



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

It's a ONEderful Life

My baby, Camille, turns one on December 23. When I consider where I am now versus this time last year, I'm a little bit ashamed.

The thing is, I never dreamed of having a fourth child. Although I was the fourth in my family, I decided long ago that three was my chaos threshold. Like a fish needs water, I need order, and playing Chief Organization Officer to a family of five—while squeezing in time to write—already had me running on fumes.

Besides, I was *just* starting to see the light beyond the tunnel of toddlerhood. With Marie Claire—my baby at the time—nearly two and a half, I'd reached a milestone. I'd graduated from Fischer-Price toys and written off the baby stage. Yes, after six years of paying motherhood's initiation dues, I was enjoying my kids as little people. I was getting my life—and my groove—back at last.

Then I got pregnant.

I didn't cry when I found out, but I certainly wasn't happy. It felt weird not to be excited. Upon news of my other three pregnancies, my heart soared, but this time was different. My emotions ranged from shock to denial to guilt. God had granted me the three babies I prayed for; who was I to complain about one more? How many thousands of women would have taken my pregnancy and run with it?

The biggest irony was that my two oldest daughters were the result of fertility treatments. I'd known the fear of never being able to have a child—and the disappointment of two early miscarriages. So why couldn't I wrap my head and heart around a fourth baby?

I'll tell you why: Because it seemed like a major setback. All the dreams I'd put on the back burner now had to simmer longer. In the meantime, I had to learn how to handle four kids when I could barely manage three.

With that said, it was a stressful pregnancy. Although my attitude improved, I had several meltdowns regarding the future. How would we swing four weddings, four college tuitions, four ongoing soap operas? Who would be scarred by a lack of attention? Would I ever be free again?

I've always loved the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, and though I think everyone has some George Bailey in them, I really related to him during this

time. Instead of coming home and seeing my beautiful kids, I'd see the flaws of my house, the mess of too many toys. No, I wasn't ready to jump off a bridge like George, but I was slightly disillusioned about my life—and the blessings under my nose.

As Camille's birth day approached, I kept my expectations low. I braced for a seismic shift and plastered a smile on my face for my kids—who were, by the way, elated. From the moment they first saw Camille's pea-sized body in a sonogram, they talked about it non-stop.

Ella, Sophie, and Marie Claire met their new sister shortly after delivery. From my hospital bed, I watched Ella start crying. The pride and joy on her face and Sophie's as the nurse enlisted help for Camille's first bath was priceless. I grabbed my camera and snapped away.

As I reflect on this past year—and coming home Christmas day with a new baby—I remember the moment in *It's a Wonderful Life* when Clarence the Angel tells George Bailey, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many others. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole." When I think about life without Camille—and the happiness I would have missed because I didn't have the foresight to pray for her—I want to cry.

I tend to think of pregnancy from a selfish standpoint—how will this impact *my* life?—but through Camille, I'm reminded that a baby redefines an entire family. Camille's birth was a bonding experience, because one thing we all have in common is love and awe for her. I thought our club was complete before. Little did I know, we needed a mascot to rally around, an adhesive force to strengthen the unit.

This holiday season, as you count your blessings—or perhaps the unanswered prayers of a tough year—I hope you'll remember the "Camilles" in your life, the unexpected gifts that fell on your doorstep as you awaited other packages. In twelve short months, my baby has changed my heart. She's also inspired my belief that what's left off a wish list is often the present we wind up most grateful for.

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