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Expecting on the Tenure Track

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Last spring it finally happened. After seven years in graduate school and countless semesters working as an adjunct instructor and professional job applicant, I landed a tenure-track position in political science. When I signed the contract to become an assistant professor at Iona College, I could scarcely contain my excitement. Here was a private, Roman Catholic, liberal-arts college, with a collegial department in an idyllic setting. It was 20 miles north of Manhattan, just four miles from my home, and a half-mile from my son's school. For someone who has commuted vast distances for adjunct work, it all seemed too good to be true.

Suspicious by nature, I began bracing for some sort of calamity. As I told several friends, "Things have been going so well, I am just waiting for something to go wrong." I didn't have to wait long.

Just as I began to allow myself to imagine what it might be like to be a full-time faculty member with parking privileges, an office, phone, and nameplate, I started to feel physically ill. While I was initially able to ignore the symptoms, within weeks they became too severe to overlook.

By the time I called for a doctor's appointment, however, I had a fairly good idea about what was happening to my body. After consulting an array of Internet sites, I became convinced that I was one of a small group of women my age who was going through early menopause. I wasn't deterred by the fact that the symptoms listed on the sites differed somewhat from my own. After all, my diagnosis made sense on so many levels.

Lately I had been inundated by reports of professional women, particularly those in the academy, who put off having children until it was too late. Much as I tried to avoid it, for instance, I was one of many who found themselves reading Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Creating a Life*. As graduate school and the search for a tenure-track position dragged on longer than expected, I became resigned to the fact that this was most likely going to be my fate as well. After all, having a child in the next seven years was completely out of the question. And after that, it would probably be too late.

Besides, I knew I shouldn't complain. While my husband and I wanted another child eventually, we knew that we were lucky to have one already. Given that time was not on our side, we had begun preparing ourselves for the possibility that our son might be an only child. Fully prepared to accept the diagnosis that my child-bearing days were behind me, I was stunned when the doctor announced, "Nothing to worry about and certainly not early menopause, not yet anyway. Congratulations, you're expecting."

For a second, the only thing I could think to ask was, "Expecting what exactly?"

But before I uttered another word she began covering key issues such as the potential due date, ultrasound, and prenatal vitamins. It was only when I broke in to ask if she was absolutely certain, that she began to suspect that the blessed event was, at the very least, unexpected.

I suppose it was a combination of guilt, embarrassment, and shock that kept me from confiding the extent of my apprehension. Although I didn't let on, that moment in her office marked the beginning of several difficult weeks in which I struggled to come to grips with the news.

At first I was convinced that I couldn't possibly have a baby during my first year on the tenure track. The thought of telling the department chairman, dean, provost, and my colleagues that I was pregnant seemed unfathomable. Besides, having followed *The Chronicle's* online discussion last winter regarding the American Association of University Professors' [model family leave policy](#), I was cognizant of the reactions that motherhood in the academy engendered. And hard as I might, I could not think of anyone I knew personally or otherwise who had attempted to walk this tightrope during her first year.

Weeks of panic subsided somewhat, however, when an ultrasound revealed that the baby was due over winter break. The possibility that I could fulfill my teaching responsibilities and have the baby without having to request maternity leave gave me a modicum of hope. That, coupled with the fact that my husband's grandmother agreed to move halfway across the country to help us manage the tricky issue of childcare, helped convince me that I might actually be able to do this.

With renewed determination, I made an appointment to speak with the chairman of my department. The Sunday before our meeting, however, *The New York Times* ran a feature in its "Education Life" section that put a damper on my resolve. "By all accounts," the article read, "the intense competition, the long hours, and the unspoken expectations of the academy's traditionally male culture conspire to make it really, really hard to have a baby and be a professor." These statements, coupled with the firsthand accounts of respected women in the academy who struggled with this issue only to conclude that "you simply can't give 100 percent to the academy when you have children," and that "parenting is not a welcome event in the academy" left me feeling somewhat queasy.

The one bright spot in the piece came at the end in describing how many young women of my generation not only feel "entitled to be here," but view the "Hobson's choice" between motherhood and professional life as "outrageous." That description struck me immediately because it is as accurate a characterization of my circumstances as I have found.

From the moment I sat in the doctor's office, I knew that this was a choice without an alternative. The unspoken benefit of a "Hobson's Choice," of course, is that it leaves you with little room to maneuver. In my case, for instance, it has left me with no choice but to do something I never would have done of my own volition, to attempt to balance the demands of pending motherhood and my first year on the tenure track.

Jeanne S. Zaino, an assistant professor of political science at Iona College, will be writing a diary about her experiences as an expectant mother in her first year on the tenure track. |