BRILLIANT EARTH

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I got pregnant with triplets at 40. I was shocked when doctors asked which of the children I wanted to keep.

I learned 'selective reduction' is common with high-risk pregnancies — but it didn't make the question any *easier*

Perspective by Christine Morrison
April 26, 2021 at 10:15 a.m. EDT

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More than a decade ago, my husband was laid off shortly after returning from our honeymoon. Having married during the 2008 financial crisis, we were grateful they waited for us to say, "I do." I vomited when I heard. Despite being confident in the brilliance of my new husband, James, and our financial security, I vomited again and again. I soon learned this was no sympathy pain: I was pregnant with triplets.

Age is reportedly a growing cause of infertility, but as I was nearly 40, had nary a pregnancy scare in more than 20 years of dating and had been recently blighted with a seizure disorder diagnosis, I didn't need a bailout — I needed an explanation. Doctors were dumbfounded. "This pregnancy is a one in a 1.5 million chance given your circumstances," they would say while squirting cold ultrasound gel on my growing bulge.

When I first learned I was having multiples, I was all alone, at a drop-in for anti-nausea medicine. When the astute doctor noted I was starting to pop at just six weeks, she said, "Let's take a look."

[*Perspective | I gave birth with no leave and a mountain of medical bills. No parent deserves to suffer like I did.*]

I wasn't concerned when she did the doting, "Aww, there's the baby." But her shift in expression when she said, "Ahmd, there's baby No. 2," changed the air in the room. I realize I was holding my breath, waiting for her to say she was joking, or saw something — anything — that made that declaration an error. A smudge on the screen perhaps? Then, looking deeply into my eyes as if to tell me she'd found cancer, she said, "And there's a third baby." The expletives that came out of my mouth were soft, but the first my children would ever hear. James and I, as newlyweds, had yet to even determine if we were going to be parents. We had just gotten married. My wedding gown wasn't even back from the cleaners.

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"I'll never do anything extraordinary," I wailed to James through a constant stream of tears that evening while presenting our trio in black and white. I bore holes in that sonogram, as if staring would erase the three watery peanuts from existence while I mourned my lifelong goals. I had just sacrificed a fashion career, moving away from NYC to start my marriage. A city dweller since college, I had never owned a car, and now my first was going to be a minivan? But through my tears and James's unwavering affection, I saw an emotion I did not expect on him. Joy.

We returned — as a family of five — to learn more about my high-risk pregnancy. I would stop training for the Boston Marathon immediately. My seizure medication would be monitored closely — and adjusted with each pound gained. While doctors initially tended to us with care, fielding questions about spontaneous triplets, they wanted to get to the facts. With genetic defect statistics and failure-to-launch scenarios thrust upon us, we felt under siege, held emotionally hostage. Apparently, it was unsafe for anyone over 35 — much less a "geriatric" like me, mere months from turning 40 — to have *any* babies without making choices. After reviewing the frightening statistics, a final question was raised: "Which child(ren) do you want to keep?"

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Silence erupted in the conference room. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, staring at the trio of doctors across from James and myself, willing them to continue the previous dis with alternatives. As if we were engaged in a staring contest, they sat, like statues, quietly allowing us to absorb the question that lingered. Finally, the softest-spoken doctor cleared her throat before apologizing for putting us at a disadvantage. "Fertility patients usually have these conversations prior to IVF." She explained that "selective reduction" — the practice of reducing the number of fetuses in a multiples pregnancy — is a natural part of the process to improve the chances of a healthy pregnancy. I noted she did not say humane. We needed time. They gave us a week.

[*A Golden Globe ad got real about the difficulty of breastfeeding. Finally.*]

When our biggest obstacle should have been eking out the last thank-you notes from our wedding, we contemplated our fate. And that of three little people who deserved all our love. How could this team of doctors not see that being asked to say goodbye to any of these beautiful little creatures — now the size of little beans — was far too daunting? "Who are we to play God?" my crumbling husband asked. I remained silent, rubbing my growing belly in search of answers.

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After seven days consumed with prayer and tears, we returned to face the three crisp white lab coats. If they had not instilled deep-seated fear in us about the safety of each baby, as well as my own health, there would have been no question about our next steps. Raging with hormones and sleeplessness, I never asked James what he planned to say as we dressed that morning. I was clad in all black, not because it was my fashion go-to, but because of the overwhelming feeling we were heading to a funeral.

"The single baby is gone," said the doctor before we spoke. I stopped holding my breath and wept quietly for our loss. It was an unforgettable moment. I was being graced with the honor to hold on to what remained inside of me. My identical boys were surviving. I wasn't just going to bring them to life; I would show them an unwavering love I could never give their sibling. I vowed I would never be so selfish again.

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We beat the odds as our dynamic duo arrived healthy 37 days early; I prayed our doctors adjusted their alarming statistics charts accordingly, telling victorious birthing stories such as my own.

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A more empathetic approach to the initial tough love conversation could ensure no couple sees heartbreaking statistics simply slide across the table, as if it's an offer they can negotiate. There are enough apprehensions in pregnancy — and parenthood, for that matter.

But as I have learned in my 11 years as a mother, it's all extraordinary.

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