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Family Medicine

NARRATIVE ESSAY

Five Days

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Five days. His life lasted only 5 days.

I remember his birth—his mother's long labor, the humid, sticky heat of the Honduran summer weighing on me as I went about my rounds. I remember the soft beep of his quick heartbeat on the fetal monitor, and the heavy repetitive click of the unbalanced ceiling fan, futilely attempting to stir the hot, stagnate air in the cramped room that served as our L&D. I remember the excitement I felt when I finally received the call that his mother was ready to deliver, racing down to the hospital in the last hours of the day to welcome him into the world. My hands were the first to hold him as he was born, and my eyes were the first to gaze into his, a deep chocolate brown, before I passed him to his mother. I was the first to feel his strong pulse as I checked his vitals and cut his cord. I celebrated with his mother and grandmother at the wonder of his birth, the small stuffy delivery room filled with joy and excitement.

"Can I take his picture?" I asked his mother. I wanted to capture that moment.

"Of course," she replied, beaming proudly. The camera snapped. It was a perfect moment—the kind you wish would last forever.

Four days.

The next morning, I was greeted on rounds by a sleepy but happy family. I congratulated them on successful breastfeeding and wet diapers. I carefully performed his newborn exam, listening again to his strong pulse and the whoosh of air passing through his tiny lungs. I examined him from his fontanelles to the spreading of each little toe as I tested his Babinski reflex.

"He's perfect," I told his mother. She beamed again.

Three days.

Discharge. I meticulously reviewed all their instructions, from feeding schedules to signs of jaundice, to the number of normal wet diapers. I would see them again in a few days for a weight check. Despite the already humid early morning, his family bundled him in a fluffy blue and white blanket with a matching hat.

"Congratulations again," I said. "See you soon."

Two days.

I stayed busy with rounds and patients and paperwork, a constant whirl of activity. Busy, busy, busy. His family brought him back to our ED that evening with a fever, but I wasn't on call, so I didn't find out until the following morning when I saw their wane faces outside the tiny ICU. I knew right away that something was very wrong. Sepsis. It's an ugly word that leaves little room for hope, but still we hope. I was eating lunch when the code went out over the radio. I raced again to the hospital through the humid heat and jungle trees, across the rickety suspension bridges that separate the staff living areas from the hospital. They had already started bagging him and performing chest compressions on his fragile body. His pulse returned but it was weak. His skin was a sickly yellow. We needed an emergency exchange transfusion.

"Quickly, who has A positive blood?" I did. I raised my hand. I barely felt the deep stab in my arm as blood was hurriedly drawn from my veins and placed in his. He stabilized, but barely.

One day.

I spent the afternoon and the following day anxiously hovering near his isolette, constantly adjusting his CPAP, feeling for a pulse. We performed another exchange transfusion. I sat next to his bed, blood trickling down my arm as the nurse drew more blood from my veins. We told his family the prognosis was grave, and I watched as their expressions crumpled, hope and fear warring on their faces; the same hope and fear I also felt within myself. They thanked me for donating blood.

"He'll be alright," I told myself, adjusting his CPAP for the thousandth time.

"He's strong. He won't give up."

I tossed and turned that night, anxious, thoughts racing. *Why didn't I . . .?* and *What should we do?* revolved in my brain on an endless loop. I walked to the hospital early for rounds and headed straight to the ICU. I stopped short. The isolette was empty, and I knew immediately what that meant.

"Yes," the nurses told me. "He died during the night. Poor baby." I stood in the hallway, motionless for a moment. Then I carefully wrapped that painful realization, like so many shards of broken glass, deep in my heart, and turned to prepare for rounds. My other patients were waiting.

His mother buried him in the small graveyard outside the hospital. The little wooden cross and fresh mound of dirt made my heart ache, and I thought of my blood mixing with his, both seeping into the dry earth. My arms were bruised, reminding me that although we tried to save him, it wasn't enough. The tears came later when I was alone and no one else could see them. I cried until there were no more tears to give.

Every day for the next 2 months, I walked past his grave on my way to the hospital, and my heart broke a little each time. Weeks later, I found the photo on my phone of his perfect little face the day he was born, and I felt broken all over again. It seems strange to think that, as his doctor, I needed to grieve his death, but I did. I needed to grieve for his family and all the joys and heartaches that he'll never experience. His life was just the quickest of flashes, briefly bright and then disappearing again in an instant. But he was real; he existed. He was loved and cherished, and he fought and struggled and suffered. His life was only 5 days, but it mattered. It always will.

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