


Due Date

Category: Stories

written by Georgia Eldridge | April 14, 2023



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to stare at
their round bellies...

It's the bright orange color that catches my eye. Nestled in a box under my home office desk, alongside unused breast pads and pumping supplies left over from the birth of my first daughter.

My first, because there should have been a second. A girl.

She would have been arriving two weeks from today. I should have been large and round and sweaty, and struggling to sleep at night as I approached our due date. Her due date. Friday, August 13.

Instead, here I am, staring at a plastic bottle of orange sugar water, the one my obstetrician's office gave me when I was sixteen weeks along—far enough along to have overcome an early pregnancy scare. (“I’m so glad to hear the testing came out okay,” I remember my doctor saying.) Far enough along to start asking, at the same visit, if I was a good candidate for a vaginal birth after cesarean. Far enough along that I began, slowly but surely, to get excited again.

The other setting where I’m reminded of my missing daughter is at work. As a newborn hospitalist in a busy postpartum wing, I spend my days seeing dozens of babies—reviewing their prenatal and birth records, examining each tiny, perfect body and conducting rounds with the new parents, who are sleepy, anxious and excited all at once.

“Congratulations,” I say to the many moms I see. “Did your baby arrive on time or early? Any complications with the pregnancy?” There’s no avoiding it.

I was like these women once: marking a date on my calendar, clearing all but the necessary appointments and checking out library books on how to introduce an older child to a new sibling.

I try not to stare at their round bellies with envy or remorse or even sadness. I have to get through my day and get home to my daughter. There's no room for my grief at work.

Now, sitting at my desk, I stare at the bottle. I wish I could get rid of it. Still, it seems like a waste to just toss it.

But to gift it would be weird, too. I imagine myself saying, "Well, I was pregnant when they gave it to me. But not by the time I was supposed to drink it and then go in for the test." Even a little white lie—"My OB's office gave me an extra glucose drink. You know, the one that helps them to tell if you have gestational diabetes"—would feel awkward. I've never been a good fibber, and honesty would feel just as gawky.

Perhaps, I thought, I should leave it at the community fridge. Inconspicuous on a shelf next to canned corn and beans and some bathroom supplies. But is that like dumping? Does anyone even need this thing?

As with my daughter, I'm unsure of what place this bottle should hold in my life. Is it a marker of my tragedy, of our family of four that should have been? Or just another piece of clutter that I'm procrastinating about getting rid of before our move?

Our younger daughter's ashes sit in a vase made by a friend of my sister's. It's white with blue lines snaking their way around a broad, round belly. Tucked behind outdated photographs of nieces and nephews in England. Relegated to a corner of our bedroom, nameless and dusty.

I asked my husband if he thought we should name her. He asked me what I wanted. I wasn't sure. Baby B didn't fit, but neither did our first choice of name for this little girl, either. I had wanted it to be a surprise, but my husband told me we were having a little girl the night we realized that this was the end.

Our daughter had severe fetal hydrops, in which abnormal amounts of fluid accumulate in the body—a life-threatening condition that can cause a potentially fatal "mirror syndrome" in the mother as well. Continuing the pregnancy would only harm both of us.

That night, as the reality fell on us of what we had to do, we held each other and cried. The layperson term was a termination for medical reasons. My surgeon called it a dilation and evacuation, or D&E. I hated both phrases equally.

And now that our daughter is a pile of ash in a vase on a shelf, it feels even more strange to name her. The baby who died at twenty weeks, only half-made when, mercifully, the doctor pulled her from my belly. Just a few weeks before we signed a contract on our first house in Florida, and just months before the dreaded Roe v. Wade Supreme Court ruling. It felt like a cruel

cosmic joke.

And now here I am. It's been eighteen weeks since I lost her, since I came home wearing disposable underwear and hospital socks, with no baby.

I still don't know what place she holds in our family.

I knew where she *didn't* belong: When the funeral home asked, I somehow knew that I didn't want her cold in the ground, somewhere miles away across state lines from me, her mama. I had to take her with me. She was a part of me. She *is* a part of me.

I pick up the orange plastic drink and throw it in the trash. I walk to the shelf where my daughter sits, tucked away behind members of the extended family. I carry her gently, instinctively close to my belly, and place her on my desk, behind my laptop, inches away from where I read and write notes and run Zoom meetings, where only I can see her.

I don't need orange sugar water to remember that my daughter existed.

She'll always be a part of me.