

The medical team wheeled Judith in the NICU delivery ward while dismissing me to the waiting room. Three solemn rows of brown factory chairs faced an oversized ticking clock, while the outdated TV droned on broadcasting the 5AM local news. How can news anchors perform with such perkiness at such an ungodly hour, I ponder. I continuously pace back and forth over the waxed white linoleum, and others just as nervous as I am become annoyed. They're eyes cut me with judgment, I sheepishly retire to a seat on the back row to gather my thoughts.

It's now 6AM and a female doctor briskly enters the waiting area and introduces herself quickly as the neonatologist and asks me to walk with her. She states that we're headed into the delivery room and begins to tell me of the dangers & difficulties of having a child 12 weeks prematurely. All thoughts and hearing diminish, when I enter the delivery room and see dampened hair pressed against my exhausted Judith's face. She is holding our son. It's the first time I see my wife and the love of my life holding our heir, but I also notice that Judith isn't smiling and I immediately begin to pay attention. I slowly turn to the doctor and ask with a dry mouth "What's wrong?" I slowly express those same words to Judith who is feverishly wiping tears from her face with one hand as she looks at him with such longing it scares me.

The doctors tone is serious as she informs me that we have approximately 7 minutes to spend with our child before, Charlie takes the deep sleep. He's been Charlie since we found out "we" were pregnant. The doctor begins to explain in terms I can understand that when babies are born prematurely like Charlie, there's not much they

can do but make his time 'comfortable.' I watch my wife as the doctor delivers these shots to our hearts with the precision of a Marine sniper. My insides hurt and twist and turn with a depth of pain I never knew existed.

With my eyes I ask Judith if I may hold him, and she gently hands over my beloved Charlie. With his thin hair and soft wrinkly skin I softly nestle him into the deepest crevice of my arm because all I want to do is fiercely protect him. We've only just met, but every fiber of my being knows him, I mean deeply and truly knows him. I lean in and take in his smell. He smells of hope and love as he rests peacefully in my arms. He's tiny & beautiful & he looks as if he doesn't have a care in the world. His fingernails are nonexistent and I begin to run my finger over his wrinkled brow. If I had all the time in the world I could simply stare at the outline of his hands. I kiss him on the forehead, because he's a living breathing angel, and I know it. I sit beside Judith as we marvel at our creation, our Charlie.

I beam as I wheel Judith through the sliding doors, she grips our football wrapped Charlie with a hold tighter than any running back I've seen during Super Bowl Sunday. I guide my precious cargo into the back seat, then anxiously start the car and begin our trek home. The ride home is so peaceful both Judith and Charlie fall asleep because its been a busy last couple of days. Arriving home, I give Charlie the grand tour of our small two bedroom house, and I whisper in his ear that it's not much but it's ours, and its full of love. I look him in his sleepy eyes and tell him to get comfortable, but not too comfortable because if I have my way he'll be moving out at 18. I chuckle to myself as I

lay him in his cradle and pull up a chair so I can continue to marvel while my little warrior sleeps.

Six months quickly pass and Charlie has graduated from an infant swing to the floor, where he has just mastered the slow crawl which looks more like a shameless butt shuffle. The greatest fort known to man is located in 'The Charlie Fun Corner', where plush teddy bears, and all of his spit covered plastic toys litter the soft burgundy carpet. Judith's got the corner so tricked out and child proofed that a suicidal man couldn't hurt himself if he tried.

Charlie turns a year old and Judith puts together the greatest birthday party any one-year old has ever had. I go out to the kitchen to bring in the birthday cake and Charlie chooses that exact moment to utter his first words. Of course, all the guests heard him mumble 'Mama' first, but I miss it. And I feel a little sad. I come in with the cake, pick up my birthday boy, and as if he can read my mind, he instinctively seems to know that I need him to do it again, just for me. He looks me in the eye and babbles and spurts out some mumbo jumbo, and I am the only one who is absolutely certain that I heard 'Dada'. No one else is sure, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that he was trying to cheer me up.

I put him to bed and do my nightly check of the house, and since Charlie's birth, sleep detail has been short catnaps rather than a steady 8 hrs of uninterrupted sleep. I know his various cries, each of them can put my senses on high alert. I learned the

three basic wails on day one, they vary between the most primal of needs 'hunger, pain, wet.' It pains me to hear either one from Charlie.

I crawl in the bed next to Judith, I inhale that sweet smell of this tired woman that I adore. My fingers linger beneath her clothes tracing the line of her stomach, thighs and the widened hips that she has boastfully resented since Charlie's birth. I could never yearn for anything different, she gave us Charlie. I gently snuggle next to Judith, and breathe in her hair as I prepare for yet another night of light sleep. Before I drift off, I lay back and enjoy the rhythmic breaths of Charlie and Judith.

Suddenly, I startle, I'm back in the delivery room, and Charlie's hand is in mine. I desperately turn to Judith and whisper that all I want to do is to put Charlie inside of my chest, to keep him warm and to protect him. My wife hears the sheer desperation in my voice - truly hears it! I realize I need more time, but I hand him back to Judith, and as I do I realize I'm handing off the early morning cries, the insomnia, the messy mealtimes, little league, his first girlfriend -- his entire life. A life that we will ALL be cheated out of.

Charlie's breathing becomes increasingly shallow, I helplessly watch as the slight rise and fall of his chest subsides. I am floating above my body and somewhere in the distance I hear a low wail coming from somewhere deep within Judith, as she holds our still, perfect Charlie in her arms. I examine Judith, then Charlie, and he looks so peaceful and happy in his mothers arms. A great wave of grief and despair washes over me. My body rattles like a paint can attempting to mix evenly, and I began to cry. I cry

Jordan Baylor - 7 Minutes With Charlie

for Charlie. Judith. And for myself. Mostly I realize that I'm crying for a million things that will never be. For a deserved life that will never be lived.

Judith, Charlie and the remains of a blubbering mess are all that's left.