

I'm at my barre studio and I can feel my entire middle section quivering as we move into ab work. I have been pushing myself harder lately during my workouts and my body is shakily agreeing to my demands. My core is particularly stubborn, and especially sensitive: it's where just five years ago, my stomach muscles were spliced in half to bring one of my daughters into the world.

In 2019, I delivered twin girls twelve weeks early and experienced something a new mother shouldn't: separation. One child, separated from me by the walls of an isolette in the NICU. The other, separated from me by the distance between heaven and Earth. It was a giant slash in the timeline of our lives; a black dash mark of what once was, and what now is. An invisible line drawn in the sand. A scar line across my lower abdomen. A signature on a page, allowing my daughter to receive life-saving treatment. A scratch mark in stone, indicating one date in time: birth and death. A tether, fraying at the seams, keeping me here on Earth where I'm needed and not *there*, where part of me aches to be.

Grief arrived and nestled its way into my prayers, my work, my grocery list, my friendships, my bed, and my body. Six weeks after I gave birth, I let my husband touch my scar. He gently massaged the area around it, bringing feeling into this part of my body that I refused to even look at it. There was *muscle memory* here, and it screamed "trauma." I understood then that grief was attaching itself to me in ways both seen and unseen. As my C-section scar started to scab over, as the bomb-proof glue holding me together started to peel away, there were invisible wounds that had to sit and fester awhile.

I didn't demand anything of my body for many years; I just appreciated the fact that we survived. I focused my attention on navigating a pandemic, nurturing a marriage through the loss

of a child, saying goodbye to a 15+ year career in TV news, bringing a baby home from a 70-day stay in the NICU, and grieving the child I didn't get to bring home.

As my daughter grew bigger and healthier, so did my desire to move my body again in ways that felt good. Gone were the 5ks, sprint triathlons and 40-mile bike rides of my past. We purchased a "pandemic Peloton" like the rest of the world, and I started taking walks – even occasionally breaking into a jog. *Muscle memory*, I'd tell myself. However, I'd often find myself out of breath; I was carrying 35 extra pounds around my waist and 1 pound, 11 ounces of grief in my heart.

I was waiting for our loss to shed away like the glue on my scar – to allow me to take a deep breath without hurting. As the months and years started to pass, it became clear that I was never going to peddle fast enough or jog far enough to get rid of this new part of me.

If I was destined to carry this feeling along with me the rest of my life, then I needed to make amends with it. Instead of a hitchhiker along for the ride, grief started to feel more like a front-seat passenger. It was my teacher in hard moments (*you've been through worse*), my champion in moments of triumph (*you're rising from the ashes*), my friend in a quiet cemetery (*I'm not going anywhere*), my constant companion through motherhood, through womanhood, through life (*there's joy, here, too.*)

*Muscle memory*, I thought, as I started going to barre again. A different face stared back at me in the mirror than the one I remembered pre-motherhood, but it was me all the same. My body had new lines and curves and didn't quite move the same way. I felt my scar rub along the seam of my leggings, a line etched into my body as unforgiving as my daughter's name on a gravestone just down the road.

*Muscle memory*, I'd think, as I walked up the hills of my neighborhood and felt my heart race. I checked my Apple watch constantly; *am I ok? Can my body do this?* My health anxiety ran a constant loop of doubts in my head that no fancy headphones could drown out. *What hurts here? My legs? My chest? Or my heart?*

My muscles started creating new memories. This body that carried a twin pregnancy as long as she could? It's the same body back here in this barre studio after so many years. This body that fed a baby as she grieved another? It also learned to feel pleasure again. This body that bares new scars? It's still capable of doing hard work. This body is softly carrying loss, carrying a now-five-year-old, carrying old wounds and new scars and, impossibly – joy! Love! Life! – and is becoming something entirely new.

Back home from barre class, my back and middle section are aching. It's a feeling I'm getting used to these days. I know I'm getting stronger in ways others can see... and in ways they can't. Grief is along for the ride – while I'm doing crunches, while I'm grabbing coffee. *It's Muscle Memory*, I think, as I make the drive to a place I know so well, as I feel the cold stone under my hand, tracing the name we share; *Muscle Memory*, as I make my way back home.