



Beautiful Inside and Out: Conquering Thyroid Disease with a Healthy, Happy, "Thyroid Sexy" Life

By Gena Lee Nolin, Mary Shomon



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Baywatch star Gena Lee Nolin shares her story of undergoing and overcoming two decades of misdiagnosed thyroid disease and shows how the estimated sixty million Americans suffering from thyroid disease can learn to live healthy, happy, and beautiful lives.

The most comprehensive, user-friendly handbook available for anyone suffering from thyroid disease: everything you need to know to reclaim the happy, healthy, wonderful life you deserve!

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Collaborating with *New York Times* bestselling author and internationally recognized thyroid patient advocate Mary Shomon, Nolin uses her own story to deliver practical information vital for anyone struggling with thyroid issues. Readers will learn how to get diagnosed accurately and treated effectively, how to lose weight, balance hormones, solve beauty challenges, and regain their self-confidence. Full of practical checklists, questionnaires, and advice from America's leading experts in thyroid and hormonal health, here is a heartfelt, helpful guide for women who are ready to feel strong, sexy, and beautiful again.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Reading BEAUTIFUL INSIDE AND OUT feels like you’re out with your best girlfriends.” (*Austin MD Magazine*)

“A must read. This book has given me and my husband clarity about the complications I experienced in the years following my total thyroidectomy. Gena Lee Nolin’s brave journey provides a great sense of support, and will be life changing for so many.” (Nancy Valen, actor and television producer and Nels Van Patten, actor and professional tennis player)

“An honest and inspiring journey of real advocacy that will help others delve into their own health and wellness, and that exposes the true meaning of beauty. Bravo!” (Rachel Hunter)

“Gena Lee Nolin is better than ever in her new book. Always a selfless giver of good health. As God has blessed her, she opens her heart in the pages of this book to be a blessing to us all!” (Stephen Baldwin)

Praise for *Living Well With Hypothyroidism* by Mary Shomon

"In this first-rate book by Mary Shomon...the disorder, its myths, and medicine's successes and failures at dealing with it are thoroughly examined. This is not a book that rehashes old facts on thyroid disease. Shomon instead challenges patients and their doctors to look deeper and try harder to resolve the complicated symptoms of hypothyroidism." (*Los Angeles Times*)

"If I could recommend only one book on thyroid problems for my patients, this would be it." (Elizabeth Lee Vliet, M.D.)

"Vital for hypothyroid patients who want to get well, and for physicians who want to do so." (Dr. John Lowe)

About the Author

Gena Lee Nolin had a starring role on the international hit TV show *Baywatch* and starred in her own series, *Sheena*. She got her start in Hollywood as one of “Barker’s Beauties” on *The Price Is Right*. She has hosted VH-1’s *Sex Appeal* and appeared on *Extra*, *Hollywood Squares*, *E!*, Lifetime, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Gena is active in various causes, is married to former NHL player Cale Hulse, and is a mother of three.

Mary Shomon is an internationally known patient advocate in thyroid disease, hormones, and weight loss. Author of eleven books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *The Thyroid Diet*, Shomon is founder and guide of the award-winning About.com thyroid site and is one of the stars of the PBS *Healthy Hormones* documentary series.

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Beautiful Inside and Out

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The Show Must Go On

First say to yourself what would you be;

and then do what you have to do.

—EPICTETUS



Gena on the Baywatch set

It might be a surprise to some people, but I've always been determined, willing to try new things, and open to mastering new skills. That's what landed me my Hollywood career and has helped me face my thyroid challenges. It goes back to my childhood in Duluth, Minnesota, where I grew up with an older brother, Michael, and an older sister, Sheila.

As a toddler, everyone says I was outgoing . . . not the least bit shy. According to Sheila, I was also very determined: "We were looking at old movies my brother put on DVD, and there's Gena at age two, hamming it up for the camera. There's some film of her learning how to skate, she was saying in this determined little voice, 'Don't help me! I'll do it myself!'"

Some of my own earliest memories are of being sick, and the year I was seven was especially tough. I went through weeks of excruciating stomachaches and ended up in the hospital with a ruptured appendix. After the surgery, all I remember is how terrible I felt all the time. My sister also remembers what that year was like: "Gena was always sick, complaining about severe stomachaches, and she barely ate anything. The doctor kept saying it was because she wasn't eating right, but the poor child was hunched over and couldn't even walk. She was so young to be so sick like that."

My mother, Patricia, continued to take me back to the doctor for two years. When I was nine, the symptoms became so bad that they hospitalized me, and that's when they finally discovered what was wrong. My mother explains, "Gena had a mammoth ball of infection in her abdomen. The doctors thought that she must have developed an abscess after her appendix surgery, and it had gotten infected and continued to grow all that year."

Looking back, I remember it was hard to spend so much time in the hospital. But I also remember making friends with other children there. Some had cancer and other serious and chronic diseases. Volunteers brought us books and balloons to cheer us up. I even spent my ninth birthday there. It was a long recuperation from the surgery and left a large, ugly scar on my abdomen that made me reluctant to wear a two-piece swimsuit well into my teenage years.

One of the other major—but far happier—memories of my childhood was putting on shows. I dreamed of being a singer, even though I didn't have the greatest singing voice. But I didn't care. My idol in those days was Olivia Newton-John, and I never tired of singing her songs.

We had a huge deck that overlooked the backyard, and I turned it into my stage. With just an old record player, I recruited my neighborhood friends into an endless series of shows, ordering everyone to sing and dance. I was always the star and MC. I bribed everyone in the neighborhood to come, offering them free Kool-Aid and my mom's homemade cookies if they would sit through my show.

My mother remembers the shows:

She was as funny and quirky as she is now. She loved to put on those shows, she was very dramatic. The kids would talk, sing, and each one used a jump rope for a microphone. I had made her this gray felt poodle skirt like the one that Olivia Newton-John wore in Grease, and she had a T-shirt with her name on it, and that was her entertaining outfit. There she'd be, singing her heart out into a jump rope. Always singing, and finally her dream came true, she went to an Olivia Newton-John concert, and of course, she wore her poodle skirt!

Though I was close to my father when I was little, he was abusive. When I was eleven, my world as I knew it fell apart when my mom put Sheila, Michael, and me in the car, and in the middle of the night, we moved away from Duluth. We lived in Colorado for a while, and then moved back to Minnesota where my grandmother lived. From that point onward, I didn't have much to do with my father, and sadly, our relationship was strained from there on out.

It was hard. My mother was worried about making ends meet, I didn't have a father, and I was the youngest. I always put on a brave, tough exterior, but inside, I felt confused about where I fit.

When onstage, making people smile or laugh, I could feel at peace during a time when everything else felt complicated. When I stood on our backyard stage, the world always felt right.

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We ended up moving to Las Vegas, and that's where I attended high school.

Through my early teens, I felt like an ugly duckling—tall, gawky, and awkward. It's funny to say now, but I avoided wearing swimsuits. There I was, doing whatever I could to not have to wear a swimsuit, and I ended up making my living in one!

When I was around sixteen, I lost my baby pudge and started to become interested in clothes. I tried to be stylish, even though we were on a tight budget. My friend Ann's mother was a great seamstress, and she helped us make some great outfits from Vogue patterns.

My mom remembers what it was like.

Gena had her own style. She's never been "Oh, I have to have this or that style." She would just get a feel for what she thought was cool and different, and try things out. And sure enough, if she wore something, the other girls would often follow her style. Gena was also someone who wanted to bring people together and create a community. She told me that everyone at high school was so uptight and stressed. So I helped her start a massage class in her high school. And it wasn't too long before they were all working on each other's backs!

I started to get some attention from boys, but truthfully . . . I felt too shy to do much about it.

I did meet a gorgeous young junior fireman, Steve, who was new on the force. He asked Mom if he could drop by sometime to say hello to me. The day he decided to come by with another firefighter buddy, I heard him at the door. I'll let Mom tell the rest of the story: "Gena ran to her bathroom. 'Mom! I don't want him to see me!' She was dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, but she put on her bathrobe over her clothes and put on a green mud mask, with a towel on her hair, and then came out to say hello to Steve the fireman. She said, 'Oh, hi! I was just getting out of the tub!'"

My mom has since told me that she always wondered why I did that. The truth is, I had a major crush on Steve . . . he was smart, funny, handsome, just a few years older than me, and he had a cute car—everything a girl could want! But I wasn't feeling my best that day. I had a big zit that had popped up, and I was just wearing my hanging-out clothes, and so I figured, better to look like I just got out of the shower. It made sense to me, but according to Mom, they didn't care. "Steve and his pal were still totally smitten with her, despite her robe and towel disguise! She did end up going out with Steve for a while."

Something unusual started to happen. I noticed that wherever I went, people would stop and ask me, "Are you a movie star?" "Are you a model?" It was so embarrassing. I remember one time, walking through a store, and this person came up to Mom and me and asked me if I was an actress. "Isn't that dumb?" I asked Mom.

Even with my history of putting on shows and early dreams of being a singer, the thought of going into entertainment never crossed my mind. But many people assumed I was already "in the business" as a teenager.

When I was sixteen, my brother told me that I was "sort of cute." (Brothers are so funny!) Michael suggested that we send some pictures in to a Ford Models Look of the Year contest that he'd seen written up in the newspaper. He had me put on a cute blouse, and he took the pictures himself at our apartment, and we sent them in to the contest.

Next thing I knew, I had a phone call from Katie Ford herself, in New York City. Holy Toledo! I'd won the regional competition, up against forty other girls. I was still reluctant to get into modeling, though.

When I was seventeen, my mother and I were at the mall one day, and an older guy came up and started talking to us. Mom remembers that day:

He was my age, and I'm thinking, "Okay, so what do you want, what's your angle?" He was talking about the Miss Las Vegas for Jaycees pageant. I didn't know if he was on the up-and-up, or just trying to hit on Gena. So I got his card, then called and found out more, and it turned out that it was legitimate. I asked Gena if it was something she might want to do; after all, it could be kind of fun. She decided to do it, so she borrowed some cool black leather pants—she had to have a pants outfit and a dress outfit—and borrowed a blue dress, and we went to Payless and bought her royal blue matching shoes. She competed against sixty-four contestants, and she was first place for the tall division. She won a photo shoot in New York, and a scholarship to Barbizon in New York City. After two days at Barbizon, the owner asked Gena to compete for the Miss Barbizon title. So there's Gena, with no experience, and she walked away the winner . . . Miss Barbizon.

It felt as if modeling was choosing me, instead of the other way around. So, at eighteen, I was off to spend three months in New York. I didn't know a soul and was somewhat nervous at first about being in the city. The first few weeks, I spent so much money on cabs, because I was afraid to use the subway. But everyone I met told me that real New Yorkers took the subway, so I finally got up the nerve. And at that point, I became

fearless and explored everything—I went to all the museums, I took the Staten Island Ferry, walked in Central Park. I was also doing some modeling, including for J Crew.

The other models and I would go to a little pub at the end of our street in Chelsea. That's when I met actor Timothy Hutton, who invited me to come see the Broadway play *Love Letters*. We became friends, and I would go to his house in SoHo for his amazing dinner parties. I met the quintessential New Yorker, Woody Allen, and Tim Hutton even let me hold his Oscar from the film *Ordinary People* . . . so exciting!

In the end, the New York agency decided that my look was not a good fit for the East Coast, which was really into the brunette, exotic, Cindy Crawford look in those days. And there I was, the blond, blue-eyed, beachy, California girl-next-door type. So back to Las Vegas I went.

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After high school, my friend Alicia and I decided to move to Los Angeles. She was an aspiring model and actress, and she always wanted to make it big in Hollywood. At that point, I had done the little bit of modeling, but otherwise, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. However, I knew that whatever I was going to do, it was going to be in California! Even as a young girl putting on my shows, I knew L.A. was magic, and I had to go.

So we packed up my Toyota Tercel and moved to L.A. We found a little studio apartment, and we ran a piece of masking tape down the middle to split up our living space.

I liked my new life in Los Angeles. I had my little car. I had outfitted the cozy apartment with a beachy sofa and chair I loved, and a television. I got little doodads at the Pick and Save to spiff up the apartment. I was nineteen, and I was creating a life for myself.

For work, I had a retail job at Broadway Southwest—now Macy's—at the Beverly Center in Beverly Hills, and worked as a cocktail waitress at the restaurant Mezzaluna. I also enrolled at Santa Monica College to take some courses while I was working the two jobs.

But I needed to decide on a more serious occupation. I didn't want to be a cocktail waitress or work retail forever. I looked into being a flight attendant, and I thought about physical therapy . . . I wanted to move into a service-oriented career.

I watched Alicia go to audition after audition, but I never really thought about getting into the business. What we did do, for extra money, were some promotional modeling jobs—trade shows, car shows, that sort of thing. A friend from those days has called Alicia and me “the Laverne and Shirley of promotional modeling.”

We were young, and on our own for the first time, yet I started to notice that there were many days when I was so completely exhausted I could barely make it through the day. It surprised me; as an active, healthy young woman, I expected to be able to keep up with anything life was throwing at me at the time—but I would find myself needing a nap before going out at night, or sleeping in on the weekends. I always seemed to be more tired than Alicia and the other women my age. I tried to chalk it up to working too hard at my various jobs, but all my friends were also working multiple jobs, but they had the energy to also enjoy the L.A. nightlife, work out, and hit the beach on weekends. With my constant exhaustion, I could barely drag myself from job to job . . . I had this feeling something more was wrong, but I didn't know even where to start finding out what was going on.

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Alicia and I were sent to Las Vegas for a promotional modeling job at a film production trade show. I was standing around handing out literature at the show when I met Greg Fahlman, who ran a film production company in Canada and was attending the conference. He came over to our table, and we started talking. He was a cute guy, older than me by at least ten years, but he was smart and funny, and throwing out these hilarious one-liners. I felt an immediate connection. He asked me to have lunch with him, and I said yes. After he left, I told Alicia, "He's not going to come back." But secretly, I was hoping he would. Sure enough, five minutes before my break, he showed up, and we went to have lunch. It was unbelievable. We hit it off and had a strong bond from the start.

Greg also remembers that night. "She seemed like a lovely girl. I asked if she had plans for dinner that evening, and she said she had a friend with her, so why not, I invited them both out to dinner! From there, we went out that evening, hit a few fun parties. The next weekend I flew to Los Angeles, and we had a long-distance relationship—me in Canada, and Gena in Los Angeles—and visiting each other back and forth, for two years."

After two years, Greg decided to move to Los Angeles, and that's when things got serious. It was one of those things—when you meet someone and you just know that you're going to have something very special with that person—that kind of connection. Sometimes I wonder if part of the attraction was his age—he was about eleven years older, and he was very protective of me. I hadn't felt a man's protection since my father left a decade earlier. With Greg, I felt very taken care of.

We married, had a beautiful wedding, and moved in together, very much in love. He was so smart and intense, but at the same time, he was protective, and he had my back. I felt very safe.

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Greg saw a potential in me that I didn't even see myself. I think from the start, he envisioned an entertainment career for me, so he was on the lookout for opportunities.

I still hadn't thought about acting, but Greg said that we should at least take some photographs. He sent my head shots off, and I got signed with a modeling agency and started to do some modeling jobs.

Then came a day that completely changed my life. I'll let Greg tell the story: "I'd read somewhere that one of the gals on *The Price Is Right*—Dian Parkinson—was leaving the show, and they were looking for a replacement. Gena looked very much like a younger version of Dian, so we mailed off her photos to the executive producer. Gena was one of the last girls they saw, out of more than a thousand girls. They invited her in for a tryout."

I'd never been on television before. I went in for a twenty-minute audition and had to show a desk, wearing a bathing suit. (Seriously. How awkward was that?) After that first audition, they called back and had me do six test shows with the rest of the cast. I decided I should just follow the lead of the other women who had been there forever, do my best, and not ruffle any feathers.

I was on pins and needles, waiting to find out, talking to every girlfriend, every family member: "Will they pick me? Will they pick me?" They were all saying, "Enough already. If you get it, you get it." When they called, I was in Canada, visiting friends. In the end, after seeing 1,300 girls for the spot, they picked me.

Greg called it the “best part-time job in the world,” and it was.

I enjoyed the camaraderie on the set of *The Price Is Right*; the crew parties and birthday celebrations had a family feeling. Apparently I was doing a good job. One of the show’s producers, Phillip Rossi, even told *People* magazine, “Nolin can bring energy to standing next to a refrigerator.” (Hey, I’ll take the compliment!)

Bob Barker was so good to me, and a joy to work with. I also became close friends with one of the original Barker’s Beauties, Holly Hallstrom. She was a strong, opinionated woman, and became not only a friend but a mentor to me. She had a gorgeous house in Laurel Canyon, and used to invite me over to have tea. We shared a love of decorating, and she had impeccable taste.

With my first paycheck from *The Price Is Right*, I bought myself a new Singer sewing machine so I could make curtains, pillows, place mats . . . you name it, I’d sew it. I wanted to create that same cozy feeling in our little apartment that I got in Holly’s house!

I didn’t have an agent when I landed *The Price Is Right*, but the minute I got that job, the William Morris Agency called. And after I signed with them, it was wild—I went from 0 to 60 in terms of opportunities. All of a sudden, I was being asked to make appearances, shoot ads, and go to events.

A few months into my work on *The Price Is Right*, I received a call to audition for *The Bold and the Beautiful*. I still couldn’t envision myself as an actress. I had no lines on *The Price Is Right*. I had never even seen a script!

I didn’t end up getting the big part on *The Bold and the Beautiful*, but I was cast as a model named Sandra who didn’t say much. I figured it was a sign that I’d better stick to showing microwave ovens and fabulous new refrigerator-freezers!

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One day I got a call from my agent. The show *Baywatch* wanted me to come in and read for them. *Baywatch*. Which at the time had an audience of one billion fans in 110 countries.

Meanwhile, my claim to fame was smiling and looking cute while I pointed at appliances. I didn’t want to go, and couldn’t imagine how I would get a part like this, with no acting experience.

I also knew it was a show about lifeguards, which meant I’d have to spend most of my time in a swimsuit. That was also a pretty daunting thought, to be honest, as I was already starting to notice that my metabolism was not what it had been during my teenage years. So Greg really had to push me to try out for the part. He remembers, “The first step in the audition was a 6:30 a.m. swim, and Gena was saying ‘No, I’m not going to do this!’ I told her that she absolutely had to do it, and I drove her to the pool for the swim audition. Some of the women trying out weren’t water savvy, but Gena was athletic and a strong swimmer. She also worked particularly hard to learn the audition lines.”

I really studied the lines, determined to do my best. I ended up reading with different producers, including David Hasselhoff, and put my entire heart into it! I didn’t care if I looked like a fool or overacted, I just did it. I clicked right away with Hassel—everyone calls him that. He’s charismatic and has a huge personality, and it was easy to act with him.

They had me in for a callback, and this time they said it was a screen test. So I was even more nervous than usual. The set was filled with a huge crew, many cast members, and all sorts of cameras. I decided to go for it. There I was, acting my heart out, and I looked up and noticed that David was waving a red lifeguard can at me. I was thinking, “Why is David being a jerk with the can when I’m in the middle of the audition of my life?!”

“Read it!” people started yelling to me.

Written on the lifeguard can were the words You’ve got the part!

I just stood there, dumbstruck.

All of a sudden, everyone was cheering, and jumping up and down. The whole screen test was a setup, because they’d already decided to cast me in the part of Neely Capshaw.

Entertainment Tonight was there, and they were in on the prank and filmed the whole thing, including my surprised reaction at learning that I had the job. They ran the segment that evening.

Greg explains how thrilling it was:

That was the moment our lives changed forever. People don’t realize, but Baywatch was a cultural phenomenon at the time—and Gena’s getting a starring role on the show catapulted her into an entirely new life for both of us. The night she got the part, she was on Entertainment Tonight, and the very next day she was on a plane to the Bahamas for a promotional shoot, and it was in all the papers by end of the week. From that point, the paparazzi started following her everywhere.

Meanwhile, I had to quickly get into the rhythm of being an actress. And it was tough!

I was learning how to act as I went along, but Neely was a fun character to play. She was always into something, on pills, drunk, chasing every guy around—she was everything I wasn’t. I used to say that I had to conjure up my worst PMS moods in order to give her the right attitude. I was able to let go and be rotten, rant and rave, and then come home and sew or just chill. She was a blast to play once I got the hang of it!

In addition to learning acting on the job, the physical demands were challenging. As Hassel used to say, “The water is cold, the sand is hot, and the days are very long.” So true.

I had to wake up before 4 a.m. and be on the set and in the makeup chair by 4:30 a.m. There were days when it was so difficult to drag myself out of bed, but I always did. Filming began at sunrise, and then it was a day filled with all that famous running up and down the beach, jumping off moving boats, back in hair and makeup again, more running, and in between, reading and learning lines. Sometimes we didn’t wrap until as late as 7 p.m.

I was also doing double duty for a while. Even though I’d gotten Baywatch, I didn’t want to leave The Price Is Right, so, for a few months I kept both jobs going. I told Bob Barker that I wasn’t sure I was going to make it with the acting. Bob laughed, and said, “There’s no way you’re coming back, kid. Go out there and be the star you are!” I’ll never forget those words.

I did keep it going for a while—working for Baywatch, and then racing back to shoot The Price Is Right. But eventually I realized I couldn’t do it anymore. It wasn’t fair to either show, and I was starting to get some

popularity on Baywatch, and they were making a bigger deal about my character. Pamela Anderson was becoming more famous than ever—she'd just married Tommy Lee—and our show was in the press every day . . . Entertainment Tonight, Hard Copy, and such. So I left The Price Is Right and committed myself to Baywatch.

On the set, in between all the hair, makeup, and filming, I barely sat down and hardly had time to grab a cup of coffee, much less to eat properly. Even though I was pin thin in those days, I was so worried about how I looked in the swimsuit that I didn't want to eat anyway. I remember the other girls on Baywatch eating, and I was getting by on half a bagel and a juice every day. I was thinking, Oh my gosh, how can they do that?

I was working sixty-hour weeks on Baywatch, I was also being asked to do more interviews, television commercials, magazine ads, and personal appearances, so I was putting in close to ninety hours a week. I blamed the intense schedule and the physicality of being on Baywatch for the way I felt, but truth be told, every day I was more and more exhausted.

A strange numbness—beyond fatigue, beyond anything I'd ever experienced—set in. I felt like I was in a fog, just going through the motions.

There I was in Hollywood, with my husband, on a successful television show, living a life most actresses can only dream about, but I was finding it increasingly difficult to enjoy what was happening. I couldn't figure out why I was tired all the time. I wanted to have the energy that others seemed to have so effortlessly. And despite a steady stream of people in my life—agents, producers, actors, cast, friends—I still felt lonely, like I should have been enjoying it more.

I think I also felt guilty and unworthy of the success. I'd seen my mother, brother, and sister struggle. I knew there were actors far more talented than me, who had spent years studying acting and who were barely getting by, relegated to waiting tables . . . I'd do my ten lines, put on a swimsuit, run down the beach, and make a lot of money. It seemed unfair.

There was a never-ending list of parties I was expected to attend, but I was so exhausted all the time, I rarely wanted to go. My mother was surprised: "Her agent would say so-and-so will be there, and it's a good idea for you to make a showing. But Gena just did not want to go. She was always so tired. She just wanted to stay home and sleep."

While I was doing Baywatch, Greg was acting as my manager. As a take-charge type of person, he was taking the phone calls, shielding me, and protecting me business-wise, but I still felt like I was always working, all the time. And outside of working, I felt so incredibly tired.

The long days, early hours, and all that running—plus the other responsibilities—were taking a toll. I didn't want to complain, because who in her right mind complains about being on a hit television show? But the producers could see that I was getting run-down, so they made an appointment for me to see a doctor.

I now suspect that this was the beginning of my long battle with undiagnosed thyroid disease, but at that time, the doctor didn't do any blood tests. Instead, he decided that I was suffering from some depression, so he prescribed an antidepressant. I took the pills, but, not surprisingly, they didn't help. I was still completely spent and struggling to keep up with my Baywatch schedule.

Meanwhile, the show was continuing to become more popular, and the paparazzi and entertainment shows never let up. Every night, there was a blurb, "Pamela has been seen here," or "Gena has been seen there."

One day, I looked out my door, and there was actually a guy up in the trees, shooting pictures of me as I walked out the door. It was bizarre. It was as if they could always find me, no matter what. I would go for a walk in Laurel Canyon with my dogs—I loved it there—and even though I hadn't told a soul I was going, almost every time I went, up popped a photographer!

On the Baywatch set at the beach, there was always a horde of paparazzi every morning from sunrise until we stopped for the day. They were trying to get shots of anything, but the more unflattering the image, the better. We had a phone booth near the lifeguard tower—and those were the days before cell phones—so we all used that phone. I remember one day, Yasmine Bleeth was using the phone and she scratched her nose. The next week, a tabloid published a photo with the headline “Yasmine Bleeth Picking Her Nose.” It was ridiculous! As soon as you left your trailer, you had to be on guard. I pretty much always wore a robe as soon as I left the trailer, because they were just waiting to catch you at your worst. It was a public beach, so it was crazy. And whenever Pam Anderson was filming, Tommy Lee often came along, and that meant there were even more paparazzi than usual.

Still, it wasn't all exhaustion and paparazzi.

One of the best parts of working on Baywatch was how wonderfully I got along with Hassel. When he walked into a room, everyone noticed. He has that big personality, and the voice, which I loved. From the start, he got me to open up, and relax, to have fun with it.

He would compliment me so respectfully . . . telling me I was smart, prepared, or that I looked beautiful. I had come from showing microwave ovens and Tupperware on *The Price Is Right*, and now I was on the number one show in the world, and this guy who was larger than life, who was acting before I was born, was giving me compliments . . . compliments I very much needed at the time. He also often told me how impressed he was at how hard I worked to study my lines.

And I did. I couldn't understand actors who came to set without knowing their lines. I always knew my lines and took my job very seriously. Hey, it wasn't Shakespeare, but it was my job, and I wanted to do it well.

He appreciated that. Hassel has a photographic memory and could literally flip through the pages and shoot a scene. I've never seen anything like it.

There were good days and bad days, but throughout that first season, I kept at it, getting to the set before sunrise and working long days, and then collapsing in exhaustion at home, until we finally wrapped my first season at the end of 1995.

To be honest, the wrap party was by far my favorite day on the show. It was so much fun to have the writers, crew, and cast together in one place. Everyone was relaxed, no deadlines, and we were able to really kick back and enjoy ourselves. I felt relieved to know I was going to have a break.

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That Christmas, I went home to Minnesota and spent the holidays with my family. It was a good reality check to be around my family. But right after Christmas, I had a call from *The Tonight Show*, and they wanted to fly me in to be on the show as a last-minute replacement for someone who couldn't make it.

I really didn't want to go. I was on my break with my family, it was so cozy, and I didn't want to leave. But you don't say no to Jay Leno. I had already been on the show a few times and had a great rapport and

connection with Jay, whether it was doing an interview or the funny skits we would do together.

But it was Christmas week. So I said, "If you're going to make me leave home at the holidays, then you have to fly my entire family out too. It's a package deal." And Jay agreed. We were all so jazzed! So we packed up Grandma Marie, Mom, Greg, and me, and we all flew to L.A. and had a great time. I was so thrilled to have them all there, and I don't think my grandma could have been any prouder! How often do you get to bring your grandma to the set of her favorite TV show?

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Meanwhile, I was back to shooting my second season of Baywatch, and in the meantime, also shooting a lot of television commercials. They were writing Neely into more story lines and giving her more dialogue, so I had more reading and studying to do, but I had gotten a better handle on the overall routine.

Still, my exhaustion was getting progressively worse, and the antidepressant hadn't helped a bit. And on top of it all, I had a case of "baby on the brain." All I could think about was how much I wanted to just stay home, have a baby, and not live this crazy life. Greg and I had been married for four years by then, and even though I was constantly on the run, my idea of heaven was to be home with a baby, sewing, and keeping house. (The way I see it, I'd have been a perfect doctor's wife!) To me, that felt like a real life, and my constant motion from sets to shoots and jetting around, well, that didn't feel real at all.

Greg didn't understand at first why I wanted to have a baby:

I had been married and had two children before Gena and I were married. So initially when she said she wanted a child I thought she was crazy, we should wait. But family was number one to Gena, and she was clear that she would much rather have a strong and happy family than the success and fame. She enjoyed being in entertainment, but at the end of the day, her definition of success was based on having a happy family. Because she came from a fractured family, a healthy, happy family gave her the sense of security she craved.

Finally Greg agreed we could start trying. Meanwhile, I had made a decision. I went in to see the show's producers and told them I wanted to quit the show, that I couldn't handle another season given my exhaustion. I told them that given the choice of my health or being famous, I picked my health.

They were horrified because they felt Neely had become a key character on the show and I couldn't be replaced. "We can't let you go because Neely is an important part of story line."

They thought I was just playing them for more money, but I really did want to leave, and wanted to get out of my contract, which I'd signed for five years. They kept telling me my character was popular. When they finally realized I was serious, they decided they needed a way to help encourage me to stay. So they talked me out of leaving and talked me into seeing a hypnotist, of all things. A flippin' hypnotist?! I laughed and cried then laughed again because they were actually serious! I went along with it, and it actually helped me relax, plus I got a raise! Who would have thought?

Meanwhile, I still had baby on the brain, and I figured out that if I timed the pregnancy right, I could work it out so I didn't have to miss too much time on Baywatch. I figured out exactly when to get pregnant, and surprise, I got pregnant the first time we tried.

I didn't tell anyone. I waited until we wrapped the season, and then I told everyone and was able to relax a

bit.

Along the way, I found out we were having a boy. It was a memorable day because Grandma and Mom—all three generations of us—were there at the ultrasound to get that first glimpse of my precious first son.

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One of the key people who came into my life during this time was my friend Janell. I love how Janell tells the story of how we met:

I had just moved to L.A. from Edmonton. There was a woman in Edmonton whose husband was friends with Greg, Gena's husband. At that time, Gena was on Baywatch, and so I called, and ended up on the phone with Gena for two hours . . . we just clicked. She invited me over, and we had a potluck dinner. I was telling her that I was a Sagittarius and things sometimes come out of my mouth the wrong way.

Gena said, "No way! Me too!"

I asked her if she walks into walls right in front of her.

"All the time!" she said. "When's your birthday?"

When I told her it was November 29th, she started laughing, because it was her birthday too. A friendship was born.

Janell and I are so similar, though we are like night and day in some ways. For example, Janell is totally a party girl. I'll be begging her to stay home and watch a movie, have a glass of wine, and curl up on the couch, and she's always itching to go to the latest event or restaurant or hotspot. But she was a true friend to me throughout the pregnancy, and has been ever since.

Pregnancy was on the one hand joyous but at the same time hard. The idea of becoming a mother for the first time was overwhelming. And physically, I knew that I had to be return to the show soon after the baby arrived, so I was worried about weight gain.

With Spencer I craved tangerine juice—I would go to the farmer's market and drink a gallon of tangerine juice. One month, I packed on fifteen pounds between two visits, and the doctor said, "What are you doing?" I told him about the juice, and he told me I needed to cut it out!

So I became much more careful about what I ate. Even so, I gained forty pounds with Spence. In the end, my body just did what it was going to do.

At one point, I was far along in the pregnancy, big as a barrel, and majorly craving a burger. So I went to the drive-through at McDonald's and got a Big Mac. I noticed some paparazzi taking photos, but didn't think much of it. Until the next day, when I was driving in the car, and heard on the radio "Tonight, on Hard Copy, Baywatch babe Gena Lee Nolin scarfing down a Big Mac." I watched the show, and let's just say it was not flattering. There was the footage of me, in my car in the parking lot, eating my Big Mac.

Everyone wanted pictures or film of the big, fat, pregnant Baywatch babe. I spent a lot of time late in my pregnancy hiding out, avoiding any more of those scenes.

My mother was there for Spencer's birth. Mom is a massage therapist, yoga teacher, and doula, so she was the best person to help coach me through. My mom had always wanted me to try to have a natural childbirth, but when I went into labor, I quickly realized it was not going to happen. Here's how my mom remembers it: "Gena was not happy. She said, 'Mother, I don't know how you did this, I'm going crazy!' I was encouraging her to go for an unmedicated birth—helping her breathe and focus. But she decided she really needed the epidural. She said, 'If I don't get some medication, I'm going to jump out of this window and land in front of Jerry's Deli!' That was the deli right next to the hospital. She got her epidural."

Spencer was born June 3, 1997, and he was a beautiful, good baby, and the joy of my life.

One of the best parts of having Spencer, though, was how close I felt to my mother. I was overwhelmed with love for Mom, realizing that she had done this at such a young age, and had three young children, and so much of it she did alone. I would call her, and say "How did you do this?" She was very much there for me.

I learned how patient a mother has to be. Before you have kids, you're on an airplane, and you hear a child screaming, and think "Can't you shut your kid up?" But once you become a mother, it's like you've gotten a patience transfusion! I gained a new appreciation for her. I think of how she grew as a woman, and I felt inspired.

But symptoms hit me hard after he was born. I thought Baywatch was exhausting, but nothing prepared me for how I felt after Spencer's birth! I was in my early twenties, physically fit, and, maybe I was naive, but to be honest, I expected to bounce back quickly. Instead, in those early weeks, I was an exhausted, fuzzy-brained, depressed, bloated mess. I kept finding myself crying. This was not like me.

Meanwhile, I was having nightmares that I might never get in good enough shape to put on "the red suit" again for Baywatch. When I got back into exercising, it was a shocker to me how my body was not cooperating. It was like, "Yoo-hoo, Gena, I am NOT listening to you!" no matter what I did. I had to throw myself fully into working out, and it was grueling. There were tears, but I was determined and motivated, because my physical fitness was my livelihood and my trademark, so I was going to have to get back into that suit. I had personal trainers coming to the house, I was climbing hills, biking, doing everything I could. I was lunging, squatting, and exercising like nobody's business, and eating almost nothing. I was not a model of healthy behavior, looking back, but at the time, it seemed like keeping my job depended on it, and I was finally able to drop the baby weight and get in shape.

While I was still on maternity leave, I went over to the Baywatch set with Spencer. I still remember, I had on Guess jeans overalls—I lived in those when I was pregnant—and had Spencer in a BabyBjörn. Everyone fell in love with him and his chubby cheeks. And Hassel got excited, deciding on the spot that he had to write a baby for me into the story line. He decided that our characters should marry, and that I should have a baby from my ex. He was going to turn nasty Neely into a good girl. (Shoot! I actually really loved being the bad girl!)

Before I went back to work, Access Hollywood, InStyle, Extra, and Entertainment Tonight all came to do "Gena and her new baby" pieces. I was so used to putting on the Hollywood Gena face—the fake part of me—and so I did my makeup and hair, tidied the house, put an adorable outfit on Spencer, and made it all look perfect. But the night before each of these interviews, I would cry, doubting what I was doing, questioning whether I was a good mother, and wondering why I was so exhausted and depressed. When the cameras rolled, though, I always made it seem perfect.

Awhile after Spence was born, my mom decided to go back home to her yoga studio, but I really needed her.

She worked it out to have some other folks take over the studio, she rented out her house, and came back to L.A. I went back to work two months after Spencer was born, and my mom and Spencer were on set every day until sunset.

While my mother was caring for Spencer, I was back to the long hours and feeling worse than ever. Doing Baywatch in the days before Spence seemed easy in comparison to how I felt now. Again, looking back, I can now see that I was struggling with my thyroid, especially after having had a baby, but I didn't know.

The days were so incredibly long. I had to become a superhero woman on set, a sex symbol with perfect hair and perfect makeup, appearing to everyone on site that I was happy-go-lucky, without a care in the world. Meanwhile, inside, I was feeling more exhausted than ever before.

Did Pam Anderson feel this way? She was a new mother, too. But she seemed able to keep up with all the filming and still have energy to party and live a glamorous celebrity life. Some of the other actors actually came to the set in the morning, directly from all-night parties. How could they do that and still work?

I barely had time to be with my baby, and it seemed as if the only time we had together was his nightly bath, after I got home from the set.

I just wanted to feel normal and happy like other moms. I was twenty-five years old, yet I felt fifty.

I went back to the doctor, told him that I was dragging myself around in a constant state of exhaustion, and feeling down in the dumps. Again, he didn't run any blood tests. He decided that this time, I was suffering from postpartum depression. He put me back on antidepressants just around the time I stopped breastfeeding.

I think my complaints just went in one ear and out the other. I was hurt, but I understood. I felt inadequate, helpless, and hopeless. I would complain to my girlfriends, but they quickly got tired of my complaints. I remember one night, getting together for drinks, and when I started to talk, one friend said, "Gena, can we please not talk about your not feeling well today?"

People wrote me off—and I felt like I was a hypochondriac. Even some family members lost patience. I remember one person saying to me, "Okay, Gena, what's next? Every time we see you, you're complaining about something new."

I started to believe some of what they were saying—maybe I was crazy, maybe it was in my head.

I went to a psychiatrist, and he said I didn't have any mental health issues . . . I was just anxious because I clearly didn't feel well.

I never talked about my health with anyone on set. I wasn't one to complain at work.

I remember when I was back on the set, I had a volleyball scene on the beach with Carmen Electra, Donna D'errico, and Pam Anderson, and I was in the suit, thinking, "Uh-oh!" By that point, I had managed to lose as much weight as I could—not in a healthy way—but I felt intimidated because I definitely didn't measure up to the other girls. Donna's son was six. And even though Pam had had a baby recently, she was a tough act to follow. She's got a rocking body—gifted, frankly—and she bounces right back. (I've also always felt like a moose next to her. I've always been a big girl; I'm big-boned, and at five foot nine, I tower over Pam.)

At the same time, though, there was this little voice inside—kind of a maternal instinct kicking in—that said, “Screw it! You look okay, don’t be too hard on yourself!” But it was so hard to listen to that little voice, being on set with all these women who looked so perfect.

In addition to the show, when Spencer was just nine weeks old, we filmed a special Baywatch episode. It was going to be the wedding of Mitch—played by David Hasselhoff—and Neely. The whole film was going to take place on a cruise to Alaska. It was a big deal at the time; they even put out Neely and Mitch Barbie dolls.

Mom agreed to go with me, and we flew with Spence to Vancouver, where the cruise was leaving. I was still a bit heavier than I wanted to be, but luckily, I had only one scene in a bathing suit. Otherwise, I was clothed, and I could have a stand-in or body double if I needed it.

Alaska was one of the most beautiful places I’d ever been. And the filming went well. Neely and Mitch got married. Hassel even put Spencer in a scene where he sings him to sleep. My little boy looked like an angel. The only catch? I had a baby girl in the story line, so Mr. Spencer was baby Ashley—dressed in girly baby clothes. (He still cringes about it!)

I continued on for a while, but I was increasingly exhausted. I’d lost my passion and energy for the show. I went back to the producers and asked them to let me out of the contract, and they finally agreed. We had an understanding and respectful departure, and they hired another actress to play out Neely’s role. (A few years later, when they did a special Baywatch Hawaii film that included Neely, they asked me to come back and be part of that film, and I gladly accepted.)

I walked away from a starring role on a hit television show because I wanted to be a mother to my son. I didn’t have the energy to do both, and I still didn’t understand why.

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