



CHAPTER 13



Halfway There

Our five-month checkup is here! I drive the two hours it takes to get to our OB's office in La Jolla. The first appointment of the day, I'm assigned a room immediately. As the ultrasound wand glides back and forth over my stomach, I wait in anticipation of my next batch of pictures.

Maybe I'll head over to the beach once I'm done, soak in some sun. It's a straight shot from the UCSD La Jolla office. It'll be such a relaxing day: I'll put my feet in the water and sit in the sand . . . it's winter, but still pleasant.

My daydream is interrupted by the technician.

"Your little one is a stubborn little thing . . . Let me get a doctor to try to get it to turn around," the ultrasound tech says

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to me in the exam room. “You don’t want to know what you’re having? *Right?*”

“No, we want it to be a surprise!” I say, answering the big decision of the day. I know she can tell what gender it will be.

“Okay. Well, hold on a sec,” she says, wiping the wand and placing it back on the resting dock. She walks out of the room.

It’s quiet for a few minutes. I think about the surprise of who we’ll have, a boy or a girl. I mull over all the choices we get to make, like whether to breast-feed, buying or making our own baby food, cloth vs. disposable diapers . . . A second tech enters the room and spends a couple of minutes waving the wand over my lubed stomach. “Hold on. . . Let me get the doctor . . . which is totally normal . . . Lots of people are seen by the doctor, so don’t worry.”

“Okay,” I say, but now I’m a little worried.

I know something isn’t right by the way the white-coated man avoids eye contact when he opens the door.

“Hi, I’m Dr. . . .” the white coat says. I don’t catch his name.

“What?” *What did he say?* The room starts to close in and the slow-motion car-crash effect begins.

“I need to see something really quick. Can you turn away from the monitor and face the wall for me?” he continues.

I do. This isn’t normal.

“I see a couple of things here . . . Hold on . . . I want to talk to you . . . The first issue I see is . . .” He begins his sentence several times. “Hold on.” He reconsiders, then looks at the monitor some more.

“Okay,” I whisper. My heart starts pounding. I can feel it beat in my neck.

He mumbles some thoughts to himself or to me; I can’t

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really tell which. Then he starts talking. “So, I am looking at a couple of things here. There seems to be a serious problem.” He pauses and sighs.

I begin to stare at the holes on the acoustic ceiling tiles, telling myself he isn’t going to say anything really bad. His voice is distant. I know something is wrong and I am completely unprepared to hear whatever it is he is saying. I interrupt him.

“Um . . . I’m sorry. I can hear you talking, but I have no idea what you’re saying. Can you please call my husband? We live out in the Valley and he’s at work,” I ask as I tear up. “He’s a two-hour drive away,” I explain.

“Sure.” He puts down the ultrasound probe, gets up and starts walking toward the door. “Come with me to the consultation room,” he says, as he walks out the door.

I scooch off the exam table and follow, ultrasound gel on my stomach, dazed. I call Vijay’s cell phone, which he doesn’t answer. I nervously sift through my purse for an office number. I call that next and ask the receptionist to have him call back right away. The doctor and I don’t say anything to each other while we wait for his call. The room seems small, sterile and impersonal. All the furniture is cold and hard, the kind you can wipe anything off of.

The phone rings. I look up and stare at the flickering light on the line that belongs to Vijay. The doctor picks up the call and starts explaining.

“Hello. Dr. Chennamchetty?” he asks.

Pause.

“Yes. Well, I have your wife here. I was performing an ultrasound and I am not seeing any movement in the left ventricle,” he explains into the phone and pauses.

“No, none at all,” he repeats.

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Pause.

“Yes.”

Longer pause.

“Okay.”

Pause.

“I’m recommending she go to the hospital to see the fetal cardiologist,” he explains. “Would you like to speak with your wife?”

I stare at his lips as he says these words into the receiver. *Ventricle? Cardiologist? He’s talking about a heart?* I reach for the phone as it’s handed to me. “Babe?!” I whimper.

“This is very sad,” Vijay says.

“What is?” I ask. I’m not following.

“Go to the hospital and meet with the fetal cardiologist. Then call me once you’re done.” He waits a minute for a response. “Babe?” he says.

“I don’t understand!” I sit holding the phone in disbelief.

“Go to the hospital and then we can talk about our options,” he says.

“Options?” I repeat.

“Yes, sweetie. Call me once you’ve met with the cardiologist,” he confirms. *Call him? Isn’t he on his way? No, he doesn’t need to come. I don’t need to overreact. I’ll call once I have all the facts.*

I hang up the phone, wipe the ultrasound gel off my stomach and put on my clothes. As I walk toward the door I hear, “You need to go to the UCSD Hillcrest emergency room. Do you know where that is?”

I sort of nod. “Yes.”

He adds, “Abortion is a real consideration here. Please head over to the hospital. They know you are on your way.”

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I don't turn around because I don't want to believe what I just heard. I walk slowly, completely dazed, out the door, down the hall and onto the elevator. Everyone and everything is a haze, a fog. I feel like I'm in a strange, cloudy tunnel. I am in shock. *The hospital? Fetal cardiologist? Drive there?*

Luckily, my appointment was the first of the day. I do know one person in town who hasn't left for work. I call my brother, who predictably sleeps in and lives only a mile away. I drive to his apartment. I tell him my news. He takes the morning off and drives me to the hospital.

Sitting in my brother's car, headed toward the hospital, my phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize.

"Elizabeth?" a woman's voice asks.

"Yes?" I can feel the anxiety in my voice and chest.

"We need you to come back to the office when you're done at the hospital. We need to give you a RhoGHAM shot because of the testing we performed while you were here," a medical receptionist explains into the phone.

"Okay," I respond. I don't know whether I'm coming or going. I feel annoyed they are calling about this now. Couldn't they have done this while I was in the office? They really don't understand the crisis I'm spiraling into. I can't just bounce around town as if running errands. I'm in shock, confused, and now frustrated.

The fetal cardiologist and a resident meet us at the hospital. They are wearing white lab coats, but I can't bring myself to really look at either one of them as they glide the ultrasound probe over my stomach. Sitting on swivel stools, they stare at a monitor, occasionally point at the screen and discuss what

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they are looking at for about half an hour. I lie there waiting, silently. My brother sits in the corner chair next to me. We don't look at each other and don't talk. When the attending physician is through, he walks the wheeled stool over to me on the gurney and starts drawing on a piece of paper clipped to his notebook.

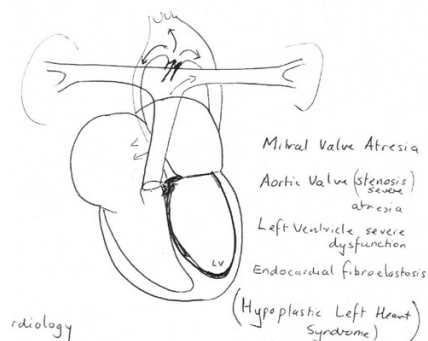
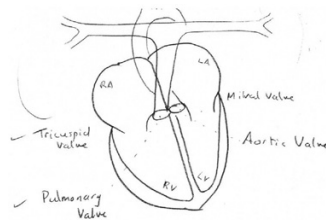
"Are you religious?" he says as he draws.

"What?!" I look at the top of his head. He's still looking at the paper he is drawing on.

He looks up from his sketch. "Well, I want to explain options while respecting your beliefs," he explains, looking into my eyes.

"Oh," I say, nodding my head in understanding. I pause. "Wait . . . So you're saying nothing can be done?" I slowly realize what he means.

"Yes. I'm very sorry," he says as he hands me the picture he just drew and begins to explain the difference between a healthy baby's heart and ours.



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“But I don’t understand. Nothing?” My voice cracks. “How can that be?” I sit dumbfounded. “How is that even possible? Nothing,” I whisper.

I sit silently for a minute. I don’t understand. Tears begin to roll down my face and I just stare at him.

He says, “Your baby’s heart is not formed correctly. There is no movement at all in the left ventricle. That isn’t the only problem, though.”

“But, can’t it be fixed?” I interrupt.

“Well, there are some in-utero clinical trials. One in Boston, one in San Francisco, but I really don’t think you will qualify. Too much is wrong. It’s just too abnormal,” he says.

My brother walks me out of the ER to the parking garage. I am overwhelmed. I know we are talking, but I’m not listening to what we’re saying. He drops me off at his apartment and leaves for work. I make my way to my car and go back to the ob-gyn’s office for my RhoGHAM shot. *Why am I alone right now? Where is Vijay? Am I strong enough to do this myself?*

Other pregnant people sit around the waiting room with loved ones, waiting for the checkup I’m supposed to be enjoying too. I look at the newborns in strollers, with mothers who have just given birth. I sit and wait for my turn. Tears start streaming again and I can’t control them. I grab a magazine and turn the pages aimlessly. The receptionist behind the counter finishes her call with a patient, looks up and calls me to the front. She checks me in and notices my watery eyes. She says, “It’s all right, honey.”

“No it isn’t,” I whisper, though I feel like yelling. I can’t understand why she would say that if she doesn’t even know why I’m crying. *Why did they make me drive all the way back*

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here right now? Can't this wait? Don't they understand I need help? I'm lost. I'm alone. I'm coming unhinged.

The door opens and a nursing assistant calls my name. "Elizabeth?"

I stand up and walk through the door and into a room.

"Are you ready for your shot?" a cheery nurse asks.

I begin to sob.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"My baby is going to die," I whimper helplessly.

"Oh," she says, not sure how to continue the conversation. I'm a little surprised she doesn't ask me if I need help. She doesn't ask if I'm with anyone. She simply picks up the shot that has been prepped on the tray.

"Just a little pinch," she says.

I don't say anything else to her.

Somehow, I make my way back to the car. I don't know where to go now. I don't know what to do. No one has given me a task, a next step. I'm at a red light and have no idea which way to turn. I see a strip mall across the street and pull into the lot. A sandwich shop is the closest store to my parking spot. I buy a drink, sit in a booth, and call my mom. As soon as she answers she knows something's up.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"It's the baby." I tell her what I know so far, my voice breaking.

"We'll be there as soon as Papi gets home from work tonight. Hopefully we won't hit too much traffic through LA," she says.

"Okay. Vijay is coming in tonight also. He has to drive back to the Valley to wrap some things up tomorrow, though," I tell her. She keeps talking, but I'm not listening anymore.

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The first real ping of abandonment creeps inside. *Where is everyone? Why isn't anyone leaving now to be with me? Isn't this a big deal?* I sit for a little while, trying to decide where to go next. I can't sit crying in a booth all day.

I go back to my brother's apartment and call my dad in Texas. I tell him our news as well. The more I say it, the more it seems untrue. I feel like I'm repeating horrible news that belongs to someone else. I lie on the living room floor of my brother's apartment, staring at the vaulted popcorn ceiling silently. The plans I have are crumbling. The meaning in my life is slipping away. The Valley, the isolation, the joblessness all float over me and our baby rains down on me like a dark black cloud, jabbing at my heart like a bolt of lightning. What am I going to do?

I lie there the rest of the day, numb. As the sun sets, the people who love me start to arrive, offering their support, advice and opinions. How did I go from having no one to a room full of opinions? Vijay, Mom, Papi, my brother—it doesn't matter how lovingly they say it, what examples they provide or how much support they offer. I don't want to hear any of it. I don't want to believe any of it. Now, I feel invaded.

It's our baby, but it's my body. I feel like all the decision-making is ultimately my responsibility. I don't want to hear about what it's like for other parents with babies that suffer on machinery or parents that have to watch their child die after birth. I don't want to hear about the *least painful* or *quickest* death. I don't want to believe these are my choices.

Vijay is such a practical person, so clinically based. He didn't grow up voicing emotion or acting irrationally. For the first time ever, he feels distant from me. I'm sure he feels this

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loss. I'm sure he is sad. He says, "This is sad," but I have yet to see a tear or hear an outburst. He is grounded and rational about the decision we need to make and it's making me angry. Why are we so different? Where are *his* feelings?

"It was nothing you did," they all keep saying.

"It is not genetic. Totally random," I hear more than once.

"You can't do anything to prevent something like this."

"These things just happen," they say.

Forty-eight hours and a few consultants later, it is confirmed. The cardiologist is right. Our baby's heart is deformed. The diagnosis is catastrophic. Hypoplastic left heart syndrome, mitral valve atresia, aortic valve atresia, left ventricle severe dysfunction and endocardial fibroelastosis. A bunch of big words that basically mean the left ventricle is not working at all. The aortic valve is not even formed. It's frozen. It is deformed so severely that even if our baby makes it to full term, he won't live without an immediate heart transplant, which is not a permanent solution and is extremely improbable, risky and painful. The damage is too extensive, unfixable. He is completely dependent on my body, which is supporting his blood flow, giving him life. Once he's born, that won't be the case.

Death is really the diagnosis. It is certain. It's just a matter of when. When will our precious baby that we have been anxiously, obsessively waiting for have to die and how painful will that death be? The choice is impossible, shocking. How can this happen? What kind of choice is this?

I suppose if fetal imaging technology didn't exist, we could be asking similarly difficult questions after a miscarriage or a stillbirth. That isn't comforting, though. We have to make a

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decision. I don't sleep for three days straight while we weigh our options.

We finally decide to have an abortion. What an ugly word, *abortion*. Society has turned it into an ugly word.

Because of my gestation, this requires preparation. I have to be manually dilated several days prior to the procedure. I can't go home to the Valley until it's over, so I decide to stay at my brother's apartment. Mom drives back down from Los Angeles to stay with me. Vijay goes back to the Valley to wrap a few things up at work. He tells me he'll be back at the end of the week.

When we arrive at the hospital, the first dilation morning, the office doors are still locked. Mom walks into the building with me and I stand against the wall in the hallway, waiting for the staff to unlock the door. I can't talk. I am numb. I lean against the wall and silently cry. Then, my knees feel weak as I slide down the wall and squat by the door.

"What do you want to do?" Mom asks.

"What *can* I do?" I say. She holds my hand as I cry.

The office door opens and I walk in. I look around the chair-lined waiting room and pick a seat. Happy couples, the women with ready-to-explode bellies and newborn babies, arrive and sit in chairs waiting for their appointments. Why do I have to share a waiting room with *them*? Why are they blissfully ignorant of the loss I am feeling? How come *they* don't see that I am in more pain than any other person has ever been in? I have never felt such pain, such heartache. I am jealous and angry. The emotions inside me are overpowering. I want to die.

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“Elizabeth. You can come in now,” says the clinician behind the door. “Is it all right for the residents to be in the room to watch?” she asks.

“Yes.” I always say yes. I think it’s important for residents to learn from real-life experiences. Today, though, I just don’t care. Nothing matters. They can do what they want to me.

Mom walks with me. We enter the room. She stands next to my head as I lie on the gurney.

“We are going to insert these laminaria sticks into your cervix to help you dilate. You will need to come back tomorrow, and we will remove them and put new ones in. You can take Vicodin for the pain and you may have some bleeding,” the doctor says as she hands me some pamphlets. “Please read this packet of information and make sure you follow the directions.”

“Okay,” I say as I drape a paper sheet across my lap. My feet are placed in stirrups and I look away.

I don’t speak for the entirety of the procedure. I lie on the table, exposed, while huge tears run down my face. Even though my mother stands by my side and holds my hand, I feel completely alone, powerless and weak. The reason I’m here breaks my heart.

They finish and I get dressed. My mom tells me I have to eat. We stop at a café for a bite. I’m not in pain, but I scoop up a Vicodin and a glass of water and order something off the menu. I sit numb and depressed as I move the food around the plate.

A half hour later we get back into the car and drive toward my brother’s apartment, which has now become the crisis hub. My phone rings.

“How are you feeling, sweetie?” Vijay asks. “I canceled

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clinic for Thursday afternoon and Friday. I'll be in town soon," he says.

"Okay," I respond, staring out the window at the passing cars on I-5.

"Vijay . . . I just want . . . oh no . . . wait . . . I can't see . . . My lips are tingling." I drop the phone. "MMMMMMMMOOOMMMM???? I CAN'T SEE!" My blood pressure drops and I begin to lose consciousness.

"I'm pulling over," I hear her say. Her voice is distant, as my mom navigates the car through traffic on the freeway.

I must be leaning against the car door because when my mom opens it, my body follows the door. The seat belt holds me in as I dangle limply out of the car and throw up on the shoulder of the freeway. My mom supports me and I can gradually start hearing her.

"Liz!? Liz!?" I hear.

I regain my composure and look up at her. I can feel the traffic speed by.

She looks me over, concerned, making sure I'm all right. When she feels certain I'm okay she says, "You might want to call Vijay back. That probably scared him."

Mourning what's to come Friday, I don't sleep. I call the mental health department of the hospital and ask for help. I get an appointment with the director of the psychiatry department and a prescription for sleeping pills, and I ask for additional therapy. Help is scarce as it's almost Christmas. Most of the staff is out for the holidays. The department head meets with me and agrees I need someone to talk to who isn't family.

By the last laminaria dilation, we are told the baby is a boy. A resident tells me that not only does he have a defective heart,

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but also a chromosomal abnormality. Both random, both rare, and neither associated with the other. I sit and process this for a moment. It's like winning the worst lottery in the world . . . twice.

A social worker sits next to me while I wait on the table in the exam room. There is a small window with closed blinds. I wish the blinds were open. I wish I could see outside, a tree or the clouds, something to focus on. I don't want to talk to her, but she starts talking anyway. I hate her because she is there, because she is going to try to help me, and I'm not ready to talk. Not yet. Not to her. There is nothing she can say that is going to help me right now.

"Do you have other children at home?" she asks.

"No," I respond. I look at her like that was a mean question.

"Oh. Okay," she says. "I only ask because then you could focus on them."

Pause.

"Do you already have the nursery set up?"

"Yes," I say flatly. *How is this supposed to be helping?*

"Oh wow. Okay. Well, retail therapy is a great form of therapy," she offers, this time with a smile. *Retail therapy? Really? What kind of training do these people get?*

A few minutes of silence pass and she adds, "Did you decide how you want to handle the remains?"

I look up and stare.

We decide to have him cremated. The social worker gives me a list of funeral homes and I pick one. I call and make an appointment. Mom drives me.

"Welcome," a somber man greets us in the lobby. "How can I help you today?"

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“I need to schedule a cremation,” I say.

“Okay. I can help you with that.” He is a fitting funeral home employee. His eyes look kind; he is mellow and consoling. I fill out all the paperwork he hands me, answer his questions and write a check.

“What was the date of death?” he asks.

I hesitate and look at him. “Tomorrow,” I say.

His eyes open wide and he looks at me, then quickly adjusts his facial expression and accepts the date, without comment. I appreciate his composure.

“The hospital will call us once your baby is in the morgue,” he explains. “We will pick him up and cremate him. Once we are through, we will call you and you can pick him up.”

Back at the hospital, the social worker suggests a support group at a local church. “Just tell them you lost your baby,” she explains. “They don’t believe in abortion.”

I look at her with a sarcastic eyebrow grimace and roll my eyes. *What the fuck? How is that going to help me? If I can’t be honest about what is happening, what good is the group?* I call the psychiatrist’s office and ask for psychotherapy. I’m assigned a psychologist and given an appointment for after the holidays. I’m totally irritated there aren’t more support options. Understanding my desperation, they also place a hospice grief-counseling referral.

The day has come.

We drive to the hospital on what I refer to as *death day*. As it’s still dark outside, I wear sweats and a hoodie pulled over my head. Vijay and Mom are with me in the waiting room. My name is called and I get into line with all the other people

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waiting to have surgery. Vijay comes in with me. My tears start streaming. I am not making noise, just crying. I feel completely exposed, helpless and sad. I don't stop crying until it's over.

The first thing I think when I see the resident in recovery is how appreciative I am that she is there. "Thank you for seeing me through this. You are the only familiar staff member I saw this whole time." It is comforting to have a little consistency. I am groggy, uncomfortable and feel a throbbing sadness. Blood is streaming from me and I feel completely empty.

"I'll bring in your husband," she says. "Your baby has been taken to pathology and will then go to the morgue. The funeral home will pick him up," she explains and walks away.

I don't see her again.

The funeral home wrote *Baby Chennamchetty* on all our paperwork. I start to wonder. Should we give him a name? We're choosing to send him to a funeral home. What do we do with this grief, these ashes and this child who will never be?

I lie on the gurney and name him.

Matthew Prashant.

A couple of days later it's Christmas. Everyone has taken back their baby-related gifts, and I sit on the floor of my living room fiddling with a stocking stuffer. I look down at my shirt. It's wet.

"What? No one told me about colostrum? I didn't even think about producing milk if I wasn't full term," I murmur and head up the stairs to take a shower and squeeze out whatever I can.

I don't sleep through most nights, and many times I awake actively crying. I dream that friends have been hacked to pieces

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and stuffed in a car trunk, or sometimes that I have been hit by a car and left in a ditch by the side of the road to die a slow, painful death.

The hospice grief counselor who is filling in for the holidays calls and lets me know my psychologist is on vacation. She tells me they want to check in with me, since this is a difficult time of the year. I tell her about my dreams. She says that they make perfect sense. There's comfort in telling someone, in admitting I have them.

Vijay tries to console me. He wakes me the nights I cry out loud, rubs my back and tells me we made the right decision.

I let Vijay give his parents updates on what is happening. I'm sure they are disappointed. I know they sympathize, but they give me a break from their opinions and comments. I don't really want to talk to them or know what they think right now. I know how much they wanted this. Being pregnant was something I finally did right.

The day after Christmas, Mom decides I need to get out of the house. As she puts it: "You shouldn't dwell." The guys decide to spend the weekend golfing in Tucson and leave early the next morning. Vijay calls about an hour into their drive to say that Homeland Security stopped them at a border checkpoint between Arizona and California. He forgot his passport and visa paperwork. They let him go after a strongly worded warning. He asks me to grab it and bring it along with me.

Now I have to go. How can I get out of going and leave my husband potentially stranded in Arizona without his immigration papers? I am skeptical of the notion that this is a good idea or that it will somehow help me with my grief. I

CALLING ALL EGGS AND SPERM

wallow in self-pity as I'm loaded into the car along with my brother and mom. I ask to drive. I want to avoid having to sit quietly in the backseat, thinking. I want to concentrate on anything other than my self-loathing attitude. I speed down I-8 deeper into the desert. *What the hell am I going to do in Tucson? This idea totally sucks! How can Vijay want to go golfing?* As I drive faster and faster, it doesn't take long before I'm pulled over.

"Ma'am, do you know how fast you were driving?" the officer asks.

The truth is I don't care. "Eighty-five or ninety?" I say flatly.

"Ma'am, you need to be more careful while operating a motor vehicle," he says. "It's a big responsibility."

"I know. I deserve the ticket," I tell him quietly.

He issues the citation and asks when the last time I got a ticket was.

"Oh, I don't know. It's been years," I say calmly. But my inner dialogue is loud and angry. *I don't care! Fuck this! My baby is dead!*

He looks at me indifferently, but still adds, "Well, ma'am. Please be careful. There is another speed trap ahead. You wouldn't want to get two tickets in one day."

I sign the citation and put the car in drive.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" Mom asks as I pull away from the emergency lane.

I don't even answer. I just keep driving. It feels fitting to get a ticket. I deserve it.

The raw, naked sting of pain is something I haven't felt before.

Not like this.

This changes a person.