

a
good
and
perfect
gift

*Faith, Expectations, and
a Little Girl Named Penny*

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“You didn’t like dolls,” my mother said. “You would put all your puzzles in a row in the playroom and dump their pieces onto the floor, then put them back together one by one.”

She shook her head as she unloaded the dishwasher. Then she turned toward me with a smile. “The only word you said incorrectly was *raisins*. Those, for some reason, you called ‘sha sha.’ Otherwise, you wouldn’t speak unless you could say the word properly.”

I smiled, a little amused, a little self-conscious. Mom wiped her hands on a dish towel. Her curly brown hair was pulled back with two barrettes. Dressed in a Santa Claus sweater and snowflake earrings, she looked her part—preschool teacher, mother of four, grandmother-to-be.

It was the day after Christmas. I was helping put away the china and silver from dinner the night before, but I soon leaned against the hutch in her kitchen, my hand pressed against my lower back. My belly was a taut globe, an announcement to the world that our child would arrive any day now. Our child. Our daughter. Penny.

Mom stacked the plates and placed them on open shelves filled with holiday cheer in the form of elves, snowflakes, miniature sleighs, and jingle bells. She closed the top of the box that held the silver and tucked it under the counter. “I have a few different options for lunch,” she said.

She poured chili into one pot and carrot-ginger soup into another as I stacked red bowls on the counter and retrieved the everyday silverware. “Anything else?”

She motioned toward the chairs. “I’ve got the rest. You sit down.”

It all felt comfortable, familiar—the paper whites blooming in the window, the smell of another home-cooked meal, the kitchen drawer that needed repair, the skylights, the sight of Mom at work.

The house was filled with reminders of my childhood. The window ledge spanning the length of the dining room held a line of family photos—one from every Christmas since my birth. I could walk through my life, starting as an only child gazing with wonder at a tree full of lights. Then, with my baby sister Kate, wearing a “falalalala” dress that Mom had made of red corduroy with white letters. On down the line, with Brooks and Elly entering the family, and from there through the ruffles and taffeta of middle school to the long blond hair of high school to the black pants and sweater that had become my uniform as a young working woman. Still, through it all, I resembled the little girl Mom had described—the one who liked books more than toys, the one who always acted a little more grown-up than her age.

That evening we all gathered in the attic, a makeshift family room that remained unpainted and without heat, home to old dress-up clothes, rows of *National Geographic* magazines, an L-shaped couch, and a big-screen TV. Brooks and Elly shared a blanket. Kate curled up in a chair with a cup of hot chocolate. Mom and Dad sat side by side, their bodies not quite touching. I leaned against Peter, his hand resting on me, waiting for the sharp kicks and ripples that always came in the evening. It still seemed mysterious—that my body could join with his and form another person. That she would inherit my round cheeks or his dark hair or my grandfather’s

chin. That she would be ours, and yet utterly herself all at the same time.

Brooks and Elly had decided we should watch some old home videos, but as they flipped through the choices, my mind lingered on the more immediate past, the preparations for new life among us. I had read a host of baby books and written thank-you notes for the dozens of presents we had already accumulated. We had attended a day-long session at the hospital for expectant parents. I learned techniques to breathe through pain, and a nurse walked us through the birthing process. We peeked inside one of the delivery rooms. I had already written all my final papers for graduate school, just in case she came early. And yet, despite the preparations, despite my body's insistence that a baby was coming, I couldn't believe we were going to be parents, I was going to be a mother. I squeezed Peter's hand when she kicked again.

Brooks and Elly agreed on a series of classics—first Brooks as a three-year-old making up a song for the camera: “Why do I have to live in this canoe?” Then Elly as a four-year-old newscaster reporting on the weather. Then the four of us, that same year, when I was thirteen, producing a video for Mom and Dad's twentieth wedding anniversary as we mimicked their daily routines. And then, there I was, two years old with bleach-blond hair and big green eyes, singing a college fight song. In the video it was summertime, and my mother was pregnant with Kate. Someone asked me when the new baby was coming. “In Octoder,” I replied, and then corrected myself with a frown and a shake of the head. “In October.”

Even at age two I had to get it exactly right. It had to be perfect.

Back at our own apartment a few nights later, I woke up with a stomachache. After two hours curled in a chair reading, I padded down the long hallway from the living room to our bedroom, shaking my head. I had seen my doctor

the day before, and I could still hear her words: “You aren’t dilated at all. You haven’t dropped. It will be another week or two at least.”

I reached the bedroom and nudged Peter’s shoulder. “I might be having contractions.”

He rolled toward me and squinted into the light. “Really?”

“It’s probably false labor,” I said, trying to sound calm. I glanced at the clock. Six a.m. “But I want to get the nursery ready. Just in case.”

He looked as if he were holding back a smile as he pushed himself up.

I shrugged, a little embarrassed that all I could think about were the tasks I wanted to accomplish. But then my torso tightened. I clenched my teeth and breathed through my nose. *False labor*, I told myself again. With the contraction over, I forced a smile. “Ready?”

Peter was a teacher and a housemaster in a boarding school, so we lived in an apartment within a dormitory of thirty high school boys, a century-old building of burgundy brick with copper gutters and a slate roof. The back of the apartment held two bedrooms that once had been the quarters for a cook and a maid. They were odd configurations with slanted walls and uneven ceilings. Penny’s room backed up to ours. It held a double bed, a crib, a chair, and a changing table, but the walls were bare.

That morning I washed all the baby clothes. We hung pictures, mostly keepsakes from our own childhoods. The embroidered alphabet my mother made me as an infant. Peter’s christening announcement. A painting of a teddy bear. Peter bounded from pushing the crib into the corner of the room to hammering another nail into the wall, as though he were playing an intense and thoroughly enjoyable tennis match. I moved more slowly, without his giddy energy. If I allowed myself to feel excited, then I would have to think about what lay ahead, the unknown intensity of labor and delivery. Excitement would soon give way to fear, so I kept my thoughts

focused on arranging pictures and starting another load of laundry until, every twenty minutes or so, the pain would arrive, and I'd clutch Peter's hand or press my palms against the cool plaster of the yellow wall and say to myself, as if it were a mantra, *False labor. False labor.*

It took about three hours to get the clothes washed and folded and to fill the walls of Penny's room. "I guess I should call the doctor," I said, once there was nothing left to do.

Another hour and three contractions later, we arrived at the hospital. Peter had showered and shaved, and I had pulled my hair back into a ponytail and put on a little makeup. Dr. Mayer examined me and said, "I can feel your baby's head. You're here to stay."

I wanted to laugh and cry all at once. My eyes met Peter's. He leaned over and kissed my belly, then gave me a lingering kiss on the lips. "I'll run home and pack our bags."

"And would you call my mom?" I asked as he headed for the door.

I found myself attended to by two nurses at once, my clothes in a heap and a hospital gown over my head and a strap around my middle to monitor the strength of the contractions along with Penny's heart rate. A prick in the vein on top of my hand and an IV dripping fluid into my bloodstream.

And then, just as abruptly, they were gone. I noticed my surroundings for the first time—a small, windowless rectangle with bare white walls. I vaguely remembered a nurse saying, "We'll get you your own room as soon as possible," and I realized another patient lay on the other side of a curtain. She spoke only Spanish, but as nurses came and went, I understood that she was in labor at twenty weeks gestation. She was carrying twins.

Every time a nurse came to her side, I wanted to call out, but the words wouldn't come. My situation—the rather mundane pain of labor—couldn't compare to the fear she must have been feeling for the lives of those babies. I lay still, and my contractions marched forward until they arrived every five

minutes. I watched the screen that measured their intensity and felt an odd sense of awe as the line shot to the top of the graph and held steady for sixty solid seconds. Pain smothered me. It took me an hour to muster the courage to say, “Excuse me? I’d like an epidural. Please.”

It wasn’t much longer until Peter returned. I caught a glimpse of him before we made eye contact, and I felt my shoulders relax knowing he was nearby. *After six years of marriage, he still makes me feel like a teenager*, I thought, as I took in his strong jawline and wavy black hair and broad shoulders. And now, even though I knew there was more pain to come, his presence steadied me.

They moved me into a private room—big and bright, with picture windows spanning the horizon. An anesthesiologist arrived to start the epidural, and soon it had numbed my body from the waist down. Now all I had to do was wait. Peter went about setting up speakers so we could listen to music. My mother and sisters arrived. They walked in quietly, but I could see the excitement on their faces. Kate’s eyes sparkled. Elly looked as if she might laugh. Brooks clapped her hands together when she saw me, but then she stopped herself as if she needed permission to continue.

“Hello, everybody,” I said, setting aside the most recent issue of *The New Yorker*. “No need to tiptoe. The epidural is working its magic. I can’t feel a thing.”

Kate let out a little cry. “I can’t believe this is really happening!”

Mom gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and turned to greet Peter.

Brooks shimmied her shoulders, as if she might start dancing. The three of them crowded around the bed.

I said, “I’m so glad you can all be here.”

“I’m glad you’re early,” Elly replied. “I would’ve been back at school if you’d waited until your due date.”

I was seventeen days early—not enough to be considered premature, but enough to surprise us all.

“Okay,” Brooks said. “Wait a minute. I still don’t understand. How are you so calm right now?”

I pointed to the screen. “It’s all about the epidural. When that line shoots to the top, it means I’m having another contraction. I just can’t feel them anymore.”

“I’d say you’ve been pretty calm all day,” Peter said.

I told the family the story so far. Then they reviewed their afternoon—Peter’s phone call, driving around town to find Mom on a walk with a friend, throwing clothes in bags and piling into the car.

“Dad’s going to come tomorrow,” Mom said.

I nodded, thinking that Dad wouldn’t know what to do with himself through the hours of waiting. But Mom and my sisters seemed happy to be here now. The energy in the room was palpable, like the giddy anticipation of kids on Christmas morning.

We didn’t have to wait long. About an hour after my family arrived, Dr. Mayer checked in again. “It’s time to push,” she said. “We’re a little short-staffed, since this is a holiday weekend.” She turned to my mother. “Mom, think you can help?”

Mom certainly had experience—four deliveries of her own, and one of those without a doctor present. He had walked in with my father, who had been away on a business trip, five minutes after Elly was born. Now Mom pushed up the sleeves of her white turtleneck and took her position holding my left leg. Peter, on the right, was my coach. He never stopped looking at me, and his voice held a mixture of gravitas and pride as he said again and again, “You can do this. Push.”

But I couldn’t figure it out. I couldn’t feel anything. I was doing something wrong. I was failing. Failing. A monitor started to beep.

“The baby’s heart rate is dropping,” Dr. Mayer said. She turned to a nurse. “Page the neonatologist.” And then she looked at me, equally stern. “When the next contraction comes, you have to push. You have got to get this baby out.”

Somehow, my body knew what to do. With the next contraction, Dr. Mayer cheered. “You’re on your way. Okay. Okay.”

Two pushes later, Penny shot into the world. I caught a glimpse of her wriggling body and heard squawks from her little lungs. With a weary, delighted smile, I lay back. Peter held both sides of my face and choked out the words, “You did it. We did it. She’s beautiful.” He kissed me and held my hand tight.

“Eight out of ten on her Apgar,” someone said.

I turned my head, following my daughter. The neonatologist had just arrived. Her presence seemed unnecessary now. She examined Penny and washed her off, wrapped her in a blanket, and placed her in my arms. Penny had a full head of black hair and pouty lips, and she opened her eyes just long enough for me to see that they were deep blue, the color of a lake on a cloudy day. And then she was gone.

It was all action and congratulations from there—Peter announcing the good news, my body starting to respond to the intensity of what it had just experienced, shaking, teeth chattering, my sisters exclaiming how cute Penny looked when they saw her through the glass walls of the nursery. We called my dad, his dad, his brother, a whole list of friends. Peter even called his boss so he could send an email to the rest of the faculty: Penelope Truesdell Becker, five pounds, five ounces, nineteen inches, born at 5:22 p.m. on December 30, 2005. Alleluia and Happy New Year!

Amidst the euphoria, amidst the doctor’s report that Penny was a little cold and they would bring her in when she had warmed up, a nurse called Peter out of the room. In the back of my brain, a warning signal flashed. I was in the middle of giving directions for Mom and my sisters to get some dinner and was more attuned to my own body than anything else—this mushy midsection that hours before held a baby, these shaky limbs, the ache that began to creep into my back. My legs tingled. Adrenaline seeped out of my bloodstream, leaving me dazed, content.

When Peter returned, my eyes were drawn to a speck of blood on the collar of his red-and-white checked shirt. It took me a minute to realize the blood was mine. Only then did I notice that his eyes were brimming. He grasped my hand. “The doctors think Penny has Down syndrome.”

I kept staring at that speck of blood, trying to differentiate it from the red of the shirt, wondering whether it would come out in the wash or whether it would be a permanent reminder of Penny’s birth. That speck of blood.

Peter said, “Age?” using his nickname for me.

I shook my head. The only word that came to mind was *No*.

The lines in his face were soft and his tone was gentle, careful. “She has some of the features of a Down’s baby, I guess. The doctors said they can come talk to you if you have any questions.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod.

The world began to break into pieces, as if I had been looking at a scene through a plate-glass window that suddenly cracked, jagged lines distorting my vision. I had a flash of anger—*How dare they talk to Peter without me?* And then a flash of concern—*Is Penny okay?* And soon they were standing there, the neonatologist, a woman with thin brown hair who never smiled, and the pediatrician, a round-faced man with sweaty palms. I thought, *They don’t know what to say*. My voice clenched, but I didn’t cry. I argued with them a little, as if I could convince them to take back their pronouncement. But I couldn’t register their words, with their grim faces and somber tones. Whatever it was couldn’t overcome the narrative inside my head. The lines that began with *No* and concluded with *I want to run away. Far away. Now*.

The day before, I had been reading about the tsunami that had devastated the island of Indonesia a year earlier. I read that before the wave hit, all the water had rushed out to sea, leaving a dry floor littered with fish. It must have been

an eerie calm, watching, waiting, wondering if the water would return.

After the doctors left the room, I felt like a woman standing on that beach. I didn't believe what was happening, and so I watched, as if it were someone else's life. As if the water would never come back. As if there weren't a tidal wave on its way.

They brought Penny into the room, swaddled tight, her head covered in a blue-and-pink striped hat. All we could see was her little round face. She felt so light as she gazed up at me with those big blue eyes. Her cheeks looked splotchy. When Peter held her, his long arms enveloped her body. He rocked her and stroked her cheek.

As I looked at them together, questions flooded my mind, stealing me from the sweetness of seeing Peter become a father. *How could this happen? What does this mean for her? Will I be able to be proud of her? Will I be able to love her?*

A nurse entered the room and handed me a pamphlet about breast-feeding. I scanned the page. "You may have difficulties," it read, "if your baby is more than three weeks early . . . If your baby weighs less than six pounds . . . If your baby has Down syndrome." It struck me as such a terrible introduction to nursing that I almost laughed out loud. But Penny nestled in and began to eat. It was awkward, and she kept falling asleep, and yet she latched on and sucked. She did it just right. The nurse said, "She's doing better than any other newborn I've seen today."

For the first time since Peter had told me the news, I smiled. And by the time Penny had finished nursing, I heard a whisper of peace. I sat there without words, without tears, looking at her and wondering what lay ahead. Earlier in the day, the epidural had numbed me from the waist down. Now, its effect worn off, I winced with the effort of trying to sit up. But my emotions seemed to have followed my body, as though an anesthesiologist had found a way into

my soul, temporarily protecting me from the fear and sadness and guilt.

I was still sitting there, calm and solemn, when my sisters and mother walked in. I had heard them in the hallway, the cheery cadences of their conversation wafting into the room. But they knew as soon as they saw us. And then the first tear trickled down my cheek. I tried to tell them, but I had to wave in Peter's direction. He said it again, "The doctors think Penny has Down syndrome."

Mom nodded, almost as if the news had confirmed a suspicion. Kate's eyes got big. Brooks jerked her head a little, as if she had been slapped. Elly looked at the floor.

"May I hold her?" Mom asked. With Penny in her arms, she said, "I knew something was wrong from the way the nurses were looking at each other after the delivery. They kept catching each other's eyes and trying to catch your doctor's eye, and they weren't smiling. And Penny's body didn't look like all of you when you were born. I wondered if she had dislocated her shoulder or something."

I thought back to Penny naked, her limbs splayed as they washed her after birth. I hadn't seen it then, but Mom was right. Her body had looked different from those classic images of newborns curled up tight, arms and legs pulled in.

"And they took her away so quickly," Mom said. Her voice held relief, as if she had been worried she would return to news far worse.

Again, I hadn't thought anything of the timing. I hadn't held Penny for long, but it hadn't struck me as odd. I just didn't know any better.

A nurse interrupted. "Penny's body temp is on the low side, and we need to run some more tests," she said, extending her arms.

Kate said, "But I haven't gotten to hold her yet."

"I'll bring her back as soon as we're done."

Silence settled upon us once Penny was gone until I said, "I need to call Dad."

“Do you want me to do it?” Peter asked.

I shook my head even though I didn’t want to pick up the phone, to call him back, as though I were retracting the good news from a few hours ago.

It was the first time I said it out loud: “The doctors think Penny has Down syndrome.”

“Oh,” Dad said.

“But she seems healthy,” I added.

“Good.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow.”

When I had told my family I was pregnant, Dad had jumped up and down in the middle of our living room with exclamations of delight. I had never seen him so happy. “Nancy,” he said to my mother, intertwining his fingers with hers, “we’re going to be grandparents.”

After I hung up the phone, a stone of fear dropped into my stomach. *What if our families don’t love her?*

Mom went back to our apartment around ten o’clock, but my sisters waited two more hours until Penny was back in the room. They stroked her cheeks and rocked her and kissed her forehead. Aunt Kate. Aunt Brooks. Aunt Elly. I was the oldest child and the oldest grandchild. Penny was the first daughter, the first niece, the first granddaughter, the first great-granddaughter. And they all wanted to be with her, even though everything I thought we had known about her had been swept away.

By midnight I had been awake for almost twenty-four hours. My sisters said their good-byes. Penny nursed again, and Peter curled up to sleep in the fold-out cot next to my bed, his hand resting upon my thigh.

A nurse came in. She recorded my temperature and my blood pressure and asked about my pain. I handed Penny to her, and she turned to walk out of the room. Almost as an afterthought, she stepped toward me and said, “I had a special child, too.”

I couldn't see her face in the dim light. I was lying down, on the edge of sleep.

"How old is your child now?" I asked.

Her tone stayed the same—even and soothing—when she said, "He died a long time ago."

I closed my eyes for a moment. I didn't want it to be true. I said, "I'm sorry."

She looked past me and shook her head, as if I didn't understand. Before she took her leave, she said, "He was a gift."

I am crying because of you. Because of joy and love that run deeper than any logical construction. Because of sorrow that you are not who I thought you would be.

You are beautiful. You are my daughter. We are delighted to meet you.

And yet I cry . . .

I don't want to cry over the birth of my daughter.

January 2006

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Again and again that night, I emerged from the blissful anonymity of sleep with my heart racing, as if a door had slammed shut, as if a gunshot had pierced the silence. And then I would remember, and I would tell myself, *Your daughter has Down syndrome*, and I would try to figure out how I had come to be this person, this mother.

Peter slept straight through, his body rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. They brought Penny in to nurse, and he hardly stirred. But I stayed awake, gazing at her little round face, trying to make sense of it all. I didn't know much about Down syndrome, but I did know that it had happened at the moment of conception, as soon as the chromosomes from Peter's body joined the ones from mine. From the beginning. Before I even knew she existed.

I thought back to that day in early May. In the course of a week, two friends had called. Each of them said, "I dreamed last night that you were pregnant." And so, on a warm spring morning, I took a test. Peter had been on his way out the door to coach a tennis match, and I had asked, "Could you wait about three minutes?" I didn't tell him why until I emerged from the bathroom wide-eyed, smiling. I held out the pregnancy test with its little blue plus sign. He yelped and wrapped his arms around me.

And here she was, falling asleep against my chest. Here she was, needing me to be her mother. Here she was, beautiful

and fragile and not who I had expected. This child who had danced along my spine, slept against my organs, kicked my ribs, and handled my hipbones. This child who had been to places inside me that I had never seen or touched, that I had only begun to feel because of her.

Her hands were so tiny—white fingernails that looked as though she had a manicure in the womb—and a chubby face with an upturned nose and puffy eyes. I gazed at her, and the nurse’s words, “He was a gift,” came back to me, a simple, haunting refrain.

Peter went out to get coffee in the morning. He returned with a blueberry muffin and a cup of tea just the way I liked it, with one Splenda and a lot of milk. The whole room was a testimony to his care for me—the down comforter and pillow he had brought from home; the laptop computer with speakers set up so I could listen to music; the stack of magazines—*Time*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *First Things*—in case I had needed a diversion during labor; and the pile of pastel-colored baby clothes on the windowsill.

He had put away the sheets and pillows from his own makeshift bed and now he sat next to me, elbows on knees, both hands around the coffee cup, eyes down. I wanted to talk, but I didn’t know what to say. The question that repeated itself inside my head was, *How could this happen?* When I tried to come up with an answer, all I could think was, *We haven’t done anything to deserve this. We haven’t done anything wrong. And Down syndrome is the one thing she can’t have, the one thing we ruled out.*

Halfway through my pregnancy, in August, Dr. Mayer had called. Peter and I were on vacation at my family’s summer house. It was midafternoon, and we sat side by side in beach chairs overlooking the water. The air was clear enough to see Long Island, miles away. Its sandy beaches were obscured.

Only the trees met my eye, as if they were floating above the water with nothing to anchor them in place.

“I’ve been trying to track you down,” Dr. Mayer said, a hint of admonishment in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. I sat upright, like a kid in school who had been caught not paying attention.

“We got some test results back,” she said, more gently. “From the quad screen you had last week. We’ve been leaving messages at home, but I really needed to get in touch with you.”

I moved my sunglasses to the top of my head, as if I could look Dr. Mayer in the eye. Peter put his book aside.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The results show a 1 in 316 chance that your baby has Down syndrome. Technically, that’s not considered a risk. One in 250 counts as a risk. But you’re so young. For a woman your age, the risk should be closer to 1 in 1,000. You might want to do some follow-up tests.”

She went through the options. A definitive answer could only come via an amniocentesis, but it posed a slight risk of miscarriage.

“No,” I said. “We don’t need that.”

Peter and I had already agreed we wouldn’t terminate the pregnancy in the event of abnormalities, so we scheduled a Level Two ultrasound one week later. And we rejoiced when the technician reported, “This baby may be many things, but it won’t have Down syndrome.”

As I looked at Peter huddled over his coffee, I heard his words again, his pronouncement from the night before, *They think she has Down syndrome*. I wanted to summon that ultrasound technician who had measured Penny’s femur, her tibia and fibula, the fold of skin at the back of her neck. That woman who had traced Penny’s picture on the screen and said, “See, the baby is sucking its thumb.” I wanted to summon her and tell her she was wrong. I wanted to say, *It is your fault that we are not prepared. It is your fault that we didn’t know.*

But knowledge wouldn't have made a difference. I could never have imagined the words *mental retardation* or *birth defect* being used in the same sentence as my child's name. It was as if having kids had become an equation: youth plus devotion to God plus education equaled a healthy and normal baby. As if taking a birthing class and reading baby books and abstaining from alcohol and praying all guaranteed certain things about our family. As if I were entitled to exactly the baby I had imagined, a little version of myself, a child who was verbally precocious and walked early and went on to skip kindergarten and excel in school. But there I was, in a hospital gown on a Saturday morning, and my child had Down syndrome.

Peter's phone broke the silence. He looked at it and said, "It's my brother." He rubbed his forehead. "I can't answer it. I wouldn't be able to say hello without crying."

Peter's younger brother Christian was at a wedding in New Orleans for one of their cousins. He knew Penny had been born, but he didn't know anything else. Peter glanced at the phone as it rang again. He pushed "Ignore call."

He looked up at me, his voice tight. "I feel like I've been swallowed by darkness. I can't . . ." He shook his head and turned away. "I can't . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

A nurse brought Penny into the room. She was swaddled tight, and someone had added a large floppy bow to her standard-issue blue-and-pink striped hat. "She's adorable," the nurse said.

"Thank you," I murmured, receiving Penny into my arms.

"I brought you all some information. From the Internet." She handed a small stack of papers to Peter. "And I'm going to try to put you in touch with some other families who've been in the same situation."

"How often does this happen?" I asked.

"You're the third I've known where a Down's baby was born unexpectedly. That's in the past five years. So, not very often."

I worked on the math. *How many babies were born each year in this hospital? Five a day? Ten? Thousands every year. Thousands. And once or twice, with an unknown extra chromosome.*

After the nurse left, I said to Peter, “We’ve become those people.”

“Those people?”

“You know, the exceptional ones.”

There were plenty of unusual aspects of our life together—we didn’t watch more than an hour a week of television, we were educated and lived in the Northeast *and* believed in Jesus, we had met in high school and dated through college and got married three weeks after graduation. *Exceptional*, I thought, with a hint of bitterness. I looked at Penny again, and the tone of the voice inside my head softened. *Exceptional*.

Peter reached out his arms. “May I?”

She was so little. He held her head in the palm of his hand and tucked her body close to his. Her toes reached the crook of his arm. He wiped his eyes. “Hello, beautiful,” he said to her. It was the same way he had greeted me most days of our marriage, and it gave me a glimpse of what I had been hoping for, the chance to meet a new part of my husband once Penny was born. We had waited so long to have children, and we both had feared that a child would change our lives too dramatically. But one thing I had longed for was to see Peter as a father, to see the part of him that only Penny could evoke. I had looked forward to the ways she would give us to one another all over again.

The nurse soon returned for Penny. Her body temperature was still low, and she needed more time under a heat lamp. Peter and I were alone again, by design. My family had agreed to return the next day. We hadn’t called any of our friends yet. It was as if we needed to test each other first, to say the words we were thinking and find out if they would disqualify us from our new roles as mother and father.

“I don’t want to go back to Lawrenceville,” Peter said.

“Me neither.”

I closed my eyes. I wanted to run away. I had visions of putting Penny in her car seat and heading north to my parents’ summer house. I knew the route well: up the turnpike and over the George Washington Bridge, onto the Henry Hudson and into Connecticut and finally, off the highway and onto a narrow road that wound its way back toward the water. Past the year-round residences and around the bend, the salt marsh in front of us. Into the driveway, up a small hill, and then seeing the Sound. The choppy gray water. The solitude. The open space.

“But we have to go back,” I said out loud.

Peter paced the room. His eyes darted from chair to corner to bed to door, as if he were looking for a place to settle his gaze, as if he were looking for some stable point in a world that had just started to float away. “I don’t want to be ashamed of her,” he said. He stopped walking and hung his head.

I thought of him holding her. *Hello, beautiful.*

“You’re going to be a wonderful father.”

He shook his head, not quite in disagreement. More with helplessness, or despair. “I’m just so afraid.”

I had tried to sound positive, but I was swimming through the same thoughts—*What do we do with a child who is mentally retarded? What if people think this is our fault? What if they pity us? What will it take for us to be able to care for her?*

I finally said, “I think I could have handled it if she weren’t our first child, if I’d had time to learn how to be a mom and how to raise a baby. But this . . .” I clutched the folds of my hospital gown and then smoothed it out over my torso. “This just seems impossible.”

Peter’s phone interrupted us again. It was his brother Christian, the third time.

“He’s like a dog with a bone,” Peter said.

“He loves you,” I replied. “I think you need to tell him.”

“Hello?” Peter answered. “Yeah, I did get your messages. Look, this is hard to say. I didn’t want to tell you in the

middle of the wedding and everything. But the thing is . . .” He looked at me and took a deep breath. “She has Down syndrome. The doctors think Penny has Down syndrome.” Christian said something in response, and the tears ran down Peter’s cheeks, and I remembered hearing that tears released toxins from our bodies, that tears brought healing.

Peter said, “I’m sorry to tell you. That’s why I wasn’t answering your calls. I knew I couldn’t fake it once we talked.” He was silent. “Thanks. I love you, man.”

I had never seen Peter like this before. He had weathered his mother’s death a few years earlier. He had wept over the loss of a friend in a car accident. But even then, his hopeful attitude shone. It was a running joke, and a running point of contention, that he was the optimist and I was, by my reckoning, the realist in our marriage. He always looked on the bright side. He always assumed it would work out, whatever it might be. But the lines on his face, the rigidity of his body, the forced smiles and eyes that looked away as quickly as possible—I had never seen this before. I felt as though all morning I had been watching him in a fistfight, a blow to the jaw and then a punch to the stomach until he was on the ground, curled in a ball, quiet and still.

And so I had to ask the question. “Do you still want to name her Penny?”

His face softened. “Of course I do.”

It had seemed such a perfect choice, to name her after her grandmother, Peter’s mom, who had died just two years earlier. On the day the ultrasound technician shared the news that our child didn’t have Down syndrome, she also had written the baby’s gender on a scrap of paper, per our request. We had opened the note in the parking lot, sitting side by side in the car, Peter’s hand upon my belly. I read out loud, “Buy pink! It’s a girl!”

A few minutes later I had asked, “Do you know what you want to name her?”

“I think I’m biased,” he replied.

“I think I have the same bias.”

She was Penny from that moment on. And throughout the pregnancy we compared her to her grandmother. When she fluttered her legs in the womb, we talked about her namesake’s love of dancing, her desire for attention, her spunkiness, her sass. We talked about her beauty, that people regularly compared her to Natalie Wood or Elizabeth Taylor. We had expected our Penny to be similar to her grandmother. But now I wasn’t so sure.

There was another knock on the door, and Dr. Mayer walked in. Her cautious smile and curly brown hair, her understated presence—her whole demeanor made me think of my mother. She pressed my belly. Her hands reminded me that my body was recovering from trauma. I closed my eyes against the pain.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

“It’s not so bad.”

“You didn’t have much tearing. You should heal in no time.”

In no time. I tried to smile. “Thanks.”

Dr. Mayer pulled up a chair. “How are you?”

My eyes searched the room for a minute, then finally landed on my hands. At first, all I could think about was practicing the piano as a little girl, with my long fingers stretching for the proper configurations, reaching, pounding my fists into the keys when I couldn’t get it right. I shook my head. “I feel fine,” I said, gesturing toward my body, as if she were asking about my physical state.

Maybe my response was a test. And if it was, she passed, because she didn’t take it as a cue to leave. Instead she said, “I have three kids. But I had a fourth, a baby who miscarried. And that baby had Down syndrome.”

I looked her in the eye then, even though I could feel my emotions rising. “How did you know that Penny had Down syndrome?”

“I didn’t. The neonatologist called me out of the room, and even then I didn’t believe her. She had to convince me.”

“Well then, how did she know?”

“Babies with Down syndrome have low muscle tone, hypotonia. And an extra fold of skin over their eyes. And Penny has a line across her palm that you won’t find without that extra chromosome.”

“So now you’re sure?” I asked, realizing that there was still a part of me that hoped someone would come in and tell us it all had been a horrible mistake.

“You can’t be sure until you get a karyotype. For most people with Down syndrome, there’s an extra chromosome in every cell of the body. But sometimes that extra chromosome is only in certain cells. That’s called Mosaic Down syndrome. Penny’s so healthy, it could be that.”

Peter said, “I’m confused. If we can’t know for sure, what are we supposed to tell people?”

“I’d say something along the lines of, ‘It is very likely that Penny will have special needs as the result of a chromosomal abnormality.’”

Peter reached for a pen. “Can you say that again?” He mouthed the words as he wrote them, rehearsing.

Dr. Mayer’s pager beeped, and she silenced it without taking her eyes off my face. “You all are going to be fine,” she said. “You have a strong marriage and a strong faith and a beautiful baby.”

As soon as she left the room, Peter began a series of calls—to his best friend, Daniel, and then his father, his aunts, his college roommates. He held the notepad with the doctor’s words. *It is very likely . . .*

With each call, he seemed to gain confidence. His face softened. His shoulders dropped. When he hung up the phone I was nursing Penny again, tapping her cheek with my fingernail to keep her awake.

“I have prayed for so many years that my heart would become more open,” Peter said. He leaned close to Penny and whispered, “Maybe you are an answer to prayer, little one.”

Penny stayed with us for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. Mostly, she slept. But every so often she pushed her warm face into my chest and nestled in to nurse. And she opened her eyes, her fascinating eyes, like pools in shadows with points of light gleaming through. We laughed that afternoon, when she crinkled her forehead in alarm or looked around the room with a mischievous expression. When she was in our arms, it felt like it had when I was pregnant. Simple love. Abundant love. The complications dropped away.

The only call I made was to our pastor. I was in my second year of seminary, and as a part of my degree, I had been working as an intern in our church. I wanted people to start praying for us. I needed people to start praying for us.

Pastor Mike answered on the third ring. I told him the news, and at first I found myself forcing cheer: “She’s really healthy and she’s nursing well, so those are good things.” But then I realized he was crying.

Just a few weeks earlier, I had preached a short sermon on the Christmas carol “Joy to the World.” I focused on “Let every heart prepare him room,” and I talked about preparing room for Jesus in our hearts and lives this Christmas season. I described the preparations we had made for Penny—baby showers and maternity clothes and installing the car seat. That sermon had made me think about Mary preparing to welcome Jesus, and it had prompted me to pray that God would prepare me to receive Penelope. But we hadn’t been prepared at all.

I said to Pastor Mike, “It’s been really hard.” I looked over at Peter holding Penny. “But this afternoon has been better.”

“It’s like a crucifixion and resurrection all at once,” Pastor Mike said.

When I hung up the phone, I reached for Penny. I pulled her hand out from the swaddling blankets and traced the line on her palm, the strong horizontal line that stretched from one side to the other. I compared her hand to mine, noting the distinction. And I wondered, as I rubbed her soft skin, *What does this line tell us about the road ahead?*