

# MULTIPLES ILLUMINATED



A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND ADVICE FROM  
PARENTS OF TWINS, TRIPLETS AND MORE

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**MEGAN WOOLSEY & ALISON LEE**

Foreword by Susan Pinsky, triplet mom, host of *Calling Out*, and wife of Dr. Drew

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MAKING PEACE WITH IMPERFECT

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I reached into the plastic box and my newborn son's tiny hand gripped my index finger. Weighing only four pounds, I could barely see him beneath the shock of tubes, wires, and tape. Just a few feet away, his twin brother was lying in an identical box. Almost a full pound heavier, he was sunning himself under "jaundice lights," his eyes covered with deceptively cute baby goggles.

*Are these really my babies,* I wondered, as a litany of dreaded possibilities raced through my mind. *What if they're not okay?*

Despite my five-page birth plan, my sons' entrance into this world wasn't the joyful experience I anticipated, starting with hospitalized bed rest at 25 weeks to manage pre-term labor. After two months staring at the same four walls, my contractions kicked into high gear. A bedside ultrasound revealed Baby A's umbilical cord blocking his entrance through the birth canal.

"These babies are coming tonight," said my doctor, holding my hand reassuringly. "If we wait any longer, we could cut off Baby A's air supply."

I was numb. After weeks of painting the ideal birth scene, complete with subdued lighting, quiet tones and immediate nursing post-delivery, my vision of holding my babies after they were born evaporated. On a conscious level, I knew the odds of a complicated birth were high, but I

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had been collaborating with my boys for weeks. They were both head down and in position.

We were two days shy of the developmental safety zone of 34 weeks—a critical milestone since I knew babies delivered before then typically spend their first days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

As the nurses wheeled me into the operating room, frigid air engulfed me. Instead of soothing voices lulling me into a meditative state, a team of nurses strapped me down to a table like a prison inmate awaiting execution. The fluorescent lights shone so bright it was impossible to shut them out—even with my eyes closed.

I wanted to scream, "Wait! My boys aren't ready to be born yet—and even if they are, they wouldn't want to be ripped from my body like this." Instead, I held my husband's gaze, grabbed his hand in a white-knuckled grip, and tried to breathe.

It felt like hours passed before I heard my first son's muffled cry rise above the surgical slurps, burps, slushes and suction. Then a minute later my second son wailed—much louder than the first—almost as if to say, "Put me back in, you jerks!"

Hearing my boys cry for the first time was incredible—they were breathing! But it was also bittersweet. There was no baby on my chest after birth, no skin-to-skin contact, no opportunity to whisper, "I love you" into their ears, and certainly no time to put them to my breast.

I saw both boys for only a second before nurses whisked them into a side room where a team of neonatologists aspirated their lungs, checked their heart rates, and gave them APGAR scores. I was grateful my sons were born in a hospital equipped to deal with any problems they might have. I was also devastated.

My babies couldn't hear my voice. They couldn't smell me or touch my skin. They couldn't feel my presence. I was trapped in recovery while strange faces strapped them to

monitors, poked them with needles and attached them to IVs.

They were less than one minute old, and already I felt like I'd left an indelible scar on their psyches. I worried they would feel abandoned, that they would miss the voice they had heard from inside the womb.

"Go with our boys," I told my husband, Brandon, trying to hold back tears.

He grasped my hand, "I don't want to leave you."

"I'm fine; they're all alone. I want them to hear a familiar voice." I pleaded.

Four hours later a transporter finally wheeled me down to the NICU on a gurney. I couldn't touch my babies from my bed-on-wheels, but I could peer over the side railing. I barely got a glimpse of my little guys before our three-minute supervised visit ended.

I watched helplessly as the nurses in the NICU tried to mechanize the human processes I had been providing for my babies. In an instant, they became their primary caregivers—not me and Brandon. I wasn't the first, the second or even the third person to hold them. I felt cheated. Guilty. Like I was already failing as a mom. I couldn't keep my boys safe. I couldn't soothe them when they cried. Those duties fell to others more qualified than me.

The following four days were a mix of agony and pain, with a few magical moments connecting with my sons. Recovery from the C-section was especially difficult because I had been confined to a bed for weeks. All of my operating systems ground to a halt so my body could focus on protecting and nourishing my babies. My resting heart rate dropped, my lung capacity decreased, even my bowels slowed to a point where the unmentionables were impossibilities, and that caused excruciating pain.

"You can't go to the NICU until you can walk to the bathroom," said the nurse, before explaining that if I wanted to feel better and relieve the trapped gas, I had to walk.

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*Yeah, right, I thought. I can't even sit on the edge of my bed without feeling woozy. How am I going to walk seven feet to the toilet?*

I couldn't tell whether the pain was from surgery, bed rest, bowel issues or a combination of all three. But the result was the same: I couldn't see my babies!

Brandon felt guilty. "It's not fair that I can see them and you can't."

"You're right; it's not fair," I replied. "But I need you to hold our guys as much as possible."

I knew premature babies needed holding. I knew skin-to-skin contact with a parent helped them regulate their breathing, maintain their body temperature, even gain weight. They'd have to achieve all three before they could be discharged. I knew if I couldn't be there, Brandon was the best stand-in. They knew his voice, too.

Almost 40 excruciating hours had passed before I got clearance to see my babies. Giddy with anticipation, I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, even dabbed on some sweet-smelling, phthalate-free lotion, no small feat considering that getting up to pee required Herculean effort. I was doped up on narcotics for the shooting pains in my abdomen. It felt like tiny knives constantly stabbing me from the inside out. But all I cared about was getting closer to my boys.

When I scrubbed in outside the NICU, I learned I couldn't hold them without asking a nurse first. I looked around the room and quickly discovered our sons didn't even have the comfort of each other. Packed together in the womb like sardines, they were more connected to each other than to me. Each feeling the other's kicks, somersaults, and hiccups. Now, they were completely isolated in industrial strength plastic boxes, separated by a few feet with foreign noises blaring at them 24 hours a day.

"How can they sleep with all that racket?" I asked while other newborns screamed and cried above the beeps, alarms, and loud voices.

"They're used to noise," the nurse replied. "It's loud inside the womb."

The nurses' expertise and intricate monitoring machines silenced my maternal instincts. Fear overwhelmed me.

*They're so small! What if I hold them wrong? What if they choke while I'm trying to feed them? What if I over-stimulate them?*

"I'm wildly unprepared to take care of them," I lamented to my husband.

"You'll be great," he said, reassuringly.

With the nurses' help, I learned to diaper, bathe, feed and soothe my babies amidst their medical paraphernalia. I also learned that just being there, holding them close, was the most comfort I could offer all four of us.

For the next 19 days, I traveled back and forth to the hospital, an hour each way. I took a receiving blanket from each of my sons every night, burying my nose in their scent, and called every morning, waiting with a pounding heart as I asked the nurse for a progress report on their feeding, breathing and body temperature.

When they jumped through the required hoops and got their discharge papers, I still didn't feel like their mom. But as we strapped our boys into their car seats and prepared for the drive home, I knew Brandon and I were gaining control of our family life.

Even though their first days weren't ideal, I've realized pigeonholing our boys into my world of perfectionism isn't fair. They won't remember a single moment of those 19 days. But I will. What I choose to remember, well, that's up to me.

Each day when Brandon and I dance with our sons in our living room and watch their faces light up as they giggle with delight, I realize how unimportant the imperfect days are. Can I say that I've come to terms with my babies' premature birth? No, but my outlook on life is different because of it. The whole harrowing ordeal shaped who we are as a family. It shaped who they are. And they are perfect.

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*Amy Paturel is an award-winning writer who has chronicled her triumphs, heartbreaks and parenting escapades for Parents, Fit Pregnancy, American Baby, the New York Times and Newsweek. When she's not trying to master the art of raising three boys without losing her mind, she teaches essay writing and pens service stories about health, fitness, food and wellness for consumer and custom magazines. Amy lives in a bleary-eyed fog, populated by giant LEGO towers, remote control cars, and captivating renditions of "The Hot Dog Dance."*