

Amy

Just as we adapt to our environment to survive, we adapt to the situation so our relationships can survive. We acquire a taste for something we previously disliked; replace bias with tolerance; and learn to keep quiet when our instinct is to speak up. To stay close to the people we love most, we evolve into a different version of ourselves. Who is to say if the change is for the better—it's about survival.

Seeing her strain under the pain is killing me. I'm here, but there's no way my clammy hand can be doing much. I've seen the posters at the gynecologist's office. I know your cervix has to dilate from the size of a blueberry to a bagel (the *outside* of the bagel—not the tiny hole in the middle).

Shaking my head to clear it of that thought, I lock eyes with Amy. Her big brown eyes search mine for encouragement and energy to give the final push. The one that will change her life forever.

In that loaded second, despite the bustling of the doctor's hands beneath Amy's gown and the excited shouts of encouragement from Steven, it's just us. I don't know how I respond to that look—maybe I smile, nod, or smile *and* nod with a hand squeeze? Whatever I do, my message is clear—you can do this. I believe in you.

Moments later, Amy is a mom.

"Unbelievable!" Steven exclaims with a proud smile. "You did it in just eight hours, Babe! That's my girl!" He quickly kisses Amy's sweaty, blotchy forehead before turning toward the commotion of the nurse weighing and measuring the baby.

"Isabelle," Amy breaths. "Her name is Isabelle Rose," she manages before her body slumps.

Although I can't wait to get my hands on the squirming bundle across the room, I stay by Amy's side just to be sure all the drama is over. Thanks to my interest in medical dramas, I know birth isn't over when the baby appears.

At the head of the bed next to the gentle slope of Amy's shoulders, I see the top of the doctor's surgical cap between Amy's legs.

I step back as an unexpected gush of blood from Amy's open legs splashes onto the floor. The doctor and nurses respond quickly. There's a flurry of movement beneath

Amy's legs. Gloved hands. Blood. Shiny instruments reflecting off the bright lights. A metallic smell.

Hours pass, or maybe minutes. Seconds? The bleeding stops.

I stabilize my own breathing, and Amy's eyes flutter open in a delayed reaction of alarm as her hand reaches down to identify the source of warmth on her legs.

"What's going on? Am I bleeding?" she asks.

The doctor, gruff but competent, simply pushes Amy's hand away and briskly says, "You're okay now."

Once again that night, I find myself smiling and nodding reassuringly at Amy. I pat her hand until the unmistakable look of fear fades from her eyes and they gently close.

As the doctor finishes and gets Amy ready to hold Isabelle, I take a deep breath in and out and finally steal a glance at my new niece.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Steven asks with a lilted grin as he tenderly cradles Isabelle in his arms.

"Yeah, pretty cool," I respond. Some of the color is coming back to Amy's face as she sets her eyes on the baby, oblivious to the fact that Steven missed the last few terrifying moments.

Over the next few weeks, I cherish every moment I spend with Isabelle, but I secretly mourn the loss of no longer having my sister's undivided attention. In a family as small and closely woven as ours, each life change, good or bad, creates a ripple in our dynamic.

I watch, awestruck, as Amy adjusts to motherhood. Her initially awkward movements with Isabelle become natural and confident, and she and Steven seem to forge a new bond as they work together to take care of Isabelle.

"This experience has brought us so much closer, and he's been so helpful, I don't know what I'd do without him!" Amy exclaims sweetly to our parents. My parents dutifully smile, although I see their eyes meet briefly before their attention returns to Amy and Isabelle.

Amy stands in the family room of her and Steven's house, jiggling Isabelle up and down rhythmically. From my position on the overstuffed loveseat, I can see Isabelle's face

begin to contort in preparation for a howl that will drown out any more attempts at conversation.

As Isabelle's lips part and a long, bloodcurdling wail fills the room, Steven appears next to Amy. "Let me take her, Hun. I'll swaddle her really tight, and then maybe she'll settle down."

Steven takes Isabelle and expertly bundles her into a tight, bunny-patterned roll, with only her head exposed. He smiles proudly at my parents as Isabelle calms down. "Well, I guess we should see if she'll sleep ..." he says to Amy.

As Amy agrees, my parents bolt up from their position on the couch and reach out to Amy for a hug. I follow their lead and say my goodbyes, lingering a moment as I hug Amy.

"Call me, okay? And let me know if you need me?"

"Yeah, thanks. Maybe we can watch a movie or something later."

We move to the door and in the light reflecting from the snow on the lawn, I can see the dark circles of fatigue under Amy's eyes. When she isn't jiggling, smiling, nursing, or swaddling, she looks like she's going to collapse.

As my parents and I back out of the driveway, Amy and Steven's silhouettes are framed in the clear glass door—the perfect happy family.

A month later finds me up to my wrists in buttercream frosting, simultaneously decorating a cake and uttering "uh-huh" to Amy on speakerphone. I can create frosting roses and be a good listener because I've heard it all before.

"Sometimes he just shuts down and refuses to talk, but other times, he gets so defensive and mean. You know, he just lashes out." I can hear Isabelle fussing in the background.

"Well, everybody gets angry and has their moments, Amy," I respond, thinking I may have my own moment if I don't finish this cake on time.

"It just seems like we're not on the same wavelength, lately. Sometimes he does things or says things that make me wonder if I know who he is at all ... I guess I just really don't like who he is ..."

Amy pauses and I hear Isabelle's fussing progress into a passionate cry.

“If it’s that bad, take some time apart or see a counselor,” I say, raising my volume to be heard over Isabelle’s wail.

“Yeah, maybe,” Amy responds.

To anybody else, the change in her tone is imperceptible. But I know the conversation is over. When I see her next, she’ll be smiling and laughing and appear perfectly content and in love.

The next several weeks are all about sheet cakes and confetti—at least for me. I see Amy about once a week at family dinners, but we have few, if any, deep conversations. So, at her request, I plan to stop over for coffee at her house today.

When I arrive, the house is unusually dark. Amy opens the door timidly with Isabelle on her hip. She still has her pajamas on even though it’s close to 5 p.m. She walks slowly inside and sits heavily on the couch. I follow her and sit awkwardly next to a pile of folded laundry.

“He ... he hit me Josie he actually hit me and now I don’t know what to do or what I’m supposed to do next,” Amy says flatly in one breath between silent tears.

I search Amy’s face through the shadows and lightly touch her arm. I shift my weight and a plush doll that must’ve been stuck in the couch cushion asks for a hug and announces that she loves me in a high-pitched, sing-song voice. Amy ignores it, but Isabelle looks around and grins. I gently slip her from Amy’s limp arms into my own and distract her with my juvenile, dangling cat charm bracelet.

I ask the question I don’t want to know the answer to.

“What happened?”

At first, I think Amy doesn’t hear because she doesn’t move and doesn’t respond. Just as I’m about to ask again, she opens her mouth. With unnerving calm, she explains that she and Steven got into an argument while Isabelle was napping.

“Steven got mad, like he has before. But this time it just seemed like he couldn’t keep his anger in his body, and I was there. I was in front of him, and he just ...” her voice trails off as she lifts her hand to tenderly touch her cheek.

I can’t see the skin of her cheek or the expression in her eyes through the darkness, but I close my eyes anyway.

When her hand returns to her lap, I cover it with mine. "Has this happened before, Amy?" I almost whisper.

She doesn't answer. She lowers her head and looks into my eyes, and despite the darkness, I see how burdened she is.

"Amy! You don't deserve this," I say heatedly. "Get out, damn-it! Take Isabelle and get out! He's not worth it!"

I don't mean to switch gears so abruptly. In seconds, I'm going from gentle and supportive to pushy and angry. But the weight of her admission is too great for me to bear. I sense her shrinking away from me, but I can't stop saying the words I think she needs to hear.

"While he's out of the house, we'll pack up some stuff, and you and Isabelle can stay with Mom and Dad for a while. When Steven is calm, you can explain that you need a break ..."

But before I can finish formulating my plan, *her* plan, I stop. She's crying and shaking her head.

I reach over and turn on the lamp next to the couch. Isabelle shakes her head against the sudden intrusion of light and buries her face against me. Amy squints up at me with red-rimmed, pleading eyes.

"No, Josie. Not now. He'll change. We can work through this." She pauses. "You can't tell Mom and Dad. Not now. Isabelle will be fine." She pauses. "I would never let anything happen to her." She pauses again. "Or her little brother or sister."

Amy brushes her mid-section lightly then moves it away quickly.

My eyes widen. "Oh fuck. Fuck, Amy. What about you, Amy?!" I say vehemently.

I stop reacting. I swallow my next round of advice and expletives.

Hot tears spring from my eyes, and in an instant, Amy's arms are around me. It's no longer clear who is comforting whom as we lean against each other and cry.

What shocked me most about that night was how angry I felt. Yes, I was angry at Steven, but I was most angry with Amy. Angry at her for not loving herself as much as I do.

In the following hours, days, and weeks, I do the only thing I can do—nothing. Amy talks less frequently about her marriage, and I stop asking.

In the fall, when I mix the blue frosting that will cover Isabelle's multi-layered Cookie Monster cake for her first birthday party, I notice the cake layers are uneven. Cookie's chocolate bottom half has risen perfectly, but his vanilla top half has risen unevenly. It tilts woefully to left. I wipe my sticky hands on my apron and blow back my bangs (a mistake—they're always in my eyes). I take a few steps back.

After several moments, I pick up my knife and continue frosting it. From a distance, it will look perfect.

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