

4.3

Efrem Castelnovo

Blandina Stecca

" There's no foot too small that it cannot leave an imprint on this world."

anonymous

Sweetest Welcome

An earthquake, everything moved, trembled, was destroyed.

And we, in the midst of the epicenter, hand in hand, in search for a sense of something we knew not to exist or, perhaps more simply, we knew not to be yet reachable by human knowledge and rationality.

Five days that changed and transformed Efrem and me deeply,
Efrem and me forever.

Walls fell.

We went to corners of our heart into which we had never before gone.
We embraced and welcomed, without any defense, the suffering of one another.
We touched fragilities, certainties, values that we had never truly reached.

An earthquake, everything moved, trembled, was destroyed.

Then the sweetest silence.

We allowed ourselves to be wrapped up in it
as in a warm blanket, soft, reassuring.
Our child, flying away, took us by the hand
and brought us with him for a part of his flight.

The perspective has changed.

From that point of immobility beyond any conflict
the world has acquired a new light, all the brighter.
Every child, every person, every living being is a precious miracle.
Life, in all its forms, and in each one of us, is such a special gift
not to be taken for granted.

Everything has appeared to us as wrapped in a veil of the deepest tenderness
and, at the same time, everything has appeared surrounded by a most powerful force
of growth and orderly movement.

Our heart has opened to listen.

It has opened even more to the weeping of the world,
to understand our tears and those of others.
It has opened to courage, to hope, to peace.
Our heart has opened and has acquiesced.

And thus has begun our journey of healing.
The wound will stay forever
but now resides in greater consciousness
and in sweetest welcome.

At the end of this journey, and at the beginning of a new adventure,
our souls intertwined in depth,
our hearts beating at the same rhythm.

We have never stopped being thankful
for the time that our child, 4.3, was with us.
We know he is well.
We know he lives within the brightest star in the sky.
He is happy knowing we are happy.

At the beginning of a new adventure,
we open our body to the horizon,
letting the breeze caress and transform us.

Efrem and I are expecting a child,
the wonderful surprise of a tiny star that descended from the sky
and now lives and grows in me: Davide.

We are wind, in azure flight, a fragrant merry-go-round.
We are sea, at ease in the deep.

Davide kicks and moves inside me,
free as a cloud that floats in the sky,
the clear sky of Spring.

One day we will tell him of his little brother, 4.3,
and the reason for such a special name,
of why 4.3 is now an Angel that protects him from on high.
We will tell him of that brightest of stars,
of the miracle that is life,
of the strength and the beauty that is within each of us.

We believe Davide will listen to us, and will smile at us
for he knows everything already
surely 4.3 will have spoken to him.

Blandina

Foreword

The sweetest news you can receive when you are trying to have a baby is ... your wife is pregnant! In early August 2018, during a trip to Los Angeles, a pregnancy test revealed that we were expecting a baby. We celebrated this news with lots of hugs and kisses and a great dinner in the Venice beach area.

The worst news you can get if you are already thinking you will become a parent is that you will not. On October 22, a 13-week ultrasound revealed a terrible truth: our baby was affected by anencephaly, a neural tube defect that implies stillbirth or, more rarely, a very short life after delivery. Sadly, most people decide to interrupt the pregnancy. We did too. This account describes the moments we lived between receiving the news about our baby's defect and the interruption of the pregnancy.

There are many reasons why we decided to write about those days. First, it is therapeutic. My brother Gianluca, who is a psychologist, told us that expressing our feelings was crucial for us to return to a normal life. We did so by talking to a number of friends who stepped in during those days and helped us in many ways. We also decided to appeal to expressive writing, a form of expression of one's feelings that has been shown to lead to emotional and physical benefits.¹ This book is the outcome.

Another reason behind our book is that our journey made us realize that there are many untold stories related to miscarriages and pregnancy interruptions. It is estimated that between fifteen and twenty-five percent of recognized pregnancies end in a miscarriage.² However, a relatively low number of parents decide to talk about their traumas. While this is a choice for some, others feel opening up to their families and friends and letting them know of their experiences and how they are feeling is way too challenging. We fully understand their difficulties. Telling our story to our closest friends cost us a lot of suffering. It repeatedly made us confront a painful truth. But it also helped us keep ourselves afloat. This account is a way to letting people who lived an experience similar to ours know that they are not alone, and that expressing their feelings can indeed be beneficial to them.

Last in this list, but first in our hearts, this book is for 4.3. 4.3 is the nickname we used for our baby during Blandina's pregnancy. The reason for this unusual nickname is that, during the very first ultrasound that confirmed the pregnancy, the gynecologist said: "All good! The length is perfectly in line with the population mean conditional on the baby's age: 4.3 millimeters." In a moment of confused joy, I thought he was referring to the length of the baby - in fact, he was referring to that of the sack containing the baby. Back to the hotel, Blandina made me realize my mistake, and we laughed about it. From that point, 4.3 was the nickname we used to refer to the baby. "How is 4.3 doing today? Kicking or not?". "Do you think 4.3 already hears our voices?". Until the sad "Poor 4.3 ..." when we discovered the fatal issue affecting him (yes, it was a boy).

As you will realize if you have the patience and strength to read this book, we decided to see 4.3 after the delivery, and we spent time with him. We promised him to convey all the energy he gave us, and he

¹ An overview is offered by Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm - see <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.11.5.338> .

² <https://www.webmd.com/baby/guide/pregnancy-miscarriage#1> .

is still giving us, to a project worth remembering. Writing this book is how we chose to convey that energy. We are sure 4.3 would be proud of us.

We believe our journey with 4.3 has been full of teachings. He has taught us that nobody and nothing in life should be taken for granted. We are all miracles. Our family members, our friends, the bus driver who drives you to your office, the plumber who fixes your dishwasher, your dogs, the trees in the park close to your home, the flowers in your garden, the birds singing in the morning ... they are all here because of miracles that have happened. Before 4.3, we had never thought about our two dogs, Irwin and Jax, growing in their mothers' bellies, becoming fully formed and ready to be delivered to start their lives in this world. Next time you hold your child, you feed your pet, you hug a friend, think about it. Think about the complexity of the journeys they have gone through to be here. Think about how blessed you are in having them. Think about how fortunate you are in being here. And take a moment to be thankful. To your mother, to all mothers, to nature. We feel better when we express that gratitude, and we hope you will feel better too.

This book uses the narrative strategy of having Efrem tell our story in first person. It was just simpler for us to write our experience in this manner. As a matter of fact, both of us worked on this project. As we noted above, writing this account has proved extremely helpful to us. If readers out there, even just one of them, find this book helpful, we will have fulfilled our purpose.

Blandina and Efrem

October 22, 2018 - Monday

It's 11:45am. I am walking from my temporary office in 137 Barry Street in Carlton - the suburb of Melbourne that hosts the University of Melbourne - to reach the clinic where Blandina will have her 13-week ultrasound at 12:30pm. Blandina has just called me to let me know that it might be possible to go in and have the ultrasound done a bit earlier. This would be good: after the ultrasound, Blandina and I are planning to have lunch at Shakahari, a vegetarian restaurant close to Lygon Street. We love that place. We have loved it since our arrival in Melbourne in late July 2014, the beginning of our Australian experience together.

I am an economist working for the Department of Economics and the Melbourne Institute. Many offices at the Melbourne Institute, where I am based, are being renovated, and mine is one of those. I like my temporary office, and I am even more pleased that, during the renovation process, our Director has given us the chance of working from home. I have frequently exploited this chance to spend more quality time with my wife and my two Labradors, Irwin and Jax.

Blandina, my wife, is a yoga teacher. She teaches Hatha and Vinyasa yoga. Since we got to Melbourne, she's actually done more than that. The day after our arrival, Blandina applied to act as a volunteer for Seeing Eye Dogs Australia, an organization working to provide vision-impaired people with guide dogs. That led us to working as a foster family for three years, Blandina being the main carer for the dogs we would welcome in our home. Irwin and Jax were formerly on training with SEDA, but they proved to have larger-than-life personalities, and it was decided that they were better suited to being family dogs. Since then, they have been (very!) active members of our family.

It's a pleasant Spring day here in Melbourne. The sun is finally shining after a long winter period. Not that we spent the whole winter here. In fact, Blandina and I took a break not too long ago and flew to Los Angeles, the first leg of a road trip in California along the scenic highway one. While being in LA, a pregnancy test revealed that Blandina was pregnant, a news that we celebrated with lots of hugs and kisses, and a fantastic dinner at Cafe Gratitude in the Venice beach area.

To be sure about the outcome, as well as to discuss the risks of travelling back to Melbourne (Is it safe for a pregnant woman to go through the body scanner at the airport? Any risks related to long overhual travel, in general? Answers: yes, and no), we decided to go to a private clinic in downtown LA for a check. Dr Richardson welcomed us into his office and asked us to sit and tell him why we were there. We explained the situation to him, and asked our questions. We found him to be a likeable person, very reassuring. The ultrasound confirmed the pregnancy. Dr Richardson said, "All good! The length is perfectly in line with the population mean conditional on the baby's age: 4.3 millimeters."

The joy of the situation obfuscated my ability to correctly interpret this information - what I thought I understood was "The baby is 4.3 millimeters long!". Later, while helping Blandina cook our dinner, I talked about the measurement, and Blandina, laughing out loud, made me understand my mistake. That day we started calling the baby "4.3". "How is 4.3 doing today? Kicking?" I would ask, knowing that it was way too early for that. But this simple question would make us smile and hug each other.

We had a fun and relaxing trip back to Melbourne at the end of August. Air New Zealand treated us very well, and the "Skycouch solution" - literally, a bed made by combining three economy class seats at a very reasonable rate - worked out pretty well for Blandina, who slept fantastically during most of the 14 hour-long trip from Los Angeles to Auckland. It was a Saturday, and some seats were empty, a fact that enabled me to sleep somewhat comfortably too. After a changeover in Auckland, we boarded our plane to Melbourne looking forward to being back in Williamstown, the Melbourne suburb where we live. There, Irwin and Jax would wait for us to play with them. Above all, we were very much looking forward to starting the very exciting journey of parents-to-be.

Since then, Blandina's pregnancy has been pretty good. She has had a bit (at times, a lot) of nausea, but nothing too dramatic. All tests so far have pointed to a healthy baby, with a regular heartbeat and measures pretty close to the mean of the population conditional on his age. Yes, his, because it's a boy! We know that thanks to the NIPTs, the Non-invasive Prenatal Tests we did two weeks ago to understand how the baby is from a chromosomal standpoint.

For some reasons, neither of us is particularly anxious about the 13-week ultrasound. I guess being optimistic is somewhat natural for us. Hence, past "Il Baretto", my new favorite haunt for a decaf cappuccino in the morning, I walk at a leisurely pace toward the clinic already thinking about the afternoon after my planned lunch with Blandina.

While approaching the clinic, I receive a WhatsApp message on my phone. The picture is of Nicolò, Stefania and Giovanni's newborn baby. What a great picture! Nicolò has got a lot of hair, and looks like a punk singer. Stefania is fine, and Giovanni is over the moon. I show the picture to Blandina, who's pretty ecstatic about it. We will certainly visit them soon, after we buy a nice present for Nicolò.

Dr Zaleh calls us in for the ultrasound. We sit in his clinic, and Blandina gets ready. Dr Zaleh, a tranquil man, jokes about the fact that the gel used for this ultrasound is warm, something he can offer to pregnant women who come in at noon - the early morning ones get the cold version, because it takes a while to warm up.

The ultrasound starts. We expect it to last a while, because Dr Zaleh will have to check all the baby's main organs and body parts for the first time. No worries, we are not in a rush and we understand this ultrasound is important.

The heartbeat is fine. Good. One down.

Then, Dr Zaleh stops talking. Too early, way too early. I look at him for a second, then I go back to the screen. Blandina's eyes are glued to the screen too. We hope nothing is wrong and he's just taking his time to study our baby's body. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Dr Zaleh says: "It seems we have a little bit of a problem here. Please give me a second. I won't talk now, let me double-check".

I squeeze Blandina's hand for a second, then I simply hold it. We are waiting for him to tell us.

Dr Zaleh breaks his silence. "Guys, I am going to draw on a piece of paper what's going on, and then I will comment on what we are seeing on the screen." He takes a piece of paper and a pen from his desk, sits close to us, and draws an ellipses with a fine line. "This is how the skull of a healthy baby looks like when seen from above." Then he marks half of the ellipses, and he says: "Unfortunately, this is what you can see if you look at the picture of the screen. The frontal part of the skull is there, but the rest is not. It's a neural tube defect called anencephaly."

We are petrified. After a moment of silence, we ask: "Can the skull get fully formed down the road?"

"No. If it's not here at this stage, it's never going to be there." Then, Dr Zaleh says what we would never have wanted to hear. "This condition is not compatible with life." He looks at us, seeming to know what we are thinking and how we are feeling, and says: "Life is miracle. Unfortunately, at times non-miracles happen. This is a non-miracle. I am sorry."

If somebody had asked me "How do you think you would react to a bad news as this one if you received it?", I would have answered that "I would start screaming, possibly run around, pull my clothes off, go nuts." Instead, I stay still. Frozen. It feels as if I am in a fishbowl. Sounds become lengthened. My thinking slows. I do not know what to do.

Dr Zaleh leaves the room to call Dr Howard, our obstetrician. We remain alone. I am about to start crying, but Blandina says "Wait, let's get out of here first." Dr Zaleh comes back in and says "Your obstetrician wants to see you. He will be in his room at 5:00pm tonight. He will also tell you what your options are now. I am so sorry for you guys." We find the strength to thank him, pick up our bags, and leave his room. I go to the reception to pay for the consultation, but the receptionists say "No need to do that for this visit." For some reasons, this sentence kills me. We thank them and leave.

We start crying while leaving the building. We walk hugging each other, sustaining each other. We feel like dead-people walking in no particular direction. People look at us with a mixture of compassion and the type of suffering you feel when you see somebody you do not know but who must be living a terrible moment. After a couple of minutes, we notice a park a few blocks off the main road, and we walk there. We sit on a bench close to a big tree. We cry again, we cry a lot. It's a non-stoppable cry. We ask the question "Why?" numerous times. And then Blandina says something so simple and at the same time so painful: "Poor 4.3 ... poor 4.3!". Yes, poor 4.3: so desired, so beautiful to us from the very first ultrasound, so unlucky to live such a short life.

We spend about two hours there. Then - somewhat mechanically, without any desire to do it - we decide to go somewhere to have lunch before our meeting with Dr Howard. We do it because Blandina wants the baby to have the best possible life until the very last second.

Most cafés and restaurants have already closed their kitchens. We end up eating at Brunetti in Lygon street, a great place for a coffee and a cake but not our typical place for lunch. We eat fish and vegetables without actually tasting any of the food in our plates. We cry, stop, cry again. At some point, I get up to go to the restroom. While looking for it, I discover an organic café right behind Brunetti. That is

the type of place we would typically spend some time in. We go there for an almond chai latte, but it is just an attempt to get a distraction before the meeting with our obstetrician. A failed attempt.

We take a taxi and reach the clinic where Dr Howard is receiving his patients today. He is actually replacing a colleague, and the clinic is new to us. The receptionist is aware of our situation, and welcomes us with compassion. Dr Howard will be free soon. We spend a few minutes in the waiting room and try to maintain our composure. The door opens, and Dr Howard invites us in. We start crying, and he hugs us warmly: a long, sad hug for Blandina, and a shorter, equally sad hug for me. We hear words that we will be hearing for the whole week: "I am sorry."

Dr Howard says: "As hard as it is to accept it, it's probably a random event. You guys have just been incredibly unlucky." I am used to think of randomness as one of the elements present in the models I work with as an economist. Differently, Blandina wants to have an explanation, something to relate to. As a matter of fact, she wants explanations that scientists are yet to discover. Yes, randomness is closely related to our ignorance as scientists. Blandina will take a few days to start accepting this concept.

Dr Howard tells us what Dr Zaleh had already explained to us a few hours ago. Our baby has basically zero chances to survive the birth, and if he survives it (for a few minutes, possibly hours) the quality of his life will be extremely low. We tell him that, while not knowing yet what we want to do, we are considering the possibility of terminating the pregnancy. He puts us in front of two options. The first one is a surgery. An intervention under general anesthesia would be performed, and Blandina would wake up after about half an hour not remembering anything. Dr Howard explains the risks associated with this intervention: given that Blandina's pregnancy is still within the first trimester, they are relatively low. The alternative is that of medically inducing the delivery. Here the prediction is for Blandina to feel nausea, have a temperature, strong cramps (magnified by the fact that her body is not yet ready for a delivery), and deliver the baby painfully after about 12 to 16 hours. The risks are lower, but the psychological impact will clearly be stronger.

Dr Howard wants us to go home and think about what to do. He proposes to schedule the termination in three days, on Thursday.

We leave Dr Howard's room and walk the streets near the clinic in search of a taxi. Grief is kicking in, and I am close to having a break down. "Why this? Why us?" I shout while crying. Blandina hugs me and asks me to maintain my composure. "Don't do that, I need you to stay calm."

Crying, we catch a taxi. The only thing we say to the driver is "Please, take us to Williamstown via the fastest route." Then, we hug each other and stay silent, a silence that we will hold until we arrive home.

We enter our place and are enthusiastically welcomed by our dogs. In spite of the long afternoon walk with Diana, our dog walker, Jax jumps to hug us, while Irwin (slightly more disciplined than Jax, and typically a bit sleepy after his afternoon nap) comes to us and asks to be cuddled. We go to the living room and play a bit with them in a robotic manner, then we move to the kitchen and make a tea. While the water is boiling, we sit down and talk about the situation. What should we do? Blandina takes a decision that looks to me both extremely brave and wise: she will terminate her pregnancy by delivering

the baby. She wants to draw the full circle, experience the delivery, minimize the risks of damage to the uterus. Above all, she wants to do all she can to minimize the suffering of the baby, which - we believe - would be more intense during the surgery. I am confused, I am not able to understand which way is the better one. Blandina is the one who is carrying the baby, and she is the one who has the right to decide. I will try to be as helpful and supportive as possible, whatever her choice.

Admiring her courage, I hug her and tell her that I will try to do my best to support her during those hours, but I know perfectly well that the onus will almost completely be on her.

We drink our teas with our dogs resting close by. As dog owners know, dogs understand one's feelings very well. That afternoon, as we move from one room to another, they stay as close as possible. And when we cry, they run to their toys and bring them to us: a sign of affection and love. Their presence during those days helped us immensely.

We make a few phone calls. Following Dr Howard's suggestion, we book an appointment with Dr Star, an experienced obstetrician who specializes in problematic pregnancies. We do not think that a second ultrasound could give us a different picture of the situation. More than anything, we want to have an opinion on the possible causes behind the defect affecting baby 4.3. We also book another appointment with Dr Howard to have a further conversation about how to proceed with the termination. They both agree to see us on Wednesday afternoon, one day before the medical intervention.

We eat a home-made soup prepared by Blandina. We keep talking about what happened, mostly to avoid moments of silence that would kill us.

After some hesitation, we decide to call home to pass the bad news on to our families. We call Luciano, Blandina's father. Luciano is a wise, balanced, reassuring person whose words are always illuminating. We call him on Skype, and find him in the living room of his house in Padova, the beautiful historical Italian town where they live and where Blandina was born and raised. Luciano's voice is lively. He is always happy to receive our phone calls. Blandina tells him that there is a bad news. She then asks me to explain to her father what's going on. I briefly explain the situation, also mentioning the fact that we are thinking of terminating the pregnancy by inducing a delivery. He stays silent for a few seconds. Then, with a broken voice that I had never heard before, he says: "I am very sorry for what has happened to you. Life can be hard, and at times it is difficult to understand why we find ourselves in situations like this one. But we have to face them, and you guys are showing an incredible strength in talking about what happened in this way. The decision to deliver the baby is one of the most courageous I have heard of. If you think it would be of help, I will ask Francesca (Blandina's mother) to get in touch with Silvia (a gynecologists and obstetrician who works in Padova) and ask her to call you to talk about your situation. For the moment, we send you all the love we have. Please keep us updated about your situation, and if you need something from us, please let us know. We will do all we can to support you." We thank him for his words and support, which are very precious to us.

While Blandina washes the dishes, I take the dogs for a walk. As young Labradors, they are physically very strong and energetic, so our night walks are 30-40 minutes long. I cut tonight's walk down to 20 minutes to be at home with Blandina sooner. Once back, Blandina tells me that Francesca sent her a

WhatsApp message: "Call Silvia, she is not at work yet and she's got time to talk to you guys." Silvia studied medicine in Padova. Padova is a pretty small place, everybody knows one another. Silvia met Francesca during her university studies, and they have been friends ever since. Padova is also the place where I met Blandina during my years at the Department of Economics at the local university, where I started my academic career. Blandina and I met at a pizza night to celebrate the birthday of a mutual friend back in June 2010.

We call Silvia, who tells us that she's already aware of our situation thanks to a quick exchange with Francesca. It is the first time that we talk to her, but we feel as if we were talking to a friend. She understands the situation very well given her theoretical background and her experience with similar cases she has dealt with. She explains that unfortunately miscarriages and terminations due to defects affecting fetuses are far from uncommon. We simply did not know it, and this information helps us put what is happening in perspective. We are not alone. Knowing this does not diminish our grief. But, through talking to her, we feel somewhat understood.

Silvia tells us that both ways to terminate the pregnancy are common. She confirms that the surgical option is faster, and she provides us with reassuring statistics on the degree of success for this type of intervention. But she also says that delivering the baby is something some women do. It is totally understandable and rational, and even if it can be psychologically painful, it can help the healing process.

We thank Silvia very much for her time and explanations. We feel we are starting to be mentally prepared for the next steps, and we understand that events like this can happen to anyone. Still, there is a lot of grief to handle, and we want to understand if there is an identifiable cause of our baby's condition.

I feel I should call my parents. At the same time, I feel I am not ready yet to communicate the news to them. I know it will sadden them immensely. I decide to postpone the call for one day.

We take a shower, and while Blandina is getting ready to go to sleep, I text Bruce, a friend and colleague of mine at the Department, to let him know about what is going on and the fact that I will not be around in the following days. He replies almost immediately saying that Jen, his partner and a Doctor operating in Melbourne, is certainly available to have a conversation with us if we need it. I thank him for the offer. After this, I turn off my cell phone and go to bed with Blandina. We are both tired, and we are aware we have some long and heavy days in front of us.

October 23, 2018 - Tuesday

We wake up after a few hours of broken sleep. After feeding the dogs, I play with them a bit, doing what I would do in a normal day. I am making my breakfast when Blandina enters the kitchen and says: "Let's call Dr Richardson. I want to have his opinion on what's going on." Dr Richardson, back in Los Angeles, had actually asked us to keep him informed about the progress of the pregnancy, perhaps because we felt he instantly liked us when we entered his clinic. Ordinarily, my answer would have been something to the effect of, "Why should we bother somebody on the other side of the planet to get an opinion that we can get by talking to people here in Melbourne?". This time, I say yes to Blandina, get my cell phone, search for his office number, and call him via Skype.

Dr Richardson's secretary picks up the phone. "Hi, how are you? ... Oh, so sorry to hear that. I am sure Dr Richardson will be happy to have a chat with you, but he's not in his office today. I will get in touch with him and write you an email once I know when he can talk to you guys. For the moment, stay strong." We thank her, hang up, and go back to our breakfast.

We talk about what happened yesterday: Dr Zaleh's face when he told us the news, his compassion; Dr Howard's sadness when he saw us, the words he managed to find; Silvia's words, her ability to support us by outlining possibilities for the near future in a clear manner and telling us that we will be fine. While talking, the doorbell rings. It's Diana, our dog walker. Our two dogs are physically very strong and not particularly obedient when we go out for our walks, and keeping them on lead has become risky for Blandina because of her pregnancy. Diana has helped us a lot lately. We are happy to have her on board, our dogs love her.

I get to the front door, where the boys (as we call Irwin and Jax) are frantically wagging their tails while waiting for the door to open. Then, they jump on Diana. It happens all the time, and every time she gently but firmly admonishes them. Still, they cannot resist. Labradors. I tell her that Blandina and I have had a bit of a problem, and that it would be great if she could walk the dogs this afternoon as well. She understands that something is going on, and she accepts my request without hesitation. She knows Blandina had her 13-week ultrasound yesterday, and her face becomes worried. I am about to start crying, but I manage to maintain my composure.

I drink a Rooibos tea while Blandina finishes her breakfast. We talk about what to do during the day. I suggest to go for a walk - it's a cloudy Spring day, but the temperature is fine, and a bit of fresh air will not harm. While I say this, I realize I have a couple of meetings at work today. I write a few emails to cancel them. I then decide to explain what is happening to Guay, my supervisor at the Melbourne Institute. I then write to David, my Head of Department, and to Abigail, the Director of the Melbourne Institute. Guay, David, and Abigail all understand that I need to stay close to Blandina for a while.

Around 9:30am, Diana rings our bell while I am closing my laptop. The dogs are super excited despite of a good run in an off-leash area close to our place, and are jumping all over the place in the front yard. I thank Diana, get the leads and the treats, and go back in.

After a few minutes, Blandina's cell phone rings. Surprisingly, it's Diana. I pick up the call. "Hi Diana, all good?" "Yes. Just called to know if you want me to keep the boys for the whole day. I am free today, and you guys would have more time for yourselves. I can be there in a short while, if you want." I look at Blandina. Diana is right, we need time for ourselves. "Ok Diana, if you really can, please come over ... and thank you very much."

Diana is back after about half an hour. Unexpectedly, she is holding beautiful flowers for us. When I see the flowers I start crying, and Blandina, who's right behind me, does it too. We thank her very much for what she's doing, but our voice is broken - we can't just stop crying. She says "Guys, no need to say anything. I will take care of the boys, and you take care of yourselves, ok? Come on boys, let's go!" She leaves again with our dogs while we go back inside. We cry uninterruptedly, hugging each other. It's painful, very painful.

Blandina then gets ready for a walk while I wash the dishes. After that, I check my email on my cell phone (an automatic impulse I am not particularly proud of) and notice that Dr Richardson wrote to me and Blandina. "Hi there, I have heard the sad news about you from my office. I am very sorry. I am out of office now, but why don't you try to call me tomorrow? I should be reachable all day." His kindness warms our hearts a bit. I write a short email to let him know that we appreciate what he wrote and that we will call him tomorrow at some point.

While we are about to leave for our walk, Blandina realizes that there is a missed call on her cell phone. Francesca, a close Italian friend of ours who also lives in Williamstown, had tried to reach her the night before. We decide to call her and tell her what's happening. Francesca listens to us. She's very sorry, and she tells us that we can rely on her for whatever need we might have. She invites us to have dinner with her and Nicolas, her French husband, that very same night. We thank her for her kindness and tell her that we will let her know.

We leave our place around 11 am. We walk to the beach, which is just two blocks away from where we live. We then turn right and walk toward the Rifle Range, which is a green area with a footpath where Blandina likes to go walking and where I go from time to time for my jogging sessions. We walk while hugging each other, and we review the moments lived the day before. We realize that telling our story to people close to us has probably represented the first mini-step of the long healing process that we will undertake. This makes our hearts feel a bit less heavy.

After walking for about 20 minutes, we decide to turn right and check if Mike is at home. Mike, an economist working at Monash University, is a very good friend of ours. He and I have breakfast together at least once a week - jokingly, we say it is our moment of freedom, because Blandina and Kalvinder, Mike's wife, never join us. They prefer to do meditation together, a practice Mike and I rarely take part in because we are too busy with other activities (usually, organizing the next breakfast together). After 20 minutes or so, we reach Mike and Kal's place and ring the bell. Mike - who works from home a couple of days a week - opens the door and invites us in.

Blandina tells Mike we have some bad news. After having revealed Blandina's pregnancy to Mike and Kal just a couple of weeks ago during a dinner at their place, we are here to tell him that things have gone wrong.

Blandina starts explaining what's going on, but cannot finish the first sentence - she starts crying, and says, "I cannot do it, please you tell him." I then explain to Mike what's going on and that we decided to terminate the pregnancy. Mike is visibly shocked. He comes and hugs us, then he invites us to sit on the couch. He makes us a tea. We start talking, describing the moments we have lived since yesterday's ultrasound: the meeting with the obstetrician, the phone calls to Italy, the exchange with Diana, the conversation with Francesca.

Time goes by, and Mike decides to prepare a few sandwiches for the three of us, a simple gesture that we appreciate immensely. We eat them while sitting in the beautiful backyard Mike and Kal always keep tidy and where they often host their guests. I try to divert the conversation elsewhere and chat about work-related things. Mike is assessing some applications for funding for his Faculty, while Kal is working on the selection of applicants to the PhD in Economics she directs (she's a Professor at the University of Melbourne). They are both looking forward to completing these tasks in order to resume working on a joint paper. The conversation comes to an end, and we warmly thank Mike for listening. He reiterates that, if we need something, he and Kal are there for us. We hug each other before leaving.

We feel a bit better after talking to Mike. While painful, telling our story to friends is helpful, because it makes us feel understood. We then check if Francesca, who lives very close to Mike, is at her place. She's indeed at home, and is glad we decided to stop by. We enter Francesca's house and, while Blandina sits on the couch in the living room, I kneel down and pet Justin, a physically imposing Bernese Mountain dog who loves being cuddled. After a couple of minutes with him, I join Francesca and Blandina, who are chatting. Francesca asks us how we are doing. We tell her how we are feeling. She patiently listens to us, makes sensible comments, supports us. We leave after one hour, hugging Francesca and scratching Justin's ears once again. Before leaving, she tells us that she and Nicolas are ready to do all they can to help us.

It's a mild afternoon, and we walk back to the Rifle Range thinking that we are not alone. Mike and Francesca are very close friends, and are part of the extended family we have created since arriving in Melbourne. Of course, a moment like this makes us miss our parents keenly, and we would like to be in Italy, in Padova and Lecco (my hometown), with our families. But Mike and Francesca are now like family to us, and realizing it once again makes us feel better.

While walking home, Blandina calls Juliet, a friend of hers. Like Blandina, Juliet is a yoga teacher. Her specialization is yoga for pregnant women. Blandina and Juliet talk a little bit. Juliet is very sorry for us, and she - who's got three healthy little kids - tells us that, unfortunately, she too experienced miscarriages in the past. We are surprised, but at the same time we start understanding that stories like ours are more common than people think.

Once at home, we are welcomed by Irwin and Jax. Diana has already taken them out for the afternoon walk and fed them. They come to us with their usual enthusiasm, and we pretend to have the same level of enthusiasm for them. But they are very sensitive, and perceive that something is different.

While in the kitchen, we boil some water for a tea. I start crying, thinking about the situation we are in, what is happening to our baby. Jax and Irwin come to me. I pet them, and they sit close by. After a while, Jax goes to his mattress in the kitchen. Irwin, at this point, would typically go to his favorite spot in the living room. This time, however, he decides to lay down close to his brother and keep us company.

We talk about the next day's meetings. Blandina wants to hear Dr Star's views on the possible causes of the baby's defect and on the pros and cons of terminating the pregnancy via surgery versus inducing labor. She also wants to have a conversation with Dr Howard about this subject. While talking, the doorbell rings. The dogs, sleepy until then, suddenly wake up and rush full speed to the door. I open it, but nobody is there. Then, I see a thermos on the porch. Mike. He brought something for us. His soup! While we were at his place, he was preparing a vegetable soup. We feel very grateful, and - after setting the table - we eat the soup silently, a silence interrupted from time to time by comments about how supportive our friends have been.

After dinner, we decide to call our parents. Blandina calls Francesca, her mother, and informs her that she's leaning towards delivering the baby. Francesca listens carefully, and tells Blandina to go with her feelings.

I then call my parents. Pasqualina and Giuseppe, Mum and Dad, are petrified when they hear the news. By now, this is far from the first time I have told our story. For some reasons, it proves to be the most difficult one for me. I begin crying while explaining to my mum what happened. She does the same. I keep my explanation pretty brief, tell her and dad to not cry for us and to not worry. My mum asks me if she can talk about what's going on to Gianluca, my brother, who's a psychologist. I say that yes, she can. Of course, I will call him too in the next few days to talk to him. I close the Skype conversation by telling my parents that I will update them tomorrow.

While getting ready for our dogs' night walk, I receive a message from Nicolas, Francesca's husband. He's back from work, and Francesca told him about our visit and the bad news. He's very sorry and tells us to let them know if we need help. I thank him very much for his kind thoughts and promise to keep him posted.

I then walk the dogs while Blandina washes the dishes. I keep the walk short. I want to be with Blandina as much as possible, as I know tomorrow will be a stressful day. After a shower, we go to bed. We hug each other tight, cry, then speak words to support each other. After a while, we fall asleep.

October 24, 2018 - Wednesday

We wake up thinking about our appointment with Dr Star. We have mixed feelings. We know that he will confirm the reading of the ultrasound done by Dr Zaleh, and hearing the sad truth once again will be painful. At the same time, we expect him to offer us a second opinion on the possible causes and on what to do in regard to the termination, which is scheduled for tomorrow. The more we know, the less complicated facing such process will be.

After breakfast, I call Ben, a colleague based at Macquarie University in Sydney. Some months ago, he invited me to spend a week at their Department and give talks to the local economists and PhD students on some of my research. We had agreed that the next week would have been a good one. Blandina and I were looking forward to going to Sydney together to spend a week over there, walk the Coogee-Bondi stretch overlooking the ocean, go to the Opera House, and spend a week-end in Manly. In light of this week's events, we decided to postpone our trip to Sydney until better times. Ben, kindly, tells me he fully understands. He will take care of the paperwork to change the dates, and says I am welcome to visit his department anytime.

I am about to return to Blandina when, suddenly, I am overcome by emptiness. The dogs are not at home - Diana has already picked them up for their usual run at the park. The house feels emptier than usual. All the dreams about us and the baby living together at our place are gone. Discussions about how to arrange the guest room, where to put the bassinet, where to change the baby, how to ensure a smooth co-existence between the baby and our dogs ... are all useless now, all gone. For the first time since we got the bad news about 4.3, I feel our place is missing something. I feel a void. I feel I want to fill the house.

I go back to the kitchen and say to Blandina: "Why don't we invite your brother Tomaso to come here again? It was cool having him around for a few weeks a couple of years ago. Perhaps he would like to come over again ... " And then I lose it. "We need to fill this house! It is empty, too empty! I want this house to be full of people! We have to organize lunches and dinners, invite people! I want this place to be colorful! Colorful!" And I start crying. Blandina comes to me and hugs me. I apologize. We need to be strong, because we are in the middle of a tempest, still far from the harbor.

Diana comes back from the dog park. While returning the leashes, she tells me that she would be happy to talk to us about what is happening. I thank her and keep her offer in mind. Perhaps Blandina would like to talk to Diana about our situation.

We then call Dr Richardson. He picks up the phone, and when he realizes it is us he immediately says "Blandina, Efrem, I am so sorry. You were so happy when you were here ... very sorry, really." We then have a brief chat about the issue affecting our baby. He also believes that we have simply been pretty unlucky. Referring to the choice of an induced delivery, he says he understands why Blandina may prefer that option, a choice he labels as rational. We thank him very much for his time and suggestions. He wishes us good luck, and hangs up.

While getting ready for a walk, the doorbell rings. It's Francesca, who's going to the local education centre in Thomson Street for her English lesson. She baked an apple cake and decided to stop by to give it to us. We appreciate her gesture very much. We hug her before she leaves, and keep getting ready for the walk.

We get some fresh air, then return home for a quick meal before catching the train to the city. We get off at Flinders Street station, walk past Federation Square, and keep walking until we get to Dr Star's office.

After a few minutes Dr Star opens his office door, and welcomes us in. He has already been updated about our situation by Dr Howard, but he wants us to explain it to him in our own words. He then asks Blandina to lie down so he can perform an ultrasound. I look at Blandina, who undertakes the process without revealing any sadness. Her composure is incredible. During the ultrasound, I hold her hand but do not look at the screen. Despite already knowing the outcome, the process is just too painful for me.

Dr Star takes his time to thoroughly perform the procedure. He then thanks Blandina and asks her to dress while he returns to his desk. When Blandina and I are back sitting in front of him, Dr Star confirms the gravity of the situation. The skull of the baby is only partly formed, and unfortunately the baby's brain is already damaged. This condition is definitely incompatible with life. He tells us he is sorry about it, and he also says he thinks that this is a random event. He then asks us if we have any questions for him.

Blandina asks him to explain the pros and cons of the two options for termination. Dr Star confirms what we already know, which is that the surgical option is faster and not particularly painful, but it presents minor risks for the uterus of the woman. He also confirms that inducing a labor and delivering the baby is a more psychologically demanding option. However, he tells us it is a perfectly rational option, and that many women decide to go down this road. These words, which are very similar to Dr Richardson's this morning, reassure Blandina.

We leave Dr Star's office thanking him for his help. He says again that he is very sorry. We believe he means it.

While leaving the building, Blandina asks me: "Did you see what 4.3 was doing during the ultrasound? He was moving his mouth! He seemed to be so active ... poor 4.3!" These words are difficult to hear.

Our next appointment is with Dr Howard. While walking toward his office, I tell Blandina that I do not feel ready to go to the hospital tomorrow for the termination, and I ask her how she is feeling about it. She agrees that we have not had enough time to sit down and think about it, we are not mentally ready. We then agree to postpone it to Friday.

Dr Howard wants to know how we are feeling, and asks us what we have decided about terminating the pregnancy. Blandina is definitely determined to go the "natural way". Dr Howard tells us he will call Frances Perry House, where he works, and ask them to be ready for our admission tomorrow. We tell him we would prefer to undergo the procedure on Friday, and use tomorrow to get mentally ready for

it. He understands, and he says he will make a phone call later to have a room reserved for us for Friday. We thank him and leave his office.

We walk toward a park close to Dr Howard's building. In the park, we receive a phone call from Eliza, a Bereavement Midwife at Frances Perry House. Eliza has words of support for us, which are much appreciated. She then describes what we will be facing on Friday. She talks about the medicines that Blandina will be given to induce the delivery; the physical reaction she may have (fever, vomit, contractions that may call for painkillers); the expected duration of the process (many hours, possibly a day); the type of support Blandina will receive.

Eliza then outlines a scenario I had never thought of: that of seeing the baby and spending time with him after the delivery. My immediate reaction is to say no, while Blandina is open to this possibility. Eliza says that nothing has to be decided in advance: parents typically know if they want to see the baby or not right after the delivery. She just suggests thinking about it. She agrees on the need to get mentally ready for this process.

Eliza closes the conversation by letting us know that, sadly, Frances Perry House cares for many families each year in similar situations to ours. We are astonished. We were not aware of how common our or similar situations are.

Sitting on a bench, we wrap up the situation. According to the medical literature, there is no established cause of the fatal issue affecting our baby: as hard as it is to accept it, we have most likely been extremely unfortunate. The choice made by Blandina to induce labor and deliver the baby is very rational. We have to be ready for a mentally and physically long day at the hospital. And we have to decide if we want to spend time with 4.3 after the delivery.

We check the time. It's 6:30pm, and we decide to catch a taxi to go back to Williamstown. The driver is an Economics student at RMIT, one of the local universities. When he finds out that I work for the University of Melbourne, he starts asking tons of questions about the programs we offer, our students, our research projects, and so on. I try to have a conversation with him while thinking about many other things. Blandina does not join our conversation. Understandably, she prefers to rest.

We arrive home and we are welcomed by Jax and Irwin, who were resting after their afternoon walk with Diana and a feed. We are pretty tired, probably more mentally than physically.

Blandina makes a light meal while I play a bit with the dogs. I then take the dogs out for a short walk while Blandina calls her parents to provide them with some updates. Once back from the walk, I also call my mum and dad. Mum tells me that she saw my brother and talked to him about what is happening here, and that Gianluca managed to find reassuring words for her. After closing the call with my parents, I also find a message from my brother on my cell phone telling me to not worry about Mum and, above all, to stay strong. I reply to his message by thanking him a lot for this.

While writing my message to Gianluca, I receive another message from Bruce. He asks how we are doing, and reminds me that Jen is available to talk to us if we feel the need. I call him. Without

hesitation, he hands the cell phone to Jen. After listening to our story, Jen gives us some suggestions on the specialists we should get in touch with to understand if there is any possible causes of our baby's issue that have not yet been considered. We thank her very much for her suggestions, which we will follow up with once it is all over. She wishes us good luck, we thank her and Bruce again, and we hang up.

Blandina goes back to a message received Monday from Laura, a friend and colleague at the Department of Economics. Laura wanted to know how we were doing. She does not know yet about the outcome of the ultrasound we had that day. Blandina calls her, explains what has happened, and tells her that she is planning to terminate the pregnancy through a natural delivery. Laura is pretty sad to hear the bad news. She has words of support and encouragement for Blandina. Blandina thanks her, and promises to keep her updated about our situation. Then, she switches off her phone, and I do the same with mine.

While Blandina and I get ready for sleep, we make a plan for tomorrow. Main goal: getting mentally ready for Friday. We go to bed, and we hug each other before falling asleep.

October 25, 2018 - Thursday

I wake up and feed the dogs, then have a quick shower and wake up Blandina. While making our breakfast, I tell Blandina that Diana is available to talk to us, if we want to. We decide it's a good idea to talk to yet another person about what has happened to us. When Diana comes to pick up the dogs for the morning walk, I tell her that we could grab a tea together when she's back. Very kindly, she agrees to do so.

While having breakfast, we think about how to get ready for tomorrow. Mentally, we need to switch from the "what happened" to the "what's going to happen". We need to think of what it means to get to Frances Perry House and go through what we have to go through. We believe a walk in the green areas of Williamstown would be of help here. We also need to buy food for when we will be back home. To deal with both issues, we decide to have lunch in Yarraville at Healthy.Co, one of our favorite places, which is next door to Plump, our favorite organic grocery.

While getting ready for the day we hear the doorbell. Diana is back from her walk with the dogs. With Blandina, we decide to go to the botanical gardens, which are pretty close to our place. Diana likes the idea. It is a nice Spring day outside, the sun is shining, and the gardens are beautiful as usual. While walking to a bench in the park, we start talking about what has happened since Monday.

Diana listens carefully, then tells us that she has already lived a similar ordeal twice. She has had two miscarriages, and she has experienced both ways of terminating the pregnancy. We tell her that we decided to deliver the baby. She recalls her experience for us. She describes what happened, how she felt during and after the process. We listen carefully, and ask questions. She answers all our questions. She also gives us suggestions on what to do to get ready for the day we will spend at the hospital (bring lots of underwear because of the bleeding, bring warm clothes because of the fever, be patient because it is going to be a long day). Her words are incredibly supportive, and her suggestions will prove to be extremely useful to us.

The conversation goes on for a while, and Blandina and I feel better at the end of it. We thank Diana for her friendship and time, and we wish her a nice day.

We then walk toward the beach to see the sea, always beautiful when the sun is shining. We have been living in Williamstown for more than four years now, but we never stop being stunned by its beauty. We pass by the Kiosk, a café close to the beach. It is already full of customers drinking their coffees. Many of them have dogs, and we smile at them. Following the bay trail, we enter the Jawbone Nature Conservation Reserve. After about one kilometer, we turn left and get to a bench that is located right in front of the Marine Sanctuary. We sit on the bench, hug each other, and silently observe the ocean. We start crying, and we hug each other tighter. We both think of 4.3. Poor 4.3, such a short life! Such an incredible amount of love for him and teachings from him to us. A very little baby, who in a few-week span has already taught us how each little step in the right direction is an achievement to celebrate, and not to be taken for granted. And he has taught us the most important thing: life is a miracle, and all living creatures are evidence of such miracle. The birds that fly past our house every day. The dogs that

run around at the dog park. The children who play on the beach close to our place. Our parents. Our friends. Everybody. We are all living miracles.

We cry a lot, release stress. We are grieving.

After some time, we feel a bit better, and we realize that it is time to go back home and take the car to Yarraville. We are just out of the Rifle Range when we run into Mike, who is jogging along the bay. We feel better seeing a familiar face. We exchange a few words, then we let him go and we keep walking back home. Once there, we take the car and go to Healthy.Co, where we eat two vegetarian bowls. The food is pretty tasty, although today we do not enjoy it as usual.

After our meal we go to Plump. We don't know how Blandina will feel after the intervention, and we want to make sure to have food for a couple of days at home in case she needs me by her side at all times. Tomorrow will be a long day. We buy healthy snacks, nuts, and fruits, which we will bring to the hospital.

While we are at the counter, a beautiful child walks in with her mum. She smiles at us, and we smile back. Blandina and I look at each other. We are happy to realize that there are no feelings of envy or negativity coming from us. We love children, and this continues to be true despite finding ourselves in the midst of the worst moment of our lives. A moment related to our own child's unfortunate circumstance. We feel reassured by our own feelings.

We drive home and, once there, we are greeted by our dogs. Like yesterday, Diana has already walked and fed them. They are happy to see us, although Irwin is a bit sleepy (we have clearly interrupted his afternoon nap). As usual, Jax – who is one and a half years younger - is more active and has already grabbed one of my shoes, a move that triggers a short chase, which he enjoys a lot.

After a quick tea, we prepare our luggage for the trip to the hospital. We want to make the hospital room as welcoming as possible. We put in our food, pictures of our dogs, a CD player and some CDs (yes, we are pretty old school), and a Himalayan salt lamp that Blandina uses during her meditation sessions. We add a lot of changes of clothes for Blandina, including warm clothes. We are thinking about the fever that she will probably have as a side effect of the medicines she will take tomorrow. We will spend at least one night at the hospital, then we also get some sleeping garments. When we finish, we realize that it seems as though we have got ready to go away for two weeks! We laugh a bit about it before going to the kitchen to prepare our dinner.

After dinner, we call home again to provide our parents with the latest updates. We feel a bit more lighthearted than the day before. We reassure our parents about the fact that we are ready for tomorrow. This is how we actually feel: ready. The purpose of today was mostly about getting in the right state of mind for what we will have to face tomorrow. We believe we have done our best in this sense. We agree that it was a very wise decision to postpone the day of the intervention. Our parents are glad to hear that.

Blandina receives a message from Laura. She's very sorry about our situation, and she wants Blandina to know that she admires her courage and determination in terms of the termination by delivery. While reading Laura's message, I agree with her: Blandina's decision is a pretty brave one.

I go for a quick walk with the dogs, and when I am back Blandina is taking a long shower before bed. I book a taxi for the next day, and take a shower too. In bed, I reach Blandina and hug her tight, then wish her a good night. We need to sleep well, because tomorrow will be one of the most challenging days of our lives, and above all for Blandina.

October 26, 2018 - Friday

We wake up and get ready for the long day ahead of us. We have a good breakfast, check our luggage, give a carrot to our dogs (one of the treats they get when we leave them at home to go somewhere), and go out to catch our taxi to the hospital. We hold hands during the ride, which is pretty smooth because we are past peak hour. We approach Frances Perry House around 10:15am, perfectly on time to check in at 10:30am as agreed with Dr Howard. The taxi driver parks his car in one of the spots in front of the Royal Melbourne Hospital. For some reason, instead of getting out from the left side of the car (the safe one, given that it would give me access to the pedestrian area), I open the right door about 30 centimeters, and ... bang! I hear a crash, and after a second or two I realize I hit a cyclist. Mortified, I leave the car and go help her. She's fine, just a bit shaken. I leave her my cell phone and tell her to let me know if she finds out there are any issues with her or her bike later. I apologize again, help Blandina with the luggage, and walk toward the entrance of Frances Perry.

We enter the building and take the elevator to the sixth floor. We spend some time at the reception to do a bit of paperwork. We are then accompanied to room number 15. We walk in the room, which is small but looks clean and comfortable. We open our luggage and start placing our items here and there: some healthy snacks and chocolate and the picture of Irwin and Jax on the little table in front of the bed; the stereo, our CDs, and the Himalayan salt lamp on the table in the corner; the luggage with Blandina's clothes between the two tables. I then take a big thermos we brought from home and leave the room to check where the kitchenette is located. Luckily, it is pretty close: it will be easy to refill the thermos with hot water and provide Blandina with teas when needed (several times during our stay). There is a good deal of light coming from the window. Our room faces an inner street, and we can see a couple of buildings near ours: no complaints here, we are not there for the view.

Blandina sits on the bed and tries to relax. While we are chatting, Emma comes in and introduces herself. She will be our nurse until 3:00pm. Very kindly and calmly, she fills a few forms for us. Then, she explains what is going to happen. Blandina will take the first dose of pills to trigger the labor around 11:00am. Every three hours, she will take the same pills. She's expected to start reacting to these pills after about a couple of hours. High fever, nausea, and strong contractions are likely side effects. Blandina can ask for painkillers, from mild ones up to morphine. Nurses are available at all times and can be called by pressing a button or using a service phone - Emma writes her number on a white board on the wall between Blandina's bed and the restroom. Dr Howard, who's expected to come soon, will check in from time to time to see how things go. If things go as planned, Blandina should deliver the baby between midnight and 6:00am. This is in line with what Eliza told us on the phone on Wednesday - the information that had set our expectations for today. We are not only ready for an intense experience. Mentally, we are ready for a marathon. Patience will have to be our friend, and meditation is part of our plan.

Our conversation with Emma is interrupted by the arrival of Dr Howard, who comes in and sits with us. He is eager to discuss the scientific literature analyzing cases like ours. I actually think it is a bad idea: we are mentally getting ready to start a long and intense day, and this is not the right moment for this type of conversation. But Blandina is curious to know more, and welcomes Dr Howard's proposal.

After about 30 minutes of conversation, Dr Howard says that it's time to proceed, and he administers the first pill to Blandina. It's 11:30am. Given that the pill is not expected to have an immediate effect, Dr Howard suggests we go out for some fresh air. He then leaves the room, and says he will be back from time to time to check on us.

We stay in the room and start talking about our situation, the experience we are living, how smooth the pregnancy was going before discovering the issue affecting 4.3. I tell Blandina about a thought I have had since the beginning of this week: Irwin and Jax in their fetal form, developing slowly but surely in their mothers' wombs before arriving in this world. What a sophisticated and delicate process a pregnancy is, for humans and animals. How many things can go wrong. In spite of what is happening to us, Blandina and I realize that we still have the strength to think of this process as mostly being successful and able to deliver wonderfully functioning creatures. Even during the worst moments of our journey, I guess we never entirely lost our positive attitude toward life.

We decide to remain in our room. Blandina is feeling comfortable here, and we can order a meal from room service. We eat vegetables with rice (Blandina) and chicken with vegetables (me). We feel satiated after our meal. We drink a tea and chat a bit more, then Blandina starts feeling tired, and decides to rest. I then walk out the room to go to the kitchen and re-fill the thermos with hot water. Since living in Beijing for three years while she worked for the United Nations, Blandina enjoys hot water above any other drink. According to Chinese culture and wisdom, hot water is highly beneficial for our body.

While returning to the room, I notice something that I had missed before: a sticker with a picture of a butterfly is attached to our door, and our door only. An instant later, I remember having read somewhere an article on the *butterfly rooms*: hospital rooms that host a deceased baby. This is to prepare staff before they enter. I remember thinking when reading the article: "It must be very sad to be part of a story like this one." And here we are.

I go back in the room, and find Blandina resting. In line with the medical staff's expectations, she has a temperature. Emma comes in and checks it: 38.5. I see the figure but decide to not tell Blandina. Emma says she will be back around 2:30pm for another round of pills.

At 2:30pm, Emma comes back. She says that this round may or may not intensify Blandina's response to the medicines. It does. Blandina now feels feverish and has nausea. Soon after, she goes to the restroom to vomit. This was expected. At the same time, she starts feeling contractions, initially mild, then more painful. All these reactions were expected, and Blandina remains calm and composed, focused. Emma comes and asks Blandina if she wants to get some antidote for the nausea. Blandina, who does not love medicines in general, says that for the moment she can manage. Emma wishes us good luck because she is at the end of her shift. Jasmine, another nurse at Frances Perry House, will soon come to say hi and check how we are doing.

Jasmine comes in after a few minutes, introduces herself, asks how Blandina is doing, and check Blandina's temperature. 39.4. Again, I decide to not say anything to Blandina. Before Jasmine leaves the room, she reminds us that painkillers are available on demand and that she's available all time.

Blandina starts feeling very cold, and asks for extra layers to keep warm. Another wave of nausea hits, and she vomits once. Afterwards, she goes back to bed and drinks some hot water, which gives her relief. She then asks me to get on YouTube with her cell phone and search for a meditation session by Sister Jayanti. Blandina has been doing meditation with Kal (Mike's wife) for a long while now, and she's increasingly appreciated the calming effect of meditation. I find the session she has asked me to search for, get it started, place the cell phone on the small table in the corner, and sit close to Blandina on the small couch next to her bed.

We spend about one hour listening to the meditation teacher. The rhythm of her voice, its calmness, her tangible inner serenity relax us, and we enjoy this nice feeling without saying a word. At some point Blandina, tired because of the physical reaction to the pills, falls asleep, and I follow soon after.

We are awakened by Jasmine, who comes and checks us around 5:00pm. She tells us that the new round of pills is due in half an hour, and asks Blandina if she needs some pain relief. Blandina thanks her but says no. Shortly after that, however, Blandina starts sweating, has another wave of nausea, and needs to go to the restroom again. We call Jasmine, who recommends some anti-nausea medication for the 5:30pm pills to be more effective. She also suggests a light painkiller for the contractions, which have now become more painful. Reluctantly, Blandina agrees.

While Jasmine gets the painkillers, I help Blandina to change into fresh and more comfortable clothes. Shortly after that, Jasmine administers the anti-nausea medication and the painkillers. 20 minutes later, she gives Blandina the 5:30pm pills.

After a relatively short while, Blandina feels slightly better, a sign that the painkillers are having the desired effect. At some point, she gets up because she feels the need to go to the restroom. While taking her first step toward the restroom, she stops and feels like getting in a squat position, a pretty natural one for her being a yoga teacher. A few seconds later, she goes "Wow! Something happened!". We immediately realize that her waters have broken. The labor has started.

While Blandina goes to the restroom, I call the nurse and update her on the situation. Jasmine comes in and checks Blandina, who is back from the restroom and is sitting on her bed. Everything seems to be all right. Jasmine tells us that the labor has clearly started, but it will probably be a long story, and we have to be patient.

I help Blandina get changed once again, before she goes back to resting. She is not feeling any pain at the moment. She drinks a bit of hot water, then falls fast asleep. I go out to get more hot water, then return to our room, sit in the armchair, and try to relax.

The rupture of the membranes occurred earlier than expected. Things are working smoothly (at least, as smoothly as they can, with Blandina having a temperature, vomiting three times, and shivering) and slightly in advance with respect to Dr Howard's predictions. This is not a total surprise for me and Blandina. She never takes any medicine, hence we were expecting her to react quickly to the pills and, hopefully, to the painkillers. But the most intense phase is still ahead of us.

In the meantime, dinner is served. Blandina does not feel like eating anything now, she just wants to rest. I leave the room so as not to bother Blandina with the smell of the food I am having (when it comes to detecting smells, Blandina is the closest human to Labradors I have ever met). I eat standing outside the room while watching Blandina through the little door window. Once I am done, I go back in. Blandina is sleeping. I sit on the couch, check a few messages recently received from some friends and our parents, switch off the phone, and try to rest.

We remain like this, with Blandina sleeping and me resting, until around 8:20pm. Then, suddenly, Blandina wakes up and feels a huge contraction. Then, another one. She gets up, and I come to her side. To feel more comfortable, she squats again. Then, she gets up and goes back to her bed. Another strong contraction. Then, a lot of blood on the bed. In the middle of all the blood, something that looks like a very tiny baby: 4.3.

It's 8:25pm on Friday October 26, 2018. Blandina and I will never forget this moment.

We call Jasmine, who arrives immediately. She comes with Giovanna, another nurse. They check how Blandina is doing, then they take care of the baby. They go to the restroom and take some time to clean him. They wrap him in a towel, and ask us if we want to see him and spend time with him.

Their question is the question we had been expecting since talking with Eliza over the phone on Wednesday. My first reaction in that occasion was very negative. Seeing my stillborn child? No way could I bring myself to do so. Blandina, true to her more open-minded nature, was more inclined towards following our feelings in that moment. Both of us now feel this is the right thing to do, and this is in fact what we do. Yes, we do want see the baby and spend time with him.

Jasmine and Giovanna come to us holding the baby. He's an incredibly tiny, fully formed baby. He has been laid on a white towel, as if he were sleeping on his left side. Surprisingly to me, we feel extremely calm looking at him. Giovanna tells us that we can touch him if we want to. We do so, carefully. We are surprised by how tough his body feels to us. Jasmine asks if it's a boy or a girl. We almost shout "A boy!".

Giovanna says: "If you move his legs, you can see his genitals." With Jasmine's help, we do so very gently. Yes, it is a boy, and the presence of all his parts gives us a sense of completeness. We are looking at a fully formed boy, indeed.

Jasmine and Giovanna tell us that if we want, they can prepare the baby for us to spend time with him. We say yes. They leave the room for a second time, holding the baby. Then Jasmine comes back with the baby in a baby cot. He is wrapped in a beautiful embroidered blanket. Close to the baby, a teddy bear. Jasmine tells us that we can spend as much time as we want with him. If we need her, we can call her anytime.

It's dark outside, on this Spring day in Melbourne. The few city lights that can work through the window of our room do not affect the sense of privacy of this moment.

We move the baby cot close to Blandina's bed. Blandina and I sit on the bed, and look at the baby. He's 10.5cm long, and the wrap covers part of his head. We look at him, then we look at each other, and we

have the same thought. Baby 4.3 is perfect to us. His hands are beautiful, his feet perfectly crafted. He looks pretty strong, his body full of muscles, in particular his legs and biceps. His torso is just amazing. He looks to us like a swimmer, or a runner. He would have been a fantastic athlete, we are sure about it.

We spend time with him commenting on how beautiful he is, gently and carefully caressing him from time to time. We talk about the things that we could have done with him, the trips we would have taken together, his early years spent playing with him, his interactions with our dogs, his discovering the beach, the water ... all projections, which we let go without anger. It is the way it is, it is the life we have been given.

4.3 was not meant to do what most children do with their parents. He was meant to do something bigger, to fly high in the sky and protect us from there. It is difficult not to cry when we think about it. But in this moment, while spending time with him, it is natural for us to admire how beautiful he is. These are moments we will never forget.

After about one hour, we feel it is time to say goodbye to 4.3. While we are both thinking about it, Jasmine gently knocks at our door and asks how we are doing. We tell her we are all right, and that she can take the baby to the room for the necessary procedures she has to undertake (measurements, weight, pictures).

We thank Jasmine for everything, and we say goodbye to 4.3. That was the last time we saw him.

When Jasmine is gone, we hug and cry. There is no anger, no sense of injustice, no fear. There is a lot of love, the love we felt, and we feel every day, for 4.3 and for each other. I feel I have never loved Blandina so much, and Blandina feels the same.

Giovanna comes to check Blandina's tummy. By gently pressing it in different points, she checks if the whole placenta came out during the delivery. If this were not the case, Blandina would have to undergo a surgery for the placenta to be removed completely. Luckily, all is good. Giovanna is happy with what she has found, and she tells Blandina that the surgery is very unlikely, although another test will have to be done in the following weeks.

Blandina takes a shower while Giovanna changes the bedding. In the meanwhile, I get the armchair sofa bed ready for the night. It seems to be comfortable enough. More importantly, it enables me to sleep close to Blandina, something I absolutely want to do to make sure I am ready to help if she needs me. While Blandina is getting ready for bed, I send a few messages to friends and family to let them know that Blandina is well and the medical part is over. We will call them during the week-end to tell them more.

Blandina goes to bed, and she falls fast asleep. I take a quick shower, brush my teeth, and go to bed too, but not before checking my cell phone for the last time. Our parents got my messages and wrote back to let us know that they are happy we are fine. I switch off the phone, kiss Blandina, go to my bed, and close my eyes. It's about midnight, and it's all over.

October 27, 2018 - Saturday

We wake up at 8:00am and hug each other. We are in a relatively good mood, thinking that the delivery has happened without any complications and that Blandina will - most likely - not need any surgery. It is breakfast time, and we feel a bit hungry. I quickly put my clothes on and leave our room. Just outside our room I see a caterer who tells me that they will come with two breakfasts soon.

We enjoy our breakfast. We eat it calmly while we talk about the night before and 4.3. There is a deep sadness in our hearts, but we understand, or at least we believe, that we have overcome a particularly difficult challenge.

After breakfast, Emma (who's got the 7am-3pm shift this week) comes to see us and asks us how it went. We talk with her in detail about what happened, and she's happy to know that things went the way we were all hoping. She then tells us that she's organizing the blood tests and Dr Howard asked her if everything is fine with Blandina. She will be back around 10:30am for the tests, but we can call her anytime if we need her.

I start collecting our stuff. The plan is to have the blood test and go home. We want to go back to our normal life, and we want to see our dogs, who have been taken care of by Diana in the meantime. While I am packing, Dr Howard comes in and asks Blandina how she's feeling. We have a nice chat with him, and he tells us he is impressed by Blandina's relatively smooth response to the pills the day before. He then talks again about the positive aspects of the story: Blandina did get pregnant, and did carry a normal pregnancy until the third month. He stresses that we do not want to underestimate these positive elements. Moreover, Blandina's body now knows what a pregnancy is (although reduced in time and intensity).

Dr Howard leaves the room, and I am about to continue packing when Eliza calls. She wants to know how we have been. She is glad to know that everything went well yesterday. Then, she makes a quick list of options regarding ongoing support. We tell her that we have already decided to see a psychologist for support. She's relieved to know that we have a plan. She says goodbye, but stresses that if we need her she will be more than willing to help us.

Time flies, and when Emma comes back for the blood test she tells us that Dr Howard would like us to stay until the outcome is known, which will be around noon. We agree to stick around until lunch time, have a meal here, then leave the hospital to return home. In the meantime, Dr Howard fills some forms. At some point, he asks us if we want to name the baby. We say yes, and we tell him that his name is 4.3. He looks puzzled and asks us to repeat. We confirm that the name is 4.3, and we explain to him the reason for such an unusual name. He smiles, and writes "4.3" in his notes. He then leaves the room, but tells us that he will be back to comment on the results of the blood test.

While waiting for the outcome of the test, we chat about what to do next. Certainly, we need to rest for a couple of days to be sure that Blandina is physically fine. We talk about the possibility of spending a few days down the coast to recharge ourselves a bit. Jo, the owner of the Pet Shop in Williamstown, rents a pet-friendly house in Breamlea, close to Torquay. Spending a couple of days on the beach with

the boys would be good for us. I open my diary (an old school paper diary) and make a note to call Jo once we are back home.

The results of the blood test come through at around 11:45am. All is good, and we are happy with it. Dr Howard says that Blandina is fine. He recommends her to rest during the next few days to facilitate a full recovery. Blandina promises she will do that. Dr Howard then says goodbye, and promises to be in touch in a couple of days to follow up.

While we are waiting for lunch to be served, Emma comes into the room with a small wooden box, then leaves. We open the box. Inside is a teddy bear, the one that was in the cradle with 4.3 when they brought him in the night before. There is a small diary with details about 4.3: his gestational age, 14 weeks; his weight, 28 grams; his length, 10.5 centimeters; his date of birth, October 26, 2018; the time of birth, 8:25pm; the place of birth, Frances Perry House; and the date of death, October 26, 2018. We turn the page, and we see his baby label, too big for his small wrist; then a picture with his small feet, which look perfect to us. Close to the picture, a beautiful poem, which touches us and makes us cry. On the next page, a folded ruler, and close to it, the length of the baby depicted in a way that makes us realize, once more, that we could have held the baby in one hand, one hand only. Next page, 4.3's footprints, and the sentence "There's no foot too small that it cannot leave an imprint on this world." Then, pictures of the baby, our baby. So small, so beautiful.

The wooden box also contains a few paper boxes. One contains a small woolen cap and two small socks; the other two boxes contain little white candles, one per box. There is a pebble, to be kept in our pockets so that, when it all feels too overwhelming, we can play with it. And a small, blue heart. There is also the naming certificate, which gives "4.3 Stecca" as the name of our child. This makes us smile. "Stecca" is Blandina's surname. In Italy, married women may decide to keep it, which Blandina has done. In Australia it is much more common for married women to take their husbands' last names. Hence, the nurses at Frances Perry House probably assumed when filling out the certificate that my last name is Stecca too ... Well, why not? It sounds good to us, and we like the fact that a woman can be the central point of reference in a world that is still far too much male-centered.

We also find leaflets for support groups for grieving parents. We will certainly consider this option, and we will also get in touch with a psychologist, at least during the first months after the departure of 4.3. We feel we need to talk about it in order to be able to let go.

At that point, somebody knocks at the door. It's the catering service. Lunch is served. While eating, we make plans for the day and for the long run. We comment on how supportive our friends, the nurses, and the hospital staff have been. We do so while packing our stuff. We feel it is the right moment to go home. Before leaving the room, we write our "thank you" to the staff who took care of us with remarkable care and compassion on the whiteboard in the room. We sign the message "Blandina and Efrem". Then we look at each other, and we add "and 4.3". We cry.

We leave the room at 2:30pm, 28 hours after our arrival. During these 28 hours, Blandina never left the room, not even for a second. This is the room where the most dramatic event of our lives took place, and we will never forget it. I touch the butterfly on the door, and we head toward the reception. The

catering personnel are working near our room. They say goodbye and tell us to be strong. They, too, seem to be touched by our experience.

After checking out, we catch a taxi to go home. During the drive, we call Diana, who has been looking after our dogs at her place. We thank her very much once again for all she had done for us, and tell her to please walk the dogs to our house and leave them there. It's a relatively warm day, and we feel like resuming our normal activities straight away. Hugging our dogs and walking them is a good way to start.

We arrive home and notice a box on our porch. It's full of freshly-prepared delicious Indian food. Kalvinder and Mike, once again! Those guys are angels. We are really touched by this gesture. We get the box inside, hug Irwin and Jax, write a text to Kal and Mike to thank them for their fantastic present, and immediately go for a walk. It feels good to be out with our dogs. It feels normal.

After the walk, we feed our dogs and make ourselves a tea. Then, we open Skype and call Gianluca, my brother. We want to talk to him about what happened. We are happy to see him, but after the first few words, we all get emotional and start to cry. We pause for a moment, and then begin again. He gives us his predictions about what will happen in the next few weeks and months - anger, grief, acceptance - and tells us about expressive writing, which is about the positive effect of writing down one's feelings and experiences. We end the call by promising that we will keep him posted.

We then call our parents to let them know that we are back home. They listen to us and speak words of encouragement. It is nice to listen to them and to their words. We then call Laura, Francesca, and Nicholas and tell them about our experience and how we are feeling. We feel much better after these calls.

While preparing dinner, I receive a message from Giovanni, the friend whose baby was born at the beginning of the week. He tells me that he believes something must have happened, given that I did not go to the hospital to visit him and Stefania and meet Nicolò, their child. He asks me to let him know. I look at Blandina. We knew this moment was going to come. We do not want to spoil the fantastic moment they must be experiencing, that of being parents for the first time. At the same time, it is clear that telling them what happened to us is hardly something we can postpone further. We then call Giovanni. We first ask him to tell us how things are going. All is good, they are learning how to interact with Nicolò. We then tell them what happened to us in the smoothest possible manner. Giovanni is very sorry, and tells us that whatever our needs, they are there for us. Stefania is in the background, and she does not speak. Her silence says a lot to us.

We have dinner, then I take Irwin and Jax out for their night walk. Once back home, I find Blandina ready to go to sleep. I have a quick shower, then I go to our bedroom and I find her asleep. I get into our bed and switch off the light. We are sleeping at home tonight. This is another step in the right direction.

The following weeks

We spend the following days by doing things that make us feel better.

We meet with friends, and receive a few visits. Mike, Kal, and May (a friend who attends Kal's meditation sessions from time to time) come over one evening to check how we are doing. We chat in our front yard, with Jax and Irwin going crazy as always when friends visit us. Mike has a few slices of pizza for me, which I keep (not without some difficulties) from Irwin's attention. We get a coffee with Francesca and Nicolas, and chat about everything, which is really helpful. We go out for dinner with Ligia and Steve, two friends of ours who live in our same block in Williamstown, and tell them our story. Fiona, the manager of the yoga centre where Blandina works, and a very close friend of ours, brings us very nice flowers.

We talk to our neighbors. They are all very supportive. We feel part of a great family.

We book an appointment with Belinda, a psychologist who helps us understand how to put what happened in the right context.

People at Red Nose, a charity supporting grieving parents, call us a few times to check how we are doing.³ We appreciate their calls. At some point, they say that they feel we are on the right track, which is nice to hear.

We go to Breamlea with Irwin and Jax and spend days full of walks on the beach and squeaky balls flying around. One day, while on the beach, Blandina and I look at the ocean and shout "4.3, 4.3, 4.3!". We do it with our arms out wide, inhaling the breeze, our eyes open, looking at the blue sky and at the immensity of the water in front of us. We feel we are opening up, physically and mentally. We also feel our fragility. We cry a lot.

While in Breamlea, we gaze at the sky at night. There are no city lights over there, and we can see the stars pretty clearly. We identify 4.3. It's the star that shines the most. It seems to be in different places every night, perhaps because of the presence of clouds here and there. After all, he always seemed restless during the ultrasounds.

Once back to Melbourne, I resume going into work. I tell what happened to a couple of colleagues. There is a lot of work to do. I cut down on coffee time, unnecessary meetings, chats with colleagues in the corridor. I do not feel like putting in late hours because I want to go home at a reasonable time to be with Blandina.

We plan a few trips here and there. We talk to our parents and friends again, and tell them how we are feeling. We cry, we hug each other, we smile, and at times we laugh.

We are now back to our routines. Part of mine is the evening walks with Irwin and Jax. Blandina has never been a big fan of walking the dogs after dinner. She prefers to read, relax, call her parents and

³ For information about their activities, see <https://rednose.org.au/> .

friends back in Italy. But now sometimes she joins us. It is always interesting to see our dogs in action, the way they smell the ground, mark their territory, become attentive when a possum moves on a tree or a cat is on a fence. But after that week in October, our attention is mostly drawn by the sky, which stars we can see. Sooner or later, we always see the brightest one, the one that shines the most.

We always see you, 4.3.

Acknowledgements

A tragic event may make you realize that you are not alone. After receiving the shocking news on the neural tube defect affecting 4.3 on Monday 22 October, we immediately got in touch with our obstetrician, Dr Howard. He welcomed us into his room and hugged us as if we were true friends. This gesture was very important for us, and helped us to start coping with the hard reality.

We then reached out to a number of friends and got to appreciate that we belong to a *de facto* family. Our thanks go to a large number of people who were very important to us in the days after the news and before the medical intervention as well as in the aftermath.

Luciano, you were the first one to receive the bad news. You listened to us and had the right words of support and encouragement. We feel we started to react to the shock during our conversation with you. Thanks a lot for picking up the phone that day and for always being there for us. Francesca, thanks a lot for all the phone calls you made during those days to many experts of neural tube defects and premature deliveries you know in Padova. Also, thanks a lot for studying the scientific literature (almost) as much as we did during those days. We felt supported. And, for sure, you helped us steady our mood in the most difficult week of our lives.

Pasqualina, Giuseppe, your support during those days was very precious to us. Your encouragement to see the positive sides of this story and, in general, to keep being strong was simply what we needed. Mum, thanks for talking to Gianluca about what was going on here. Dad, in our phone calls you were always close to Mum, and that was important to everybody.

Gianluca, you are a true brother, in all senses. Our Skype call helped us a lot. We certainly embraced your suggestion to express our feelings, both in oral and in written form - well, this is an example of the latter, I guess.

Tomi, you found the way to uplift our spirit during our conversation at the phone. We had a good laugh with you, and that was very much needed. Thanks!

Thank you Silvia for anticipating what was going to happen during the medical procedure, and even more importantly for all your words of encouragement and reassurance. We certainly felt much stronger after our phone call.

Thank you Mike for opening the door that Tuesday morning. You welcomed us, listened to us, understood us. You also brought us a nice and warm soup that night - you guessed we would not have time to prepare a meal, and you were right. And you also guessed that we were going to need gestures of love. Kalvinder, thank you very much for preparing meals for us in the aftermath of the medical procedure. Finding a box full of food on our porch was priceless. You and Mike are simply great (something that we knew already, in fact). We really appreciate all you have done for us. May, thanks a lot to you too for helping us during those days.

Thank you Francesca for listening to us that Tuesday afternoon. Your support was just what we needed. We certainly also needed to have a sweet moment during those bitter days, and your apple cake came

as a very nice present to us. And you and Nicolas were there when we felt we wanted to express our feelings again. We always feel good when we are with you. And with Justin too!

Jen, thanks a lot for helping us in designing a plan to follow after the medical intervention. Even without knowing us much, you had the patience to listen to our story. That was pretty important to us. Bruce, thanks a lot for your help during those days, and for being constantly present with your messages. We certainly felt your support.

Diana, you understood everything without us telling you a word. You were there exactly when we needed you. Thanks a lot for your beautiful flowers and for the conversation with you the day before entering Frances Perry House - it was a game changer for us. And thank you very much also for taking care of our boys during those days - Irwin and Jax simply love you!

Ligia and Steve, our dinner together was of great help. We felt comfortable in talking to you about what happened. Thank you very much to you and your family for your support, the very nice flowers, and the card with such a touching poem.

Alan and Heather, thank you very much for inviting us to your place to have a lovely dinner a few days after we left the hospital. We always feel very welcome, and our hearts warmer, when we are with you.

Brian and Ann, thank you very much for your card, your beautiful flowers, and for the nice evening spent together. You guys' stories made us laugh, and we appreciated once more the importance of our friends' affection.

Fiona, you also brought us beautiful flowers, and your closeness was important to us. Blandina felt better after you came over, and that relief in that moment meant a lot to us.

Laura, thanks a lot for our conversation over the phone and for texting the right words to Blandina before the intervention. You helped us to gain strength, which is what we needed.

Giovanni, thanks a lot for taking some time away from Stefania and Nicolò to listen to our story. We felt you were there for us. We tried to not spoil the magical moment you were living with the arrival of Nicolò. When we called you guys, we felt your friendship, and that was important to us.

Antonio, thanks for listening to us during our phone call and for your encouraging words regarding the future. We appreciated them a lot.

Belinda, we showed up in your office without really knowing what to expect. The experience with you was the first time for us in front of a psychologist. We still remember how much better we felt after that meeting. We really appreciate your compassion, your ability to understand what we were going through, and that of always finding the right word at the right time.

Emma, we would have loved to have gotten to know you under different circumstances. Your support to Blandina during the medical process was simply exceptional - you really managed to make us feel comfortable in one of the most uncomfortable situations we can think of.

Jasmine, we would have loved to have gotten to know you as well in a different context. Your support was also exceptional, and you - together with Giovanna - showed us our baby and treated him with care and affection. We will never forget when we moved his little leg together and verified that yes, it was a boy!

Giovanna, thanks for taking care of us in the aftermath of the delivery. Your presence was reassuring, and your words helped us a lot. You also held our baby, and this fact makes you a special person to us.

Eliza, you are a great person, and your compassion meant a lot to us. Thank you very much for taking care of us during the days at the hospital. And yes, you were right: the importance of seeing our baby after the delivery is something we understood at the right moment.

People at Red Nose: thank you for reaching out in the aftermath of the event. Your phone calls and emails to parents who have lived experiences similar to ours are important - they were certainly important to us. Keep doing what you are doing, it's simply great.

Luciano, Ligia, Julia, Fiona, Antonietta, Gianni, Bruce, Kal, Mike, Belinda, and James: thanks a lot for reading versions of our story and for your feedback on how to improve it as well as your support for what happened. We know you are always busy, and we appreciate you finding the time to read our account. If this story gets to a reader's heart, it is also thanks to you.

*"A life so brief,
a child so small,
you had the power
to touch us all."*

anonymous

THANK YOU

VERY MUCH
FOR TAKING CARE
OF US.

From Blaudine

4.3