



## CHAPTER 1

# The Sharp Heart

The first thing they hook you up to when you check into a maternity ward is a fetal heart monitor. It's not much more than a flat plastic paddle attached to a long cord. The whole thing is then plugged into a small machine near the bed that monitors your baby's heartbeat and broadcasts it back to you in three ways: a whooshing drum beat, a set of green fuzzy numbers and a jittery printout that looks like the results from a polygraph examine. It's a truth machine. Indeed.

For whatever reason, though, when no fetal heartbeat registers, the machine goes silent, the paper goes blank, and the numbers are replaced with what now seems like a cruelly ironic little symbol for a heart. It sits there frozen on the screen, pumping at you, flashing at you, mocking you, like a stale yellow traffic light. The sound and printer go dead with a moaning whir and all that's left is that heart.

That puke green, electronic heart. That cheap, misshapen, god-forsaken, square heart. A heart with corners. A sharp heart. The same one I still see every time I close my eyes. The one that has forever been tattooed on my psyche.

It was early August 2000 when my wife, Kim, entered the hospital 41 weeks pregnant. Without professional prodding, it seemed our son, Noah, was perfectly content to stay exactly where he was, snoozing and getting rounder by the day. "He's such a Fleming," Kim joked. And for the longest time, after checking into the hospital in order for Kim to be induced the next morning, we listened to the reassuring pump and whoosh of the fetal heart monitor. It made it feel like our boy was right there in the room with us. His strong and noisy heart filled the air—loud, clear, and steady; never dropping below 135 beats per minute.

It went on like that for six hours. Now, there are a million things that can go wrong during a pregnancy, but for some reason, when we made it to the hospital, only hours away from reaching the finish line, in our hearts it seemed only natural to relax a bit, to celebrate and think, “We made it.” It’s such a great feeling. As we filled out paperwork and phoned our friends and family, Kim and I sat side by side in that hospital room, holding hands, playing kissy face, laughing, hugging, and daydreaming about having our son here in less than 24 hours.

“We’ll be a family tomorrow,” I said, walking over to check Noah’s printout. I held the paper in my hands, so proud of that strong and steady chart. It looked like the most magnificent mountain peak known to man.

*Dave, get away from there. Kimmy, will Noah be taller than me? Everyone is honey. Will he have blond hair? Brown. He’ll be tough and funny, right? He might be sensitive and serious. When would he get married? I don’t know. What school would he go to? Miami, maybe. How about Stanford? Okay. Will I like his wife? Yeah . . . and she’ll adore you. I want to backpack through Europe with him the summer before he goes off to college. You think he’ll want to go with me? Maybe, if you can somehow manage to stop acting like such a complete dork right now.*

Oh, what a glorious six hours.

Then, suddenly, Kimmy winced.

That is where everything began to turn sticky and confusing—gelatinous almost; where the world we knew before Noah was slammed shut behind us and sealed forever.

Although her contractions were coming up mild on the monitor, Kim was bent over in pain and in progressively more anguish. You must understand something: Kimmy is about as tough as they come. This wasn’t normal. I was shocked, in fact, when the next time the nurse came in with more paperwork, Kim asked if she could have a shot for the pain.

In the time it took for the nurse to get the shot and come back, Noah’s life had begun to slip away. In those 200 seconds, the kaleidoscope of color and smells and sights all went grayish and blurry—as if everything was suddenly wrapped in sticky plastic, the ceiling melting and swirling into the floor, the colors of our lives mixing into some new kind of reality. This all took two, maybe three minutes tops. That’s all it took for our world to change—completely and forever. Two hundred seconds. Two hundred terrifying seconds. The length of a short song on the radio. A few TV commercials. That’s it. That’s all the time and warning we got, and then our entire being was twisted inside-out; as if someone had yanked our guts out from the navel; like untangling an old, bunched-up sock.

Another burst of pain burned in Kimmy's side.

She sat up and winced, bent sideways, squeezing my hand until I was sure the bones would snap like dry twigs.

Seconds before, we were talking about what college Noah might attend. Now the fetal monitor, which had been steady and strong like a drum, was suddenly wobbly and warped and jumping all over the place like a slot machine. The numbers, those ugly green fluorescent numbers, jumped to 210 then down to 15 and back up again and down with increasing randomness.

There was no pattern. No steady beat anymore. Not from any of our hearts.

Just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, just when our thoughts made that leap from "No biggie, the monitor's just slipped off" to "WAIT . . . IS SOMETHING WRONG?" the sounds and symbols disappeared all together.

Nothing.

Then 188.

Both our eyebrows rise.

Back to nothing.

Jesus.

Now 55.

111.

32.

...

Nothing.

Goddammit.

Silence.

A steady beat.

His heart beating again, ours too.

135 . . . 133 . . . 140 . . . 131 . . .

Breathe. Inhale.

Atta boy. Good boy. Thank you.

Our hands come together. We squeeze. Total silence on the outside; screaming in our heads. Our eyes lock. We are reading each other's minds. *Something's wrong.*

22 . . . — . . . 74 . . . — . . . 221

Back to that stupid green heart. Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

— . . . 118 . . . — . . .

Nothing.

Nothing.

Oh Jesus.

Nothing.

No numbers, no sound. Just that heart.

Nothing on the screen. Forever.

Nothing, forever.

Looking back, that may have been the hardest moment to take. Because in retrospect we realized that in these few short minutes, Noah was fighting for his life. Fighting, suffering, struggling in his own little net, daddy's little warrior.

"Oh, he just wasn't meant for this world," they will say, patting their own heart.

"Ya know, at least he didn't suffer," they will say, dropping off a casserole.

They weren't there, though. He fought. He struggled. He gasped and moaned and cried. He may have been meant for another world, but Noah battled to be here. He wanted to be here. He suffered. He thrashed. He kicked. He was in pain. I have to admit that. I have to come to grips with that if I ever want to get better: my son was in great pain as he fought for his life.

He was bleeding to death.

That is essentially what happens with a placental abruption. The placenta, which supplies blood to the baby, tears away from the wall of the uterus, and the baby bleeds out. Imagine what it would be like if someone unplugged the aorta from your heart. Placentas have life spans. That is another lovely detail we learned. Placentas can get old or tired or used up. They can die. Partial placental abruptions are not uncommon. A pregnant mother sees a little blood while at home, she drives to the hospital, gets some clotting medicine, stays in bed for a while, then has her baby.

But full placental abruptions where fetal death occurs are extremely rare. Lightning strike rare; 1-in-5,000,000 rare. It's the Powerball of pain. It's so rare, in fact, very little research has been done. There are no celebrity benefits. No marathons. No bake sales. No research grants. No one trying to cure it. Trust me, Kim is an expert now; can quote *The New England Journal of Medicine*; statistics, studies, proteins with long names. She knows more than most doctors, although we've learned that's not always saying much.

"Okay," said the serious and confident neonatologist we saw after Noah died. "Now, you had a placental abruption at 41 weeks that resulted in fetal death."

"The fetus' name was Noah," I always want to interject. But who am I kidding? I don't have the guts anymore, don't have the energy or the confidence.

"And you were at home . . . ?"

"No we were in the hospital."

"In the hospital?"

“Yeah, on a heart monitor waiting to be induced.”

Stunned silence. Always stunned silence. Nurses. Doctors. Even the gray-haired expert who has seen it all takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. He adjusts his ugly, blue and burnt orange Tommy Hilfiger tie. He buffs off a spot on his giant mahogany desk the size of a Civic.

“Oh . . . I see . . . hmmm.”

There are very few known causes for placental abruptions, other than extreme high blood pressure and cocaine use. And if there are next-to-no known causes, then there are even fewer ways to prevent, predict or counteract a full PA once it starts, other than almost immediate detection, which we most certainly did not get.

The nurse came back in, finally, with the pain shot for Kimmy and immediately we asked her about the heart monitor. She made a cursory glance over her shoulder and saw the screen.

Heart. Heart. Heart.

“Hmmm,” she mumbled.

Then it jumped.

212 . . . — . . . 42 . . . — . . . 117 . . . —

Heart. Heart. Heart.

“See?”

The nurse shrugged.

“Probably just slipped off your tummy,” she said.

We squeezed hands. Our lungs refilled with air. *Just slipped off your tummy.* Happens a lot.

The shot went into the IV, but it gave Kimmy no relief. As the nurse lifted Kim’s gown and fiddled with the fetal monitor, Kim relaxed a little bit and sunk back into the bed. Her body was no longer as tense, but the pain was still there, still white hot.

The nurse kept fiddling. Kept adjusting while looking over her shoulder at the monitor, waiting for the numbers to climb, to get steady—for Noah to come back. I wait, still, to this day. A minute went by. Then two. Her adjustments got more physical, moving and pushing Kim’s tummy.

“These stupid monitors,” the nurse said.

We have developed the technology to clone a human being, to keep men alive with artificial hearts and send go-carts to Mars, but the fetal heart monitor, well, those little contraptions are still run on Radio Shack technology and held in place by equal parts elastic bands, gel, and luck.

Nothing. The nurse kept working, but the screen stayed blank.

She fiddled with it some more.

She pushed. Adjusted. Added more gel.

Nothing.

Nothing but that puke green, cubed heart flashing in our faces.

“Come on little one, where are you?” she said.

There was a little panic in her voice now.

Nothing was working.

“Let me go get another nurse who’s better at this,” she said. “Let’s see if she can help. It takes a certain touch, you know.”

She walked to the door, but as soon as she hit the hallway she started running. Her white sneakers squeaking on the floor. Panic setting in. You could tell. She tried to hide it, but we understood. Kimmy and I looked at each other in silence, knowing. Something wasn’t right. We’re in trouble. We know it. No one has to say anything. Our hands squeeze together. They are soaked in sweat. We know it.

Almost as quickly as it closed, the door swung open again. It was another nurse; this one blonde and southern, her eyebrows already pinched into a V. Faking calmness. All “Hihowareyou?” and “Isthisyerfirstbaby?” as she messed with the monitor. More blue gel. More pushing. Sliding. More worried, nervous over-the-shoulder looking.

Nothing.

The other nurse bounced from foot to foot in the background.

“Hmmm. Well. Gosh. Maybe he flipped over. That happens. Come on little fella, where you hiding at?”

And then suddenly, Kim, who had been quieted a bit by the pain medication, exhaled and sat up in bed as if awakening from a nightmare. She smiled a puzzled smile.

“Oh wow,” she said with a hint of hope, “I think my water just broke.”

“He’s coming tonight,” I thought. “He just can’t wait to get here. Okay. Okay. That’s why the monitor was all screwy.” It’s weird looking back how we tried to talk ourselves out of the stark reality that was as clear as that green heart on the monitor—the one that was screaming at all of us in a way no one was hearing: NO HEART BEAT NO HEART BEAT NO HEART BEAT.

“Okay sweetie,” said the blonde nurse. “Let’s check.”

She stopped with the fetal monitor for a second, smiled warmly at Kim, and pulled back the bed sheet.

Bright red blood.

A giant pool of it. Crimson—inky almost—horrifying in its volume and its contrast to the pure white bed sheets. The most blood I have ever seen. Bright. Bright. Soaking into the sheets now, almost pinkish and shiny on the edges. I swallow. I shiver. I stumble back and grab hold of the armrest on the chair next to me. The nurse immediately pulls the sheet back over Kim, turns and runs out of the room. The little black-haired nurse follows her. They say nothing. They just leave. Running. No faking it anymore.

We're all in deep shit.

I reach out and touch Kimmy's cheek. She doesn't know. She is looking at me. Those sweet blue eyes wide open, asking, pleading. Her face, framed by thick, sweaty brown hair, is a question mark.

"It's okay Kimmy," I say. "There's blood—a lot of blood. They went to get a doctor."

Kimmy is fading a bit. I lean in close to her.

"You okay? Hang in there, sweetie. A doctor's coming. Coming right now, sweetie. Hang in there. Two seconds. HANG ON KIM, sweetie, hang on."

I kiss Kimmy on the cheek. Now I'm the one who is faking calm. The images are swirling again. Colors mixing, like blood seeping into those sheets. The net tightening. All those warnings: *If you ever see even the tiniest bit of blood call your doctor or come straight to the hospital*, echoing in my head.

Kim asks me to go check on the nurses. I walk briskly out the door and down to the nurse's station. They are leaning over a phone, wildly leafing through a giant phone directory, searching for numbers on the gray pages.

They are so frantic they don't see me there, standing above them.

Blondie puts her finger on a number and looks up.

"Is that amount of blood normal?" I ask.

"We are trying to reach the doctor right now, okay Mr. Fleming?"

I used to be daddy or proud Poppa or future diaper changer. Now, all of a sudden, I'm Mr. Fleming.

Blondie looks down. They ignore me.

I walk back to Kim's room, and on the way I list to the side of the hallway for a moment, like someone on a ship that's just been hit by a big wave. I realize later what that was. It was the tidal wave reaching land; the sonic boom hitting me; the signal that nothing will ever be the same again.

Nothing.

Forever.

Boom.

I get my balance back, take my hand off the wall, and keep going.

I am back at her side. We hold hands. The nonverbal communication is stunning in its completeness and clarity. Glances. Sighs. Looks. Smiles. Squeezes.

We know.

Do we know?

We know. We know.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

That green heart. The jagged heart. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

Then the door busts open, and behind a giant clumsy ultrasound machine on wheels is a tiny female doctor in blue scrubs and a funky, paisley operating room hair-cap.

Everyone moving with a sense of purpose now; the machine wheeled into place. The plugs, the switches, the gel, everything one-two-three like a drill, including shoving me out of the way.

"I understand you've had some bleeding and trouble finding your baby's heartbeat," said Doc Paisley. "What I'm going to do now is check the baby with the ultrasound to see how he's doing, and we'll go from there. . . ."

She starts with the wand over Kimmy's stomach. The lights flick off as she tilts the screen toward her so she can see. Moving quickly she tries several different angles and locations.

There is nothing.

No heart beat.

No movement.

Nothing.

On the screen, Noah is face down, limp, sluggish. Nothing. He's not moving. Lifeless. This is very hard to watch. He looks limp. A blob. He's gone. Is he gone? He can't be gone.

I will pray and cry and beg and scream and vomit and curse and pound my fists through walls for the next six months and finally go half-crazed at Christmas trying to find some peace with this, but Kim and I both know it, or are starting to understand it: He's gone.

The doctor has seen enough.

She stands, shoves the machine away, nods to the nurses, and they start rolling Kimmy's bed toward the door.

"Your baby is in trouble, okay?"

We nod.

"We need to take you in RIGHT NOW for an emergency C-section."

"Right now?" I ask.

More nods.

Kim and I glance at each other. That's all the time we get. This isn't the movies. One glance. I grab hold of the railing of the bed by her foot. I will help push the bed and stay with Kim and be the hero and will the outcome to be different. We hit the door. The doctor slides in front of me. I give her the go-go-go nod, like, "Come on, time's a wasting."

She puts her hand firmly on my chest. I lose my grip on the railing. This memory goes into the gallery, next to the frozen green heart on the monitor, the unused car seat that stays in the trunk for months

and that look on Kim's face—me forced to let go of the railing, the cold metal bar slipping out of my fingertips like losing the grip of someone who is dangling off a ledge.

"You can't come with us," the doctor says. "You just can't. Stay here. We will keep you informed. You can't come. We'll take good care of her. I promise."

I'm not listening; I move to my right and tiptoe above the doctor.

"I love you Kimmy. Hang in there. I love you sweetie . . ."

What more do you say? I hadn't rehearsed this. There's no time.

Just a few minutes before we were discussing godparents and Christmas presents and whether or not he'd be a fullback on the football team or a center on the hockey team. "Both," I said, "and an artist." Now it's as if I'm looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, and Noah is getting farther away instead of closer.

My throat swells. My tongue is thick and sticky now. I shake my head. Rub my eyes. But I'm in a fog. I can't focus. The bed is rolling. The doctor turns to grab on where I was just holding it. Taking my place. I can't think, can't speak. I swallow. The bed is moving. Almost out the door now.

"I love you Kim . . . be strong . . . everything is gonna be . . . I love you . . ."

Kim gives me a flat smile and a nod of her head. Determined. Scared. But strong. She is the fighter. I am nothing like her.

"I love you," she mouths to me.

Then she's gone.

I stand there, frozen. The tart, muddy, acrid smell of blood flows up my nostrils and stings my brain, like ammonia. *That's Kimmy's blood.* I can't breathe. Won't breathe. Have to avoid that smell. That very thought. Feel sick. I want to go back. Press pause. Erase. Rewind. *That's Noah's blood.* The room is empty. Silent. Still. The overhead lights are still dark from the ultrasound machine. Can't see too well. The sick, greenish glow from the fetal monitor is the only light in the room. I do not move. My hands and arms are heavy at my side. I can't move. I am alone, paralyzed with confusion.

Did that just happen?

Wait.

No.

Stop . . . no . . . wait.

What just happened?

The door is closing.

Wait.

Did that just happen?

Wait. Stop. No.

Wait.

Wait.

Please, wait.

The heavy, wooden door swings shut.

I am plunged into darkness.