

Growing Pains

Marcella Runell Hall

New Year's Eve 2006 was a perfectly divine evening. Despite frosty New York weather I attended an early church service in Brooklyn with my then boyfriend of three years and one of my best girlfriends, Keisha. The sermon was a prophetic word on how 2007 would be a year of completion and preparation in anticipation of 2008, which promised to be the year of new beginnings. Later we attended a swanky Brooklyn party where, Dave, my boyfriend, was spinning. It was a lovely and fulfilling night: a perfect way to end 2006, which had been full of transitions, many of them difficult to manage.

Early into 2007 I realized big things were starting to happen for me. In February I called my mom nearly every week, starting our conversations with basically the same question, "Hey, Mom, do I sound different now that I have been *promoted*?" "Hey, Mom, do I sound different now that I am *a published author*?" or the best one, "Hey, Mom! Guess what—do I sound different now that I am *engaged*?" (Yes, my thoughtful and loving boyfriend proposed on Valentine's Day, making the beginning of 2007 one of the most special times in my life.)

All things work-related continued to improve while I enjoyed my job directing a blossoming education and training program at a small nonprofit; in March I found out that my "dream job" was unexpectedly opening at NYU—my former alma mater and first place of official employment. I ended up getting the job offer the evening before my very blessed May wedding. During the special ceremony, which was family-only in my parents' home, there were many *amens* and *hallelujahs* from both sides of the family as the pastor (and father of my best friend, Keisha) asked everyone to pray for all of the future children he knew we were going to

have. I was overjoyed, although I wondered how I was going to squeeze it all in with a new job and so much still to do. The book I had coedited, *The Hip-Hop Education Guidebook*, was doing very well and was leading me to many more writing projects and speaking engagements. My wedding, however, was intimate and romantic, and I was poised to start my dream job over the summer. I only had one other major issue to contend with—finishing my dissertation so I could complete my doctorate. Life was amazing, but I was silently wondering how I was going to in fact “have it all.” My mom had warned me for a long time that early menopause runs in our family (she started at thirty-six!) so I was doing the math trying to figure when we could start on the baby making. I was thirty-two at the time . . .

In July of my amazing year, my husband and I attended the wedding of a college friend. We came home and had a romantic evening celebrating the newness of attending our first major event as husband and wife. The next day I left for Florida to complete a much-needed writing retreat to get a head start on dissertation work before my new job started. While I was in Florida, I came down with lingering flulike symptoms and was having some of the worst cramps of my life. I persevered and kept on working, however, taking borrowed antibiotics (my health insurance hadn't kicked in yet) and popping Aleve for the cramps—coupled with plenty of coffee to keep me up to write.

When I returned home, I hit the ground running at work, coming early and staying late to show my enthusiasm and gratitude. In addition I was also hanging out with friends quite a bit, celebrating all the blessings that had come to me in 2007. After a few weeks I suddenly had a startling thought. My cramps had gone away, but my period never came. I was in denial about what that might mean, because in the twenty years of getting my period, I had never been late—and I had also never been pregnant. I finally brought myself to buy a test.

I fumbled with the box, reading the simple directions over and over again, looking for the words of reassurance that might say something like, *Don't worry you probably aren't pregnant, you weren't even trying. And you used birth control, so take it easy.* But I didn't see those words, so I peed on the stick, and within five seconds it turned blue—both lines! I wasn't only pregnant, I was *very* pregnant, if that was possible. So I did it again just to make sure. And the same result remained. I, I mean *we*, were having a baby.

I came out the bathroom in awe of what I had just witnessed. I walked into my husband's music room, and said something to the effect of, "So honey, I just took a pregnancy test 'cause I was late, and it was positive, so I don't know that that means." Yes, with all my education and experience, I still couldn't bring myself to believe that I knew what it meant. My husband looked like he had seen a ghost, and maybe he did—the ghost of independence past . . . or something comparable—flashing before his eyes. He gave me a hug and I said we couldn't really confirm until I saw a doctor anyway. I went to sleep shortly after because I was nauseous and tired, and ended up waking up to pee at least twice. The writing seemed to be on the wall: I was pregnant.

The next day I handled the news by doing what I do best: marching myself to the closest bookstore and buying as many pregnancy books as I could afford. Then I made a doctor's appointment to confirm what the home pregnancy test had already told me twice. And I didn't tell another living soul besides, even after the doctor confirmed it.

I was having very mixed emotions. I was frantically searching the Internet to see if the bootleg antibiotics I had borrowed from an aunt in Florida were dangerous to my unborn child. When I was convinced that they were okay, I moved on to panic about the Aleve, then the possible fetal alcohol syndrome from the after-work celebratory cocktails, and eventually about the extra caffeine I had drunk during my writing retreat. I was a nervous wreck. I had been

waiting to be a mother my entire life—I took care of my multiracial Cabbage Patch Kid collection as if they were living children. I babysat and shamelessly “flirted” with babies everywhere just to see them smile or laugh. I had dreamed of this moment for my entire life. And yet all I felt were mixed emotions. I felt regretful for my unmotherly discretions, I felt scared that I would look unprofessional at my new (old) job by recklessly miscalculating my birth control situation, and on some level I felt like I just wasn’t ready yet.

Then the unthinkable happened. A good friend and mentor who is an NYU professor went through the most unimaginable tragedy. Her beautiful young daughter was murdered just a few short blocks from my office and in the same apartment complex I had lived in as a graduate student. Her death made the front page of every newspaper. I was devastated. And then all of a sudden I felt like a fool. I was feeling mixed emotions about this life growing inside of me, this miracle, and my friend had just lost her own precious gift.

I snapped out of it. My mixed feelings dissipated on the spot, and after a week of post-pregnancy-test brooding, I, I mean we, finally started to get excited—really excited. I shopped around for the perfect ob-gyn. And like everything else in Manhattan, I had to get on a waiting list and plead my case. I finally settled/was selected for an all-woman practice right between my office and my husbands’ office—perfect for midday ultrasounds. We told our parents, who were overjoyed, to put it mildly. Dave’s mother remarked, “Oh what a big year this has been for me! Oh . . . er . . . I mean for you!” Both of our mothers were thrilled. I was estimated to be about eight weeks pregnant at this time, with a projected due date sometime in March.

I took the day after Labor Day off from work and went for my first ultrasound appointment. Dave and I were so excited. The first one is a vaginal ultrasound, so I told Dave he didn’t need to come for this one, a mistake I would soon come to regret. My doctor was a young

woman about my age, very helpful and excited, as was I . . . until she did the actual ultrasound and found that my baby did not have a heartbeat. In fact it seemed as though the baby had stopped developing about two weeks earlier. I immediately thought of how selfish I had been, and wondered if the baby could sense my ambiguity. Then I thought, *why couldn't I tell that she had died?* All the while my doctor was trying to tell me how common miscarriages are and that there probably wasn't anything I could have done. I felt like the whole scene was unfolding in slow motion. And then I felt a wave of dizziness like I might faint right there.

Somehow I pulled myself together to hear that I had two options for getting rid of the fetus. I could take a drug called Misoprostol and insert it inside my vaginal wall. I would have cramps and some pain, but it would cause my body to expel the fetus over several days of bleeding. Sounded pretty awful. The second option was to go to an abortion clinic recommended by my doctor and have a D&C procedure, which frankly also sounded pretty awful. I opted for the drug since I could at least be at home. And then I called Dave. I couldn't even get the words out, I just burst into tears. He left work and came to get me in a few short minutes (turns out the central location was very beneficial). We stood on the bustling Soho street on the perfect early sunny September day, and I cried like a baby—and for the baby that wasn't coming anymore.

Later on, after a few drinks—the necessary liquid courage—I went home and administered the drug. I later found out it is used to terminate pregnancies in developing countries. Scary thought, because I soon found out that it doesn't always work. In fact I tried it twice, staying up all night sweating and cramping, so scared of what was happening to my body. After two unsuccessful tries, I had another appointment and the fetus was still there, not budging. I reluctantly agreed to make the D&C appointment. Then a few days later the roller coaster continued: I started to bleed on my own and realized my body was naturally handling the

situation. My husband and my doctor were happy. I finally (after three weeks) was starting to feel better. I waited two more weeks and went back to the doctor for my checkup. And alas, more bad news: There was still too much tissue in my uterus, and now my health was of great concern. The D&C was back on, and I needed to go the very next day.

Ironically, my talented DJ husband had just been asked to DJ on a major NYC radio show with millions of listeners—a huge break—but the same day as the procedure was scheduled.

Early on the morning of October 6, we drove into midtown Manhattan and made our way into the clinic. It was very unassuming; I kept imagining there would be protesters or some other obvious sign of what was about to go down. When we walked in the waiting room, there appeared to be at least fifty young women waiting, some with male partners, but many solo. I was pretty sure I was the oldest person in the room at thirty-two.

Fortunately, my doctor had called and arranged for one of the private outpatient waiting rooms, so we only had to wait two hours, as opposed to however long the other young women were waiting. As I went in for the procedure I was terrified and sad. I was literally on the table with my legs spread, getting the IV of anesthesia, when the doctor performing the surgery said two things to me. First, he said, “Don’t worry, you are young, you can have another baby later. How old are you?” I replied, “Thanks. I am thirty-two.” He said, “Oh, well, in that case you should have one really soon and then another one right away; you really need to have two before thirty-five.” I said, “Um, okay, thanks.” And then he said, “And you should probably lose twenty-five pounds too.” I was mortified. I couldn’t have been in a more vulnerable position, literally and metaphorically. As I was passing out and the anesthesia was kicking in, I was thinking, *this is the worst day of my life.*

When I awoke half an hour later, I was in a room with many other women at various stages of recovering from their procedures. People were being offered cookies and juice, since we couldn't eat for many hours leading up to the surgery. One young woman remarked that she wanted the same cookies "as before." I was dumbfounded in that moment. I was in excruciating pain, trying to process all that was going on. Then "Dr. Tactless" came out and said I would be in more pain than everyone else because the tissue had connected to my uterus and was more painful to remove. *Perfect*, I thought.

Later on, after I was safely home, Dave was able to leave me alone long enough to do his thing on the radio, and by the next day I was physically feeling better.

It would be nearly three months before my period returned and my body finally healed from the trauma. Every website said it would be back after four to six weeks, but that wasn't my experience. Having a miscarriage is a painful and often taboo conversation topic, and yet is eerily common, especially in women over thirty. I found out that most doctors won't even start to run tests until it happens three times. And what I have discovered, once I tell my story, is that many other women have had similar experiences or are close to women who have had them. While I was only a mother for a few short weeks, I now know it is possible. And I believe that my experience, albeit painful, contributed to my year of preparation.

I am no longer worried about my job security, as my probation period is over and it truly is my dream job-I even got promoted. Recently my husband and I were finally able to take and enjoy our belated honeymoon—pregnancy free—which has some benefits. I have been faithfully taking prenatal vitamins, exercising, and eating much better. I am much closer to completing my dissertation and looking to graduate this year. We have paid off our debt and are saving to buy our first home. And we are making plans to try again soon. In retrospect, if I had known what

was going to happen, I probably would have been terrified and certain that I couldn't handle it. But I have once again learned that a crisis is only a crisis when you don't have the knowledge and skills to deal with it. This will not be my crisis again. I am looking forward to being a mother when the time is right.

Marcella Runell Hall is the Associate Director of the Center for Multicultural Education and Programs at New York University. She is also a freelance writer for the *New York Times* Learning Network and *VIBE*, and is the author of *The Hip-Hop Education Guidebook Volume 1* with Martha Diaz (Hip-Hop Association, 2007), *The 10 Most Influential Hip-Hop Artists* (Scholastic/Rubicon, 2008), and *Conscious Women Rock the Page: Using Hip-Hop Fiction to Incite Social Change* with JLove Calderón (also featured in this book), Black Artemis, and E-Fierce. (Sister Outsider, 2008). She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, David Hall, a.k.a. DJ Trends.