

Peter Soh Jia Ann

❧ *Date of Birth: 26 Feb 1998* ❧

❧ *Date of Death: 2 Mar 1998* ❧

I still remember the day I received the last ultrasound scan picture of my son from my gynae. I was 19 plus weeks into my very smooth pregnancy, past the non-stop nausea. She announced that baby had been cooperative and that it was definitely a boy. I could clearly see his little penis from the picture. Nothing could describe my happiness then, as I had always wanted a boy. For some traditional, irrational sense, I always thought that a boy would have it easier in life than a girl. I also had a false sense of well-being, as baby was already way past the dangerous first trimester. The only "sign" that something bad was going to happen was that my right eye kept twitching. Soon-to-be daddy dismissed my paranoia and told me that I was probably just tired.

On the exact day that I hit 24 weeks, I woke up with an overwhelming sense of tiredness. I dropped back to bed but hubby reminded me that I would be late for work. It was also the day that the soon-to-be grandpa (my dad) was getting his new Toyota car. It was a very typical and normal day at work. When it was lunch time, I went to the cafeteria to buy my food and a packet of drink. As usual, my colleagues gathered in the basement meeting room for the makan session. I searched for a place to hang my drink packet, found a hook on top of a whiteboard, raised my arm and then it happened - I felt a sharp abdominal pain, so bad that I had to lower my hand. I mumbled something about not feeling well and went to the Ladies. To my dismay, I was bleeding bright red. After calling my hubby, my boss took me to the hospital to see my gynae immediately. It was a tense and upsetting journey there.

The gynae was very worried. I was experiencing placenta abruptia and to make it worse, I also had placenta previa. Placenta abruptia is when the placenta separates prematurely, while placenta previa occurs when the placenta embeds itself in the lower part of the womb, partially or fully blocking the cervix. The gynae was concerned enough to stick a tube into my right hand vein, in case I needed an emergency blood transfusion. The

procedure was really painful but I was still in a state of disbelief and shock. I was sent to the labour ward, where I started experiencing contractions. Poor hubby had his arms scratched with red angry lines by the very distraught and painful me. I begged for an epidural when the gynae came. I did not care then that a needle was to be inserted into my spine, as I was such a coward when it came to pain. With the pain relief given, I lay there hoping helplessly and naively that the baby would not come out.

My gynae came again and told me that she did not want to do a caesarian to bring the baby out as she would need to do a vertical c-section instead of the normal bikini cut. I might develop infection later and compromise my fertility. She said since the baby was “only” a 24 weeker, “we” will let the baby figure his way out. When she said those ominous words, I did not know whether to agree or disagree.

The water bag finally burst after a very long labour into the night. Peter came out breech at 2 plus am. The pediatrician, after carrying him to my side, quickly whisked him off to the NICU. My heart felt so heavy when I saw my tiny son for the first time. The nurse had also mistaken that baby was a girl (what a contradiction to my happy discovery 5 weeks back); as he was so small that she did not notice his penis. She was to inform me later that it was a boy. I felt terribly sad and disappointed with myself. So what if he was a boy? He would be facing insurmountable problems, being born so early and that was my main concern.

After the delivery, I was sent to the maternity ward room. There, I heard babies crying so heartily that each cry was a stab at my heart. Where was my ideal birth, where a full term healthy baby would be suckling at my breast? I was in the room all alone, all alone... Things were happening in a blur and I could not remember where hubby was. He had gone to see Peter but had remained expressionless when he came back. He would only say our son was very small. I could not help but felt a sense of loss, especially when my little 3 year old nephew visited me that day, all happy and jumping around my bed.

The bad news started to come as feared. The pediatrician came to the room and kindly broke the news that Peter had bleeding on the right side of his brain. He said Peter had a difficult birth, so his fragile brain was hurt as he tried to come out through my birth canal. This meant he had a 50% chance of developing disabilities. Both of us sat there grimly as the pediatrician informed us of the arrangements to transfer Peter to a public hospital as his care would be extremely costly, without subsidies, if we continued his treatment in private.

The next day, I went to the NICU to see Peter. As I had read about premature babies before, I mentally psyched myself up as to how Peter would look. So the nurse was surprised that I only looked at the small tubed-up baby helplessly and did not cry, Peter was making jerking movements once in awhile, which the chatty nurse said was good – as it meant that his nerves were working. I apologized silently to Peter for putting him in such a predicament before leaving the NICU. I wanted to give up. Where would I have the strength to take care of a handicapped child and was I able to accept one? Those were sad, selfish thoughts that I kept to myself. Beside Peter was a huge baby, probably born of a diabetic mother. The huge baby's dad looked at Peter and then at me curiously. I wished I could whack him for his insensitive stare.

It was bad news again when the pediatrician brought hubby and me to a private room, just outside the NICU on the third day. Peter had bleeding on the left side of his brain as well. He would likely end up quadriplegic. Along the way, there would be build up of the cerebrospinal fluid covering his brain, putting pressure on the skull. Peter would need surgery to insert a shunt from his brain down to his spine to draw out the fluid and the shunt would stay with him for life. Peter had also stopped breathing that morning and was given a \$1000 injection to start breathing again. It was truly painful to see him struggling and suffering with all the uncomfortable tubes everywhere, and thinking about his very bleak future.

The pediatrician asked if we would like to continue intensive, moderate or palliative care, given the dire situation. Finally breaking down in tears, I asked if Peter would experience pain if we opted for palliative care. The pediatrician said they would keep Peter as comfortable as possible with extra oxygen and assured us that he would not be in pain. With this doubt answered, I opted for what I knew I would have chosen all along. If the Lord wants to take Peter back, we should accept and let go. I actually felt a sense of relief when the palliative care decision was made, as it meant Peter would not be suffering for long.

I called up my old classmate's mother as I was at a loss on how to get Peter baptised. It was unfortunate that most of the Catholic priests were on vocation seminar then, but we managed to get hold of a kind and understanding Franciscan monk. I could not stop crying during the baptism ceremony. My mother was in tears while my mother-in-law kept shaking her head mumbling "baby too small, baby too small". At least we women folk had an outlet – tears. Till this day, I still wonder how my hubby coped with the grief of losing his first born son. He never did want to talk, even now.

Peter was very brave. He held on for another three more days before surrendering to the Lord. We got the dreaded call on the early morning of the sixth day. Hubby drove and I could still remember the quiet night as the car cruised its way to the hospital. Peter was tired. He was breathing heavily and not moving much. To me, he seemed less agitated, perhaps at peace finally that he would no longer be suffering. It was the first time that I was allowed to carry him. Silently, I told him sorry again, that I really love him so much that I would not have hesitated to give up my life for him, if he had had a chance of a quality life here on earth. He went slowly away that morning, so slowly that it was heartbreaking to see him laboring breath after breath. Morbidly, I kept praying that God would let him die fast, but it was not to be. He passed away only at the break of dawn. My baby is now an angel in heaven.

We went home and hubby called my dad to ask how to proceed with the funeral arrangements. Hubby was unusually calm and collected throughout the conversation. As I was exhausted from crying, hubby persuaded me to take a sleeping tablet that the gynae had given. I was to regret this as I slept through the entire funeral arrangements. Hubby had to return to the hospital to collect his first born son's tiny body himself and dressed the baby in the coffin. I never knew about this, until years later, when we were having a conversation about something else, and he let slip what had happened that very sad day. Hubby had been a pillar of strength and I never did appreciate that during those dark days, being too absorbed in personal sorrow.

I was grateful that I managed to attend Peter's funeral or I would never have the closure needed. My family, especially my mom, in their misguided kindness, did not want me to go and I suspected that they were hoping that I would sleep through the entire day, with the cremation over before I woke up. I saw the little white closed coffin and badly wanted to open it. Thankfully, the caretaker asked if I would like to take a look. When the coffin was opened, I saw Peter sleeping there. He looked so angelic and sweet with the flowers surrounding him. I managed to touch his cold little face only for a short while before the coffin was closed again as the caretaker said it was time for his cremation. I guess it was unfortunate that I did not have someone to guide me on this journey of grief as I felt totally helpless. The fact that I did not have any control in deciding my own child's funeral upsets me greatly even to this day.

The next day, we went to collect Peter's ashes. The same kind Franciscan Father helped bless his bones and ashes. My mother-in-law, a Taoist, told her son not to erect a tablet for baby so that he could get reincarnated faster. When the officer asked for the urn, hubby (whose English is not exactly great) told the officer to take back the bones and to

“dispose” them. I was very very upset when hubby kept repeating the “dispose” word to the officer. “Dispose” sounded to me like “throwing rubbish”. I burst into tears again and chastised hubby, told him not to use words that he did not know the meaning of. He was shocked at my outburst and gently queried on the correct word to use. This unintended incident sounds rather like a joke now but it was terribly upsetting to me then.

I wish I had taken Peter’s bones and ashes that day, instead of leaving them to the Ministry Of Environment to “dispose”. It would have been more comforting if I could have them scattered in the sea myself. Till this day, I still do not know what happened to my son’s remains.

For a few years, my heart felt very weighed down every time I saw a cute little toddler boy. I cried when my second pregnancy ultrasound showed that it was a baby girl. It was so unfair to my daughter; I had secretly wanted her to “replace” my first born son.

My darling daughter will be 9 years old soon. She was also born premature via caesarian and was only 3 weeks later in gestation age than her brother during delivery. Although she too had a host of problems initially, she was lucky that her brain was not damaged. She is now a happy, healthy and well-adjusted girl in school. I am truly thankful to God that He has given me such a wonderful and beautiful daughter to keep.

My dad's new car was delivered to him on the day that Peter was born. It is due to be scrapped next year as the 10 years COE is expiring soon. I have never liked the car, for some weird reason, because of its association with Peter's time of birth. Now that it will be scrapped and gone for good, I feel a weird sense of loss again - after having sat in his car on occasions for close to 10 years.

For my son Peter, I am grateful for the 6 months that I had him within me, and the 5 short days that he spent here on earth. Through him, I now understand the meaning of selfless love. *Son* - You will always have a special place in my heart.

Luv
Mummy Olivia