

EIGHTEEN ATTEMPTS AT WRITING ABOUT A MISCARRIAGE

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I was alone with the doctor when I found out. I had come in for an emergency appointment because that morning I'd happened to notice the tiniest of smears on my toilet paper: a light brown smudge. Scott had asked if he should come with me, but I'd said no; it was nothing. If I hadn't glanced down at the paper, I wouldn't have known. I was eleven weeks along. There had been no problems before this. It was my second pregnancy. I knew that strange fluids and sensations were the order of the day. Who goes to the doctor because of a smudge she can barely see? I called and said, "I'm sure it's nothing. I'm sure I'm being silly. I should just calm down, right?"

"It's probably nothing," the nurse on call said, "but come in, just for your peace of mind."

I'm sure I'm not the only woman out there who has a problem with the word *miscarriage*. It sounds like a mistake I made: *Whoopsie, I dropped the baby. I was carrying her all wrong. Forgive me.* But what are the alternatives? "I lost the baby"? How bad a mother do you have to be to misplace a baby who's inside you? "The baby died" is a little too direct for most people. And let's not be dramatic about it; it wasn't quite a baby yet. Almost. But not yet.

The doctor — she wasn't my regular doctor, just the one on call the day I rushed in for my peace-of-mind ultrasound — said that nothing I'd done could have caused this miscarriage. That's the first thing she said after she'd told me the baby was gone. It hadn't even occurred to me that it might have been something I had done, so my mind raced with the possibilities. Had I done something wrong? How many ways could I blame myself for this?

The very first thing the doctor said was "I'm so sorry." I didn't understand. What was she sorry about? Was she sorry that the ultrasound machine wasn't working correctly? Wasn't that the reason the baby hadn't seemed to be doing much of anything? But of course I did understand. I knew perfectly well. After she left the room, I called Scott and repeated her words: *I'm so sorry*. The nurse brought in a cup of water and said sorry again to me as I sobbed and sobbed, and I apologized back for making so much noise. We echoed, I am sure, a chorus of voices throughout time saying the same thing for the same reasons: *I'm so sorry; so, so sorry*. So many voices apologizing for something none of us have any reason to be sorry about. I'm looking right at you, God, you jerk.

The doctor gave me the news while the ultrasound wand was still inside me. That alone can be traumatic. You are not supposed to be given bad news while you are being penetrated. To the doctors reading this: Remove the well-lubricated instrument before you tell the patient her baby is dead, especially if

you care at all about her ever having sex again. That's a tip for you. You're welcome.

Someone told me about the Jizo bodhisattva in Buddhism, who serves as a guide for lost and unborn children. A few days after the miscarriage I found that I couldn't cry — I needed to, but when I tried, I could manage only a dry whimper, which was unattractive as well as unsatisfying. So I went online to search for a Jizo figurine to purchase. A little moon-faced icon to hold, I thought, would surely bring on the tears. But most of the statues I found were jolly, roly-poly ivory figures — completely wrong for the occasion. Then I found the Jizo I needed: a four-inch-high cast-iron statue, his hands clasped, his eyes cast down. Small, dark, tasteful. He showed up, and instantly I hated him. But I can't get rid of him, so he sits on my dresser, inviting my wrath. He is hard and cold, no matter how long I press him between my palms, and he leaves my hands smelling like blood. He seems the right weight for bashing in someone's skull. I've tried to think of him as my ally, but he just feels like the world's crappiest consolation prize: *Hey, you lost a baby, but at least you can have this iron cudgel*. I told all this to a particularly contented Buddhist friend of mine, who laughed and said the Buddha would approve of my hating him, that he could handle it. "Yeah, well, I hate you too," I said, and she laughed some more.

At the moment I found out I had miscarried — April 28, 2008, 2:15 P.M. — time itself split into two paths. The timeline I was supposed to follow veered one way, and I went in the other, ridiculous direction, this road down which I wouldn't have a baby in November. I shouldn't even be writing this, you see, because I'm not supposed to be here. Two roads diverged, and I took the one I didn't want to travel, because the other had a ROAD CLOSED sign across it. I continue farther and farther down this road, and the longer I go, the angrier I get. But, of course, there's no way back.

What I did that may have caused this: I ran for the train. I drank a Coke. I had a sip of coffee. I had two sips of wine. I ate way too many cookies. I didn't eat enough fruits and vegetables. I forgot to take my prenatal vitamins six times. I never did take those omega-3 capsules. (I was more concerned about the fishy aftertaste than about my baby.) I petted my cat right after she used the litter box and probably didn't wash my hands. I took Tylenol three times. I wasn't sure I wanted another child. I laughed too hard.

The day before I found out I had miscarried, I was murdering day lilies.

(end of excerpt)