How It Started

Danielle Sgambati

After months of severe weight loss, unquenchable thirst, and fainting spells, my mom was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at the age of 13. She found out after suffering horrifying symptoms and days of her tongue falling apart in her mouth. Her parents had taken her to the doctor, and they had told her she had severe damage to her kidneys because of how late they were to diagnose her. I think she still blames her mother for never noticing how sick she actually was.

14 years later was September 15, 2000. My mom had been pregnant for only a short while. The doctor told her it was incredibly risky and that more likely than not, she would die trying to have a child or lose the fetus during labor. She chose, against everyone's wishes, to stick with it. To carry the very thing that was killing her (it sounds very dramatic, but it was true). She carried that ticking time bomb around with her for 6 months by then.

That day in September, my father came home from work to find my mother screaming in agony on the ground. Her bloated body lay on the carpet in the unrelenting humid heat of the Florida air. My father quickly put her into the car and sped to the nearest hospital. Accelerating, terrified to watch his pregnant girlfriend slowly die, my father caught the attention of nearby police officers by going well over the Florida state speed limit. The cop attempted to pull my frantic father over to no avail; this quickly turned into a car chase. My dad gestured out the window for the police to go to the other side of the car, hoping the officer would notice his pregnant, half-dead girlfriend's dire state. Luckily, when the officer noticed my dying mother, the car chase turned into a police escort to the hospital. When they arrived, the doctors informed them that it

was now or never. My mother had lost her vision, her kidneys shut down, and both of us were dying.

My mother was only six months pregnant, meaning I was three months premature. This in itself wouldn't have been an issue if the mother herself were healthy. A three-month premie in the early 2000s had about an 80% survival rate. Yet a three-month premie weighing in at about 1 pound, with a hole in her heart and in the back of her throat, with severely underdeveloped lungs, all while being birthed by a dying diabetic mother, well, the chances weren't great. In fact, I died.

We kinda both did.

So there we lay, once conjoined in the same body, surgically ripped apart into two separate operating rooms. Would we ever meet? Would the body that fought to keep me alive be sacrificed for nothing? Teams of surgeons and doctors worked to keep our hearts pumping, fighting to save our organs, our family on the other side sitting in uncomfortable plastic waiting room chairs, desperate to know the outcome. My father paced back and forth underneath the fluorescent lights as the hours ticked by without a word of an update on either of our conditions.

My heart had stopped several times, and twice I was medically, for lack of a better word, dead.

My mother's heart stopped as well, also making her technically dead.

My father needed a distraction; he couldn't bear the thought of not only losing the woman he loved or the child he had never met, but he couldn't cope with the feeling of helplessness that flooded him. He stared out the window into the parking lot of the Florida hospital. The swaying of the palm trees seemed to mock him in their carelessness.

"I'm gonna steal a fucking coconut." He stood up, pushed his chair back with a metallic screech, and marched out the front of

the hospital doors.

His father, alarmed, chased after him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screamed after his son, now sprinting towards a palm tree.

"I WANT. THAT. COCONUT." my father yelled, confident as ever.

He began to grasp onto the edge of the tree, using nearby ledges to hoist himself up.

"Raymond, please, get down from the tree, and we can just take a walk," his father pleaded with him, getting closer, reaching his arms out to help him down. Raymond climbed higher and higher into the tree, using the hospital's fence as a guide.

"I am going to get this coconut." His foot got to the top of the fence, and he reached his arm out, now just inches away from the nearest coconut.

"Raymond, please just get down," his father begged, "this is ridiculous."

Raymond ignored him and continued to slowly reach. His hand grazed the end of the branch, and as he pulled it slowly toward him, he thought, 'I've got it; I'm going to bring this back for them.' The fibers of the coconut grazed the pads of his fingertips; he almost had a grip on it until his foot slipped from the metal chain link fence that once held him. He plummeted down, and his face hit the cement of the hospital parking lot.

So who do we have here? My mother, whose kidneys were failing, and was now blinded for the foreseeable future. My father, whose jaw was shattered and nose crushed by the unforgiving tar. And me, a hole in my heart and throat, underdeveloped lungs, and just shy of a pound in weight.

What a first day on Earth.