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# *the* Examined Life Journal

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# Hearts in our Hands

RYAN MCADAMS

The overhead fluorescent lights reflect off the dark windows that loom over a row of six incubators that line the back of the neonatal intensive care unit. Divots riddle the small room's concrete walls, which are covered with copper conductor tubing and webs of wire draped between clusters of outlet boxes.

"The unit hasn't changed since last time I visited," I say as I scan the room.

"Do you see him?" Beth, my cardiologist colleague, asks.

"Not yet," I reply.

As we stand at the entrance of the neonatal intensive care unit, a Mongolian nurse wearing a starched white nursing cap stares at me with a furrowed brow.

"We're here to see Hangol," I say. "Dr. Bayarmaa called us to help. We are doctors visiting from America," I add.

The nurse nods, then points to an incubator against the far wall.

"Thank you," I say with a smile. The Mongolian nurse smiles back as we set our medical supply bags down next to a small sink with a missing cabinet door. She walks toward us and hands us a cracked porcelain plate holding a broken chip of soap, which I pass to Beth. We scrub our hands under the water trickling from the rusted faucet. The strong smell of bleach emanates from a red bucket filled with "sterilized" plastic tubing that sits on the warped blue linoleum floor by our feet. I grab the tattered gray towel hanging on a hook above the sink, dry my hands, and head to Hangol's incubator. As we approach him, my throat tightens.

Hangol is not the same happy baby cooing in his mother's arms I first saw last week when I diagnosed him with a heart defect. Tonight, his skin is gray and mottled. A breathing tube dangles from the right side of his mouth and a feeding tube, filled with green bile coming up from his stomach, hangs from the left side of his mouth. As a neonatologist, I am all

too familiar with dying babies. Now I am worried Hangol might not make it through the night.

“What do you think happened?” Beth says as we huddle around Hangol and peer into his incubator.

“I’m not sure. He looked good last week. I’m just glad his mother brought him to the hospital.”

“If we don’t stabilize him, he won’t be able to fly to the US to get his heart repaired,” Beth says.

“I know. We need to save him,” I reply.

I examine his breathing machine and run my hand along his oxygen tubing to make sure the connector pieces are tight while Beth checks his heart rate monitor on the plywood shelf above his bed. I trace the electrical cord from his breathing machine to an outlet strip on the wall packed with plugs, one with frayed wires held together with white medical tape.

“His equipment seems to be working,” I say. “Although these exposed wires make me nervous,” I add, pointing to the outlet.

I reach into Hangol’s incubator porthole and peel back the white blanket he is bundled in. His bare chest heaves up and down, which causes the skin between his ribs to retract with each breath. I place my palm on his small chest and feel the rapid thumping of his heart beneath my fingers. My hand sweeps along his distended abdomen as my fingers palpate his rounded belly, which feels like a firm volleyball. I set my stethoscope on his chest and hear crackles, a sound produced as collapsed, wet air sacs pop open during inspiration, like the noise of Velcro being ripped apart.

“I think he’s in heart failure,” I say.

Beth listens with her stethoscope and nods in agreement.

“Let’s get an x-ray to look at his lungs and abdomen,” I say.

Out of nowhere, an electrical circuit hisses and the room goes black.

All the breathing machines in the unit stop.

“Power failure!” I shout.

“Don’t they have a back-up generator?” Beth replies.

“I doubt it,” I say, as I slide my hand onto Hangol’s bare chest and let my fingers rest on his rib cage. His chest doesn’t move.

“Hangol’s not breathing!” I call out. “I need a ventilation bag.”

“It’s above you,” the Mongolian nurse says. “On the shelf.”

In the darkness, I wave my hands toward the wall until I feel the shelf, then I sweep my hand across it and grab the ventilation bag.

“Hurry, he’s still not breathing,” Beth calls out. “And his pulse is weak!”

I slide my hand along the incubator and into the open portal, running my fingers over Hangol's face until I feel his breathing tube. My hands fumble for a few seconds as I unhook his breathing tube and connect the ventilation bag.

"Breathe, two, three. Breathe, two, three," I repeat as I squeeze the bag and crouch over him.

"His chest is moving. Keep bagging him." Beth says.

"What about the other babies?" I say.

"Hopefully, the nurses are with them."

Just then, the lights flicker back on. An explosion of beeping sounds blasts the room as the monitors, ventilators, and incubators reboot. The two Mongolian nurses scramble from baby to baby confirming that they're okay.

But it may be too late for Hangol. He's blue and not moving.

I place the stethoscope on his chest and listen.

"His heart rate is only in the 40's," I say. "We need to start chest compressions."

I yank my stethoscope off, open the sidewall of Hangol's incubator, and lift his limp body in my hands.

"Pull out his bed tray!"

Beth pulls out the padded tray, allowing us access to Hangol. I set him down on the tray and wrap my hands around his chest until my fingertips touch his spine.

"Start CPR," I say as I place my thumbs on his sternal bone and squeeze my hands, pushing his sternum and spine together to compress his small heart, which forces blood to pump out of it. At the end of each brief squeeze I relax my grip to let his chest spring back so that blood flows into his empty heart chambers.

"One and two and three and breathe," I call out as Beth squeezes the ventilation bag, which forces oxygen into Hangol's lungs.

Just then a "Boom!" fills my ears and the room goes pitch black.

"Not again!" Beth shouts.

In the darkness we continue doing CPR on Hangol.

"Stop compressions and check his pulse," Beth says after a minute.

I slide my left hand up his chest, encircle his right shoulder and run my fingers down to his bicep.

"Can you feel a pulse?"

"I'm trying," I say as I search for his brachial artery by massaging my

fingers back and forth over his small arm until I feel a faint recurrent beating under the tip of my index finger.

"I feel a pulse...it's above 100," I say with a sigh. "Keep bagging him, I'm going to grab a light from my bag."

With arms outstretched, I feel my way along the wall until I find my backpack. I hunt through the bag, grab my cell phone, and rush back to Hangol's incubator.

The faint glow of the cell phone illuminates Hangol. His breathing tube is still connected and his chest expands with each squeeze of the ventilation bag.

"You're getting good chest rise," I say as I look at Beth. She glances up and the light reflects off her eyes and raised eyebrows.

"We can't do this all night," she says and shakes her head.

"I know."

A moment later the lights flash on.

I stare down at Hangol. His eyes are shut and his skin is blue. He looks dead. I grab a stethoscope and listen to his chest.

"His heart rate is in the fifties," I say, pulling off the stethoscope. "I'll start compressions."

My hands encircle Hangol's chest, which I squeeze together 90 times a minute as Beth breathes for him. After two minutes, Hangol's heart rate is above 100 again.

Beth takes the stethoscope and listens to Hangol's chest.

"He sounds wet. I hear crackles."

"We need an x-ray," I say and look over to the Mongolian nurse. "Can we get a portable x-ray?"

She shakes her head. "Only in radiology."

"Where's radiology?"

"Other side of hospital," she replies. "Ten minute walk."

I take a deep breath and run my hand across my forehead as I stare at Hangol.

"We need to figure out what's going on with him," I say. "His breathing tube may not be in the right position; he could have pneumonia or heart failure." I pause and look up at Beth. "And I'm really worried about his abdomen."

"We don't have much time. He's already coded twice since we got here," she says.

"All right, let's go."

We don't have a transport incubator or any portable oxygen tanks. We must jury-rig Hangol's life support equipment to take with us.

The Mongolian nurse fills two canvas "pillows" with oxygen, wraps Hangol in a blanket, disconnects his monitor wires, and then lifts him from the incubator and holds him upright against her chest. The other nurse holds up Hangol's IV fluid bag in her right hand and clutches a bundle of tubing in her left.

As we leave the NICU, I hug the first oxygen pillow, squeezing air into Hangol's lungs through the plastic tubing connected to his breathing tube, which Beth holds so it will not dislodge. In her other arm she carries the extra oxygen pillow. I shine a flashlight ahead of us as we race together down the long, dim hallways. After ten long minutes, we ascend two flights of stairs into a dark, deserted hallway where a locked glass door halts us.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" I ask.

The Mongolian nurse nods.

I bang on the door. No response.

"Where is the radiologist? You called and told him we were coming, right?" I ask the nurse.

"Yes," she nods.

The oxygen pillow in my arms sags, almost deflated. *Hangol could die right here in this damn hallway*, I think as my mind races. My eyes fix on Hangol and my heart rate quickens. I recall the trusting look his mother gave me when we first met. *Her son deserves better than this* I think to myself as I bang on the door again. I peer through the glass door down the dark distant hallway.

"Maybe no one can hear us," I say, clenching the canvas pillow. I pound the door with my fist and the glass rattles.

A minute later, a white-coated radiologist trudges toward us as if half asleep.

"Please hurry! We're almost out of oxygen!" I shout. The radiologist nods, unlocks the door and motions for us to follow him.

We rush in and a nurse positions Hangol for the x-ray. Since we have no monitor, I reach under Hangol's blankets and place my hand on his chest. His skin is warm and his heart thumps against my palm. He is okay for the moment, but the first oxygen-filled pillow is empty. Time is running out.

Minutes later we grab the x-ray film and dash through the halls carrying Hangol and his equipment back to the NICU. We arrive just as his second oxygen pillow deflates.



We return Hangol to his incubator, connect his breathing tube to the ventilator and then gather around the light box to view his x-ray.

I flick the light box switch on, stick the film into the holder, and then step back to study the x-ray.

Hangol's huge heart fills his chest. His lungs look fluffy white from fluid overload and his bowels are bloated with multiple cystic gas bubbles lining his intestinal walls.

"He's in heart failure," Beth says.

"Yeah, and I think he has necrotizing enterocolitis," I say with a heavy sigh, knowing this catastrophic bowel infection can't be fixed here.

"Can we call a pediatric surgeon?" Beth asks as she touches Hangol's hand.

"No," I shake my head. "He's too sick. They can't operate on him." I look up at Beth. "Not safely."

"But won't he die without an operation?" she says and strokes Hangol's head.

"I don't know," I say placing my hand over my mouth and chin. "Probably."

We stare at each other for a moment in silence. There seems to be nothing left we can do.

I look down at Hangol and notice his right foot kick out from his blanket. *He's still fighting*, I think.

"I can't give up, yet."

"You stay with him," Beth says and nods in agreement. "I hate to leave, but I have three cardiac cases today."

"When's your first one?" I say.

"Eight a.m. It's a cath case on a five-year-old girl," she says as she touches Hangol's head and strokes his hair. She pats me on the shoulder as she leaves.

I am alone with Hangol and the other five babies in the room. The cyclic sounds of his ventilator, like a series of ocean waves, resonate in the air. I sit next to his bed and study his long eyelashes and his round cheeks. I reach out and hold Hangol's tiny hand. Then I close my eyes and pray for him.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, I turn to see Hangol's mother. Her smile fades when she sees my weary face. A Mongolian nurse translates for me, while I explain to Hangol's mother that he might not survive another day. She nods, wipes her eyes, and sits down in the chair next to her son. I stand back and listen to her whisper to Hangol. She caresses his forehead, then strokes his hair and kisses his cheek. After an hour, she departs.

Alone again in the NICU, I sit next to Hangol's bed. He seems stable for the moment, so I leave his bedside to walk around to the other five incubators. One by one I observe the babies. Some are curled up asleep and peaceful appearing, oblivious to my presence. Others who are awake stare back at me.

I peer down at a tiny baby girl in the corner incubator who appears to be sleeping. Earlier, the nurses told me that this baby's monitor alarm sounds off all the time because it was broken, which may have explained why they had been slow to respond to it. Pale skin hangs off her thin frame and thick white tape plasters her cheeks securing the breathing and feeding tubes that hang out of her mouth. Her ill-fitting diaper engulfs her abdomen and chest. Multiple purple scabs cover her hands and feet from IV needle puncture marks.

As I stare at her closed, sunken eyes and gaping mouth, I notice she is not breathing. Her alarm begins to wail. She appears lifeless so I reach my hand into her incubator and stimulate her with a gentle rub. Like a switch being flipped on, she starts breathing and opens her eyes. My heart sinks. *Who knows how many times her "broken" alarm has gone off because she had stopped breathing?* With a little nudge she keeps fighting to stay alive.

I look at the clock. It is 3:30 a.m. I sit back down in the chair next to Hangol, rest my chin on my chest, and close my eyes.

Thirty minutes later, a blaring alarm jolts me from my sleep. I jump up and notice Hangol's chest is not moving. His ventilator is silent. I flip the power switch off and on, but there is no response. I grab a ventilation bag, attach it to his breathing tube, and start breathing for him. A nurse scrambles over and attempts to fix the ventilator. Hangol's oxygen level and heart rate plummet. I squeeze the ventilation bag over and over as I watch Hangol's chest rise and fall. I know if I stop, he will die.

After twenty-five minutes of relentless alarms blaring like a cawing murder of crows, the nurse gets the ventilator to work. I place Hangol back on the breathing machine and watch over him, afraid to leave his side.

Two hours later, the Mongolian neonatologist, Dr. Bayarmaa, a short, rotund woman wearing a white scrub jacket and pants enters the unit to start her day shift. My head aches as I update her on Hangol's condition.

"I am his aunt," she says with sad look in her eyes.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry," I reply. "He's a fighter." She nods, bites her lip, and then glances away.

Hangol's mother enters the room. Dr. Bayarmaa stands, greets her with a warm smile, and puts her arm around her shoulder. We all walk

over to Hangol's bed. He looks like he is sleeping. I place my hand along the side of his head and let it rest there for a moment. Hangol's head feels warm and his hair soft like silk. I wait for him to open his eyes, but they stay closed.

"Goodbye, my little fighter," I whisper, hoping he is just sleeping. His mother and Dr. Bayarmaa thank me. I hug them good-bye and then leave the NICU.

Half asleep, I trudge along the dirt path in front of the hospital to find a taxi to my hotel. As we speed off, my head falls against the seat. Numb to the chaotic traffic, I picture Hangol gasping for air while his mother weeps at his side. I close my eyes and hear the sound of bedside alarms reverberating in my head.

A few hours later, at the hotel, my bedside phone rings. I drag myself from a deep sleep to answer it.

"Hangol has just died," Dr. Bayarmaa says in a soft voice.

I let out a heavy sigh. "I'm so sorry," I reply. "Thank you for calling me."

I hang up the phone, collapse into my bed, and look up at the dark ceiling as tears run down my cheeks.

The following day I return to the hospital to attend Hangol's autopsy. I descend the basement stairs to the morgue. When I open the thick autopsy room door, I see Hangol's small naked body on a stainless steel table. His skin is bleached and wax-like. My eyes fixate on his swollen face. Next to Hangol, two other dead babies lie blanched and rigid. My heart sinks as I realize that they are from the NICU. One is the tiny baby girl with the broken ventilator alarm. A wave of grief and frustration hits me as I realize that half the babies in the NICU have died in the past day—all deaths that may have been preventable had the babies been born in the US.

The autopsy reveals that Hangol had a rare congenital heart defect, cor triatriatum, characterized by three upper heart chambers, instead of two. I stand above him and survey his splayed chest cavity. My gloved fingers glide across his glistening white ribs. I touch his salmon colored lungs, which feel like a soaked sponge. Loops of purple and black bowel spill out from his open abdomen and lie like entangled bicycle inner tubes on the steel table. Next to the bowel, Hangol's heart sits in a small maroon puddle of blood. I reach down and cradle his plum-sized heart, which feels cold and rubbery in my gloved hand. I insert my index finger into the dilated extra heart chamber and dislodge a thick blood clot that looks like a clump of grape jam. I trace my finger along the smooth muscular strands adhered like vines to the pale pink, inner heart walls. After a

few minutes, I lower my cupped hands and set his heart down on the table and step back.

As I leave the morgue, I turn and take one last look at Hangol's lifeless little body.

Later that afternoon, I return to the surgical hospital to rejoin my team. As I search through a large box of surgical supplies, a Mongolian translator tells me that Hangol's mother is waiting in the lobby to see me. Surprised, I head down the hallway. I pause for a moment and then push open the lobby doors.

Hangol's mother smiles at me from across the lobby and a tear rolls down her cheek. I walk toward her and give her a hug. She then hands me a white frosted cake adorned with strawberries and mandarin oranges to thank me for caring for her son. Overwhelmed, I look away and swallow hard, amazed by her generosity.

"I am sorry that your son died. I wish I could have done more to save him," I say as I put my hand on her shoulder. "Hangol fought like a great warrior with a strong heart."

She nods and wipes her eyes. We stand together for a photo and then say goodbye.

With my head down, I walk back toward the operating room holding the cake. At the end of the hallway, I step into an empty room, shut the door, and sit down on a couch. I bury my forehead into my hands and close my eyes. Images of the three dead babies flash in my mind. I feel anger swell in my chest. *How can we help these babies if we can't even count on having electricity, an oxygen tank, or alarms that work?* I press my hands against my face as tears wet my palms. Then a picture of Hangol's mother, caressing his head as she whispers to him, surfaces in my mind. This image is followed by scenes of Beth's hands squeezing the ventilation bag and the Mongolian nurse carrying Hangol to radiology as we all rallied to save him. *Hangol had lived and died surrounded by love. He was loved.*

My heart stops pounding, as a sense of calm comes over me. I stand up, walk over to the window, and peer out. I close my eyes and feel the warm sunshine on my face. When I open my eyes, I see a rosy-cheeked mother wandering along the dirt path toward the hospital carrying a bundled baby. *Another baby who needs care, another opportunity to help...*

When I return to Seattle I call my mother. The answering machine beep lasts half a minute.

"Hi Mom, I made it back from Mongolia..."

The phone rattles as she picks up. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear your voice. I was so worried! I haven't slept since you left. Did you see the news about that lunatic in North Korea? I think you should stop going on these trips. You could get killed. Your brother was so worried about you. Did the kids miss you? You must be tired."

"Mom, I'm okay."

I tell her about Hangol.

"Oxygen pillows? Come on," she laughs. "Did you ride a camel? I hope you rode a camel. How was the flight? Did they feed you? Last time I flew they didn't even give me peanuts. They've gotten so cheap. Can you believe it, no peanuts? Did your luggage make it?"

"Yes, I got my bags."

"That baby, Hugo?"

"Hangol."

"Did you get a picture of him? How do I know this isn't one of you and your brother's jokes? Oxygen pillows..."

"I brought his heart back with me."

"What? They let you take it on the plane? How did you get through security? Wait, you're kidding. You're kidding, right?"

"I'll send you something to prove it."

So I cupped my hands together and pictured his silent heart. Then I wrote this story, hoping you could still hear it beat.