The Day He Was Born

The August morning my son was born on his mother's birthday, the strength I watched her summon across sixteen hours, and the father who was born beside them

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And I never knew I could fall more deeply in love with her until that day, the day she gave birth to our son, the day my love for her doubled, the day my heart doubled in size, because I have never seen such strength, such endurance, such ferocity of love, sixteen hours of labor, two hours of pushing, wave after wave of pain breaking over her body, and she met every one of them with a courage that took my breath away, and when I thought I could not be more in awe she reached deeper still, and I knew then I was standing in the presence of a miracle, not the kind sung in choirs or painted in stained glass, but the kind that comes sweating and straining, muscles trembling, lungs heaving, the kind of miracle that smells like iron and salt, like the beginning of everything.

And it had begun so ordinarily, which is perhaps how the days that divide your life into before and after always begin, just a Thursday, just a routine appointment, the two of us walking into a doctor's visit still believing we knew what the day contained, until the doctor told us no, today, it will be today, your water has broken, your child is coming, and suddenly the architecture of the day collapsed and there was a birthing room as dim as a chapel, and a rush home to get bags, and nurses and machines blinking in the half-light, shadows moving past underneath the door, a heart monitor translating our son's hidden life into sound, one harsh light bent low between her knees, that astonishing galloping proof that somewhere inside her there was another person trying to enter the world, and our playlist filling whatever silence remained, Ben Harper and other songs I can no longer remember and, because apparently even the most consequential hours of your life are allowed to be ridiculous, Salt-N-Pepa's Push It, which made us laugh in the middle of everything, and I am grateful now that we laughed, grateful that there was room inside the fear and pain and exhaustion for a joke, laughter even in the storm, hymns and humor and heartbeat mingled in one long unbroken song.

And then, at 5:37 in the morning, he was here.

Head and shoulders and belly and feet, nine pounds, five ounces, twenty-one and a half inches of entirely new human being, my son, my boy, suddenly outside of her after all those months inside, and I cut the cord with trembling hands and they laid him on Nicole's chest and he cried and opened his eyes only a sliver, only for a flicker, as though even that dim room contained more light

than he could bear, and his lips were full and purple, almost the color of bruised fruit, his cheeks swollen and red, his head misshapen from the immense journey he had just completed, his body warm and impossibly new, and Nicole pulled away her gown and they laid him bare against her bare skin, chest to chest, heart against heart, these two people who had never before been physically separate now meeting each other for the first time, which is still one of the most beautiful things I can comprehend about birth, two beings who had never been apart, the person whose heartbeat he had heard for every moment of his existence was suddenly a face, a smell, a pair of arms, his mother, and she held him against herself and I stood beside them and watched the two people I loved most in the world become visible to each other, and I swear the room itself exhaled.

And through it all were the nurses, the saints in sneakers, the ones who carried us when we did not know how to carry ourselves. These women whose names I can still remember because there are people who enter your life for twelve hours and somehow remain inside it forever, faces and voices etched in us, Julia most of all, unforgettable Julia, steady as oak and tender as water and seemingly incapable of being rattled, a doula in all but title, staying beside Nicole through the long night, her hands and her voice and her eyes communicating what we most needed someone to tell us, you are safe, you are not alone, we know what to do next, a guide, a keeper of calm, and later Nicole would say that words could not begin to express what Julia had meant to her and she was right, but there was Sarah too, with her humor and kindness when carefully made plans began unraveling, and Jodi with her quiet strength, and Annette cradling Nicole through the awkward, trembling beauty of that first feeding, women who did this every day and somehow never made us feel as though what was happening to us was anything but extraordinary, and together they were a choir of women who bore witness, who reminded us that birth is not only medicine but mercy, not only an act but grace.

And at 5:42, only five minutes after, I fumbled for my phone to take the first photographs of the three of us together, my glasses crooked and beard wild and hair going in every direction, looking completely wrecked and bewildered and happy, a father wrecked and reborn, and beside me Nicole exhausted beyond anything I had ever seen, her body having just done something almost beyond comprehension, and still she was smiling, this enormous exhausted smile with Benjamin pressed against her chest, happier than I knew a face could look, smiling the kind of smile that will outlast stone, smiling as if nothing else in the world mattered but the tiny miracle pressed to her chest, and I do not know if I have ever loved her more than in that moment, her face luminous, her lips brushing his forehead, her body radiant.

We look like two people who have just discovered that the world is larger than they had been told.

Those pictures remain some of the purest proof of joy I possess.

By seven in the morning he was wearing that little pink-and-blue striped hospital cap that seemed to be issued to every newborn child in America, swaddled so tightly, and they placed him in my arms in the big blue chair with the pale wooden arms and I took off my shirt because Nicole and I had talked about skin against skin, and suddenly there was nothing between us, his tiny bare chest against mine, his warmth pressed into me, his heartbeat flickering against my ribs, and I touched him the way you touch something you cannot quite believe is real, his toes first perhaps, or his fingers, I cannot remember the order anymore, only the almost absurd smallness and perfection of each piece of him, fingernails and knuckles and the soles of his feet, tracing him as if he were scripture, all of these parts that had existed yesterday without my ever having seen them, as if he were the answer to a question I hadn't known I was asking, and in that chair, an hour and some minutes after his birth, the purpose of life arrived like a revelation, and I remember looking down at this enormous boy asleep against my chest and understanding something I had probably heard people say a thousand times but had never understood at all, which is that your life can cease to belong entirely to you in an instant, and that the surrender can feel not like loss but like arrival, the reason for breath and blood is holding my boy against my chest.

At 7:10 they weighed him, nine pounds, five ounces, a boy already too large for the word tiny and yet tiny enough that I could hold nearly all of him against my chest, and by eight Nicole's parents were there, Grandma and Grandpa now, although they had not been when they went to sleep the night before, standing beside the bed and staring at him with faces stunned and shining, lit with awe as they stood in the soft morning light, looking at Benjamin and then Nicole and then me, everyone understanding without needing to say it that the names of things had changed overnight, daughter had become mother, husband had become father, parents had become grandparents, and the family had become larger.

Later my parents came, tears welling in their eyes, marveling at him, reaching for him with the tenderness of people receiving something they had been waiting years to hold, the circle widening, stepping into grandparenthood as naturally as though some part of them had been preparing for it all along, and then the next day came Nicole's friend Grace, and Elliot and Kat, the stream of love continuing, arms taking him and returning him and taking him again, this small procession of people gathering around a child barely able to open his eyes, a baptism not of water or religion but of love, and I began to understand that a baby is born into more than a single family unit, he is born into a larger community of hands, people who say without saying it, give him to me for a while, I have him, you can rest, I will help you carry him.

And later, when everyone had gone and the room had finally become quiet, I tried to give Nicole a chance to rest and hopefully sleep, and I curled myself awkwardly onto the narrow bench beneath the window with Benjamin's bassinet pulled close, and every few minutes I would look over just to make sure his chest was moving, that he was breathing, that he was still there, this magnificent lion,

this magnificent bear, my son, and I remember the enormous relief of those hours, the almost primitive gratitude and relief that he was safe, that Nicole was safe, that all three of us had made it through this together, and I drifted there with him, guarding him, surrounding him, that he was here, that I was a father now, the one I would love and teach and protect and cherish until the end of my days. The man who had walked into that hospital was not precisely the man curled on the window bench beside the bassinet, now there was another human being breathing inches away whose pain I would have taken into my own body without hesitation, whose life had somehow become more important to me than my own before I had heard the sound of his voice or knew the color of his eyes, and I did not yet know about basketball or Pokémon or peanut butter toast or the thousand private words we would invent together, did not know the sound of his feet running through a house or the feeling of his sleeping arm thrown across my chest.

I knew only that he was here.

And he was born on his mother's birthday, August twelfth belonging to both of them, and I have always loved the symmetry of that, because looking back now I understand that Benjamin was not the only person born in that room at 5:37 in the morning, as if the universe had stitched a secret rhyme into time itself, mother and son bound not only by blood but by the very day, as if the stars had whispered a promise long before: on this day you will both be born, one into the world, one into motherhood, one into fatherhood, and none of you will ever be the same. A child was born, certainly, nine pounds and five ounces and twenty-one and a half inches long, but a mother was born too, exhausted and astonished with her son against her bare chest, and somewhere beside them, wild-haired and crooked-glassed, a father was born as well.