

Memoirs of a Premature Birth by Diane Currie Sam
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A year ago, I gave birth to a premature baby boy. He was 3 months early, less than 3 lbs, and born at B.C.'s Children's Hospital.

I said one day I would write about it, about what it was like: this coming apart, this birthing.

I was 37 years old. I thought I knew what love was. I thought I knew. But I have never loved anyone, anything, so fiercely, so terribly, so wonderfully, so achingly, as I did my little son, my only child, struggling in that incubator.

The day I remember most was about a week or two into it when his breathing kept slowing down, all day long. I watched him, all day, hooked up to IV lines, tube feeds, alone in his incubator, his monitor beeping on and off, his heart rate and breathing dropping precariously low.

Then I remember being huddled in the back seat of my car in the middle of a hot Vancouver day, sobbing on a long distance call to my mother: "... my whole heart is in that incubator. Mum! My whole heart!" Surprised at my own intensity, wondering if she, or anyone, could understand what I felt, how much I loved that little child. But also somehow desperate that she understand how completely I needed him to breathe better, to live. How utterly alone I feel when I sit beside him and I can't pick him up, like I'm not actually watching this happen to my baby, but rather something in my own soul - my entire heart is torn open and taken from me. And there's nothing I can do to get it back. I'm alone in a desert that stretches out for miles ahead of me, behind me, around me, above me; there is no return, no options.

What I wanted my mother to understand is that when I said my whole heart, I actually meant it. That, at that moment, I understood love could never be fractured out or parceled here and there, doled out when I felt able, or familiar, or loved back, but was something indivisible, complete, piercing.

So I joined the other too-soon mothers in the special care nursery, us incubator-watchers. I would watch, hover, hang on every word from the doctors, every nurse's chart notation, IV change, tube feed. Everything. I, the big picture "don't bore me with the details" person became vigilant - nothing was too small to escape my attention. Because I couldn't do anything else. He was too fragile to hold much, too tiny to feed. I couldn't hold him, soothe him, nurse him. I could only watch him, monitor his machines with full aching breasts dripping milk, holding nothing.

There we were, hovering around like bees in a hive. Together in this clinical place, but also alone. Alone in our own worlds, our singular obsession with the child that it is ours in name and spirit, but who is caught in a sort of limbo world of high tech machines and

medical care. Watching our babies whose bodies were held in this web that we weren't part of but somehow got trapped in.

People asked me if I got to know the other mothers in the special care nursery, the women I'd see day after day. But I didn't, really. We were polite, we gave each other kind smiles and nods, hoped for the best. But we each lived in our own world. It was like I didn't want to know if another baby wasn't doing well, I just didn't want to know. I wanted to block that possibility from my mind, to pretend that other mother's look of fear didn't really exist. Bad things don't happen to little helpless babies. I think I felt too fragile myself to reach out to anyone else with much more than a friendly smile and a silent prayer.

I didn't write this until now, partly because I couldn't, partly because it seemed like telling the story without telling the inner story would be dishonest, incomplete. Like how I kept dreaming of water, of being swept away in a flood and desperately holding on to my baby amid the raging floodwater - clinging to a rock or a tree or something on the side of river, desperately afraid, me and my baby, how there is no rescuer coming. I can only wait it out, hold on to him, alone, wet, scared. How I still have these dreams, dreams of water sweeping me away. Not having ground to stand on.

This is how I felt, but there is also something else here. Something else I need to say, to describe. This story isn't just about what it felt like to be a mother of a premature baby. It's also about how when I needed people to help care for my baby, a whole system stepped in. It's about how I realized that there are people who dedicate their lives to making sure these little babies get the best possible start in life. There *are* saints among us, and some of them are working at your local children's hospital. I've heard that you can judge a society by how it cares for its most vulnerable. I guess what I want to say is that I now know there is something deeply good about this country. I am profoundly grateful to live here.

So how does the story end? Well, something amazing happens. He begins to grow. He puts his little mouth right on my nipple (then falls asleep, he is still too young to suck). Then they move him from intensive care to special care, from the specialty neonatal ward at BC Children's to the nursery at Lion's Gate. One day, he is out of the incubator and in a little bassinette. Except for the monitor wires and feeding tubes (which I barely notice anymore), he looks like a regular baby. And then one day there is no tube! He is feeding well, growing, healthy. And then, one happy happy summer day my sweet husband and I pick up our son, put him in a car seat, and like regular parents, take him home.

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