

*These Days* originally appeared in MERIDIAN-Winter 2017

To Marissa's query about whether they should be concerned, Kendra said: it's sleep deprivation, she's just really tired. You can't worry about someone who's said she manages to keep the house in at least superficial order and makes a passable dinner a couple times a week, I mean, that's better than the rest of us manage, right? But I saw her ad for a twice-weekly housekeeper, Danielle noted, so it seems our little Ms. I Can Do It All is a little more overwhelmed than she's letting on, apparently she never got the memo that you're not expected to pass the white glove test when there's a baby in the house. Wait, said Quinn, she told me that her husband's a way better cook than she'll ever be, there was a housekeeper working there when I stopped by a few days ago, and someone told me that they'd bumped into her sister out walking with the baby on a couple of recent evenings. She's got plenty of help, so I'm worried that maybe there *is* something going on. Wouldn't a good OB/GYN screen her for something, Marissa wondered, because if you're still dead tired after the housekeeper's cleaning and your husband's cooking, it seems like you'd mention it to your doctor. It's hormonal, quipped Lauren, not much you can do about that. It's only been a day or two since she posted to ask if she was the only one feeling like they're constantly slogging through wet cement, Kendra said, and it's not like something really serious springs up overnight, let's not overreact.

Hormones shmormones. We're all a little exhausted, how could we not be, with those three-times-in-the-fucking-middle-of-the-night feedings and no time to even grab a

shower during the day, it doesn't make sense to run to your doctor every time you feel a little out of sorts, Finn responded when Marissa persisted. But if it turns out that it *is* more than just being tired, it can be treated, there's been all sorts of attention paid to it recently, but she has to know to ask, replied Marissa, yes, but we're all looking out for each other, suggested Kendra; she knows where to find us. But there's so much *noise*—don't you think—and it's easy to lose track sometimes, Marissa insisted, to assume someone else is paying better attention, that if anyone's MIA for a day or so, someone will notice and she'll be poked to be sure she's okay. Seems to me that's just what you've done, said Lauren, you've made sure we're all on the lookout.

Honestly, there's so much '*my baby blah, blah, blah,*' and asinine posts about the mortal sin of adding cereal to breast milk, links to blogs parsing which solids are really solid, knock-down drag-out debates about the perfect amount of Tummy Time, don't even get me started on those super cute pictures of babies with painted-on eyebrows, or shots of baby barf splattered on the hardwood floor, Danielle said, and, really, let's admit it—it all just adds to the exhaustion. Sometimes it makes me feel better, said Quinn,—about myself as a person—for not bothering to log on and look, I get self-righteous about it; to the point of feeling sort of bad our parents never got the luxury of knowing what it felt like to avoid a day or two of the constant onslaught when they were our age. Are you suggesting, said Finn, our two career parental units actually missed out on something they could feel good about? To which Danielle replied: I'm just saying, I'm with Marissa, there's a little too much noise. Maybe so, answered Kendra, but what are you going to do? It's just how it is these days. It's like everybody thinks they're connected, Danielle continued, but really, are they?

What I sometimes feel gets lost in the chatter, said Ivy, is how great this motherhood—oops sorry, Finn, parenthood—gig is; better even than I dreamed. I suppose the baby could develop colic overnight and turn my world to shit—should I be waiting for the other shoe to drop? I don't mind being called a mother, but you never know, Finn replied, y'all's posts sometimes make it sound like some turn-the-world-to-shit monster's lurking in the shadows, if it's not colic or some weird skin rash, there's always titty-biting or some other horror to look forward to, but, regardless—whatever—none of you will ever convince me that my baby won't always be perfect. No one says titty these days, said Danielle, you're such a goon, Finn. Seriously, shouldn't she talk to her doctor, Marissa pressed. I'm telling you, it's those fucking hormones, urged Lauren, they shoot up astronomically during pregnancy—like four hundred percent—and the second you give birth it's like an elevator plummeting a million miles an hour until WHAM!, it hits the basement floor and knocks the shit out of you. Confirmation, yet again, how lucky I am to be a dude, noted Finn, trailing his post with several dancing emojis. It's just a matter of time, Kendra texted Marissa, you watch, everything will be fine.

\*

It was her own decision to be hospitalized, reported Vanessa, or so said my next-door neighbor who's a friend of the sister, who also said that, supposedly, she started feeling better almost immediately. Lauren added that she'd run into Sage at the farmer's market, who'd heard from someone—oh, who was it—that she was mortified that anyone might find out she's in the psych ward, but who also confirmed—shit, who the hell was it—that,

yes, she was getting better. You're trading old information, ladies, Quinn piped in; I've talked to her, she's out and pretending it never happened. I figured it was some sort of overreaction, Kendra said, she never sounded that bad. Maybe it would only seem that way to us because she'd never let on how awful she'd felt except maybe to Ivy, since she was closer to Ivy than to anyone else, even me, said Quinn, but Ivy disagreed, saying it was probably more likely that she was keeping her troubles to herself and that it was hurtful to suggest that I wouldn't have insisted she get help if she had given off any inkling that things were so bad, which, Ivy insisted, she had not. I'm not casting aspersions, Quinn said, it's just that she knows I've been trained to weasel the truth out of people, so maybe she felt she couldn't be as open with me. I thought you two were friends, Ivy huffed, not lawyer and defendant. Of course we're friends, insisted Quinn, I'm not even sure how we got off on this tangent, all I was saying is that if she'd shared what was going with anyone, it would have been you, and since you didn't know, she either wasn't really that bad or did a good job of hiding things. You're right about that, Ivy said, and since she's fine now it doesn't make sense for any of us to blame each other for things we didn't know. That's right, Lauren urged, we should blame hormones not each other, and don't forget, we're not even supposed to know about it, added Kendra. Amen, said Quinn, let's just be supportive, supportive without being so obvious added Ivy.

She's barely home and everyone's emailing to invite her to go for walks or meet for coffee, Pia noted, or posting offers to share their personal trainer sessions in the park in the mornings, so who says people aren't connected these days, and, said Quinn, Lauren's trainer stopped by her house and when she didn't answer offered her a free session by leaving a

note on the seat of the stroller sitting by the front door (who leaves such an expensive stroller on their porch, Danielle wanted to know). Maybe one of you should text her, Quinn or Ivy, Marissa suggested, and see if she'd like to go to lunch like you used to, before the babies, I think she'd like that, don't you? I'd ask her to lunch, Ivy answered, but I worry that because things are going so well with me it might cast any of her own lingering woes in sharper relief. Really, said Kendra, I hope you're not just feeling awkward because you know about the hospitalization, and that's nothing for anyone to be ashamed of, added Pia, haven't you all seen the commercials? The truth is, Finn emailed Lauren, Ivy's reluctant to see her—or any one—because she's afraid someone might find out that things aren't really as rosy as she makes out, I've heard, confirmed Lauren, that Ivy's husband has suddenly been taking long business trips, for days a time, added Finn, something he'd never done before the baby.

Something's definitely not right, Marissa posted, I heard that Olivia took five year-old Madeline to the emergency room for stitches (not soccer, *ballet*) and saw her there, said she'd seemed panicked, saying the baby hit her head and needed a scan, but—this is *scary*: Vanessa told me she'd said the same thing to her on an entirely different day, when Vanessa walked past her house and saw her crying while strapping the baby into her car seat, but, according to Olivia and Vanessa, the baby looked perfectly fine and had, in fact, been happily cooing. Then Sage told me, Marissa continued, that she'd emailed her to ask what happened to their Tummy Time play date and got a late reply with apologies, saying she'd been too frazzled to check email or do anything else. Apparently the doctors told her the baby was healthy, but she didn't believe them and was taking her to a specialist, and Sage,

Marissa added, felt the tone of the email was frantic, even though she'd refused Sage's offer to drive them to the neurologist appointment.

That makes four, said Marissa, after Danielle mentioned a conversation in which Bethany described exchanging texts with her (within days of the Sage email) and said she'd cut short the conversation because the baby had just banged her head against the leg of her chair and she had to go. You don't think she's *hurting* her, asked Vanessa. Pia piped in: I read about some women having visions of hurting their babies, crazy shit like smothering them with the pastel-colored afghan Grandma knit, or putting a Ziploc baggie over their little heads, to which Vanessa asked if it could be possible that she's actually been dropping the baby on her head. *Intrusive thoughts* I think it's called, continued Pia, but the thing is, those mothers have visions that they're hurting their babies, but they don't actually act on them, that's right, said Vanessa, I remember reading something about that too, they sometimes go to weird extremes to make sure they don't, like locking themselves in their cars or asking someone to take the baby for awhile. Gee, it's too bad Andrea Yates didn't think of asking a neighbor to take the kids to Burger King, or that woman in Florida who pushed her car with her two babies strapped in their car seats into the drink, mused Finn, but wait just a minute, we've made a leap that shouldn't be made, noted Kendra, the idea that she might be hurting her baby—or even thinking about hurting her—is totally baseless. You're right, thinking you've hurt your baby when your baby's not hurt is a different animal, Vanessa agreed, and besides, said Sage, even if the comparison could be made, it couldn't possibly be true that *she'd* hurt the baby, because, don't forget, she wanted that baby worse than all of us combined, they'd been trying forever, three rounds of IVF, interjected Quinn, so you just wouldn't imagine that after having gone through all that, but wait a minute everyone,

Marissa interrupted, the doctors told her the baby was just fine, so what if, continued Marissa, she *was* having delusions.

Speaking of delusions, noted Olivia, this reminds me of the time I had tea with her, we'd both just started showing, and she mentioned that she'd had a lot of trouble sleeping, that ever since she'd gotten pregnant she had weird dreams in which the baby was something other than a baby. Something like what, Danielle asked, an alien? You know, said Olivia, I remember the conversation, but I don't remember what she'd seen in the dreams. Speaking of aliens, said Sage, Bethany once told me about a woman with bouts of psychosis so severe that she refused to pump her breasts because she knew there was a monster lurking in her refrigerator. Oh God, I can't stand it, Finn said, not the dreaded One-Eyed Breast Milk Beast? Do we think it's possible, pressed Marissa, that she's actually suffering some sort of mental illness?

Huh, posted Ivy, I wonder if the IVF played some role, because of the hormones, agreed Lauren, I'm so glad someone's finally listening to me, but no, not just the hormones, Ivy continued, the stress of having to go through all the effort to get pregnant; the temperature-taking, the charts, the shots, and then the continual disappointments, maybe all the upset lingers even after you have a baby. What do you think is in those shots, Lauren persisted, but yes, all that stress *and* the hormones, what a toxic combination.

In what planet does Lauren live, Sage texted Olivia, the baby's nearly nine months old, it's not like her hormones haven't leveled out, and since everyone's been talking about how worried they are about her, it makes no sense that Lauren's back on her estrogen soapbox. Maybe Lauren's suddenly interested because she feels bad about having been wrapped up in her own stuff, trying to get back to her size 0, they were friends before the

babies, maybe she knows she should reach out to her instead of working so hard to get her figure back, Olivia replied.

Don't you think one of us should do something, Marissa implored. Quinn asked what could be done when she wasn't returning anyone's texts or emails, even Ivy's. Marissa suggested that maybe someone's husband could talk to her husband. Are you volunteering yours, quipped Danielle, or Finn's?

According to Bethany, it was the sister who talked her into going back to the hospital, Kendra said, after failing for weeks to get her to go back on her meds, which she was right to suggest, agreed Pia, given that all the literature says it's better to stop breast feeding and stay on meds than to risk a downward spiral. It turns out there's a history of bi-polar in her family, said Olivia, like her cousin, or maybe it was the sister. No, I'm sure it's not the sister, Quinn argued, the sister has her act together, no one would ever believe there was anything wrong with the sister, who is, I heard, said Sage, a prominent doctor, or is it a professor? But Quinn, didn't you say that she'd continued to insist the baby was brain-damaged, asked Marissa, and kept taking her to different doctors even though they all said the baby was perfect, even the baby's own pediatrician, who agreed that the baby was flawless, had been concerned not about the baby but about *her*, said Olivia. Once they get her meds adjusted she'll be fine again, Kendra suggested, I mean, I'm sure she sees by now that she needs to take them, but it will be important for us not to flaunt breastfeeding in front of her—right, no more posts about it, agreed Danielle, well maybe we all should just give it up in solidarity, Ivy said, not to mention that some of us should have weaned our babies months ago anyway, added Quinn.

Buy stock in Purel everyone, Finn posted, she's baaaaack, I ran into her, and she's Pureling everything in sight. Of course it would be you, Finn, the self-appointed mamadude, who'd notice excessive use of Purel, Danielle said, I mean, the rest of us practically bathe in that shit. But I heard from Cecily there was more to it, Marissa said, like that she was squirting it on her and the baby's hands ten times in a row, not even letting it dry before adding more, yeah, added Olivia, Finn said he saw her put it back in the diaper bag but drag it out again before she'd even zipped it up, it seems like even *we* would have thought that was extreme. But Finn told me, said Kendra, she'd laughed about it—right Finn—and said that she'd never been afraid of germs until she'd been in the hospital the second time and noticed all those little dispensers mounted everywhere. And Bethany texted me, said Vanessa, that she'd run into the sister, who was happy to report that she was looking so much better, the color had returned to her face, she'd put on a little weight (and her being able to mention the hospital was a sign of some sort of breakthrough, right?), did she look better to you, Finn? So it's good if she looks okay, but what about the baby, Marissa wanted to know, was she still saying things about the baby being hurt? No, Kendra answered, if you believe what the sister told Bethany, she's now talking about how perfect the baby is. Did she still have those worried eyes, Marissa pressed, and when Finn didn't answer, Quinn suggested that someone should text Ivy and ask if she'd seen her. Why not you, Quinn, said Danielle.

I've been checking in with her every day, reported Quinn, and she sounds much improved, no longer fussing about the baby having been brain-damaged. Checking in as in seeing her,

asked Danielle, or checking in as in virtually, to which Kendra said, oh boy, here we go again. Ivy jumped in, saying: I stopped by and her house was spotless, you could eat off the floors, and even the front steps of the brownstone looked freshly swept. Okay, so I guess we know she has a dog, Danielle quipped, or maybe it's a signal, Pia suggested, that she's completely recovered, I read an article that said a clean house is a sign of mental clarity, or the presence of a stellar housekeeper or a hungry and neglected-because-of-the-new-baby dog, insisted Danielle. I heard she even mentioned having another baby someday, Kendra said, she'd said the same thing in an email to me, mentioned Quinn, but not that it was a someday thing, more that she was planning it for soon, like next year, which is a very good sign, Marissa agreed, though I'd feel better if Finn's husband, who used to see her husband on the commuter train, would report that he's been seeing him again lately.

She RSVP'd yes to my baby's birthday party, Vanessa said, which is the first one she'll have been to since Olivia's party, and that was what, at least a year and a half ago, Ivy answered, that was a party for which I paid dearly for nearly two days, remember all of us pumping and dumping and our husbands all disdainful, but wait, I don't even remember her being there, said Danielle, can I blame baby-brain or must I admit to a blackout? Oh, she was definitely there, said Olivia, she was about to pop, offered Finn, don't y'all remember her pulling up her top to show us she'd taken scissors to the waist of those really great tie-dyed leggings? What a damn shame, those leggings were amazing, and that was some stomach, too. Of course a protruding belly'd impress you, Vanessa answered, since you'll never have to suffer one yourself. That's right, said Finn, and here's something else you can bank on: my never suffering the indignity of pumping and dumping. I'd add that you'll never

suffer the indignity of wearing leggings to your list, Danielle suggested, but we all know you better than that. Girls, girls, girls, quipped Finn, all this jealousy. It's so unbecoming.

Danielle had run to the drug store and was waiting for the signal to cross the street when she heard sirens, she said, and though she never pays attention to them, when she saw the text she remembered having had a really unsettling feeling when the fire trucks and ambulance went by. Finn was standing in line at the Westside Market when he overheard the women in front of him talking about having seen people huddled on the corner near her house, crying and hugging each other, he'd told Olivia, and it wasn't until he was home a little later that he got a text from Kendra asking him if he'd heard, and even when he reread it seven times, he wouldn't have believed it was true if he'd not overheard those women at the grocery store. He'll never be able to shop there again, is what he'd said to Cecily, who told Marissa that she'd been at the Apple store upgrading her phone when the message came in, so she got word right there, in the middle of all those people, and literally stopped breathing, couldn't even tell the guy who was helping her that she was alright and was surprised he didn't call an ambulance. It's like when people can tell you exactly where they were when they watched the second plane fly into the tower. Yes, Kendra agreed, when news stops you in your tracks, your first reaction is to hope beyond hope that it's all a stupid lie—and you'll think about it later and see yourself folding burp cloths, and it won't be like you're you seeing yourself, you're someone else looking at you. That's right, agreed Finn, and you'll quietly chastise yourself for folding, or shopping, or getting a new phone, because maybe if you hadn't been doing that, maybe they'd still be here.

She'd had anxiety and a couple of episodes of psychosis in her thirties, before she'd even tried to get pregnant, a reporter quoted the sister as having said, according to Pia, I read it this morning, she said, which has to make you wonder why she'd decided to get pregnant in the first place, mused Olivia, aren't mental illnesses genetic, but maybe she thought a baby would make her happy, Marissa remarked. The human race would have ended long ago if everyone were honest about what having a baby can sometimes be like, said Danielle, oh come on, Kendra said, our babies *do* make us happy. It's just so tragic; I've never been so close to something this horrible in my life, Marissa wrote, how can we even process it? I keep thinking that if I feel this sad, how must the people really close to her feel. Is everyone else clinging to their babies for dear life?

According to Cecily, Ivy had just run into her at the grocery store two days before, Sage said, and mentioned they'd had the longest chat (mostly about the girls, of course), so poor Ivy, who's all torn up, continued Sage, has replayed the conversation over and over a million times trying to figure out how she could have missed something so wrong. It's not about one isolated conversation, suggested Kendra, so she shouldn't beat herself up about that, ah, but poor Ivy's got a lot to be torn up about, interrupted Vanessa, I heard from Bethany that Ivy's husband moved out, so Ivy's got all *that* and now *this*, Sage mused, I don't know why she didn't mention the separation to Cecily, but I feel even more awful for Ivy now. I know, I was sorry to hear it, said Vanessa, but I know how Ivy must feel; I'd just seen the husband in the park last week, fawning over the baby, adjusting the stroller visor while singing some silly song, and he'd said to the baby as much as to me, mommy's getting a massage, and Vanessa said, I keep thinking I must have missed some sign or something. My God, Finn replied, can you even imagine what he's going through, his wife *and* his baby, how

does someone get over that. They don't, said Quinn, I've seen him, believe me, he won't. And you, Quinn, how are *you*, asked Sage, you two were so close. A mess, Quinn replied, I'm such a fucking mess that I can't even find the words to express it, but maybe the memorial service will provide some sort of closure, whatever that is, said Danielle, how can there ever be closure, added Marissa, though if I'd been invited I'd go and hope for the same thing, said Pia. Will Ivy be there, asked Olivia, to which Quinn answered: she's invited, but isn't responding to my messages, so who knows, and what about Lauren, asked Kendra, I heard she wasn't invited, which, responded Marissa, isn't right, Lauren was her good friend, and from what I've heard, Lauren's heartbroken and barely able to put one foot in the front of the other, in fact, she continued, I'm very worried about her. Even though the family's keeping the service very small, they would have included Lauren, Danielle said, we must have misunderstood.

I'm just trying to get the image of the police cars and ambulance, the yellow tape stretched out in front of their apartment out of my head, you know Lauren saw everything, right, said Kendra. Oh my God, Lauren, actually *saw* them, asked Olivia, to which Vanessa said, no, according to Ivy, wait a minute, Marissa interrupted, you've seen Ivy, not me, said Vanessa, Bethany texted with her, and anyway, apparently Lauren showed up at Ivy's doorstep in complete hysterics, eventually able to say only that cops had been directing traffic around the building, and that if spin class had let out five minutes earlier, the bodies—oh god, can you imagine, we're talking about their *bodies*—wouldn't have been covered. I just knew something more was up with Lauren, said Marissa, but thank god, interjected Kendra, if she'd gotten there a few minutes earlier, it would have been so much worse, can you imagine *that* picture in your head forever. Did Bethany say how Ivy seemed, Marissa

asked, not that you can tell from a text, interjected Danielle, to which Vanessa answered that Bethany figured that maybe she was in shock.

Is anyone else more mad than sad, asked Olivia, I keep wondering when my tears will start, I went outside this afternoon and screamed at the sun for having the audacity to shine, and when my husband asked me for the Purel yesterday, she continued, I literally flung it at him. Don't be so hard on yourself, said Kendra, no one alerts the National Guard because someone's using too much hand-sanitizer. I'm not saying I'm mad at myself because I could have done anything about it, replied Olivia, I was merely saying that I'm mad at her for what she did. You're both processing in your own way, Pia said, your reactions are within the spectrum of appropriate grieving according to the book I bought. What does your book say about this, Danielle asked: I had to have my mother-in-law come pick up the baby, because every time I look at him weird noises issue from the back of my throat and it scares the shit out of both of us.

Am I the only one getting weary of the gossip, mused Finn, I can't remember who I heard it from, was it you, Sage, or maybe Bethany, but there's a fucking rumor circulating that they'd both still be here if she hadn't refused the electroconvulsive therapy she'd been offered during the second hospitalization. Wait, they still do that, asked Danielle, I figured it had been outlawed since *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and, if it is still around, why would any sane person ever agree to it, oh shit, she added, I didn't mean to say that, but it scrambles your brains, right? I mean, of course you'd refuse. The point isn't whether she refused or not, wrote Finn, or who saw or didn't see or heard or didn't hear what, the point is that it doesn't matter, they're *gone*, and everyone needs to just be quiet and reflect.

How about we focus on the happy times, wrote Olivia, like right after the baby was born, do you remember how thrilled she was? Of course we do, Kendra said, she was elated. Added Danielle: I've never seen so many baby pictures, in the early days she posted more than all the rest of us combined. You should check out the memorial Facebook page, suggested Vanessa, it's full of all these sweet, gorgeous pictures, there's one, she continued, with the triple lipstick kisses on the baby's forehead, do you remember when Quinn took and posted it, and the video showing her licking her fingers and smoothing her fuzzy little waves, while telling her that someday she'd be glad for those curls, Kendra remembered, even though, said Danielle, if there was anyone who complained about her own curls, it was her. The baby looked just like her, didn't she, Marissa said, yes, Finn agreed, the baby was definitely her own little Mini Me.

I just keep thinking what if *we*—her *community*—had reached out to her, said Marissa, *really* reached out to her, but hold on, interjected Kendra, she'd not been well, apparently, for a very long time, and she didn't want us to know, so while we can all keep wishing there was something we could have done, a sign we might have seen, I mean, if her own husband and sister didn't see it coming, if they couldn't stop her, what makes us think we could have? The good news, if there is such a thing, is that this has spawned discussions about recognizing and treating maternal mental health issues, said Olivia, but who said it has anything to do with pregnancy or motherhood, Kendra interrupted, remember the sister said she'd had psychotic episodes *before* she got pregnant, and whatever, Danielle said, how can something positive possibly come out of this. I just looked at the memorial page, posted Kendra, there's a picture of all of us and our babies in the park, without a care in the world, oh my god, it was such a beautiful day, do you remember? Hey, Finn said,

hadn't we agreed to make that a weekly event, what happened to that idea, to which

Danielle answered: I think it rained. Was that it, Kendra asked, yes, said Marissa, it rained.