

life lessons

| and baby makes three? |



my unexpected family

A surprise pregnancy throws together a pair of polar-opposite parents—she, ambitious and orderly; he, creative and slovenly. That's a movie plot, right? Actually, says writer and mom **Jennifer Baumgardner**, it's the story of her life.

I GOT PREGNANT in early 2004, at the age of 33. It was an accident, but the moment I saw that positive EPT, like *that*, I knew I'd have the baby. The next day I told my best friend. "Wow," she said and then asked, "What did Gordon say?" "I haven't told him yet," I replied. Gordon was my ex-boyfriend and the least compatible person I had ever met, much less dated. I'm an extroverted neat freak who counts Gloria Steinem as a role model; he's a misanthropic rock musician (and schoolteacher) with the

social skills of Larry David and the hobbies of Homer Simpson. Our relationship reminded me of a "Sylvia" cartoon from the 1970s in which a feminist fairy tries to talk some sense into two love-struck opposites. "He's a member of the NRA!" the fairy yells. "And you have a bumper sticker that reads, I BRAKE FOR HOBBITS!" Equally mismatched, Gordon and I spent a tumultuous year fighting and making up and annoying our loved ones with our drama before we finally broke up.

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While I had initiated the split in the midst of a flurry of actions designed to get my life in order, I found I couldn't quite make myself move on with anyone else. As the positive pregnancy test illustrated, a part of me was still involved with Gordon—the part that was enthralled by our chemistry, by his rakish handsomeness, by the effortless intimacy we felt, well, some of the time. That part of me was still sleeping with him, following once-a-week secret dates that camouflaged the daily conflicts that had led me to leave him.

I told him I was pregnant over the phone. And when he asked (with touching tenderness, I thought) if I was OK and whether I knew what I wanted to do, I said that I was going to have the baby. After all, I felt I could raise a child on my own, if it came to that. I met him hours later at a grocery store, to pick up dinner, where he immediately grabbed me in a pythonlike embrace while Rod Stewart croaked “Have I Told You Lately That I Love You” over the tinny sound system. Gordon gazed into my eyes. “I wish this song wasn't playing,” he said, and I laughed.

His response to the news was so right on that initially I thought we might be able to live together with the baby. But as my pregnancy progressed, our differences were once again painfully evident. I was tired, achy, nauseated—in other words, pregnant—and suddenly unable to meet for drinks and uninterested in going to 1 A.M. rock shows. Gordon, not pregnant, found he was repulsed by my frequent trips to the bathroom, constant milk-shake drinking, and vomiting from the intense smells of summertime New York. In fact, Gordon seemed irritated about any extra help I needed and overly worried that having a child would make it harder for him to schedule band practice. He looked at dads pushing strollers and winced, as if fending off some future emasculation.

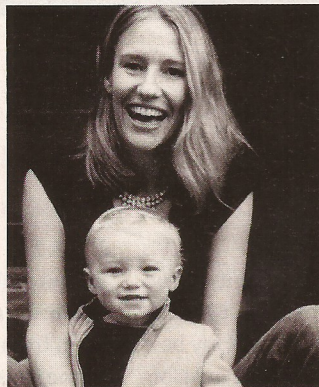
One August day, Gordon and I trudged to childbirth class during one of those New York City squalls where you are lifted up by gale-force winds and pummeled by rain balls. I was eight months pregnant. Once indoors, I began struggling in my manatee state to pull off my wet boots. The

Alan Alda type on my left was waiting on his wife, making meaningful eye contact with her as if to say, “Thank you for offering your body to grow this child for us. I can never repay you, but I can subjugate myself to your mood swings and won't leave you because your breasts sag.” The suit-and-tie guy to my right jumped to assist when his wife grunted while attempting to remove her shoes. “Hey, could you give me a hand?” I whispered to Gordon, furtively eyeing Alan and Suit. Gordon sighed deeply, as if he'd had about enough of my Leona Helmsley ways, and said, “You want me to get down on my knees and remove your shoes?”

And that is when the truth dawned on me: I had manacled my life to someone who didn't want to be my partner. It was clear we couldn't live together, but I wondered if I was going to be able to be this baby's sole responsible parent and also shoulder the burden of dealing with Gordon, who acted like my other, not-so-cute child.

But shortly after this epiphany something happened. Skuli was born, and Gordon fell in love—unselfishly and totally—with his son. We spent the first three months of Skuli's life in my tiny apartment. (Gordon still had his own place but wanted to live with the baby, and I was happy for the help.) But since we didn't need “together time,” as we weren't romantically coupled, the second he got home from teaching in the afternoon, I could take off. Although the mother of a newborn, I still had time to take a walk, meet a friend, or go to a dinner party. Often, though, I would stick around and watch TV on the couch with Skuli while Gordon cooked dinner and took breaks to coo over our baby-acne-covered infant. When Skuli was about six months old, Gordon got a new apartment with a room for the baby, which he immediately filled with bizarre amounts of toys from FAO Schwarz. Skuli soon began staying over there at least two nights a week, which meant I even occasionally got to sleep in.

Because I wouldn't always be around, Gordon had to learn how to do all the stuff I did, when he might not have been the type to do so otherwise. And I was forced



about the author

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to give up control—something I wouldn't necessarily have had to do in a more traditional mother role. I couldn't micromanage Skuli's outfits, nap time, or food intake when Gordon was parenting, and so I learned not to. Thus, if Skuli showed up in red plaid shorts and an emerald green top, looking like a Christmas elf in July, I lived with it. I learned to trust that there was more than one way to take care of Skuli, and in that trust came the freedom for me to have a life.

Our wildly disparate natures even seemed to have purpose when it came to parenting. At my orderly house, Skuli has cleanliness, unbroken toys, and lots of friends and family coming over. At Gordon's creative house, they jump on the bed and toys never need to be

put away, so you discover a bounty of old trains and robots under a couch pillow and—voilà!—new toys. (Gordon calls these found objects “play stations.”) At my house, Skuli has a chalkboard; at his dad's, he is allowed to draw on his crib or the floor. As a former city kid who was given a subway token at age 12 and told to “go play,” Gordon takes Skuli to a museum or a zoo at least once a week. I bring Skuli to my childhood home in Fargo, North Dakota, where we sit on the lawn and listen to the mosquitoes.

Still, while I believe that this coparenting arrangement is best for everyone, Skuli, now three, might not agree. The other night, after a family dinner, Gordon was heading out the door when Skuli said, “I don't

want Daddy to go. He should stay.” Gordon’s face crumpled, and I felt like a witch. As our son gets older, I am going to hear this more, I assume, as we take on more of the contours of a traditional broken home. I feel a pang of loss that we can’t all hang out in bed Saturday mornings and read the paper. I get weepy when I see that Ford Freestyle commercial where the family has a fun day at the beach and then drops the dad off at his prefab divorce apartment. The tears well for a few reasons: the sadness of Skuli’s having to say good-bye so often to one of his parents, but also the reassurance of knowing that there are so many once-together parents who now have joint custody (and manage just fine) that Ford is marketing to them.

Sure, sometimes I get furious because all my Tupperware has migrated from Skuli’s lunch box to the black hole known as Gordon’s kitchen, and I know to bring it up is to court a fight. But then I take a step back and I see my trajectory: from the EPT stick to the moment of clarity during childbirth class to the ritual end-of-night phone calls between Gordon and me to check in about Skuli. I really wouldn’t trade any of it. We even have regular Illegitimate Family Night dinners to take the place of those old secret dates. True, we are far away from the Jennifer and Gordon who were madly, chaotically in love, but the lasting benefit of that brief and ineluctable union is drawing on the walls right now. ■