

To Wynand, on Day 40

My precious son

I still hesitate to put it down black on white: my “son”. The word suddenly seems unfamiliar, a bewildered collection of letters that might as well have spelt “nos” or “ons”. It’s hard to believe that such a confusion of emotions can be locked up in this one short, strange word.

People ask me how it feels to at almost forty suddenly become a mother. But I don’t feel like a mother. On Day 12 I received a bouquet of flowers from two friends who wrote me a letter on your behalf. “Dear mom,” the letter began, “Thank you for bringing me this far – I’ll put my arms tightly around your neck as soon as I’m strong enough. Until then I’ll keep my eyes closed and dream of that day.” Signed: “Your son, Wynand the Fighter.” The letter made me weep so that I was unable to read it to your father. It was the first time I thought of myself as a “mom”.

You know, it is hard to feel like a mother if you’re not allowed to touch your son, to pick him up or caress him. If I merely stroke your little body protruding with lines and tubes, the alarms shrill because the lightest touch so exhausts you.

But particularly I do not feel like your mother because my chief emotions towards you are of humility and awe. You don’t look like a baby, but like a wise and crumpled old man who has at forty days old lived through far more and knows far more than I do on the eve of my fortieth birthday. I keep vigil at your bed, small and unimportant in your enormous battle, and I am overwhelmed by respect for you, by your fighting spirit and by what you are achieving in defiance of all predictions.

At your birth the doctors gave you a 10 percent chance of survival. You weighed 540 grams, born almost 16 weeks prematurely, the smallest baby ever to be welcomed in the hospital. But you were also a little fighter, they said. You came out vigorously, pink, and although you barely had lungs, you attempted to cry.

After three days your chances at life would double. And then increase by 3 percent a day. Try to cope a day at a time, the doctors advised us. Don’t think too much about the future. It’s going to be a long battle.

Today is Day 40. And 40 days, the paediatrician said this morning, are 40 days. It is nothing short of a miracle, he said.

In the beginning I was so scared of tempting fate, I didn’t want to tell the sisters your beautiful, beautiful name. I knew they were going to write it down and tape it above

your bed, and once you had been written down, you had lived, and you could die, could become someone for whom a funeral could be held. In my mind you were a little baby for whom life was still lingering in the future, who was still in the process of being completed there in your hospital bed.

But as I filled out your name on the application for your birth certificate, as I took photographs of you and each night wrote your name with a bold black koki pen on the little bottle of mother's milk I had been expressing for you during the day, as I shared your name with other mothers in the neonatal unit, as I gained the courage to unpack your stork party presents and display the congratulatory cards in honour and support of you – so my hope grew, my belief that you would live, and my incredible pride in you.

Today is Day 40, already you have conquered one deadly infection, and a second is losing the battle against you. Your lungs are struggling, but they are growing stronger; the risk of a fatal brain bleed is growing smaller. Today you weigh 800 grams, and under the ventilator tapes your little cheeks are for the first time starting to round.

And I am grateful for how I have grown in 40 days, thanks to you. Before you were born, I didn't want to have you baptised. The decision would have to be yours. Now I wish to thank a Life Force, the inexplicable Meaning of Life which our culture symbolically calls God and Christ. Unlike before your birth, I now know that I want to bring you up in the Christian tradition... not only because it is the way of worship most familiar to me, but also to humbly show how I appreciate you.

Through you I developed a new sense of friends and family. Our hardship taught me a greater empathy with those around me. I now realise how I neglected my people in the past three years – it was always so busy at work. And still they all came when we needed them – support and friendship like I have never experienced. I know one of the reasons why your progress is so surprising, is because there are so many people all over the world who think of you and send warm, positive wishes.

We are blessed, little Wynand, that you have come this far. We know how privileged we are when we see others in the intensive care unit: the young parents with the heart baby who lived for only ten days, the three year old boy who is dying from a brain tumour.

For you too the danger is not over: life-threatening infections and other setbacks may be waiting, a brain bleed has not yet been completely averted. There are unexplained shadows on your brain sonar, and the possibility of developmental problems because of your extreme prematurity. Day 40 is a milestone, but it is not even half the time you still have to remain in hospital.

But I now have the courage to start looking a little bit further than Day 41: I can cautiously dream of the day when your father and I will bring you home, of the holiday we'll enjoy as a family next summer, of the values we want to teach you.

Your grandparents say that when one has lived through such an experience with a child, he will always remain special. You are a very special person, and I pay tribute to you, my son.

Your mother

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