

Steven Edwards
from *To Tell a Happy Story*

For our own survival, we fell into shifts. Since Rebecca took care of so much during the day (feedings, laundry, dishes, bills, her own work as an editor) while I taught my writing classes at the University of Nebraska, I picked up the slack at night. When his crying started at one, two, three in the morning, I rose and went to him. I changed his diaper. I tightened his swaddle blankets. I rubbed his little back. If he had spit out his pacifier, I put it back in his mouth. I held him in my arms and sang in a whisper. And always my mind went down the ever-growing checklist of what could be wrong. Was he hungry? Thirsty? Was he too cold? Too hot? Did we need a white-noise machine to imitate the sound inside the womb? Did we need to let him cry it out? Was he napping too much during the day? Was he overstimulated? Was he just fussy? Spoiled? Trying to manipulate us? In those moments in the darkness, alone with my son, I blamed myself for never having an answer that helped him.

Other men pulled off fatherhood with such grace and humor, and with multiple kids: the difference, I thought, had to be me. Our son's crying was a problem because I wasn't patient enough. Because I wasn't man enough. The thought that he might die, that it might be better for us all if he died: I saw it as a personal flaw, and the night shifts were my penance. Sometimes he slept for an hour or two between crying jags. Other times it was only ten minutes. Rebecca would roll over, drowsily ask if I needed help. But if the two of us got involved, half-asleep and tense, it could lead to a fight, and that was the last thing we needed. I would tell her I was already up, that everything was fine, that she

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should rest. To keep myself awake I shouted into my pillow, punched myself in the thigh. Whatever it took. Again and again, over weeks and months that slowly turned into a year, then two, I rose in the night and went to our son.

Through it all we were compulsive about documenting his good times. We kept a camera with us and were ready at a moment's notice when any smile, like a ray of sunlight, passed over his face. To tell a happy story about our child, even if slightly fictional: we needed that. For all of his desperation and pain, he was still an incredibly beautiful boy. Dark blue eyes and soft honey-blond curls. Chubby dumpling cheeks inherited from Rebecca's Polish family. He was the baby strangers at the grocery store, men and women alike, stopped in their tracks to coo over, who people called a little doll. Rebecca organized our pictures of him on Facebook to share with friends and family, and in any spare moment of downtime she and I found ourselves scrolling through them, hungry for the lives of wonder and enchantment the pictures suggested.

And, yes, there were the rare good days: the times we put him in the stroller and, one foot in front of the other, walked the neighborhood. There were the days we stopped to chat with friends down the street about Nebraska football or the weather. He would sleep a bit, then wake and keenly take in the world, and even play peekaboo and giggle a little. We began to wonder if it were all in our heads.

I remember one day we came home at dusk to the sound of a robin chirping in the maple tree in our yard, and that sound—those gurgling chirps—lifted me out of myself, out of my pain, out of despair.

Other days I managed to write for an hour or two, or garden in the backyard, or cook Rebecca a nice meal and chat with her in the evening as we watched television. For those

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few hours his screaming and screeching, his terrible sleep, as well as his new symptoms—the eczema scarring both his cheeks and forehead, his distended belly and disgusting bowel movements—belonged to a distant, harmless past. On the good days we were as optimistic as we had been on the night he was born.

Unfortunately, there was no method for inducing one of those infrequent good days. What calmed him on one occasion could provoke him on the next. If one thing went wrong—if none of our bottles were clean and we had to wash one before feeding him, and if in the time it took us to wash the bottle he started to cry—nothing brought him back. Theories about his pain dominated our talk. We got different brands of diapers. We changed formulas. Changed detergents. We got him softer sheets and an organic mattress pad. We put him to sleep in his crib in his room, in a swing, in a co-sleeper by our bed. We put him to bed early, kept him up late. Fed him vitamins, a probiotic. Every minute of every day was consumed by the most basic of necessities: getting him to eat, getting him to sleep, getting him to *stop crying*. Like wild animals—like wolves frantic over a wounded body in the pack, faced with blood, raw bone—we circled and paced around our helpless child. We kept a vigilant watch for clues, for answers that never came.