

Weathering the Winter

By Andrea Eisenberg

Outside the wind is whipping around, trees bending and swaying, rain drops creating puddles everywhere. I run into the building, my heavy bag shifting my weight to one side, my frizzy hair flying into my face.

Inside, however, I never know the weather. Each room carries the potential of any climate. Calm sunny days, filled with the joy of new life, new love.. Dark stormy nights with gale winds filled with shame, grief, loss, fear. Sometimes hurricanes causing hollowed out lives that feel directionless.

I live within these walls, the exam rooms of an obstetrician/gynecologist, caring for women throughout their lives, their many transitions, witnessing their hopes and tears and heartaches and accomplishments.

I walk in and out of rooms a hundred times a day. Opening and closing doors. Up and down hallways. Back and forth from patient to patient and then back again. Weathering the weather as it changes from one room to the next.

On this day, a particularly heavy snow day, I almost needed a shovel to go from room to room.

I saw her walking down the hall with her coat hanging low, her gaze blurring out the future, and her belly withering. Within the walls, behind the masks, she began her tale of the last couple days. Urine leaking, tightening belly, some strange discharge and no movements from the baby. But she was only 20 weeks along, only half way through the pregnancy, none of her symptoms made sense to me.. Not feeling baby move at 20 weeks is so common and normal. But urine leaking? Not usually so early in the pregnancy.

She unwrapped her heavy coat and laid on the table. I pulled up her sweater to see her small brown roundness bare. I felt for the baby. So small, I was unable to discern its lie. Cold gel, doptone, find the heartbeat. So routine, I'm chatting unhurried, unworried. Until the gel is smeared everywhere and no heartbeat is found with the doppler. I look up at her, hidden behind her mask, unable to read her face and detect if she is concerned. I am though. My heart quickens. I want to see this baby.

I bring her to the ultrasound room. Dark except for the faint light of the ultrasound machine. She lies down and again I cover her small rounded belly in gel. Immediately I know. Her baby is dead. It is lying too still. Babies at 20 weeks never lie this still. Dead at 4 ½ months, dead probably for days, There is no fluid around the baby, it looks like the baby is being smashed in by the thick uterine walls, sitting tall, head, heart, sacrum, in parallel to its mother. The "urine" leaking wasn't urine, but the amniotic fluid lost too early. The strange, malodorous discharge was the infection brewing. The cramping was the uterus trying to relieve itself of the burden that no longer was alive.

Words escape me, but I must speak. The air is so still in the room and she is waiting for me to say something, anything. This never gets easier for me, to tell someone their baby is dead. It should never get easy for me – if it did, my heart would be closed.

I sat across from her. “I’m so sorry, so sorry.” I wanted to repeat those words over and over again. Behind my mask, behind her mask, how could I convey I wanted to hold her during her agony. But her steely eyes looked back at me. “Tell me what I do now.” No tears. She could not cave in to her emotions or she may never come out. My words “this is not your fault” fell flat on the floor. Her first instinct was to blame herself.

I explained she would be induced at the hospital and what the process would look like. She would probably deliver the baby the next day

As she left the room, I tried to leave the room too, let the walls carry the weight, but it lingered on my shoulders and in my heart. I called the hospital to let them know she was coming.

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The next room was heavy with the burden of a secret. “I didn’t want to... I thought I was protected.” I glance over at the counter and see the 2 bright red lines. This time, even behind the mask, the anguish is obvious although her words are the same “tell me what I do now.”

She is so young, at least compared to me. Even not compared to me, she is young and has so much life ahead of her. She felt forced into sex by her boyfriend, “I didn’t know I could say no.” Her friends thought she was being overly dramatic and so she kept it to herself. She couldn’t sleep, couldn’t concentrate on school, couldn’t eat. She couldn’t remember when her period should have started, but then looking at her pack of pills, she realized it was late. Or did she miss some pills? She didn’t know.

How could life grow in this inhospitable garden, seeds laid without love or respect or consent? And yet it did, despite only one left to tend the garden. “He broke up with me.” Her eyes searched mine for answers to questions she didn’t know how to ask. I could see her heart filled with shame and self blame, abandoned by the one who planted the life.

And so I sat with her, discussing each possible path, how would life look for her, which garden she wanted to sow. To continue the pregnancy, to grow and care for another life. To continue the pregnancy, to grow another life and give it away. To not continue the pregnancy and grow her own life. Deep down, she knew her decision already, she couldn’t go forward in this way, she knew the only life she could manage right now was her own. The tears flowed, more than the walls could absorb. “Who can be there for you besides me? Your mom, your sister, a friend?” I tried to mop up the tears. This is not a path anyone should walk alone.

After a few minutes of silence, she looked up. “So now what happens?” Since she was early enough in her pregnancy, I explained to her how a medical abortion works. A pill here, some pills she takes at home, the cramping and bleeding that would follow. I also told her about a surgical abortion, the cramping and bleeding during the procedure, the medications given before to help with that. Either way, she had to consider everything we talked about for at least

24 hours. Another night of angst, hopefully eased a little by knowing at least one other person was part of her world now.

As I leave that room to enter another, a room filled with joy and light-hearted banter, I have to find a way to shake off the heavy flakes and start fresh so the joy in that room can be celebrated. The couple so excited for their first baby, so many questions, so much to share with me, the recent visit with their bubbe and her sharing her birth story. Generations continuing traditions. The sun shining bright on their growing family and all those excited for them. Not a cloud in the sky.

Room after room, I make my shifts. But someday, the heavy snowflakes can't be brushed off so easily, the walls can't absorb all that it witnessed, and my body must carry it, honor the suffering and embrace the happiness. In the busyness of the day, I don't have time to settle my heart, I need to keep moving, keep doctoring, keep opening new doors. Perhaps later, in the quiet of the day's end, the walls and I will have our reckoning.

At some point, though, I have to reckon with all the storms I've witnessed, unburden my shoulders of the heavy snow, find a warm cave to hide in and let the coldness melt. Those are the days, I hope beyond hope, I can walk into my house and find no one. I cannot take another word, another story, another's anguish or even joy.

Hiding in my room, bits of waning light filter through the trees. On a folded up blanket nearby, I see my cat's gray fur rise and fall, and hear her snore loud and clear. Outside of this door, the winds pull me in many directions, but for this moment, I sneak a reprieve from the harshness of winter. No need to talk, to listen, to care, to ache, to doubt, to perform, to fail or succeed.

Andrea Eisenberg is an obstetrician/gynecologist who over the years has shared in the joys and heartaches of her patients. She finds writing helps her to process some of the more difficult experiences of her field. She has published essays in various narrative medicine journals.
