

Counting Cards

Category: Stories

written by Alexandra Godfrey | May 15, 2009

Alexandra Godfrey

Once again, I see a still heart. As I stare at the fetal monitor, I search for signs of life. The screen flickers; my son's heart does not.

The last time I saw him, he looked happy-content in his life-bubble. As he turned somersaults, he waved at me. I had thought he was saying hello, but I realize now that he was waving goodbye.

Soon I must deliver his still form into the world. My labor will be difficult-his cries exchanged for my tears; his body, small and membranous, fitting into my one hand.

This is not what I had envisioned. I had dreamt of my son's vitality, not his mortality. I contemplate the suffering-is there no way to tally up the trauma?

For the third time, I am faced with the loss of a child, and experience is not making it any easier.

When my first child was born, he too had a still heart. As he was rushed away, I was asked to give him a name. I called him Ben.

Life almost evaded him. Ben was born with a complex congenital heart defect that affects one baby in ten thousand. Without emergency cardiac surgery, the defect is lethal. I did not expect my son's birth to herald his death. I could not make sense of it-beginning and endings existing together, creating dimensions beyond my scope.

I'd thought that I had laid the foundations of his future so well, but the path before us buckled under the weight of my son's oxygen-starved cells. My dreams of life had been reduced to a house of cards. As I watched the doctors perform CPR on my son, I felt bewildered-fifteen compressions asking why, followed by two breaths of silence.

Ben came back to life. He remained blue, but his heart had a rhythm, and the ventilator breathed for him. An expert in pediatric cardiology tore a hole in my son's heart-a procedure crucial to bypass the defects that were killing him.

Students, residents and fellows marveled at my son's aberrant anatomy. His great vessels were reversed, his valves thickened and narrow, and his only coronary artery abnormal.

For the scholars of medicine, he was a fascinating case. For me, he was a lesson in suffering. I saw a small body broken-veins punctured, dreams shattered, love insufficient to heal the hurts.

Ben's cardiac defects would demand the skill of a thousand surgeons blended together and developed through time: a series of incisions and sutures born of countless errors and successes and honed into a single perfect operation. The surgeon drew me pictures, the nurses gave me hope, and my friends sent beautiful cards without messages of congratulations.

On the twelfth day, the surgeon cracked my baby's chest open, stopped his heart mid-beat and then began to redirect the flow of his life's blood.

His surgery took hours. I ate tasteless muffins, drank insipid coffee and lit a candle in the chapel. I was instructed not to linger by the operating theater or ICU. Apparently, it makes it worse. So I resigned myself to the waiting-area fish tanks, paintings by Monet and rocking chairs placed by windows that framed the living. I watched a man pick up his child and a mother push a stroller along the pavement. I wondered if I would ever do the same.

Before my son left for surgery, I had tried to ask if he would die. I'd played with all the usual euphemisms, hoping the doctors would catch my question, but they never seemed to hear. I wondered if my words had gotten lost in the breeze of the ventilator, or maybe tangled up in the myriad lines that sustained my son's life. Sometimes now I wonder if they were buried under the piles of textbooks that speak only of curing

As it was, Ben survived the surgery. Against all the odds, my blue baby came home.

Years later, I lost a pregnancy at eight weeks. This time, I was not too surprised. Many pregnancies are lost in the first trimester, and I knew that I was not exempt from that rule. I grieved for my lost child, but I believed that my next pregnancy would be safe. I'd had my share of loss, I felt; life would not make me suffer any more.

Now, as I look at the ultrasound screen and see yet another still heart, I know that there are no safety nets; one disaster does not shield you from another. We can understand and play around with the variables, but we are never protected from that chance statistic...that one-in-ten-thousand anomaly.

The doctor offers me five days to keep my son with me. Then I must deliver him.

When I leave the hospital, I see people smiling at my rounded belly. One lady asks, 'When are you due?'

I say, "In five days."

My son and I go home together. I sit in the rocking chair in my bedroom, look at the Monet that is now on my bedroom wall, then in my heart and mind I paint for him a window adorned with angels.

There's a lot to be said to one's son who is already dead.

I suspect that over the next week the mailbox will again fill with beautiful

cards without congratulations. Maybe, after all, these cards are the best measure of my suffering.

About the Author:

Alexandra Godfrey is a second-year physician assistant student at Wayne State University. "I have always had a deep love for language. I adore playing with the spaces between the words—there's so much room for creativity and expression. The death of my baby son moved me from reading the work of others to writing my own stories. My son Benjamin is now twelve years old. Doctors, students and fellows still marvel at his cardiac abnormalities. Ben's future remains uncertain, but for now he is enjoying a full and happy life. His brilliance is highlighted by his difficult beginnings. This is our privilege, and I am grateful."

Story editor:

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