

needle and thread

When Henry was born, we brought music into the delivery room that we thought would be the right sounds for him and for me, to serve as the soundtrack for his birth. We played songs by Ben Folds and Snow Patrol and Johnny Cash and the Beatles. Even now, when I listen to that playlist, it takes me back to that room, to the bright light in an otherwise dark room, to the tears running down my mom's face, and to Aaron's wide eyes, looking at once scared and amazed.

Just after Henry was born, and I mean *just* after—when Linda, the nurse, was weighing and measuring him, and his thin little gasping first cries sounded like the most beautiful sounds we had ever heard—at that moment, the only other thing we could hear, in the middle of the night in a silent hospital, was a song called “Needle and Thread” by Sleeping at Last. It's about God and angels and hospitals and love, and in that moment, it became ours—our song, Henry's song. Henry yelped and wiggled under the yellow light of the bassinet, and I laid in the bed motionless, spent and relieved and overwhelmed. I felt emptied in the best possible way,

like I had done something brave and portentous, and now my work was done.

We heard the song again a few days later in our car when we brought Henry home from the hospital. Aaron was driving, and I was sitting in the backseat next to Henry in his carseat, my arms stretched over him, shielding him from any possible harm. I was also practicing Jedi mind tricks, willing all the other cars on the road to slow down and back away from our car. I imagined that everyone else on the road was either a bank robber in a getaway car, or a crazy person, or a drunk, and I glared at each one of them, preemptively rage-filled at their recklessness. And then that song began, and my rage and anxiety braided themselves into tense, muscular love. I cried all the way home, thinking about how God and his angels knitted this boy, our boy, together with needle and thread. And I thanked God for that song, and for creating a person who could write that song, our song.

I know that the song isn't about Henry. I don't think it's about birth at all. Maybe it's about someone's uncle, or an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*. It doesn't matter, because the thing about a truly great song is that it becomes, truly and deeply, about our very own lives, regardless of what it started out as when it was written.

A few months later, Aaron and I went to a *Sleeping at Last* show, and when they played that song, we held hands, and I cried some more, and thought about our boy, about the night he was born, and the ride home, and the thousand moments in between—of life with Henry, and the rich and miraculous thing that it is to be his mother.

I wanted to tell the songwriter about it, about how thankful we were for his song, about how deeply his song traveled through the tenderest parts of our life, about how those words and sounds had become part of the story of one

of the most sacred events of our lives. As I walked out to my car after the show, I almost went back to wait in line and tell him, but I knew that I would cry, not sweet little tears, but the kind that make your nose and eyeliner run, and that very possibly I would try to hug him, which would be mortifying for both of us. I don't know a lot about being a rock star, but I do know that just about the last thing a rock star wants, when there is a line of cute twenty-year-old girls in skinny jeans and black nail polish, is a thirty-year-old mom showing him pictures of her baby on her phone, trying to tell him something very personal and weepy about her son.

And so I didn't tell him, but if I had, this is what I would have said: Thank you. Thank you, and keep going. Please keep writing songs. Please keep believing in music, because we do, and we need it, and specifically, we need yours. We need the sounds and words and rhythms of hope and longing and beauty. We need the drums and the strings and the haunting twist of your voice. We need the poetry of your lyrics and the spirit and force of your sounds. And not "we," Aaron and I—"we," everyone. We're desperate for great music, and there's so much out there, but never, ever enough. We're desperate for great storytellers, great painters, great dancers, great cooks, because art does something nothing else does.

Art slips past our brains straight into our bellies. It weaves itself into our thoughts and feelings and the open spaces in our souls, and it allows us to live more and say more and feel more. Great art says the things we wished someone would say out loud, the things we wish we could say out loud. When Ryan from *Sleeping at Last* sings, that's how I would sing, except that I sound like a five-year-old with a head cold when I sing, so I'm so glad that he does the singing, and I do the listening. My friend Anne dances

the way I would dance if I could. My friend Sarah creates paintings that make me feel alive and free and like the world is more beautiful than it was before I saw that very painting, and I'm so glad she does, because I sure can't, and because I'm better for having seen her paintings.

It matters, art does, so deeply. It's one of the noblest things, because it can make us better, and one of the scariest things, because it comes from such a deep place inside of us. There's nothing scarier than that moment when you sing the song for the very first time, for your roommate or your wife, or when you let someone see the painting, and there are a few very long silent moments when they haven't yet said what they think of it, and in those few moments, time stops and you quit painting, you quit singing forever, in your head, because it's so fearful and vulnerable, and then someone says, essentially, thank you and keep going, and your breath releases, and you take back everything you said in your head about never painting again, about never singing again, and at least for that moment, you feel like you did what you came to do, in a cosmic, very big sense.

I know that life is busy and hard, and that there's crushing pressure to just settle down and get a real job and khaki pants and a haircut. But don't. Please don't. Please keep believing that life can be better, brighter, broader, because of the art that you make. Please keep demonstrating the courage that it takes to swim upstream in a world that prefers putting away for retirement to putting pen to paper, that chooses practicality over poetry, that values you more for going to the gym than going to the deepest places in your soul. Please keep making art for people like me, people who need the magic and imagination and honesty of great art to make the day-to-day world a little more bearable.

And if, for whatever reason, you've stopped—stopped believing in your voice, stopped fighting to find the time—start today. I bought a mug for my friend, from the Paper Source in Chicago (which is, by the way, a fabulous playground for creative people), and the mug says "Do something creative every day." Do that. Do something creative every day, even if you work in a cubicle, even if you have a newborn, even if someone told you a long time ago that you're not an artist, or you can't sing, or you have nothing to say. Those people are bad people, and liars, and we hope they develop adult-onset acne really bad. Everyone has something to say. Everyone. Because everyone, every person was made by God, in the image of God. If he is a creator, and in fact he is, then we are creators, and no one, not a bad seventh grade English teacher or a harsh critic or jealous competitor, can take that away from you.

My friend leads a junior high ministry, and it's a fun, funny, creative group of kids and leaders who get together on Tuesday nights to talk about how to live great lives and make the world better in God's name. He asked me to come one Tuesday night so that he could interview me and let some of the students ask questions. We talked about being a writer and what that's like, and about Henry, and about bands that I like, and after it was over, one girl came up to talk to me. She looked nervous, and a little shy.

"I write, too." She said it like it was a confession or a secret. She leaned toward me and opened a notebook and showed me page after page after page of precise cursive. "Do you have any advice for me?" she asked.

"Thank you, and keep going," I said. "Thank you for writing, for taking the time and spirit and soul to write, because I love to read, and I'm so thankful to writers like you, for writing things for me to read. And keep going, even when

cold tangerines

people make you feel like it's not that important. It might be the most important thing you do. Keep going."

So to all the secret writers, late-night painters, would-be singers, lapsed and scared artists of every stripe, dig out your paintbrush, or your flute, or your dancing shoes. Pull out your camera or your computer or your pottery wheel. Today, tonight, after the kids are in bed or when your homework is done, or instead of one more video game or magazine, create something, anything.

Pick up a needle and thread, and stitch together something particular and honest and beautiful, because we need it. I need it.

Thank you, and keep going.