

The Rhythm of Our Lives

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Written to be read aloud.

The rhythm of our lives has changed so much, the score:

Toddler-touch in the morning. Foxy's damp paw. The *pad-pad-plod* on the landing, as you're intent on handing Mama a biscuit, when all she wants is a solo poo.

Our lives, with you.

Nursery rhymes in my head whilst I sit at work, boobs hurt. Missing you. Pleased to have my arms back, but joy when I get back at your panicked giggle that I'm home.

Safe arms, doors closed.

The rhythm of our lives used to be counted out in two week waits, thumbing through my diary, counting out the days.

Is bad news better at Christmas or on my 30th birthday? Which is a worse day?

If the gift isn't two blue lines, is blood on cotton, blood on water, if the gift makes us cry.

I'm a storyteller and I want this to be linear, to chart you through each loss:

one, two, then three and four

– the needed pause –

five and six

in one belly, this time mine.

I'm not sure there's time.

But here's the montage, scenes flash into view... maybe that will do.

It's 2015. Just married, finally happy. Both having navigated seas of early trauma, deserving our dry-land joy, feet in the sand with each other, all warmth and stretching horizons, both loved and lover.

Before we learnt:

THINGS THAT WON'T GET YOU PREGNANT:

Pineapple. Crystals. MacDonald's fries.

Open hearts, open legs, open eyes.

Acupuncture, hoping,

Paying ten grand,

Sitting with cold tea in Harley Street, holding hands.

Leaflets, forms, excuses,

Shouting at the world,

Injections, stomach bruises.

Hating half your Facebook friends for posting their scan pictures.

More money, more grief.

South west London witches,

who literally wrap you in sheets and blow smoke and chant...

...And *who even are you?*

Except, lucky to be an aunt.

“Queer people shouldn't have miscarriages”.

Standard, hopeless, angry breakfast chat.

And others say,

“I’m happy for her, but...”

And you say,

“I’m not. Fuck that.”

Zoom out. Zoom in. Wind back....

We’re standing on Streatham High Road. An ambulance won’t come and our Uber never arrives. A friend with a baby gives us a ride. As we go over speed bumps gently, hospital not far, her baby holds my finger. I hope we don’t leave blood in her car.

At the hospital, I say to the Doctor,

“My diagnosis is shit luck”

And she asks me where I trained.

And those people who assume I’m a sister or a friend because that’s more obvious or easier to them than *wife*. (You know, years ago, a dentist thought I was her mum! Me 22, her 21.)

We’ve learnt to: “And this is my wife, Kate...”

Before we’re even through the door, because the last thing you need when you’re bleeding and weeping and numb, is for the person not to understand that you’re the other Mum.

I go to the Miscarriage Support Service after our fourth loss. Cold January, grey, two month wait. I’m polite. They’re at a loss what to say, except:

“I’m sorry, but we support women who’ve lost babies.”

And I say, “Like me.”

And, choking on their heteronormativity, they say,

“No, the women who’ve actually lost them.”

And, later, I explain: My eggs in her womb, two mums, bodies fused...

They say, "Oh, so it really *was* your baby too."

FUCK YOU. And your hierarchy of motherhood. And the box I don't fit in because the skin I'm sitting in wasn't the home to our babies at the moment that you're counting. I'm far too polite, but inside I'm shouting. So, I do what sits more naturally with me. I write to their trustees. They send me a letter. Say they're committed regardless of age, race or gender. But still I don't count, though the losses stack up.

The rhythm of our lives: put up and shut up.

Pay up. Pay up.

Is our tenacity a source of pride or shame? Our resilience to blame for keeping going.

Would it be braver to stop? But we have a future we won't let go of.

We had a Plan A. We had a Plan B. None of them easy. We move to Plan C.

I was going to be an anonymous egg donor, but the clinic said that no-one would choose me.

I'd been teaching consent in a Muslim girls school in Croydon when they call. Sit and cry outside on a wall. A man comes out the off-licence, gives me a tissue. Ten seconds later, a bigger issue. Mother-in-law on the phone says,

"Why are you crying? I haven't told you yet."

Stare at feet, damp leaves wet, sticking to my shoes. Her mum, Gemma's nan:

It's not good news.

Remember, we were 27, newly-wed, really happy. With our deaf cat, our one bed flat, all hope and future planning. Then I'm standing at the hospital, trying to interpret a language I

can't speak, staring at shapes on the screen like they're a coral reef, held breath, still air. All hope, no belief.

There's no heartbeat.

The rhythm of our lives:

There's no heartbeat.

Or rather:

No heartbeat.

No heartbeat.

No heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat stops.

No heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat stops.

The rhythm of our lives:

Heartbreak.

Lots.

I'm worried I've given the plot-points away too quickly. Haven't walked you down our trauma-path at a speed more fitting. But let's pan out for a sec. *Flash-back context.*

I'm 21 and I'm having a panic attack. A doctor injects me in both thighs with an antipsychotic. Rather than giving me a cup of tea, and a hug, like I really need.

I lose control of my eyes, my tongue, my jaw seizes up, stuck scared, can't talk.

Allergic reaction hitting me, like a metaphor in my shit teenage poetry.

Literally silenced, because I couldn't breathe.

So, for the rest of my life, when faced with a form, I'm honest and I tick:

I've had a bad reaction to an antipsychotic.

The clinic says, "No-one would choose you, you can't donate."

And my self-esteem's like, "Thanks, mate."

My mum says, "I'm sure they would if they met you."

I'm 5'11", I've got a PhD, no glasses, good skin...

But they'd have to meet me.

Looking back now at this catalogue of news, at each step wrong-footed as we tried to push through, I can't believe, need you to know, how hard the start was, before any blue lines on show, before our six losses, before that specific grief. Peel back the layers, there's so much already underneath.

I'm not all about a misery memoir, pity party, grief list, rather this is who we are, where we've come from, what we've seen. I know the word "journey" is over-used, but I need to tell you where we've been.

And I *don't* hate to be political, in the rhythm of our lives, 'cos, hey, this is in a context where two mums couldn't adopt 'til 2005! And it wasn't until 2008 they decided it's love that makes you a parent, and there was no longer a legal "need for a father". So, I'm thankful that

we're the ones that came after the older pioneers who came out and spoke out (and for the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act).

Yet, I refuse to be grateful, though suffused with gratitude, to kneel down and be thankful for our basic right to choose how we create our family and who gets to decide who is stamping out the beat in the rhythm of our lives.

Something so personal in someone else's hands.

And that's before your legs are in stirrups and they're lubing up a dildo cam.

To make our babies, before they're born, we sign a lot of forms.

The *in the event of her death*.

The *in the event of my death*.

The one that says we're not a *risk of harm* to the child that's not yet in our arms.

But it turns out there's a worse form.

We sign it in the "bunker of doom". Early pregnancy unit in Tooting, no natural light, underground waiting room, full of people crying, holding little numbered paper tickets. It's basically a raffle, where half the room won't win it.

You know when you're doing a meditation, picture your favourite place:

Big skies, waves lapping, stunning open space, or log fire burning, cat on your lap.

All those things? It's like the opposite of that.

It's plastic chairs and grey tea, no phone signal, posters about diabetes.

In another windowless room, or on flip-chairs in the corridor, the worst of the bad forms.

They apologise for the language.

Product of conception

Sensitively incinerate

They hand us a pen.

Sign.

Date.

Our grief doesn't have a barbed wire fence around it. I want it to be welcoming, so you know yours too can sit with it. Hold hands, share tears or deep embrace. Loss stroking loss's hair.

Holding sacred space.

Oh, I meant to ask before if you'd heard of me? There's a tiny chance you might.

'Cos, for a few hours, in 2021, we were in the third most read article on the BBC website.

SAME SEX PARENTS BATTLE FOR INCLUSIVE PAPERWORK FOR BABY.

It's a good news story.

We took on Devon ICB, County Council, Department of Health, our local GP.

All the people who forgot that we need counting, didn't leave space for two mums on the forms that we encounter.

It's really fucking tedious, in a moment of celebration – Red Book in the post, registering the birth, the necessary admin – and then there's no box for you, just a binary system on an online portal you can't scribble with a pen.

We're in the news about it, and I'm an idiot for looking at the comments that people write on Facebook:

The baby must have a father.

Nobody can have two mothers, consider putting the child first, not yourself.

That's the do-as-you-please society of today. What are they going to say to the child when they ask, "but who was my father?"

*The 'click and collect' child was just another one of their political vanity projects, part of
their militant gender ideology arsenal.*

And yes, it's almost farcical, like a game of bigotry bingo, fill up your card.

I try not to take it personally – 'cos they're ignorant – but it's still hard to read our 'click and collect' baby, like we never fought for him. Like the fact that we're still standing, and loving and laughing and dreaming is basically amazing.

Can I tell you a bit about him?

He loves music and dancing, his first word was 'cat', he loves splashing in puddles, he won't wear a hat. His eyes are blue skies, his bum is a peach, he likes saying "more", his arms always reach. He likes books, baths, balls, the park. He is currently obsessed with broccoli. He kept getting the hiccoughs when he was inside me. His favourite animals are hop-hop rabbit and baa-baa sheep. I wish he would sleep for longer stretches, but he still needs the comfort of my skin.

I love him. Like a punch in the gut. But he's not the punchline.

And nor is the baby growing in my wife, who last week I felt kick for the first time.

This is a story that deserves as much telling as one without a "happy ending".

The rhythm of our lives: a complex symphony.

The rhythm of our lives:

the heart

that beats

in me.