

Jane Rosenzweig
from *Terrible Crying Stories*

When Rebecca told Davis she was pregnant, he threw a plate. Not at her – at the wall after she left the room. And not an ordinary plate—the Bart Simpson novelty plate that was their first joint-purchase, mail-ordered with a form they cut from the back of a cereal box early in their relationship. When the plate arrived, the box contained a card warning that it was not safe to use for consuming actual food.

The moment when you find out the girlfriend you thought was about to break up with you is pregnant called for a grander gesture, but it took a while for him to process what she was saying. He caught the word “pregnant,” of course, but she said so much so quickly that he couldn’t piece it all together. She had either forgotten to take her pill the week they went to San Diego or chosen not to. Either way, the outcome was the same. Subconsciously or consciously, she said, she’d allowed herself to get pregnant. She wasn’t sure herself what the truth was, she said, but it didn’t seem important now. She was thirty-four years old and she wanted to put the past behind them and focus on having a healthy baby. She hoped having this baby would be good for both of them, she told Davis, even if it didn’t seem that way right now. He could tell she had rehearsed this speech, but what he couldn’t tell was whether it was hard for her to deliver it.

She understood, she told him, that things weren’t right between them then, hadn’t been for a long time, even before San Diego. They weren’t *in sync*, was what she said. If this wasn’t something he wanted, she went on to say, she would understand. It took him a minute to realize that she wasn’t saying she wouldn’t have the baby if he objected. She had already made her decision, and now she was leaving it up to him to choose whether

Jane Rosenzweig

or not to be the father of his own child. *I love you*, she said. *I want to have this child with you*, she said. Then she went into the living room and turned on the TV. Davis sat at the kitchen table for a few minutes, waiting to feel whatever he was supposed to feel. Then he got up, lifted the Bart Simpson plate from its “decorative plate stand” and threw it at the wall.

Rebecca didn't seem to realize he'd actually thrown the plate on purpose, or she pretended she didn't. “What fell?” she said.

He was on his knees, pushing the pieces into a pile. “I'll get the broom,” Rebecca said. “Be careful you don't cut yourself.” Davis stared at his hands. He was holding the piece of the plate with Bart Simpson's legs on a surfboard.

When he goes over that conversation in his mind now, he thinks he must be forgetting something that happened between them, some step between buying the plate and breaking the plate, between San Diego and the kitchen table, between the baby and the broom.

People tell them terrible crying stories. They hear Julian crying, and they say, *I heard about a baby who*, and then fill in the blanks with anecdotes about babies who have cried more, cried longer, cried harder than Julian could ever hope to cry. In the margins of the spreadsheet he made to chart Julian's cries, Davis has been keeping a handwritten list of crying stories. So far, there's the baby who cried until he threw up (*vomit story*), the baby who cried until she stopped breathing (*breathing story*), the twins who gave themselves hernias trying to outcry each other (*competing hernia story*), the

Jane Rosenzweig

baby who cried constantly until her parents took her on a trip to Arizona. The desert air turned out to be just the thing, and the family decided to move there (*Sun City story*).

This one came from Davis's sister Elaine, and Rebecca insisted she must have made it up, which made Davis want to defend it.

“Are you saying you wouldn't do that for Julian?” Davis said. Someone else might have called him a jerk, or worse, turned the question back on him. But not Rebecca. She was rubber, and Davis was glue. “Can you hand me a wipe?” she said.

People say: Did you try rocking him? Is he allergic to breast milk? To the mattress in his crib? To the air? They say, Maybe you should try a white noise machine; it might remind him of the womb. Last night Mrs. Peterson, the landlady, stood in the doorway with an offering of undercooked banana bread and said, “Have you tried to keep him up during the day so he'll sleep more at night?” When she had gone, Rebecca said, “She must really think we're morons.”

“She probably invites the neighborhood children into her apartment for banana bread just before ushering them into the oven,” Davis said. But he was glad Julian didn't stop crying when Mrs. Peterson held him. In the two short weeks of Julian's life, Davis has divided the world into two categories: Those who stay by the door and leave quickly for fear they will do something to make the crying worse, and those who step right in, eager to be that person—the one who can crack the code and make Davis and Rebecca eternally grateful that they have been able to stop the crying. And this is how Davis knows he's not the father he should be: He's torn between his willingness to do anything

Jane Rosenzweig

to stop Julian from crying and his hope that no one else will be able to do what he has failed to do.

Published in *Glimmer Train*