COUPLES ESSAY

This Is What A Miscarriage Feels Like

by Alyssa Ages

On November 3, 2016, I found out I was pregnant. By November 28, I began to miscarry and yet it wasn't until nearly three weeks later that the process ended. If you can't imagine what that's like, lock yourself in a room, put on Nickelback and turn the volume up to 11. Lose the key. Watch *Beaches* while dicing onions. Fall asleep and have one of those dreams where you're trying to run but your feet have been replaced by cinder blocks. Wake up to find both legs are asleep. Get out of bed and immediately fall down.

Which is to say, there were ungodly levels of crippling physical and emotional pain. There were and still are ugly-cry moments of deep devastation. There remains an endless sense of utter helplessness.

We had gotten pregnant after just three months of trying. I knew before I even took the test, after excusing myself three times from training a client to dry heave in the bathroom, a sensation that bred its own confounding mix of concern and cautious elation.

For two weeks, I lived off pretzels and saltines to avoid vomiting during meetings, tried not to fall asleep while dining with friends, and lost my shit on my husband for cooking salmon for us when he should have read my mind and known that the scent of seafood made me gag. It was uncomfortable and at the same time it was wonderful to feel those pregnancy symptoms, the ones that let you know that finally something is happening.

For two weeks, we arrived early at restaurants where I would whisper to the bartender to serve me a club soda with a wedge of lemon in a tumbler so I could keep this secret for the required twelve weeks. I counted the days until we could tell someone, anyone else.

For two weeks, I pretended I wasn't thinking of baby names, imagining what a nursery might look like, or thinking of exciting and surprising ways to tell our friends and family.

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And then after those two weeks we went for a "dating ultrasound" where a stone-faced technician instructed me to "remove pants and underwear" so we could see on a screen what I imagined would be, in nine months, a crying, shitting, smiling bundle of joy. As she twisted and shifted the ultrasound contraption around inside me, she began to contort her face into looks of concern, deeper concern, and utter confusion. And then she left without saying a word.

We learned that there was no audible heartbeat while heading to the airport to go back to New York for Thanksgiving. I'm sure we were told things like "don't worry" and "it's still early" but all I heard was "it's over."

But when you don't know for sure, you can't rely on faithful coping mechanisms like throwing back shots of tequila at a dive bar while sloppily dancing to "Pour Some Sugar on Me," or inhaling a block of (unpasteurized) cheese, or running as fast as possible until your lungs give out and you collapse into a sweaty and satisfied heap. So instead I just existed in a steady state of measured sadness. I kept a secret I no longer wanted to keep.

When we returned to Toronto, we had the second and final pregnancy ultrasound. The wonderful thing about being pregnant in Canada is the free health care. The confounding thing about being pregnant in Canada is that for the first 10 weeks, you'll see nameless ultrasound technicians who will tell you absolutely nothing during your appointment but will say things like "we'll bring your husband in if there's something to see" and then will not bring in your husband. And for two days you'll wonder why as you wait for the results to be delivered to your doctor.

When we left that second appointment I knew. I held back tears until we reached the parking lot because adults supposedly don't cry in public. And then I lost it because I knew for certain it was over. When we returned home, I began to bleed and it became real. I seemed to miscarry naturally, for one day, until the bleeding stopped.

We waited. For a few maddening days, nothing happened. Under the advice of my doctor who confirmed what I already knew, I took a pill that triggers a miscarriage in order to finish the process that had already begun. She felt it was safer than the surgical procedure. My body began its second attempt at miscarriage but this one didn't take either. Instead it was two days of pain, and cramps, and...nothing.

We had to schedule the procedure. I met with a nurse whose unenviable job it is to explain to women who have miscarried the process by which a surgeon will remove the remains of what should have been the beginning of the rest of your life. She made it through one sentence before I started sobbing.

On the day I had my D&C— three weeks after that final ultrasound— my sister-in-law was being discharged from the same hospital, three floors up, with her new baby. You could, I'm sure, wax poetic about the cycle of life and death and birth, but the joy I wanted so desperately to feel was subdued by the crushing weight of emptiness.

But it was over. Physically, I hadn't felt this much like myself in months. The nausea was gone, along with the bloating and the sore boobs. And the blood and the tissue, that was gone too. What was left was a sort of abyss.

If you saw me at that time, and you asked how I was doing, I would have told you I was fine because that's what I do. I suffer briefly in sad times and then immerse myself in distractions to cope. I would have smiled and asked how your day was going to change the subject, because no one wants to be around someone who is a shell of themselves, who says "terrible" when you were really asking just to be polite.

Then I would have gotten into my car and cried. I would have put on a series of songs that had become my power songs and my sad songs, like "Man in Motion" from the movie St. Elmo's Fire and "Never," that angry warehouse-dance song from *Footloose*.

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I wanted to unload all of this on someone and at the same time I wanted so badly to never speak about it again. Because it's this awful thing that no one talks about. If you ask them, women with healthy children will tell you about the time they miscarried. They'll tell you the stories of their success, how they were surprised at how quickly they got pregnant after the loss, how you should stay hopeful. And you'll be optimistic because it seemed to happen for everyone else. And then it won't happen. You'll spend weeks, then months, wondering why your body can't just do the thing it was created to do. And although you'll know you are part of a massive statistic of women who miscarry, you will feel utterly and helplessly alone.

I found myself resenting friends and family who didn't call every day to see how I was doing. Why couldn't they read my mind and know that this was a horrible thing? That it was far worse than I had let on? That I needed the love and compassion of every friend, family member, and complete stranger? Of course, I understand with some distance that if you don't ask for help, no one knows to provide it. To borrow from novelist Tom Robbins: Maybe I couldn't blame them, but I could ache.

As time passed, and as I had good days and then days where if you asked how I was doing, I would start to cry into my brunch plate, I found that I wanted to talk about it more and more. I wanted to tell everyone because it became empowering to tell people this thing that no one else wanted to talk about. It became something I could own, a pain that if I could capture it, I could tame and control it.

So, I'm going to talk about it. Well, I'm going to write about it. Because I've heard enough success stories. Because I'm not a success story. Because when I needed it, I couldn't find anything honest and raw and vulnerable and I want to be that outlet for other people. And because writing is and always has been my therapy.

I am not OK. I still cry at power ballads from the 1980s. I've started listening to Jagged Little Pill. I am the owner of more than a dozen fertility crystals, multiple bottles of essential oils, a meditation cushion, and no fewer than three gym memberships. I am coping but I am not yet OK. And that's OK.

If you pull up next to me at a stoplight, I might still be singing "Man In Motion" at the top of my lungs and you can roll down the window, smile, and ask how I'm doing. And this time I'll tell you. Pass the tissues. p

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