



A Fitting Answer

MELISSA FAST

HOW MANY CHILDREN DO YOU HAVE?

In the early weeks and months after Nolan and Simone died, I used to try on different answers like a woman might try on slacks at Macy's. On the floor lay a crumpled pile of pants, legs turned inside out. On the back of the dressing room door hung a couple of maybes. This was when I believed I would find an answer that would fit and make me feel good when I left the room. I didn't know then the question would always tug and pull and restrict my breathing.

At first, I tried to answer, "I have one boy and a set of twins," but my words stammered and halted, and before I could recover and say, "but the twins died shortly after birth," the person would say something like, "Man, I bet they keep you busy."

Busy wishing I wouldn't wake up tomorrow.

"One boy and a set of twins" was checked off the list of possibilities. For a long time, I said, "one living child." I got that from an online support group.

Those were the unsophisticated years of the internet. Chat rooms existed as a computer screen full of Courier text and blinking cursors. Mothers created elaborate signatures with angel emoticons before there was such a word. Typing the angel symbols took time and three lines and a whole lot of slashes and dashes and Os:

Melissa, mother to:

Russell, living child, born 11-3-94, five-years old

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/o\ /o\ Nolan and Simone, b/d 1-13-00

Typing the signature created a distraction from the thoughts of killing myself, and it was one more way to make the twins real to someone besides me and Lyle. So I hung out in this virtual world with other mothers who didn't tell me it was time to move on and who knew how hard some questions were to answer.

Eventually, I gave up on the online support group; scrolling through pages of the message boards became too sad. Even mothers who'd been in the group for years were still heartbroken. I knew it was a safe place to express grief, but I still assumed there was

a time when I would be over it. It would be years until I accepted that grief sometimes simmers and churns and bubbles over with bursts at some inopportune times. Times when I thought I was perfectly good to go until some stupid Sarah McLachlan song blasted into the car on the radio speakers. Boom! Tears slid down my cheeks. The only difference now is the tears quickly subside, and there is no suffocating heh-heh-heh breath forcing me to pull off the road. I used to get really mad when the unexpected tears came. Now I dig through my purse for a Kleenex while keeping my eyes on rush hour traffic. Sometimes I wonder if new moms of that special club would be relieved or freaked out to know they have this to look forward to so many years in the future.

People don't ask, and I don't offer that the only good memory I have of Nolan and Simone was when they were swooshing around inside my womb as I tried to imagine what my life would be once the twins were born. I would watch my children play in the living room and place plates and cups on the kitchen table just a few feet away. Taking his big-brother responsibilities very seriously, Russell would corral Nolan and Simone from the living room to the table, "Come on you two. Mom's got lunch for us."

I'd smile at the three of them as I'd carry a plate of PB and J sandwiches, oozing with Jif and Welch's Grape Jelly.

These day dreams took place before the twins were Nolan and Simone, only referred to as Baby A and Baby B, like some Dr. Seuss rhyme. I won't go into some off-color riff of Thing One and Thing Two because I know it would horrify most people, but sometimes sick humor was the only thing that kept me from driving my van into freeway abutments.

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You would think after more than 15 years of meeting new people and telling stories about my now grown man-child I would breathe normally when I hear, "How many children do you have?" or the equally troublesome, "Is he your only one?"

Yet, I still get the sickening sweet taste in the back of my mouth. Sometimes I think the question might be my penance. I wonder if I can gain acceptance without atonement, or if I am the only one judging me. Hell, the act of ruminating might be the only way to keep the guilt alive. Most days, I'm successful at suppressing the leftover guilt, but the question about the number of children I have stirs it all up again. Sometimes I try to avoid it in social situations by putting my extroverted self into motion asking others about work or hobbies—anything to lead conversations away from the personal.

I thought I was off the hook not long ago when I dragged Lyle to a small dinner party at a woman's house I know through work. I told Lyle I needed to go for some business networking. I was sure I would avoid the children question since I had never heard any children chatter from either of the two women who would be at the gathering. I didn't know any of the whys behind the fact that they didn't have children in their homes, but I knew for damn sure I wouldn't broach the subject.

I felt so grown up and 'with it' as Lyle and I walked into the downtown condo of my new friend. A spread of frou-frou cheeses, flatbreads and dried fruits splayed across a dark granite countertop with sparkly flecks. Next to hors d'oeuvres, a wide variety of port wines lined the counter, which provided an exotic taste test, compliments of the hosts who had just returned from a trip to Portugal. The other couple leaned against the kitchen island, the man sipping his wine and the woman reaching for a piece of aged cheese and a slice of dried fig.

Conversation felt stilted. I hoped the other couple would loosen up after a glass of wine, or I was in for a long night. Lyle, not fond of fancy-schmancy gatherings, caught eyes with me. I saw the flash of the familiar look—the disappearing tight lips and the squinting eyes—that said, “You’re gonna owe me for this.” He grabbed a glass of port and slugged it down.

The hostess was extroverted like me. We shared work so we chatted easily and laughed to take the pressure off the room of introverts. Wine loosened everyone up a bit and soon dinner was ready, which offered a welcomed change of scene.

Retracing the evening, I know it was my own damn fault—I had inadvertently brought up something that Russell was doing. I was proud of the fact that he was navigating his life after manning up and taking his knocks following some rough consequences from some over-zealous partying his first year away at college. If not for that moment of mommy pride, the children topic may never have come up, but out it came, “Is Russell your only child?”

“Mmmm hmmm,” I said.

I wondered if the other woman saw the lie in my eyes. I fought the urge to follow up with, “Are you childless by choice or was it chosen for you?”

I hate it that I wanted to throw such a jab, but mostly I hate it that I’m still haunted by the fucking question.

If Lyle had been sitting closer to me at the big round dinner table set with bone china, crystal goblets, and polished silver, he might have placed his warm hand on my leg under the table.

Even as polite dinner conversation continued, I wanted to interrupt. “No, wait. I have, I mean had, three children.”

I slugged some wine and pushed the thought aside and actually believed I’d escaped the usual gut-bubbling guilt of denying Nolan and Simone’s existence. It wasn’t until the next morning when I sat in my comfy chair with a journal propped open on my lap, waiting for the caffeine to hit my brain, I felt a hot tear slide down my cheek. Lyle walked through the living room on his way to the morning coffee. I wiped the tear away as quietly as it had appeared.

I wondered if I should bring up the conversation from the night before. Lyle probably didn’t even remember it, and I doubted he had noticed my pause when the new acquaintance asked about kids. But I couldn’t help but wonder if his stomach had lurched when he heard me say, just one.

“Are you okay?” he said.

“I still hate it when people ask how many children I have,” I said.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Do you say, just one?”

“Yeah. It’s easier.”

For who, I wondered.

I don’t know how many times over the course of my life I had asked the same question to someone new. But after January 13, 2000 at 11:24 a.m., I know the number. Zero.

I may slip up from time to time with questions like, “How are you?” but the children question was banished—forever.

I went back to my journal and thought again about the woman from the night before. I imagined picking up the phone to call her. “I just wanted to tell you that I lied last

night. I really have three children. I gave birth to a set of twins who died shortly after they were born.”

Perhaps I’d hear a sigh on the other end of the phone, and the other woman would say, “I’m so sorry.”

“Their names were Nolan and Simone. I held them until they died.”

“Oh my God. That had to have been horrible.”

Here’s what I would never say: It’s been more than 15 years since I held the twin babies, born too soon. It still makes me want to puke every time I think about trying not to count their teensy purple-gray fingers or touching their upturned noses or wondering how in the hell I was supposed to say goodbye to children I would never cuddle or nurse or kiss away the pain of ouchy, scraped knees.

I won’t talk of the guilt, which still sours in the back of my throat, when I remember wishing they would hurry up and die in that hospital room—just hours after they were born. I also won’t talk about how obsessed I became when I decided Nolan and Simone needed rocking before they died. No one had said anything about the silent rocking chair across the room, but I saw it. It was nearly identical to the rocking glider I sat in five years earlier with the twin’s big brother. Even today seeing the chair in my mind’s eye makes me chew on the inside of my cheek.

Instead, I’ll tell people how kind and gentle Lyle was, helping me across the room from the hospital bed to the chair, which is true, but I’ll leave out the fact that I actually thought rocking them might provide closure. I had read that in one of the books like *What to Expect When Expecting*. All of those goddamn books with dog-eared pages contained chapters—toward the back where you’re not likely to stumble across them by accident—that talked about when things don’t go as planned.

I also won’t tell anyone before I even read those chapters, I somehow knew the pregnancy would end horribly, wishing there was something I could have or would have done to change the outcome, which led up to the premature birth. I won’t talk about how I threw off the covers of the hospital bed and teetered at the edge; how Lyle quietly wrapped his arm around my shoulders, leaned my head into his chest and kissed the top of my head. “Are you sure you want to do this, Melissa?”

I would tell him that rocking my babies was the only thing I would ever do for them as a mother. Later, I would think rocking them was the only *right* thing I did.

During the months (okay years) I used the “one living” response, I hate that I often found perverse pleasure watching people realize the conversation somehow became littered with landmines. I know today people don’t mean harm with the seemingly innocuous get-to-know-you question. People will squint and blink a few too many times, dart their eyes around the room for a second. Sometimes they start to cock their head then stop. They don’t want to look obvious as they try to catch up to the conversation and calculate whether to ask a follow-up question, offer condolences, or pretend everything is still peachy.

I say today that Lyle and I chose to give birth to both babies and let them die because it was the most compassionate thing to do for two extremely premature infants. I might quickly add that you just don’t know what you would do unless put in that situation. Then, I will look down at the floor or over your shoulder; I don’t want to see if you’re making a judgment.

I don’t blame anyone for judging, but nothing anyone thinks or says matches my constant mental rewinding of should haves, could haves, would haves, and if onlys.

I don't want to get into any of this deep shit with new friends at a stupid-ass party. I know I'm supposed to keep things light and airy; however, if I truthfully give you an answer to, "How many children do you have," I know you're going wish you never walked up to me.

Still, I wonder if social graces are important enough to deny the existence of two children.

I looked back at Lyle in his pajamas sitting in his chair across the room from me. He finished his coffee and walked over to grab a banana. This man has eaten his share of bananas in the 30-plus years I've known him. We're both softer and rounder than when we first met, but in all those years, he still looks at me with the love and care he did when we were kids not knowing what our life would bring.

Not once in all the time since Nolan and Simone died did Lyle chime in with agreement when I talked of all the things I wished I would have done differently leading up to their death. Instead, he pulls me close and says, "This won't help, Melissa. You can't bring them back. You did the best you could do."

Someday, I hope to believe it.