

A 1991 Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest Winner

# NOT GETTING PREGNANT

By Rae Andrus

“K-I-R-O, SEATTLE. KIRO NEWSTIME, 9:45. IT’S 53 degrees and raining this Sunday morning. . . .”

Static from the radio jarred Susan awake, and the telephone rang a second later.

*Don’t move. Can’t talk. Where’s the thermometer?* She fumbled her hand around next to the radio. *There.*

The phone kept ringing. *The answering machine will pick it up after five rings. Lie still. Wait for the thermometer to beep. 97.7. It should go down tomorrow.*

The phone stopped ringing. She heard faintly from downstairs a woman’s voice recording a message. Couldn’t hear the words. The radio was still on. She leaned over and flipped it off.

She ran her hands over her hips and abdomen, pausing where she thought her right Fallopian tube and ovary had been. *I wonder how it heals, inside, where they cut off the tube. Is it like the stump on a severed leg?*

*Can’t think like that! Negative emotions. I have to think positive.* She exhaled and inhaled slowly, closed her eyes and in that dark space created the image of her uterus—pink and bright, incision scars smooth and flat, like seams from a sewing machine.

*I, Susan, will conceive a completely normal, healthy child. I will carry her to full term without any problems; I will have a trouble-free delivery; and both she and I will be completely well, healthy, and strong during and after the pregnancy.*

She ran her hands across her abdomen again. The doctor said her uterus was still a little bigger than normal. Stretched. Swollen. She didn’t like the slight bulge. *I weigh 108 and look like 125.*

She had friends who thought 5’6” and 125 would be wonderful. She was used to better. Average-looking, with a long nose, brown eyes, and short black hair, she’d always felt good about her figure. Now it was another part of her gone.

*Where’s the pen? Under the radio. Got it.* She rolled out of bed and to the dresser. In the middle, like a centerpiece, was the stack of temperature charts where she recorded her hills and valleys. She pulled out the sample chart the doctor had given her. The dip signaling ovulation was pronounced, smug, with a big circle around it to show that the sample couple had timed

their intercourse perfectly. The subsequent fourteen-day hormone-induced temperature jump was high and enduring. None of her charts looked like the sample chart.

She had the directions memorized, but they were reassuring to read. So easy. So hard to mess up.

“Your temperature should be taken each morning, immediately on awakening, before eating, talking, smoking or arising. Carefully record your temperature on the graph by means of a dot under the appropriate day. Circle the dot on the days that intercourse occurs, and write ‘a.m.’ or ‘p.m.’ above the circle, as the case may be.”

She put a dot at 97.7 under day thirteen. *Sex tomorrow if it dips and my OvuQuick test is positive. Don’t do it today. It will reduce the sperm count. Better tell Paul when he gets home from bishopric meeting.*

She knelt next to the bed. “Please, Father, bless us with the righteous desires of our hearts with regard to children. Bless us to be able to have a child. Please bless us.”

No warm feeling that everything would be okay. She wished she knew if it was all right to pray to Heavenly Mother. *Heavenly Mother would understand. Can Heavenly Father understand, really? He can care, but can he understand? Is it wrong to think that? Why doesn’t he answer me?*

Susan thought about her prayers over the past eleven months.

The first month: “I know that with thee nothing is impossible. Thou hast opened the wombs of other women. Please bless us with a healthy, normal child. We have faith in thee. Our patriarchal blessings promise us the blessing of children. Please, Father. Bless me that my uterus will be well and accept a child. Bless me that my remaining Fallopian tube and ovary will stay healthy and perform well. That all will be well. We have faith in thee.”

At five months: “Father, please bless me to be able to conceive and carry a healthy, normal child. Please, bless us with a child. We have faith in thee, Father.”

At nine months: “Father, if it be thy will, please bless us with the righteous desires of our hearts with regard to children.”

*I’m preparing myself for reality by decelerating my prayers. “If it be thy will. . . .” But this month, month twelve, the last-chance month, I needed to say it all, the faith and the doubts. Like someone who knows they won’t get the job—the interview didn’t go well—but still hopes against hope. Please, Father. Please bless us with a child.*

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RAE ANDRUS lives in the Northwest. She is the home-management teacher in her ward.





She thought about fifty new years of telling him yes.  
She wondered when “yes” would again mean, “I want you.”

She heard the garage door open and stood up. She could tell Paul was in a good mood by the way he ran up the stairs a few minutes later.

“Hi, Suz!” He pulled her toward him and cupped her bottom with his hands. “You come back to bed and be with me?” His brown eyes were teasing, gentle, hopeful.

She kissed the side of his mouth and pulled away. “We can’t. My temperature didn’t go down. We have to wait till I ovulate. Tomorrow is day fourteen. We can’t waste sperm.” The words tumbled out as she begged him to understand.

For ten years they hadn’t had sex when he wanted because they didn’t want to get pregnant. Now they couldn’t have sex when he wanted because they did want to get pregnant. Ten years of rhythm, condoms and abstinence, marital strain and resentment, all because she insisted they not take chances with her fertility—no pill, no diaphragm (she couldn’t get the hang of it), no IUD, not even spermicide. She hadn’t been ready to have children yet, but some day she would be.

*The joke’s on me. All that work wiped out in a month when they discovered my uterus was riddled with fibroid tumors; I had a bad case of endometriosis; and I needed major surgery to cut the fibroids out of my uterus and the endometriosis out of my tube.*

She remembered another joke—a joke she’d told, a little self-consciously, at a recent party:

“A high school boy decides he wants to have his first sexual

experience. He goes to his Aunt Mabel, and she says he should have protection—go see a pharmacist. So he does.

“The pharmacist says, ‘Do you want the three-pack, the six-pack or the twelve-pack?’

“‘The three pack is for high school seniors—one for Friday, one for Saturday, and one spare, because you never know.’

“‘The six pack is for college men—two for Friday, two for Saturday, and two spare, because you never know.’

“And the boy’s eyes get big, and he says, ‘Who’s the twelve-pack for?’

“And the pharmacist says, ‘The twelve-pack is for married men—one for January, one for February, one for March. . . .’”

After she’d told that joke, Paul had said, “Yeah! I’ve had less sex in ten years of marriage than most men have on their honeymoons!” The others thought he was kidding. She knew he was half-serious.

Now he drew her closer and kissed her—the way he’d kissed her when they were dating.

“Paul. We can’t. It’s month twelve. It’s our last chance.”

“I know.” He sighed and moved past her to lie down, his arm behind his head, his feet hanging off the double bed that was too small for all 6’2” of him.

“Tomorrow,” she promised. “Tomorrow is day fourteen. My temperature should drop. Your suit’s getting wrinkled, and your hair’s getting messed up.”



He felt the back of his head where several silvery blond strands were forming a cowlick.

He sat up, threw his suitcoat onto a chair across the room, and pushed the cowlick down. "Oh, well. Com'ere. I'll just hold you."

Now that she felt safe—he wouldn't try anything—she lay down next to him, sideways, so she could put her head on his chest.

"Paul, do you think maybe we *are* being punished? I mean, remember that quote from some general authority condemning couples who wait to have children, then can't and want a special blessing? The rational part of me says: No, if anything, this is just an occurrence of nature. It's Mother Earth, not Father God. But then I think, 'Okay, but why can't he help me overcome it? Why can't he make it so I can get pregnant?'"

"I don't know." He stroked her hair. "I don't think we're being punished. I don't know." His hand moved down her face to her shoulder and then to her breast.

"Paul!" She rolled onto her back. "Remember two years ago when Harold said to us at tithing settlement: 'This is not Harold talking; this is your bishop talking; I feel that there are special spirits waiting to come down to you. The Lord will provide a way. You shouldn't wait any longer to have children.'"

"I resented that. It wasn't any of his business. But maybe somehow he was inspired. If we'd gotten pregnant then, it would have been before I got endometriosis and fibroids. That one doctor said I was the youngest patient he'd ever seen with fibroids. Most women who get them are thirty-five or more.

"I don't like to think Harold was inspired. I'm pretty sure I don't think he was inspired. And if there were special spirits waiting, even if their time to come to earth was then, why aren't there more special spirits waiting now? As I understand it, there's not a spirit shortage in heaven." She snorted. "If anything, we've been told we're supposed to have tons of children because there are so many spirits waiting for homes, especially 'good homes.'"

She drew a breath. "But there's still this little doubt. Maybe he was inspired. He'd probably be over here with an 'I told you so' and a challenge to repent if he knew what we are going through now."

Paul smiled. "I don't think he's *that* crass."

"Well, look at Rob." Rob was their current bishop. Paul was his executive secretary. "When he came to see me after my surgery, he said that now I was half a woman. I understood. He felt awkward. He didn't know what to say. But still!"

"Yeah. His wife was really mad at him." Paul chuckled.

"You're avoiding my real question." She looked at the clock. Church in thirty-five minutes. She got up, grabbed a roll of dental floss and said between teeth, "Well?"

"We've been over this before. We prayed about waiting. We didn't feel good or bad about it. Maybe that's because it was okay, or maybe we just didn't want to hear the answer. I don't think God would punish us for doing our best, though."

"I can't believe a loving God punishes people just for waiting until they feel the time is right. I refuse to feel guilty, but part of me, a little part of me, does.

"Anyway, you wanted to wait because of the money. You thought we couldn't afford it. At least I wanted to wait because I didn't feel ready. I didn't just want to be a mother; I wanted to be a good mother."

Paul sat up. "Come on, Susan. It was also because you wanted a chance to succeed in your career, to be fulfilled there. Don't give me this high-and-mighty, it-was-all-altruistic, it-was-all-for-the-kid business."

"It was. A lot of it was." She peeled off her clothes and left them, even her garments, in the middle of the floor on her way to the shower. She slammed both the bathroom and the shower door. As the water started to flow, and she flicked away her tears, she heard the radio come back on.

*Everything sets me off these days. Maybe the Lord knows I can't be a good mother. Maybe I don't deserve it.*

Paul was dozing when she got out. She dressed quickly. "It's time to go." Paul groaned. He'd left at 6 AM for his first meeting. She went downstairs ahead of him and pushed the "play" button on the answering machine.

"Hi, Susan. This is Tammy. Sorry to call at the last minute, but I just this morning got a chance to look at my lesson for Young Women. It's on knowledge. Could you take five minutes to talk about how knowledge has helped you in your career? I especially want you because you're the only career woman. Gail's going to talk about spiritual knowledge, and Lisa's going to talk about how knowledge helps her be a better mother. Thanks! See you there!"

*Ten minutes on the way to church to think about what to say.*

Paul showed up and they got in the car. "Be really quiet, okay? I have this drive to prepare a statement on how knowledge has helped me in my career."

He grunted. "Just tell them how you were valedictorian of your high school and graduated *summa cum laude* from college and landed a full-time job as a reporter before you were even twenty and won a national award for in-depth reporting and have about a hundred other awards and are now managing editor for a national magazine."

"Right. They'll be thrilled to hear me brag about myself for five minutes."

*Maybe I can tell them about watching open heart surgery, and interviewing Isaac Stern, and doing a series that changed state programs for unwed mothers, and how so many things I never thought would apply to my job have come in handy. My love of learning—that's what has helped me.*

She looked out the window. When it rained, the landscape looked like a Monet painting. It was beautiful but unsettling. No definite lines. No solid reality.

*Gail and Lisa will talk about spiritual knowledge and how knowledge helps them be better mothers. Don't ask Susan to talk about that. I'm distinctly lacking in spiritual knowledge right now, and I may never get the chance to be any kind of mother.*

*Don't think like that! Yes I will! I have to think positive! I, Susan, will conceive a completely normal, healthy child. I will carry her to full term. . . .*

Were her affirmations more like a prayer of faith or the Litany against Fear in Frank Herbert's *Dune*? She wasn't sure.



“KIRO newstime, 8:30. It’s 40 degrees outside. Traffic is heavy for a Tuesday morning. Use an alternate route. . . .”

Susan pulled herself out of non-sleep. Non-sleep wasn’t the same as being awake. It was like doze, without the positive connotations of doze.

*Why hasn’t someone invented a word for this? It isn’t troubled sleep or restless sleep. It’s a dull doze. If you can have a dull ache or a dull pain, surely you can have a dull doze.*

She fumbled for the thermometer. Waited for the beep. 97.6. About where it always was on day eight. She capped the thermometer, laid it on Paul’s pillow and snuggled back into the blankets.

She was tempted to lie in bed for another hour. She’d taken the day off and didn’t have to meet Paul at the doctor’s until one o’clock. He was taking half a day off. *In case the news is bad. Told his office it was related to long-term follow-up from my surgery. I guess that’s true. Last time he had to leave work, it was for his semen analysis.*

They’d had a semi-earnest discussion, punctuated by a lot of uneasy giggling, about why it was okay for him to masturbate into the test tube: “This is for a medical purpose. Just be sure to think about me while you’re doing it. You’re not spilling your seed on the ground, just into the tube.”

He’d called her at work with the results. “I am humbly delighted to tell you that my sperm count is well above average. And they said the little critters were fast, too!”

“Paul! Is your door closed?!”

“Of course. And I’m talking softly.”

“Well, you’re obviously very proud. At least one of us is functioning correctly.”

“Hey, I’m a powerful baby weapon!” She bet that if they’d been face to face, he would have winked.

*The weapon was powerful. But the target had already been destroyed.*

She hugged herself. *Don’t give up. Be positive. Come on.*

“Heavenly Father, thou knowest how important this day is. Please bless the doctor to come to the right conclusions and give us the best advice, and bless us to know what to do. And, please, Father, if it be thy will, bless us that we might be able to have a child.”

She showered, shaved her legs extra thoroughly and put on clothes that were quick to get out of. She tried to concentrate on *Don Quixote*—she was reading all the classics she hadn’t gotten to yet—but began to get impatient with his adventures. It was like watching Saturday morning cartoons: too much farcical action and riotous dialogue.

She felt ashamed. Everyone agreed it was great literature. But although she had devoured *Crime and Punishment* and put *War and Peace* ahead of Paul for three weeks, *Don Quixote* made her restless.

*Maybe I can only handle fluff right now.* She switched to Bernie Siegel’s *Love, Medicine & Miracles*. That agitated her, too. *All those people made a difference in their lives. They beat back cancer, and I can’t even bring about pregnancy.*

Finally, she drew an old *Reader’s Digest* out of the magazine stand.

At 11:00 she filled her red plastic sports bottle with water and began sipping. *Eight glasses’ worth before I leave. I’ve never been good at dealing with pressure on my bladder. This was s-o-o-o much fun the last time.*

The last time she’d almost wet the table.

*Well, maybe they won’t be an hour behind today.*

PAUL was waiting in the clinic lobby. He’d saved her a seat. She avoided his eyes, but he took her hand. Squeeze. Let go. Squeeze. Let go. She turned to him. It wasn’t like him to be nervous. He was always so calm, so pragmatic. The two words heard most often in an argument with him were, “Be reasonable.”

She glanced at him. “How was your morning?”

“Okay. How ’bout yours?”

“Okay. I read a little.”

“Good.”

He let go of her hand.

They watched the other patients. Some were pregnant. The others must be fertility hopefuls. She and Paul were the only couple.

“Susan Marr.”

“We’re up.” Paul followed her to the door.

In the examination room, while she undressed, he talked about the ward volleyball team. Looked like they might be the stake champions. He wished he had time to play this year.

Susan closed her eyes and breathed deeply. *Inhale, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Exhale, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.*

The ultrasound technician, or whatever they called her, arrived. “Ready?”

She flipped off the lights, and pulled the machine forward. Paul, shuffled into a corner, couldn’t see very well. Neither could Susan. She tried to lie still and ignore the periodic pushes on her bladder.

Some technicians were gregarious. This one went about her business silently.

Susan tried to turn her head without moving anything else. “What do you see?”

“Your doctor will go over the results with you. You can get up now. The bathroom’s right there.”

*Relief!*

A nurse came and moved them to another room.

Dr. Graves, tall, fiftyish, matter-of-fact, met them at the door. “I’ll take a look at you, and by the time we’re done, the ultrasound pictures should be ready.”

Paul studied the floor while Susan climbed onto the table for the pelvic exam and Dr. Graves pulled on his latex gloves. *Ouch. Every man should have to go through one of these at least once. This is lasting longer than usual. I wonder what he feels.*

“Okay. Why don’t you get dressed, and I’ll come back and talk to you.”

“Okay.”

*If this were a movie, this would be the time to make a scene: “I need to know now, doctor! Tell me now what you found. Will I ever have children?”*

She got dressed. Turned toward Paul. Started to say, “Hug



me?" Decided not to. She sat in her chair, and Paul sat in his chair, and they said nothing. Paul leafed through *People* magazine. She concentrated on the walls: the breast self-examination chart, the gestation chart, the proper-nutrition chart.

*Why are we afraid to talk to each other?*

She jumped when the door opened.

Dr. Graves pulled his stool over to face them and cleared his throat.

"I am afraid that the results of the examination and your experience over the last year lead me to believe that you will not be able to have a successful pregnancy."

Susan clenched her fists in her lap. She didn't look at Paul.

"You mean, I didn't heal well enough after the surgery?"

"It appears that at least partly due to the amount of scar tissue, your uterus is not able to accept the implant of an embryo or, if it does, to carry it long. There is always the off-chance, of course, but it wouldn't be fair to hold out too much hope.

"We also think that some fibroids are starting to grow. They are probably not very big, which is good news, but you'll recall that before your surgery I said we can never get all the fibroids—some are microscopic, and those might begin to grow. We think the hormones produced in pregnancy accelerate the growth, so if you wanted to get pregnant, you had to do it as soon as possible after surgery, while the fibroids were smallest.

"The more time goes by, the more you increase your risk of miscarriage or premature birth. If you were able to get pregnant, you would be at greater risk now than you were a year ago.

"I suggest that perhaps you consider adoption. We have a family-planning counselor on staff who can talk to you. I know your feelings must be running high right now."

He stood up and held out his hand. "Good luck. Ask Kathy at the desk to get you an appointment with Jean Chase."

*How many times has he had to say this, I wonder? He's so cool. Does he know what he just did to us?*

*It's what you expected, Susan. Don't be melodramatic.*

She vaguely felt Paul put his arm around her and walk her to the waiting room. He didn't make an appointment with Jean Chase.

*Why don't I feel anything?*

Paul drove silently. He's afraid to talk to me. Afraid of what I'll say. I want to hurt somebody. Hurt him. Hurt myself.

She began slugging her right thigh.

"Don't." His voice was soft, full of pain. She quit.

*Don't think. Don't feel. It's okay. Nothing's changed. I'm not any worse off than I was two hours ago. I didn't have a child then. Losing hope is like losing paper money on the stock market. Not a real loss. Not the loss of a real child.*

Paul pulled the car in and opened the door from the garage to the house. Susan got out.

*Why, Father, why? Help me to understand. I don't feel anything, but I hurt so bad.*

Paul held out his arms, drew her close. "I'm here. It's okay to cry. Cry."

His voice sounded funny. She looked up. *He's crying.* The sobs came then, aching voiceless sobs, while Paul's tears rolled noiselessly down his chin and landed on the top of her head.

"KIRO newstime, 10 AM on this Sunday morning."

She stayed in bed. The start of another day, a day for trying to forget.

She hated feeling sorry for herself, despised it. Every day she tried to count her many blessings and be nice to other people, and sometimes she repeated the sappy epigram often quoted by a former Mutual teacher: "It's easy to smile and be happy when life goes along with a song, but the girl who's worthwhile is the girl who can smile when everything's going all wrong."

*What did Paul say a few months ago? I told him I'd probably fall apart if I couldn't get pregnant, and he said, "You're stronger than that."*

*But is this strength—this robotic life I'm leading, this numb feeling, this pretending to be normal, this trying to pray when I don't know what to say?*

*Everything is supposed to teach us something. No doubt this will enhance my meager ability to bless the lives of others, will give me the patience and compassion of a god. Part of me wants to be good, wants to learn, wants to grow my way through this. Part of me wants to yell and scream and tell the teacher he's mean, mean.*

*Everything seems to take so much energy, to be so hard. Just carrying on. Is that strength?*

She heard the garage door go up, and rolled out of bed, quickly tucking in sheets as Paul trudged up the stairs.

"Hi." He blocked her way to the bathroom with an embrace. She started to pull away. He hugged tighter, and she gave in.

Paul hesitated. Then he said, gingerly, gently, "You come back to bed and be with me?"

*How dare he? How can he ask that? It's so soon. It's too soon.*

"I can't believe you would be so selfish, so insensitive. . . ."

He released her. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes.

She choked back the feelings of outrage and anger and blame. She sat on the edge of the bed.

*There are no temperature charts to drive this, no fear of getting pregnant or not getting pregnant. Just us, and the love that we have for each other. Even if there isn't a third love, our love for a child, we have this love.*

*I'm not strong, but I can break us. He can't hurt like me, but he hurts. I'm hurting him.*

She made circles on the bedspread with her fingers. She thought about ten years of telling him no. She thought about fifty new years of telling him yes. She wondered when "yes" would again mean, "I want you."

*At least, for now, it can mean, "I love you."*

"All right. I'll come back to bed with you." Her voice was flat. It was the best she could do.

He pulled her down next to him, and she closed her eyes. He kissed the tears on each cheek and stroked her hair before his hand moved down her face to her shoulder and then to her breast. ☞