



my life



Cherish

Kate Rotherham, A SHORTLISTED ENTRANT IN OUR MY CHILD/PARENTING EXPRESS WRITING COMPETITION, ANXIOUSLY AWAITS NEWS FROM HER NEWBORN'S SURGEON

The paediatric surgeon has quickly located another identical case on her laptop and is showing me photographs, sketching anatomical diagrams and finalising paperwork for surgery later in the week. I am listening, nodding, breastfeeding and signing things while her kind face and her framed medical qualifications start to spin slowly around me. I absorb about every fifth word: 'Surgery, general anaesthetic, overnight hospital stay...' My baby girl is 17 days old.

In the madness of Pippa's arrival and caring for her three siblings under school age, I barely know her. I feed, change, bathe and soothe her, but all the while I am locating lost shoes, cutting up fruit and applying sunscreen. There is none of the uninterrupted gazing I remember with my firstborn. She is not photographed from every angle, in every new outfit.

Snuggled in her front pouch she zooms with me through the daily logistics of washing, cooking, refereeing and encouraging. My husband and I are like two cheerfully exhausted acrobats juggling our children's personalities, routines and activities in a delicately choreographed circus act.

Now, tada! A precious newborn has entered this wonderfully chaotic mix. I catch her when she comes to me and my heart sings but if I stop to gaze adoringly at her, I'll drop everything.

The anaesthetist comes by to introduce himself. He looks like somebody's dad. Can this man with squeaky shoes really put my brand-new baby safely to sleep and then magically let her wake up again unharmed? 'Do you have any questions?' My mind floods with worst-case scenarios: allergic reactions, cardiac arrests, an impossible, unimaginable, unbearable grief. My words are out before I can catch them, 'Are you really, really good at your job?'

We wait together on the ward, my little baby

and me. The beside-herself mother and her oblivious newborn. A range of expressions flicker across her little face as she sleeps, playing out like a silent movie. I trace tiny veins across her translucent cheeks and smooth her feathery, blonde eyebrows. I lose myself in the perfection of her long, curled lashes and her full strawberry lips. I kiss her little fingers and wonder what gifts she will share with our family. In the unhurried stillness a long-forgotten quote comes to me: *Hold tenderly that which you cherish.*

We walk silently down the long aqua corridors following the signs to the theatre. *Breathe, breathe, breathe*, is my mantra. The surgical team meet us and smile gently. 'She's very beautiful,' they say quietly. I rummage for another question, another anything, that can prolong this moment where my baby girl is safe here with me. 'We'll look after her for you.'

My heart gallops loud and fast and I'm frozen in the fear of too many unknowns. I want to tell her I love her more desperately than she knows, that I'll be waiting for her, that her noisy, crazy family utterly adore her... but no words come out. I kiss the top of her soft, fuzzy head and taste the salt of my own tears. I pass her, still sleeping, into the skilled hands of strangers. They cradle her and disappear behind double stainless steel doors.

In the waiting area I sit, stand, pace and sit again. The nausea is worse than morning sickness and threatens to overwhelm me. I flick through magazines full of celebrities I have never heard of frolicking on beaches in the south of France. I sip water and stare at the ticking clock. What if her new body is too little for all of this? Should we have sought a second opinion? Should we have travelled to a bigger city hospital? What if – right now behind those doors – she is drifting away and they are fighting to save her? I plead to a god

I hope is listening for more time with my baby girl. More time to see her unfold from sleepy newborn to funny baby to cheeky toddler and beyond. More time to watch her find her own special place in our family. More time to kiss, love and cherish her.

The surgeon finally appears in her green scrubs. Time stops while she pulls her face mask down under her chin and I scramble to my feet. She's smiling. 'It all went beautifully. Pippa's fine. But she's starving!'

Her pink limbs are flapping and the recovery room is filled with her desperate squawking. My plucky baby girl. A certificate is stuck to her humidicrib: *Pippa was brave today*. She feeds for a long time snuggled beneath a warm hospital blanket. Her tiny fingers clutch my pinky. *I missed you, Mumma*, says her tight little grip.

Returning to the ward, other waiting parents smile nervously in my direction. Before the day is over they too will surrender their babies, of all ages, to the theatre doors and wrestle with their worst fears in the hellish limbo of the waiting area. We nod to each other in unspoken understanding when the long, nail-gnawing day is finally done.

I fold out my makeshift bed next to her humidicrib. There are no dishes to do or clothes to fold or lunches to pack. I tuck myself in and watch the soft, gentle rhythm of her breaths. In the blue-fused light of the darkened ward I fall completely and hopelessly in love with her. My little one. My little one to cherish. ●

Writing competition

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