

Joanna

By Sarah Gundle

I slit the edges of the package open without thinking, carelessly sorting mail and hanging up my child's backpack simultaneously. The pink fuzzy monogrammed blanket I had ordered from Pottery Barn for my friend's baby naming ceremony was in the box. Monogrammed in loopy letters was the name—Joanna. It was the same name my patient had given the baby who had died in their arms that week after a traumatic birth. As I tried to quell sharp pricks of tears, I went into the other room to sit on my rocking chair, instinctively needing the repetitive soothing motion. I wanted to cuddle up in the soft blanket, holding it to my cheek, but recoiled from the name, once so musical, now a reminder of how cruel life can be.

I had seen the couple in treatment for a few years as they underwent countless IVF and other procedures in an attempt to get pregnant. I accompanied them as they rode out vertiginous cycles of hope and despair. Would the acupuncture be timed well for her cycle? Would the new procedure take? Could they survive as a couple as the hormones she injected brought on bouts of emotional chaos? Would this be the time she became pregnant, or would it be another bitter disappointment? It felt a bit like spelunking, groping in the dark through a cavernous unknown. Few people understand how difficult infertility is, not just emotionally but bodily. They were committed to one another, but their bond was undermined daily by infertility. The therapy felt high stakes—we'd find the light together or become permanently lost in the dark.

Six months into her pregnancy, they declared they'd made it through.

"I think we are cured," she laughed as we had our last session.

After years of treatment, arguments, repairs, and bursts of fragile hope ending in sadness, their relationship had a whole new depth. I felt invested in their pregnancy project and immense joy for them when they passed the 3-month mark and moved from the infertility clinic to a regular OB-Gyn. In that moment, I felt less like a therapist than a guide, reminding them that they were in it together, that turning toward one another when things were hardest was the only way through.

I saw a new side to them as her healthy pregnancy progressed. They had always sat in separate chairs in our sessions, but then they moved to the couch, his hand stroking her back occasionally as we spoke. There was a softness between them. I agreed that we had come to the end of our work together, an intense collaboration that felt satisfying and complete. They promised to send a baby picture when she arrived.

A few months later, the phone rang. It was his voice, frantic and shrill.

“She can’t get out of bed,” he kept repeating. “I can’t get her to move.”

I sat down heavily, my body tense. “What happened?” I asked him.

He paused for a long moment. “We lost the baby. We lost her—her name is-was-is-Joanna.” His voice was raspy and dazed.

I tasted metal in my mouth. “What can I do?”

“Can you come? I mean, here? She really can’t get out of bed.”

I arrived at their brownstone building and went up the stairs, acutely aware of the baby strollers and child-sized rainboots outside the apartments as I climbed. I entered and felt a strange unease. I'd rarely spoken to them on the phone, never mind visiting their home. Therapists don't see patients in their homes, but there they were, sitting on the floor surrounded by the brutal reminders of the baby they never got to know. I sat down beside them.

“We don’t know what to do with all this,” the husband motioned to the piles of impossibly small onesies and newborn diapers stacked on the chairs. “We can’t even open that door,” motioning to the baby’s nursery. I tried to move as little as possible as he spoke, afraid that the wrong gesture might, at any moment, shatter their fragile equilibrium.

“And we can’t seem to go outside,” the husband said. “How is it that people are just acting normal? There’s this disconnect—it feels like this should be on the front page of the newspaper, that the world should be as altered as we are. But they are all the same. Life is just going on. Only we’re not the same.” Their knees touched, sitting next to each other on the floor. “What do we do now?”

I searched for an answer but had none. We sat in a weighty silence.

Eleven years have passed since Joanna died. I still wince when I hear that name called on the playground or by a teacher in my daughter's classroom. That name, Joanna, is for me buried, along with the tiny body who never heard her name.

Recently the wife called me out of the blue, asking to have a session, this time by herself. She caught me up on their life—a gorgeous 7-year-old boy, a move to the suburbs, and new work for them both.

“Joanna, though, she’s here. She will always be here,” she choked out. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“I will never forget coming to your apartment the week that she died,” I said.

“I forgot that you were there,” she murmured. “I think that’s why I wanted to see you. I wanted to talk to someone else who knew us as parents of two children.”

I sat quietly while she cried.

“I don’t know why her eleven-year anniversary shook me so much,” she said, still tearful. “I hate saying this, but it’s true.” She looked down at her lap, picking at some loose threads on her dress. “Without her, there would have been no Jonathan. And that I just can’t imagine. He is just such a delight in every way. I know every mom says this, but it really is true. I don’t believe in God, but if I did, it would be because he came to us. But I hate saying that about Joanna; it feels like a choice between them.”

“Does it have to be?”

“What do you mean?” She leaned forward.

I thought about the ghost of Joanna, how many times I’ve thought of that powerful afternoon I spent on their floor, and how I, too, carry her brief presence in the world with me. The last trip the couple had taken before her pregnancy forbade travel had been to London. She had been particularly taken with the symmetrical rows of birches outside the Tate Museum. They had imagined Joanna swinging in the birch trees, playing and laughing as she ran from tree to tree. I winced as I remembered how I had encouraged them to picture their daughter, to permit themselves to dream about holding and playing with her despite the ordeal they had experienced getting there. They had found the Robert Frost poem “Birches,” which I loved already.

Sitting with her, the poem came back to me.

“Do you remember how we imagined Joanna swinging in the birch trees?”

“I do,” she smiled, wiping her tears. “I still love birch trees.”

“You know there’s something I never said back then.” I studied her face and swallowed.
“Those trees in the poem, the reason they were weighed down was because they were covered with ice. Not because of the boy swinging on them. They bent almost to the ground but didn’t break.”

“What?” she looked startled.

“The boy in the poem, he did swing between the birches the way we imagined Joanna, but their branches stayed bowed down because of the ice.”

She blinked.

“I totally forgot that part,” her voice trembled. “Joanna was born in an ice storm.”

“I remember,” I said.

“That image of swinging freely and the birches being weighed down with ice—they are both in that poem.”

“I sometimes don’t know the boundary between grief and love for Joanna. Are you saying that I can get to the place where I can hold both children?” Joanna’s absence felt palpably present between us.

My heart pounded as I responded. “No, I’m saying you already do.”

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