The Story

In late October of my sophomore year, I met the proud parents of identical twin boys. Both parents seemed quite young, no more than a few years older than me. Because the twins were slightly premature, they were nursed in adjacent incubators until they were healthy enough for discharge. This is a common occurrence for newborn twins, as multiple pregnancies often result in preterm births. By their feisty movements, energetic temperaments, and the neonatologist’s reassuring words, I could tell that the twin boys were on track for a healthy discharge. The mother was elated to have their photographs taken, and she did...
not hesitate to share with me how excited she was to bring her boys home. She was incredibly friendly and talkative. The father, on the other hand, seemed rather reserved. There was a palpable tension in the air. Each time I arrived to make photographs, he would acknowledge my presence with a cursory smile, a terse greeting, and nothing more. Physicians often hold inherent power over the patients they care for; likewise, photographers have the ability to impose the same unwanted dynamic onto their subjects. I was worried that this was happening with me and the young father. Just as a clinician must first garner trust and understanding of the patients they treat, a photographer must do the same with their subjects. Unfortunately, I felt like was struggling to earn the trust of the father. One day, a couple weeks after my initial visit, the mother was ready to give the twins kangaroo care: a skin-to-skin care technique to promote mother-child bonding. As she and the nurse excused themselves for a technique demonstration, I was left in the room with the father. We waited in quiet companionship with the sound of beeping monitors in the background. I did not mind the congenial company, but I was apprehensive about initiating a conversation to break the silence. A few speechless minutes passed, and before I was able to strike up a conversation, from the corner of my periphery, I saw the father inconspicuously wipe away tears from his eyes. “They mean so much to us,” he finally said. He rarely spoke, so I stayed silent, waiting to see if he wanted to say anything else. “It really [is] special.” I asked if this experience was as special as he imagined. I was not sure what kind of answer I was expecting, but without hesitation, he emphatically responded with, “yes, it is.”

A feeling of warmth and content rushed through me. After the birth and admission of their premature twins, I knew the mother and father faced many troubles and uncertainties. Although I never necessarily doubted it, I was glad to hear that they found solace in this special moment. I wondered if this was the case for other families as well. From then on, as I photographed other newborns in the neonatal intensive care unit, I asked each parent the same question: “is this experience as special as you imagined?” Every response was some variation of “yes, it is.” Their responses became the inspiration for my photographic series’ title.

I soon learned about their first child, who unexpectedly passed away seven weeks after birth. He pointed to the hat he was wearing; it had the name of their first child spray-painted on the front. I listened as he talked about the joy of being a father again. As he stared at his two premature twin boys in front of him, I could not help but wonder if his first child was on his mind. I admired his courage and openness. We wrapped up our conversation as the mother and nurse walked back into the room. They invited us to come, watch, and photograph the kangaroo care. As we walked over to join them, I asked the father if he has held his twins before. He said he is scared of accidentally dropping them, so he has not yet. The father took a seat beside the nursing mother. Exhausted from the day, he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep. The mother gave the father a look of amusement, and the corner of the father’s mouth flashed a gentle smile.

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