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Abstract

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LANI YOUNG

Stillborn

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3 MONTHS

Well, its happened — I'm finally pregnant. After so many starts and stops, so many hopeful beginnings and hopeful waitings. And I'm utterly miserable. I try to focus on the beauty and joy to come but I find it impossible to see past the nausea, the horror of the now, of the past three weeks. I am sick all day long — fighting not to throw up every minute of the day. I hate so much to vomit, it scares me to be out of control of my body, to have it so close to choking. I hate this. I cry all the time and I wish even to die, but it doesn't end. Even wishing for the unthinkable doesn't make me feel better. I started bleeding two weeks ago, the worry was miscarriage so I have had to take time off work to rest all day. To puke my insides out all day. I can smell everything and it all triggers unpredictable responses. I retch at the smell of Chris' deodorant, I heave at the faintest sniff of the neighbour's cooking wafting over the back fence. A car pulls up and I run from the room gagging at the overpowering stench of gasoline. Ugh ... don't people know how many smells they carry around with them all day? Their perfume, their sweat, their breath, their laundry detergent on their clothes.... I can smell them all and it makes me sick to my stomach. This baby is an alien life form taking over my every sense and seeping through my every pore. It is unbelievable to me that something as tiny as a slimy tadpole, could make one this sick. Will this never end?

'I heard the terrible news. I'm so sorry about what happened Luana. You must be feeling awful.... Is there anything I can do to help? You must look at the bright side at a time like this you know — you feel bad now, but you can always have another baby. Just wait a few months and you two can try again!'

5 MONTHS

I am so tired of being sick, of being a burden. Each day, each minute drags on, and each is as miserable as the next. If I died then everyone wouldn't have to look after me anymore. I hate being so helpless. Chris is so run-down and carrying too much of a load. I wish someone could help him. If I weren't here then all he would have to worry about would be the children. I can't do anything for them — I can't make their school lunches. I can't bathe them. I barely have enough energy to smile at them. At times I can't even bear to hug them or have them

anywhere near me. Children carry so many smells with them. I am becoming a stranger to them. A stranger they would be so much better off without. I don't want to go on. I'm afraid of how I feel. Awhile back I wished I could die. Now, I wish the baby would die. I don't want it anymore. Can you hear me baby? I just want you to go away. Go back to where you came from. I'm no good for you anyway. I just want this to end. I don't want to live anymore. This isn't worth it. People say, 'oh just wait, it will be over soon'. Soon!? Don't they understand that nine weeks have dragged me along with my soul in pieces, and I can no longer see beyond the *now*. I am suffocating in a black cloud of despair. I am drowning in a sea of hopelessness. Please help me.

'Hey Luana! Its me Kim just calling to see how you are. I heard about what happened. Are you okay? I guess you're not too busy or tired then to come to an aerobics class with me today? You must be glad at least to have your body back to yourself. What a bummer the way things turned out. You must feel like you totally wasted your time these past 9 months!'

5 ½ MONTHS

At last, food has begun to appeal rather than repulse. I have stopped losing weight. I can keep things down now. Vomit surprises me now, rather than being the commonplace reality. Perhaps it's really going to be okay from now on. Each morning I hardly dare to awake, wondering whether this will be a good day. Slowly, slowly, my good days are out numbering the bad. I still spot bleed every now and again so forced rest is the norm. I am afraid. Is it my life slowly seeping away or yours my child? Will I wake up one night drenched in your blood, our blood? Will I lose you before we have even met? I find myself talking to you now. Quiet little conversations when no one else is around. Secret, furtive little chats as if I am daring the impossible ... speaking to a child who has not quite decided whether she will stay.... My child, it is 5½ months since God sent you to me, to us, I should say. Where I once longed for death — now it terrifies me. I am scared that I will die ... or the unthinkable ... that you will — before I ever get a chance to tell you these things in person or for you to understand them, so writing them down eases my mind somewhat....

My child, I want you to know that you were made with great love, passion and tenderness. Your father cried when he found out the news, he was so happy. I have not been so glad these past months. I was very sick, angry and resentful as throwing up and nausea became for me, a daily routine. You were an invader then, an alien, but you were never really real. I couldn't see you or feel you. Nothing. Then slowly the sickness passed and now, I feel like I am emerging from a very long and very dark tunnel. The other day I was lying on the beach, hot and golden, when I felt you move for the first time. You. You're really real. You're a person. You're a life I helped to create. You're my child and I can't wait to meet you and love you. How can I have hated the thought of you when now I can no longer wait for the reality of you?

'Hey did you guys hear about what happened to Luana and Chris? They lost their baby — well, I guess it wasn't really a baby — it was stillborn, you know, born dead. Yeah, isn't it awful? They said it died during the labour or something like that. Poor Luana — its almost like having a child die but I guess not as bad since they didn't really know the baby or love it yet....'

7 MONTHS

Pregnancy — its ripe, red tomatoes (not mushy) plump, firm with ripeness ... white milk froth on a vanilla milkshake ... its supremely sensual in a heavy, lumbering sort of way, big — stomach, breasts everything — and luxuriating in healthy food (I mean, hey, everyone wants you to eat!), a supremely sensitive body. The baby kicks, swims, flesh trembles, dips and waves. Its incredibly self-absorbing — I am all body and always look within, to the life growing inside. No-one, not even Chris, can feel or understand what I am feeling. No-one can hear the conversations that I have with you my child — it's just us two. A silent symphony. An invisible cord of communication binds us. I love to go swimming at evening. Just you and I and I am not alone. We float in midnight black water lulled light, liquid awash in night stars. A velvet cloak enfolds us as for a time I am you and you are I in amniotic warmth. Is this what it feels like for you in there? Wet, warm, dark and blurred sounds from far away resonating through the water. I wonder, can you hear me? Can you feel me? Do you know that I am here? I imagine what you must look like, tiny pink fingers and toes waiting to unfurl in the light, eyelashes a flutter in the face of eternity. I shall reach up and pick a handful of stars for you my love, a silver shimmer to adorn your hair as we float in the night sky. Glorying in the heavens, I am reminded of a line I once read:

'Now wonderingly engrossed/ In your fearless delicacies/ I am launched upon sacred seas/ Humbly and utterly lost/ In the mystery of creation/ Bells, bells of the ocean.'

That's how I feel with you ... lost in the mystery of creation....

Out shopping. The lady at the breadshop asks, 'So what did you have? Where's baby?!' ... We lost her. She died. 'Oh, I'm so sorry. Talofae.... It was all that walking you were doing. I knew you shouldn't have been exercising while you were pregnant. Remember I told you? I said to my neighbour, there goes that woman, walking on the sea wall when she's pregnant and should be resting at home. You should have been more careful....'

9 MONTHS

I bought a little girl's dress today. A blue summer dress with yellow daisies embroidered on the hem. I felt so daring ... so ... I don't know. It's like tempting fate to get things ready for you. At times I can't shake the feeling that you are an emergency waiting to happen. It feels so dangerous to prepare for you. I can feel you — you are bigger than your big brother Stephen ever was. You hurt me all the time. You stretch against my ribs and pummel my insides constantly, like

you long for space, for air, for room — to stretch, to grow, to dance, to fly. Are you tired of your safety place? You give me hot flushes and I get breathless, dizzy and tired often, carrying you. At night, I must toss and turn while you look for a comfortable position to sleep in, kicking and punching all the far way round my sides and back. We had a scan and the children were so excited to ‘meet’ you face to face. ‘She’s a dinosaur mummy! Look at her bones!’ Stephen said, excitedly pointing to your spine as it curved over the screen. You were too big to tell what you are but I know. Its our secret you and I. You’re a girl. Heaven.... The day draws closer and the excitement in our home builds. ‘Where will she sleep mum? Here, she can wear my clothes mummy,’ offers little Mele.

‘I will share my teddies with her mum,’ confirms Stephen. ‘I will take care of her. And I won’t let her be scared in the dark...’ my son the protector. You hear that Little Frog? You have a guardian. A watcher, a bringer of light, a fighter of shadows already. And Mele? She will tickle you and sing to you. She sings beautiful songs my Mele, lilting melodies of jumbled words and nursery rhyme phrases. ‘See mummy — I have picked some flowers for her!’... a handful of blossoms. Soft frangipani, and petal pink hibiscus. You see my child — you will be surrounded with colours, so many — lush green wet with rain, a fiery orange evening sky, the vibrant blue of the kingfisher that sits on our washing line ... I wonder — are you excited too?

An empty crib. A quiet room. A mobile of dancing butterflies flutters in the breeze. Plaintive voices ask again and again — ‘Where is she mummy? Why? Why did our baby have to go back to heaven? Didn’t she want to see us? Didn’t she like the teddies I picked for her? Why did Jesus take her back? She’s our baby sister.’

FULL TERM

It’s time. The pain started early this afternoon. An irritation at first and building now to cramping waves that have me bent over and gasping for breath. The children are asleep, blissfully unaware of the pain and panic that I feel. I am afraid. Of what is to come. Of what may happen. I hold them close. I start to cry as I look at them asleep in the moonlight. What if something goes wrong and I don’t come home again? Who will love them? Who will explain to them why and where their mother has gone? Why must one walk so close to death before new life can arrive? Please Lord. Let everything be alright. Little one, don’t be scared (even though I am). Soon we will hold you in our arms. I at least know what is happening to us, but you my little one — how confused and afraid you must be as you are squeezed and pushed, forced out. I at least have your daddy to hold my hand and whisper reassurance in my ear. What do you have? I wish I could hold your hand Little One, to keep you safe, to keep you close ... please stay with us....

It has been an unbearably long labour. There is blood, sweat and confusion everywhere. The heart monitor went silent not long ago but I had stopped paying

attention to its hushed tones anyway, senses blurred with drugs and tiredness. It's over. I know that it is. But I am waiting to hear her cry. I am waiting for them to stop working on her and give her to me. I can't feel much. I can't move my arms or legs. 'Just lie still,' they soothe me and stitch me.... Where is she? I try to ask. Where is my baby? Where is Little Frog? Why can't I hear her? Christopher's voice breaks as he comes to me, sweat and tear stained. 'She's gone Luana, she's here but she's gone.' He hands me a perfect child. She's just like I imagined her to be. Petal-soft curls, unbelievably long eyelashes, a pouting lower lip just like her sister's, long thin piano-playing fingers and gecko-like toes (she takes after me!). She is still in my arms. So still ... deathly still. No mewling sound of new lungs eagerly gasping in breath, no hot mouth searching for milk. Gently, I hold her little hand. So soft. So small. A frangipani blossom ready to wilt once held too close. 'I'm here Little One. Mummy's here.' But she is gone. And I am empty and alone.

6 MONTHS LATER

Stillborn. What does that mean ... still born but dead. Still here but never met. Never known but still loved....

'I'm sorry', people say. They tell me how I should feel and what I should do. That is of course when they are not avoiding me, avoiding us, shying away from the death topic, from any mention at all of anything remotely baby-like. Death does that to people. They don't know what to say or do. I don't know what to say or do. All I am certain of, is how I feel.

Anger — at the strange things well-meaning people say. At Chris for not truly understanding the full scope of what I feel no matter how hard he tries. At myself for not coping better. At God? For blessing me with a baby to fall in love with and then taking her back before we could even meet. Sadness. Frustration — after suffering for so many months only to lose my child. So much effort, so much sacrificed. Hopelessness — I ask myself, what if we go through all this again only to lose another child? Fear. I am afraid of getting pregnant again, of being sick and unable to control my life, my body. I am afraid of the pain of carrying, of delivery, but most of all I am afraid of the pain of losing.

But the strongest emotion that overwhelms and overshadows the others is love. Yes, I lost her. But that doesn't stop me from loving her. My love for Stephen and Mele is heightened all the more, tempered as it is by the loss of their sister. I lie here and watch them play outside in golden sunshine — the way the breeze catches on Mele's reddish gold hair, the way Stephen carefully carries a caterpillar to show his baby sister — and I wonder what my daughter would have looked like now, what she would have been like, what things would have made her smile? At night, I hold my babies close and send a silent prayer of thanks that I am blessed with such choice spirits to love. Yes, I miss my daughter, but I am a better mother for having had her. And one day, I know, that the anger, the fear and the grief will fade, and I will face the possibility of loving another child with renewed hope and faith. For after all ... I am a mother still.