

The Baby Kaboom

CRISTINA NEHRING *was thrilled to meet a guy, less thrilled to get pregnant, terrified when he left—and ecstatic about the child who changed everything.*



NOTHING CAN HAPPEN in life, especially nothing." These words hung above my desk for years. A quote from French writer Michel Houellebecq, they chilled me with their threat of the eventless existence that lay ahead were I not driven, smart, and daring enough to *make things happen*. By "things" I meant legendary love affairs. Travel. A soaring literary career. Not for me the noisy nursery—my children would be books.

I made strides toward the life I wanted: just enough writerly success to steel my resolve through years of poverty, just enough travel to make me homeless in several countries, just enough love to break my heart. But then I *really* made something happen—and it was not at all what I'd envisioned.

I'd gone to the island of Crete to report a story for a travel magazine and fallen for a wild-haired boy—ardent, tempestuous, penniless. Soon I was pregnant, contraceptive pills notwithstanding. When I leaped to phone an abortion clinic, he stayed my hand: "I'll do anything for this child," he said. "My family, sister, cousins, nieces will do anything."

I loved him. I thought of friends trying to get pregnant. And I decided the brave thing to do was play the cards I'd been dealt. I asked him to join me for the birth in Paris, where I had a job, health insurance, and a tiny garret I called home.

Eurydice was born during an April hailstorm. Her father was in the delivery

room and photographed her first moments. Then he abandoned her. Eurydice had Down syndrome. When she and I returned home after two weeks in the hospital, her father repaired to Crete, changed his number, and told his family never to speak to me again.

Thus ended life as I knew it. Caring for a disabled infant was all consuming. In cafés where I used to write, I now tossed Dice from side to side to calm her colic; when I had to go to the toilet, I perched her on my thighs. Privacy? Romance? Intellectual life? Gone, I believed—for good. People with DS often remain with their parents for life.

But before long my daughter began to laugh. Her first, and for many years, her only, vocalization was the sweet, wet smack of a kiss. Rather than make me weaker, she made me stronger. I'd stand over Eurydice's crib as she slept with a smile on her lips, marveling that I was a safe space for this most fragile of creatures. Me: the child-woman, full of learned helplessness and debilitating anxiety. I was a protector.

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The more you do, I soon saw, the more you *can* do. I took Dice on my travel assignments; she came to Morocco and Scotland, Corsica and Tunisia, Sardinia, Greece, and America; she slept in Irish hotel drawers, had diapers changed on baggage trolleys, and spent time with a mafioso on an island off the coast of Naples. I was prouder of our travels together than I'd ever been of my endlessly easier solo adventures.

By the time Eurydice and I moved our suitcases into an L.A. isolation room for chemotherapy to treat the acute myeloid leukemia with which she had been diagnosed, we'd packed more life into her two years than others do into 50. Nonverbal though she was, she'd become my best friend, my accomplice, my heartthrob. I could not imagine her taking any voyage on her own: I loved her enough to die with her if death was her next destination.

Eurydice laughed her way through chemo, giving me the greatest lesson in courage I have ever known. Never again will I fear a needle, or blood, or scars. Three ports took their turn in her tiny chest to receive the toxins intended to kill her cancer—which they did. When we got out of isolation after seven months, we catapulted to an empty lot adjoining the hospital, dug our fingers into the bare earth, and exulted in the dirt under our nails. Farewell to the sterility of the hospital room! Mud, dust, dung—welcome!

Life is a series of chapters, and our business is to write them as boldly, as imaginatively, as unapologetically as possible. So many people stare at the same screens, storefronts, and story lines their whole lives. When change—even for the harder—touches us, I say we're lucky.

My life with my daughter has been everything I did not believe I wanted. It slowed my writing career, cut into hundredths my occasions for romance, limited the time I have to waste. But it has provoked insights, wisdom I would never have obtained otherwise, brought into my sphere only the best of men, and multiplied—exponentially—the love I have to live.