



MADISON BECKSTEAD BOWMAN

To Lose an Unborn Child

It begins so slightly, so innocently. A little touch of red, nothing much. Nothing to worry about, surely. I read about this and I know that it is very common, very common indeed. Just another signal of what is approaching, another flag waving from the starting line, another reminder, until—suddenly—it is not so slight, and not so innocent, and it should not be happening this way.

We will not be having a baby in eight months.

And being what it is—it is something, but mostly nothing, because this happens to many women, happens all the time really, which I know because I have read everything there is to read on the subject. I am fine. This is normal; there is nothing wrong with me. I am fine.

But left to wonder: Who am I? To begin and end a life, to be the battleground? What business do I have mixing pleasure and creation, or giving life, even? While the dastardly ripples reach farther and farther, I remain on the bank with my toe in the water, looking into the sky with nothing to say for myself. I'm a free-wielding child blowing puffs of dandelion into the sky. I don't know—I can't know—where they reach, where

they land, where they settle, what havoc they wreak on a perfect garden plot or beauty they bring to a dead one.

And these little seeds—I am full of them!—stream out of me like breath, constant, led by my longing to create, and the vague, passing thought that maybe I will do this with some dexterity someday, this life-giving.

But now I am confused. If I can make a life one day, and the next day it is gone, what does it mean? What do I mean, and does it much matter?

And will it happen right one day?

That is the question that sinks into me like a black hole: will I and my David really have the chance to do this—this wonderful thing—someday? Will it work? Will *we* work?

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I once had many dreams: dreams of building orphanages in Africa, of backpacking through Southeast Asia, of holing up in a house on the coast of Maine, where I would wear cable knit sweaters and woolly socks and write my life's great work. I dreamed of being in a great rock band, of touring the country, of touring other countries. I dreamed of climbing something tall and significant. I dreamed of meeting fancy Euro men in cafés and falling into wind tunnel relationships short on potential but long on intellect and passion. I dreamed of making art that would resonate so deeply with the masses that the cosmic weight of their gratitude would turn me into some sort of saint, a liberator of free-thinking humanity.

And then I had the dream that halted all other dreams. It didn't erase them, didn't nullify a single life's desire. But, as with a man dying of thirst, all other thoughts lagged far behind.

I dreamed of being a mother, and everything else fell away.

I was working a night shift in an Ecuadorian orphanage when it came. My arms were cradling a fuzzy string bean of tears

and burps and spit-up, and as I coaxed a bottle into the trembling mouth—like a drain in its desire to be plugged—I knew. . . .

Or I was even younger, stooped in a cave somewhere east of Bethlehem, singing Christmas carols along with my fellow travelers, thinking about my mother and His mother and my potential to be a mother, and it struck me: in an instant I knew that I was capable. It was not that I had grown up, but I knew that, if called upon, I could. I *could* love that way. And it was not only possible; it was imperative. It was my purpose. I carried that dream in my heart, knowing that my God was asking me to become something great, something divine—knowing that He had given me everything I needed to become like Him, even the potential to participate in giving life.

Years later, I got pregnant within a month of getting married. The chances of this happening were very low, but pregnant I became. And taking this as some sort of sign that it was not our time to wait, as we had supposed and planned for, but instead our time to begin, my husband and I settled into a surprise parenthood. I felt my body slowly adjusting to being shared with another, felt my senses sharpen, felt my emotions work their way closer to the surface. It felt like being planted.

It ended much differently from what I had supposed and much sooner.

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Four of my sisters grew into motherhood as I watched. The oldest, a second mother to me, had her first daughter when I was eleven. The baby was born on Thanksgiving; my sister named her Grace. I didn't much care then about the concept of motherhood, though the concept of aunthood thrilled me to no end. I adored that baby, hung her three-month-old portraits in my middle school locker, wrote poems inspired by her sleeping face.

A baby boy followed on Grace's heels; then more sisters married, became pregnant, and brought more babies to our family, more subjects to the kingdom where, on weekends together with the family, I ruled as Queen Aunt. It seemed a fun game, this having of children, and in my stolen moments as a fill-in member of the Adult Table, I pretended to commiserate when my sisters spoke of the vicissitudes of parenthood.

But then Caitlin announced that she was pregnant. Only two years older than I, and so, by birthright, my forever best friend, my closest sister would be having a child of her own. A family of her own. This was more than a little staggering. Her announcement felt like an eviction notice for both of us: leave childhood behind; do not linger to pack your belongings.

But then I was not the one being called. I was not the one who grew and grew, whose belly became a sunbathing watermelon, a safehouse, a refuge, an incubator. I was not the one developing a mother's sensibilities, a deepening intuition. I was not the one kept up nights by the sheer discomfort of it all. I was not eating for two. I was not doing anything for two. I was simply the one perpetually left to enjoy a childhood that no longer held a place for me.

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Discovering that you are pregnant feels rather like being chosen. Somewhere, Someone is offering a nod of approval, a celestial recognition that your efforts are acceptable. It is a quick compliment received and noted before being granted the grandest responsibility of humanity: to perpetuate mankind.

In truth, I didn't know what to make of that compliment when it came, and I didn't know what to make of it when it was taken away. Every day I was forced to wonder, as the once glad bearer of the best kind of news, what it means to lose an unborn child. The feelings I knew well: it felt like rejection

from God, from the child himself. It felt like being rooted up. It felt like being exposed as a fraud, unworthy.

And yet. As a deeply spiritual person who believes that God loves and cares about me, I couldn't very well maintain this thought process without calling into question my beliefs. So instead, I wondered if I had done something wrong—physically, spiritually—or if miscarriage, in my case, was some sort of punishment. But then there were others, others whom I loved, infallible, unpunishable others, who had suffered the same loss. What of them? What of us all?

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As I consider it most days, parenting seems uncomfortably tedious and perhaps impossible, like being asked to swim the English Channel while balancing the Crown Jewels on my head. The pressure is great and the room for error is small. A parent is constantly watched and often emulated. A mother is one to whom all a child's virtues are attributed, or else all his faults ascribed. She is forever praised or eternally critiqued and often both in the hands of her adult daughters. No woman could be so self-satisfied as to think she could perfectly rear a child in her example. And there could be nothing so frightening as to find that you have reared a miniature version of a self you were not very pleased with in the first place.

But, oh, to try! To feel the weight of humanity on my shoulders and the wind of God at my back; to have the chance to do something great, to create something truly beautiful; to be more than myself. That is the chance for which I will abandon fear.

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It may be that years from now I will look back on these motherhood musings and scoff at the ignorant child I was.

Perhaps I will find myself up in the night, some night, fatigued and frustrated, with a crying child, or three, or four, and I will wish that my longing to be a mother had delayed itself a bit.

But I hope I find instead a willingness: to be prodded and suckled, to grow stretched and soft, to invite into my arms and my heart whatever souls I am blessed with in the future. I hope to find patience in the sleepless nights, to see the joy behind the messy faces, to find grace in the changed body, to feel comfort in the knowledge of who I am. And to the one who was almost mine: I hope to always feel the warmth that settled over me the moment I knew you for the first time.

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As I write these words, nearly a year and a half since that first miscarriage, I can feel the tiny movements of a new baby, see his feet glide underneath the stretched surface of my stomach, growing more pronounced every day. I am twenty-four weeks into this pregnancy. We have seen our child, heard his heartbeat, been overwhelmed to understand that the Lord is trusting us again with the most profound blessing we could hope to be granted.

I had supposed that the faith required of us in the process of becoming parents would be tested most in the months of trying to conceive. But I learned quickly that pregnancy was no guarantee of a healthy child and that even good health would not ensure a worry-free life. I discovered that fear can stalk me in any circumstance, that darkness will consume me whenever I open myself up to it, and that a greater portion of faith is required of me now than ever before.

The reality of faith, I have realized, is not in knowing exactly what the future will hold, but in trusting that God holds the future—mine, my husband's, and that of this tiny child—in His ever-loving, ever-blessing hands.