

BRIDGET BOLAND

## Lost and Found

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*“Lost and Found” explores themes related to miscarriage and the loss of a pregnancy. My husband and I were elated when I became pregnant quickly and easily. That elation turned to despair when I woke on April Fools’ Day to what felt like a cruel joke: I was bleeding at ten-weeks gestation. A sonogram confirmed that the fetus had no heartbeat.*

*I went home and miscarried naturally, without having a dilation and curettage (D&C). We had shared our happy news with family and some friends. Reactions to the miscarriage ranged from helpful support to trite assurances that we could try again. One friend sent a packet of seeds to plant in memory of the baby we’d lost. My mother-in-law, a writer, suggested I see the pregnancy I’d lost as a throwaway “first draft.”*

*Overcome with grief, I first used food to numb my pain. Healing finally came from an encounter with another pregnant mother who had also been through several miscarriages. Her support and shared experience allowed me the opportunity to work through my grief.*

*I turned to tools I’d learned from my yoga practice and my therapist. I created a safe space in which to express my feelings as I hit a pillow with a tennis racket. This somatic expression allowed me to process my emotions instead of sugarcoating them.*

*Despite the pain of my miscarriage, our story had a happy ending when I conceived again, and later gave birth to a healthy baby boy.*

After several months of trying to make a baby, my husband and I were elated to see a definitive blue line in the pregnancy test window one bright February morning. We were going to be parents! We were excited about realizing this dream and starting our family. My labour began in a typical way, with cramping and some mild spotting. But the timing was off. Way off. I woke on Sunday 1 April, and went to use the bathroom. Dark red blood bloomed on the toilet paper. I wiped a second time. More blood. I went back to bed. As

soon as I lay down, the cramps started. They came on slowly but built steadily over the next several hours. I got up to use the bathroom a second time. Blood again. More than the first time. Brighter red.

Timing is everything. Had they come six months later, these signs might have set off a thrill of eager anticipation that we would soon meet the child I'd been carrying inside me for over nine months. But I was only twelve-weeks pregnant. Instead of delight, terror coursed through me, along with the painful awareness that I was powerless to stop whatever might happen next.

It seemed a cruel April Fools' joke to lose my child on such a vibrant spring day. I went into shock, disbelief, and denial. Around 8:30 a.m. my husband woke up. The cramping was still intermittent, the bleeding light. I didn't mention the ominous symptoms. We dressed and got in the car to go to church. When he asked if I wanted to stop for coffee on the way, I snapped at him that we didn't have time. He recoiled from my harsh tone, and then asked if I was in a bad mood. I wanted him to know what was happening, but I resented that he couldn't just see how terribly wrong everything was. I resented having to say out loud that I was losing our baby. I fervently hoped that if I ignored my body's signs to the contrary, the baby would be fine.

I withdrew deeper into myself as the day went on, fitfully sleeping for a few hours until the contractions grew more insistent. Our first sonogram had been scheduled for the following morning. Around 4:00 a.m., I woke up with a yelp. My startled husband reached a reassuring arm out, mumbled, "Do you need anything?" then rolled over, and started snoring again. I lurched doubled-over to the bathroom, panting in an effort to manage the searing pain gripping my belly. When I called the midwife she said I should come in for my scheduled appointment so they could take a look, although she was pretty sure I was miscarrying.

"There's the uterus," the sonographer pointed to the image on the screen when we arrived for our appointment. "And at the bottom there, that's the fetus.

"And... no heartbeat."

All my life I've wrangled with words. "Button your lip!" my father bellowed when one of us kids talked back. I learned early on how to choke down what I felt, putting on a good front for survival's sake. But words took on a stark new importance when I miscarried, beginning with my plea to the bean of a baby growing inside me: please stay.

Even the word "fetus" took on a heightened importance: up until the twelfth week of pregnancy, the baby is called an "embryo." It graduates to fetus status at the twelfth week, making it feel a larger loss to miscarry then.

There was nothing the midwife could do, other than counsel me about letting the baby pass naturally or seeing my obstetrician for a D&C—a therapeutic gynecological procedure used to clear the uterine lining after

miscarriage. I opted to let nature take its course. By the time we arrived back home, I was moaning and rocking in the passenger seat of the car. My insides howled, and my mind was wracked with a different but equally awful pain.

Throughout the morning as my body expelled blood and tissue, I sat on my birth ball breathing through the contractions. I rested when I could, and walked or moved on the ball when the pain got too intense to endure lying down.

I insisted that my husband go to work; there was nothing he could do to make me feel better, and I wanted to be alone. By late afternoon, the bleeding and cramping had eased again. It was still there, but not as urgent as earlier. I felt antsy. I didn't want to sleep, and I couldn't sit still.

A bag of maternity clothing I had bought just a few days ago caught my eye. Another pain ripped through me, this one in my heart. The clothes had to go. I grabbed the bag and headed downtown. I was anxious. The pent up energy of my grief fuelled a kind of manic need to keep moving.

I walked into the maternity store, hoping to return the clothing and get out as quickly as possible. But the sweet salesclerk who had helped me pick out the numerous items I had purchased was at the register again. She remembered me, called me by name, and asked how I was doing. When I explained what had happened and why I was back, her smile melted and tears ran down her cheeks. I hastened her through the return, and averted my gaze from the pity in her eyes.

I walked out of the store clutching the return receipt. I felt so still inside. But emotions rumbled beneath that veneer of quiet. They threatened to erupt if I allowed them. I should have gone home, should have taken to my bed and wailed for my loss. Instead, I reverted to a coping behaviour that had gotten me through my childhood. I drove to the nearest Dairy Queen and ordered the largest malt on the menu. Twenty-one ounces of chocolate sugarcoated every bit of sadness and loss until I couldn't have felt it if I'd wanted to.

I'd started stuffing my fear about miscarrying two days earlier, as if on some unconscious level I'd already known the baby was dead. I'd been walking home from the grocery store when a friend drove by. She stopped the car then jumped out and walked over to me; a big grin lighted up her face.

"Guess what?" she asked coyly.

I guessed at her news immediately: she was pregnant, too. They were expecting their second child in October.

"Our kids will be playmates." She grinned again.

I was thrilled for her, but an ominous thought scuttled through my mind: *Too bad my baby won't be alive.*

I pushed the unsettling thought out of my mind and walked the rest of the way home. The eerie premonition didn't return that night, but when I got home, I did an odd thing. I walked into the kitchen, pulled open the refrigerator

door, and removed a quarter of a carrot cake left over from a dinner party we'd had earlier in the week. I removed the plastic lid, grabbed a fork, and stood at the kitchen counter shovelling forkfuls of cake into my mouth until it was all gone. I recall wondering vaguely why I felt compelled to eat the entire thing when I wasn't even hungry. I seemed to be in a trance. I couldn't get the fork from the platter to my mouth fast enough.

The next morning, I'd started miscarrying.

The words of my writing teacher at the University of Chicago rang in my ears over the next days as my body continued to expel my hopes and dreams of being a mommy along with the "products of conception," a ghastly way to refer to a baby. My grandmother had passed away while I was in school, and I'd never forgotten my professor's instruction when I requested permission to miss class to attend the funeral. "Take notes," she'd directed. "Take lots and lots of notes."

I'd found her suggestion crass at the time, as if observing the events of my beloved grandmother's funeral and burial would lessen my participation in mourning. But after my miscarriage, I found comfort in my teacher's wisdom. If I didn't write down what was happening, there was a possibility I would eventually forget—perhaps not the miscarriage itself, but the nuggets of valuable insights I was meant to glean and hold onto after the pain of the loss subsided.

The words of others also felt imbued with heightened value, like my playwright mother-in-law's feeble attempt to remind me that we could try to get pregnant again soon. "Consider it a first draft, a throw-away." She'd meant well, but this was far from a balm to my sorrows.

My own mother's words were disturbing for different reasons. After offering placating platitudes slightly less offensive than those of my mother-in-law's, she went on to remind me that she had endured two miscarriages in the midst of carrying five healthy children to term.

"Do you remember?" she prodded. "You had to go down and get me a container to put the parts in during the first one."

I remembered all too well that initiation into womanhood the summer I turned twelve. It had made me dread getting my period, a rite of passage that prior to her miscarriage I'd been anxiously awaiting. What I didn't point out to my mother was that she had misrepresented herself. Her second "miscarriage" was an elective abortion my father and a doctor had talked her into due to her advanced age and an increased risk of having a child with Down syndrome. I hadn't known the truth at the time she underwent the abortion, only that my mother went to the doctor's office one afternoon then came home and took to her bed for nearly six months. Some years later, she confided in me about the source of the depression that had led her into a dark hole full of anxiety attacks and agoraphobia, which left my father, siblings, and me floundering in the

habits and routines of running the household my mother had abdicated.

I didn't have the emotional strength during my miscarriage to call my mother out on her subterfuge about the abortion. Her ability to shapeshift the truth to meet some standard of acceptability in her mind infuriated and panicked me. Had she not sworn me to secrecy when she divulged her abortion to me, I might not have taken on her mixed emotions of shame and longing, emotions that led me to terminate my own surprise pregnancy in my twenties.

For most of my early life, I had no strong sense of self-identity. I knew who I was expected to be—who my parents, siblings, teachers and friends saw me as—but I moved through the world amorphous as an amoeba, in constant undulation to meet the expectations of those around me. I was the good daughter, the oldest child; to my father, I was his “big girl.” I'd been standing in for my mother, playing the role of an adult, since childhood. All along, I'd been holding my breath and waiting for the day when someone would see through me and call me out as the fake I sensed I was deep inside.

After my miscarriage, I had no time or inclination for making nice or acting as someone I wasn't to make others comfortable. When my siblings called to encourage me, one more cheerful and upbeat than the next, I answered their phone messages with a group email telling them that if they couldn't be comfortable with my sadness they should not call again. I needed time. I needed to grieve.

The miscarriage had occurred just before my husband and I were to travel to my in-laws' for Easter—being away from home offered a distraction from the loss. For nearly five days, I acted as though everything was fine, nearly convincing myself that was the truth. No one brought up what had happened or asked how I was doing, for which I felt not angry but relieved.

But back at home the Monday morning after our trip, an earthquake of sorrow rumbled deep in my pelvis. There was an achy full feeling around my left ovary, as if something was lodged up against it. Although the pain was physical, I felt certain the source was emotional.

I went to teach a prenatal yoga class, something I normally loved but now felt like a cruel slap in the face by the hand of Fate. My facade held up pretty well in class. I moved into competent, professional teacher mode when I entered the studio. My students knew I was pregnant—or had been—but no one asked how I was feeling, and I made it through the class with my composure intact. We were gathering our things to leave when Callie, a sweet, out-to-here-pregnant blonde, turned toward me and unwittingly chirped, “So did you get to see the baby on the sonogram? How many weeks along are you?”

Five first-time moms turned toward me expectantly. They were always eager to share in one another's good news, and my pregnancy had elevated my status from teacher to the ranks of the initiated.

I choked out the news that I'd miscarried the week before. Some girls looked away, fearful that my misfortune might be contagious. A few gasped with shock and dismay as they ran their hands reassuringly over their protruding abdomens. But Callie lumbered as quickly as she could across the room, swept me into her arms, and held on like she would never let me go. The nearly full-term baby in her belly made it impossible for us to get close, but she did her best to pull me into a fierce mama bear hug. I wanted so badly to melt into the warmth of her embrace, but if I had started crying, I might never have stopped. Callie whispered in my ear that she had endured two miscarriages. She knew it hurt so bad you just wanted to die.

Finally, here was someone brave enough to speak to the pain I felt. I wanted to wail in Callie's arms while she rocked me gently back and forth. I didn't give in to that instinct, though. I wrenched myself away from her, mumbled senseless words of thanks for her compassion, and fled the studio. But I knew what I had to do. I had to give my grief a voice.

I went home on a mission. No more overeating. No more sugar. No more pretending I was okay. It was time to face the sorrow threatening to drown me. I'd been practising bioenergetics—a psychotherapeutic modality that works with the body and mind to resolve emotional issues and create more pleasure and joy. Down went the yoga mat with a chair on top of it, a pillow on the seat of the chair. I picked up a tennis racket and a small wooden dowel, preparing myself like a surgeon before an operation. I was doing a kind of healing, an excision. I rolled my feet on the dowel to open up my body the way my dear therapist had taught me, and leaned all my weight into the sole of the foot on the wooden rod until the pain was so sharp it brought the tears I hadn't been able to cry since the sonogram.

I rolled my hips as if I had an invisible hula hoop around my middle to awaken the remaining energy of the miscarriage lingering in my pelvis. I shut the windows and drew the drapes. The last thing I needed was the neighbours calling the police over the noise I was about to make. At last I was ready. I raised the racket up over my head and brought it down onto the pillow as hard as I could. The stuck feeling around my left ovary unclogged. Something drained out—grief. Black and gooey, toxic as tar if left unchecked. The wail that burst forth from me was primitive and raw, the sound of a wounded animal keening. Over and over for the better part of an hour, I raised and lowered the racket onto the pillow until my arms ached and my throat was raw from weeping.

Afterward I rested on the couch, more peaceful than I'd felt in weeks. I was empty but clear, open again. I'd lost my baby but found my voice. I could feel something more than anger and sorrow again. It felt safe to hold great expectations for a happy future.

## Postscript

Although my miscarriage was a painful loss, the way I dealt with my grief made the experience much cleaner. The sadness didn't linger long. For the first time, I chose to feel my feelings and express them instead of covering them up or numbing them with food. For a few weeks after I did the bioenergetics exercises, I poked gingerly at the memory of the miscarriage the way one probes the tongue into the hole of a missing tooth to see if the nerve is still raw and throbbing. But each time I went after the memory, I felt only a sense of closure. The miscarriage had happened, and I was sad, but it wasn't going to take over my life or ruin the deeper sense of happiness that was my foundation. The loss brought with it a tremendous lesson about the value of grieving, and how it ultimately allows us to let go with grace.

Three and a half months later, my husband and I learned that I was pregnant again. Fearful that I would miscarry a second time, I used the fourteen weeks of early pregnancy to sit with my mixed feelings of delight and terror, to learn how to hold steady in all the uncertainty arising when there is simply nothing left to do but wait and hope. Our beautiful son Liam was born in our home on 29 April 2008.