

Abnormal Pregnancy

The familiar pain started in the morning. Ava went into the bathroom, pulled down her pajama bottoms, and sat on the toilet. The pain got stronger. She rested her forehead on her knees. It was like a ripple at first, starting at the base of her spine and then crashing its way through her body. Her husband, Tim, had been with her the first and second times. They had both been scared.

Plop. She was afraid to look in the bowl because she knew what was there.

The twisting in her stomach subsided and she sat up slowly, pushing her sweaty bangs off her forehead. Taking another deep breath, she looked between her legs and saw what she expected: a tiny goldfish floating in a drop of red blood.

She considered calling Tim, who was probably at his desk, eating the sandwich she had packed for his lunch. She didn't want to hear the pity in his voice, though.

She sat motionless for a few more minutes to make sure the bleeding had stopped. Then, she wiped herself and stood up, peering down into the bowl. The goldfish was wriggling in the water. She felt bad. She had grown this little goldfish inside of her, nurturing it with her own blood and tissue. But she had hoped for something more.

Sighing, she hobbled to fetch the net from beneath the kitchen sink. She knew they didn't have any more fish bowls, so she grabbed the largest vase she could find and went back into the bathroom. She ran the tap until the water felt lukewarm, and then filled the vase halfway. Then she knelt beside the toilet and carefully scooped up her little baby, plopping him into the vase. He began swimming energetically. *At least he's athletic*, she thought, but the thought failed to amuse her. Suddenly, she felt very sick. She turned her face away as she flushed the toilet.

She considered naming the little guy, but decided to wait until Tim got home. She set him on the hallway table next to his siblings, Samantha and Charlie. That she wasn't sure of their sexes dully occurred to her.

Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket.

"Hey, it's me," said Lily, her sister. "How are you feeling?"

Ava had called her the night before to tell her about the pregnancy.

"I had another goldfish."

She began to cry.

Her sister sighed into the phone.

"Oh, Ava, I'm so sorry." Lily had given birth to a litter of kittens that spring. Ava had rushed to her house when she called to say she was delivering. She held her sister's hand and watched as fur ball after tiny, bloody fur ball emerged from between her legs.

Lily was pregnant again, but this time, her ultrasound had revealed a human baby boy.

"It's okay. I'll get over it," Ava said. "How are you feeling?"

"I keep eating everything in sight. I'm actually making a batch of cookies now, and five bucks says I eat them all before Steve gets home."

"How are the kittens?" she asked. She never felt comfortable referring to them as her sister's children.

"The kids are good," Lily replied. "Getting big. One of the neighbors had the nerve to ask if he could have one. Can you believe that?"

"No."

"I feel bad, because he and his wife are older and never had any pregnancies, but what am I supposed to do? I told him to try the humane society."

"That's good."

"Really, Ava, are you okay? You sound so down."

"I'm just disappointed." Tears threatened to come again. "I thought this time might be different."

"Oh, babe, I know. I'm sorry. But hang in there. It happened for me, so it can happen for you, too."

"Thanks," Ava said.

"Do you want to come over and talk? I'll save you some cookies."

"No, I'm going to lie down, I think. Love you."

Ava hung up and went into the nursery. More and more, she felt drawn to this room. Sometimes, an entire afternoon would pass, and she wouldn't leave until she heard Tim's key in the lock. He would ask what she had been doing

all day, and she would lie, making up some list of obscure chores ... *I polished the silverware ... I dusted the base boards ...* She never used to be like this. She used to be a woman with hobbies, a woman who liked to sew and who read voraciously. But now, she just liked to sit in the nursery and stare at the walls, imagining what life would be like when she finally got to be a mother. Her own mother would call this “setting an intention,” the idea that if you wanted something enough, and thought about it enough, it would happen. Ava didn’t put any stock in it. How many years had gone by without her dreams being realized? Sitting in the nursery just made her feel better. She had painted the walls the same green as her childhood bedroom. She wanted her future child to grow up in a room like hers.

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It had started when she and Tim were in college.

AN UNNATURAL PHENOMENON was what the papers called it. Their campus raged with the news.

“It happened to my parent’s neighbor ...”

“My cousin is pregnant ...”

“I heard she got an abortion ...”

Religious figures all over the country said it was a sign of the End Times. Scientists were baffled. Politicians blamed the rise of street drugs.

Pharmaceutical companies hired lawyers, and claimed they weren’t to blame.

Ava and Tim and their group of friends were skeptical at first. Tim thought it was all a hoax, like when Orson Welles had scared the country with

his radio show, "The War of the Worlds." Another friend was convinced it was the government's way of oppressing the poor and discouraging them from having children. Ava vaguely thought it was a conspiracy.

But the news continued to spread. *Abnormal pregnancy* was the term that caught on. The political correctness of it did little to mask the horror of what was happening. Women started giving birth to animals, seemingly at random. It worried Ava to the point where she stopped sleeping at night. She wanted to be a mom more than anything. It was a secret she kept to herself. As a college senior, she felt like her focus should be fixed on her grades, and getting a good job once she graduated. But all she wanted to do was marry Tim and move out of the city, settling into a nice home in the suburbs where they could raise their kids. By the end of their senior year, she told him what she wanted. He agreed. It was best to marry soon and have children soon. Maybe there was still time to beat ... whatever was happening.

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Ava emerged from the nursery later in the afternoon. Her stomach was still cramping. She thought soup and crackers might help. She heated a can and took her lunch into the living room. In the hallway, she passed the goldfish. Part of her resented their existence. Guilt gnawed at her whenever she had those thoughts. It wasn't their fault that they were only fish. Still, she could hardly bring herself to look at them. Tim was the one who fed them and changed their dirty water. She didn't have the heart to do it.

She clicked on the television. A sleek-haired newscaster was poised to speak. Below her, the ticker tape read, "Disturbing Abnormal Pregnancy."

Ava swallowed hard.

"An abnormal pregnancy in Britain is being called the worst of its kind," the newscaster said, her tone grave. She stared into the camera with a penetrating look.

"Friends and family members of thirty-six-year-old Bella Tildon are mourning today, after she died due to complications arising from an abnormal pregnancy."

Ava gasped. The camera cut to another reporter, a thin, mousy man standing in front of Elizabeth Tower.

"Mike Johnstone joins us live with the story. Mike, can you tell us what happened?"

"Susan, as you know, abnormal pregnancies have been on the rise and today, one of the worst cases has been reported. Bella Tildon, of Tooting Bec, died after reportedly becoming pregnant with an elephant."

Ava brought a hand to her mouth, a wave of nausea rising within her.

The man on screen continued.

"Reportedly, Ms. Tildon did not seek medical attention. Experts are saying that her death could have been prevented, had she had a preliminary ultrasound."

Ava jumped up from the couch, knocking over her soup. She barely made it to the bathroom before she vomited.

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Ava woke the next morning to an empty house. Tim had left a note on her bedside table. *Didn't want to wake you.*

She absently crumpled the note as she walked down the hall. The mid-morning sun fell through the windows in warm bands. As she passed by the hallway table, she stopped to look at her three goldfish.

Their tiny eyes bulged wide, as if they were surprised by her sudden attention. Their gummy lips opened and closed, mouthing wordlessly to her. In the strong sunshine, their scales glittered like fiery gold.

She got down on her knees, really looking at them for the first time since each of them had been born. They were pretty. It was strange to think of Tim as a father, but he certainly did a good job caring for them, cleaning and decorating their little bowls. They'd have to get a proper bowl for the newest goldfish. With a start, Ava realized they hadn't named him yet.

"Hey, little guy," she said, tapping at the vase.

He swam over to her, his tiny mouth quivering.

"What are you trying to tell me?" she asked. "Maybe I'll name you Seamus, because you're so golden red. Seamus Hannigan. That sounds nice."

Ava got dressed for the first time in days, pulling on one of Tim's old running t-shirts and her favorite pair of jeans, worn soft from use. She scraped her hair in a ponytail, splashed some water on her face, and brushed her teeth. Then she took her house key from its hook by the front door and left.

As she drove, she thought of Bella Tildon, of how it would feel to carry an elephant in her womb. That poor woman had been kicked to death from the inside. Ava couldn't even imagine the pain she must have suffered. She kept running a worried hand across her own abdomen. She felt completely normal, despite having just given birth. Maybe goldfish weren't so bad, after all.

At the pet store, she hovered in the fish accessories aisle, weighing her options carefully. She finally settled on green rocks and a stone castle, because they reminded her of Ireland. She chose a glass bowl like the ones they'd bought for Samantha and Charlie.

Back at home, she set up the new bowl, and then carefully scooped up Seamus and lowered him into his new home. He began to swim vigorously, the way he had when she put him in the vase yesterday. She laughed, but there was an ache deep in her heart.

She went to the nursery and stood in the doorway. Despite the many hours she had spent in that room, it looked dusty and unused. If she were honest with herself, she was tired of trying. Exhausted, really, from the hope and disappointment. And now, there was that terrifying news story. She ran a hand across her abdomen again.

The room already had a crib, purchased years ago. Tim had put it together in a single afternoon. It looked sad and empty. Weak sunshine filtered through the curtains and fell on it, dust motes sparkling in the air. This room never got good light.

Ava closed the door. She didn't know if she wanted to try a fourth time. She also didn't know if she wanted to quit trying for good. For now, maybe she could just accept what was.