



EMPTY WOMB, ACHING HEART
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Chapter 8

Marriage: How Could He Still Love Me?

Becky- Age 40

Infertility is an insidious monster. It sneaks up on you, taking a bite here, a nibble there. It feeds on your life, and on your relationships.

For a long time, I didn't recognize the monster. But one day, I saw it - in my reflection in the dresser mirror. There it was, staring back at me through the dullness in my eyes, the stress lines around my mouth, the droop of my cheeks. I didn't always look like that.

My gaze dropped to a photo that sat askew on the dresser. There, my husband and I grinned from the confines of the silver frame. John's arms looped around my shoulders in a casual embrace. Behind us, the ornate doors of Notre Dame rose to the top of the picture. Paris. It had been beautiful that May. And we were two young lovers walking its streets hand-in-hand as we celebrated our first anniversary. We were so happy then. Innocent, in love, and looking forward to a future filled with the promise of giggling children and vacations that would take us to Disneyland instead of Paris. Those were good days. I could see it in

the shine of my eyes, could hear it in the laugh that would spill from my lips a moment after the camera's shutter clicked. I could almost remember it, almost remember how easily John and I used to laugh together, how he would tease me when I wanted to take just one more photo, how I would chuckle and skip away from him as I asked yet another stranger to snap our picture. But that was B.I. - Before Infertility - and those days were gone.

I sighed and traced my finger over the image of my face in the picture. I seemed so vibrant, so alive, so different from how I felt now. My gaze again rose to the mirror. Who was the woman who stared back at me from the glass?

Gone was the beautiful, sexy, loving wife my husband married. Instead, I felt like a baby-making machine that for some reason wasn't working right. As a result, our love life had become sterile and mechanical. The purpose of intimacy was no longer to share our love, but to produce a baby, no longer to enjoy one another, but to accomplish a goal. We made love based on the reading on an ovulation predictor stick, and according to the instructions given by our doctor. On the magic day when the stick read positive, I would call to my husband, "Today's the day," and later that evening, whether or not we felt like it, we would do our duty, all the time with our thoughts focused on the baby we hoped to conceive. No more romance, no more spontaneity, no more passion.

Slowly, I turned from the dresser mirror, walked downstairs, and pulled a photo album from beneath the coffee table. Then, I sat on the couch and flipped through the pages. In photo after photo, I saw the joy of our life together. John making a face at me from behind a glass of sparkling cider. Me grinning from the

top of a tall boulder where I'd climbed during a summer hike. The two of us dancing at a friend's wedding. A snapshot of me, hair ruffled, as I sipped a cup of coffee at the breakfast table.

As I looked at the pictures, I realized that it wasn't just our love life which had changed. Our daily interactions had also been affected by the infertility beast. Once, I had been a normal, even-tempered woman. But now, the monster had nibbled away at me, leaving a person who constantly teetered on the brink of anger or tears. When John was late to our appointment at the infertility clinic, I accused him of not caring. When he tried to tease me like he used to, I called him callous. When he said it would be okay if we never had children, I burst into tears and refused to speak to him for days. In my sane moments, I knew he was doing his best to understand me. But somehow, it just wasn't enough.

As I stood there, studying the difference between the woman in the photos and the one who had looked back at me in the mirror, the thoughts I'd been fighting for months flooded over me. John should have married someone else. Then, he could have had a family by now. How could he still love me? Did he regret the "I do" spoken so many years before? Could we ever recapture the love we once had? Would we ever feel normal again?

It seemed like every week that passed, every month when I found out I still wasn't pregnant, the monster grew stronger. Every day it chewed up a little more of the love between John and I. Somehow we'd forgotten each other in this pain-filled journey through infertility. We'd forgotten how to really see one another, to

rejoice in what we loved about the other. Instead, we'd become so focused on the goal of having a baby that we'd become blind to everything else.

We needed a change. I needed a change. Somewhere inside, an attractive, fun-loving woman still hid. I just had to find a way to let her out again.

A week later, the day came when the ovulation stick again read positive. But this time, I was determined to make things different.

That night I dressed in my best, black velvet gown. I curled my hair, put on makeup, and fastened on the special sapphire earrings my husband had given me three years before. I bought a bottle of wild, new perfume and dabbed it on my wrists and ears. Then, I looked in the mirror and smiled. It was a forced smile at first, but at least it was a start, a beginning to recapturing the woman of fun and romance that I'd once been.

The first stars just started to peek from the evening sky as I set up our back patio table with candlesticks and our best china. My husband's favorite meal was bubbling in the oven and light music drifted from the stereo in the family room when John arrived home. I still remember the look of surprise on his face.

"What's the occasion?" he said.

I lifted my chin and offered the smile I'd practiced earlier. "Because I love you, and I love us," I replied. "Tonight we're celebrating each other."

John raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're my wife?"

I grinned and pointed to the camera I'd placed on the table. "How many pictures do I have to take to convince you?"

He laughed. "Oh, only a hundred or so."

I picked up the camera and snapped his picture. "Now go up and change your clothes and hurry back. It's date night."

"Whatever you say." He jogged upstairs to our room while I finished preparing the meal.

As we sat down over baked lasagna and glasses of sparkling cider, I realized something. I felt attractive again. I felt alive. And I noticed how handsome my husband was, more handsome than the day we married.

For the next hour, we talked and chuckled and reminisced about our favorite memories as a couple. Then, when we finished our meal, John stood and reached one hand toward me. "Care to dance, m'lady?"

I nodded and placed my hand in his. There, under the moonlight we danced with my cheek on his shoulder and his mouth near my ear.

"We're going to make it through all this, you know," he whispered.

And for that moment, I believed him. There, beneath the stars, with my husband's arms around me, the monster of infertility grew weaker until I thought that perhaps, just perhaps, we might be able to survive the pain, the disappointments, the sorrows yet to come - if only we could remember to love each other.

After that night, we planned a special date night whenever the ovulation stick read positive. The next month, John brought me roses and took me to my favorite restaurant. The following month, we snuggled in front of the fireplace and toasted marshmallows over the flames. They were simple things, but

important in reminding us to listen to each other and care. These dates soon became times we cherished as we focused on appreciating each other, on listening to one another and hearing the other's heart. In doing so, they took the pressure away from performance, away from the goal of making a baby, and instead gave us time to pay special attention to our relationship.

To my surprise, after a few months, we began to find it easier to enjoy each other during other, "regular" times like when we did yard work together or washed the cars or folded clothes. Soon, we found ourselves planning more trips together. With the expense of infertility treatments, we didn't have the money for vacations in Paris anymore, but we could take a walk on the beach, or see a funny movie, or take a drive to the country to watch the sun set. On Saturday afternoons, we started to enjoy picnics in the park like we used to do in our college days before we were married - anything to help us remember how to laugh again, to remind us why we fell in love.

Of course, the pressures of trying to have a baby still haunt us, and sometimes I feel the monster still nibbling at my heart. But, now I know that at least once a month John and I will tell one another we love each other, we'll take time to laugh together like we used to. And for that one day, the monster will be held at bay. For that moment, at least, I know I'll be able to remember the woman who once smiled into a camera in front of the cathedral of Notre Dame.

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