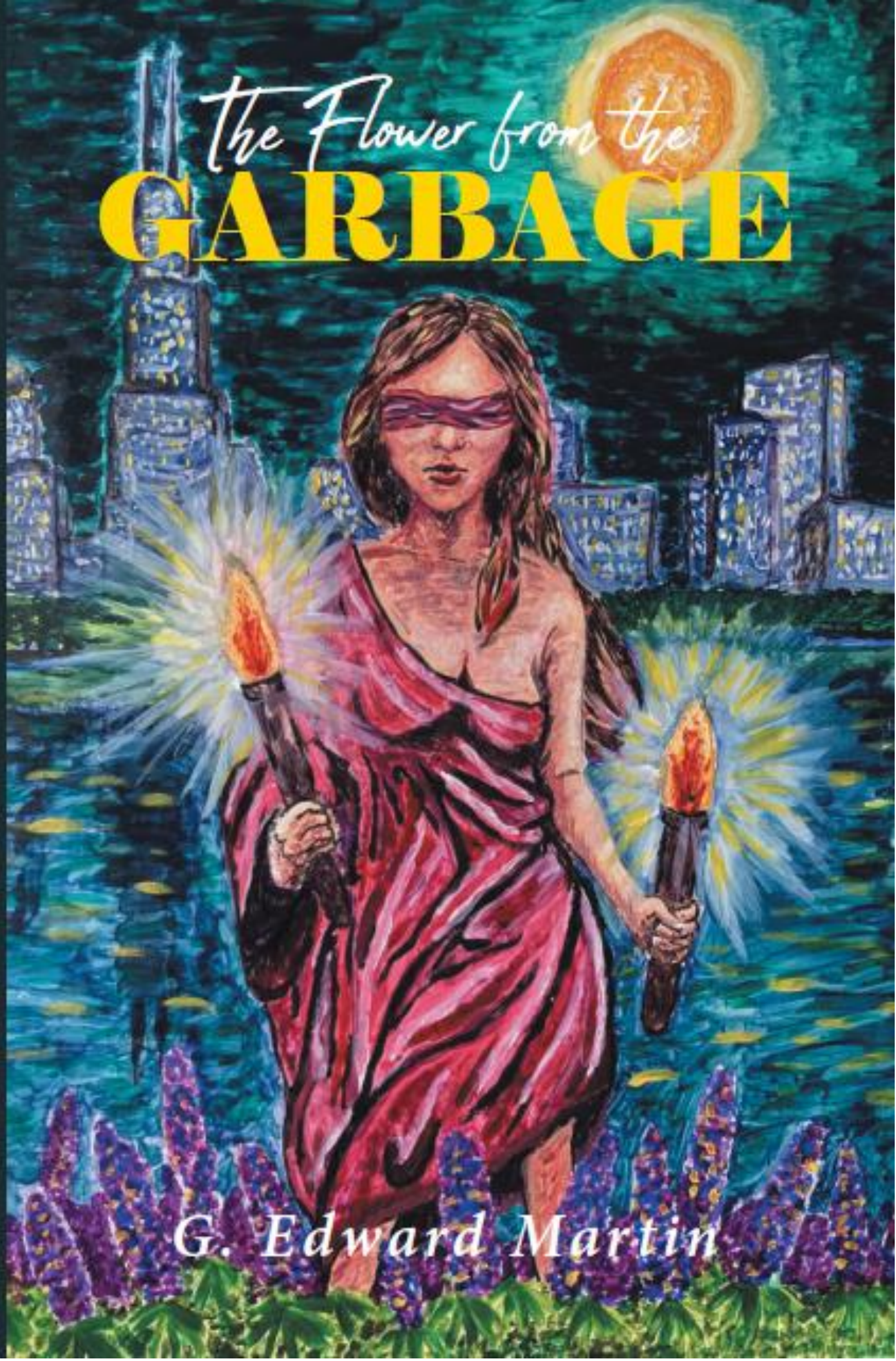


The Flower from the
GARBAGE

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G. Edward Martin

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PREFACE

I struggled to write this novel. Between you and me, it was a challenge to create this. I have read many books that are potent with philosophic wisdom, but they were wrapped up in bland packaging. Although they are still great books, it is hard for a reader to stay focused and finish reading them.

Equally so, I have read many books that are beautifully written but ultimately have nothing to say. In my opinion, few things are more frustrating than investing time into reading a book from cover to cover, only to walk away with no new insights.

I could not understand why it seemed so difficult to package philosophy with good storytelling. I will say honestly that when I set out to create this story, which I believe contains healthy amounts of both, it was a humbling experience. I was challenged to find the correct balance between the message, plot, setting the stage in each scene, and the passage of time.

Although this is the second book I published, it is the first book I wrote. The reason this book was not published first is because I threw away the entire first manuscript from 2019, believing it would be easier to start from scratch. Even now, this story is not exactly what I want, nor will it ever be. The only promise I can make is that it will not be a waste of your time.

When I sit down to write, I consciously consider that your time is the most valuable thing you have. I recognize that all our time is limited, and it is a bank account where we can never know the exact balance. Having you as a reader is a blessing, and I take that blessing seriously. For this reason, I have put the entirety of myself into this piece. Although this novel is fiction, it is not entirely fictional. There are many parts of this story that are personal to me and taken from my life or the lives of people close to me. I hope you will find these characters relatable and interesting, as I do.

Additionally, I taught myself how to paint so that I could create all the illustrations for this book. I have always loved to draw, but I

never explored painting and the use of color. Whether you see the paintings in color or black-and-white, I hope they work to deepen your interaction and understanding of the story.

Lastly, I will warn you in advance that this novel is meant to challenge you. Life is complicated, and stories about life should be complicated as well. In this book, I will address many difficult and uncomfortable topics from life and death to God and meaning, marriage and infidelity, drugs, war, identity, personal responsibility, and navigating the modern world.

Although these are difficult subjects, I believe that great art should exist without any sort of box or boundary. I think putting limits on our creativity and expression will only limit the total expression of our culture and diminish our ability to make anything beautiful in this era.

Humanity is a work in progress, and this is represented in the evolution of our art over time. I also believe art is the gateway for us to understand one another and to break down the perceived barriers that separate us. Do not put limits on art.

I do not expect you to agree with everything I say in this book, nor should you. In all likelihood, I will have some refined or retracted beliefs about these same topics throughout my life. I am not claiming that everything I say in this book is correct, but I promise that I fully believe everything I have said. I hope that this story serves you well and enriches your life in some way.

Thank you for being a reader! I hope you enjoy.

TRIAL AND ERROR

NOTEBOOK EXCERPT

Francis M. Hall



Emilia backstage at the Chicago Lyric Opera, 1976

July 21, 2013

What is the best way to honor the life of someone you loved but have now lost?

What does it mean to be a husband? What does it mean to be a father? What does it mean to be a man? On which values should I judge the quality of my life? What is the correct way to wisely measure my successes and failures? For what purpose or transcendent meaning should I arise from bed each day and continue to work hard?

My life is a journey of ignorance; I have always been the fool. I am no stranger to love or loss. My story is a tale of trial and error, wisdom and foolishness. My notebooks are reflections of retrospective

truth—those which I needed to know but learned too late. I suppose my life is the life of a sacrificial teacher, preaching the wisdom of my own failures. By the time I learned to see, that which I wished to look upon had already come and gone.

I pray to grow something beautiful. From struggle, ignorance, and corruption, I wish to make something sacred and useful. I want my life's work to be one of alchemy, turning garbage into gold. I want to be your humble servant, a steward of *The Word*, a friend to life and existence. In this role, as an old man who lives to serve others, I hope to finally find peace.

Tomorrow, on the first anniversary of my worst day, I will go to the library to type my last résumé. At the age of sixty-five, I am once more going to type a document that boils down my life's work into a single page. However, unlike the résumés I wrote as a younger man, this one is not for a job I hope to gain but for the job I have always had. This is a retrospective résumé—me trying to prove to myself that I was the right man for the job I was born with. This résumé is a reflection; it is an investigation to ask myself if I did the best I could with the life I was given.

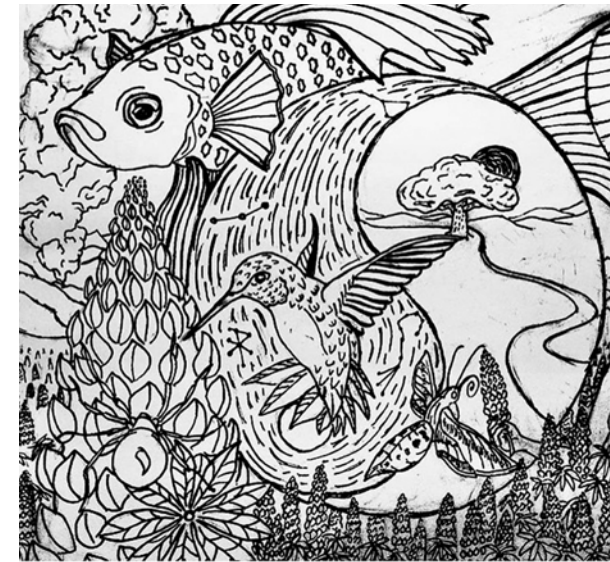
Did I properly honor my gifts and my nature? Did I honor my ancestors who came before me? Did I honor my wife, my family, and my God? Did I share my blessings to the benefit of everyone around me? Was I a good husband? Was I a good teacher? Am I a good man? Was I ever a good man? Would any other actor have played the role better if he were given my life instead of me?

This last résumé is an investigation for validation. I cannot hope to carry on unless I can learn to believe that my wife, God, and everyone who ever loved me were not foolish for doing so. I need to know that they invested their love, faith, and time into a worthy cause.

Perhaps, if I am lucky, this look backward will tell me how to move forward. Perhaps the reason I do not know where to go is because I do not know where I am. Emilia, everything I do now is for your memory. I will carry your flower with me wherever I go to remember that you are still with me. I miss you more than you will ever know.

CHAPTER 1

THE LOSS



Order and chaos—Part 1

One day, I was sitting upon my porch, writing notes in this very notebook. I was deep in contemplation about my own existence and my place within the world. The thoughts I needed were not coming easily, and I could not help but feel there was something fundamental that I was not seeing.

Suddenly, as I looked up, a hummingbird appeared a few feet from me, investigating Emilia's hanging basket of flowers. The hummingbird worked the flowers, delicately drinking their nectar and pollinating them. Then she hovered to me (perhaps because I was wearing a red shirt), and she came within inches of my face. She hung around for multiple seconds, so close to me that I could hear her chirp and her wings flutter in their

figure-eight pattern. I did not know hummingbirds could chirp, but they do. And their song is a beautiful whisper.

At that moment, I had a realization about life and about myself. As much as life is built on pressure, competition, and survival of the fittest, it is equally built on mutualism and interdependence. Perhaps all these years I have misperceived my own place in the world. What if I am not meant to be in competition with everyone else? What if I am not meant to go to war with my life, other people, or my search for purpose?

What if I am a small but vital part of a larger system? What if everything in the world is not attempting to knock me over but is simply leaning upon me the way I am equally leaning back against all of it?

Chicago, Illinois, April 2019

"You may feel a slight pressure, and it's going to feel a little bit cold," the nurse, Ms. Weekly, said as she lubricated the ultrasound equipment and positioned herself between my wife's legs, which were held up in stirrups. "You're doing great, Audrey."

I held Audrey's hand and stood beside her as we both watched the blue LED screen that illuminated the small dark room. Though Audrey's eyes were a deep dark brown, they twinkled white and blue with hope as the light from the screen reflected off of them.

Audrey was wearing a fine blouse with a dark-blue flower pattern, a perfect complement to her long brown wavy hair. From the waist up, she looked stunning and composed. From the waist down, she was completely naked, covered only by a thin, cheap, disposable sheet with the texture of paper towels from a gas station bathroom.

Audrey flinched as the cold device moved inside her and as Nurse Weekly wiggled it around, looking for our nine-week-old baby. The nurse understood how awkward and uncomfortable this felt for young couples doing this their first time. She made casual conversation with us to make Audrey more comfortable.

"So how long have you two been married?" she asked.

"Two weeks," I said with a smile.

"Oh," Nurse Weekly replied with a tone of unintentional surprise.

"Courthouse," Audrey said, "but we've been together for five years."

"Well, congratulations," she replied with a warm smile.

It was true: Audrey and I ran to the courthouse when we found out she was pregnant. Although we had been together for years, our marriage was a rushed operation in preparation for our coming child. We ran over there on short notice with just my mother and Audrey's two parents as our witnesses.

This was not what Audrey's father wanted for his only daughter. Audrey's mother and mine were simply excited just to become grandmothers, and to have a new child in the family. To them, this baby could not arrive soon enough. They had nothing but joyous anticipation for their first grandchild.

Audrey's father did not feel the same. Of course, he would not tell me directly, but it was implied through his insistence that Audrey and I move into their home. This was part of a recurring trend where he demonstrated that he was not ready to let go of his only daughter. He knew that Audrey was too good for me, and he was not wrong. Her childhood and homelife were much different than mine, and she was royalty compared to me. I was the peasantry.

In any case, Audrey chose me, and we were having a baby. I did not know why she chose me, but her dad would need to find a way to accept that she did.

"We always planned to get married, but the baby sort of accelerated our timeline," Audrey explained to Nurse Weekly.

"I'm sure it won't be the last time the baby changes your plans," Ms. Weekly mused. "Trust me. I have two myself."

"I'm sure you're right," I said.

"I can't wait," Audrey replied. "She's already a troublemaker."

"She?" Nurse Weekly asked, keeping the conversation going as she navigated Audrey's womb with the handheld device.

"I know she's a girl. I just have a feeling, you know?" Audrey said as she squeezed my hand and flinched slightly.

Nurse Weekly did this many times per day, and she knew the drill. She knew how to make us as comfortable as we could be.

Admittedly, it was much less comfortable for my wife than for me. But Audrey endured the situation gracefully. She lay very still during the whole process and remained calm even though her most personal places were on display. I knew that she was uncomfortable, but her composure was amazing. She appeared fearless, showing no discomfort or insecurity.

Audrey endured this process for our baby—nine weeks old and already the most beloved thing to ever come into her life. She would do anything for our baby, and this moment was simply part of the process to make sure our baby was healthy.

This is a woman I can build a life with. We did the right thing getting married, I thought as I watched Audrey's eyes, which were fixated on the ultrasound screen.

When Nurse Weekly went deeper, Audrey and I both focused on the LED screen that was showing us an image inside Audrey's womb. We stared patiently with bated breath, and we waited. All three of us went silent in anticipation. Audrey and I did not know what we were looking at, or what we were looking for, but we knew that we would know it when we saw it.

Nurse Weekly pushed the device deeper and deeper, wiggling it around more and more. She was searching, searching, searching, but she did not seem to be finding. None of us could see anything. The screen just appeared like an empty void—a hollow place that was not supposed to be hollow.

After one minute, Audrey took her eyes off the screen and looked at me. We both knew. We did not want to know, but we did. As I looked at Audrey, I could see her eyes appear to fade out as if her soul was slowly retreating into a deep place where it could hide. She was looking at me to confirm her suspicions, and I did. Without even meaning to, I confirmed her worst fears.

"Let me go get the doctor," Nurse Weekly said with a subtle urgency as she stood up and left the room with fast steps.

Audrey and I did not speak. We stared back and forth between each other and the empty screen. We both knew what came next, but

neither of us was ready to face it. The two-minute wait for the doctor felt like two hours as we sat in that dark room. The only light was the empty and silent screen where a baby's heartbeat was supposed to be.

When the doctor came in, she did not speak. She urgently hustled onto the stool and slid herself between Audrey's propped-up legs. She took the ultrasound and went back inside without a moment of hesitation. She moved the device throughout Audrey's womb quickly and decisively, once more searching. But it was futile—she could not find something that was not there.

Finally, the doctor slid the ultrasound device out and scooted herself back to look at the two of us. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, you two. We lost the baby," she said as she watched Audrey's eyes closely.

I looked at Audrey, and immediately the tears were beginning to form as her eyes turned glossy and red. They screamed with desperation and grief, but she did not speak or move. As I watched her, I could see her face turn pale and her hair go flat. She looked like someone who was about to vomit or was running a high fever.

She looked disoriented and disconnected. Maybe she thought that she was hallucinating, or that this moment was a perverse nightmare. I did not have the heart to tell her that it was real. It was not a dream, no matter how much she wished it were.

The doctor slid back in her stool and positioned her feet to sit more casually as she worked to formulate the words. She had seen this before many times, but we had not.

"Please don't blame yourselves," Dr. Schimmel began. "One in ten babies don't make it through the first trimester. I'm sorry this had to happen to the two of you, but you're not alone. Unfortunately, I see this almost every single day."

Audrey and I did not reply; we just listened. I did not know what Audrey was thinking or if she could really hear anyone at the moment. On behalf of us both, I listened to the doctor and nodded when she spoke. Truly I did appreciate the genuine compassion in her voice and her poise as she did her best to console us. She tried to keep most of her attention on Audrey, and I was grateful. I did not know what to do or say, and I had no prior experience to pull from.

It was clear, at least to me, that Dr. Schimmel did frequently have this exact conversation with many shattered couples, but it was also clear that it never got easier for her.

The doctor looked back and forth between the two of us, then continued, "This can be one of the most stressful moments any couple faces. Please keep an open mind about talking to someone in the next few weeks. We have a lot of resources for these moments."

Then she wheeled her stool over to the cabinets along the wall and opened one of the drawers. She pulled out a small stack of trifold pamphlets and handed us multiple different ones.

"We have counselors, support groups, couple's therapists. Believe me when I say, the two of you aren't alone. Please consider talking to someone," she urged us.

"Thank you, Dr. Schimmel," I said as I glanced at the covers of the various pamphlets.

"Again, I'm sorry this happened to you two. One final thought, then I'll leave the room and give you two some space: it's important that the two of you stick together and share this grief," she suggested.

Dr. Schimmel looked back and forth between us, then she looked to the floor and stood up to quietly leave the room with Nurse Weekly. When they left, it was just Audrey and me. There was nothing to say. I leaned over the bed so that Audrey could wrap her arms around me. She grabbed ahold of me and quietly spilled tears into my shirt until they soaked through, and I could feel them on my chest.

The car ride home was nearly silent. Audrey stared out of the window as tears slowly and steadily ran down her cheeks and began to form small dark spots on her blue jeans and blouse. Audrey did not want to talk, and I had no idea what to say even if she did.

Instead of speaking, I lit a cigarette and got carried away in my own thoughts, analyzing the day, what had just happened, and what it meant.

When Audrey woke up that morning, this was one of the happiest and most important days in our lives. This was the second checkup to check the baby's progress, and I even took off from work to be there. By early afternoon, this was the single hardest day of Audrey's life.

Worst of all, I could not truly understand how she felt, and she could not explain it to me. I did not even know how I felt or how I was *supposed* to feel. I was trying to experience something from the outside that Audrey was experiencing from the inside.

To me, as a man, without seeing the baby or feeling it growing, the baby seemed almost more like a concept than something tangible and living.

When Audrey told me, "I'm pregnant," those were just words. They could not break through my dense nature. If Audrey were to hand me a baby and say, "This is your daughter," then I would immediately understand.

Holding a living baby, I would stare in awe at the baby's face, recognizing myself, and it would be the most real thing I ever witnessed. The fear of God and the immense responsibility of fatherhood would quickly sink in, and I would know how to feel and what to do. But right then, I could not. As badly as I wanted to be there for Audrey, she was shattered into pieces, and the news had yet to even get under my skin.

I understood that communication was one of the critical elements to sustaining a marriage, but what was there to say? How could a woman explain such things to a man? How could a man speak honestly about such things if he was simultaneously heartbroken and relieved?

Am I even ready to be a father? I wondered. *Will I ever truly feel ready?*

When we finally arrived back at our apartment, as soon as I opened the door, Audrey immediately walked right through the apartment and into the bedroom. She got into the bed and pulled the covers over herself without even undressing.

Following her lead, I also got into the bed, slipping my arm under her neck and wrapping her up. I laid with her for one hour, not knowing where I should be or what I should be doing.

Eventually, I became restless and got up, but Audrey did not leave. We hardly spoke the rest of the evening, and Audrey barely moved except to get up and use the bathroom. That night, she did not eat, and she barely spoke.

What is she thinking? What is she feeling? I wondered. *Just how bad is it?*

The next morning, Dr. Schimmel called to check in and see how Audrey was doing. Audrey answered the phone, and I sat silently, trying to listen. The call was short, but this was the most I had heard her speak since yesterday morning. After the call, I tried to talk to her, but she did not have much to say.

"That's really nice of Dr. Schimmel to call," I said, trying to converse with her. "She's a great doctor. I'm glad we found her."

"Yeah, she's good," Audrey replied in a neutral tone as she went back into the bedroom.

Audrey turned away from me as she got into the bed, and I was left standing there, awkwardly lingering over her.

A few hours later, when Audrey got up to use the bathroom, I was able to get more details from her about the call with our doctor.

"What did Dr. Schimmel say? What do we do next?" I asked.

"She said the baby will naturally pass in the next few days when my body realizes it's gone. If my body doesn't respond and expel the baby soon, we'll need to come in and have a procedure done. Otherwise, I could get an infection," Audrey said.

"What's the procedure called?" I asked.

"It's called a D&C," she replied. Then Audrey pulled the blanket over her head and ended the conversation.

I left the bedroom and hopped onto my computer to look up the procedure. As I read about it and the cost, I was painfully aware that it was not cheap, and our health insurance was a joke. I knew we

could afford it, but I would need to take the money from our savings and take another day off of work.

I worked hard to save all this up. I don't want to dip into it right now. I'm trying to buy us the house of our dreams. And I can't miss another day of work to drive Audrey to and from the procedure. I already called out yesterday. How can I convince her to wait a few days and do this at home? What should I tell her? People have been doing this at home for thousands of years. Why can't we? I thought.

Later that day when Audrey got out of bed once more, I convinced her to wait so we could see if the baby would naturally pass without any procedure involving vacuums and anesthesia.

As much as I believed everything that I said about doing it naturally, I knew I was also being a coward. I was not ready to face the truth that I had many motivations, and very few of them were pure.

I did not want to miss work, jeopardize the promotion I was gunning for, or pay for a procedure if we did not have to. We had already spent over \$1,000, and for what? The baby was gone.

* * * * *

The next day, Audrey woke up with the worst cramps she had ever experienced. If I had not known better, I would have thought she had been shot in the gut. She cried out in ways I had never seen, and I was frantically hovering over her with no idea what to do.

Her abdominal muscles contracted in waves, and she cried out with each invisible ebb and flow of pain. These invisible waves came and went in short cycles, where Audrey would cry out in agony for a few seconds, then she would have a small window of time to readjust and prepare for the next one.

All I could do was stand over her and try to comfort her. She cried out, then desperately shifted from one position to another, trying to find some pose or place where she could minimize the pain. Finally, she arranged herself on all fours upon the bed, and she could manage the pain because her abdominal muscles could contract correctly. Her discomfort was still obvious, but at least she could tolerate it.

This went on for one hour until Audrey suddenly jumped from the bed and ran to the bathroom with incredible urgency. Within

a few seconds from her sitting down, everything passed, and it was over. Audrey wiped the sweat from her face, and the color came back into her cheeks immediately as the pain and cramps vanished.

"Wow, okay," Audrey said as she panted.

I was speechless as I watched her catch her breath.

"I'm kind of hungry," Audrey said reflexively as soon as she calmed down.

I did not mean to laugh when she said this, but I did not expect it. A minute earlier, I had considered calling for an ambulance, but the moment the ordeal was over, her body completely forgot it even happened. I had never seen anything like that. I had never seen a person in so much pain, and I had never seen a person rebound so quickly from it.

Audrey wanted to know if it was actually finished, but she did not have the heart to check. Reluctantly, I looked into the toilet on both our behalf. I will not describe what I saw, but it was indeed over.

From there, Audrey went into the kitchen and ate a banana and a yogurt. When she was finished, she crawled back into the bed, turned to her side, and pulled the covers over her head once more. She did not speak or leave the bed for the rest of the day.

I had many questions but few answers. I did not know what to expect from Audrey in the coming days or the implications for our marriage. I knew that Audrey would need time to grieve, but how much time?

What should I be doing while she's grieving? How can I help her, or what can I do? I wondered as I lingered over the bed. *I haven't left our apartment the entire weekend. Does she even care if I'm here? We're out of beer, but I need one. And I need a whiskey. I really need a whiskey.*

I sat down on the couch to make sense of what was happening and what I ought to be doing. At the very least, I knew that we needed to keep paying our rent. I knew that we should try to keep our home stable. I knew that if I wanted the promotion, I could not bring this grief into the office or let it affect my performance. I knew that if I let my attention be divided between two places, I would fail in both. I knew that regardless of the baby we had just lost, Audrey and I were still trying to buy a really nice house.

Our goals haven't changed. This is just a minor setback, I thought. Audrey will be fine in a few days. I just need to stay focused on my career. She'll work through what she's going through.

I got up and drove to the gas station to get beer and whiskey. When I came back, I drank alone for the rest of the evening. I did not see Audrey again until I came to bed much later.