

The Tale of Two Babies

There is a not-so-factual saying that goes a little something like “A woman will fall in love three times in her lifetime.” I have never known that to be true or false, but I guess that depends on what love means to you. Or rather, what kind of love you are falling into. And it kind of seems like a poor choice of wording. What about the women who meet the love of their life in kindergarten, or end up marrying their high school sweethearts? Even the career driven women who decided it was best to tuck the potential of love away, only to get swept off their feet in an airport. My argument: Are we talking about true love, here?

There is something about this saying that makes women seem like they are bound to get it wrong a couple of times before getting it right. Crazy as it may seem, love is a basic human need. Regardless of the number of times you fall. Love is the closest thing we have to magic. It’s what we read about in books, it’s why we take tissues to the movies and drag a guy along with us who probably didn’t realize he’d be leaving the theater with a woman who favors the lead singer in the band KISS (non-water-proof mascara gals). It’s why we wake up every morning. Love is what puts breath in our lungs. To put it simply: love is a human’s hope for the future.

That’s what I thought. I thought you met a guy, he checked off enough boxes on your list, you fell in love, you got married, there would be something in the fine print about a white picket fence, and a golden retriever and you’d bake a pie. Maybe not in that order, but I imagine something along those lines. I thought that having this big shiny ring on my left hand meant that I had worth. It was a clear message to the universe: Someone loved me, therefore I had value. We had the pictures taken with the realtor in front of the sold sign of this big, beautiful home we would grow old in. We would fight over each other’s AARP coupons together. He carried me over the threshold of that home, in my big poofy overpriced white dress. Because that was how it was supposed to be. And we were perfect, we were everything, until we weren’t.

But this is not a story about heartbreak, this is a story about love. This is a story about a phrase I stumbled upon that rattled me in the best and worst ways, and I cannot wait to share my love stories with you.

“Nothing worth having comes easy.” There’s another phrase I once again clung to, because maybe in some weird way it would encourage me that I wasn’t a waste of space after all. I had tried everything to grow our family and have a child. Everything. It was doctor’s appointment after doctor’s appointment, scans after scans, more blood work, I started to feel like a failing science project. You know, the one you stayed up all night to finish, and you get to the front of the class to present it, and suddenly it doesn’t work and then you have to explain what it was meant to do. Yeah, that was me. Explaining my failure. At every family gathering, every baby shower, even at the grocery store. When are you going to have a baby?

One day, it was my turn. I was mom. I was going to finally experience the magic of motherhood. Something I had longed for, my whole life. I think that’s why I became a nurse; I have this instinct just to take care of others. Call it control or OCD, but honestly if I can work willingly with my hands and

leave the hospital knowing that someone, even just one person breathed a little easier because I was able to care of them, that's everything to me. Feeling needed, being made to feel that I was making a difference in people's lives, helping people, it was incredibly rewarding.

And what happens when people find something that gives them worth? They cling to it. Attach, and never let go. I lived at that hospital. It was my home, patients felt like family. I ran myself ragged but I didn't care, I was needed. I was little mother hen, until I got to be a mother, in real life.

February 14th, Valentine's Day. The day of all things pink and soft with hearts, and lovely. The day of love. I lost her. I lost what I had longed for, forever. I was wheeled out of the hospital in which I planned to have her, leaving without her. As I sat in the wheelchair waiting for the car to be brought around, a woman next me also in a wheelchair, waits. With a baby wrapped in a little pink blanket, balloons, and flowers in her grasp, too. What a beautiful horrific day. Setting a tone that every Valentine's Day would never be filled with love. It would never be the same again. Once again, I was a failure. I remember the earth-shattering tears that followed. Being the "it's fine, I'm fine, everything's fine" woman that I am...I of course immediately returned to work, I needed it. I needed my life back. It would hit me again, at baby showers, family events, except at the grocery store, a baby would cry or giggle or smile at me, and I was not too far from the produce section when I realized, I was going to leave infertility in the dust. Just like it left me, feeling as if this brokenness which is me, would define me for the rest of my life.

I had always thought about adoption. My heart always felt compelled to do so. I mean, I went to work everyday and showed love and compassion to strangers, how could I not do that for a child? After great thought, applications were completed, and clearance to become an adoptive family took one year, and a place on the waiting list would follow. Three years would pass of waiting on what started to feel like a hopeless, non-existent list.

I'll never forget that phone call. A typical Wednesday morning. Finally, this time for sure, the magic of motherhood would be granted to me. It seems so wild to me; motherhood was something that came so easily to people who didn't even really want it. What did I do to have to be a failure of a woman, unable to grow a family? But all of that would be put to rest. It felt like I was an orphan, getting to meet HER family that she had been longing for.

I had just finished assessing a fresh hip fracture when my phone rang. I answered the unknown number, and it was the news that would define the rest of my life. The birth of a baby boy, and he was mine. My knees became weak. "How soon can you catch a flight?" I still hear those words coming across the phone, sending chills up my spine. My fellow nurse colleagues took my charts, and graciously assumed care of my patients and I swear that I had never ran so fast in my entire life. Barely making it in time to catch the flight. I remember boarding the second plane after the first layover. Everything felt like it was happening so fast, yet I felt like I was moving in slow motion, an out of body experience. It was raining and I remember staring out the window of the plane counting the rain drops, thinking to myself: I am going to wake up to my alarm clock going off any minute now, this cant be real. I look down at my well-worn tennis shoes, stained with iodine from a bedside procedure awhile ago. I thought to myself, "Wow. When I was putting my scrubs on at 4 o'clock this morning, I did not think I would be meeting my son's birth mother in them. Raindrops continued to collect on the window as the plane arrived at the gate. I tried to think, overthink. I did not have a suitcase packed, a plan, not even a baby name

picked out. All I had hoped for was this 747 was taking me to my forever. I reached a point where I could only focus on the collecting rain drops, because that was all I had right in front of me.

I sat in a hotel room for the longest 24 hours of my life. I received news that birth mom tossed the idea of adoption around, back and forth with thoughts. The phone rang again, same number. This time, bracing for impact. Ready for what felt like, losing another baby. I answered the phone with the heaviest of hearts and hands shaking, barely able to even speak a simple "hello?"

"Hi, final decision has been made, documents signed. You want to pick him up this evening?" In a nonchalant tone like I was in no way about to have a hemorrhagic stroke in this Hilton waiting, pacing, counting ceiling tiles to keep my mind occupied.

I walked in these large silver automatic sliding doors, anxious yet beyond ready to pick up this tiny miracle. Nothing could prepare me for the moment the social worker asked me: "Are you ready to meet your son?" I nodded my head in disbelief. The moment he was placed in my arms, I knew that I...forever and always, would put him before anything, until the end of time.

I was his mommy. I loved him for YEARS and he didn't know it. My heart belonged to my daughter that I lost. And from that moment on, my heart also belonged to him, long before his existence. I think that in itself, is the most incredible love story. My boy. Holden, meaning "grace."

I was a mom, and he, my son.

When I lost Ava, family encouraged me to journal. But honestly, I was convinced that the empty bassinet that collected dust, mirrored my heart. Lifeless, and untouched. Until I decided to write for good, and not just pain. I would write something that gave me peace while searching for hope. So, I decided, that if we got chosen off the long adoption list that felt like the length of a CVS receipt, it would give me strength. I wrote letters to my future child. Three years, I collected letters. I don't know if it gave me much strength, there's some places that aren't legible due to tears smudging the ink, my point in telling you this: Someone once asked me: "if you could go back and change anything, what would it be?" I couldn't give them an answer. Truth is, if I could go back, I'd tell that motherless girl: Stay bold and wild in her dreams of motherhood. Grow your faith, throw caution to the win. I'd wipe her tears night after night as she wept. Reminding her to press on, because the best is yet to come, come the day he's yours.

Here's the thing about the magic of motherhood, he is mine in a way he will never be hers. Yet, he is hers in a way he will never be mine, but it is beautiful and joyous, because it's what made him, him. The boy knitted for me, not in my womb; but in my heart. Regardless of my reproductive failure, it wasn't who made me, me. Holden is. Not in one of those "I live through my child" situations.

It's through everything, even the letters I wrote him, are what made me, me. In one of my letters to him, I warn him that people are going to say the silliest of things. Maybe things along the lines of "Oh, you're adopted" "Oh you're lucky to have a family." The juvenile list of phrases goes on. I ask him not to listen to those foolish ones for even a single moment. I am the lucky one. For it is he, who is the hero on our story. My promise to him, is what made me a mother: There won't be a day that passes that I am not reminded that I am the luckiest girl in the world; to have been able to give my heart away, to him.

Fast forward seven months after bringing Holden home, and that's the plot twist, or: "God's curve ball." Two pink lines. Nine months later, I was wheeled out of the hospital where I had lost Ava. Only this time, with a baby. Sitting in a wheelchair. Looking around me, thankful there wasn't a girl with empty arms next to me, because I had been her, before.

My family looks a little differently than most. It's just us three. Me, Holden & Henri, meaning "leader."

Holden and I sure could use a little leader to keep us in line. Some days I wonder, who is raising who? Single motherhood can bring whatever challenges it wants. It's not easy, but I can tell you this: I wouldn't change a moment in my life. Every choice, every minute of every hour, every hope, prayer and dream is what gave me these two babies. Thirteen months apart, I am running a fraternity house. Things are broken, messy, non-functioning, sticky, sometimes there's vomiting, but lots of dance parties. Come to think of it, that's the description of a toddler house and a fraternity house. Here is to the pillow fights and hanging Christmas lights. Here is to curing tummy aches after licking the bowl. Here's to blowing bubbles in the bathtub, and checking under your bed for monsters. Here is to the messes we make and staying up a little too late. Here is to getting to love them, forever and a day.

Life has a funny way of showing us that maybe a woman does or doesn't give her heart away willingly, but maybe; just maybe, she does fall in love three times in her lifetime, or maybe even more than that. But who am I to keep count? After all, love is the closest thing we have to magic. Why put a silly numerical value on it? I didn't. I don't think you should either. It doesn't matter who you love or the number of times you fall in love, but HOW you love. Love with your whole heart, and I can promise you that you'll have a life worth living. Maybe no white picket fences, or a shiny three carrot Harry Winston. Love with ALL of YOU. You are worth the love you give, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. This world needs your love, and this world needs your heart. Most importantly, this world needs you.