

“Five Weeks from Happily Ever After”

Week 1

There is a man with his face on my stomach.

In most contexts, this would be an alarming and uncomfortable declaration. But in my reality, it's actually rather sweet. In this case, the man is my husband, Oscar, and he's speaking to our baby. Our Baby Boy. Oscar has gotten the interesting idea of storytelling to enrich Baby Boy's gestational time. Hence, the story time. This morning's story, The Day We Fell in Love, is off to a bumpy start. Oscar has an unfortunate flair for the dramatics.

“It was a dark and stormy night-”

“Honey, it was in the middle of the day during a drought.”

Oscar shoots me a look but doesn't miss a beat. He continues ominously, “It was a bright and sickeningly-hot day.”

“What kind of love story begins with an evil narrator?” I can't help myself. He hates when I interrupt, but the way his eyebrows furrow is so utterly Oscar. “Nothing about that day was scary.”

“Plenty of things were terrifying during the day, Shiloh.” This is Oscar-speak for, “*Shut-up, my darling pregnant wife and let me tell the damn story.*”

I'd take pity on him, but I'm in desperate need of entertainment. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

“The dead grass. Wilted flowers. Your clashing socks and sandals.” He always knows how to elicit a giggle from me. Hopelessly silly, this man of mine.

“As I was saying,” Oscar clears his throat ceremoniously, but loses the Transylvania Act. “It was a bright and sickeningly hot day when the handsome Prince completed his dangerous quest to the Castlebrook Mall. There, he saw the fair maiden snacking on the delicacy known as the apple.”

It’s me, by the way. I’m the fair maiden.

“She had just set down the core when the Handsome Prince strode towards her, hair flowing the gentle, air-conditioned breeze.”

“Oh, Handsome Prince?”

“Yes, Fair Maiden?”

“The baby is going to have eyes.”

“And?”

“I think a blind man could tell that the Handsome Prince is bald. Flowing locks, he had not.”

Oscar considers this. “I see your point. Okay, so the Handsome Prince strode towards her, head gleaming under the fluorescent lighting-”

DOOT DOOT DOOT DOOT. The alarm on my phone jolts us (mainly Oscar) back to reality.

“Sorry Bubba, that’s all the story time you get this morning,” I kiss him, right there on his bald head as I get up from the couch. “The Fair Maiden has budget meetings at work today.

“Be careful on your way to work please,” Oscar kisses my cheek as I’m heading out the door. “The Handsome Prince is worried about our precious cargo.”

He's right. Fairytales aside, I'm 24 weeks pregnant today. Precious cargo, indeed.

This doesn't stop me from teasing Oscar as I open the garage door. "What sort of trouble can a girl get into during a ten-minute commute?"

He rolls his eyes before kissing me and Baby Boy goodbye. Then, I'm in my car and off on Maple Tree Drive. Peace.

I've come to treasure this short ride to the office. Once I get there, I'll be swamped with answering the phones and staffing the front desk. But for now, it's me and Baby Boy, listening to the radio and admiring the maple trees.

In a way, today is freeing. I'm into my second trimester. It's another huge milestone in the marathon to carry full term. And it's another milestone Baby Girl never got to see. It feels different this time. The internet tells me it's because I'm carrying a boy now. But Baby Girl only got to 16 weeks, so, I think I'm just shocked at how much larger I've gotten in the past two months.

Oscar never talks about Baby Girl. I get it. Losing a baby is something that tears your soul apart. But it hurts that we don't talk about her. I lived with her and grew with her and talked with her for weeks. There's a part of me, buried deep underneath the audacity, that feels like having Baby Boy is almost like cheating on my Baby Girl. For now, I just have to believe that she's looking out for me and Baby Boy. If Oscar and I are the Handsome Prince and Fair Maiden, Baby Girl will be the Fairy Godmother. She's going to keep him safe.

Week 2

Today is the perfect day for a picnic. The sun is shining on our blanket, the birds are chirping a quiet chorus— this is everything idyllic about living in suburbia. Sure, it's launched a

thousand midlife crises, but the city doesn't have this storybook tranquility. After the last week, this is exactly what the doctor ordered. No busy schedules, no stressful projects, and no back pain here on our picnic.

"You need anything Shi?" Oscar's questions are just another voice in the perfect symphony.

I wouldn't change a thing. "No, everything is perfect."

We sit and watch the sun sink behind the grassy hill. There are so few moments like this in life. Seconds, minutes, hours – moments when you don't feel rushed by the inevitable pull of the universe. I am so completely at peace with this Handsome Prince of mine and our Baby Boy. He's bouncing around, beating me up. It's uncomfortable, but a pain I'm glad to bear. Each kick is a butterfly kiss. A loving reminder of my luck.

"Shiloh, look!" Oscar nudges me with a dandelion in hand. "Make a wish."

I nestle myself even closer to him. My heart is burning. "I have nothing to wish for."

Oscar kisses me lightly. "Are we at the end of our fairy tale yet? Did we get to the ever after?"

"Almost. Just a few more weeks."

He smiles. "I can wait that long."

There were times I thought I would never return to this easy intimacy with Oscar. During the aftermath of Baby Girl, he disappeared into himself. The dark night of the soul. Something broke between us and for the longest time I thought it was completely and totally irreparable. But slowly, painfully, quietly he came back to me. Back to the man I married. We knit our hearts

together. He surprises me, always. He trusts, always. He loves me, always. I want to live in a world with dozens of mini-Oscars running around. Good boys who will become good men.

Oscar rattles a nearly empty Tupperware container in front of my face. “There’s one more insanely good cookie left. You want it?”

“Go ahead and have it.”

“Still feeling icky?”

“Yeah. More crampy than pukey, though. I guess that’s progress.”

“We should head home, then. Better to be crampy in a comfy bed with an exorbitant number of pillows than a blanket on the ground.”

I manage to upright myself (no small feat with this belly) and stretch. Oscar is folding the blankets when something catches his eye. He’s staring at me...or my stomach.

“Hello? Anyone home?”

Oscar’s distracted. “Sorry, Shi, um. Hey, do you feel okay?”

“Yeah, I feel great. What’s wrong Oscar?”

He won’t take his eyes off my stomach, and he’s hidden the blanket behind his back.

“Just, be careful, and walk slowly to me. I’m going to carry you to the car.”

I’m starting to freak out now. “What? Why? What’s going on?”

It’s only now that Oscar breaks his gaze and looks me in the eye. “There’s blood all over the blanket and your jeans, Shiloh.

“Be careful on your way to work,” Oscar doesn’t look up from his cereal.

I hesitate. He doesn’t want to hear me respond, but I should, just for appearance’s sake.
“I’m only doing a half day today, so I’ll be back early afternoon.”

He shrugs. That’s the only response I’ll be getting, so I get into the car and pull onto to Maple Tree Drive. Alone.

As I’m driving, an alert pops up on my phone. A reminder I’d programmed to go off, set up 18 weeks ago.

Congrats on 26 weeks!! You're in the last tri now = home stretch!!

Did you know, only 1% of women have back-to-back miscarriages. I didn't know that.

And now I do.

I’m glad Oscar isn’t here. I have a feeling he would not handle this well. He’s not handling anything particularly well at the moment. He forced himself to forget everything we went through with Baby Girl, so this pain, this trauma, is all fresh for him. I never forgot Baby Girl. The pain I’m feeling? The dull, agonizing ache starting in my heart and radiating to my toes? It’s an old friend.

I would only ever say if this if I knew I was alone, like I am now with the radio and the maple trees, but I’m almost okay with this whole thing. For months, I beat myself up thinking that I failed Baby Girl. It was my job to bring her into this world safely and I couldn’t. I left her alone and scared and half-conceived. But now she has Baby Boy to keep her company. My little unicorn babies together. Safe, in a way I could never keep them on Earth.

Week 4

Oscar left yesterday. Not forever, just for a few days. A business trip. Supposedly unavoidable, but the Oscar I knew would never have planned an out-of-state meeting during the last trimester.

He's avoiding me. I don't blame him. But I do want to slap him upside the head. I understand that we're processing this differently. I get that. But he can't just run away. Too many marriages fail when the kid dies. How are we supposed to make this work if he won't look at me?

We were foolish enough to finish the nursery weeks ago. The walls are the perfect shade of blue, like the polka dots on Oscar's lucky tie. He keeps the door shut now. Like it never existed. Like we didn't spend three days arguing over the crib and five days picking out a rocking chair. There's a sturdy oak bookshelf bolted to the wall. It's nice, the kind of furniture that will last your kid's whole life. It's full of blankets and stuffed animals, but we did buy a couple of cardboard readers. Fairytales to read to Baby Boy. Oscar loves to tell stories, so I came up with the "Two Stories" rule. Every time Baby Boy goes to nap or goes to bed, Oscar was going to read him any two stories. Quality father-son bonding time that doesn't include a societal stereotype about sports.

All those tainted reminders sit untouched. Oscar is gone, though, for another few days. So, I walk into the nursery. I sit in the rocking chair that we spent too long squabbling over and I stare at the crib that will be forever empty. I pick up a cardboard book.

"My First Book of Fairytales"

And I read to my babies. To Baby Girl and Baby Boy. I read them two stories because Oscar never will. And when I finish those stories, I lay my children to rest. I look at the lucky blue walls and I soak it all up because Oscar will paint over them with Agreeable Gray when he

comes home. He will cover up any trace of our unicorn babies. I will remember them fiercely because he will stubbornly erase them.

I understand that we process differently. I recognize that there are different ways to cope. Some people keep grief around, right under the diaphragm, so every breath is painful. Because that pain reminds them that they are alive in place of others. They have a responsibility to live and love and learn because others cannot. Other people bury their losses deep in the brain, next to the decaying neurons that can no longer fetch memories. They do this because any reminder of their grief will bury them. To them, it's better to be alive and incomplete than dead and aware of your pain.

I understand that we process differently. I know that we are dealing with two different demons. I cannot pretend to understand what it is to be the father of two unborn children. I will never feel that pain.

Week 5

A few days turned into two weeks. Everyday, I call him. Everyday, he sends me to voicemail. Everyday, I get a text explaining why he can't talk to his wife.

Things are just so hectic here.

I'm not in a position to talk right now.

Can't text, later.

It's more surprising now that he's back. We're silently sitting at the kitchen table, eating cereal. Is it normal for two cohabitating people to be this quiet for this long?

And just like that, Oscar clears his throat and breaks the silence.

“I have a theory about magnets.” He’s looking down at his spoon, but at least he’s speaking.

I have no clue where he’s going with this, but I don’t want to stall the conversation before it even starts. “What’s your theory?”

Oscar stops messing with his Cheerios. “Magnets connect with each other when they’re close by, right? They’re attracted to one other with all the science and the polarization.”

“Right.”

“But, when the magnets are farther apart, the magnets’ attraction isn’t strong enough, so they stay separate.”

“Yeah.” Where is he going with this?

He sets the spoon down, but Oscar still won’t make eye contact. “I think we’re like magnets, Shi. Ever since you kill- since you had your accident, we’ve been growing apart. And now we’re too far apart to ever snap back together.”

Oh. *Oh*. Oscar is trying to break up with me. “Spit it out, Oscar. Don’t beat around the bush.”

For the first time in weeks, he looks me in the eye. “I want to do a trial separation, Shiloh.”

And all the grief I’ve been bathing in washes away, replaced by a bitter resentment. He’s not being honest with me. He’s not being honest with himself. He doesn’t want a separation; he wants an eraser. He wants to cover up any trace of this marriage because it no longer suits him, but that’s a decision he made. He doesn’t get to implicate me in the destruction of our relationship with some stupid magnet analogy.

My anger bubbles over. “A trial separation? What the hell has the past few weeks been Oscar? A fever dream?”

“They needed me at the office, I-”

“Bullshit. You wanted an out and you took it. Anything to keep from facing reality, right?”

“Shiloh. It’s not like that. I just wanted us both to have space.”

“Space for what?”

He doesn’t say anything. He never does. But good lord, I am going to make him acknowledge the whole story. He doesn’t get to cut and run without admitting what he’s running away from.

“Space for what, Oscar?” Every word feels like a bee sting on my tongue, slowly filling me with poison.

He stays silent for two unbearable moments. “Space to grieve, Shiloh. Space to cope. Space.”

“Grieving what, Oscar? What would cause you to run away from me?” My heart is racing uncomfortably past. “Say it. You have to *say it*. I won’t let you go before you say it.”

His voice is quiet, but it is full of unadulterated loathing. “Grieving the two kids that we couldn’t have. Grieving the end of our marriage, because even though I logically understand that you didn’t do anything to my kids, I keep equating you with some evil witch who kills unborn children. Grieving, because I thought I was a good guy who could always love his wife. And grieving, because I don’t. Not anymore. The whole time I was away, I felt guilty. Not for leaving you, but for feeling relief. Feeling glad that I wasn’t here. Feeling free.”

For the first time in my life, I can't describe how I'm feeling. It is an all over, painful numbness, like when your foot falls asleep. It's a cannonball to my gut, burning and eating away at my insides. It's a bullet in my lungs, working its way into my heart.

He takes my silence as an answer and gets up from the kitchen table. He grabs his keys from the counter and pauses on his way out the door.

Do I look at him? Do I turn around and preserve the last moment of our marriage in my memory? I do.

He smiles reflexively. Not a real smile, the kind you give to strangers when they hold the door open. Almost as an afterthought, he adds, "I'm sorry Shi. I really am."

And he walks out the door. And gets in the car. And escapes down Maple Tree Drive.