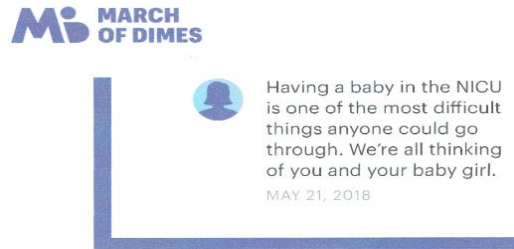


Gray May morning. I was scanning emails. Annoying solicitations from charities I donate to. Why can't they give you a grace period after a gift before the begging begins? Then one from the March of Dimes held my eye and the horror of 1982 erupted again in my heart.



July 2: the kids I taught “graduated” from Vacation Bible School.

July 3: I lost my mucus plug an hour after I got home from church. I called the hospital and they assured me it was just Braxton-Hicks contractions. No need to come in. I wasn't due until August 18. Labor started at 11 p.m. My husband was unconcerned – I could go to the doctor on Monday. We made a little joke about our children's future loyalties: July 4th was Independence Day in US, July 5th was Independence Day in his native Algeria. He slept peacefully. I spent the night negotiating with God for the lives of my twin babies.

July 4: contractions hit the “must go” 5-minute interval at 8:00 a.m. I took a quick shower, woke my husband, and we drove to Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana, IL. Ahmed remained calm. We'd attended Lamaze classes. He knew childbirth was painless. I was starting to have doubts! They checked me in. Assigned a labor nurse who knew more about labor than my husband. Then she left the room in panic. She couldn't find my cervix –I was fully dilated.

Having a baby on a holiday – much less Sunday the 4th of July – is not a great idea. We spent nearly 2 hours waiting for the doctors to arrive – yes, doctors. Premature twins gets you 4 – 1 OB., 1 anesthesiologists (just in case), and 2 neonatologist. Plus 3 nurses. Miriam Elizabeth Kaci, 4 pounds 13 ounces, was born at 10:57 a.m. and whisked away to Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). I never got to hold her. I was preoccupied with going through labor again, but the good news is the 2nd twin almost pops out. Kahina Cathleen Kaci, 4 pounds 10 ounces, was born in breach position at 11:03 a.m. She was blue. She was immediately engulfed by the staff and disappeared into NICU.

They wheeled me into a recovery room. We watched Breakfast at Wimbledon. Connors battled McEnroe, finally winning 6-4 in the 5th set. Finally, they decided to move me to my

room. Seated in a wheelchair with an IV sticking out of my hand, we made a drive-thru visit to NICU. I reached out to touch my babies, but the IV tubing restricted my movements. My 2-kilo babies, lying nearly naked on warming beds, so tiny and vulnerable. And I couldn't hold them.

Confined to my room, that night they decided I needed a sedative, so I wouldn't hear the other mothers feeding their babies. I spent as much time in NICU as I could, scrubbing and donning a green gown each time I entered. On the third day my milk started to come in. That was the day they sent me home. My first response was to refuse to leave. Clearly that was not an option. Leaving the hospital empty – without your babies – leaves you feeling hollow, like part of you is missing. And it is. And your brain and emotions don't know what to do.

Miriam under the bili-lights for jaundice was the low point. After that the girls were moved to Neonatal Intermediate Care and classified as “growers.” The nurses staggered feeding schedules so I could spend time with each baby. For 8 days I obsessed with going to the hospital at feeding time – at least 4 times a day. Ahmed devoted every daylight hour to finishing the roof he was replacing on the house. He rarely came to the hospital. The nurses would say, “Where is your husband?” and I would say “On the roof.” They didn't understand.

One poignant incident still makes me smile. The hospital was adding a wing that abutted the building where NICU was located. Windows looked out on the construction. I would find the basinet facing the exterior windows in the viewing position. The nurses set it up so hard-hats walking 4-floors above ground on steel girders could come view my beautiful twin babies.

July 15: they said the girls could come home. Urbana-Champaign was in the middle of a heat wave. The transition from hospital to car and then to house in the heat of day was more than the delicate systems of preemies could handle – so the girls checked out of Carle Hospital at 10 p.m. Novice parents trying to securely fastening tiny babies into car seats in our 2-door coupe in the dark, even with the help of two nurses, wasn't easy.

We took our babies home at last to a quiet house. The roof was done. Afraid to let them out of our sight. On alert for the smallest whimper. Panicked if we could not wake them on time for a feeding. We were like most first-time parents but exponentially to the 2P – two preemies. By the time they were two months old in September, we were nearly normal parents. Each girl weighed 10 pounds. The pediatrician said the babies were doing fine but the parents needed a night out.

Twin babies:

Two kilo preemies, so tiny, so rare.
I nursed you, and bathed you, and watched you sleep
So afraid I couldn't care for you or I'd let a germ stay.
I rocked you when you cried in the night.

Twin toddlers:

So much energy, so curious, so brave.
I ran after you, protected you, put away toys,
Hid sharp objects to keep you safe and frilly dresses sewed,
I kissed you and put you to sleep each night.

Twin school girls:

Kindergarten, elementary, and junior high.
I found things for class projects from missions to space,
Created dance costumes; endured endless rehearsals.
I took you home for dinner each night.

Twin teen-agers:

Restless, eager, impatient to be grown,
I over-mothered, stung by barbs when your anger flared,
Tried to shield you from the insanity surrounding us
I listened for your key in the door at night.

Twin co-eds:

Picking colleges, discussing future careers
I ached when your hearts were broken, dried a few tears,
Smiled while walking a bride down the aisle.
I was so happy to talk to you at night.

Twin adults:

Entering the world, tentative, talented, eager
I am proud of you, happy for you, but no longer needed each day
Wishing for you a future so much better than the one I knew
I sit alone, thinking of you at night.