

# MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side of our profession and our lives

## The Weight of Stewardship

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I stood in the hallway, and I promised to be your son's steward. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I was blinded with optimism, my own son like yours born eleven weeks early and weighing less than a kilogram, having just recently made it home happy and healthy. I kissed his cherub-red cheeks that morning before I left for work, lingering a little too long. I remember telling you, "You'll be home with him soon, too."

That's the beauty and the challenge of being a parent. It colors every aspect of your world.

I couldn't help myself. I wanted, I needed to comfort you. Despite my medical degree, I was a NICU parent too. A badge unwanted and foreign, sharp, and edgy, yet unmistakably mine. I told you my story because I thought you would find comfort in knowing his doctor had walked in your shoes; that perhaps when I said, "I'll care for him like my own," I meant it.

Like all good mothers you must have sensed danger. I don't think I'd ever had a parent ask me before how likely I would need to "resuscitate" their child during a procedure. In fact, I remember your use of that word took me aback. And despite my best attempts at reassurance, I couldn't hide the truth that he was terribly, life-threateningly fragile and we were about to perform a procedure that is only done on a baby his size maybe a hundred times a year in specialized centers. We spoke about statistics and worst-case scenarios, but in the end, I left you with reassurance; "Give him a kiss, and you'll see him again soon."

But that was the last time you touched his cheeks, pink and warm. Did you wish you had lingered longer? The next time they were grey and cold, and you were wailing. Sounds no human should ever have to make. Sounds that seemed to permeate my mind for weeks in both waking and sleeping hours.

We had invited you and your husband into the catheterization lab after it was finished. After I used every resource possible to stave away a truth that I wasn't ready to face: he was dying, and I couldn't save him. No one fought harder for him than I did. I promise I was fighting for you, too. But it wasn't enough, and I wept.

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We tried to hide the blood and gore, make him as presentable as he could be for you. I found the most comfortable rolling chair around, as if you cared about your comfort in that moment. The nurse handed him to you, peaceful and swaddled. It could have been an image from the birth suite, except that he was still, ever so still.

When your mother came in a few minutes later her cries rose loudest, and I shuddered. How can she possibly go on carrying her pain and yours?

It had been an hour of precious time alone with him in a quiet, clean room when we walked in to offer condolences and explanations. I tried not to notice how your husband held him closer when he saw us, as if his son still needed protection, and we were the ones who would hurt him.

When he asked, “What happened?” it should have been punctuated as an exclamation rather than a question. I let the cardiologist speak first, explaining the procedural course and the complications. Then I chimed in with recounts of his resuscitation, and when I used that word just as you had a few hours earlier, I felt a deep sense of heaviness.

I wasn’t surprised when you were angry. I may have wished for it even. Yet your words of disappointment and blame still hit me like a gut punch. All I could muster in response was that I did everything in my power to save him, but it was beyond my control. I knew this was the truth, yet I couldn’t help but feel that I needed convincing too. For, what had I been to you but a steward of death and tragedy?

It has been months now since that interaction, but your piercing words still find their way into the forefront of my consciousness. They have found a home in the dark depths of quiet and self-doubt, yet not for their truth as I am certain that I did everything I could. But they serve a purpose, a reminder of the limits and weight of stewardship. The problem with being stewards of fragile lives is to those who love them the labor doesn’t matter, does it, when in the end the result is the same. So how could I blame you for finding me responsible?

Do you know I think of you and your husband often? Whenever my son meets a milestone that yours never will, my thoughts drift to you. I hope and wish that you have found the peace to celebrate him anyway.

Yet, I move on, the secondary trauma as termed, in tow. I must move on. I have found a new dichotomous existence. I try to be the same mother and pediatric anesthesiologist that I have always been, but how can I be? I am changed. I am changed by the love of my children, and by the loss of yours. I am fractured, and yet whole. I am scarred, but also the best version of myself.

Perhaps one day, you can be too.