

Take My Old Wives' Tale. Please.

PLAYING THE BOY-OR-GIRL GUESSING GAME

by Stephanie Susnjara

IN A TREATMENT ROOM at Anushka Day Spa in New York City, I lie on a massage table, my pregnant belly spread out like a mound of rising bread dough. I'm waiting for Nanetta, a Romanian cosmetologist. Until recently, my physique had always been boyish—lean, lanky, and flat-chested. But now that nature has taken over, I've developed new curves and new padding. To my surprise, these changes are not at all unpleasant. I enjoy imagining myself a Rubens' nude—a classic beauty with flesh defined by soft lines, not the sharp angles of a rippled stomach.

Even though I'm a willing participant in this physical drama, my body definitely has a mind of its own, dictating the food it wants to eat (burgers piled high with American cheese and sour pickles) and the beverages it wants to drink (one gallon of Snapple lemonade per day). My passion for spicy foods has been replaced by a raging sweet tooth. A universal folk belief mandates: Never deny a pregnant woman her cravings. Naturally I comply, downing pints of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream, boxes of Famous Amos's chocolate chip cookies, and fistfuls of Tootsie Rolls on a nightly basis.

It occurs to me that losing control of my body's shape, along with losing control over my diet, is the reason I'm lying here now at Anushka Day Spa, awaiting an eyebrow wax. Being pregnant is new terrain—exciting yet scary—and there's something comforting about having my brows shaped into a neat, controlled pattern.

Next to the massage table, an electronically operated waterfall cascades onto a bed of shimmering black stones. I wriggle my toes and close my eyes, allowing the rhythmic patter of falling water to relax my body. I drift off and dream I am giving birth. "Here comes the baby," someone announces. A TV monitor is set up at the foot of the birthing bed. A newborn baby—my baby—all glistening and pink, appears on the screen. I cannot tell if it's a boy or a girl. There is no cutting of an umbilical cord. There is no pain. The birth is a complete out-of-body experience.

My eyes flutter open. Nanetta, clad in crisp whites, hovers over me.

"How far along are you now?" she asks in her clipped Romanian accent.

"Four months," I tell her.

"Do you know what you're having?"

I shake my head. I'd had my sixteen-week sonogram reading a week ago, and my husband Randy and I opted not to find out the child's sex.

"Ah, this is better," Nanetta says. "There are so few mysteries in life."

Nanetta positions a bright fluorescent lamp above my face. I clamp my eyes tight, avoiding the lamp's harsh glare. She cups my cheeks in her palms.

"Ah ha. Your skin is broken out. This means that you are having a girl." She dips a wooden stick into a pot of warm wax and slathers the goo under both of my brows. "A girl robs her mother of her beauty," Nanetta continues. "If you

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STEP RIGHT UP

and test your mettle. Whether you're a sayer
of sooth or just an old wife, *you* answer the
age-old question ...

BOY OR GIRL?

She had morning sickness. She craved grapefruit and eggs. Her skin broke out, but she says her hair looked healthier than ever. People told her she'd have a girl ... and they were right.



were going to have a boy, you see, your skin would be clear—a boy gives the mother beauty.”

I don't mind Nanetta pointing out that I have a few pimples. Nor do I mind that she thinks I'm having a girl. Boy or girl, it doesn't matter to me. What I do mind is that this undesirable side effect of pregnancy—blemished skin—is associated with a female fetus. Does this mean that women who carry boys are the only ones to experience that famous pregnancy glow, that healthy flush of rose across their cheeks, that you-look-like-you-just-had-sex complexion? Freud would have loved hearing someone say “a girl steals her mother's looks.” Such a belief reinforces his theory of the Electra complex, the competition between mother and daughter kicking off *in utero*.

The idea that diminished physical attractiveness signifies a girl baby strikes me as sheer nonsense. I squirm on top of the massage table, disturbed by this anti-feminist thought.

“Hold still,” Nanetta commands as she presses strips of cotton gauze onto my wax-coated skin.

I suck in my breath and grab the sides of the table. In two quick moves, she tears away the gauze, lifting the hairs out by their roots. The pain lasts only a few seconds, but its intensity lingers. I wonder if the pain of labor will linger, too, or if it really is true that the joy of new motherhood obliterates any unpleasant memories associated with the birthing experience.

I sit up. “So, you're sure about this—I'm having a girl?”

Her dark eyes widen in amazement, as if she can't believe I'd doubt her. “I tell all my clients what they're having, and I am *always* right,” she says with the conviction of an experienced soothsayer.

After my appointment with Nanetta, I decide to go online to see what I can find out about boy-or-girl old wives' tales. At the child-birth.org website there's an online questionnaire titled, “Will it be a Girl or a Boy?” After answering all nineteen questions, I click on the “Submit” icon. Within seconds, the results appear on my computer screen: *Congratulations! You have a*

65% chance of having a boy! You are carrying the extra weight out front, so it's a boy. You didn't have morning sickness during pregnancy, so it will be a boy.

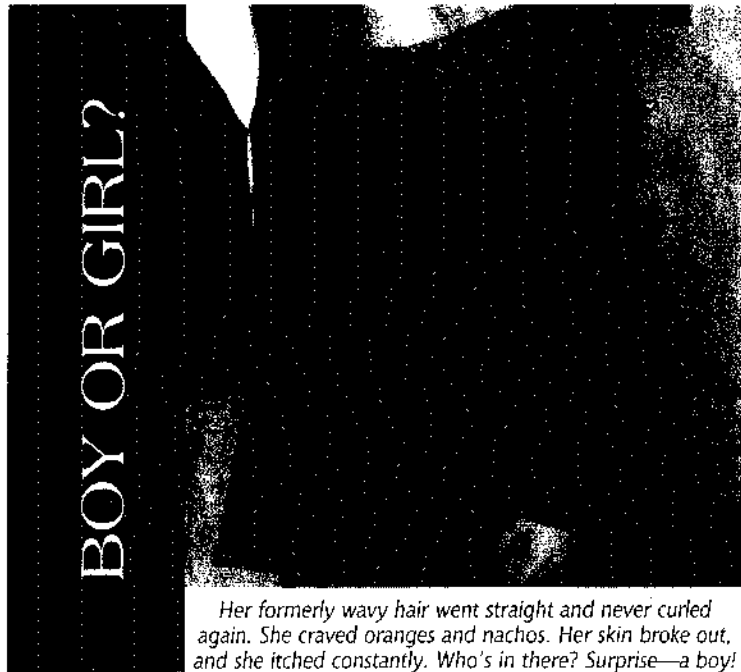
Etc. Etc.

Hmm. So now it's a boy? The skeptic in me remains unconvinced. The test is comforting, though, since it lists some negative side effects of pregnancy associated with male as well as female fetuses. Apparently, a boy in the womb causes hairier legs and a spreading nose.

A spreading nose? Give me a break, I think. But a few months later, as I enter my seventh month, I have an encounter that makes me think twice about this particular old wives' tale. It happens while I am shopping at Ferrucci's market, an Italian grocery store on Second Avenue in the East Village. As I select a fresh loaf of crusty Tuscan bread and a hunk of Pecorino-Romano cheese, the owner, Sal, takes hold of my wrist and proclaims, “Ah ha. I can tell you're having a boy.”

“How can you tell?” I ask warily.

“Your face has changed. Your nose is bigger.”



Before I was pregnant, I would have taken offense, but by now I have gotten used to unsolicited comments. An unborn fetus is often looked upon as public property—everyone thinks they have a right to protect or comment on it—and a pregnant woman is often regarded as a mere vessel. Even New Yorkers, an aloof bunch who prize their anonymity and usually avoid eye contact, think nothing of invading a pregnant woman's space.

And when it comes to pregnancy and babies, everyone's an expert. Those who have already experienced childbirth and childrearing want to relieve the excitement. I believe that for the most part these old hands at procreation don't mean to offend. Seeing a woman with child, they become swept away in a fog of nostalgia and simply want to share in the bliss. How many women have I passed on the street who stare at my belly then give me a conspiratorial smile, as if to say, "I've been there,

mama." All this attention my belly has garnered reminds me that motherhood is both a private and a communal experience. As a community, we celebrate the birth of a child because we possess a shared sense of the future, a future intended for our children to carry out. In light of this, don't we all have a stake in an unborn child? So perhaps the old wives' tales that get passed along with every pat of a pregnant woman's belly help convey our culture to the next generation, strengthening the bonds of that community.

In ancient times an old wives' tale was regarded as important wisdom. Nowadays they're usually viewed as common misconceptions. Still, guessing a child's sex remains a popular pastime. According to an African-American tale, a craving for lemons means a boy is inside the womb. Another fable, present throughout Europe and the United States, holds that a baby's sex can be

determined by the motion of a golden ring suspended by a thread over the mother's belly. If the ring swings in a circle, it's a girl. If it swings in a straight line, it's a boy.

Throughout the ages, people have looked to folk medicine for help in selecting their child's sex. If you want to have a boy, a Romanian folk-tale recommends, sprinkle salt in your bed. A Native American custom advises taking a rock off your property and burying it in a wooden box to ensure the birth of a girl. An Irish myth suggests eating peanuts if you want to bear a son.

Today women can find out whether they're carrying a boy or girl via prenatal screenings, yet many choose not to. For some of us, an element of surprise only enhances the thrill of the pregnancy ride. But for those who want some say in the matter, there's now a patented procedure called MicroSort, which can increase the chances of delivering the child of your choice up to 85 percent. MicroSort was first developed at the Genetics and IVF Institute in Fairfax, Virginia, to help couples who carry genes for conditions such as hemophilia or muscular dystrophy—conditions that most often affect boys. Now couples who simply desire one sex over the other are participating in clinical trials. MicroSort works by separating sperm carrying X chromosomes (which, when combined with the X chromosome carried in the mother's egg, produce a female fetus) from those carrying Y chromosomes, which will produce a boy. In our increasingly control-oriented culture—a culture where money can buy anything—the advent of a mechanism that allows us to select our child's sex is not surprising. What disturbs me most about this, however, is the way in which it meshes procre-

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ation with commerce. An unborn child becomes a bit like any other commodity we desire—like choosing suede shoes over a leather pair, or a red convertible over a black one.

By the time I reach the eight-month mark, I am like a Botero sculpture, all earthy and swollen and on display. Suddenly, Nanetta's prediction that I am carrying a girl has gone out of favor. Everyone—from my grandmother to strangers on the subway—begins telling me I am going to having a boy. When I ask why, I am repeatedly told: "You're carrying low." Or, "The baby is all out front." My belly does slope down low in front, like a kangaroo pouch. My skin has cleared up. In fact, it has never been clearer or smoother in my entire adult life. The checkout woman at Associated supermarket, the owner of my dry cleaners, and my dentist all tell me, "You look great! You must be having a boy!"

By now, I've heard it all. The girl myths are far more often negative than the boy ones: "A girl steals her mother's looks"; "Severe morning sickness means you're having a girl"; "Girls make women gain weight in their hips and bottom." Boy babies are said to give mothers torpedo-like bellies that stick straight out. These women are described as "all baby"; they're said to be "carrying well." Boys are credited with giving mothers-to-be phallic-like shapes, whereas girls are said to make expectant moms look more feminine, with physiques as soft and round as ripened fruit.

I suspect that the negative myths surrounding female babies persist because of traditional gender roles. Until recently, only boys grew up to be breadwinners, giving them primary status over girls. In parts of

modern-day India and China, female infanticide still occurs for this reason.

I ask Dr. Nirgish Tsjani, a professor of obstetrics at New York Medical College, if there is any science behind old wives' tales. Do some women's noses really spread during pregnancy? To my surprise, she doesn't laugh. Instead, she explains that a change in one's facial features during pregnancy is not unusual.

"During pregnancy, you retain a lot of fluid," she says. "Most of it is intra-vascular—that is, the amount of blood increases. But some of it is extra-vascular—you gain a lot of fluid in your tissues."

I hate to admit it, but the owner of Ferucci's was correct: my nose has grown a bit.

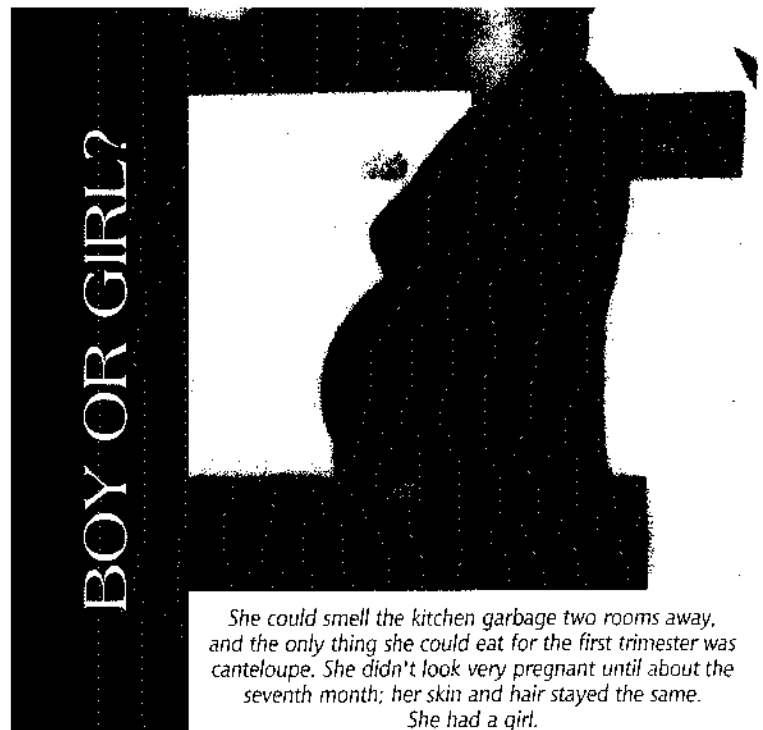
"But," Tsjani states emphatically, "this has absolutely nothing to do with the sex of the baby."

Could there be any truth behind the notion that a baby girl snatches

her mom's looks? Jessica, a pregnant friend, tells me it has to do with hormones. "When you're pregnant, you have more estrogen pumping through your system—which can make you break out."

Positively not true, according to Dr. Tsjani. "There is no difference in hormone levels whether you are carrying a boy or a girl. The increased hormones come from the placenta, and placentas are indistinguishable male from female."

I ask Dr. Tsjani about the how-to books, such as *How To Choose the Sex of Your Baby* by Landrum B. Shettles, M.D., which bases its advice on the time of ovulation. Sperm cells carrying X chromosomes live longer in the reproductive tract than sperm cells carrying Y chromosomes. If you want to have a boy, Shettles advises, you should try to conceive within 24 hours of ovulation. If it's a girl you're aiming for,



BOY OR GIRL?



Her skin looked great—but there was a lot more of it since she swelled, especially in the face, to twice her normal size. No morning sickness and she craved chocolate-peanut butter ice cream. It's a ... boy!

you should try to have intercourse three days before ovulation.

"That simply doesn't work," says Tsjani. "There's always a 50/50 chance."

As my pregnancy progresses towards its finale, I am bombarded with old wives' tales well beyond the boy-or-girl variety. One day, the owner of a Jamaican eatery in the vicinity of Union Square scolds me for ordering jerk chicken. Flavored with scotch bonnet peppers, jerk is famous for setting tongues on fire. "Don't you know that spicy foods will give the baby colic?" she reprimands. The cause of colic—those sudden, uncontrollable outbursts of crying some babies experience within the first few months of life—is still not clearly understood by the medical profession, and this uncertainty fuels a lot of conjecture. In the United States, colic is some-

times blamed on anxious parents, but most physicians, such as William Sears, M.D., author of *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby—From Birth to Age Two*, claim there is no evidence to support this belief.

Despite all the advanced medical knowledge of modern-day obstetrics, no one can accurately predict when a woman will go into labor. This doesn't discourage my grandmother or mother from insisting that I'll go into labor early, since they both did. Many people worldwide believe that a full moon can induce labor by causing a woman's water to break. Though there is no scientific proof to back this claim, some attribute this phenomenon to the decrease in barometric pressure that occurs during a full moon. Amy Alpern, a New York City-based midwife, tells me that on nights when the moon is full, the birthing center where she works does

seem busier than usual.

Some of the most intriguing old wives' tales surround pregnancy and sex. In *Mama Toto, A Celebration of Birth*, author Carroll Dunham writes, "The Chagga of Uganda say a couple should take care in the last months and reduce lovemaking from 10 to three times a day. But among the Kaluli of New Guinea, sex during pregnancy is essential because the man's semen is necessary to the proper development of the fetus." Today, in the United States, sex during pregnancy is considered perfectly safe unless a woman has a history of miscarriage or premature labor.

In all cultures, pregnancy is a life-defining event, allowing people to celebrate customs tied to their own heritage and pass down family lore.

"I tell women, ask your mother what her mother believed," says Emalie Gibbons-Baker, a midwife at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital in New York City. "Pregnancy myths are an opportunity to find out who you are and where you come from."

Despite our ever-increasing reliance on technology, birth remains magical and mysterious. No matter how much science teaches us about manipulating the act of procreation and birth—fertility drugs, sperm sorting, cloning—a perpetual awe keeps old wives' tales alive.

Two weeks before my due date, I go to see Nanetta for another eyebrow wax. "You look very good," she remarks. "Perhaps you are having a boy, after all."

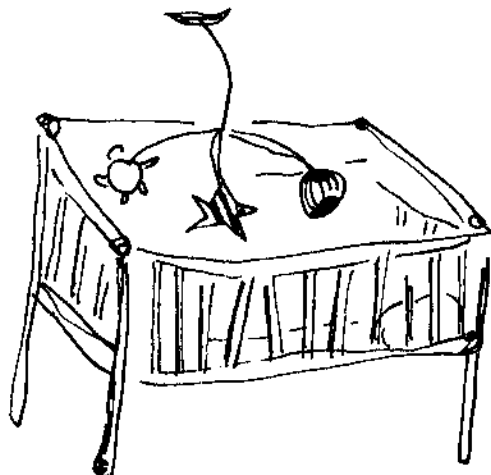
Nanetta is completely oblivious to the prejudice of her remark. I grit my teeth and sigh.

As my due date draws near, though, I note that all the old wives' tales overwhelmingly point toward a boy. Besides "carrying low and out

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front," there are other telltale signs: my husband Randy has gained weight along with me during my pregnancy, I am craving meat and cheeses, my feet have swelled up, and my chest has not grown in size.

And wouldn't you know, on December 14th, 1998, at 5:37 p.m., I gave birth to an 8-pound 11-ounce boy, whom I named Gary. The dream I had on the massage table—that dream of pain-free labor—turned out to be pure fantasy. Unlike my mother and grandmother, who were both three weeks early, I was two weeks late. Though I labored hard for thirteen hours, the reward of a healthy child dulled all my memory of intense pain.

Once the baby arrived, I figured my run-ins with old wives' tales were over. A short while after I gave birth, though, I was standing in the lobby of a bustling dim sum restaurant in Chinatown, waiting to be seated. I held baby Gary in my arms. A young Chinese-American woman approached me.

"Excuse me, but my mother wanted me to tell you, your baby has very beautiful ears."

I looked at the petite gray-haired

woman standing beside her. The old woman grinned at my son; then she turned and said something to her daughter in Chinese.

"My mother says that in China, beautiful ears mean your baby will have a very happy childhood."

Standing there with my newborn son wriggling against my chest, I smiled at the old woman, grateful for her wisdom.

After seven years working as a film executive, STEPHANIE SUSNJARA decided to chase her dream and became a writer. She holds an M.F.A. from Goucher College in creative non-fiction and is a freelance writer based in New York City.

I began this essay when Gary was just a couple of months old, back when the wonder of new motherhood was still very much intact. Now that Gary has entered his twos, some of that initial magic has faded, giving way to new challenges. Although I concluded that old wives' tales should be valued for communal and cultural significance rather than any truths, I can't help but wonder, did all that spicy food I ate for nine months fuel my toddler's recent tantrums?

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