

Warmth is a Measure of Time

By Dora Chen

When newborns die in the delivery room, their bodies do not immediately start growing cold, in the way you or I would if we dropped dead. Their bodies stay warm because they are in the baby warmer. They are tenderly swaddled, with hats put on their heads and then lifted and placed into waiting arms. That keeps them warm until slowly, it doesn't.

I wish I did not know this: I wish the baby did not die.

It was a Friday night, my first labor and delivery shift as a third-year medical student. The team assigned me to a first-time mother. She was young, about my age. She was having a baby boy. She was Chinese, and I am, too: we quickly switched over to speaking Mandarin. I felt excited and privileged, to be a little bit useful and a part of the moment in any way.

I'm not sure when I first noticed something was wrong during the C-section. Even with my fingers hooked into the uterus, trying to stretch wide the incision, I had no suspicions. It seemed just as smooth as anything I'd seen on my surgery rotation. Even as the PA struggled to push on the abdomen and the attending strained to pull, I had no clue. Childbirth had always seemed to involve struggle and strain. And when the baby came out a little bit purple, I simply thought: purple is pretty close to pink.

But sometime after he was whisked to the warmer, I knew the birth had gone awry. Behind me, the pediatrics team worked with escalating commotion and urgency. I heard the unmistakable sounds of CPR and registered the arrival of a breathless NICU doctor. As we sutured the uterus shut, I tried to stitch together what was happening behind me. At last, I heard a screech and rustle, as the doctor moved the curtain, which shields partners from the operating table, to speak to the father. I felt his response before I heard it: wild and wounded, formless and wordless, more fearful than a wail and more biting than whimper. It was the sound of incomprehensible pain. The doctor had confirmed the worst. In the end, thirteen minutes of life.

In contrast, the mother was silent and still as I wiped her abdomen clean with a wet cloth. Her eyes were open, but internally, she was shattering. All the stoking elements that give life its forward thrust seemed to chill, cooling the room. When finally, she held her baby for the first and last time, she murmured -- He's still warm. I understood then that for her, the warmth closed the distance between the dead baby she held and the living baby she'd lost. It was an illusion; the warmth was not corporeal. But no one had the heart -- or rather, lacked the heart -- to tell her.

Back in the student work room, the sob I had been choking down hardened in my throat. My distress, large and unclear, had the strange, solid quality of a deep hunger, like a stone in my belly. It pulled me down to sitting, my arms to my knees, my face to my hands. I ate a jelly donut that my friends working the day shift had left for me, and then immediately felt sick to my stomach. I wondered – What kind of monster could eat at a time like this? Friday night passed into Saturday morning.

Later that week I would scrub into another C-section. When the scalpel first grazed the uterus, my whole body would flush, and I would feel sweat pooling under my mask. But the baby would come out, and he would live. The next day, I would stand at the end of another woman's bed, my hands on her child's crowning head, the PA's hands over mine, and we would guide this new life out of her womb. It would be the highest high of my clerkship year.

But not yet. It was still Saturday. At my attending's insistence, I took some coffee and a bagel, which I saved for later. I went home and slept until the sun beamed in through the west, a bright triangle across my face and pillow. I called my mom and sister. I ordered takeout. I ate the whole meal, and then I sunk back into bed.

To this day, the lone figure of the young father moves through my mind from time to time. His surgical bouffant comically large on top of his thin, long face, his silly looking shoe covers. His figure is hunched, slowed by grief, shuffling out of the operating room. I wonder if he will continue to bear this form in the months and years to come, silhouetted by a kitchen light as he paces at night in their apartment. I wonder if the mother will be there, or if their shared but separate pain will have long since pushed them apart. I wonder about her, how grief might sharpen and dull the moments of her life and if I misunderstand grief completely. I wonder if one day, she will have another child, younger and just as beloved. Maybe one night before bed, the mother will hug tight her happy, healthy baby, feeling the warmth against her chest, and tell them about her other baby-- the one who lived for thirteen minutes. I wish for this.

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