

EVERY TIME I HEARD either of my children say “mom”, I cringed and ducked, hoping they weren’t looking for me. I hid forever in the colorless tile of the bathroom, behind the pinstripe curtain that reminds me of a man’s suit, soaking under hot water or at least what part of me would fit into the water; as if the water could cleanse the part of me that hated myself for feeling what I felt. I just sat there in that ugly white fiberglass staring at rusted out faucets and holes some half-assed maintenance man rubbed caulk over to keep water out of the insulation. It wasn’t even clean in the place I went to cleanse myself. I can’t remember the last time I used the toilet brush or wiped off the mirror. What I do remember is telling my husband, John, that I was pregnant for the third time, and watching him grin, like this was fantastic news. Did he have a clue how much more work this would be? I couldn’t even keep up with the laundry. We could barely put food on the table for our family of four, now diapers and formula and a family of five? I had no help from him now with all the hours he was putting in at his job. And I had just barely managed to get my youngest one toilet-trained. I thought I was done with diapers. I couldn’t even revel in my small victory. I looked from the soapy water to the surrounding bathroom. Empty toilet paper rolls lay on the counter. There were discarded, naked Barbies,

My Little Ponies, and the remnants of pirate ships and princesses that never made it to their plastic bins in the utility closet. Too many used towels left in piles on the floor, hiding mismatched dirty socks that somehow missed the hamper only a few steps away, and an overflowing trashcan full of stinky pull-ups that I never managed to take down on trash day. How is it I could sit in this chaos and still know peace? This ugly, grey, dingy bathroom had become my sanctuary. It wasn’t the bathroom I would have chosen and it certainly wasn’t beautiful, but it was my only place to escape the responsibilities of folding the laundry, cleaning the kitchen, cooking the meals, paying the bills, reading *Goodnight Moon* for the hundredth time, ironing my husband’s clothes, and breaking up arguments on whether it was time to watch “Spongebob Squarepants” or the “Wiggles”.

I can’t remember ever feeling so miserable. It wasn’t just that I couldn’t see my feet anymore or that every time I ate something, even as simple as bread, it burned like someone was ripping out my insides with a salad fork. It was the kind of misery that crying doesn’t purge from you. It was the unmistakable hard edge of suicidal thought, but suicide wasn’t even a remote option. It was being saddled with consequences of making the wrong choices with the wrong

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man and not being able to change it. I knew that while I wanted to leave the misery, I was bound to it by duty, and responsibilities of wife and mother. I didn't care what the OB/GYN said about showering instead of bathing so late into the term of my pregnancy. I didn't care about anything.

I finally emerged from the bathroom, clean, but not purged of my thoughts. Trance-like, I lumbered awkwardly, the towel barely wrapped around my large frame, into the darkness of my basement bedroom, the cave of it dank and dim, sheets twisted from my nights of discomfort. I wanted to be free of my responsibilities. I started to wonder what my life would be like if I got on a plane and flew to Mexico, where no one knew about me or my life here, and the sand squished between my toes, and the sun burned my pale skin, and the cabana boy brought me some exotic fruity drink in a hurricane glass, and did anything except have this baby. But it was too late. I was going to have this baby and nothing short of death would stop her from coming.

As I lay back on the cool sheets still not dry from my bath, disgusted with my lack of clothing options for my growing stomach, I started to wonder if maybe death wasn't the obvious answer, but I couldn't bring myself to hate her enough for that. I knew it was a "her" and I resented that too. Just as I resented her very presence and all the ties that came

with it. She was keeping me from things I wanted for my life and, try as I might, I couldn't love her. I wanted to be the kind of mother that could afford Christmas presents and could volunteer for the school homeroom parties. I wanted to be able to attend every baseball and soccer game and cheerleading competition that would come in the future. I wanted my one beautiful, perfect daughter to never be outshined by another daughter and to know I could afford prom dresses and expensive hair appointments and all that came with having girls. I wanted to finish college and get a foot in the door at some great company and still have time to be the kind of mother my mother was to me. I didn't think that would be possible now. I couldn't take care of the two children I had. I was letting them down already by not being able to offer financial dependability. John and I had already borrowed so much money from my mom and dad already. I wasn't ready for more responsibility and yet, here it was. What kind of mother could I be if I couldn't love her? What about the children that were already here for that matter? Didn't anyone understand that I wanted to disappear into oblivion and never be needed again? I just stayed there in that dark room, thankful for a moment of peace while Alex was at kindergarten and Julia was taking a rare nap.

Most days the couch was the only thing that touched me---the deep

stained cushions of a couch that were once an off-white but after it had been moved 6 times, it carried the remnants of each move. I couldn't bear to part with it because it had belonged to my friend that had, on so many occasions, saved me from my self-destruction. The couch was just a piece of furniture, but it seemed my link to sanity and to my only salvation from my friend, Dawn, that had up and moved with her husband to Maryland, too many miles away, and right when I needed her most.

Dawn was the kind of friend that would find a job for you if you were out of work. If you needed something, she was the first one to find it for you. She was spiritually guided, smart, ambitious, and everything I wanted to be. A few years older than me, I was aware of her struggle to have children with her husband, but it wasn't working for her. They were well-off and managed to keep up with the expensive fertility treatments that were required for her if she wanted to get pregnant. I was sensitive to her plight because I truly did love my children, but the thought of another child was just too much. I wanted her to be here so we could sit up late and talk like we always did. I didn't have her here with me like I wanted, but I had her couch.

It was possibly the one tie that made me feel like I still had a hold on things; the couch I was too tired to even adjust the slipcover on any-

more. Sometimes I would imagine that the cushions were beautiful and that the couch was somewhere else...like a hammock hanging on palm trees in Mexico. I could truly see myself there. To me, this seemed like a real possibility. Running away seemed so simple. I could picture a pregnant me, where no one knew my name, on a beach somewhere in Mexico, healthy and relaxed. Yet even Dawn, trying so desperately to understand my thoughts, made me feel alienated and guilty, as I knew her own struggle and desperation to become pregnant. And here I was with a baby I didn't even want.

Name her, my therapist said. As if her very name could make me somehow accept her invasion on my body and the sickness she brought with her. I wanted to scream at my therapist that this was not just some exercise in accepting my fate, this was my life and I was hanging on by a thread. I know she thought she was helping me to cope with my anxiety and depression, but it wasn't working and I didn't think naming her would suddenly catapult me into loving, nurturing mother. But I was convinced no one understood how close to the edge of madness I was standing. Name her. And so I took a week, enveloped in my couch cushions, and consulted all the books and friends and family and I picked her name. I flirted with the name Jenna, but I couldn't stand a shortened version of the name. I finally settled on

Jessica Dawn. Her middle name was for my friend because I was hoping to impart some of Dawn's charm, cheerfulness, and positive outlook through the name alone. Her name was a name I couldn't possibly hate. But I didn't love her. Not even then.

I was working towards motivating myself; trying to convince my mind that I felt something for this little girl growing inside me. I had gone to therapy, called my best friend, read some books and magazines to prepare myself for the birth, and finally I called in re-enforcements. "Mom, I need you to help me with the baby's room," I told her. (Another suggestion from the therapist.) And she came, as always, totally prepared, and ready for tackling any large project; her Honda CRV loaded down with everything from cleaning supplies to paint rollers. The baby had a room already. The girls would share a room, the other little occupant both eager and reluctant to share the space. Tiny though it was, I crammed it full of color and sass hoping to cheer myself out of my numbness and discontent. Mom went readily to task as if the room itself could transform my thinking. She taped off a stripe for the wall, purchased accessories in every shade of pink and purple imaginable. Her excitement was not contagious. I painted her room purple; the kind of purple that reminds me of princesses, ice cream, and spring. I forced myself to hold a paintbrush

and disgustedly painted mismatched furniture white. I resentfully screwed on hardware like maybe going through the motions meant I cared just a little. We hung new lighting. We put a new comforter on the brand new mattress and box springs of this inspiring "big-girl" bed. We put the freshly painted white crib in the corner with its purple and white gingham checked quilt, gallantly displayed inside and we arranged and re-arranged the furniture to make room for new things. I tried to pretend that my mother wasn't staring at me with hurt and confusion when I tried to explain that I didn't much care if she even had a room to sleep in.

"But what about her big sister?" mom would ask, "Doesn't she deserve something special if she has to share?"

"I don't know," I'd say. She just didn't get it. I couldn't make her understand my disgruntled attitude. I wasn't ready to deal with problems.

"Honey, this baby is coming whether you like it or not. How can you not love her? She deserves to have a happy, healthy home. I hope you come around and soon. Your health and hers depends on it."

"I can't make myself feel something I don't, Mom. I didn't want another baby."

"Well you know how that happens, don't you? Why didn't you take precautions?" I was incredulous, floored she would even say this to

me.

“We DID!” I shouted. “Did you know that birth control is less effective for overweight people? That the percentage of pregnancy prevention is not as high as it is for average weight individuals?” Thinking back to what my doctor had told me only after I found out I was pregnant while on birth control. “Well I DIDN’T!” I was yelling louder then, my tirade zapping me of any energy I might have had in me. I dissolved into sobs and walked out of the room leaving my mom to stare in my wake, hurt and bewildered because I had lashed out at her. Somehow that room got finished without me and there was a big ceremonial presentation of the “big-girl bed” to my daughter, Julia, at the end of the day. I attended with false enthusiasm and a smile pasted on my face, as if my life depended on it, my eyes still swollen from crying. John gave the room a quick glance when he came home, and nodded his approval, but never uttered so much as a thank you since he spent the day at the office and we worked on it all day without his help. Even I managed to squeeze out a “Thanks, Mom,” before she left.

Later in the week, there was another doctor’s appointment; another check-up in the posh Dublin office. Newly built, the inside was impressive, with maple hardwood floor polished to a high-gloss sheen. Glass and steel were dominant architectural

features, with impressive fish tanks recessed into the walls. The glass and steel were softened by diffused natural lighting from floor to ceiling frosted windows and large trees in planters on the corners, and the plush area rugs in muted shades of plum and green. Several copies of the latest parenting magazines and gossip rags were stacked on light maple tables. I felt so out of place here. And it was here my patience was tested further as Julia wrecked the neatly designed waiting room in toddler style; tearing apart every magazine and tirelessly asking to read children’s books, standing on designer chairs with spindly legs, dirtying the new fabric and fingerprinting the spotless windows. I didn’t bother to correct her behavior. The very breath it would have taken me to speak was too much effort, and wasted effort at that. Some moms-to-be looked on with polite smiles as if to sympathize with my plight, an acknowledgement of understanding. Others looked on in fear, wondering if this is what they have to look forward to; an out-of-control 3-year-old that had only one speed, and it wasn’t a speed that could be clocked on radar, just really, really fast.

There were problems the doctor said. “She could have severe complications if you don’t eat.” I wasn’t hungry. Every morsel felt like acid going down only to come back up again. I tried to explain this to the doctor. The doctor gave me

a choice: eat and gain weight in a week, or be hospitalized and fed through a tube. I chose to eat and be miserable as opposed to having needles and tubes attached to my already encumbered body. As always, I called to brief my husband on the appointment. He was angry. "Why are you always sick? What is wrong with you? Don't you want this baby?" No! No! I don't want this baby! I didn't want this baby. But I said nothing. God help me, if something happened to her, it would be my fault. But I never wanted Jessica. She felt like a curse to me. And the guilt made my despair worse, because I knew I had no right to feel so angry.

Alex and Julia ate pop tarts for breakfast and lunch. I cringe to write it, but it doesn't make it less true. While I napped on the couch, they stayed in their rooms and tiptoed around me if they needed to come downstairs. I somehow knew they saw my callousness and they were afraid. Where did Mommy go? I could hear it spill from their minds and bite me viciously as if it were coming from their lips instead. I forgot to look at the time so that I would be awake when the bus came home in the afternoons. I was late to Julia's morning ballet class because it took so much effort to get ready and actually drive somewhere, anywhere.

I slept until I had to wake to go to the bathroom if I could get away

with it. I hated my little family for being in my presence, as if it were their fault my body was no longer my own. I hated my husband especially for making me like this, pregnant and resentful, and then not understanding me. I hated myself for being needy and incapable of understanding how to communicate my needs. I hated this baby and what she was turning me into, and most of all, I despised that there was no one that understood, and no one that could take my burden and mend my thinking, despite the supportive gestures.

There were problems. Always more problems. I was at the bottom of the stairs where I had fallen, crying out in pain. I had twisted my body in an effort to protect my stomach when I lost my balance. I was alone with Julia, and she was scared and crying because mommy was hurt and she didn't know how to help me.

"The phone," I cried, "Bring me the phone." I had twisted both ankles on the stairs and I had hurt myself in the fall. I called John.

"I need you. I fell down the stairs at the house and I hurt myself badly," I explained through sobs.

"Well, can you walk? Go out to the car and drive yourself down to the doctor's office." He sounded annoyed that I had even called and interrupted him at work.

"I can't walk! It's serious. Please help me. I need you to drive me to

the hospital,” I pleaded.

“I can’t leave work right now. I’ve missed too much already because of the baby and you. I just can’t leave. If it is that serious, call the squad. I have to go, my boss needs me.”

Tears rolled down my face, as my toddler crouched beside me stroking my hair, concern and confusion in her eyes. He hung up and I felt angry and frustrated and helpless. I called the doctor and they said I needed to either get in there right away or most likely go to the emergency room. But I was alone. I tried to stand up on wobbly, swollen, sore ankles. I told my daughter to get her coat, and realizing I couldn’t walk, crawled to the bathroom on hands and knees to check for bleeding. Seeing none, I took a big breath, and prepared once more to stand. It took every effort to get to my car and I bitterly drove myself and Julia to the emergency room. Calling him again, I gave him no choice but to get both children, Julia from me at the hospital and Alex from school. I was admitted to the hospital for monitoring of fetal activity. My blood pressure was soaring and there was a concern for an onset of toxemia, a condition of pregnancy that means a sharp rise in blood pressure, and abrupt swelling of extremities. I knew this was serious because it meant the placenta could detach itself and both of our lives would be in danger.

It was only a few weeks later that I was again at the hospital, on doctor’s orders. Fears were confirmed. It was definitely toxemia this time. My feet, so puffy my shoes would not go on, resembled water balloons that were only partially filled. My rings were cut off my fingers. And I was alone.

I was alone in a room with curtains for doors, where some pastel painting on the wall was hinting somehow that this was a fine place to be, indeed. The machines I was connected to, beeped furiously and if I moved to get more comfortable, it sent monitors and nurses alike into a frenzy. They would come rushing into the room in pairs and one would take my blood pressure again while another looked at the printed sheets of paper registering fetal activity. They would move briskly and efficiently, but always as if there were major consequences for me stirring. Someone would come and tell me to lie still (as if it were no problem for a woman in my condition) so I would stare at the emptiness around me, counting ceiling tiles, wondering why they never put clocks anywhere in this place. All I could smell was sterilization and urine that had been left too long. Eventually my nose adjusted to the unkindness and I sought solace in my pillow. People rushed by and I was forgotten except when someone poked or prodded at me. (I swear if that resident doctor

kept sticking her hands in me like I was a hole in the wall, she would feel wrath like she had never known!) Needles and tubes were everywhere and my husband wouldn't come because he had taken too much time from work already. I clutched the phone to my ear, straining to hear him over the machines.

"What if the baby comes?" I asked.

"Then she comes and I'll get there as soon as I can", he says. "You're in and out of the hospital all the time now. I can't take off work every time." I knew then I would divorce him.

They made me wait 2 days in that room alone, sick and suffering and worried that I would not like her when she came. But she came anyway. And she came out with black hair, soft as rose petals and a mouth turned up like she was smiling. I remember her red and wrinkly skin and how silky it was and almost transparent. It was the dimples that got me, though. Those deep little dots in her skin that somehow turned me into a blubbering mess and made me ask God's forgiveness. I pleaded with Him to excuse me for not wanting her. I couldn't imagine at this moment how I could have ever felt that way. I asked that He forgive me for ever thinking she could have been a burden to my life. I couldn't believe He could have given me anything so perfect, as ungracious as I had been. She looked at me like she knew all along that I would love her anyway, and she makes sure I do. It was as

if the fog had lifted and there had never been anything to worry about in the first place. Maybe my precious baby knew that somehow. Her newborn spirit renewed me and I felt God's presence there too. I felt as if the burden I had been carrying all this time had been taken and replaced with sheer delight. It was a shared spiritual moment, where I felt her almost speak to me, and God too knew my struggle and had given me this gift, this angel for my very own. I was given ecstasy wrapped in pink blankets and I cried from the sheer pleasure of knowing this child and I had made it through. It was almost as if my new daughter said aloud, "See? Wasn't I worth it? I knew all along you wouldn't let me down."

Jessica Dawn was my third child and my last. She is the hardest to be mad at and the easiest to love. God sent her to me with the most sparkling personality, with a laugh that comes from deep in her belly and infects me with giggles, and her smile is almost constant. She has a look in her eyes that is wise beyond her years. She lights a whole room when she smiles and those dimples have not been outgrown. We share a secret, Jessie and I, an un-whispered secret about how she began her life unwanted, and ended up attaching herself to my heart.

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