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I Chose To Be A Surrogate Mother. I Didn't Know It Would Break My Heart.

5 After nearly 48 hours of grueling labor, my first-born child slipped from my body and was placed into her father's arms.

As I listened to the sound of her first cries, my heart both soared and shattered. At just 22 years old, I gave birth as a traditional surrogate mother, meaning I used my egg to conceive with the intention of having a baby for someone else to raise. Traditional surrogacy is less common than gestational surrogacy, which involves the surrogate carrying a child who is not genetically related to her. This is primarily because of the legal and emotional complexities involved in traditional surrogacy.

10 But on that day two men became dads, filled with joy, ready to embrace their new daughter and the journey ahead. I became a sort-of mom — a birth mother (not quite like adoption but not a “real” mom raising a child, either.)

15 In my early 20s, my maternal instinct went into overdrive and I felt a deep desire to get pregnant. I knew I wasn't ready to become a mother, as I was still in college and working part-time as a nanny. After watching a news segment on surrogacy one evening, I turned to my partner at the time and said, “I want to do that.”

20 Despite her pleading with me to consider it only after we'd had children of our own, I placed an online ad on a surrogacy website to find a couple I could have a child for. As a lesbian myself, I wanted to give a same-sex couple a chance at parenthood, and within days I heard from a gay couple who lived only three hours away. We exchanged a flurry of emails, talked for hours on the phone, met in person weeks later and within two months, I was pregnant with their child — my biological daughter.

“I became a sort-of mom — a birth mother”

25 Nine months later, Natalie was born on a rainy December day. As the newly minted dads drove home from the hospital with baby in tow, I drove to my own home with empty arms and a broken heart.

30 Most surrogacy agencies won't work with a woman unless she has already completed her family or — at a minimum — has a child of her own. But because I worked as an “independent” — meaning without the help of an agency to facilitate the arrangement, I was able to throw convention to the wayside and act as a surrogate before becoming a mother myself.

35 While grappling with the emotional rollercoaster of saying goodbye to my newborn baby, I realized why the experts advise against childless women becoming surrogates. Not only were there reproductive health risks, but it was impossible for me to know exactly what I would be going through during pregnancy and what I was giving up post-birth, having never experienced motherhood before.

45 In the throes of my grief after Natalie was born, I turned to online forums to seek comfort and camaraderie from other surrogate mothers. Through the message boards, I found a small group of women who shared my experience and feelings, most of whom had their own children but still struggled with feelings of loss after the births of their surrogate babies.

50 Defying reason, I became a surrogate once more, giving birth only 15 months later to another healthy baby girl. Any therapist would tell you I was recreating trauma to gain some semblance of control over the situation the second time around.

55 When Daisy was born, she was placed on my chest and I counted her 10 fingers and 10 toes, kissed her downy blonde hair and whispered, “I love you” in her ear as she firmly gripped my pinky finger. Then, I placed her in the arms of her mom — my “intended mother” in surrogacy-speak — the one who would be raising her and loving her every day.

60 My second surrogacy was a more positive experience than the first — unlike the first time around, I felt like more than just the means to an end. The couple I had the baby for quickly became my chosen family. Still, saying goodbye to another baby I had created and carried for 9 months wasn’t without heartache.

With the help of a good therapist, I finally let myself grieve both babies shortly after Daisy’s birth. I was no longer the naive former version of myself who thought a few pictures now and again would quell my maternal feelings for the children that I had carried and loved.

65 Shortly after giving birth, my relationship with my partner ended, and I began to realize just how much surrogacy had changed me. And it wasn’t just because stretchmarks now adorned my body, the physical reminders of what I had gone through to make other people parents.

70 Surrogacy changed the way I loved — I became more guarded with my heart. It changed the way I saw mothers with their babies. At times, jealousy would overcome me as I watched mothers play with their toddlers in the park while I looked after the children I nannied. And although I had satiated my desire to experience pregnancy, my maternal instinct never quieted — it only grew louder.

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80 Nearly a decade later, I gave birth to my own child — another girl, this time as a single mom by choice. My daughter Evelyn (meaning “wished for child”) was born in the comfort of our home, surrounded by the calm energy of midwives and our closest loved ones. Hearing my daughter’s cries — the sounds of a baby I would love and care for daily — cracked my heart wide open, knocking down the walls I had built around it all those years ago.

85 The first time I sat in a rocking chair cradling my newborn daughter and humming her a lullaby, large, hot tears escaped my eyes. My silent cries turned into sobs that were deep, guttural and healing. The tears were a release — a physical manifestation of the feelings of loss I had been hanging on to for years. As I soaked my new baby’s fuzzy head, I cried for all I had given up and missed out on when I gave birth over a decade ago as a traditional surrogate mother.

90 Surrogacy’s impact on me hasn’t all been negative. I appreciate my daughter’s presence in my life more than I perhaps would if I hadn’t been a surrogate. I am grateful for all of the moments I have with her — the cuddles, the kindergarten concerts, the bedtime stories and yes, even the sleepless nights. The women I connected with on the surrogacy forums over 10 years ago still remain my friends, bonded through our grief and shared experiences. These women were among the first to know I was pregnant with Evelyn; one

of them sewed her outfits, cloth diapers and knitted hats. “You will be an amazing mom,” she scrawled on the note in the care package.

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The girls I gave birth to as a surrogate are now 14 and 13 years old, living full and happy lives with their families. There is no doubt in my mind that both are exactly where they belong and are loved and treasured beyond measure.

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With some time, distance and experience being a mother, I am able to see more clearly that surrogacy can be a beautiful thing — particularly for the families who may not otherwise be able to have a child. It is love that makes a family — biology is the least of what makes a mother.

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Still, while I may have never nursed Natalie or changed Daisy’s diapers in the middle of the night, in the deepest parts of my heart, I love them like any mother would: with all of my being.

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