

Alexandra Howard

Henry

There was one and then two and the next thing you know the entire room was filled with doctors. I was euphoric, we just found out we were having a boy. I already had a name picked out, it was Henry. I was lying in bed, a very narrow bed. My shirt was pulled up all the way to the wire of my bra, and my pants were pulled down so low that you could see some of my pubic hair. My big, brown belly was full of gel from the ultrasound technician. I was so happy, I couldn't move, I couldn't think, I couldn't do anything.

John kissed my forehead and touched my belly. "Everything is okay," he said. I looked up at him and smiled. He squeezed my hand gently. The same way that he pressed my hands when we found out we were pregnant.

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It was unexpected, but we were both thrilled. We were living away from our family, in a small apartment in New York, fresh out of college. We spent most of our evenings with friends drinking wine and eating well. We were at an Italian restaurant in Tribeca. I just finished the spaghetti and meatballs, my favorite.

My friend Ana and her boyfriend Kevin were with us. We were all laughing our asses off at this couple sitting across the restaurant. They looked miserable. I think they may have hated each other. It was sad but hilarious to watch.

Then I puked, right there at the table. There was no warning, just vomit. I was so embarrassed. My favorite restaurant and I would never be able to go back.

Ana called me the next day to check on me. “Are you feeling better?” she asked. “No, I think I have some sort of bug. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I am so tired, and I haven’t been able to eat anything.”

“Madison,” she said. No one every called me that. She knew I hated it. Madison was a great name for a child not such a great name for an almost thirty-year-old woman. And definitely not the best idea for a thirty-year-old black woman. “Maddy, do you think you are pregnant?” she asked.

“What, no. of course not,” I started laughing. *Shit, am I pregnant?* That’s when I realized that it had to have been at least two months since my last period. “Maybe I am pregnant,” I said

“I will be there in twenty minutes,” Ana said, hanging up the phone. She somehow made it there in ten. I don’t know how. She worked in Times Square, and my apartment was in lower Manhattan. She even managed to pick up a million pregnancy tests on her way.

John got home late that night. He walked through the door with a bottle of wine in his hand. “I’m sorry I’m so late,” he said, as he grabbed two glasses out of the cabinet.

“It’s okay. Ana just left a little while ago,” I said.

“I didn’t know she was stopping by. I thought you weren’t feeling well?”

“I’m not, that’s why she stopped by John,” I replied laughing.

“Maddy, what’s so funny?” he said, opening the bottle of Malbec. I wanted a glass so bad. He handed me a glass. I put it close to my nose and breathed it in before setting it on the

counter. I kissed him and put my hands in his soft, thick hair. He kissed me back and grabbed me by my hips pulling me up against him. I could feel him get excited. “We’re pregnant John,” I blurted out between kisses. I didn’t know how he would react. His eyes lit up.

“Really? We are having a baby?” he said.

“Yes, Ana bought me like seven pregnancy tests, they were all positive,” I said. He somehow managed to pick me up. I giggled, and we kissed some more. He walked the three short feet over to our bed with me in his arms and gently put me down. He started kissing me all over. He kissed my lips, my neck, my cheeks, and nose, and down to my shoulders. He lifted my oversized t-shirt, revealing my naked breasts. He kissed them, and touched them and made his way down to my belly.

I never let him touch my belly, much less kiss it. But now our baby was in there, so I let him kiss my belly button and all of the rolls and crevices. “I love you, baby,” he whispered, pulling my panties off. He got down on his knees and kissed me some more. He kissed my big thighs, my legs, and even my feet. The kisses eventually turned to licks.

He put his hands on my hips, almost holding me down. Then his mouth was on me. I moaned and grabbed his hair, pushing his head deeper between my legs. I could hear his tongue mixing with the moisture. I sat up, wanting more, I pulled off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt running my hands down his dark brown chest.

He unbuckled his belt and pulled off his pants. I pushed him onto the bed and got on top of him. We moved together better than we ever have.

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I suddenly realized that there were a lot of doctors in our room. I felt dizzy like I was seeing flashing lights. The room was hot. *Was something on fire?* I felt like I couldn't breathe. I tried to tell John that I couldn't breathe but no words came out.

They were whispering about something, and then they all left. Everyone last one of them even the technician. I started coughing, finally able to breathe. "Maddy, are you okay?" John asked as he cupped my face in his hands.

Something was wrong. I wanted to cry, I felt like I was crying, but I wasn't crying. "What's happening John?" I asked, but he didn't reply.

"John, what's going on," I said again. "Is he okay, is our baby okay? Where did the doctor go? Get the fucking Doctor John," I yelled.

"It's okay, as soon as they get back we will find out what is going on. Everything will be all right," John said.

Seconds later a lady walked in. Her name tag said Dr. Beth Abahms. "Thank you for waiting. I am Dr. Abrahms," she said. "We just want to make sure that you are getting the best care, do you mind if I take a look at your baby?" We both nodded our heads yes.

She sat down next to the bed, grabbed the probe and put it on my belly. I heard her take a deep breath. She started to move the wand around, and there he was. Our baby boy. He looked just like me.

"Is everything okay?" John asked. Looking over at the doctor. She looked down, and took off her glasses. She set the probe down and reached for my hand.

"I am so sorry," she said.

“Sorry about what, what do you mean you are sorry?” I yelled, pulling my hand away. “What is wrong with you people?” I got out of the bed letting my shirt fall and stick to the gel on my belly. I reached for my purse sitting on the chair next to John.

“Madison, sit down,” John said grabbing my arm. I pulled away and grabbed my jacket. “Please, Maddy, you have to sit down,” he said.

“Fuck you, John,” I yelled. “You think I am going to sit here and let these crazy people tell me there is something wrong with my baby. Fuck all of you,” I said.

I heard John apologize just before the door closed. I walked down the hallway, toward the elevator and pressed the down button over and over again. John made it in just before the elevator door closed. He grabbed my hand, but we didn't look at each other.

We stepped out into the lobby and walked toward the revolving doors. John pulled out his phone to request a car, making sure to not let go of my hand. The car came, and he helped me into the back seat. He got in on the other side grabbing my hand before even sitting down. We drove in silence at first but then the driver started talking.

“How is your day going?” he asked as if it wasn't obvious.

“It's okay,” John replied coldly.

“It looks like you will have a baby, congratulations, do you know what you are having?” he said.

“We are having a boy,” I said surprising John. “We are naming him, Henry. He will be here in less than two months, we can't wait.” John just stared at me, he looked like he was trying to figure out what to say.

“What a great name. I just had a little boy myself, he is seven weeks old,” the driver replied. He continued to talk about his son until he pulled up to their building. John handed him five dollars and got out. He came around to the other side and opened the door for me.

We walked up the four flights of stairs to our apartment. John unlocked the door and ushered me in. It was almost empty except for a few boxes and our mattress on the floor. We were supposed to be moving in a few days.

We sold most of our furniture a few weeks prior. I spent a month convincing John to buy new stuff for the house we just bought. We made the decision pretty early on that we were going to move back to Pittsburgh to be closer to our families.

John took a job with his dad and already gave notice to Sullivan & Cromwell, his dream job. I stopped getting modeling gigs as soon as I started to show. There wasn’t really a market for pregnant women, in the plus size industry.

I put my purse on the counter, took off my jacket and my shirt. I reached around my back and unbuttoned my bra. My breasts sat on top of my round belly. I slipped off my flats and took off my leggings pulling my underwear down with them. John watched but didn’t say anything. I walked the short distance to the bathroom and closed the door.

He didn’t come after me. I turned on the shower and waited for the water to warm up. I thought he would have knocked on the door, but he didn’t. I took my curly hair out of the bun and let it fall to my shoulders before getting in.

I let the water run over my belly, rubbing off the sticky gel. *Henry, its mommy.* I whispered, trying to shake my belly, trying to wake him up. *He was asleep, he had to just be asleep.* I didn’t feel anything. I turned the hot water down, thinking that if I made it really cold,

he would move. *Henry, wake up baby.* The water was ice cold, I was ice cold, but I thought that if I just stayed in a little longer, he would move and it would be okay.

John knocked on the door. “Maddy, are you okay baby? Can I come in?” he asked. I just ignored him. He kept knocking and saying my name. I just wanted him to leave us alone. I needed to be with my baby. I got so cold that I had to sit down in the tub. John decided to let himself come in.

“Maddy,” he said opening the shower curtain. He saw me sitting there and realized the water was cold. “Maddy, get out,” he said, trying to pick me up.

“Get off of me,” I yelled. But he wouldn’t let go.

“Please, get out baby.” he pleaded with me. Trying to pick me up. I hit him over and over and screamed at him to leave me alone, to leave us alone. He turned off the water and reached for a towel. I eventually gave up and let him take me out. He collapsed to the bathroom floor and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he said.

I looked at him. I looked at his small brown eyes, his strong manly chin and his dark skin and I finally cried. I cried so hard that it hurt. I cried for me, I cried for him, I cried for the things we would never get to do with our baby. We spent hours on the bathroom floor, holding each other. We stayed there until we couldn’t bear sitting on the frigid, hard tile any longer.

It was almost midnight by the time we left the bathroom. I felt empty. I felt like I couldn’t go on. We made our way to the mattress on the floor and fell asleep. John kept his arms around me and his hands on my belly.

I woke up the next day to John whispering to someone on the phone. “Yes, she understands,” I heard him say. “Yes, we will be there this afternoon.”

“Who were you talking to?” I asked as he put down his phone.

“The hospital called. They want us to come in to discuss delivery options,” he said unable to look at me.

“No, “I’m not going back there. There is no way in hell. He will come when he is ready like we planned.”

“Madison, it’s not safe for us to just wait and see what happens.”

“I don’t care, John. And you don’t know that.” I said trying to get up. He walked over to help me. I grabbed my phone and called Laura, my doula. I knew as soon as I found out that I was pregnant that I wanted a natural childbirth. I found Laura, and we clicked right away. She was the perfect person to support us.

I called her and asked her to come by. She asked if everything was okay, but I didn’t want to tell her the news over the phone. She wasn’t available until later that evening, so I made John call the hospital and tell them we would come in another day.

“I am going to get us some lunch. I will be right back. Will you be okay for a few minutes?” he asked.

“I’m not hungry, get yourself something and come right back,” I said.

“Maddy, you have to eat something,” he said, putting his shoes on. I ignored him.

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As soon as he left, I dialed my mom’s number. It rang once, but I hung up, not ready to deal with her reaction. She called me back seconds later. I had to answer. If I didn’t answer, she

would worry, like she always does. Then she would call John, and then Ana, and every one of my friends until she got a hold of me.

“Hi mom,” I said into the phone.

“Madison, how are you feeling honey? I just saw your call.”

“Maddy, are you there honey?” she said.

“Yes, I’m here. Um...Is dad around? I want to tell you both something,” I said trying not to let her hear the pain in my voice.

“He’s right here sweetheart. What is it? Is everything okay with the baby?” she asked.

I felt relieved that she asked and I could just reply that everything wasn’t okay.

“What happened honey?” she said.

“He is gone, mom,” I said tasting the saltiness of my tears.

“Maddy, what do you mean he is gone? I could hear the fear in her voice.

“We went to our ultrasound yesterday, and his heart wasn’t beating anymore. He’s dead, mom,” I said.

“Maddy, I am so sorry.” she couldn’t hold back anymore. My dad got on the phone, choking back tears. This was the first time I ever heard my dad cry.

“Maddy, we will be there tomorrow sweetie. You hang in there,” he said.

John walked through the door as told them I loved them. I couldn’t stop sobbing. He knew who I was talking to. He knew he would have to tell his family too. I went back to the mattress on the floor, and I stayed there. I didn’t eat. I didn’t sleep. I just waited.

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Laura made it to our apartment just after dinner time. John opened the door for her and offered her some tea. He apologized for having just the mattress to sit on. I was coming out of the bathroom as she sat down.

She knew right away that we lost our baby. My eyes were swollen, and I could barely move. She got up and put her arms around me, and held me, she held me until I was ready for her to let go. She hugged John and told him he needed to be strong for me. She didn't cry, she didn't apologize, she didn't ask what happened. She didn't call me sweetie or honey or tell me it was going to be okay. It wasn't okay. My baby was dead, and there was nothing I could do about it. She sipped her tea with one hand on top of mine and waited until I was ready to talk.

"I don't want to have a c-section," I finally said. "I don't want to be sedated. I know that I don't get to have my baby. He is gone. I know that. But he's still inside me, and I don't just want him ripped out. I can't have him once he gets here, but can I at least have him until then?" I asked.

"Of course you can," Laura said.

"What do you mean? No, she can't," John chimed in. "It's not safe, Laura. The doctor said it wasn't safe."

"Labor can still occur spontaneously. She has every right to wait. There isn't a right or wrong way here. One way is not safer than the other," she said to him.

"Maddy, are you sure this is what you want?" John asked. I told him I was sure. We discussed the birth plan we decided on last month. Laura said she will take care of the details with the hospital and that I should do my best to rest and savor the last couple of weeks with my baby.

So that is what I did. I ended up with two more weeks with baby Henry. I slept, and I cried, and I ate spaghetti, and I cried some more. I talked to him and told him how much I loved him. Some days I couldn't get out of bed, and some days, I managed to be grateful for the time that I did have.

John arranged for our families to stay in a corporate apartment while we all waited for the baby to come. He made sure they gave me space. He deactivated our social media accounts so that we wouldn't have to deal with telling our friends. He was strong, just like Laura said to be.

It was snowing when the contractions started. The pain was almost unbearable. I felt like someone was tying a rope around my stomach, tighter and tighter. Laura helped me work through the pain. She reminded me that I was bigger than the pain, the pain was not bigger than me. She told me I could do it, she rubbed my feet and held a warm towel to my head. John never left my side. We stayed home until I felt like I had to push.

When we got to the hospital, I was asked if wanted anything for the pain. I declined. Everyone knew I was giving birth to a dead baby. The nurses, the doctors, they all looked at me with sympathy. I didn't care if they thought I was nuts for wanting to go through the pain. They didn't get it. I didn't need them go get it. By the time my doctor arrived, I was already starting to push. It only took 20 minutes for him to come out.

He was born and died on January, 18th at 6 pm. Hey looked just like me. He had dark eyes and curly brown hair, and the most perfect lips I had ever seen.

I gave him a bath and wrapped him in a blanket and held him. I closed his eyes, and for a second, I allowed myself to think that he was just sleeping. I held him for hours before realizing

