

Still Angel

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Winner of the short story contest sponsored by Actor Rutger Hauer on his official website, January 2003.

Two days before Christmas, my water breaks, and usually, that's the beginning of a joyful and miraculous process. I am nine weeks pregnant and it signifies something else...something unexpected and horrible.

The hospital obstetrics practice has a policy; they won't see you until you've been pregnant for ten weeks. I haven't had my first appointment, but I need immediate medical attention two days before Christmas. I lay on the couch, clutching my belly and bracing for the inevitable, as my husband nervously places the call.

"My wife needs to see an obstetrician immediately."

Pause.

"Our first appointment is scheduled for January 6."

Pause.

"Nine weeks."

Pause.

"We KNOW your policy, and we KNOW we've never been there before. This is an emergency and she needs to see a doctor, NOW."

Pause.

"Excuse me..."

Pause.

"Ma'am..."

Pause.

“Look, what part of ‘emergency’ didn’t you understand? She just passed a whole lot of fluid, and we think her water br...”

Pause.

My husband slams the phone down.

The administrator on the phone needs to talk with a nurse about their policy in a case like ours. They will call us back. I urge him to call another office...any other office...the cramps are beginning, and I won’t mind labor cramps as long as I don’t have to see...

He calls another office...no answer. He calls a third office...they ask him a barrage of incredibly personal questions and dismiss him because we have the wrong insurance. On the bedroom chair is a little snowsuit I impulsively bought last year for the baby we’d someday have...the pattern of cherubic suns, moons and stars matches our bedroom decorations. Now, I cradle the snowsuit in my arms, bury my face in it, and weep. I’ll have to put the snowsuit away now. The fourth office tells us to come over right away. It doesn’t matter that I am a ‘new’ patient, and our insurance is fine.

In the waiting room, I still feel the slow ooze of fluid. I will not cry, I tell myself. Pregnant ladies, smiling and healthy, walk in and out and wait cheerfully. A closed-circuit television broadcasts information about “you and your healthy baby.” The medical secretaries are wearing Santa hats and sampling from a table of Christmas cookies in the file room. In a last-ditch effort to maintain my emotions, I seize a nearby magazine, with its cover torn off. I open the magazine, silently praying for some redemption in its pages, but crying starts instead. The magazine is “Fit Pregnancy.” The pregnant ladies are staring at me, but I don’t care and think, “You just go ahead and stare. Stare at me, and just rub your belly, and be thankful you aren’t me, thankful you have a healthy baby, thankful that a trip to this office is a rite of passage instead of a death sentence.”

We are called into the sonogram room. I had a sonogram two weeks earlier, and saw the baby’s heartbeat (Blink, blink, blink, blink). We have a photo from the session, which my husband carries in his wallet; he calls the baby “Munch.” This time, I also see Munch. But the steady flicker of a heartbeat, so strong only two weeks before, is gone. Utterly, completely, and forever gone. I sob on the table. The technician keeps taking pictures from every angle; clean, clinical. I continue to look at the screen, in case somehow she’s made a mistake and the heartbeat suddenly appears. The mistake never comes. My husband stands quietly in the corner, the color draining from his face.

We wait in another small room, painted a sunny yellow with floral prints on the walls. I am doubled over with tears, my heart broken. A compassionate female doctor explains our options to us: wait for a miscarriage (the first time anyone’s actually said the word in my presence) to occur naturally, which involves pain and things I probably

shouldn't see, or have the contents of my uterus surgically removed under anesthesia. I think about how unfair the word "miscarriage" is because of how it implies that the woman has somehow failed and it doesn't actually have anything to do with an extra set of chromosomes. We know there is no heartbeat, so there seems no moral choice involved...I am immediately prepared for surgery, an "emergency evacuation." I picture a loudspeaker going off in my womb to the dead child..."This is an emergency evacuation, please form a single file line and head for the stairs..." (In the meantime, the other hospital calls our home voice mail to say they've decided to see me.)

My hospital gown has suns, moons and stars on it, just like the baby's snowsuit. The surgery ward is a solemn place. Soft wails can be heard from neighboring rooms where other unlucky women wait their turns. Despite the macabre feeling in the air, a kind nurse named Jennifer smiles and talks to me softly. I burst into tears and thank her for smiling.

I awaken in the recovery room a mere moment later. I feel a slow turning pain in my abdomen, remember where I am, and tears flow again. Simple as that. Pregnant, not pregnant anymore. Clean, clinical. A nurse sees the tears and asks if I need a pain pill, and I explain that I'm just sad. She suggests professional counseling, and I despise her for it. The woman in the next bed over, recovering from the same procedure, is cheery and talkative with the nurses and I despise her for it. As they wheel me out of the recovery room, another nurse says "Merry Christmas."

All I can think about on the way home (when I'm not throwing up) is the baby. What have they done with my baby? Clean, clinical, simple as that... Is it in a jar somewhere, or a disposal bin, or waiting to be used by some scientific researcher? Is my baby in a garbage pile with used coffee grains, plastic silverware and kleenex? I'd been so afraid to see it, yet now it's gone and I want to see it more than anything. I want to tell it I'm sad, I'm sorry, I'll love it, I'll miss it forever.

We pass the Christmas lights flashing from houses in our neighborhood (Blink, blink, blink, blink), and the sight of a nativity outside the Presbyterian Church slices through me, an icy dagger. "Merry Christmas," the nurse said. Merry Christmas? What does that mean? A feeling of peace and goodwill to commemorate the birth of a baby? I vomit again.

The next day is Christmas Eve. The church chimes, ringing out Silent Night, keep waking me up. I'm not throwing up anymore, but I hurt worse. A neighbor slips a note under our door: would we help light the luminaria at the neighborhood observance later? The mail arrives, including three Christmas cards with congratulations for our baby, friends' Christmas pictures of their babies, and a Christmas present my husband ordered for our baby. The phone keeps ringing with happy relatives and holiday wishes, but I don't want to answer it or even hear the messages. Merry Christmas. I fall back to sleep, and dream of the empty celestial snowsuit, walking around the house by itself. Merry Christmas.

Our other two children have been with my mother. When she brings them back, we have to tell them. My 5-year-old son sees me crumpled on the couch with a tear-streaked face and yells "Mommy! What's wrong!" My 7-year-old daughter hovers in the doorway. "Um," I begin, swallowing back tears. "The baby died. I had to go to the hospital, and have an operation, to take the baby out. So I don't have a baby in me anymore, because it's gone." Silent Night. Blink, blink, blink, blink. My son throws his arms around me and holds on for dear life, while my daughter looks small and ghostly, and pretends to be invisible. I cry into the boy's sweet-smelling hair and cover his face with tears and kisses. Merry Christmas. "You're still going to church with your grandmother tonight, guys, so change your clothes," my husband says. My daughter slinks over, grabs my hand tightly, and whispers, "Mommy. Can I still be an angel?"

Christmas Eve dinner at my in-laws, the biggest yearly affair, starts at 6:30. I can't handle seeing the entire extended family, so we go over at 5:15 to be gone before most people arrive. Everyone is in holiday velvets — I am in a sweat suit. Merry Christmas. Neighbors I've never met are also seated in the living room. My brother-in-law kisses my forehead and asks how I'm doing, and the neighbors ask what's wrong. "I just had surgery," I explain discreetly. My mother-in-law crosses the room to where the neighbors are enjoying miniature quiches on festive holiday plates, somehow forgetting I'm in the room, and loudly says "She lost her baby yesterday." Clean, clinical, simple as that. Blink, blink, blink, blink... You just go ahead and stare... and be thankful you aren't me... I'm suddenly dizzy and need to leave, but not before enduring guilt for not staying and eating, and having our appearances criticized. "You didn't even shave," my husband is told. Merry Christmas. Mommy. Can I still be an angel?

In the morning, I watch the kids open their presents for as long as I can. I don't care to open mine. One of my husband's is a baby present, not taken out of the stack soon enough. I go to sleep hoping my dad stops calling until I'm ready to talk. He will keep calling until my husband stops saying I'm asleep. I don't mind the thought of talking to him as much as I fear he'll have things to say about the Will of God that tornado victims never have to hear.

Now it's been a little over a week. At the mall, I see a teenage pregnant girl, and cry with frustration and jealousy. I venture out for sushi (because we know there won't be any pregnant ladies there) and see a couple with a newborn baby (and wonder how that baby would look in a celestial snowsuit). The first time I laugh is in the car, right before I see a baby on a billboard and start crying all over again. An angry letter I wrote to a newspaper editor about anti-abortion protesters and their pictures of dead babies is published four days after my operation. I send difficult e-mails to friends, relatives, and professional contacts. Merry Christmas. Some people say nice things, some people say insensitive things. My four pregnant girlfriends, in a club I no longer belong to, are suddenly distant. I return to work, stare at the cubicle wall, and tears roll down my chin. Seven women I know confide their similar experiences; varied times, varied stories, all of them still sad and still haunted. I search for an anonymous, online support group... I click a search engine's suggested address, and find a site where women post photographs of their dead babies, all excruciatingly pictured in lifeless slumber.

Sometimes I have nightmares. A pink slimy creature with large eyes, stubby arms and a tail crawls up next to my ear and whispers, "Mommy." I wake up with a start. Munch whispers different things to me sometimes, and I am never sure whether I love it, am afraid of it, or whether I'm beginning to lose my mind. I don't need counseling, I tell myself...I don't need someone to hear me snivel and tell me how to live my life until time's up. Other nights, I lie awake (Silent Night) wondering whether I have the right to grieve for a baby that wasn't even really here yet, didn't have a brain, a gender, a name. I reason that the baby was already dead, no heartbeat (Blink, blink, blink, blink) so we didn't kill anything by having the surgery. Clean, clinical. Sometimes I'm deeply frightened by the notion that somehow I really let them kill it. Some days I laugh for no reason, most days, I cry for no reason, apparently as random as the episode itself. Christmas is over, (Merry Christmas,) a new year has begun, and Munch whispers, "Mommy. Can I still be an angel?"