

'MELINDA HILDEBRANDT IS AN INCREDIBLE WRITER WITH AN AMAZING STORY...
YOU MUST BUY THIS BOOK FOR EVERYONE YOU KNOW.' CATHERINE DEVENY

Amelia & Me

*On deafness, autism and parenting
by the seat of my pants*

MELINDA HILDEBRANDT

*For my hero, Amelia Isobel.
You have my whole heart.*

*And for every parent out there in
the trenches, I'm with you.*



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Welcome to Holland?

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The day we found out that our daughter was deaf, we were given a blue book called *Choices* (Australian Hearing). The first page of the book features a piece called 'Welcome to Holland' by Emily Perl Kingsley, aimed at parents whose babies are born with an unforeseen challenge or disability.

The basic premise of Kingsley's piece is that having a baby born with some kind of challenge is like planning a trip to Italy, but when you land (post-birth) you are suddenly told you have arrived in Holland.

It's not where you intended to go but it's not a terrible place, just different to what you expected.

There's nothing flippant about her use of the analogy. She's asking parents to try and adjust their thinking about their shattered hopes for their children and start to consider the special things about Holland. Because, and this is the key, you ain't going anywhere else.

But on D-Day (Diagnosis Day), I wasn't ready to be philosophical about what I was feeling, which was absolute devastation. Because I had thought we *were* in Italy for more than two years.

We'd arrived with our bags, unpacked them, explored the sights and started to put down roots in this strange but exciting place. I'd relaxed and allowed my shoulders to drop a little. It felt like home to me.

Finding out we were actually in Holland – that my cherished daughter could not hear me when I sang to her or said her name or told her that I loved her – swallowed me whole and kept me in the belly of grief for a very long time.

I couldn't contain my anger and pain at the 'lie' of our time in Italy. I felt cheated, like we'd been made a promise and sucked into the pretence that we had 'made it', when all the while the 'truth' of Amelia's deafness was lying in wait for us.

It was impossible not to feel alienated by the endless holiday stories of friends and family who took that journey to Italy with relative ease, over and over again. It stretched that distance – from Italy to Holland – between me and others, that began with infertility and, I thought, ended with IVF success.

Now the gap had widened into a bottomless hole, and I experienced a powerful sense of isolation from people. Every time I saw parents with their kids at the park or at parties bonding through incidental chatter, my heart cracked a little more.

This was more like far-flung Siberia than a nearby Western-European country.

I know this distance changed me, made me harder, and there is part of me still bruised on the inside. In a way, I chose not to heal all the way through, because this toughness is something for which I'm oddly grateful.

It keeps me strong in the fighting zone, which is where I so often have to be for Amelia: punching hard in her corner.

I have come to realise that you don't mourn forever, and the parts of you that still grieve rear their hydra heads less often. And good people keep building small bridges that reach you and help you to make it at least part of the way back.

Cos it's only Italy, right? That's what people tell me. There are plenty of other places we could have ended up. I see it in Amelia's deaf kinder class every day and it never fails to floor me and bring me back to myself.

And what of Holland? It takes a lot of work and even more time, but eventually I did accept the pain and incorporate it into new plans for the future. It's not all tulips and windmills, and sometimes the snow obscures your view of the path ahead, but it's unique and rewarding in a way I never imagined.

Recently I have found myself able to take out those pictures and memories of our time in faux-Italy. It's bittersweet but my heart doesn't

ache as much as it used to. Amelia was as beautiful to me then as she is now, and nothing will ever change that.

I've also made some kind of peace with that feeling of betrayal that buried me deep for almost a year, and that is a very good thing.

We only had one shot to get to Italy or anywhere on the map as it turns out. But if we'd known before Amelia was born that we had a one-way ticket to Holland, I'm sure we would still have chosen to go.

To meet our daughter, to bring her into the world and hold her close, I know I would have gone just about anywhere.