

**That Other Family****jenna GENSIC**

For weeks I was waiting for my premature son Mikan to gain weight. Now that he finally reached two pounds, his neonatologist was fighting his edema, an excess of fluids that made his little body work too hard. He was only two weeks old and already sported half a dozen life-threatening conditions. He lived in an isolette surrounded by a labyrinth of tubes and wires that would surely thwart Theseus. I looked at my son, who remained on a jet ventilator, requiring high oxygen and regular blood transfusions, his frail body so covered in wires that I was holding more machine than baby, and couldn't help but feel frustrated with his uncertain future.

The machinery, combined with Mikan's fragility, had required the assistance of a nurse and respiratory therapist to transfer him out of his isolette so I could kangaroo him. Silently swimming in and out of self-pity, I snuggled Mikan and witnessed another set of parents sitting through a procedure a doctor was performing on their week-old child (born at 24 weeks) across the room. From an earlier conversation with his mother, I knew the tiny boy had contracted a dangerous infection. The parents watched their doctor don a blue gown, white surgical cap, and gloves. Nurses crowded around the baby's isolette, handing the doctor instruments and supplies. At least we weren't going through a procedure, I thought. Not this moment, anyway.

Then came a beeping from the monitor above the baby's bed, first cautionary...then a more urgent tone, and nurses and doctors exchanged concerned looks. I was versed enough in NICU beeping to understand that this particular tone and its duration were serious. Scrubs scurried around the isolette, then ran for the epinephrine to restart the baby's heart; the mother wept into her hands, muttering "What's wrong? What are they doing?" After catching my gaze, another nurse set screens around the baby's isolette, leaving room for the doctors and nurses who were now vigorously bagging the bird-like body at high oxygen. My own heart raced, and while I wished I could will my extra beats across the room to the still child who needed them, I feverishly checked Mikan's vital signs.

The parents were escorted out and then back in again several times by the doctor, depending on the level of the mother's hysterics and the urgency with which the doctor was needed at the bedside. I held my breath as the hospital chaplain entered the unit and performed a baptism. At the chaplain's cue, the staff at the nursery, all engaged in different activities caring for other babies, bowed their heads and recited "The Lord's Prayer." "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." The unexpected harmony of their voices stunned me. I wondered how often this ritual occurred, touched by the staff's prayerful awareness of the fragility of life. The crowd slowly dispersed, and the parents were left behind with the doctor. I heard the mother whisper, "So, those are just vent breaths?" and the doctor walked

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them away from the bedside. Finally, the baby was carried out from behind the screens, free from the Medusa-like uniform of tubes and wires to meet his parents in a private room.

The nurses carefully packed up his baby blankets and onesies in plastic bags, and broke down all of the machines attached to the isolette. Some nurses brought the baby's body back and made moldings of his hands and feet for the parents, then packed up NICU memorabilia for them with items such as his heart monitor leads, and his tiny blood pressure cuffs. When his body was removed from the unit, screens remained around his empty isolette, waiting for an environmental team to come and sanitize it.

I stared at the empty space across from me, holding Mikan tightly. I hadn't cried. I remained frozen and humbled. A nurse who participated in "The Lord's Prayer," walked past the two of us, looked down, and said, "Makes you want to hold em' a little tighter, huh?" And my dammed up tears ran down both cheeks. I'd never been so happy to see Mikan's tubes and wires.