

Vanished

by **Amy Kathleen Ryan**

I was on the subway. It was Sunday evening, but the train was crowded. A family got on at Union Square. The woman was tall and heavy, with an open face and thick russet hair. She had round trusting eyes. She had her little boy sit in the empty seat next to me while she sat across the aisle. Her little girl, in a stroller, she arranged in front of her knees, while her portly husband stood over them all, in the center of the aisle where he could see everyone. I made eye contact with the woman and asked if she would like to switch seats with me so that she could sit next to her little boy. She smiled and shook her head no, that wasn't necessary, thank you.

I felt trusted.

I rode a few stops with the family, and I watched the little girl. She had her mother's round eyes and lovely pale tan skin. I stole glances at the little boy. He was so small, and I felt quite large sitting next to him. He was such a little person, complete unto himself.

Again, I made eye contact with the mother and smiled at her. In New York, you do not smile at the children themselves, you smile at the parents to give them the intended compliment. Your children are beautiful. She smiled back at me. Thank you.

I had the impulse to tell her something very personal. I wanted to tell her, "I lost my baby two months ago. It died inside of me, and I'll never know why." Of course I said nothing.

The train stopped at Graham Avenue, and I got off. I didn't look back at them.

It's a tired cliché, but it really does feel like a miracle. Suddenly your body kicks into a state unlike any you've known before. You're so tired, and your breasts get huge, and you're starving all the time. Your hair gets thicker and your skin oilier. Sometimes you want to be left alone, but sometimes you want your mate so much you can't wait to tear

his clothes off. You're angry one moment, crying the next, and by supper you're laughing wildly at a *Seinfeld* episode you've seen five times already.

Through it all you're so happy. You surf the internet for baby names, and cribs, and you learn new words like 'layette' and 'areola.' You know you shouldn't, but you tell your father because he made you promise. And he's so happy when you tell him, it becomes like a drug. You tell your mother, and her voice hits a register you hadn't heard since you were a little girl. You need another fix so you tell your best friend, and then your other best friend. Suddenly you're walking up to other pregnant women and saying things like, "Do you ever feel cramps in your lower abdomen?" and you point to the side, just near your hip-bone, and they roll their eyes and they say, "Just wait. It gets worse." And you both pretend to be tired of the nastier symptoms, but the truth is every new ache makes you a little happier because every day you're getting closer to your baby.

For our first prenatal visit I was nervous. My doctor, a warm Italian woman with a ready smile squinted at the monitor as she moved the wand over my stomach. "This screen is so..." she muttered.

I didn't watch the screen. I watched her face. If there was something wrong, I knew her face would tell me, and then I wouldn't have to hear it out loud. I looked at my husband, whose brown eyes were trained on the screen. He was trying not to show how nervous he was, but I could feel his hand sweating as he held mine. I tried to smile at him, but then my doctor said, "Ah! There it is! Just what we want to see!"

She pointed at a tiny moving dot on the screen. Just a tiny little fluttering motion. The heart.

Rich and I stared.

I'd imagined this moment so many times. I thought we'd laugh, or cry, or both. But we didn't. We didn't move; we just stared. We were perfectly quiet. We were in awe.

I had a lot of rules.

Don't buy any clothes for the baby until after the second prenatal appointment.

If you feel tired, just lie down. It's not a race.
Only one small cup of coffee a day.
Yogurt.
Don't care about the acne. Just ignore it. It doesn't matter.
Don't buy any maternity clothes until you absolutely need them.
Only buy unisex clothes so the second baby can have hand-me-downs.
Work out four times a week. Labor is like a marathon, after all.
Don't talk about baby names with anyone.
Don't worry about things you can't control.
Enjoy this.

I imagined this child at different ages, all different ways.

If I imagined a teenager, it was a girl. She had glossy brown hair and long legs. She was rebellious, but I didn't worry too much because she had a good head on her shoulders. She loved me, but she thought I was boring. If she only knew.

If I imagined a toddler, it was always a boy. He and I played in the backyard of the house we would buy. First, I'd roll the ball at him until he felt confident enough, and then we'd toss the ball back and forth. When he fell down, he'd get right back up. He was a solemn child, and thoughtful, but he was happy.

If I imagined a baby, she was a girl again. I imagined how she'd feel in my arms, soft and pliant, so warm. She'd lay her head on my breast as she slept, and I'd curl my hand under her leg to make sure I didn't drop her. Her steady breathing would be my favorite sound in the world.

I finally understood the women who would say, "I loved being pregnant." Before, I had always found this puzzling because the process seemed so miserable. Stretch marks and flatulence, morning sickness, mood swings, weight gain, exhaustion—what's to love?

Now I know. What they love is the state of mind. Something happens to your hormones, and suddenly life becomes simpler. After decades of insomnia, you sleep like

a rock. You have beautiful dreams about swimming with whales. You don't worry, not even about the baby. You're suddenly the even keel, steady person you've always wanted to be. And you're happy. Life takes on a new sheen, and things make sense. It's a difficult world, and there's violence and terrible problems, but life is beautiful. It really is.

We went on a hike in Connecticut in a little state park that we enjoy. It's full of trees and growing things. The air smells green and florid. I was very tired, but I wanted to keep going. I wanted to get to the top. Rich and I would stop every twenty feet or so while I caught my breath.

We had decided we weren't going to talk about the baby. We didn't want to discuss names anymore, or our plans to leave the city. We just wanted to enjoy the day. But I couldn't help thinking that this was baby's first hike, and I wished we'd brought the camera.

After a grueling two hours, we finally made it to the top. We looked out over a large green valley as we sat on top of a mossy rock eating bananas and granola bars. In the sky were three hawks, all of them hovering over the trees, their beaks pointed down as they looked for movement. One of them flew quite close to us, and Rich yelled out. After a while they gave up and soared toward the pastures at the bottom of the valley. I imagined what it would be like to be one of them.

When the sun hung low, we decided to head home. Though I'd been exhausted on the climb up, I was positively bouncing down the hillside. I felt like a fawn jumping from rock to rock. I felt young again, and I remember thinking that I wasn't that old after all. Thirty-six, and we finally had proof that I was still fertile. I'd begun to doubt after a year of trying, but it was all going to be okay. I felt great, and we were only days away from the second prenatal visit.

We might even be able to learn the sex of the child.

It was almost clear at first. I thought I was imagining things. It looked slightly colored, that's all. There'd been plenty of fluid, it's quite normal. It was probably nothing.

The next day there was more. Brownish, though. They say you should only worry if it's pink. I read about it in my big pregnancy book. It's called "old blood". The uterus stretches, and old menstrual blood comes loose. It happens in about forty percent of pregnancies.

The next day there was quite a lot. I called my mother. "I'm spotting."

"That can be normal."

"I've been feeling these cramps."

"Oh, I felt cramps all through my pregnancy."

"I'm scared."

"Then call your doctor. But I'm sure it's nothing, honey."

My husband picked me up after work. We drove through Central Park on our way back to Brooklyn. I tried not to panic. He tried, too.

At home, I called the emergency number, and ten minutes later the on-call doctor returned my call. My husband listened as I listed my symptoms. "I'm spotting. The blood is brown. My breasts feel less tender." And then I told her the symptom that had frightened me even more than the blood: "My vulva is no longer swollen."

"Oh, well. Your vulva shouldn't be swollen until the third trimester."

I didn't know what to say to this.

"It doesn't sound serious," she told me. She sounded so certain. "It's probably old blood."

Old blood. It sounded made up, like something you tell a child who has asked why the sky is blue. Because blue is a prettier color than red, you might say. You say that because you know they wouldn't understand the real answer.

"Don't worry," the doctor told me. "You have your second prenatal appointment on Monday. We'll take a look then."

I hung up. I looked at my husband. He rubbed my leg, kissed my cheek. "Try not to worry, honey."

I decided I was being paranoid.

I should try to calm down.

The internet.

Chat rooms.

Dozens of miscarriage stories.

Dozens of stories from women with identical symptoms who were now proud parents.

It's old blood.

It can be normal.

The worst thing you can do is worry.

I kept remembering that hike.

The way I'd bounced down the hill.

"Are you nervous?" I asked him.

He was driving, and he didn't answer right away. The sunlight seemed particularly bright. I don't know if I just remember it that way, or if it really was unusually bright that day. It hurt my eyes.

"We're late," he said. "I'm never going to find a parking space."

I laughed at him. Trying to act normal.

I went up while he parked the car. I filled out some papers. A woman came in. She was pretty and hugely pregnant. She had a little boy with her. She asked the nurse if she spoke French, and the nurse said no. I said I spoke a little, and I tried to help her fill out the form. She got to the box that asked for the father's name. I didn't know the word for husband. I said, "L'homme?"

She shook her head at me, her lips pursed. She did not look at me.

The nurse thanked me for my help.

I hadn't been any help at all. I'd only embarrassed her.

The next moment, my tall handsome husband breezed in and sat next to me. He kissed me. Then Rich started flipping through a magazine, and I watched the woman's little boy. He had black eyes, and very short black hair. He was beautiful, and perfect. I imagined my son would be similar to him, cheerful and quiet, a little shy.

I smiled at his mother.

She glared at me.

First a technician looked. My eyes were fastened to the screen. Rich held my hand. We watched while she moved the sensor over my abdomen, again and again.

On the screen there was an empty black cone. "Is that my uterus?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That's not normal, is it?"

"I'm really not a doctor."

She left.

I remembered the hawks we'd seen in Connecticut. I remembered bouncing down the hillside. Two days after seeing them the blood had started.

After five minutes a doctor came back with the technician. Not my doctor. Someone I didn't know. She looked for it too. She looked and looked. She turned off the machine. She put her hand on my arm. "I have bad news," she said.

"I know," I said. I curled up. She left Rich and I alone.

Old blood.

Now I know what bullshit that is.



"Chairs at Rest" by John Chavers

Two days later, I was teaching my writing class about a beautiful novel called *Kira Kira* by Cynthia Kadohata in which a teenager dies, and I pointed out a brilliant scene that depicts how the family members react to her death. They look for her hairs on the bathroom floor. They search through the garbage for the newspaper that would help them remember what happened on the day their beloved died. Suddenly my students were talking about how they coped with their deepest, most painful losses. One woman went to work the day after her son killed himself. Another woman couldn't understand how her mother still cooked meals after her sister was killed in a car crash.

I thought about how I'd reacted to my loss.

I realized I didn't remember anything after the appointment.

The whole day had vanished.

Like my baby.

If nothing happened in a week, I needed a procedure. Dilation and curettage. It's just like an abortion, but the baby is already dead.

But what if the baby wasn't dead? What if there'd been something wrong with the ultrasound machine? I must call and ask that question before the day of the surgery.

But I didn't call.

I couldn't make myself.

A couple days before the surgery, the doctor's office left a message on my answering machine telling me where to go and what to do. Go to the fourth floor, room M as in Mother. She actually said that. Don't eat or drink after midnight. Bring your insurance card. Someone will have to accompany you home.

I had questions, and I left some of them on the nurse's answering machine:

Will you knock me out?

Will it hurt too much for me to teach my classes?

Will you do an ultrasound to check for the baby's heartbeat, one last time, just to make sure?

I had other questions I did not ask:

Is it wrong that I don't think of my baby as a person?

Am I terrible that I have begun to hate it?

This death inside of me that I'm still carrying around. I can feel it.

I have found a way to stop loving it, but my body can't let go.

Is that normal?

I had a terrible headache. The nurse took my blood pressure, and I told her I was dehydrated. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything since before midnight. I was worried being dehydrated would affect me. I was worried I wouldn't wake up from the anesthesia. I was worried I'd never be able to bear a child.

"Will they give me a saline drip during the procedure," I asked the nurse as I rubbed my temple.

For the first time she looked at my face. She stopped. She said, "You really are in pain, aren't you?"

She meant my headache.

Dressed in a thin cotton nightgown and some borrowed socks, with a shower cap covering my hair, I was made to sit in a hallway with half a dozen other strangers dressed exactly the same way. It was absurd. Suddenly I had lost my identity, and had joined a temporary society: the sick ones.

There was no chit chat.

I wished I could have some water. My head hurt terribly.

I kept thinking of my husband. He was just on the other side of the door. Just ten feet away from me.

The nurse got me and led me into a large room full of hospital beds and sick people, all in the same gowns, all in plain view. Even after the absurd hallway, I was shocked at the lack of privacy. The nurse began to lead me to a desk in the center of the room, but suddenly my doctor was there, and she said, "Let's bring her in here." I was

unbearably glad to see her, a familiar face in this alien, terrifying place. She led me to a small room, and she sat in front of me and said, "Do you have any questions?"

There were two women standing off to the side. They were wearing scrubs. Trainees, I could tell. I didn't care about them. "Are you going to knock me out?"

"Yes."

"How do you know—" I began, choked. "How do you know you aren't killing a living baby?"

One of the trainees gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. I did not look at her, but I felt cared for. To this person, I was not routine.

My doctor's voice softened. "Your baby stopped growing at eight weeks. There was no heartbeat. Believe me, we're sure."

Eight weeks.

My baby had been dead for over a month.

My baby was already dead the day we went hiking, the day I'd seen the hawks. The day I'd bounced down the hillside so happily. Baby's first hike.

I hadn't killed my baby after all.

They left me alone for ten minutes while I cried.



My doctor walked with me down a long hallway. "Why is it so cold?" I asked her. "Is that to help the blood clot?"

"It's to quell the spread of infection."

I felt grateful that she was wearing scrubs and a shower cap over her hair.

Her clothes were as humble as mine.

The room was full of people. Six of them. I lay down on the table, and they descended on me. Professional, I remember thinking.

The anesthesiologist tapped my arm. Shot me full of something. I looked at him. He could not have treated me more like a piece of steak.

"Is that the anesthesia?" I asked him.

"Yes." He seemed surprised I was taking an interest in what was happening to me.

The operating table I lay on was shaped like a cross. As they spread my arms and strapped them down, I thought how very much like Christ's position was my own. I wanted to laugh.

My doctor told me, "Go to sleep."

It seemed like a good idea.

And now someone is pulling on something in my mouth. "Open your mouth. Open your mouth. *Open your mouth*," she yells.

Something is pulled from between my teeth.

Two hours have passed, to the rest of the world. To me, it was about five minutes.

"What was in my mouth?" I ask the shape standing over me.

"It was keeping your airway open," she tells me.

I'm in one of the beds in that large room I'd found so shocking before. I'm one of the people lined against the wall. No privacy.

I don't care about that anymore.

As I waken, my middle slowly fills with a deep, horrible ache. Oh. It hurts. I writhe. I cannot stop my legs from squirming, as if the movement could help me avoid the pain. Do I tell the nurse it hurts? For some reason, I want to be brave.

The nurse comes over and says, "Do you want Ibuprofen or a Vicodin?"

"What is that? Is it an opiate?" I ask to prove that she can use medical words when she talks to me. I don't want her baby talk.

"I don't know if it's an opiate," she tells me.

"I doubt I need it," I say, though it hurts. It really hurts.

The nurse looks at my writhing legs and says, "I'll get you the Vicodin."

I have to wait. As the anesthesia wears off, the pain grows deeper and harder, but then finally, oh thank god, the Vicodin kicks in. And it's amazing. The pain is gone.

"My husband," I say to the nurse.

"What is his name?" she asks.

"Rich."

I sleep until he comes, and he holds my hand and says, "See? It wasn't that bad, right?"

He needs to believe I'm okay, but I want to say, "Oh, fuck you." Instead I say, "It wasn't so bad." I want to be brave.

He holds my hand. He knows when to stop talking. He knows I just need him to be there.

The nurse makes him leave after only five minutes.

After a couple hours recovery time, they let me go home. We take a cab. We watch the city go by. The view from the Williamsburg Bridge is so beautiful.

At home I camp out in the recliner and watch *The Third Man*.

The worst is over, I tell myself.

It's finally out of me.

Slowly the vanished day has come back to me. The day we found out.

Calling my dad. That was the hardest. He'd wailed in agony, yelled to my brother in the next room, "Mike, the baby didn't make it."

My mother said things about God and heaven.

I think I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

But mostly Rich and I just lay in bed. Rich held my head to his chest and he kept saying, "Don't worry. We'll try again. Don't worry. It will be okay."

I was numb.

I wasn't in my body.

That's why I hardly remember it.

Months later, I asked Rich: "Do you ever think about it?"

"The miscarriage? Not as much anymore," he says. But he says it sadly.

We are folding laundry and putting it away. We are quiet for a while, but soon I realize that wasn't really the question.

"Do you ever think about the baby?"

"Well, I had that dream, remember? About our son?"

"I remember."

He'd dreamed that he and I were walking down the sidewalk, holding the hands of a toddler who was stumbling along between us.

He shrugged. "I used to be sad thinking about it, but then I realized that dream wasn't about the baby we lost. It was about the baby we're going to have."

The leaves all fell off the trees. Then winter, and then spring. It was a warm spring this year, and the trees were full again so soon.

My due date came and went.

This morning I was walking to work, and I smelled autumn—that wet leaf smell right after a rain. And I thought how beautiful it is. It really is.

I can think about the baby again. The baby I'd held in my dreams. The pliant, beautiful little creature that slept against me, she trusted me so. I remember how soft she felt in my arms. I remember how she smelled of shampoo and lotion and baby powder.

I remember sitting next to her crib, on the floor, watching her sleep.

I remember my favorite sound in the world: the sound of her breathing.

I remember all the things I'd planned to tell her, about the world. About life. I'm sorry, I tell her now. I couldn't hold you. I had to let you go.

Something in the way I can notice the birds singing helps me know: I am forgiven.



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John Chavers, "Chairs at Rest" (photograph), is an artist and photographer. Most recently, his work has been accepted at *3Elements Review*, *Birch Gang Review*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, and the *New England Review*, among others. John's residency fellowships include Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks and the Great Smoky

Mountains National Park. John lives in Austin, Texas where he has a fascination for the diminutive, works of art on paper, and the desert.