

## Expecting

The few moments it took for the tiny stick, with all its unassuming power, to decide whether or not it would grant our wishes, were lengthened in suspense and dread. A single second felt like a year. Two, and it may as well have been a century. In the thick of this limbo, I had almost decided that this was where we were destined to stand: on the line of doubt between fantastic jubilation, or crushing disappointment. But eventually it came into focus. And the doubt was burned away like water underneath the sun. Standing in the middle of the bathroom, we waited and watched as those two little lines slowly began to define themselves. We watched with twin beams as our efforts were finally successful.

We were exuberant. Ecstatic. We had hardly put the test down, before we were throwing ourselves into everything we possibly could. We called every family member we could think of. We sectioned off a room for the nursery, and we began to buy tiny toys and stuffed animals and blankets— anything our baby could possibly wish for, we wasted no time before purchasing. We did not know this person, and yet we were already certain we would not allow them the tiniest moment of sorrow, or want. They would not go hungry, because we had formula. They would not fall, because we stationed protective gates on every staircase.

My husband wished for a boy. I secretly wished for a girl.

So, it was nothing but a joy for the both of us, when we discovered that neither would be disappointed: that we were to have both.

We did everything right. We bought every book, and googled every question. I took as many vitamin supplements as I could cram down my throat, and my husband never allowed me to lift more than ten pounds. I walked and maneuvered as though the floor was crafted out of eggshell. Every night I would sing a lullaby to both of my children, and I would lay awake and imagine them growing up together, under my watchful eye. My husband and I would pass entire evenings listing possible names. Sarah, Emily, Lea, Claire, Kinley. Shaun, Thomas, Jackson, Lincoln, Jared.

We could never decide on one, because none seemed perfect enough.

We didn't do a single thing wrong. We had the parties, and the showers.

We went together to every doctor's appointment, and we framed every ultrasound.

So, although I heard the words clearly, I did not understand them.

"One child was unable to make it. We're very sorry for your loss, and we did all we can. But she was much smaller and more underdeveloped than the other; it's unfortunately a relatively common occurrence with twin pregnancies. Usually we try to catch it early, and attempt to intervene before it's too late. But...I'm sorry." The doctor said this all very steadily, and with an obscene amount of control in their voice. They did not weaken at the look on our faces, and their voice did not hitch in sympathy when, unable to control myself, I broke down into hysterical sobs.

They were unaffected, and unmoved.

"I'm sorry." They just kept repeating it. I wondered bitterly if this person was just reciting this from memory. I pictured a tiny notecard pinned to the wall on the way into the hospital, that every doctor reviewed on their way in. Because that was all this sounded like: a blank, apathetic narration of lines for a play too harrowing to watch. I wondered next if this person had any children themselves. Certainly nobody should be allowed to preside over these things if they didn't know the feeling. Somehow, I was certain that they didn't. That they couldn't possibly understand the pain their words inflicted, if their stony expression was anything to go by.

They brought me my other child – my only child – and at first, I almost didn't understand. Simple point A didn't connect to simple point B, and I found all I could do was stare down at the tiny bundle. Just stare. The only thing that existed was silence, until my husband, offering me a smile that seemed far too bright, asked: "How about Shaun?" It was a revisit to a name we had debated over before. A revisit to the nights – which seemed worlds away now – spent laying in a darkness that seemed bright with possibilities, baby names tossed between each other like we were playing tennis.

I had refuted it, once. In that other, long-ago life.

Now, I didn't even hesitate. "Okay."

And so we adjusted our plans, and our expectations, and our lives. My husband went home first, and though he didn't say it, I knew it was to get the second crib out of the nursery, because he knew I wouldn't be able to stomach the sight. And when we got into the car to go home, the second car seat we had strapped in was gone, as well. Every shred of evidence was destroyed, down to the second high-chair we had gotten, and every pink stuffed animal.

Though somehow, the absence of these things was even worse than if they had surrounded me on all sides.

Shaun was the perfect baby. He wasn't loud or fussy; he was scheduled, and predictable. He learned how to walk almost as soon as he learned how to crawl, and before too long he was speaking up a storm. He loved to smile, and he loved to play outside, though he would never stray too far. My friends always fawned over how healthy he was, like all mothers do with one another, and I crafted a smile onto my face that hurt my lips.

I smiled through a lot.

I smiled through the birthdays, where I watched my son grinning widely over a cake, trying not to imagine a little girl grinning at me with just as much love right beside him. I smiled through the moments where he asked me if he was my favorite person in the world, and I smiled through the times he held onto my hand those first few days of kindergarten and said he didn't want to leave me. I smiled through the school field trips, for which I had to pack a single sack lunch. I smiled through the vacation to Disney World, where he got to meet Mickey Mouse and ride Space Mountain and make memories that she would not have been able to have.

She. All the while, in the back of my mind, she was there. I didn't know her name; she had a different one every time she forced herself into thought. Would Carly have had the same hair color as Shaun did— would she have those same blue eyes, or would she have had my green? Would Abigail have loved vanilla ice cream like Shaun had, when my husband took him out after school, or would she have liked strawberry more? Would Savannah have lit up on Christmas morning like Shaun did, or would her smile have looked different? Would Maddie have been just as scared about starting middle school as Shaun was? High school? Would Candice have slowly turned just as quiet as he had? Just as reflective? Would Stephanie have

gone to her father for advice or for help, like he did? Would Alice have told me of everything that happened to her at school, or would she have to be prompted to do so from her father, too?

Would my daughter be exactly like my son?

Or would she have liked me?

It was constant, and ever-present. I knew it shouldn't be. But it was.

My husband tried to help. As best he could, he tried. He wore the smile of someone who was trying to fake their way to a happier point in time. I always hoped my fake smile was better than his. I like to think it was. But it was that painfully-forced smile that roused me from my thoughts. I had been sitting on the edge of the bed, my mind wandering and my stare a little vacant. At the sound of my name, I picked my head up, and his smile only tightened. Maybe he'd meant for it to widen. "Are you ready?" he asked, and I watched as he lifted his hand and dangled the keys in front of my face. I said nothing, but it was okay, because he was used to the silence. "He'll be home any second. I thought we could wait for him in the driveway."

The date was staring me in the face, like it had all day long. So I stayed mute. But I did manage to force myself into motion; I stood up from the bed and I put on my coat and I followed him outside. And then we stood in the chill in complete silence. I could feel my husband turn and look at me every so often, as if he wanted to say something; but he must have never found the right words. Because the next noise that broke the quiet was the sound of wheels against the snowy road, and before too long, our son was deposited by his friend at the end of the lane.

Shaun turned to wave goodbye to the driver – I couldn't recall their name – and when he looked back front and saw us, he stiffened with a little bit of surprise. But his eyes only grew even wider when he saw what was beside us: a car. The age-old gift for a sixteenth birthday. He rushed the rest of the way up to us; a smile was already spreading wide over his face. "Is this for me?" he asked, and my husband laughed at his expression of shock. I smiled. "No way this is for me!" he burst.

"Do you like it?" my husband asked.

"Do I like it? I love it! This is awesome!" he yelled, his hands going up to his head. He was beaming. I watched in silence, my hands clasped in front of me. It was cold. "This is so

great, Alex will never believe it! Wait until I text him!” Was Alex the name of the boy that had just dropped him off? Or was he talking about another one of his friends? I found, standing there, that I had no idea. Shaun turned around, still wearing that large smile. “This is awesome!” He looked to his father, when he said this. “It’s great! Thank you!”

My husband smiled. But the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Your mom helped, too,” he announced, and I perked at the lie. All the same, I drafted a smile on my face, as my son turned his gaze onto me.

His eyes flashed with something close to confusion. I could see his smile fracture, and waver. “You...you did?”

“Do you like it?” I returned. It wasn’t a lie, this way; not if I didn’t really answer.

The confusion ebbed away little by little. His forehead creased for the briefest of moments, before he seemed to push aside his puzzlement. He smiled instead, though I could still pick up on the ghost of astonishment when he amended: “Yeah! It’s amazing! Thanks, mom!”

I nodded, watching as he turned and rushed circles around the car, inspecting its every inch. My husband leaned over and put his hand on my shoulder. He offered me a bracing grin, a question going unspoken, but writing itself across his face. I hoped the smile I gave him would be answer enough to whatever he was wondering. And I turned back front before I could find out; I turned back to watch my son turn in circles and exclaim over his new gift, opening the car door and getting inside to look at every feature.

There was no bickering.

There was no fighting over the color, no back-and-forth of ‘No, I want to drive it first!’

Immediately, I felt guilty, and I scolded myself for the thought. I crossed my arms over my chest, and I tried to ignore the cold, along with everything else.

I needed to be better. I wanted to try to be.

It was more than difficult; I hoped that it appeared easier than it felt. That was the main hope that ran through my head. When I saw him going to prom with a girl I had never seen before, I hoped that my smile was big, and that my voice was earnest when I told her I was

happy to meet her. I hoped that I didn't look as empty as my chest felt when I only got to watch one child walk across the stage, and wonder if she would have graduated with highest honors as well. I hoped I didn't look as hurt as I felt when he rushed to his father first to show him the college acceptance letter he'd gotten in the mail.

I hoped for a lot of things. Mostly I hoped that one day I would be able to just deem it all unimportant. I hoped that when I got up and threw the covers off of me, that the weight of my sorrow would be thrown off right along with them. Or that the choking pressure around my throat would lessen just a bit when I talked to him, or told him I was proud. I wished it would lessen, and maybe it did. It didn't lessen enough, though. Not enough to make a difference, or make things easier.

I blamed the pressure in my windpipe now, on the day. Again, my husband and I were standing in the driveway. But it was hot out, now, not cold. We had just finished packing Shaun's car to the brim, stacking and arranging cardboard boxes like it was a game of Tetris. Now, he was ready to drive across state lines, to attend the college of his dreams. He was ready to go; all that was left was for him to get in the driver's seat.

"You have everything together?" my husband asked, after triple-checking the list he'd made.

Shaun grinned, and nodded once. "Yeah, I think so."

My husband smiled. I looked at the pride and the affection that was in his eyes, and my stomach clenched as I looked away. I felt like a child, throwing a never-ending tantrum. 'This isn't fair.' 'I don't want this.' 'I want that more!' I let out a slow breath as he leaned over and patted his shoulder. "Alright," he exhaled. "Then...I guess that's it! Are you sure you don't want us to come down and help you get set up? We could...look around campus with you. Get to know where you're going to be for the next four years!" He ended this with a laugh, but it was a little strained.

"No, no that's..." Shaun smiled, but it wasn't a normal one. His eyes flickered briefly over to me, and if I didn't know him any better, I would have thought that a tiny sense of discomfort leaked into his gaze. "That's fine," he reassured, looking back to his father with a shake of the head. "It's fine, I don't need anyone else with me. I've got it on my own." My lips

pressed together tightly at the comment, and how true it was. He brightened up and leaned out to hug my husband tightly, his voice melting and turning warm when he said: “Bye, Dad.”

My husband hugged him tightly, and when they pulled apart, he patted his shoulder again. “Do good,” he ordered. “I don’t want any calls about you failing your classes.”

Shaun laughed. When he turned to me, the laugh died, and the smile on his face weakened. He looked at me as if I was a stranger he was passing in a store, and he just needed to be polite enough to find a way to scoot around me. All the same, he quickly righted his misstep and pasted the grin back onto his face. He walked over to me and gave me a hug. One that wasn’t as tight as his first, and one that was much shorter. He stepped back after only a few seconds, offering a quieter: “Bye, Mom.”

I matched his smile. “Bye,” I returned. My arms found their way back across my chest. “Good luck. Call if you need anything.”

“I will,” he promised.

I knew he wouldn’t.

My husband and I stood in the driveway and watched our son leave. We lingered there together for a moment, neither of us moving, as if we weren’t sure what to say now, or what to do. Eventually, we looked at one another. My husband’s gaze was mournful as it met mine. Without a word, he turned and started back into the house, leaving me on my own. I hesitated still, and just turned back to look where my son’s car had vanished.

It seemed like ever since the first day I had brought Shaun home from the hospital, I had been waiting for this one. I had been waiting for the day he would leave, and the constant reminder of what I had lost would leave along with him. I expected the hole in my heart to be filled, or at least easier to handle. But somehow now, it felt even worse. Even more gaping. Like the pain had been doubled.

Maybe the thought should have occurred before this moment.

Maybe the realization had been staring at me in the face, and I was just too blind to see it.

But now the pain in my chest made it more than apparent.

I had lost two children. But one of them was of my own doing.