

THE FIRST SMILE

When motherhood is far harder—and sweeter—than expected. —ELIZABETH MILLER WOOD

O NE MORE PUSH—I CAN SEE HIS RED hair!”

That's what my doctor said as Caleb was being born. It was the first thing I ever knew about my son. Red hair. Like his mama. Well, his daddy, too. With a couple of ginger parents, the poor kidd didn't have a choice.

They plopped him on my chest. A slimy, gooey, beautiful mess. He cooed and nestled onto my skin. He was perfect, exactly like I had imagined him for the past nine months. Red hair and all.

Caleb barely cried in the hospital. Only soft, puppy-like whimpers. Throughout my pregnancy, I had a feeling Caleb would be sweet and mild-mannered. “He's going to be calm and collected,” I would tell people. “He just feels like an easy baby.”

Those first couple days in the hospital confirmed that my mother's intuition was right. Caleb was indeed mild-tempered and predictable. I congratulated myself on being such a perceptive, natural mother.

Then we got home, and the child I thought I knew so well was suddenly a foreign intruder in my life. Caleb quickly became a crier. All day, every day, he vacillated between shrill whining and panicky sobs. He didn't give his mommy long sleepy stretches where she could take a nap or shower or bake cookies—all things people told me I'd be able to do with a newborn. He cried when I bounced him, rocked him, shushed him, and swaddled him. If he wasn't nursing, he was crying. And usually, so was I.

Those first several weeks were raw and



humbling. No one had prepared me for this darker side of new motherhood—the side that can feel lonely and hopeless and crushing. All I had been told was how “easy” and “portable” newborns were. Nothing about this felt easy and I began to think I just wasn’t cut out for motherhood. I believed those internal lies that said I wasn’t patient enough or tough enough or savvy enough to handle it. One night over dinner, with tears falling into my lasagna, I shamefully admitted to my husband, “I love Caleb, but I just don’t like him yet.”

Of course, you’d never know it by my Instagram feed. I posted snugly, perfectly filtered pictures of Caleb cuddling on my chest and sleeping in my arms. I desperately wanted to be the new mom who was obsessed with her newborn baby. And mostly I was...but also, I wasn’t.

Then, when Caleb was five weeks old, it happened. It had been another long day of relentless crying, desperate prayers, and four-letter expletives. He had just nursed and was propped on my thighs in the glider. His gaze met mine and his little eyes twinkled as the corners of his mouth curled up ever so slightly.

“Kyle! Come here!” I yelled to my husband. He bounded up the stairs and flew into the nursery.

“What’s wrong? Is he OK?” he panted.

“His first smile!” I said. “Here, look!”

Of course, Caleb didn’t smile again on cue, but it didn’t matter. That precious, flitting moment—the first of many—pulsed courage through my weary veins. It changed everything.

The days didn’t necessarily get easier after that. Caleb still cried a lot, but I began to see that all the rocking and bouncing and shushing—it meant something. It showed me that the unbelievably hard moments of motherhood are a small price to pay for the unbelievably sweet ones.

As it turns out, I really like this kid after all. @

→ Elizabeth Wood is an advertising copy director and the founder of gatherguides.com. She lives in Mariemont with her husband, Kyle, and their new son, Caleb, who is full of smiles these days.

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