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Samuel

by

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She named him Samuel. It wasn't the name he was supposed to have, not the one they'd carefully chosen after weeks of lobbing names back and forth, but she wanted to save that name, the other one, for a baby that lived. Mitch thought it was silly, naming a baby that wasn't even a baby anymore, but Ellie needed it, a name to call him, something real, permanent. Because while Mitch could carry on like it'd never happened, like the pregnancy had just been a dream they'd both had, woke from together to find it evaporating into the darkness, Ellie knew it had been real. Knew little Samuel had existed, even if only for twenty weeks. Knew she'd never be the same again, now that she'd had this slim glimpse of motherhood, before it had slipped away.

Incompetent cervix, they called it. It was her body that had let them down, herself and Mitch and little Samuel. Incompetent. What a cruel label to bear.

Even worse than the actual grief, which came in inopportune waves throughout the day, was all of the people around her with their mind-numbing platitudes, their empty reassurances that "it wasn't mean to be," all of those arrogant comments about God's will and it not being the right time, and that when it was meant to happen it would happen. Their ignorance was staggering.

The only helpful words anyone had offered came from the old lady who caught Ellie crying in the grocery store, standing before the tiny jars of baby food that sweet

Samuel would never taste, who said, “Only people who’ve lost babies have any idea what it’s like.” She’d clutched Ellie’s hands, wadded wet tissues and all, and said, “I know your pain.” She relaxed her bony blue-veined grip, surprisingly strong for such an elderly woman, and went gingerly on her way, listing to the left. Ellie wondered, as she watched her round the end of the aisle, if this woman had ever succeeded in having children. She both wanted to know and didn’t. She wasn’t in the mood for other people’s happy endings, and couldn’t bear the weight of a tale that ended in emptiness.

She kept a picture of Samuel on her dresser. It was all she had left: the grainy black and white ultrasound of his pumpkin-shaped head, domed belly, long skinny limbs. Just the promise of a baby, really. Mitch wanted her to put it away, thought seeing it every day was just a reminder of all she’d lost. That was the difference between them. For Ellie, it was a touchstone for her grief. She wasn’t feeling this dark emptiness for nothing. It was for Samuel. When the hollow feeling was too much, when it was threatening to swallow her whole, she could sit before the framed photo of Samuel, back when he was safe inside her, and rest her hand on her empty belly. She could touch his tiny nose as her tears fell, and tell him how sorry she was.

Mitch wanted nothing of apologies.

“It happened. It’s actually fairly common. Next time they’ll stitch it closed and we’ll be fine.”

Next time. It loomed over her, weighed down on her. Everyone talked about next time, about putting this behind her, getting pregnant again, erasing Samuel and her sorrow with a new pregnancy. But the thought of trying again terrified Ellie. She woke, startled, from nightmares about babies dropping out of her in a book store, at Starbucks,

in the middle of a work meeting on monthly goals. Trying again meant opening herself up to the chance of losing another. When Mitch brought it up, he smiled reassuringly at her, squeezed her shoulder, stroked her hair, all the while Ellie held her breath, tried to slow her racing heart, tucked her damp, trembling hands beneath her thighs.

It wasn't that she didn't want a child anymore. Just that she wasn't in a hurry to erase this sadness, forget about Samuel, move on to a new level of fear. Her pregnancy with Samuel had been easy, uneventful, until the bleeding had started. She knew her next pregnancy, if there was one, would be an exercise in slow-motion panic. A daily battle of will not to let the fear swallow her whole, the way the grief was now. Would she ever be intact again, without some big, dark emotion trying to obliterate her?

Mitch took them away for the weekend, a thoughtful surprise, to a hotel up the coast. It was a wild and windy day, storms looming, slate seas under gray skies, whitecaps everywhere, rain blowing in, moving on, doubling back. Mitch built a fire in their suite. Ellie watched from the bed, snuggled in a cocoon of down. For a moment, nothing else mattered, just the warmth of the bed, the cozy dreariness outside, the view of Mitch's broad back as he carefully stacked the wood, the promising whiff of smoke, the snap of the flames as they took.

When Mitch settled beside her, his hand on her hip, the moment dissipated.

"I can't," she said. The only words that ever felt true anymore.

"It's okay," he said. "We have time."

Time stretched, slowed, bent and wrapped too tightly around them. Time hammered in Ellie's chest and split her in two. Time accelerated and carried Mitch with it, away from Ellie, away from Samuel. Time was her only hope, and her worst enemy.