

Miracles

Cry, Baby, cry. The words reverberated through my mind in an endless loop. The seconds passed by unbearably slowly; each click of the second hand seeming to take hours. I lay on the gurney in agony, not my body, but my mind, my heart, my soul. My body, thankfully, was numb after days of excruciating pain. Would I bring home a brand-new baby from the hospital or would I have to tell my children, waiting at home, that their baby brother or sister had died? *Cry, Baby, cry.* I prayed for all I was worth as the minutes inched by. I thought back through the last hours, days, weeks, months that had brought me to this moment. How much could one person endure?

Was it only a month ago my mother had died? She'd sold her home, our family home in New York, and planned to move to North Carolina. For the first time in my adult life, my mom would be within hours of me. But then, on her trip south, she'd contracted pneumonia, and with her body weakened by age, exhaustion, and the never-ending ravages of polio, she'd succumbed. Two weeks in a hospital in Virginia in a coma and then she was gone, her life ebbing out of her body like the waves, being gently pulled back into the sea. She'd been put on a respirator and into a doctor induced coma, but after ten days the doctor told me there was no hope and agreed it was time to turn off the machines that were keeping her alive. I was the one to give permission to put her on the respirator, and I was the one who gave permission to let her go. Despite knowing both choices were valid, they took a toll on me.

I coped. What else could I do with four small children, a husband, and a home to take care of? I did the necessary work by day, the endless cycle of fixing meals and taking care of my little ones, something that I normally loved to do, but then at night, I'd curl up, my hands

embracing the life within me, and cry, knowing this little one would never know his or her grandmother. Time marched on. I'd like to say the loss got easier, but I wasn't there yet.

Then, four days ago, I was home with my preschool children and nephew. Grady, four, Stephen, three and Hannah, two, were all up to their regular antics. I didn't feel well, but I was coping. I loved our mornings and tried to make each day an adventure, putting food coloring in eggs or sprinkles on toast. I'd make menus with pictures, teaching my children how to order a meal. Grady asked for a flompot for breakfast with a twinkle in his eyes, his name for an omelet. Hannah wanted cinnamon toast and Stephen had cereal. Momma's Morning Diner, I called it.

Once breakfast was over, we continued our work on letters. I cut out large letters, and the children worked on cutting out or coloring pictures that started with the letter of the day. We'd gotten up to N. That's when my world imploded. Suddenly, I felt a pang, sort of like something popped, and then nausea. I was in week twenty-five of my fifth pregnancy and had first assumed I was feeling the baby moving, a kick in my bladder or something like that. Then waves of pain rolled in. I lay on the couch watching the kids doing their cutting and pasting. My sweet Hannah brought her baby blanket and covered my baby bump, then rubbed my back and told me to feel better.

At first, when I started feeling ill, I figured it was just a culmination of the weeks of driving back and forth to the hospital in Virginia, the subsequent decisions, and the ultimate results. My mom was gone, and my heart was broken. Finally, however, determining the pain was not going away, I called my husband, found others to care for my pre-school children, and headed to the hospital.

Hours later with a diagnosis of a stomach virus, I was sent home with the instructions to rest, drink lots of fluids, and come back if things got worse. Relieved, I put my faith in trained doctors and attempted to relax, even though my brain was still telling me, that wasn't an ordinary pain. You've had viruses before, I thought. This was nothing like that. But self-delusion argued back; it's a virus. That's what the doctors said, so that's what it is. Relax!

I drifted through two more days, getting progressively worse, sick, and in so much pain I found it hard to focus or cope with day-to-day activities. However, the night of the third day, everything came to a head. Lying beside my husband in excruciating pain, I awakened him. "I can't stand it anymore. I'm in so much pain, and you know how much pain I can tolerate. I cannot tolerate this. Take me to the hospital, please."

Family swooped in to take care of the kids, and we flew down the road, the twenty-mile trip seeming endless, every bump in the road searing through me like red-hot knives. The next hours went by in a blur of agony. Almost before the sun came up, the doctors jumped into action. The blood and urine tests came back normal for a pregnant lady, but then, after a sonogram, a tentative diagnosis of an inflamed gall bladder seemed to fit the symptoms. If only they'd run the sonogram a little lower, about five inches, they might have seen the actual problem, and this story would have turned out very differently. Doctors came up with a plan to care for me as the day drew to a close. My husband, who'd been at my side all day, returned home for the night, and I settled in for another night of misery. A diagnosis was good, but due to the pregnancy, pain meds were not an option.

Lying in the dark, trying to at least get some rest, I was startled, then horrified, when I felt the first contraction. In denial, I waited, hoping against hope that I was wrong. But as my abdomen tightened with pain, I knew I wasn't. After several more contractions, I called the

nurse. She tried to dissuade me, but after delivering four babies, I knew a contraction when I felt one. She called the doctor. They verified my fear. I was in labor. Terbutaline made no change; the contractions continued. After the dosage had run through my IV line, the calm before the storm, and no change had occurred, my room exploded into action.

One nurse called my husband, another called for an ambulance, and the doctor hurled out instructions. I was twenty-five weeks pregnant, in labor, in a hospital that didn't have a neonatal intensive care unit. Within minutes, I was rolled down the hall and placed in an ambulance. The forty-mile trip seemed to take seconds and yet hours. The pain, oh the pain, was beyond measure with contractions now on top of the previously existing pain. I panted, I cried, pain and terror warring for supremacy in my heart. *It's too soon; it's too early. I can't have this baby yet. I cannot go home to my children and tell them their baby died.* My thoughts whirled through my mind in an unending loop of anguish. I prayed. *God, please save this baby. Please. Please. Please.*

Finally, and yet too soon, we arrived at Forsyth Hospital. As long as we were flying down the interstate, I still had my baby. But arrival, what did that mean? Fear was my constant companion. Then a moment of humor. It was January 29, Superbowl Sunday, around 4:00 in the morning. It was cold, and there I was in a cotton hospital gown covered with one of those thin hospital blankets, and the doors to the hospital were locked! The attendants rolled me from door to door trying to get me inside to no avail. The nurse who rode with me finally got somebody on the phone, and after my cold, bumpy ride around the parking lot, I, at last, felt the warm air of the emergency room.

An obstetrician was waiting for me, and within minutes, my husband arrived. The doctor was clear, calm, straightforward. "We can't stop your labor. You're going to have this baby. Its

chance of survival at twenty-five weeks is slim; he has about a fifteen percent chance.” Her words, staccato, hit my ears like rifle shots, yet I appreciated her candor. After the examination, she continued, “The baby is sideways, so we have to do a C section. After the baby’s delivered, a second team of doctors will try to figure out what’s going on with you.”

The next few minutes were a blur of action. My husband changed into a hospital gown while the doctor’s team prepped me for surgery. An epidural gave me the first relief in four days and within minutes the incision, the delivery, the silence.

Cry, Baby, cry. I held my breath waiting, praying for that affirmation of life. Then the miracle, a quiet, wavering cry, weak, yes, but still a cry. He was alive. “It’s a boy,” the doctor told us, but not with the exclamation that usually followed that proclamation. It’s a boy, but how long will he live, the unspoken words. We learned later, Caucasian boys had the lowest chance of survival, and at the time, twenty-five weeks was right on the cusp of viable births.

Another flurry of activity as a team of pediatric doctors took over the baby’s care, suctioning, assessing, bagging, doing what they did to keep him alive. Two pounds, two-and-one-half ounces, so tiny, so pale. The team wheeled him by me so I could see him before they whisked him off to the neonatal unit. One glimpse, one moment of bonding before they took him away. “Fight for me, Baby,” I pleaded, and then he was gone.

Then it was my turn. A new team of doctors worked on me, quickly determining the cause of my distress. A ruptured appendix, clearly ruptured for days, probably four days – since the inception of pain. Their care of me was intense, fast, focused. They told my husband I probably had an hour or less to live. Acute gangrene. Severe infection everywhere. They didn’t even close the incision, ready for whatever emergency would happen next. It was day five before

I recovered enough for them to close me up. After several days in intensive care, they moved me to a regular room. Somewhere in the midst, we decided to name the baby Joel. After all, a two-pound baby needed a small but powerful name; Joel translates to "The Lord is God."

Eight days later I was discharged, able to go home to my four children, but forced to leave the fifth behind. By day I took care of the four and every night my husband and I would take turns at the hospital, sitting by Joel, reading to him, singing to him, doing everything we could to let him know we were there, and he was loved. He was so thin, his skin translucent, his eyes still fused shut. My husband could take his wedding band, slide it over his foot and all the way up his leg. On a respirator and attached to multiple monitors, this tiny child fought for his life. The nurses told us he was a fighter, and they were right.

He was in the NICU for over three months, survived heart surgery and eye surgery and all the other complications from prematurity. Four and a half months early, he shouldn't have lived, but he did. With a diagnosis of cerebral palsy and retinopathy of prematurity, he's had to continue fighting for many things throughout his life, but the bottom line is, he has fought for himself and the life he's earned. He graduated from college in three years, law school in three more and passed the bar on the first try. My son, my Joel, my miracle.

Sometimes moments of life can be encapsulated in a few simple words. I survived. He survived. We saved each other. My miracle baby. My miracle life. Thanks be to God.