

By Anne Bokma

And then there was one

Pining for the twin that might have been

WHEN I found out I was pregnant with twins I could barely speak. I was in a stupor. After the radiologist gave me the news, I wandered down the hospital corridor, mumbling to myself, “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.”

I made my way to the pay phone in the lobby to call my husband, who was immediately thrilled by the news. I, however, couldn’t seem to absorb it. I lay awake that night, my mind whirling around a million details: How would I possibly manage twins and my active three-year-old at the same time? How would we fit two cribs in our small guest room? How would I breast-feed two babies? Whom could I call on to come and help me after the babies were born? I tried to construct what a typical day would be like: I had a vision of myself scurrying like a squirrel from one child to the next, anxiously attending to their needs. Truth be told, I also pictured myself splayed across the couch when my husband got home from work, the kids bawling and me weepy and snivelling, still in my bathrobe.

What helped me wrap my mind around this extraordinary happening in our lives was getting my hands on information. I logged online and found the Parents of Multiple Births Association (POMBA) and

became a member. I bought books on having and raising twins. I started to relax. The ultrasound I’d had at six weeks confirmed that the twins were identical. I began making plans. I decided I wouldn’t dress

them alike for the amusement of others, thus setting them on a path that would help them carve out their own unique identities. I figured I could place their cribs against the wall in an L-shape which would leave plenty of room in the middle of the floor for play. I knew that in order to keep my sanity intact I would need to call upon every resource available to get me through those trying first few weeks, so I started making lists. As I settled into the idea, I began to think about how special this experience was, what a gift we’d been given.

At three months we started sharing the news and it was thrilling to tell people. They’d act as shocked and surprised as if we’d just won a million dollars. In a way, that’s how we felt: like we’d won this incredible fertility lottery that would make our lives far richer than we’d ever dreamed.

Then, at 18 weeks, I had another ultrasound. The technician left in the middle of it and I could hear her murmuring on the phone in the next room. Tears slipped down the sides of my face as I lay there, knees



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in the air, cold goop on my belly, thinking about the twins I'd surely lost. She came back in the room and carried on, business-like, with the exam. I pressured her for details and when she sweetly took my hand in hers, my heart sank. It lifted when she asked me, "How many children were you hoping to have in your family, dear?" I wasn't sure what she was getting at and thought maybe I was pregnant with triplets, that they'd missed one of the babies on the earlier ultrasound. But it sank again when she told me I was carrying only one fetus. The other was not there. It had simply disappeared, like a dream that escapes when you awake in the morning.

What happened to me happens to plenty of women. In fact, experts estimate that one in eight pregnancies begins as twins even though only one in 80 or 90 live births produce twins. It's called vanishing twin syndrome, because one of the fetuses is simply gone. The fetal membranes are reabsorbed into the mother's body, leaving no physical evidence to prove it ever existed.

The increasing use of ultrasound to detect early pregnancy has proven that twinning is a common occurrence. Many of us, in fact, began life in the womb as part of a pair, but only a few of those twin pregnancies make it to the delivery table.

"Somewhere in the vicinity of 10 to 15% of us (and that's a minimum estimate) are walking around thinking we're singletons when in fact we're only the big half," says Charles E. Boklage, a developmental biologist at the East Carolina University School of Medicine and a researcher on twin biology.

No one is really sure why one twin vanishes, but I did

come across one wacky theory on an otherwise fairly helpful Web site (vanishingtwin.com). This theory proposes that aliens somehow extract one of the twins from the mother's body (while she's sleeping most likely), incubate and hatch it on a spaceship and use the well-known telepathic power of twins to link the earthbound twin with its extraterrestrial sibling to pass on technological information to earthlings. Talk about out of this world.

There was a sense of the supernatural, however, in experiencing the loss of something I wasn't sure I'd ever really had in the first place. And, unlike a miscarriage, there was no bloody aftermath to offer physical proof of the life that once was. It was also strange to simultaneously experience grief over one missing baby and joy over the impending arrival of another.

I spent a weekend in bed crying when I got the news, but then I moved on and tried to put it from my mind. On May 3, 2000, our daughter, Lucy, was born, a sweet-natured little girl whose favourite things are Barney and her big sister, Ruby.

I wonder if, like some psychoanalysts say, she'll feel incomplete when she's older, as if a part of her is missing. I don't often think of her other half anymore, but every time I see a set of twins, there's some sort of involuntary reflex that happens and I react with a sharp intake of breath. Sometimes I catch myself looking deeply at Lucy, with her crystal blue eyes, her chunky cherubic cheeks and her aching wide smile, and I can't help but think: "There were supposed to be two of you." HW

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