

Heartbeat

It was an unseasonably chilly and dreary September afternoon. My husband, Ben, and I were outside of our two-story apartment building. He was busy tinkering endlessly on the engine of his Plymouth Sundance. I, on the other hand, was sitting quietly on the stoop, still wearing the pajamas I had worn to bed the previous evening. That morning was actually one of the better ones. At least I wasn't hunched over the toilet heaving up the two Saltine crackers I had managed to keep down earlier in the morning.

As I sat on the cold cement step, I felt a strange wetness between my legs. It was as if I were unconsciously peeing. I called for Ben to come sit by me. There were others around, so I whispered into his ear what was going on. Ben instructed me to just stand up and run to our apartment while he moved over to sit where I was. We knew that even though I was only two and a half months pregnant, my body was doing strange things; this definitely wasn't out of the question.

It seemed like I climbed the stairs to the door in almost one leap. I raced across the living room and shoved open the bathroom door. After I took a split second to turn on the light, I looked down and stood there stunned by what I saw. My blue and white linen pajama pants were soaked with bright red blood. My heart, previously racing, seemed to stop. The air in my lungs was sucked out, and I choked to breathe.

After a few moments, I was finally able to move. I tried to call to Ben from inside the bathroom, but my voice was as squeaky as a mouse. I ran out the door to the balcony, bent over the railing, and yelled. My concerned husband flew up the stairs as he listened to my hysterical explanation of what had happened. He roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me inside the apartment so he could look closer at what was happening. Within a split second of seeing the blood, he grabbed my arm again and pulled me back out the door. Ben didn't say a word until we got to the bottom of the stairwell. "Get in the truck. We're going to the hospital," he calmly stated.

We lived only five blocks from the medical center. He drove cautiously down the side streets, yielding at all the unmarked intersections. Once we arrived, he pulled his little red truck into the ambulance bay and jumped out. By then the nurses had seen us and rushed out with a wheelchair. Ben explained what was going on; once again, I was hysterical.

As I stood up, my legs didn't want to move, and I stumbled. Ben's strong arms were right there to catch me. He held me up as I struggled to gain some balance, and then he guided me to the waiting wheelchair.

After I had been properly registered for my emergency room visit, I was taken to a small, cold exam room. Ben was still parking the truck, so the nurse helped me undress and put on a hospital gown. By then I had stopped crying; I just felt empty and cold. Goosebumps covered my arms and legs. The nurse tried hard to make me feel at ease by asking about work and school, but conversation seemed so insignificant. All I wanted was to know what was going on with my baby.

The nurse left then, and I was alone. As I looked around my desolate holding tank, I realized my heart was still beating rapidly. It thudded hard in my chest like a hammer was beating from the inside, and it

rang like a bell in my ears. Questions without answers were darting like lightning through my mind. I wanted to scream for someone to come and unravel the web of thoughts in my head. After what felt like an hour, someone brought Ben in to be with me. He held my hand and rubbed the back of it with his thumb. That small touch was all it took for me to feel safe again.

The nurse returned with her tools in tow. She began the drill of taking my temperature and blood pressure. She asked a list of questions about my past, inquiring about any illnesses, diseases, or allergies I may have had. When she had completed her questionnaire, she informed me that the doctor had been called and would be in shortly. She then turned and left the room.

When the nurse returned with the doctor, there was another whole list of questions. I felt like I was part of an inquisition. He finally came to the conclusion there was nothing that I had done differently in the preceding days that could have endangered my fetus.

The next step was a physical exam. I held Ben's hand as the young doctor put my feet in the stirrups. I tried to relax as he did the exam, but the reality of what was happening began to set in. I thought about all the blood and what it meant. Hot tears once again streamed down my cheeks. The more I tried to calm myself down, the more anxious I got. Ben caressed my forehead and softly said, "Everything is going to be fine, honey." I relaxed enough to let the doctor finish, but the sobs were welling up inside of my chest. I felt like they were a bomb, ready to explode at just the wrong moment.

After the doctor said he was finished, he took off his gloves and stood up. He paused for a moment and seemed stumped. He stated that he hadn't found anything out of the ordinary, besides the blood. He also noted that he couldn't find where it was coming from because my cervix was closed. He assured Ben and I that if it had been a miscarriage, my cervix would have opened up to expel the fetus. A huge tidal wave of relief rushed over me.

The perplexed doctor went to one of the many drawers and pulled out a Doppler to try to hear the baby's heartbeat. He covered my legs with a blanket and then pulled the gown up to expose my abdomen. He squirted a cold, bluish colored jelly on it to help the Doppler move easily across the skin. I hadn't heard the baby's heartbeat before, and, since nothing was wrong with the baby, I was looking forward to hearing it. The doctor fumbled with the paddle, moving it one way and then the other. A couple of times he found my heartbeat, but he couldn't find the baby's. All the anxiety that had gone away slowly began to creep back. After a few more attempts to locate the heartbeat, he stopped and went to get another doctor to assist him.

When he left, I looked at Ben. He must have been able to see what I was thinking, because he quickly told me, "Stop thinking the worst."

It was only a minute or two before the first doctor knocked and walked in accompanied by the second doctor. He was older than the first, so I was sure he was experienced enough to find even the tiniest heartbeat. He too tried to find the sound of the baby's heart unsuccessfully. I saw the look that he passed on to the other doctor, and I knew instantly that something was wrong. I was told to relax before the two exited the room. In my mind, this could only mean one thing: Something was clearly wrong!

For a few moments, Ben and I didn't say anything. The dead silence was awkward. Neither of us wanted to state the obvious: no heartbeat meant there was no baby. We hadn't been prepared to get pregnant,

but we never even considered any other options but to become parents. It was the right choice. We wanted to have a family eventually. So what if we started a little early? Ben was finally the one to break the silence. "If we did lose the baby, it's for a good reason," he somberly stated. I knew he was right, but I hadn't wanted to admit it out loud. Ben and I waited for almost an hour in that cold exam room. We tried to keep our spirits up by talking of different things, but it was to no avail. The stone cold silences became longer and the conversation shorter.

Finally, there was an opening in x-ray for an ultrasound. I felt like I was entering a gas chamber on death row, except it wasn't me who was sentenced to die. It was an innocent little baby.

The technician was ready to go as soon as we arrived. Within seconds of the start of the procedure, I was able to see my little baby for the first time. I could see her little arms and her tiny legs. I could see that she was moving around and rolling all over. I wanted to think that it was a good sign, but I didn't want to get my hopes up. After just a few short seconds of checking over how the baby was, the technician smiled and said, "It has a healthy little heartbeat." I was amazed to hear those words. I had spent the last several hours preparing for the worst, but now my baby was okay.

Once again tears began to well up in my eyes, but this time they were tears of happiness. I didn't try to stop them as they filled my eyes and poured like a warm fountain down my cheeks. Feelings towards this living being growing inside of me rushed over me like a tidal wave. I then realized what I was destined to do with my life. I was to spend every moment cherishing that innocent child.

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