

The Devious Doctor

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If your husband can not be with you for the birth of his first child, I suppose being with your parents is the next best thing.

That describes my position many years ago. Our daughter Jean was born a month before my twenty-second birthday in the Atlantic City Hospital. I say "the" because it was the only one in what is now a popular gambling resort. There was no hospital where we lived in Wildwood, New Jersey, some sixty-five minutes away.

Earl was serving his country in the Army in Japan (involuntarily, as he was grabbed by the draft the moment he left grad school). He directed a newsroom where soldiers and civilians were writing pro-American propaganda designed to "win the battle for men's minds." I was home in the house where I grew up, with loving but somewhat bewildered parents trying to adjust to the rapidity with which they had become in-laws and, now, grandparents.

Jean and I settled into my old room on the second floor of the modest house at 211 East Sixteenth Street, where I lived until I escaped to college. Then, in rather rapid order, I married Earl late in my senior year, graduated, and had a child. Even now, many years later, I feel a twinge when I pass a house numbered 211. Since there was no bathroom on the second floor, all the activity associated with a new baby took place in my parents' first floor bedroom. You know the drill—washing, wiping, changing, bathing, dressing, playing, and loving.

Let me describe the joys and hazards of bathing my chubby little girl. Remember bathinettes? Those cunning little folding bathtubs made of rubberized cloth? Bathing an infant in the kitchen sink was not the proper thing to do, although it would have been much easier. So the bathinette, in addition to cloth diapers, a diaper pail, clothing, towels, powder, diaper rash ointment and fun things like that occupied a permanent spot in that rapidly-becoming-crowded bedroom.

The bathinette took up too much space in that one small bathroom. We carried pails of warm water to first fill then empty it. We were obeying the how-to-test-the-water rule demanded by the omniscient baby guru Dr.

Spock by testing its warmth with an elbow. After the bath, which included lots of splashing and water in places where it shouldn't be, we lowered the top and placed the wiggly child on it to dry, dress and play with her.

My doctor father, whom I consider one of the best and the last of the G.P.s (general practitioners) figured out how to give Jean her required childhood immunization shots and still remain her adored grandfather. When he decided the time had come, we placed her tummy down on top of the bathinette. Dad rushed in, gave her the necessary needles in her rear end, rushed out, strolled back in, confronted his howling granddaughter and solicitously inquired, in his loving grandfatherly voice, "Poor baby Jean. Did someone bad do something to hurt you?"

He picked her up, did his customary funny little shuffle song and dance routine around the room—the same one, I am told, he did with me when I was an infant. The tune was pretty much a monotone; the words were not much better: "Pretty brown eyes, I love you. Pretty brown eyes, you're sweet. Pretty brown eyes, I adore you, even your sweet flat feet." Jean and her grandfather smiled at one another, and all was well in the world once again.