. I believe we can learn from each other. To that end, I drafted a morning-sickness questionnaire that I distributed to hundreds of women: friends, strangers, friends of friends, sisters of friends, mothers of friends, anyone who would listen. Sprinkled throughout these pages then, you will find those survey answers about everything from strange food cravings to feelings about life at the time. They are first-person accounts from the front lines of morning sickness, and it's these voices filled with humor, despair, and honesty that you will find most useful. As I read over all the question-

naires I received, I often wished I could invite all these women over for tea because they were so comforting, and my hope is that they, in their indirect way, can become *your* morning-sickness companions. I want you to know that even when you feel your worst, you are not alone: Someone else is subsisting on cheeseburgers, drinking warm Coke at 9:00 A.M., and barfing on the bus. And crying about it despite the undeniable joy of knowing a baby is on the way.

Short of a cure for morning sickness, a cure *not* on the horizon, we might as well search for better ways to survive it. I believe that means turning to each other to share our trials, tribulations, and of course, all of our remarkable strengths.