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Carrying Loss

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Author Bio

Hallie Wilk is a senior at Gettysburg College, who is a Health Sciences major and creative writing minor. She is on the cheerleading team. She loves to read, write, and photograph in her free time and hopes to continue to do the same in her future as a Physician's Assistant.

Carrying Loss

HALLIE S. WILK

You never knew how much could commence with that one kiss. How it was a seedling, dropped into the dirt. The genesis of future exhilaration, creation, and loss.

That one kiss fell from your lips, down to your neck, to your chest, to your abdomen, lower and lower. You remembered that it was more than kisses, and sweat, and breaths. Your husband held you in his hands after, and you were peaceful. Your entire body stayed still except your swift heartbeat, the nerve synapses teasing each other under your skin, and the static movement underneath his fingers. Those remained.

Do you remember waking up two weeks later? As the warm wind from July wisped in through the window cracks and under the doors. You scrambled across the hardwood floor to the bathroom, feet lumbering over the streaked wood. Finally, when they reached tile, your feet were relieved by your knees, in front of the toilet, and suddenly everything inside of you yearned to come out. As you sat back on your legs, the nausea didn't subside as much as you'd hoped, but it told you what you needed to know.

The next day you were certain.

July 15th.

Your fingers, nimble, toyed with the pregnancy test, twisting it, waiting the time allotted. But finally, you turned it towards you and the parallel pink lines promised that your body was then a home. Your husband's face lit up just the same as yours when he heard. You looked in the mirror, at yourself, pale, and suddenly powerful looking... "You did it," you told yourself.

There was a strength, and a pride, in realizing the potential you have. You were growing a life inside of you. Although there had been other moments like this in your life — each one you remembered, with each child that was either gone too early, or was asleep downstairs, healthy — they never became stale. Each was just as electrifying, in contentment and agitation.

That afternoon your husband hugged you a little bit tighter. A miracle had come between both of you. Something to be grateful for.

You called the doctor with thrill in your voice, counting down the days until your appointment. And when you finally went, you and

the days until your appointment. And when you finally went, you and him held hands, and smiled as she confirmed the pregnancy. Your longing had finally paid off. Your doctor looked at the both of you with glee in her eyes, as she checked the vitals of the tiny life inside of you. There was enough small talk to last hours. Smiles were not scarce in the room that day.

A few months of nausea, fatigue, and tenderness of your body from the baby's body inside of yours, passed before *the* doctor's appointment. You had been through this part before, with your other two children, and the few you lost inside your womb. The first trimester was one that held risk, but also elation — a secret between your husband and you, before you found out the gender, and told people, and chose a name. Before you thought about buying baby stuff, all those small toys and necessities. But every doctor's appointment still gave you the same excitement. You got to hear how big your son was getting in comparison to pieces of fruit, got to hear his heartbeat, and talk about what you could eat and do to make your baby's home more nourishing.

This time, though, with the brink of chill in the air of September, there was hesitation on the doctor's face, and you didn't know why. Finally, she unraveled before you and your husband.

The first word that came from her lips was “Unfortunately.”

And everything she said after lived up to that word's potential.

Trisomy 18.

Eventually, a genetic counselor came into the room with you and your husband. He tried to explain to your shaking hands holding your stomach, to your flushed cheeks, and to the trapped looks you sent to your husband, that *unfortunately* your unborn child had extremely low chances of survival, in pregnancy, let alone in life. In the most likely scenario, the baby would die in the next 4-6 weeks. The seed you buried would not grow or flourish.

You did not understand.

See, his words made sense, but they didn't register in your mind, considering your child was supposed to be a miracle. But something went wrong inside of you. Somewhere along the way it must have been *you* that painted your baby imperfectly, with deformities and genes jammed together like a child trying to make puzzle pieces fit.

Your baby will not survive, they said.

But you could not let him go.

So the weeks of the pregnancy dragged by like glass through your skin. Your stomach did not expand at the rate it should with how far along you were. But you obsessed over any growth you noticed. So finally, when your skin began to swell, you cried of joy. But the more you learned, the more you realized that the volume inside of your body, the expansion you

prayed for, was just fluid in your son's lungs. Was just abnormality, and that size was not a promise of health. The doctors advised you to let him go.

But how could you do that when they showed you him on the ultrasound? When you could finally *see* his perfect, tiny face, growing inside your womb? When you could watch every sign of life he administered: the flex of his hand, or movement of his head?

Motion became a promise every day. That maybe the doctors were wrong, and he wanted to live, and this was all just a mistake. That he was healthy. He moved, and kicked, and seemed to dance inside of you. Maybe all the pain you felt was not a waste.

Your belly stretched almost too far, your entire body bloated. You felt like a balloon, but you absolutely loved it. Because every time you touched your hand to your stomach, and felt the surface of your skin shift, he was telling you that his fight isn't over.

But eventually, the doctor confirmed the diagnosis through a blood test. There was no denial you could entertain anymore. All you hoped for then was to carry him to term, and that your womb, his home, would not forsake him before you could hold him in your arms.

Shadows hung over Christmas that year. Although you usually loved the multicolored lights, the decorations, the family time, and the celebration, it all seemed so trivial now. Everyday was a miracle, and a time of suffering. Everyday you were supposed to feel lucky that your baby was still alive inside of you, yet you knew it was only a matter of time. So each day in December, you tried to come alive for your daughter and other son. You tried to keep up with your family's Christmas traditions, and you attempted at maintaining the magic of the season for them. But every single activity, spell of laughter, and piece of cookie dough stuck in the oven was absolutely agonizing. When there was happiness, it felt stolen from something outside of yourself. Undeserved.

How could you smile, when there was the possibility of death sprouting inside of you every single day?

Your husband started to pull away, manifesting your eating desire to escape from that everyday torture. But you couldn't escape it like he could, because the grief was inside of you. You *created* it. Your daughter and son, also, did not understand. They couldn't comprehend what was wrong with Mommy, or why she was always trying not to cry, or why she was acting different. So you had to stay with them to reassure them that you were okay, but your husband only had your back when he could handle it. And he was all you could lean on.

It was January 26. You went to the hospital for the midwife appointment. Your son had been moving less inside of you than usual, but you thought it was just because he was getting bigger. But the midwife could

not find a heartbeat on the ultrasound. You started to entertain thoughts in your mind: it was just because there was so much fluid, and they couldn't get a good reading; it was just because the midwife was flustered and new at her job; they were just doing it wrong... Then suddenly the midwife glanced up at you.

"I'm afraid he's passed."

Your husband was holding you in his arms, because you kept screaming no, that he was just moving. Then they told you that that movement was just because of all of the fluid in your womb — he had just been floating around and bumping against the walls of your uterus.

He was not alive.

Your husband kept telling you that you were a good mother. But how could you be when you let this happen? You failed.

Weeks passed. After 8 months of carrying your son inside of you, the doctors finally induced labor. The hours were grueling, and when it was done, you allowed sorrow to flush over you. You couldn't find your husband, but you realized he was just holding your son, and wrapping him in blankets. Then you finally got to meet him. Hold him inside of your arms. When you finally saw him, you were overcome with awe. Wonder. But also fear of his delicacy.

You held him and kissed his face. Your son. He's so much more fragile than you'd think, for surviving this long. His stomach is shrunken and rubbed raw. His elbow has lost its skin, and his skull bones have shifted and already begun to sink in, and there's blood on his face.

The doctors hadn't warned you that he would be so breakable. They didn't tell you that you couldn't bathe him, or dress him in the clothes you brought for him. He was so beautiful, yet so small and so contorted. His lips would never exhale any more breath, would never form themselves to create the word "Mommy," would never laugh.

His brother and sister came to meet him. His sister wasn't ready to see him like this, and neither were you. But you both held him anyway. You wished you could hold him forever.

When it was time to leave, they brought you and your family to the bereavement room to say goodbye. The hospital put a stuffed white bear in the cot with him. You placed your hand on his hand, and it was so sunken and cold. You and your husband cried over him, pressing lips to his head in farewell. Your children didn't know what to do or say.

The hospital made you sit in a wheelchair to leave, and that frustrated you. But they reminded you that you just had a child and you were fragile as well. You were going to give his bear to his sister, but they put it in your arms as your husband wheeled you out of the hospital. And you couldn't help it. You had to be selfish in that moment. Nothing will replace

the feeling of your son in your arms, but it helped to clutch onto something. Especially as you yelled at yourself for leaving your son behind. There was nothing left of him, but as a mother, you could never forgive yourself for that.