

## That Magical Smile

'We're going to have to induce,' says the obstetrician, distracted by the night's rapidly expanding list of tasks invisibly unfurling before his eyes.

'What, now?' my wife Neda gasps, horrified. The baby isn't due for another month. We'd just finished a long work week, then driven down two hours to the hospital. We're running on fumes. Getting to this appointment was exhausting, and now they expect us to pop out a baby on top of everything? Guilt surges through me. Her. They expect *her* to pop out a baby. In this scenario, I am the twelfth man at best.

'Yes, now,' the doctor clarifies dismissively before he launches into action, barraging the midwife with a series of instructions which might as well be in Vulcan for all my brain is able to process. My own disparate thoughts hit me like Santino Corleone in a Lincoln Continental. Our dismal nursing-quarters-turned-motel is only booked for tonight. Where will we sleep tomorrow? Thana is coming a month early. What's got the doctor so spooked? Why take such drastic action?

I know enough to answer my own question. Each question is in fact very simple, very manageable. But they are arranged in my head like a house of cards. They blow over at the slightest breath, and a hurricane is blowing through the room. So I shut the door.

Without the draught of adrenaline to blow it away, a thick grey and beige haze descends across my vision. Thoughts are so indistinct, so indistinguishable, I can no longer tell if a dozen or a thousand are piling up around me.

'Jack,' Neda's voice slices through my brain's fog like a knife through a much more literal fog. 'I need you to be with Thana when she comes.' This moment of clarity is all I need to map out the next twelve hours. I know roughly how long the inducement will take. If Thana survives the birth, the nurses will bustle Thana out of the room into neonatal intensive care (everyone calls it NICU), where they will insert little hoses into her lungs to help her breath. I push down all the fractions and percentages the doctors had told us about her chances of survival so I can concentrate on maximising my own helpfulness. Neda will be in no shape to be with Thana after the birth and she'll be relying on me to bring her regular updates. For me to watch over Thana. For me to speak to our daughter, as the only person in the room whose voice she will know.

Once the baby arrives, I'll be on my feet for a very, very long time. My eyes dart across the room to the waterproof beanbag they have in the birthing suite's bathtub. I hear myself asking permission if I can sleep until Thana comes. I am vaguely aware of Neda's assent.

I lie in the bathtub using the beanbag as a pillow, despising myself. The glare of the lights reproachfully roast my retinas, the smooth material of the beanbag spitefully hints at the litres of gushing urine and amniotic fluid passing over my head's resting

spot in the hundreds or maybe thousands of nights before. The contractions commence quickly and thickly. I pretend to be asleep at their arrival, trying to ignore Neda's pained grunts and cries, but I don't have to pretend for long.

Maybe one day Neda will forgive me.

Two and a half hours later I slip back into consciousness to Thana's stonily silent arrival. Two nurses place her on a tiny trolley and wheel her to NICU, mercifully placed one room away from us. The induced birth, as expected, was fast and unsympathetic to Neda's nether regions, but she nevertheless shoos me out of the room with a look of heavily restrained desperation I've never seen in her or any other human being before.

Thana may have broken from my line of sight for a few seconds, but she is easy to spot; a small throng of specialists crowded around her, calmly talking through the steps they would be taking to pump life into their pint-sized guest. The doctors and nurses are all mercifully short, allowing me a clear view of my daughter.

I am shocked when a nurse asks me if I need a chair, and if I am feeling okay. In my own opinion, I had already spent one hundred and fifty minutes too long off my feet. I thank her for her concern, reassure her that I feel fine, and I would prefer to stand.

They ask me another four times in the next fifteen minutes, and I finally work out why when a short, sinewy father, seeing his newborn in an incubator for the first time, buckles under the weight of his own despair, prompting a scrum of nurses to apparate above him and haul him into a nearby chair.

I watch the floppy-limbed man, ashamed. I feel not even a tinge of lightheadedness or kneesbuckledness. I'd known about Thana's slight chances of survival for quite some time now. Have I hardened my heart to her this much already?

Doctor Cara introduces herself, rescuing me from my own thoughts. She runs the show as the consultant, which signifies to me that the hospital is pulling out absolutely all stops to give Thana a fighting chance. Cara calls the shots with a steady voice and even steadier hand. She jokingly apologises for ruining Thana's prospects at becoming a bikini model thanks to the scars she will develop from the little hoses shoved in through her ribs into her lungs. I open my heart to her joke, then I stifle a chuckle at the juxtaposition of Cara looking like a stereotypical witch with her dark hair, hooked nose, and muddy brown eyes, which contrast hilariously against the reassuring warmth and confidence she projects onto me like the light from a nearby lamp.

Hours later, the doctors and nurses trickle away one by one until one neonatal nurse and I remain. My eyes fixate on Thana's tiny chest, drinking in every rise and fall. The nurse hardly takes an eye off her patient for a moment, even while she asks me about Thana and how I am doing. She steers the conversation with a practiced word here and there, getting me to divulge just about every tiny detail I know about Thana from the first ultrasound appointment when we discovered she had a mass of cysts

instead of kidneys. The nurse doesn't need me to explain how amniotic fluid is swallowed by the fetus and passed through, among other things, the lungs and the kidneys. With no kidneys, the amniotic fluid dried up. No fluid, no way for the lungs to practice stretching. It would take a miracle for the lungs to breathe on their own. We talk for three hours, our eyes transfixed on our sickly mutual acquaintance.

Without prompting or preamble, the nurse uses a word rhyming with kitty to describe Thana's situation and it isn't pretty. There is something about the brutal honesty of her appraisal which sends a flood of relief through me. I nod along to her words, my eyes growing hot and prickly. After spending the last four months questioning God's motivation for allowing this to happen to Thana, the plain, simple truth of the matter is laid bare in eight words from a stranger. This is just a terrible thing that's happening. That's all there is to it. It's not much to live with, but it will do for now.

If Thana survives, she will need twelve hours of daily dialysis until she receives a transplant. Fifty percent of kidney transplant recipients last until they are eighteen. She has a one in five chance of surviving to thirty-five.

All the advice my friends and family have given me comes flooding in. What kind of a life is this for someone? A short, painful, hopeless one.

Maybe one day Thana will forgive me.

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Two and half years later, Thana lies down in a bed for the first time. She is so excited she hardly notices the two teddy bears ready to snuggle her to sleep. Thana is a big girl with a big girl bed. No tubes tying her to machines from her nose or her belly. She is free to babble and wave her arms around and just sleep like a normal girl her age.

Now I look at her and no longer see my own failures and pain. I no longer see her suffering and what makes her different from almost everyone else.

I see a beaming, uninhibited smile. And in that magical smile, I tentatively touch against the tiniest hint of an answer to the question I've been asking myself since that first ultrasound. I feel a warmth in my aching soul, a trace of feeling I should have felt when I first saw her.

Maybe one day I will forgive me.