

I Can't Want That

On the evening Emerson was born, we almost lost him. That is, he almost died. There was no warning. Corbin was in her final push when, suddenly and unexpectedly, the doctor came into the birthing cathedral with seventeen attendants. I counted. There were machines and wires and the treacherous, relentless, medical beeping sounds. Everyone except us knew beforehand there was a complication. They had given themselves time to prepare. But we got nothing. Surgeons and parents were living in two completely different realities.

When Emerson came into this world, he was disfigured and silent. The room was silent. And gray. And Emerson was gray. With all the lights and people and medical equipment, I most remember the grayness and the silence.

I had photographed many births in Africa, but never was there this sort of silence. No one made eye contact with me. I asked what was going on - and so did Corbin - but there were no answers. They let Corbin hug his tiny, limp, silent body, before racing him to another place.

After a couple of days, when Emerson was safely cleared, I left the hospital for the first time. A prisoner leaving a prison, breathing fresh air again - as if it were the first time. I went to get us sandwiches. I decided to walk. I was hyper aware of my surroundings - the pavement and the sunshine and the crispness of the trees - I kept asking myself why everything was normal. Did they not know Emerson had come into this world? There was a man mowing his lawn, this seemed odd when just a block away, my son almost died.

Then it occurred to me how a hospital is an ongoing alternate universe. There were two narratives playing out; my new identity as a father existed in a sphere parallel to the rest of the world going about their daily routines.

The personal schism of parenthood and the dark corners of the world overlap through the way I have decided to navigate my life. The divide is in my photography. The camera is a conduit between being a committed and sensitive father and the darkness of humanity.

Two realities. First being formed and manipulated by the gray and quiet interior of the hospital room - and then manifesting itself differently in the delicatessen. In both locations I am the same person and, yet, on the same day, I was experiencing two completely different worlds. We all have interior lives that intersect with the exterior of society and the environment as a whole, but this was different. More visceral.

Photography has always excited me in its loneliness. Using the camera, interacting with the world, creates a conversation we may only have with ourself. The internal and emotional back and forth that becomes an inside joke. Or maybe, more accurately, a secret we are unable to share with anyone.

There is the dualism of the safe insulated world and the external world of darkness. Once in Uganda, I spoke with a boy named Phillip who had to execute his parents. He did this to prevent himself from being executed by the men who kidnapped him.

Philip told me all this with a sweet British ring in his voice. He had fought in a war and somehow, traversing through different realities, we met in the lobby of a posh hotel in Kampala.

As a stressed and anxious child, my mother used to tell me, “whoever promised you a fair life”. It seemed she’d say it for no reason, or maybe as a reminder to me, or to herself, of the toughness of living.

Being human isn’t about fairness. In fact, it’s about what is unfair. The idea that Emerson and Phillip inhabit the same planet is REALITY – the reality of contemporary society. Emerson and Philip were born in two completely different universes but on the same planet.

I’ve been making photographs since I was twelve. This was the age as Phillip was when he was forced to murder his parents. I was also twelve when I had a day at the circus where I wandered the grounds and made photographs, starting from early morning, when the workers were raising the tent, until the evening, when the last of the audience left. I had four rolls of film - 148 frames - to carry me through the day. This day was one of the most wonderful of my life! I wonder what Phillip had to carry him through the day he executed his parents? I wonder what Emerson will have to carry him through his days.