

The 100 Babies and How They Were Born

By Jesse Rettberg and Scott Rettberg

This is the story of the 100 babies. This is the story of how they were conceived, born, delivered, and introduced to human society in a city called Bergen, in the west of Norway, in an extremely damp but beautiful place surrounded by majestic mountains, open to the fjords.

The conception of the 100 babies occurred in exactly the same way as you would expect. Two parents, Mommy and Daddy, were people in love, though by this point in their lives they were no spring chickens, and they were already the parents of a five-year old girl, Jessica (though everybody called her Jesse) and a three-year-old boy, Benjamin (though everybody called him Benji).

Mommy and Daddy loved their darling children more than words can say. One day Jesse and Benji asked if they might be granted the favor of another little brother or sister, whom they felt would come in handy to settle their various disputes as a third, neutral, voice (and who could presumably be easily swayed or bribed by an older sibling).

Mommy and Daddy said “No.”

Of course, they said no. They were happy with their allotment of children from the universe, and they were both past 40, and any further pregnancy at this point would be uncertain and most likely untenable.

To everything, they explained, there is a season, and the having-new-children-season was almost certainly last season, not the current one.

One night, Mommy had a splitting headache after a very long day full of dreadful weather and traffic noise and other sorts of disagreeable situations in the workplace and at home. In the middle of the night she did something that you should never do. In a groggy haze of half-sleep she took two pills from what she thought was a bottle of Ibuprofen but which turned out to be something else entirely—the fertility drugs she had acquired years before.

The next night Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain* was playing on iTunes. Jesse and Benji were over at their Grandma’s for a rare evening of babysitting and grown-up alone time for Mommy and Daddy. Mommy and Daddy drank a tasty bottle of Sancerre, and ate fresh peaches imported from France, and then lobster tails with a drawn butter and lemon sauce, and then hand-torched vanilla bean crème brûlée.

Soon after that the miracle of life had begun.

During the first trimester of the pregnancy, Mommy and Daddy and Jesse and Benji went to the doctors for an ultrasound (this is a wonderful machine able to produce images of babies still nestled in the mother's womb).

You can imagine everyone's surprise when the doctor operating the device fainted moments after turning on the machine.

Daddy got the doctor a glass of water and handed it to him, and asked,

"Is everything ok with the baby, Doc?"

The doctor, a rather young obstetrician with freckles, a good bedside manner, and a gentle smile, looked paler than a ghost. He gulped and said,

"I think you'll need to use the plural, sir. Babies."

"You mean we're having twins?"

Mommy put her hand to her forehead and rolled her eyes.

"Twins? You can't be serious?"

"I'm, ah, I have never seen this before—" the doctor replied, haltingly.

"You are not going to have twins, or triplets, or quadruplets, or quintuplets, or sextuplets, Ma'am, you are not even going to have septuplets or octuplets. I do believe you are going to give birth to many more than that. You might have as many as . . . **100 babies!**"

Now it was Mommy and Daddy's turn to faint, and they did.

After they were revived with smelling salts, they returned home (where they found that scores of spring chickens had hatched out of their shells and become chickadees tweeting all around the front yard) and began to plan with Jesse and Benji for the new lives that were coming.

There were many preparations to attend to. The doctor explained that with 100 babies in her belly, Mommy would grow quite large before the pregnancy came to full term, and that she would need to spend a lot of time in bed, and that the bed would need to be quite large. In fact, the room the bed was in would also need to be quite large, because 100 babies, even if they are quite small babies, is, well, a lot of babies.

Teams of carpenters were set to work. Mommy and Daddy and Jesse and Benji lived in a nice red house up on a hill in a quiet part of Bergen, but it was not a very large house, and the master bedroom had a relatively low ceiling. The carpenters had to cut a hole in the roof of the bedroom, and build a new roof ten feet higher up, and they also had to put new reinforcing beams in underneath the bedroom floor, so that the floor would not cave in to the kitchen beneath it.

With preparations made, the family settled in for the long remainder of the pregnancy.

And a strange pregnancy it was.

Mommy's belly, as predicted, grew to immense proportions. It was larger than a beach ball, much larger. It was larger than a big watermelon, much larger. It was larger than a lion seal, even larger than that. It was larger in fact larger than a small whale, though not a large one, such as a killer whale. It was about the size of a small house or "hytte" as the Norwegians say, though of course it was shaped like a normal belly. Imagine half of a gigantic peach that could feed a small village. Her belly was that large before eight months were through.

Benji and Jesse and Daddy were simultaneously shocked at the immensity of the belly and enthralled with Mommy's radiance, as she grew large with the 100 babies. Though she was on bed-rest, the whole room was vibrant with the energy of life springing up.

Oh and the cravings!

Now you may be familiar with the sorts of strange foods a mother desires during a normal pregnancy. Fried pickles and the like. But in this case Mommy had 100 fetal cravings to fulfill, each of which required a different food.

There were cravings for broccoli in honey sauce, mashed potatoes with strawberry ice cream, chocolate-covered crickets, rhubarb pie with codfish, plain spaghetti with butter sauce, cheddar cheese with deep-fried ants, vegetarian chili con carne made with tofu and sauerkraut, salted pineapple slices with spam, chocolate mousse topped with ketchup icing, boiled squid, large quart-sized glasses of lemon juice, and of course French fries, wheelbarrows full of French fries. Sometimes with ketchup, and sometimes with other odd condiments such as oyster sauce or pineapple salsa. Many strange things were consumed in that custom-built extra-large four-poster bed.

Around the eighth month of the pregnancy, a leak occurred at the hospital (a technician posted a picture from the third trimester ultrasound on Twitter) and the Norwegian media got hold of it and went wild.

Reporters from *Bergens Tidene* and *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet* and *Klasskampen* came around with notebooks and photographers, and NRK sent one of those trucks with a satellite thing on top of it. Soon the Swedish and Danish news outlets were covering it as well, and the next thing you know, the story was in the international media and reporters from the BBC and CNN and the Weather Channel were parked out front (as we got closer to the big day, there were some questions as to how the rain forecast might affect the delivery of the 100 babies). Al Jazeera sent a crew, and Jamie Oliver did a cooking show on pre- and post-natal cuisine. The *New York Times* opinion section did a think piece on fertility drugs and mothers of an advanced maternal age.

It was a circus, I tell you, a circus. And this was even before the 100 babies were born.

Those of you who know the neighborhood of Minde in Bergen and in particular the street of Svaneviksveien know that parking is always a challenge, so you can anticipate how the

neighbors felt more than a bit inconvenienced by all the ruckus in their normally quiet surrounds (not to mention having to park their cars all the way out by Brann Stadium).

At first Mommy and Daddy were irritated by all the fuss and of course the noise. Mommy needed quite a lot of sleep at this point and special soundproofing materials needed to be installed in the master bedroom to dampen the sounds of the chattering news crews, the global media village that had suddenly assembled itself in their front yard.

Then one day the University of Bergen (where both Mommy and Daddy work) sent over a media consultant to help with the “formidling” (this is a Norwegian word which roughly means “communicating with the public”).

Since Mommy and Daddy were both digital culture researchers, they were given instructions on how to spin the media coverage in ways that would highlight their latest critical and theoretical research on blogs, social media, and electronic literature. Daddy and Jesse were in fact already working with friends to design a series of apps that would highlight the story of the 100 babies in the form of storygames, even as it was unfolding in their very lives.

Though Daddy was within a fortnight quite tired of the media coverage, Lars Hamsun, the University of Bergen media consultant, pointed out a very significant fact. While health care coverage in Norway is generous by any measure and the costs of the birth and delivery of the 100 babies would be supported by the welfare state, the actual costs of housing, feeding, and raising the babies would quickly exceed available resources (while Mommy and Daddy made a decent living, they were by no means rich).

A fundraising campaign was necessary, and one that would generate fast results! There were now only two weeks left before the 100 babies were to be born, and construction on the nursery had not yet even begun.

The media consultant felt that Mommy and Daddy should try to use their moment in the klieg lights to lobby both for government and private support to cover the expenses, which would otherwise overwhelm and bankrupt the family. And so they set up a fund and launched a Kickstarter campaign and had a Facebook page and a Twitter account and a Vimeo channel and of course a blog and a Tumblr, and soon the donations came pouring in.

Jesse and Benji were media stars. Though neither Mommy nor Daddy really wanted to be on television, their photogenic children were happy to give interviews via satellite uplink, to explain the various additions to the house that would be necessary to shelter the 100 babies, as well as their anticipatory pride at being the big sister and big brother of 100 girls and boys, who could help settle their disputes over such matters as whose turn it was to play with the iPad or who actually broke the porcelain plate with the Mumi trolls on it, or who had pulled whose hair and had, in short, started it.

There were other logistics to consider. The doctors contemplated moving Mommy to the hospital, but they realized it would be impossible to get her down the hill without putting lives at risk. So they had to call in the carpenters again to put in scaffolding and build another extension to the master bedroom, which now sort of jutted out over the hill on

large stilts but which could serve as a suitable theater for the coming operation, sure to be a rather complex delivery.

And then the day came!

What a mad scene it was!

A team of five doctors and ten nurses gathered round the birthing bed while dozens of reporters and camera operators and sound engineers with great furry boom microphones and floodlights kept a blabbing vigil and millions around the globe waited for the anticipated news of this most multitudinous of human births.

The 100 babies were born of a difficult birth.

Though Mommy's belly was quite large, each of the 100 babies themselves were quite small. A surgery was of course necessary. No human woman can deliver that many babies by conventional means.

The hardest part was how to get them out. The doctors couldn't do it alone. Once they opened the incision, they found that their fingers weren't small enough. So they had to ask Jesse and Benji to scrub in and help out. There were so many of the babies so tightly packed into Mommy's belly. The operation called for very small fingers, and most of the doctors had hands that were fatty-fat-fat in comparison to Jesse and Benji's lithe precision digits.

And so, Jesse and Benji and the team of doctors and nurses carefully extracted the 100 babies and delivered them into the world.

It was more or less miraculous. It was 100 babies!

As soon as the newborns were delivered and Mommy stitched up and various healing creams applied and 100 babies placed into 100 incubators, everyone had a moment of realization, hope, and fear.

The 100 babies were real!

Here and now! In the room!

Life would never be the same. The 100 babies were no longer sweet notions, but a reality.

Life would henceforth be expanded in many ways, if reduced in many others, more focused because of the responsibilities that would be required, for everyone. It takes a village to raise 100 babies! I'm not kidding, for real, a whole village!

The 100 babies were born in good health, though they were each quite small.

That is to say that they were smaller than average infants, even infants prematurely born. They were not teensy-teeny-tiny, of course, not microscopic. They were larger than most gerbils though smaller than large Guinea pigs.

They all had a great deal of growing to do and would need to spend some time at the local hospital, Haukeland Sykehus, before they could return home (and the architects were still finalizing the drawings of the nursery).

A clever transport operation was arranged involving several helicopters to airlift the babies from the family home to the hospital. After a quick cleaning and a short visit to Mommy's bosom, the babies were each quickly checked for vital signs, weighed, measured, placed into a mobile incubator, passed through the French doors to the balcony, where a paramedic carefully hooked each of these most tender packages onto a waiting cable attached to a helicopter hovering overhead. The sounds of choppers coming and going from the hill in Minde to the hospital in Kronstad echoed through the valleys and over the ridges of the hills of Bergen all day long. The helicopter noise was drowned out only by the cheers and applause of thousands, for it seemed the whole population of Bergen was out in the streets celebrating this birth of a century, and watching these curious modern storks fly the babies safely through the skies across town to the safety of the hospital.

Mommy was the last to be flown to Haukeland. The bed was on rollers and just fit through the doors. There were seatbelts for Mommy, and Jesse and Benji as well, and as the bed rose into the air and Mommy and Jesse and Benji looked down at the red tile roofs and chimneys of the houses below, thousands of Bergensers applauded and threw their hats into the air. One hundred church bells rang in a glorious cacophony. As a purple dusk descended and the mother of 100 new babies, not to mention Jesse and Benji, landed on the helipad at Haukeland, fireworks shot from the center of town blazed into the sky in 100 blooms of light.

Daddy took a taxi to the hospital, where Mommy was being served an enormous smorgasbord. As you can imagine, after her ordeal, Mommy was hungry and glad to be fed.

They brought out bowls of blueberries and blackberries, gravlax and smoked salmon and pickled herring in three different sauces, knäckebröd and slices of Norvegia cheese, pickles and olives, pieces of lutefisk, honeydew melon, cucumbers, tomatoes, vegemite sandwiches, cinnamon buns, hard-boiled eggs, reindeer sausage, elk salami, raspberry yogurt, slices of orange, sardines, cinnamon buns, muesli, fruit smoothies, fresh plums, brown cheese and Roquefort, as well as coffee and tea and a slice of apple cake. The feast was served to Mommy on a large rolling table with 100 miniature Norwegian flags.

The national anthem was played through tinny speakers and the prime minister entered the room to shake Mommy and Daddy's hands to thank them for having so many children in such a spectacular manner. Norway is a relatively small country, and 100 babies is a substantial increase in the national population.

Mommy and Daddy thanked the prime minister for continuing to support universal health care, even though she was not a socialist. Mommy enjoyed the delicacies laid before her and then took a short nap.

When Mommy woke later that evening, the next task at hand was to name the 100 babies. The babies were rolled into the extra-large hospital room in sets of ten. The 100 babies comprised a perfectly balanced set of fifty girls and fifty boys. With all of the preparations

required for the birth, the family had had little time to think of 100 names, and so they had to do it on the spot. Mommy, Daddy, Jesse, and Benji took turns naming the children on the basis of a quick impression from a glance inside the incubator or a pass of swaddled infant round the room. Some names were vetoed as unspellable or absurd, though most got through the committee with no problems.

The names of the 100 babies are as follows.

The first set of ten girls were named: Leia, Paia, Filagh, Maya, Ala, Sherri, Ange, Anne, Sheranchu, and Ague.

The second set of ten were boys named: Micky, Freddy, Zephron, Zack, Drago, Dragu, Sammy, Johnny, Nicky, and Jack. That made twenty names.

One team of nurses rolled them out and brought in ten beautiful girls, who were named: Cheryl, Shawna, Alicia, Petal, Peony, Araingi, Bell, Ariana, Raime, and Soot. That was thirty down.

A respectable lot of ten boys followed, who were dubbed: John, Juggle (the nurse almost dropped him as she passed him to Mommy), Pluto, Build, Bill, Artie, Frank, Budgie, Pludgie, and Paul. A set of forty names had been assigned by 8PM.

Ten more girls were introduced and named: Disco, Danielle, Shantelle, Chandaleena, Caitlin, Emily, Robadanca, Rebecca, Rose, and Daisy (Jesse contributed a lot of flower names). Half of the babies, fifty, named!

Ten more boys, a sturdy looking lot, were passed among the family members seeking inspiration and they were called: Bobby, Robby, Raine, Monchadona, Tom, Tornado, Per, Hunkhunk, Hank, and Mytheus. Sixty children now had given names! Forty more to go!

The next set of ten girls were a bright and giggling gaggle and they were named: Nilly, Millie, Sunflower, Tournesol, Michelle, Orange, Eraisa, Wanda, Deidre, and Sunbeam. It was far past bedtime, but seventy children had been uniquely assigned. Thirty more to go!

The next bunch of boys seemed handsome and mischievous and they were called: Willy, Sam, Paris, Peter, Judd, Talan, Jeff, Jethro, Around (it may seem like the family was struggling to come up with good names at this point but the rotund infant seemed present in this way), and Skinny. For those of you counting at home, that is eight sets of babies that had now been named, totaling eighty, leaving only a score of babies left to give a proper moniker.

The last girls were named just before midnight as: Paula, Lana, Mocha, Frilly, Tulip, Tina, Shiva, Tess, Lily, and Chandelier. Nine sets of ten, or ninety percent of the population of 100 babies, which is to say ninety children, were now known to the world.

Though it was by now almost 1 AM, it only seemed fair to name the last ten boys: E.C., J.R. (there some debate as to whether giving these boys only initials was really fair, but why quibble?), Harani, Regus, Adge, Fjord, Turnip, Teddy, Mike, and last but not least, Chatty (who was already talking up a storm in language known only to prelinguistic infants).

One hundred! 100 babies!

Benji and Jesse agreed that the whole exercise of naming their sisters and brothers had been an excellent way to stay up far, far past bedtime, but in the wee hours of the morning, everyone was quite tired, and so Daddy took them home and tucked them into their beds, where they slept as soundly as the 100 babes in their incubators and bassinets back at the hospital, or like bricks, if you will.

Neither the television reporters, nor the news helicopters, nor the construction crew getting set to work on the nursery, nor the cleaning crew at work with green soap, wiping down the surfaces of the room where the miracle had occurred, could disturb these two children, asleep and dreaming of all the adventures they would soon have with the 100 babies.

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