

A Birthday (halfway through the book)

They place an embroidered yellow rose sticker on the door to alert anyone who enters of the loss. After the patient is moved from the Perot Building, which is all labor and maternity, to the Jackson Building, they affix a little heart sticker on the door. Different building, different sticker, same meaning. In another world, yellow roses and hearts are good things.

I find myself hurting more for Jeff and for my mother, than for me. I told Mom numerous times to watch over Jeff because he was alone. I had a team of doctors and nurses watching over me.

We named her Mattie Elizabeth. We held her tiny warm body in a tiny warm swaddling blanket, our one-pound baby girl.

I gave birth to a dead baby.

I don't ever want to say those words again.

My water broke at 8 pm, just as the three of us were sitting down to dinner. My pants were crazily, instantly, completely soaked, and I ran to the bathroom, saying "My water broke?! How can that be?"

Then I heard Jeff retching, vomiting and gagging in the guest bath. And that's when I got scared, as I listened to his agony.

I began to feel something hard and firm between my legs—Mom and Jeff looked on saying, "Oh my God."

"Call 911. What is happening? What is it? Is it the baby—can you see her?"

"It's blue and cord like," said Mom.

"Don't look," I told Jeff. "It's the umbilical cord. Call 911."

Sirens outside. Mom is getting instructions from the 911 dispatcher to put her hand inside me and hold the cord, to stop it from coming. She was pale.

I was trying to say *Hail Mary's*, but I could only remember the beginning so I just kept repeating it again and again in my head. *Hail Mary, Full of Grace. The Lord is with Thee. Hail Mary, Full of Grace. The Lord is with Thee.*

I'm on the bathroom floor—on the green and white rug, six paramedics lift me and carry me to the gurney in the hall. The doorways are too narrow in our house to allow access. It was

built in the 50s and not gurney friendly. Laughing, the guys said they would only drop me once. I said that seemed fair.

Someone throws a purple blanket over me to cover my entirely naked bottom half, as we proceed to the ambulance waiting outside.

“Where is Jeff? Where is the cat?” I am calm and in control, very still and focused on remaining so. I can see some neighbors emerge outside on their lawns, watching them wheel me out. I know they’re confused and frightened—“something is going very wrong with that sweet couple who just moved in,” I imagine them saying.

I want to sit up and tell them to go back inside, like a high school coach, “Nothing to see here, kids. Go back to class.”

“Where’s Jeff?” I demand that the EMTs tell me his location. “He shouldn’t drive. He’s too upset.”

The two Fire Department EMTs are so good and strong. The guy with the blue eyes is hooking up an IV—“If I go into shock,” I tell him, “my blood type is 0+ and I’m allergic to sulfa.”

My legs are shaking terribly and the female (the most mannish woman I’ve ever seen) has her hands in and on my vaginal opening, trying to keep my baby alive.

“Does the umbilical cord have a pulse?” I asked her/him.

“No,” she whispered back, and I can see she is fighting like hell to keep me together. I feel her squeezing rhythmically down there, this freakish below the waist version of CPR.

Both EMTs are now crying out to the driver, “Easy Barrett, I’m on my knees here! Let’s move now- get there!”

They are terrific and capable, I tell them, and they tell me I am also. They wheel me through the bright yellow Labor and Delivery doors to Room 14, where it is to occur. My blood pressure is 170 over 105. “Is that bad?” I ask.

Dr. Bodden, who has been my gynecologist since I was 18, FINALLY shows up. He says he can see the baby’s little feet and that I am to deliver her with as little intervention as possible. “What does that mean?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer me, but there is choreographed chaos all around us.

“Please, I don’t want to feel any pain,” I say, embarrassed.

I am given anti-nausea serum via the IV and an epidural from Dr. Frankfurt who tells me he wants to take his wife to Costa Rica soon. And there is Nicole, the very sweet and very overweight nurse. She is from Heaven.

I go back to my *Hail Mary's*.

They also inject something to induce labor, and I feel an urgent need to go to the bathroom—crazy pressure. Some cramping—these are contractions. Nicole holds a kidney bean shaped bowl in front of my face, and I vomit HARD, as I give birth to my baby girl.

My mother has broken down in hysterics, and she and Jeff are holding each other in agony, while I do what I've got to do.

I hear my mother's pained voice say "Why does she have to vomit? Why can't she get a break?"

I lift the blanket to look at her between my legs. She doesn't look anything like I expected. She is beautiful. And I mean, beautiful. Earlier Jeff and I were asked if we will want to see her, to hold her, to say goodbye. We both decline instantly.

But as time passed, we have independently both decided to do exactly that. We want to see her, to hold her, and to say goodbye.

Nicole is throwing out my vomit, and I am telling her I have fully delivered—I could feel her emerge. It was amazing.

Nicole cuts the cord and I hold her then. She is as small as a newborn kitten, but she's my daughter. I am not crying- I am numb- I am in love with her. Mom and Jeff are crying like crazy people- I realize I must be in shock or denial.

Jeff holds her.

Mom holds her.

We are asked if we'd like to have her buried at Restland.

"Yes," we reply blankly. It is surreal, unreal, too real.

Our daughter is like a doll, I decide. Mom doesn't want to let go of her. My beloved Jeff and my beloved mother-- they seem more grounded in this strange reality than I am- I don't understand how this can be. I'm a bit drugged and numb, but I am acutely present. The room is in Technicolor.

Dr. Bodden is hoping the placenta will come naturally, and it does. As I break into a coughing fit, the pressure from that forces it free. He presses on my stomach to make sure everything is clearing. It hurts.

My nausea returns in a hateful way, and I begin to feel irritable and angry. The blood pressure tests every 30 minutes feel like a death vice grip and I swear my veins are going to explode. *Enough al-fucking-ready, people.*

We move to the Jackson Building.

Three Days Later

“I want to tell you about Mattie!” said my extraordinarily beautiful mother.

After the Reverend gave his funeral service, which was standard but very nice, Mom, amazing Mom, brought down the house—telling everyone how lovely and perfect her granddaughter Mattie was, and how lucky we feel to have known her. She described how her eyes looked like mine, how her legs looked like Jeff’s. And how her smile was a very cool combination of us both. She told us not to associate Mattie with sadness, but with beauty, grace and joy.

I have never felt such love and admiration for someone. She let everyone know our daughter and her granddaughter. Afterward, Jeff leaned over and told me he fell a little more in love with me because I am HER daughter. Paul said he never loved her more than in that amazing, giving moment either.

Not a dry eye, not an unfeeling heart. Our baby girl was celebrated today, surrounded by loved ones and several huge pink bouquets. When we first entered the chapel, I caught my breath in one of those audible gasps that are embarrassing—I saw all those pink floral arrangements and was overcome—my mind protesting the sight. These flowers should be at her homecoming or her wedding, not her funeral.

Everyone has left our house now, and it’s just Jeff, me, and Stupid Kitty and we’re okay.

Each day will be a little different, harder and easier. We’ll have to pack her toys, clothing and books that we’ve been collecting for her in waiting. It will hurt terribly, but today we might have found a place to hold Mattie peacefully.

She is with God and with Jeff's dad in Heaven. She is safe and playing happily. She'll never be hurt, never be afraid or mocked, never have a broken heart and she'll never feel loneliness or pain or longing. She'll remain innocent and perfect.

Mattie Elizabeth. We don't feel the need to change anything—it's good where she is. Jeff and I are close and so in love. We are solid. I can't imagine a stronger, more wonderful man, or a more wonderful husband. Blessed.

Blessed we are.

Later, in the Middle of the Night

*I wanted to know you--
 Watch you grow up,
 Witness your discovery of things big and small,
 I wanted to brush your hair,
 Feel your cheeks with the back of my hand,
 I wanted to love you longer in this life.
 But I am grateful for the moment--
 The one that I got.
 Thank you for that.
 I love love love you.
 Today we framed your footprints.
 You wouldn't believe how tiny they are.
 And yet what impact--
 Feet that never touched the ground
 Crushed me.*

Four Days Later

Jeff and I laughed all morning. He had a beer for breakfast, and I ate an entire sheet cake. We didn't tiptoe around words either. Our conversations ranged from an analysis of Loretta and Doolittle Lynn's relationship to trying to rank the seven deadly sins in order of least horrible to

the worst. He voted for pride. I awarded the blue ribbon to wrath. Is anything uglier than anger?

I forked the chocolate cake in my mouth, feeling suspended between fury and exhaustion, flirting with two of the seven. I watched Jeff move around the house and I sometimes followed him. I didn't know what else to do. It reminded me of when we first moved back from our year of living in Costa Rica and he called me his shadow. The entire first week of life back in the States, I had to relearn everything it seemed, like a child following the lead of his parents.

Like Mattie would have done.

Jeff's sister Dana in California called to say they planted a lemon tree in Mattie's honor. That moved me immensely, thinking of Dana and Matt and their four girls getting dirty and digging in the dirt for us. Amy and Linc left a message saying that they'd planted a fig tree in Tennessee. Kristin planted an evergreen. And that's when I started crying. An evergreen.

We went to a nursery to find a tree to plant ourselves. The fact that where you buy trees is called a nursery spurred the decision to add to the list of the seven deadlies...*inappropriate nomenclature*. Jeff eyed this Aristocrat Pear Tree, which looked perfect to me also. So we lugged it home.

I sat on the front porch wearing a big floppy straw hat I had not worn since Costa Rica, watching Jeff jab at the ground with the shovel. In high school, he worked for a nursery (ugh, that word), so he knew what he was doing. I admired him for that. I watched the sweat drip down his face almost instantly.

While watching, my fingers found my ribs and my hips thru my t-shirt and yoga pants. Most women would be thrilled to find these jutting bones, but I was angry. Wrath. I was angry at my body for moving back to its original state far too quickly. Despite the sheet cake, I'd lost the pregnancy weight in four days. Truthfully, I hadn't gained too much but still.

My chest was a different story though. They ache. I read in What to Expect While Expecting that my breasts would only (only!) be engorged for 24-48 hours if I didn't nurse. And I wouldn't nurse. I took off my hat. Jeff looked over, like he sensed my discomfort.

I gave him a totally lame smile and asked if he wanted another beer.

He wiped his dirty arm across his forehead, smearing soil and tears. "I would have done anything for her. I would have watched princess movies. I would have gone dress shopping till

my eyes bled.” He was crying, standing there with shovel in hand. I could have gone to him, but I sat on the porch, feeling my bones, stuck in my own pain. Sloth.

I lay in bed that night going through *what if's*. I also read in that horrible book What to Expect that I should have been on my hands and knees and not on my back when it happened, to release pressure from the cord. What if I had thought to tell Mom to look in the book, to tell Jeff to jump on the internet? I felt fury at the 911 operator as I closed my eyes. We could have saved our baby if only, if only, if only. But that’s a dangerous game to play.

When I was a little girl, I used to think of every horrible thing that could possibly happen to me. Plane crashes. Head-on collisions. Being struck by lightning. I got it in my head somehow that if I imagined it, then it wouldn’t happen. I must have overheard an adult conversation that alluded to the idea that the thing that kills us, we never see coming.

So I’d walk to school, completely confident I’d never get hit by a car, never get cancer, never get kidnapped or worse because I had already thought about it. I never thought I’d lose a child. And the adults were right, it killed me.

I fell asleep at last, praying that the other thing I read would not come true. It suggested that the grief of losing a child could last two years before life gets back to normal, and many marriages don’t survive.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace. Hail Mary, Full of Grace.

Five Days Later

It was September 11. Everyone writes about this day; it always matters. I struggled with my pain. I drew swirling lines in yet another sheet cake with my coffee spoon. My tragedy paled in comparison. I knew it did. So many parents lost their children that day. And children lost their parents. Which was worse? A parent learning her son had died in the Twin Towers or a three year old whose daddy did not show up at day care because he died in the Twin Towers?

I chose then to take the pain, swallow it whole. It was a powerful realization for me to consider that my pain in losing Mattie was preferable to her experiencing losing me. I talked through this with Jeff, who kissed my forehead and whispered, “You’re such a good mom.”

The best of the worst of dreams came that evening. I dreamed I was playing with Mattie, and I could hear her Tinkerbell laugh. I was winding her golden curls around my fingers,

lengthening golden strands and then releasing them into bouncing spirals, like curling ribbon on a Christmas present. I saw her flying above me and around me, giggling, with gossamer wings. I cried in my sleep playing Mommy/Baby games.

Next Chapter (name TBD)

“Blow me over with a feather,” my friend LouAnn said when I told her we were getting divorced. She couldn’t believe it. “But you and Jeff are Barbie and Ken, Jena. You can’t ruin the Mattel franchise like this.”

“I’m sorry.” I was ashamed in front of LouLou. She and Michael have the kind of marriage everyone wants and hears about, but they are so freaking rare, the kind of relationship where navigating daily life appears effortless. Even their fights are smooth. There is never a question of *what if*. Michael and LouLou are forever. Jeff and I were not.

However, Jeff and I nailed the landing in our divorce.

“Blow me over with a feather,” she said again a year and a half later, as she witnessed how effortlessly we walked the tightrope of parallel, but independent, parenting at Louie’s birthday party. “I’m proud of you guys.”

In a way, it is effortless. We should have written a book together called How to Get Divorced. Our love for our children keep the playing field fair and just. Jeff is the real hero of course. Whereas my dad was the original dickface, Jeff is the crowned prince of fatherhood. He forgave me. I can’t imagine how he did it, but I bow humbly in his honor. *I’m proud of him.*

Jeff and I are state of the art. We’ve got most things down to a systematic science. From the kids to the houses to money matters, we know each other’s probable responses in most situations. We are no longer together or close, but we know each other. It’s the most distant of intimate relationships.

For example, if I say I’ll be somewhere at 1:00pm, he can safely assume I’ll arrive around 1:15pm. I can assume he’ll be irritated even if he planned his day around the expected 15 minute delay. He will look at me sternly, but he won’t say anything. If he says he’ll email me the flight reservations, we both know I will need to remind him a few times before he gets around to it, and most likely, I’ll be the one making the damn reservations. And I won’t say anything.

If he answers his cell on a workday with a staccato “I’m on a call,” I will reply with a lightning speed delivered news report of one of our kid’s doctor’s appointment results and hang up promptly without either of us having hurt feelings. If I say I need a check for our son’s gymnastics or for our daughter’s dance recital, he writes the check and questions nothing. We play poker face up.

We regularly converse using movie lines in lieu of normal conversation, like at his little sister’s wedding reception where we watched in fabulous horror as his brother-in-law and uncle wheeled each other around on the dance floor in a stolen wheelchair, saying “That is FAR from okay.” And when I pick up the kids in a sling because I hurt myself trying something at the gym, I explain nonchalantly, “I just wanted to ride the bull, Bud.” It works for us.

We rarely use each other’s real names or our children’s real names either, come to think of it. We reply to dozens of monikers each, but only to each other. Sometimes our respective families are in on the game, if they were privy to the special circumstance that spawned it. Like the holiday dinner when Jeff told everyone the story of how he waited in line at customer service somewhere, and a young country boy nudged his prone, sleeping grandmother awake by shouting “Mau Mau. Mau Mau!” Not surprisingly, my mother still answers to Mau Mau, begrudgingly.

We were so so happy at first. We were connected and in sync. We spoke the same language. After our first miscarriage, a tiny spider vein webbed through our perfect world. After the second miscarriage, it got worse. Jeff developed an aversion to travel. I developed a constant craving for it. He embraced gravity and stillness. I fought against it like a Cirque du Soleil performer. And after Mattie, well, I think we both felt the bridge beneath our feet give. To me, it sounded like that horrible grind of wrenching metal in a movie where buildings collapse in an earthquake. To him, I imagine it was more like sitting on the beach and watching the waves recede without returning, ebb without flow.

We became careful and cavalier. We made plans and executed. We showed up at parties, and we threw them. We were surrounded by friends and family, but the eerie pink afterglow of Mattie’s death was circumambient, like a San Francisco fog cover or a Parisian misty morning in spring. We grew apart.

Congo, the bear.bat.wolf.thing cat we adopted helped us heal. That fuzzy black cat defied the existence of anything but love, and sometimes I think he saved both our lives.

And then came Louis. And 20 months later, Alayna made four. We bought a big house and moved to the suburbs, and all the leaves fell off the tree as we broke every rule we set for ourselves. The bigger the house, the smaller the marriage. Queen sized bed in the master. No TV in the bedroom. The list of not-to-do's but did-them-anyway got longer. Jeff morphed into superdad, a big huge S on his shirt that left room for very little else in our oversized home. And I broke the biggest rule of all. I dared to disturb the universe.

And yet, here we are, years later, still calling each other Loretta and Doolittle Lynn, saying "as usual," in the elongated New York accent of the elderly couple who so amused us on an airplane years ago.

I drop the kids off at 4pm on Saturdays. They roll with it amazingly well, and we are ridiculously proud of them. And though it's difficult sometimes, Jeff and I communicate better than most couples, newlywed or 50 years in. "We're, you know, connected."

The first Easter after our divorce, we hugged in the driveway of his new house after we took the kids to church together. I told him I loved him, and he told me he loved me. We promised to keep up the good fight and to keep our eyes on the two bouncing balls we call LTB and Pooka.

There's an ever moving light on the horizon for me...what's next...what's next...what's next. For now, this works. I have love in my life but I don't think any man will ever know me truly as he did, as he does. Jeff and I are state of the art. Everything's just wonderful.

We've got this down to a science, don't we?