

Give Me A Happy Ending

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When I was little my sister and I were obsessed with a 1982 rip-off of the Pirates of Penzance film called "*The Pirate Movie*". It's a poorly acted, low-budget 80's film that her and I both have a soft spot for even as adults. We have both tried to get other people to watch it and love it as we do, but so far everyone thinks it's terrible. Still, we know all the songs and sometimes quote entire scenes to each other. It's one of those comforting memories from our childhood.

One of the things I love about that movie is that it is so happy. It even ends with a song called "Give Me A Happy Ending". It's exactly how I want movies to end, with a wedding and everyone being happy and healthy and friends forever. It's been a joke for everyone my whole life that "Mishi won't watch movies or read books unless there's a happy ending". My best friends know to vet movies for me and will say, "You won't like it. It doesn't have a happy ending...". I've never enjoyed watching the nightly news because I always felt like it was all bad news. Maybe I lived by the "ignorance is bliss" mantra.

When Stella was diagnosed with DIPG in June of 2011, along with the intense grief and heartache there was an ultimate feeling of injustice. The "why is this happening?"..."how can this be happening?"... "what do you mean there is no cure?..." For someone like me who is fixated on happy endings and refused to watch "Titanic" or "The Notebook" because they were too sad for me, living my own story of heartbreak was incredibly difficult. I still remember the feeling of wanting so badly to crawl out of my skin because I couldn't stand the pain of living the reality of watching my daughter die. I've never wanted to escape from my own life so badly. It was at some points excruciating to be existing in a world where I knew there would be no happy ending for my daughter and I. Eventually, Stella taught me to find the joy in the everyday, and I stopped focusing so much on the "ending" and tried to enjoy the journey instead. Retrospectively, life is a series of beginnings and endings, a quilt of separate blocks all stitched together to create a life. But not straight, organized blocks. Ones that all run into each other where the threads cross over and the shapes are different and sometimes clash. Like a "crazy quilt" I once saw at pioneer village made entirely of leftover fabric pieces. There are natural starts and stops, but no true endings. Even after someone dies, the story doesn't necessarily end.

I am living life without my beautiful, funny, energetic and incredible daughter Stella, but I am not unhappy. I laugh each and everyday. I sleep at night. I make plans for the future.

When I see photos of Stella, or videos of her, it almost feels like an out of body experience. That life, that world, seems so distant from the one I am ensconced in now. Sam and Hugo are extremely close as brothers and I have trouble imagining life any other way. Sometimes I try to picture Stella there being a big sister to Sam, and no Hugo. But I find it nearly impossible to imagine because the two boys in front of me that are singing and laughing and jumping on the couch in their underwear are so real and three-dimensional whereas Stella is a colour photograph sitting on the mantle behind them. She existed. She lived and she mattered and

she changed everything I thought I knew and wanted. But she is not here being part of our daily routine of waffles for breakfast and packing backpacks for school. I don't even know if Stella ever ate a waffle. She ate maple & brown sugar porridge. That was a different block of the quilt.

Like most parents, Aimee and I are exhausted nearly all the time. Between working full time and making dinners and lunches and cleaning the house and doing laundry, we always seem to be short on time and energy. But last night Hugo and Sam asked us to be special guests at a show they were putting on. They moved the kitchen chairs to in front of the couch, took the cushions off the couch to create their "stage" and invited us in. With whispered plans to one another, they started strumming on their "canjo's" (like a banjo, but made out of a can) and singing the Barenaked Ladies tune, "If I had a million dollars". Aimee and I were in stitches. They were so funny and watching them interact was beautiful. Aim turned to me and said, "Sometimes when I watch them like this my heart feels so full, I'm so happy".

It's moments like those that we treasure and cherish. The non-public, non-planned, silly little family moments that take place within the walls of our tiny bungalow in East York.

it's moments like those that made Aimee and I want to have one more child. One more chance to create silly, funny memories.

After years of negotiating, talking, saving and planning, we decided to try to have one more. We doubted ourselves, doubted our ability to manage another child. We questioned whether the want was part of a never-ending wish to fill the void left by Stella that we know can never be filled, but we live with everyday. We talked about the financial strain, the exhaustion, how old we now are. We discussed if the same sperm donor that we used for Stella, Sam and Hugo wasn't available, was it a deal-breaker for us. We talked and discussed and disagreed for over two years. We went back and forth. It was one of those decisions that makes no sense whatsoever on paper, that is completely illogical and maybe even a bit irresponsible. But somehow, eventually, during one of those magical moments where the house was clean and the boys were sitting colouring quietly, it just felt like the right thing to do.

We said we would try once. So we did, and it didn't work. When the pregnancy test came back negative, part of us was sad and part of us was relieved. We thought maybe it was too crazy anyway.

It took 6 months to save up enough money to try again. We agreed that if it didn't work we would just be happy with our sons because we didn't have the money to keep trying and we rationalized that maybe it was the universe— or more precisely Stella— telling us not to be selfish, and just be fulfilled with the incredible life that we already had.

So we tried one more time. The LAST time, we said.

It worked. Positive pregnancy test.

And then we waited to see if the pregnancy would be viable. I was 37, my job was physical, so

many things could go wrong. So we waited. And everything seemed to be fine.

So, if all goes well, I will be giving birth to our baby #4 in late April.

Our friends and family were surprised. In fact, when we started sharing the news with people, there was a mixed bag of reactions. Some people seemed thrilled, some people seemed cautiously excited and some people came right out and said they thought it was a bad idea. Some of the comments hurt. It was hard to feel judged and hard to remain strong in our conviction that this was the right thing to do when so many people seemed so judgemental. It made me angry that people outside of our little private family unit thought they had a say in our decision. "What gives them the right?" I raged at Aimee. She, much calmer than me, rationalized that everyone loves us and was worried about us. They weren't privy to the two years of discussions we had, the therapy and the whispered conversations at night. But still, it hurt. Telling people we were pregnant was totally different from our other experiences. When I was pregnant with Stella, everyone was absolutely over the moon excited. Sam was the same. When I got pregnant with Hugo, I think a lot of people thought we were being rash and crazy, but they didn't say anything because Stella was dying and the pregnancy with Hugo was keeping me alive. But with this one... we felt openly judged. We know people were whispering behind our backs questioning our reasons and our sanity. So we didn't tell too many people. It was an odd feeling to be so excited about something and yet afraid to tell people.

When I was 20 weeks pregnant we were able to have an ultrasound that would tell us if the baby looked healthy, and the sex. For the most part, I wanted the sex to be a surprise because I really and truly didn't care if it was a boy or a girl, but Aimee thought it was important that we know— she said if there was any emotional fallout based on sex, we should try to deal with it ahead of time. So we went together to the ultrasound. The night before I had a very vivid dream of Stella. it was surprising to me because I never dream about Stella. But there she was. In my dream she was tiny like a little fairy with wings and she was flying around my head. She said to me, "Mama...the new baby is a boy. I don't want you to be sad Mama, but I want to be your only girl". In my dream, I assured Stella that I wasn't sad it was a boy. I told her that I loved her brothers very much and that I loved how they were close to Xavier and the three boys do all their activities together, and since my sister just had another boy in May, I told her that it would be nice for the younger two boys to have each other too. Then I reminded her that Gracie was like a little mother to all the boys, and would be happy to have another one to look after.

When I woke up that morning, I told Aimee about my dream and felt completely and totally relaxed going into the ultrasound. I felt very at peace and very excited at the thought of having another boy. The technician was very quiet though out the ultrasound and then he invited Aimee in to see the baby at the end. Aimee asked the technician whether he could tell if it was a boy or a girl. He nodded that he did and asked if we wanted to know. Aimee said, "yes, what is it?" He pulled up a fuzzy black and white ultrasound image, pointed at a blurry part near the middle and said, "it's a girl". "It's a girl!?" Aimee practically shouted. I felt numb, immediately going in to complete shock. My pulse quickened and I felt a bit lightheaded. "Are you sure?" I stuttered. He pointed at the picture and said with a straight face..."well, I'm not totally sure but there is definitely no penis, so..." I got up off the table and went into the change

room leaving Aimee excitedly texting her parents in the other room. As I bent over to put my pants on, I saw tears hitting the worn blue carpet beneath my feet. I hadn't realized it, but I was crying. I kept wiping the tears away as I dressed, but they just kept coming. The wave of emotions was totally overwhelming. I felt happy, but also sad. I was shaking a bit. I was so sure it would be a boy, I hadn't really let myself consider that it was a girl. "a daughter...girl...a daughter..." I was almost completely quiet on the car ride back home. Aimee kept saying to me, "what's wrong with you?" but I couldn't find the words to explain it. I was happy, but I was also truly shocked and I couldn't understand why I would dream of Stella telling me it was a boy, when it wasn't. My friend Omo said to me when I told her the story later, "What do you mean, that's SO Stella...she was totally messing with you!". I laughed ruefully at that. True. I could so see Stella thinking that was a really funny joke to play on me.

When we told the boys they were excited, but slightly indifferent as well. Not too surprising. At 4 and 5, they are way more focused on lego and sword fights than a new baby. It's a bit abstract for them. As more people were told or heard we were pregnant, we kept getting asked, "Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?". It amazes me how many people when told it's a girl react in a very relieved and "oh, that's amazing...you needed a girl". It makes me think that if this baby was a boy people would be disappointed or upset by it. My favourite reaction was an acquaintance who said, "Oh my God, it's a girl!? That's amazing! if your life was a movie, this would be the happy ending!" As often happens in my life now, this seemingly innocent and very well-meant comment really bothered me. She may be right— if my life was a movie, it would probably end with a close up shot of Aimee and I cradling a new baby girl with a picture of smiling Stella just over our shoulders in the background. But my life isn't a movie, and having a baby girl isn't the "happy ending" of Stella's story. Like everything else in life, it's just another piece of the story that continues to unfold. It is neither an ending nor a beginning, but simply a continuation of a life that is full of joy, pain, grief, stress, love and hope.

I still don't like to watch movies or tv shows that are sad. I still prefer to believe in, and want to see and experience, happiness in the stories I read and watch.

Sometimes late at night when I'm lying in bed and the baby is moving around, I put my hands on my stomach and sing her the lyrics of the Pirate Movie song, "Give Me a Happy Ending"

No more sad times, mad, or bad times,

No more minor keys

Life's for living, sharing, giving,

Life's for you and me

When the going's rough and you've had enough,

Leave your troubles and your woes

Turn the other cheek and forget your grief,

Make a friend out of your foe

Give me a happy ending every time

We'll kiss and make up,

That's a very peaceful sign

Give me a happy ending every time

Don't be unhappy, everything will work out fine.

Grief is so complicated, even Aimee and I don't always expect or understand how we feel. But I know for absolute certain that I am excited to welcome a new baby to our amazing circle of family and friends. I know that she will be different from Stella and I never want her to feel like she is living in the shadow of her dead sister. We have no plans to name this baby after Stella, or put her in any of Stella's old baby clothes. This is a different child. She is not a replacement child, she is a new member of our family. She isn't our happy ending, but she is certainly a happy part of our life. And we can't wait to meet her!!!

See you soon little baby!



Xavier, Sam, Hugo & Gracie visit Santa:



Our Valentines:



Showtime... Hugo, Gracie and Sam:



Winter Fun with Xavier, Sam and Hugo:



The boys play the “Canjo’s” at an impromptu concert:



Happy...



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