

## Return to Sender

Dear [name no longer TBD],

Here's the good news: nothing will change. I don't need to change my budget, cancel that trip, or try to make more space in the house. I don't need to buy new clothes or change my diet. I can eat the stinky cheese, runny eggs, and sushi. I can drink as much as I want.

Because nothing will change.

I didn't expect you to come. Normally before someone arrives, I try to tidy up and get ready, but I wasn't ready. You have to understand I'd given up. I'd run out of hope, so you were a surprise.

I was more hungry and tired than usual, but I assumed that was just the new job. My back was sore, but I figured I'd just gotten out of shape.

But then I was late. Extra late. When I finally took the test, the second solid line stared up at me and I stared back at it, unbelieving. I walked into the other room in a daze and whispered to your dad that I thought he should finish the wine we'd opened and he'd probably need to cancel the trip he had planned in nine months. The best part might have been his face when he turned to me, wide-eyed, and said, "Wait, really?"

You have to understand, we really wanted you. We'd waited for you for years. When we tearfully hugged, shaking with joy and shock, you gave us a terrible and dangerous gift. Something I'd run out of. Hope is one of the most treacherous human emotions, and I almost wish you didn't give it to us. Almost.

I took another test, to be sure.

Then a blood test, to be sure.

The best part may have been telling my sister. She had also waited for years. The best part may have been telling my best friend. They both would be such good aunts to you. They already loved you just because you existed.

The best part may have been my first appointment. The first time we saw you on the screen, you were a tiny little cashew. The app said you were the size of a sweet pea, your heartbeat a fiercely blinking light on the screen.

Everything will change.

The last time I saw you, a week later, you were just as tiny. Too tiny. You'd stopped growing. No more blinking heartbeat.

I don't know when it happened. My body was still building a home for you and somehow I never felt the moment when your heart stopped beating. When neither *expectant* nor *mother* described me anymore. When my body became a graveyard.

The worst part was when the doctor quietly said, "I'm sorry," and the color drained from the world and I forgot how to breathe and my vision blurred. The doctor told your dad and me to take as long as we needed, which was a kindness, but we needed an eternity.

This is a letter you'll never read because by the time I started it, you were already gone. I thought I'd get to meet you. I couldn't wait to see who you would become and how you would change the world. I thought we'd have more time together.

The worst part was when we left the doctor's office and the receptionist said she was sorry for our loss. The worst part was crying on the bus on the way home. The worst part was the heaving sobs escaping from my body into your dad's chest after we finally made it home. The worst part was texting the two people who I had told because I couldn't do it over the phone. The worst part was losing something I never got to touch. The worst part was clogging the toilet with used kleenex. The worst part was trying to plan a video chat with your grandparents, who didn't even know about your existence yet, and now I had to tell them you were already gone.

When I sent a text, your grandpa responded, “Is everything okay?” and I lied to him because they were about to go out to lunch with their friends and I didn’t want to ruin his day any earlier than necessary. The worst part was telling your other grandparents, who seemed eager to change the subject.

The worst part was the amount of painkillers the doctor prescribed to me for the coming days. I want to tell you that both of your parents are strong and resilient and brave but even in the depths of my grief, I was afraid of how painful your exit would be. The worst part was when I thought about how your dad was taking such good care of me, and I thought about how he would be such a good dad. The worst part was seeing how much pain he was in.

The worst part was the pain in my body as the remnants of your home and your tissue slowly broke down. The worst part was when it occurred to me that this was probably the worst day of my life. Amidst the shades of grief, past the initial shock, it was just an abstract thought that floated past me like a cloud in the gray sky, long enough for me to see it, to acknowledge it, and then it floated away.

The worst part was opening the mail, while your remains were still leaving my body, and finding a bill for the positive blood test.

The worst part is still feeling constantly crushed by an invisible heartache that no one else understands. Walking through a world that is full of people who have hope, joy, and sweet mundanity. Walking through that world feeling more than bereft. Less than nothing. Grieving the loss of something, someone I never even got to hold in my hands.

The worst part is all of it. And also, none of it. Because for a short time you were ours and we were yours. We gave you our hearts but they weren’t enough to keep yours beating. The worst part is how much it still hurts.

The worst part is when I absentmindedly touch my belly and think of you and then realize you’re not there anymore. You’re not anywhere anymore. All you are is the shadow of a memory. A cut so deep that nothing will soothe it.

I don’t know how long I will feel like this. I’m afraid the answer will be forever. *It will fade over time*, they’ll say. *It will get easier*, they’ll say. But I don’t want it to fade or get easier because as long as

this wound is still tearing me apart, as long as I'm still bleeding, it's like a small part of you is still with me. Just let me hurt a little longer so I can pretend you're not gone. I know there's a flaw in that but I can't see it through the tears.

We never got to say goodbye.

We never got to say hello.

Nothing will change.

Never bigger than a sweet pea but for seven weeks you were ours. For the short time we had together you were a source of joy. A beacon of light, casting away the hopelessness. Long anticipated. Deeply loved and deeply wanted.

The hope you gave us is shattered. *It's not your fault*, the doctor said. *Nothing you did*. I'd waited so long for you that I didn't think about all the things that could still go wrong. There are reasons to be hopeful, but anytime I try to touch them, they slip through my fingers, like ash. I can't see outside this moment, take a step away. I'm afraid I'll forget the pain and lose what I had left of you.

I've learned not to run from emotions that are bigger than me. It's better to reach out and touch them. It's okay, it will hurt. You might cut yourself when you wrap your fingers around the shards of hope scattered around you. But it helps to hold the feelings, even if they burn you. To make them into a part of you, to name them. Something I never got to do with you.

I never knew it would hurt so much to miss someone I'd never meet.

Nothing will change.

I wish we had more time.

Love always,

Your mom