

Papaya

By Laura Vater.

A white rose was taped to the door, and I pushed the metal handle to enter. The glow of moonlight beamed through the blinds and onto a woman laboring, clutching the hand of the man beside her. In between contractions, she trembled, her cheeks streaming a flow of pain. His eyes were dry, hollow as if his pain was contained somewhere deeper.

Unlike the other rooms we'd entered that night, no displays stood by the bed. No monitor hung around her waist. No fluctuating lines traced onto red graphs. The ultrasound had confirmed the woman's worst fear: the child's heart stopped beating at just 23 weeks. His existence, but a brief bloom, here and gone.

I saw my reflection in the window, the short white coat over baggy blue scrubs, aimed at hiding my ever-expanding abdomen. I felt my daughter flutter kick, as she tumbled in my womb. My hand went instinctively to her, then I pulled it away.

At 23 weeks, she was the size of a papaya. She could hear my voice, my heartbeat, the whoosh of my blood, or so the book had said. It instructed me to prepare for Braxton Hicks contractions, to start childproofing my home. I thought of the mahogany crib in our nursery and the dresser we had planned to anchor to the wall.

I wondered what crib this family had chosen. What color they had painted the walls. What life they had been planning for, hoping for, before the dream had dissolved.

Throughout the night, my team performed the rituals of childbirth—the intermittent checking, coaching, assisting—until the small boy emerged. I had been trained to listen for that first cry. When only silence echoed out, it shattered me.

The nurse cradled and cleansed his body, veins visible through translucent skin. His eyelids remained shut as I gazed at his tiny nose, his parted lips. His chest stood motionless as the nurse swaddled him in an ivory blanket.

She brought him to his mother's side, "He's beautiful. Just try to breathe."

The woman reached out, hands shaking, and my team quietly left the room. I followed, closing the door behind me.

Time stretched onward and into early morning. The minutes and hours spent with him could never be enough, not when they had planned on a lifetime. The child was carefully placed in a plastic bassinet and brought to a room down the hall. The nurse pressed tiny feet into ink and onto paper. I bundled the blanket around him once more before stepping out. We left the light on.

At dawn, I walked into the February cold and squinted at the bit of moon still awake. And something in me released, like a latch. The quiet student, the passive observer was supplanted by the woman carrying a child. Out came a welling of tears for the boy who would remain as papaya. Who would be buried in cold winter ground rather than flourish in a warm womb until summer. For the mother, for the father who would leave the hospital with arms empty. For the silence that would flood their home in the months and years to come.

I had found myself in a place, in a career, where life gets upheaved, where death comes unannounced. It was an unnatural pattern of being. I was just learning how to weave such

upheaval into the fabric of my life, and to go on living. I didn't know that learning how to navigate this landscape—to feel, to care, to grieve, and then restore myself again—was a skill as important as interpreting a blood count or stitching a suture.

When July came, with its sweltering days, so too did my daughter. She emerged with a piercing scream, with writhing limbs, with eyes wide open. The nurse placed her into my arms and said, “She’s beautiful. Congratulations.”

I would forever contrast the cries that night, and the coos, wails, and laughs in the months to come, with that silent room. That still-as-stone face. Those tiny feet. The ritual of loss. His death, and her fragile, flourishing life.

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