

## 9. Time to scream

‘The service will be private,’ I told the woman sitting next to me who had introduced herself as Elizabeth, ‘so there is no need to put the time in the newspaper.’ We sat in burgundy colored, straight-backed leather chairs identical to 30 others in the room at the funeral home. My eyes studied the shiny brass upholstery tacks that attached the leather to the wood-frame of the chair. I wanted to find a tack missing. I studied each chair that lined the walls and each chair placed around the table. Row after row, chair after chair, I focused on every shiny brass tack in the spacious room. All the tacks were neatly in place. There weren’t any empty places.

The empty chairs were in the room as if waiting for people to come, to fill them up and talk about burying the person who has made their lives empty. ‘What’s a hole for?’ my mother asked each of us when we were four years old.

‘To sew up,’ I told her.

‘If Treesa doesn’t think she did it then I guess I did,’ said Mike, thinking Mom was accusing him of breaking something.

‘To put things in,’ said Joe.

‘To dig in,’ said Carl.

‘For burying treasure,’ said Frank.

‘To look into,’ said Pete.

Three chairs on the other side of the massive table were occupied by Tom and two men from the funeral home. Elizabeth and I sat across from them. The wide rectangular table stretched between us in an empty gulf, intensifying the light and dark chocolate hues of the walnut grain. Light and dark, full and empty, night and day, pain and joy, skin and no skin. My eyes began to sting so I looked down at the rug. It was oriental and thick, red mostly, blood red.

‘Is Sarah spelled with or without an H?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘With an H, and have the papers say that Sarah was “the new-born daughter” of Mr and Mrs Vigour. Some people don’t know that I had the baby.’

‘What about the name of the minister?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘I’ll have to call you after I find out who it will be.’ What I meant was, I’ll call you after I find one. Although I was raised Catholic, I hadn’t been to church in years. I didn’t have a priest

to bury our baby. And I was not going to be a foxhole Catholic who would call a priest only when I needed one. But experience brings us to religion, one priest had said years ago when I was still attending church and listening to sermons.

‘Can you arrange to pick up the baby from the hospital after the doctors finish the autopsy?’ I asked Elizabeth. I couldn’t say body. Elizabeth nodded as if baby was the right word to use.

Across the table, Tom was talking to a man about kinds of caskets. He asked my opinion of a casket style or color or something about brass handles versus wood. I told him I liked his choice, although I don’t know what he asked me. Being in that room and discussing Sarah’s funeral was not real to me. I wanted to go home, to be with Molly and Emily. I wanted everything to go back to normal.

I handed Elizabeth the gown that Molly and Emily had worn when I brought them home from the hospital. It was light yellow and printed with darker yellow ducks. The gown had a drawstring at the bottom, and the sleeves had extra pieces of material to fold over the baby’s hands so she wouldn’t scratch herself with her fingernails. My mother had given me the gown and a matching blanket before Molly was born. She wore it home from the hospital seven years ago, then Emily wore it two years later. Now it would be Sarah’s always.

The blanket that matched the gown was dingy-gray now, and its edges were frayed from too much loving. This was the blanket Molly named Acey when she was 18 months old and distraught because she’d lost it. She followed me in and out of rooms in the house as we looked for her blanket. Her anguish seemed to ease when I chattered. So I held her hand and asked, “Where’s Molly’s blanket? Where’s Molly’s blanket?” as we went from the kitchen to the living room to the bathroom.

‘Uun no,’ she answered in language I understood. I don’t know, she responded to me again and again. Then I opened the door to her bedroom. There on the floor was the blanket. Delighted, I shouted, ‘I see it.’ For Molly, the joy in my voice merged with the comforting sight of her blanket. The words *I see it* were forever after words of happiness, reunion, security. So Acey came to be.

She took Acey everywhere with her. She dragged it through sand and waves at the ocean. She took it to nursery school where it hung on her peg with her coat until it was time to come home. It went to birthday parties when she was two, three, and four years old. By the time she was five, the blanket no longer traveled

with her – it stayed home to be comfort at night. Affection for the ragged blanket permitted passage from infancy’s dependence to a lifetime of independence.

Emily wore the yellow gown with the yellow ducks when I brought her home from the hospital, but she was not wrapped in Acey. Molly would not have parted with it, and I wouldn’t have asked her to. And Acey was too worn to wrap around a new baby to bring her home from the hospital. Emily didn’t need a blanket as it was a warm day in spring. Chrysanthemums, red buds, dogwood blossoms had burst out in joyous celebration of her life. It was warm, too, the day I came home from the hospital without Sarah. She wouldn’t have needed the blanket either.

‘Do you have a blanket that I can wrap the baby in?’ Elizabeth was asking.

‘No, not one that matches.’ I reached into my wallet to get a five-dollar bill. I started to hand it to Elizabeth. I was going to ask her to find a blanket to match the yellow in the gown. Then I remembered that it didn’t matter about the blanket because the casket would be closed, so I told Elizabeth that we wouldn’t need a blanket.

Molly wanted desperately to see the new baby. The night before coming to the funeral home, I called our regular pediatrician. If I woke him, he didn’t tell me. I can hear the softness of his voice even now, years after that conversation.

‘The children will be expecting to see a Gerber Baby,’ the doctor said. ‘They won’t see that.’

What would make Sarah look less like a Gerber Baby, the autopsy or just death itself, I wondered while the doctor was on the phone. Maybe death alone was reason enough not to look. But death can’t be hidden from our girls. Her death was permeating everything for all of us. I couldn’t research it all then – all the questions that needed answers, that must be answered. Should they look at Sarah? How do I explain the scars where doctors cut open her head to look at her brain? She was so pink and warm. What color is death’s face when it isn’t powdered like Robert’s? Would her forehead be permanently wrinkled from the pain she must have endured before she died? So many questions went unsaid when I asked, ‘Doctor, Molly is begging me to let her see the baby. And then there is Emily. She would come, too, if we went to see the baby. What would you do?’

He and I had been through cuts that needed stitches. His stitches were neat and his voice was calm and nonjudgmental. He

never asked me how I let an accident happen. Even on the day Molly and Emily found a jar of Sudafed tablets in my purse and ate several of the pretty red pills that looked just like candy red hots. They chewed pills while I vacuumed unaware. He treated the girls and me during that emergency room visit. He had the girls vomit a total of seven pills, and he told me to sit down. After I did, he said I was about to faint. Fear and relief drained my face of its color and my body of its ability to remain upright. The mutual trust between us was built upon years of discussing treatment and respecting each other's area of expertise. His decisions had been valid. This call was his, right or wrong. What we would see and what we wouldn't see during those next few days would haunt each of us for the rest of our lives.

The doctor spoke tenderly, softly, yet deliberately. He must have known that I would hear his words always. My friend, the pediatrician, said, 'Keep the casket closed.'

'Good night,' I said.

A man came into the room and whispered to Elizabeth. She nodded to him and said softly to me, 'A call for you. This man will take you to the phone.'

I assumed that Molly or Emily was calling. We had been gone for more than an hour. But instead of a little voice saying, 'When are you coming home, Mommy?' the neonatologist's anxious voice said, 'You cannot have an autopsy done. You cannot afford it.' At first feeling assaulted, my stomach tightened, then loosened when I became indignant. Then, realizing he had no say, no input into this decision, I was in control.

'I'm having it done,' I told him.

'I don't advise it.'

'I'm not asking for your advice.' I said and hung up the phone.

I went back to the room where Tom was and Elizabeth and the two other men from the funeral home. Tom was moving toward the front door.

Driving home, I told him about the call from the doctor. 'It's none of his business whether or not we have an autopsy,' he said. 'He's got a hell of a nerve calling us at the funeral home. The decision is already made. And asking for you instead of me. Does he think he can bully you?'

The doctor knew nothing of our finances or my recent inheritance from my grandmother. His reasoning did not make sense.

Nothing about our home was familiar. Walking up the steps to the front porch, I heard a low awkward humming. Inside, people in an unfamiliar situation didn't know whether to try to make jokes or smile at an acquaintance or just concentrate on feeling droplets of sweat run behind their ears and between their shoulder blades. Human shapes moved throughout the living room in ripples. I couldn't focus on faces. The moving blur was like looking at an anthill from a few feet away: I know there are individual ants, yet I just see the mound move. Foresters were there from the Weyerhaeuser paper mill where Tom worked, and government foresters, foresters' wives, and teachers from the elementary school where I worked. My shoulders bumped other people's shoulders. Hugs and muffled I'm sorrys, came from all directions. I smelled the perfume of shirts just out of the dryer or just off the clothesline or jackets just back from the cleaners. I felt out of place in my red-and-white-checked maternity dress that had wrinkled when I folded my arms tightly across my empty womb, yet each of us in that room was out of place.

Then out of the hum and blur, Kath and Glenda's faces emerged. I found their hands and pulled them toward the kitchen. Kath is Molly's godmother. Glenda was my boss at the elementary school where all our children went. She was the teacher; I was her aide. Together we taught 26 kindergarteners whatever they were capable of learning: some learned how to read and some never learned to sit still. Teaching came naturally to her, suited her. She was teaching me how to teach almost without my knowing it. How important those two women had become to me; for years we'd depended on each other as we hadn't had family around. Mom and Carl and Pete had moved to our East Coast town only recently. Glenda, Kath, and I had not spoken in the past four life-changing days, then I remembered I hadn't told them about the baby's birth.

'Come to the kitchen right now, you two. I'll pour the coffee. It was the oddest delivery. I have to tell you.'

I forgot. In that instant, in the company of my friends, I forgot. In my desire to tell them about the baby's birth just as they had shared their birth experiences with me – I forgot that Sarah had died. During the delivery I was only thinking of the baby to come. I had no thoughts of any other outcome. It was that joy, that expectation that I wanted to share with my close friends. I smiled. I laughed. I told them what happened until I remembered.

When I did, the pain came in a fresh rush as if she had just died. I never forgot again.

We sat on bar stools and rested our elbows on the counter where, for years, we had traded recipes, discussed children's discipline problems, explored our newly evolving roles as wives and mothers, tried to imagine that we were making something of ourselves in the early years of women's liberation – the 70s and 80s – even though our days were spent changing diapers and enduring two-year-olds' temper tantrums. I told them about the contractions being mild, so mild that I could not believe it when the nurse said it was time to push. But something happened. Each time I tried to push, the pain was terrific. It wasn't like the other deliveries. Pushing for the others was not painful. I pleaded with the nurse-midwife to do something, but she told me to keep pushing and said how wonderful it was that the baby was small. I wasn't tearing and wouldn't need an episiotomy. 'If the baby was small, why did it feel as if it were coming out sideways?' I asked them.

Kath was laughing, pretending not to take me seriously, but actually, she knew that Glenda and I remembered the episiotomy was worse for her than any other part of labor and delivery.

'No laughing,' I told her challenging her, baiting her.

She bit. 'You earth mother,' she said. 'If you wouldn't be such a hero and take some Demerol or have a caudal, you wouldn't get yourself into these situations.'

'All right,' I agreed, 'but remember, Kath, you couldn't raise your head off the pillow for 12 hours because of the medicine you took. Remember the doctor said you'd have a headache to end all headaches if you did? And, Glenda, you went to the hospital after lunch, and you didn't see Scott until the next day when you woke up. I wanted to see the baby right away.'

'Pain was the price you paid,' Kath said.

I knew she was right, but I said, 'Well, it didn't hurt until it was time to push.'

'Then it was too late for pain medicine,' said Glenda.

'All the Lamaze literature says it's not supposed to hurt when you get to the pushing part. It hadn't hurt for Molly and Em,' I said.

'Naaaah,' they said in unison.

'How would you two know? By the time you got to the pushing part, you'd already had medicine,' I said.

'It wasn't the time for me to test some man's theory about how to have a baby,' Glenda said.

‘There are times to cover your you-know-what, and this is one of them,’ Kath said.

‘It’s a good thing I’m not looking for sympathy from you two,’ I said laughing. ‘And, remember, you’re drinking my coffee.’

‘Okay, so tell us what happened,’ Glenda said.

‘Well, Tom said I bent the bed frame. I reached under the mattress, found some springs and metal strips and squeezed. He said the bed frame was bent after I let go. But before I did let go, I heard the baby cry. Tom said we had another girl. And the nurse-midwife was so excited she screamed, “Apgar Score 10”.’

‘They wrapped her in a blue and yellow blanket and handed her to me. I’ll tell you something: I was mad at her then. But only for a second or so . . . well, a few minutes maybe. God, that was a painful delivery. I unwrapped her; she was beautiful. The cheesy skin coating was in the folds of her neck and under her arms and behind her knees. As I looked under each arm and leg and counted her fingers and toes, she seemed like a tired rag doll. I guess the others were like rag dolls just after birth, but this baby seemed more tired. Maybe the delivery was hard on her too. Then I started to feel sorry for her. I wrapped her up again and held her close to me. My heart was beating so hard that I thought it would beat its way out of my chest. I brought her closer to me. She found the nipple and fell asleep. That was the last time I held her.’

They started to cry before I did. They remembered before I did. I heaved, inhaling the horror of Sarah’s death. As if to shield myself from the intake, I covered my face with my hands and sobbed. Kath and Glenda’s arms squeezed my shoulders.

‘When is the funeral?’ Glenda asked. ‘We’ll be there with you.’

‘It’s private. It will be just the family.’

‘Well, we’ll see you after. Call me. I don’t have to work Wednesday. I’ll be home,’ Kath said.

‘Call me in the middle of the night if you want to,’ Glenda said as she and Kath left the kitchen and made their way through the crowd in the living room so they could leave by the front door.

The phone rang. It was my friend, Vera. I never have to wonder what Vera is thinking. She tells me. Once I became accustomed to her, I found myself being honest – completely honest with her and myself. Kath and Glenda and I, on the other hand, alter the truth a bit to avoid hurting each other. We dance around each other’s feelings. We’re all a good bit Irish. ‘Someone’s at my door, I’ll call you later,’ might really mean: ‘I have been on this phone

for 20 minutes listening to you fuss about how your husband hasn't repaired the screen in the back door. I'm tired of listening, and besides, I have to do laundry this morning.' Or, if one of us is bothered by something and not volunteering what it is, the other two of us might wonder and hint, but we dare not ask for fear of intruding. Not Vera.

'When's the funeral?'

'It's private, Vera. Just family.'

'That's not what I asked you. When's the funeral?'

'No, Vera, I mean it. It's private.'

'There are times when your dear friends know how to help. You shouldn't have to do this alone.'

'No, Vera.'

'Why?'

'Because.'

'Because why?'

I turned my back to the people in the kitchen, and I cupped the mouthpiece of the phone with my hand. In a low voice I said, 'Vera, I think I'll scream. I can't believe I'm having Sarah's funeral. If I start screaming, I won't be able to stop. I don't want anyone to hear me.'

'I'll come for the girls first thing in the morning. They can play with Jena while you are at the funeral.'

'Thanks, Vera, but we need to do this as a family. We all need to say goodbye. I was at one of my brother's funerals when I was four. On this, I know what I'm doing.'

'I'll see you after. I love you.'

Love was as tangible as the Saran wrapped tray of sliced roast beef and cheese, or the envelope full of \$320 in small bills – the overflow from the flower fund collected at Tom's office. Love came in hugs that gathered the pieces of our shattered souls. It came with pretty bows from florists as well as from the reddened eyes of friends saying the seemingly lame, yet compassionately comforting, 'I don't know what to say.'

Forever after I would know the need to go quickly to loved ones in pain. How lopsided, I used to think, that the new griever is flooded with sympathizers at first and then endures months of a drought of visitors. Rather, the time of public mourning is immediately after death. Grievers can draw on that love, either literally or by calling up the memories, in the months and years of private grieving.

## 10. The rosebud

When I woke up the next day, the morning of Sarah's funeral, the warm, sunny weather seemed out of sync with the event before us. How could the sun light the bedroom? Where were the black clouds? And rain so cold and blowing it stings stockinged legs? And wind that threatens hurricanes?

I closed my eyes and pulled the sheet over my shoulders. Maybe it isn't so . . . Sarah . . . the sun. But my closed eyes saw Sarah's pudgy cheeks, her hair the color of mahogany, her pink lips, her slate-black eyes rimmed with the promise of becoming blue.

The night before I had told my mother that the thought of seeing the casket being lowered into the grave was ungluing me, she assured me it would remain above ground until we left. In mentally previewing the emotionally necessary, symbolic ritual of burying Sarah – all I could focus on was watching the grave workers feeding, hand over hand, more and more of the supporting strap as the casket slipped below the level of the ground. I cried thinking about it as I had cried 16 years earlier thinking of my dad's handsome, athletic body decaying.

The house was quiet with Tom and the girls still asleep, an eerie quiet after being filled for two days with mourners. The perfume of flowers wafted from the living room to the bedrooms, along with their airborne pollens, allergens, irritants. Our normal slightly unkempt house with its clutter – magazines on the coffee table or on the arm of a chair, newspapers on the sofa, teddy bears and dolls in strollers or baby beds, books, mail on the mantel or on top of the piano, crayons, magic markers, shoes – was too neat. As I surveyed the living room and turned to go to the bathroom, my bare feet left imprints in the springy pile of newly vacuumed carpet. Even the house was changed by death.

I rotated the faucet in the bathtub all the way to hot and cupped the cold water until it began to warm my hand; I pulled the lever diverting the flow from the tub to the shower and stepped in. At once, the warm water activated the letdown reflex and Sarah's milk dripped from my breasts. My shoulders shook, my eyes stung. I couldn't feel my hot tears because they were washed away by the shower's spray. Lochia, the bleeding after childbirth, ran down my legs and swirled in red pools around my feet and between my toes before disappearing down the drain. I got out of the shower

quickly, so I didn't have to see any more reminders of childbirth, didn't have to watch any more of me go down the drain.

My navy blue maternity dress with small red and pink flowers was on Sarah's changing table where I'd laid it the night before, along with a nursing bra and thick support stockings. Soon, my legs would stop aching, and I could stop wearing the stockings. But it would be weeks before regular clothes would fit. My eyes drifted from my clothes to the empty changing table, the empty bins. Just the day before the bins were filled with the miniature undershirts, the gowns in pinks, yellows, and greens with matching receiving blankets soft as cat's fur, one-piece play outfits, the diapers my teachers at school had given me at a surprise shower, the baby wipes and Desitin for diaper rash, the jars of Q-tips, diaper pins, cotton balls, the towels and wash cloths, the dresses in sizes 0-3 months that had been Sarah's older sisters', the matching tights and socks, baby rattles. My mother was in the living room when Molly asked for a big safety pin, and I headed, without thinking, to Sarah's changing table for a diaper pin until I remembered that Sarah wouldn't be coming home. Without my willing it, I heard myself inhale as if I were trying to take in a reality that was new again, fresh as the moment I learned she had died. My mother must have gathered Sarah's baby clothes and dipes and wipes and rattles. So the changing table was empty, looking as it had a month ago, before the girls and I had gone to the attic to find the box marked 'infant clothes,' before we'd washed, dried, and folded each tiny shirt, each little gown. The remembering made it new again. I gasped, waking Tom.

'What time is it?' he asked.

'Eight ten.'

'Are the girls awake?'

'I don't think so.'

'How are you?'

'Drained.'

'Can you manage?'

'Like having my legs amputated. It will be over. I won't have to dread it anymore.'

Tom noticed my shoulders slump, defeated. He followed my eyes as they stared at each empty bin of the changing table, and as they stopped moving to focus on nothing. He wanted to get my attention, to bring me back to the morning tasks of feeding and dressing the girls, so he hugged me. When my heavy arms would not raise to hug back, he knew I was somewhere else, as distant

to him as if in another century. He pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt; he'd put on his suit after fixing breakfast and getting the girls dressed.

From our home the cemetery was a 15-minute drive.

'It's 20 minutes until ten. We'll be late,' Tom said, issuing his last call for us to get into the car.

'They won't start without us,' I told him.

In my arms I clutched my purse and two cold, unopened bottles of beer.

'It's time to go,' Tom called. I didn't see the girls; I guessed they were already in the car. I hadn't seen or heard them all morning.

I was swept to the already opened front door by a sense of obligation. Something in my genes or upbringing said, you can't not go. I always finish everything on my plate, always drink the last of my milk. I could not have told my legs to move me through the front door, but I felt myself stumbling toward the car. The front door to the passenger seat was open. I sat in the seat and slid the beers, my props, into the side-door pocket of the Volvo wagon. I had no tranquilizers, no sleeping pills, no sleep, no skin. If I screamed or felt like it, I would drink the beers.

Molly and Emily were in the back seat already buckled in. Emily squeezed several folds of her security blanket into her left hand and sucked the thumb of her right hand and gazed at the window. Until that morning, Molly had been leaving her blanket at home, but she held hers tightly and she, too, fingered one of its corners and sucked her thumb. Normally the car would be filled with their chatter and Tom's and my responses, but tension manifested in silence.

Many cars and trucks lined the narrow winding asphalt paths of Green Leaf Cemetery. Since ours was a private family service for the four of us and my mother and my brothers, I thought there must have been services for someone else going on at the same time. One parking place was left. It was directly in front of the funeral home's green tent. I thought there was not enough room for our car. We should find someplace else to park, maybe at the end of the line of vehicles, a quarter of a mile ahead. Walking back would delay the starting for at least ten minutes, mercifully. Before I told Tom what I was thinking, he parked the car in the space that was too small.

I shut the car door and turned toward the funeral home's green tent a few yards away when the weight of my empty arms pulled me down. An eroding slope of sandy dirt and pebbles and sparsely

distributed blades of grass and clumps of moss rushed toward me. Before I hit it or it hit me, I surveyed the gravesite and saw three faces I recognized: Jamie King who taught me biology, anatomy and physiology, and genetics, and moored his cat-rigged boat at the sailing club. But this was a family-only service. Next to Jamie was Calvin Stokes, my principal, my friend, my boss, and next to him was Annette Angst, who had made beef stew elegant when she served it at a baby shower for me before Emily was born. I couldn't make eye contact so I looked down at their shoes: Jamies' brown deck shoes, Mr Stokes' wingtips, and Annette's shiny patent pumps, neat, pointed, proper, pretty, so like her. Beyond them were rows and rows of oxfords, loafers, work boots, dress flats, high heels. Pair after pair, two by two. Seeing the shoes of my friends made my arms not weigh so much. Could they have known I would have fallen without them? Because they were there, I could carry the heavy weight of my empty arms.

Four folding chairs were placed in front of the miniature white casket. I wished they weren't for us. No one should have to sit in them. Behind the casket stood Brother John, the Baptist preacher who would deliver the sermon. He rolled the stem of a rosebud between his thumb and forefinger. A rosebud, he said, has the potential to become a rose, yet it does not.

Brother John had called me the night before.

'Do you have someone for the services?'

The kindly man reminded me of Mr Rogers of *Mr Rogers' Neighborhood*. He wore blue canvas lace-up shoes and spoke slowly, softly. He ran the vacation Bible school every summer for children of any or no religion. Molly and Emily wanted to become Baptists after one week of making papier-mâché crosses and coloring cutout pictures of the apostles.

'Would you handle the service, Brother John?'

'Of course.'

At that moment I thought of becoming a Baptist, too. How had I stopped attending Mass? A habit as much a part of my life as eating breakfast. Was it the church's ruling on birth control?

'The pope's gone too far when he enters my bedroom,' my friend Kath told me when I asked her how we could think of taking the pill and Communion.

'It's one or the other, Kath.'

'If you believe the pope has a place in your bedroom,' she said.

A lifelong habit ended, I thought for only a short time, when I

couldn't concentrate on the Mass while shushing two noisy, wiggly toddlers. I kept saying I'd start back and hadn't, so I was in a town where I had no connection to the local Catholic church, and after a trouble-free pregnancy, Tom and I had to plan a funeral. Since attending church wasn't Tom's thing, it became mine. The thought of introducing myself to a priest and saying I was a Catholic once, and asking him to come to the gravesite and say a few words to comfort a family he didn't know paralyzed me. Maybe my Irish guilt held me back, maybe shock. So, when a Baptist friend had called last night and asked if we had someone for the services and I said, no, and she asked if we would like her to call Brother John. Then he called me.

The pastor's words, delivered in his mellow, soothing voice, contrasted with the harsh reminder of the purpose of the gathering, so I listened to the sounds and not the words. I drifted mentally, almost floated, out of the group of mourners toward the billowing clouds suspended in the blue sky. I looked back from my vantage point in the clouds and saw myself, a 32-year-old with short brown hair that frizzes on humid days, with arms and legs covered in freckles, sitting in the beige metal folding chair atop an emerald green mat that resembled grass only in its placement. I was startled by this view of myself because what didn't show was the devastation. My gut churned and rippled; my thoughts raced uncontrollably. I looked as if I had slept and eaten in the past four days, though I hadn't. I looked as if I had skin on, but I was an open wound. I looked as if I were in control, but I didn't know if I would start screaming.

Tom was next to me wearing a white, permanent press, dress shirt that had come from the back of the closet and showed the characteristic wrinkles of having been shoved and crowded for too long. He hated wearing ties; he said they made his neck itch, but the two, pointed, blue-stripped panels hung from his neck. He had on his suit pants.

The dress Molly wore had been plucked from the pile of clean clothes, unironed. The strands of her hair that had not made it into her ponytail lifted and fell with the light breezes. She was on the other side of me in my mother's lap sucking her thumb. My mother, all 100 lbs of her, looked like a giant in a floor-length beige dress with small orange flowers because her strength showed in the set of her shoulders. Emily sat in my lap and occasionally kicked her feet, making a popping sound because her too-loosely-buckled shoes flapped.

To the right of the casket and dominating the landscape was a horseshoe-shaped piece of Styrofoam covered with hundreds of pink rosebuds sent by our sailing friends, Barbara and Preston Sellers. The curved shape and the blends of dusty pinks were a blur until I focused on one rosebud. Its small perfectly formed petals were made of a soft pile, like velvet, in shades of pink that ranged from a pale blush to a rich Windsor rose. The rosebud itself was exquisite but was even more wondrous for the unfolding it promised. Like a baby. My eyes stung and the rosebud blurred. There were other flowers on stands – funeral sprays. Whites and pinks with babies' breath and ribbons. Flowers and more flowers.

Holding Little Joe during the year and a half that he lived, my mother's face would be so full of happiness that her cheeks pushed her eyes into slits, and her mouth opened so wide that when her laughter came out it filled the room as he played with her red curls and tried to put his fingers in her mouth. I remember the sounds of his giggles. I remember him vomiting, turning blue, gasping for breath, and my mother's face collapsing and sinking in, and the laughter stopped. I grew up learning the meanings of the words *blue baby* and *congenital heart trouble*.

Behind the flowers, pine trees lined the outer edges of Green Leaf Cemetery. When I smell pine needles or hear Caribbean accents, I am four. I am walking with Christine to the blueberry field behind my grandparents' summer home, Wabeno, in Lake Placid, New York. Christine is from the Dominican Republic. I am so happy being with her that unexpectedly tears of joy and reunion filled my eyes decades later when I visited the Caribbean and heard the people speaking in her voice. Gathering blueberries with Christine may have been the only time that summer that I wasn't surrounded by my family's grief. We were visiting my grandparents in Lake Placid when Little Joe died.

The only light that shone into my crib at Wabeno came from the bedroom's open door. My mother was standing in the doorway. The light from the hallway behind her made her dress appear to billow and float. I couldn't see her face. I heard her voice. 'Little Joe is sick. Daddy and I are taking him to the hospital . . . Yes, I will fill your bottle.' I was drinking chocolate milk when I heard the front door slam.

Tufted pale blue satin lined the tiny casket and cushioned Little Joe, pillow-like. He wore the red and black plaid shorts with straps that went over his shoulders and crossed in back and the

white shirt with an appliqué of a Scottie dog in the same red and black plaid as the shorts. The dog had a black beret. It is the same outfit he wore on Sunday mornings, and the time he pulled himself to a standing position by grabbing handfuls of the flowery-red slipcover on the chair in the living room. I put a baby bottle full of milk and a blanket into the casket and stepped back to look at the grassy valley amid outcroppings of the flat blue-tinted rock of the Adirondack Mountains, unaware I was committing the moment to memory. Rain fell ever so slightly as the priest stopped speaking. Dad put his arm around Mom and whispered, 'See, Miz, even the heavens are crying.'

My brother Robert died three years later at birth. Just Dad went to the funeral. Mom was in the hospital recovering from the flu, and Mike and I and our new two-year-old-brother, Joe, stayed home with our housekeeper, babysitter, cook, Mildred. I remember crying when I heard that Robert had died. I must have sensed my mother's excitement in the months before he was born as her pregnancy progressed. I must have been grieving for joy that didn't come. He wore a white gown long enough to cover his feet and keep on going. The lace edging at the hem matched the lace on his cap that circled his face. Satin ribbons under his chin were tied in a bow and rested lightly on the gown's lace bodice. His face was a powdery white; his mouth was lipsticked red.

Our home was filled with flowers when I was 16; I could smell them before I opened the front door. My brothers Joe, Carl, Frank, Pete, and I had gone to our cottage on the Chesapeake Bay for a last week of swimming and sailing before the end of summer and the start of school. Our brother Mike stayed home with our parents. Our mother called to tell us to come home early because our father was dead.

Arrangements of flowers nearly as tall as I was lined the baseboards in the living room, dining room, and our parents' bedroom. Daisies in small glass vases and philodendrons in ceramic bowls were on the mantel piece; roses, prayer plants, and peace lilies were on the fireplace hearth; lily of the valley, bromeliads, and spider plants were on the coffee table in the living room; spiky, fuzzy cactuses and vases of cut flowers were on the piano; tulips, ferns and weeping figs, hyacinths, and palms were on the dining room table. It wasn't our home anymore; it belonged to flowers and death.

'Why do people bring flowers?' I asked my mother that day.  
'They want to do something. They know we are hurting.'

Carol Talbot, my friend since childhood, sent Molly and Emily a box of chocolates that arrived the day before Sarah's funeral. The girls were enjoying selecting one each of the big pastel-colored candies after every meal, breakfast included. It was out of character for me to allow candy after breakfast, but I figured they needed any treat they could get. Carol was with me the day I had flowers instead of a father. She knows that flowers make my eyes itch, my nose run, my head throb, my body sneeze, and my heart ache.

The night before Sarah's funeral Brother John asked, 'What would you like me to say during the funeral?'

'Keep it short.'

'I mean, what would you like me to talk about?'

'I don't care. Just keep it short.'

Brother John mouthed words I did not hear. I watched him because if I looked anywhere else, my eyes saw the rosebuds or the casket between us. I hoped the woman from the funeral home, Elizabeth, had gotten a blanket. Sarah should have been wrapped in a blanket. I said it didn't matter when we were at the funeral home, but it does matter. The preacher's drone stopped. He placed the rosebud he'd been fingering on top of the casket. It was over. I didn't feel like screaming or crying. I didn't feel.

'If there is anything I can do for you, just let me know,' Calvin Stokes said.

'I want a job,' I told him.

'I mean it now, you just let me know what I can do for you,' he says.

'I mean it, Mr Stokes. I want a job.'

He nodded and left. What would I do if he didn't call? I couldn't stay home without Sarah. Soon Molly and Emily would be in school. Tom would go back to work. I couldn't be alone without Sarah.

'I'm so sorry,' someone said.

'I am too,' I said.

A teacher from school was crying. I put my arm around her shoulders and whispered in her ear, 'If you don't stop crying right now, I will start. And if I do, I assure you, we'll all drown.' She stopped crying and smiled. She gave me a teddy bear at the surprise baby shower at school. On a ruse of a teachers' meeting, I was summoned into the library after school one day. The library was full of large square boxes, all wrapped in pastel blues, pinks, lavenders, yellows. Each teacher had brought a box of paper

diapers. Except the teacher who brought the fuzzy brown bear. The bear wore a T-shirt with letters saying: *Someone you love needs something to hug.*

I kept facing the people, so I couldn't see the casket behind me. I moved to the right side of the semicircle of people because it was farther from the casket. I embraced each person. I thanked each one for coming. Why would anyone want to come to such a sad event? I was grateful that they had. Maybe because they were there, I didn't feel like screaming. Talking to each person gave me something to do so I didn't have to think about why we were there. When I came to the end of the semicircle, I walked toward the car. I was afraid that if I waited any longer, the funeral home workers would begin lowering the casket, so I walked to the car and sat next to the still-cold beers and knew I had just done the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

## 11. Arthritis and group B streptococcus

We hadn't expected Tom's family to come to the funeral. It was a seven-hour drive, and with few funerals in their family, attending them had not yet become their family's tradition. When each of Tom's grandparents died, his parents told us not come, that our obligations at home were more pressing. But it was to his family in Waynesboro, Virginia, his parents, his two brothers, his sister, and sister-in-law, that we escaped after we buried Sarah, to be embraced by other sets of arms, to be cared for, to leave our home, our place of mourning.

Against my protests, my mother thrust her most cherished possession into my arms as we pulled out of her driveway to head for Virginia. She, who had given up on organized religion, focused on reading the Bible. The church, she felt, had let her down after her prayers could not prevent my father's death and, again, after a priest came ostensibly to comfort our grieving, fatherless family and sexually molested my brother Mike, then 14. Solace for her came from reading her Bible. She would underline some

passages and highlight others; she'd make notes in the margins, and tuck holy cards or birthday cards or hand written notes (hers or others') in between pages. It was a virtual scrapbook of her memories, aspirations, struggles, keepsakes. I was not a studier or even reader of the Bible, and knew I would not read hers, but she would hear none of it. I tucked her Bible between my seat and the car door.

We visited my friend Carol who lived then in nearby Nelson County, and I cried when it was time to leave, telling her that I didn't want to go back and face life at home without Sarah. She offered me her guest room. Stay a week or two, she said. My mouth dropped open at the possibility. A month, she added. And I've never loved her more or been more grateful for an invitation. For a moment, I thought about cool nights on her deck, watching the sun set behind the Appalachian Mountains, trading stories, drinking beer, rehashing our growing up years. Then I thought about Tom caring for the girls by himself and that I'd just be putting off grieving, and some part of me knew that I had to go home. I think I knew then that for emotional survival, I couldn't put off what was ahead, though I did not know and could not have predicted how difficult the next months or years would be, how much I would learn, and how I would be changed. I didn't stay with Carol for another reason: Tom. I'd followed him around like a lost puppy since Sarah; I couldn't watch him drive away.

It seemed like a little thing, to follow Tom and he to appreciate being needed, but it would have a big impact on our relationship. My gratitude for his being there for me when I was most needy would never end and would take trust to a new level. And years later, when his boss would close Tom's satellite office leaving him without a job, I experienced devastation from the other side. 'I can't think of anything to do,' he'd tell me in the weeks that followed. I'd stuffed my pockets with notes of jobs that needed doing just so that I could respond quickly. I'd turn so he couldn't see me pull out a note.

'How about changing the light bulb in the hall bathroom?'

'Good idea,' he'd say and head toward the cabinet where the light bulbs were stored.

After our five-day trip to Virginia, Tom went back to work and the girls went back to school. I wasn't ready yet to be by myself, so after I'd see them off, I'd go to my mother's house. On that first day back from Virginia, my mother asked me if I enjoyed reading

her Bible. I don't remember how I answered, but I did go to the car to retrieve it, and it was not there. She loaned me what was her source of strength in tough times, and I lost it. I don't remember when or how, but it must have fallen out of the car because after a day or so of driving, I never saw it again. She didn't cry or yell at me; she just looked dumbfounded and never mentioned the loss again. After her death years later, my brothers and I were going through her things and found four Bibles with passages in each one underlined or highlighted. Cards and notes were tucked in between the pages. Four memory books: one for each of us.

On those days in May when I'd appear at her doorstep after taking the girls to school, she never seemed busy or acted as if she had other plans. She was always available. I would bring my box of stationery and address book and write thank you notes or letters to cousins who didn't know yet of the birth and death. Mom would sew. Often those visits, those healing visits, were wordless – like two soldiers who have returned from war, we didn't need to speak of what we'd experienced. I grew closer to her remembering snatches of days after Little Joe died when I was four, and my mother's only connection to life was the air she breathed, the rise and fall of her chest. She would have no energy or words or smiles. She would lie in bed and not hear me or see me though I stood by her side and talked to her or held her hand or stroked her arm. The house would be dark because my mother would not open the heavy red drapes printed with Egyptian figures that covered the picture windows in the living room, the ones that welcomed the morning sun, the ones that gave me a view of the world. In those days there was no world inside either, because my mother would not laugh or play the piano.

The drapes to my concern for Tom and our girls were drawn, too, much of the time, veiling them and their needs. I did not close them; they closed themselves. My mother and I could not have done otherwise. I understood her and myself in one epiphanic moment – a realization that freed us both of guilt and fault because breathing is all one can do sometimes. A death in the family makes each person needy, and a mother should nurture, especially then, but sometimes the drapes close, wrapping a mother in a much-needed cocoon so that she can emerge healed, stronger, enlightened.

When my mother opened the heavy red drapes, she would make pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse's big ears and big head: three-in-one pancakes. She would read the comics to my brothers

and me from *The Washington Post* which had four pages of daily comics. She read each comic strip. We listened to her every word while propped up by fluffed pillows leaned against the headboard of hers and Dad's bed. The bed was warm and soft and as inviting as she was on those days. We laughed.

Normally after school, Molly and Em would come to my room where I worked as a teacher's aide, but since I'd quit my job, I was in the pick-up line with the other mothers. The cars lined up one after the other, like adding beads to a necklace, on the shoulder of the road leading to the elementary school. It was 3.10. When the school bell rung at 3.20, the front of the line would begin to move slowly as one car after another would leave with its child or children. Until then, we mothers and fathers waited. Ahead of me a woman stood by her station wagon watching her preschooler pick up pecans in the grove next to the parked cars. I pulled my car behind hers. She looked familiar. We smiled. She came to the window of my car. 'Hey, how are you?' she asked.

'You mean since my baby died?' The words tumbled out on their own.

'Oh. I'd heard you'd lost a baby,' she said in a voice unnaturally high as if she had just remembered what happened to me. She looked away from me, toward her child.

Suddenly, I felt shunned as if I had a contagious disease. Perhaps she was just making small talk: 'How are you?' could have meant nothing more to her than 'Nice weather we're having.' Then I mentioned my baby dying and we were both without words. I had forgotten how to make small talk. Either I tried to crawl back from being shunned or I tried to assess the meaning of her words when I asked, 'Are you asking to make conversation or do you really want to know how I am since Sarah died?'

'Just making conversation,' she replied crisply as if she wanted this to end quicker than I did.

None of this was her fault. Or mine. The shortest end to the conversation I could think of were two words. 'I'm fine,' I said relieving us both.

Mr Stokes called me a week after Sarah's funeral. 'Theresa, maybe you can help me. Maybe, that is, if you feel like it. It's completely up to you. I just wanted to let you know there is an opening if you are interested. Mrs Burrell, you know Madeline Burrell, the kindergarten aide? Well, her husband is going in for open-heart surgery the first part of next week. If you would like to take over for her for the rest of the year, we'd like to have you

back. It will work out to be just about a full month. Do you want to think about it and call me back?’

‘I’ll be there. What day?’

‘Come Monday and meet the children.’

‘Thanks.’

Mr Stokes’ call was a relief as I didn’t want to stay home by myself, and I couldn’t always stay at my mother’s house. I would be going back to the school routine with friends and coworkers, with children who made me laugh. I knew that grief wouldn’t stay at home, but I thought keeping busy in the professional setting would help me have more control over my emotions in the same way that I didn’t scream at the funeral as I thought I would. I had never before, in my adult life, had emotions stronger than I was. When I mentioned that to a friend, she commented that for her it was frightening to see another person fall apart. Me, she meant, and just when I felt like, hands down, I was the needy one. Yet, that was part of grief, too, the dealing with friends’ emotions over the death of my baby as well as my own emotional reaction. And letting friends know how to help or what helped. It seems like it shouldn’t be necessary for the griever to have that responsibility, too, but when none of your friends have buried babies, they don’t know what helps and what hurts. Having emotions that intense went against all I’d been taught, beginning with my parents’ earliest efforts in socialization, when they admonished me to mind my manners or my temper, to speak pleasantly even to people I did not like and, no, I couldn’t ask the lady who lived across the street why she was so fat.

With each first after Sarah my emotions ruled. The first time I drove to the school to teach, I thought about driving to school the last day I’d taught before taking off to have the baby. The remembering contrasted that anticipation with the reality of her short life. Seeing each coworker for the first time, especially the ones I was closest to, would start the tears flowing. I’d duck into bathrooms and sob. But it was just the firsts. When I saw someone or did something for a second time, I could maintain control.

Maybe the way one walks after casts are taken off legs that were broken isn’t really walking in any normal sense but moving the legs as if to walk reminds the mind and body how it is done. That’s how I felt working as a teacher’s aide two weeks after Sarah died. I wasn’t really teaching or assisting, even though it might have looked as if I were.

I taught the new kindergarten class a lesson that my own class

had enjoyed. Before rain was expected, I read the children a book entitled *Mushrooms in the Rain*. The story tells of the magic and science of mushrooms popping up after the rain. After reading the story, I took the children on a nature walk. We looked for mushrooms, but we didn't see any. The next day – after a rain – we walked the nature trail again. We counted 89 mushrooms and meshed science and magic. Seeing their joy of discovery reminded me of my own joy, weeks earlier, anticipating the new baby's birth when I walked the same nature trail with my own kindergarten class. I walked the last of the nature walk with tears in my eyes and on my cheeks. When the children asked about my tears, I told them that the tears and wet cheeks were from raindrops falling from leaves. They believed me. I couldn't have begun to explain grief to them after we'd counted 89 magic mushrooms.

I learned the children's names. All 27 of them. I didn't think I was capable because, mentally, I wasn't able to think and, physically, I wasn't sleeping or eating much. But I learned their names. In a bizarre, surreal sense, it helped to go through the motions of teaching and of working again even though I felt incapable of either. I thought of the patient in physical therapy who goes through the motions until one day the body can work on its own again. My thoughts were not so lofty; I went through the motions so that I wouldn't be home alone with the pain.

One day I sharpened 27 pencils in preparation for a writing lesson. I shaved points by turning the crank of a mechanical sharpener mounted on the wall. The electric sharpener would not take the fat kindergarten pencils that are about the thickness of three pencils put together. By the time I had sharpened 15, my right thumb ached a bit, but I continued sharpening. During the next three days the joint in my right thumb swelled to nearly twice its normal size, and it hurt. I must have been thinking arthritis because a book entitled *Arthritis* jumped out at me when I was in the library one day with the children. I glanced through the book and six words appeared in large bold type:

*Arthritis can harbor group B streptococcus.*

I made an appointment with a doctor whose specialty was listed in the phone book as bones and joints. 'Three weeks ago I had a child who died of group B streptococcus. Now I have what I think is arthritis, and I read that arthritis can harbor group B strep. Will I just harbor these bacteria? What if I get pregnant again? Will I lose another baby to group B strep?'

He took my hands into his own and compared the sizes of my thumb joints.

‘I’ll agree with you about the arthritis. Were you treated after your baby became sick?’

‘Yes, with antibiotics.’

‘Then that would have killed the strep in your body. You don’t have it anymore.’

‘But how did I get it? If I got it once and didn’t know it, I can get it again, right?’

‘Don’t worry. Lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place.’

Driving home I was struck by that phrase: ‘Lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place.’ I heard it over and over. It wouldn’t stop playing in my mind until I said out loud. Disease isn’t lightning. We can’t stop lightning. We can’t control the weather, but we can give antibiotics for a strep infection. How unscientific for a doctor to say lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place. What if it were his child? Could he be so sure? Would he be so sure? No, he would read about group B strep and find out how to prevent it from happening to another child of his.

The hospital was not far from our home. I had an hour before Molly would get off the school bus. Emily was at a friend’s house until 4.30 p.m. I knew I could do some research in the hospital’s library because years ago, I had had a medical question and couldn’t find an answer in the local library. A nurse friend suggested I look in the hospital’s library.

‘Isn’t it just for doctors?’ I asked.

‘Only doctors can check books out of the library, but anybody can go in there and read. Public funds have purchased all the medical books and magazines.’

In the medical center’s library, I read the indices of medical journals until I found an article on neonatal group B strep in a journal entitled *OB/GYN*. Doctors in rural hospitals miss the diagnosis for group B strep, it said, more often than doctors in large suburban or urban hospitals. The hospital where Sarah was born was definitely rural. But the doctor who treated Sarah was a neonatologist – a specialist in newborn care as well as illnesses and diseases.

The article continued: ‘If antibiotics are administered within the first twelve hours of life, the neonates with group B streptococcus survive.’ Sarah was nine hours old when the neonatologist told me that I couldn’t have Sarah for the noon feeding, but I could have

her at 3.00 p.m. And he was going flying . . . Sarah was born at 2.50 a.m. the day before . . . At 2.00 p.m., after the neonatologist left to go flying, Dr Smith, the doctor on call for him, asked to do chest X-rays because he thought Sarah had pneumonia . . . It was after the X-rays showed that she has pneumonia that she started getting antibiotics . . . It could have been almost 3.00 p.m. before antibiotics were started . . . Sarah didn't get antibiotics until Dr Smith recognized she was sick . . . She was nearly 12 hours old by then.

'In the case of premature rupture of the membranes, the incidence of group B streptococcus is no greater if labor commences within 24 hours.' Amniotic fluid leaked at the sailing club after a late dinner. It must have been 7.30 or 8.00 p.m. Labor started the next night after dinner. We ate dinner at 6.00 p.m. So by 6.30 I was walking. That's when contractions started. Labor started less than 24 hours after amniotic fluid seeped. So I didn't cause Sarah's death by not going to the hospital sooner as the neonatologist had said.

In an article that Carol Baker, MD published two years earlier in *Pediatrics in Review*, she said, 'Full term neonates with no known maternal predisposing factors for infection may develop early onset infection, and those presenting with respiratory distress should be regarded as highly suspect for group B streptococci.' . . . *respiratory distress . . . highly suspect for group B streptococci*. The neonatologist said Sarah had a breathing problem particular to premature infants. I told him Sarah wasn't premature, so he should have suspected something else. But he didn't listen to me. At the time, my joy at Sarah's arrival tempered my anger at the doctor's arrogance because it did not occur to me that she would die – not until she was taken to Wilmington. While reading these articles, I was a mixture of bottomless sadness that her illness was treatable and relief that I had not caused or contributed to her illness and death. Had I believed the 'experts,' the neonatologist and the nurse-midwife, and their mean-spirited remarks that I was selfish and responsible for Sarah's death, I might have remained stuck in grief. To have thought that I caused this nightmare would have been emotionally crippling.

From Dr Baker's article I learned that group B strep is transmitted vertically, from mother to baby, and horizontally, from hospital personnel to baby. Babies who become ill before the fifth day of life are said to have an early onset disease, transmitted vertically.

In addition to treating infants with group B strep in the first hours of life, the article said there was a way to prevent the infection from occurring at all: 'The simplicity of obtaining a vaginal culture for streptococcal isolation and the proved vertical transmission of these organisms to neonates with early onset disease are given as reasons to initiate prenatal screening for group B streptococcal colonization.' The bacteria are a 'frequent constituent of the genital bacterial flora in women and men.' My obstetrician could have tested me for strep, treated me with antibiotics, and Sarah would not have gotten sick. Why wasn't I tested?

The article concluded with a statement that should have set off an alarm to all neonatologists, pediatricians, obstetricians, mothers, and fathers: '. . . group B streptococci has been linked to neonatal disease since 1938, but only in the last decade has it become the leading etiologic agent [cause] for bacteremia and/or meningitis occurring during the first two months of life.'

Group B strep is the leading infectious killer of newborns. It is more common than Down Syndrome, spina bifida, and phenylketonuria (PKU) combined, yet for nearly 30 years, parents first heard of the disease when their sick or dead newborns' cultures came back positive for the bacteria.

Dr Baker's interest in group B strep began in 1969, when she was a pediatric resident, and she began seeing infants with an unusual kind of meningitis. In medical school, she'd learned that meningitis contracted in the first month of life is caused by gram-negative bacteria (pink when gram-stained) – but – the babies she was seeing were infected with gram-positive or blue-stained bacteria. The Baylor Affiliated Hospitals laboratory identified the bacteria as a streptococcus but not group B streptococcus because in 1969 it was not believed to be a cause of disease in humans. Within three weeks, this 'new' meningitis took the life of one of Dr Baker's patients, left one with severe brain damage, and another failed to return to normal following severe seizures. Dr Baker asked her senior physicians about this unusual kind of meningitis; the answers did not satisfy her curiosity or her frustration or what became her horror at the death and destruction of beautiful and otherwise healthy newborns.

She began reading old papers dating back as far as 1938 describing GBS infections in a handful of pregnant women and newborns. She also studied the recent cases at the Baylor hospitals and found patterns in the onset of the disease, the symptoms and signs, and the outcomes.

'I had the brilliant (in retrospect) foresight to save the bacteria isolated from these cases. Seeing as I knew little about microbiology, only the hardy nature of GBS allowed their survival,' she told me. She sent these bacteria to Dr Rebecca Lancefield at the Rockefeller University in New York whose classification system for streptococcus is still used today. Dr Lancefield was excited about Dr Baker's streptococcus because the overwhelming majority was a type that she had only uncommonly encountered since she developed her system in the 1930s. Later Dr Lancefield invited Dr Baker to study with her in New York where she learned the typing and beginnings of the chemistry of the organization.

Dr Baker's article was rejected by the first journal she sent it to with the comment that group B strep was 'nothing more than a localized phenomena in Texas.' The year her article was published, 1979, the bacterium was the leading cause of death of newborns by infectious disease and remained so for nearly two more decades, after approximately 400 000 babies in the US alone died or suffered from its devastating physical and mental disorders.

## 12. Hove to

A storm at sea can be avoided by going ashore or sailing into a cove where the violent winds are choked off by land and trees. Sometimes, though, the shore is too far away or no coves are nearby, and the storm cannot be dodged. Strong winds can capsize a boat or rip the sails and snap the stays, the metal ropes that support the mast, or crack the rudder or centerboard. Each tear, each broken stay, each splintered piece of wood, each crack in the fiberglass makes the boat more susceptible to further damage. When sailing in rough weather is not an option, a safe way to weather the storm is to adjust the sails a certain way called hove to. Hove to stops forward motion, allowing the boat to ride out the storm at sea.

Before I was pregnant with Sarah, Tom and I were caught in one of those summer storms that built so quickly that outrunning it to a cove or shoreline was impossible and sailing through it was too risky for our little boat. We had only read about hove

## HOVE TO

to; we'd never tried it in good weather or in bad. The storm was battering us with strong winds and rain; the sails protested by alternately filling and slapping against the stays, spilling their air as high waves rocked the boat. Proceeding on course was becoming dangerous. We came into the wind, that is we steered the boat directly into the wind so that the bow was facing the wind and the main and jib sails flapped like flags. We tied the main sail down tightly by pulling in the mainsheet as far as the rope would allow, close hauled it's called. Then, still into the wind, we tied down the jibsheet tightly, too, but the jib was on the other side of the boom. The bird's-eye view of sails in hove to is a dollar sign with a single line drawn through the middle. We drifted downwind, creating a slick in the choppy water. The slick, a protective slick it's called, blunted the force of the waves as they broke well to our windward, before they reached us, and long before they could toss the boat. A sailboat is built to sail, so it naturally tries to sail even when hove to. We dragged an anchor at the bow, as we drifted backward, thus keeping the boat from creeping forward and attempting to sail. If we had to ride out the storm, hove to was a safe way to do so. We didn't make any progress, but our boat wasn't battered and broken by waves and wind too strong for our little craft.

There's a time, too, while grieving to hove to. Weeks after Sarah, the shock of her death began to become a reality and the longest and loneliest stage of grieving began. I was like a dog licking my wounds; I found corners in rooms or in my mind for myself and my sorrow. The forays I made into the world were physical only; mentally I lived in a cocoon that only began to unravel months later. Grieving is typically a year-long process that is particularly sad during the first six months; after that the heaviest weight lifts. But when death comes without warning, when it is as unexpected and tragic as death from a car accident, or suicide, or murder, or after a problem-free pregnancy, grieving is longer than a year. Three years in these cases is more the norm; some experts say two to four years is to be expected after the death of a child. Grief mirrors love: its depths are in proportion to its heights – its breadth in proportion to the loss. The death of an aged grandmother who's lived a life of fulfilled dreams is a loss surely, a loss of what was, but the death of a baby that one planned to share life with, is a loss of what was to be, what should have been. One is the loss of your past; the other is the loss of your future.

My cousin Ann called from her home in West Virginia, 'Where are you in the stages of grieving?' she asked.

'I've been through them all,' I told her. 'I've been through shock, denial, anger, depression. Well, all but acceptance.'

In reality, the stages of grief that I'd experienced in those early weeks were more like fireworks; I'd had flashes of denial, anger, and depression, but I was too steeped in shock to experience them fully, to deal with them completely. In the weeks after Sarah, as I could take in the meaning of her death, I became aware of how much I had lost.

Grief had a bottomless black hole. At first, the sides sloped gently then they became tiered ledges, and the grade increased dramatically. The fear of slipping in was more frightening than any fear I had ever known. Somehow I knew that if I fell into the black hole, I would struggle forever and without success to get out. The danger of slipping was always present but at times was more imminent. It was worse when I accidentally found the baby blanket that I made for Sarah, the yellow-checked one edged in eyelet lace. Hot tears spilled over my cheeks, debilitating me, and I stumbled from flat ground to a tiered ledge overlooking the black hole. I wondered what I ever did to deserve Sarah's death. And I stumbled again, closer. I was not strong enough to resist the pull. I felt my father's large hand squeezing my little one. We were on our first 'date,' the father-daughter night at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. I was seven years old, and my new patent leather pumps pinched my toes. My heels are so narrow that I select shoes too short for my feet so I won't walk out of them. My father's squeezes made my shoes not hurt; they made all things right. I wished for another squeeze . . . my brother Joe whistles; Little Joe smiles . . . the scenes marched through my mind like band members in a parade, relentless, and I slipped further toward the black hole. The only way to keep from slipping all the way into the blackness was to stop the parade. I would begin doing something, anything, with a frenzy: rake leaves, vacuum, walk the hall, phone Kath or my mother, or give Daisy a dog biscuit. I did not fall into the blackness that time. The effort to keep from falling would leave me breathless. My heart would race.

As I would drive the curvy blacktop road to my mother's house, I would see Sarah's face in a mirage on the road. Her eyelashes would be brushing her round, full cheeks. I would speed up to get a closer look, but the image would disappear with the mirage.

And I would be stung by grief for the thousandth time that day, no, that hour.

I wanted to shed the grief, but not the look, smell, feel or sound of Sarah. I would hold her in my mind and in my dreams. I would wake from snatches of sleep to realize that the dream of her nuzzling between my arm and my body was only a dream. Waking was horror. I couldn't stop what was happening to me. I could only control a small part of my reaction to it. I stopped sleeping real sleep. I applauded myself for sleeping lightly. Mornings were easier that way. I was getting better I thought – mornings without horror. Better? My God, what an existence – avoiding horror.

I became a walking zombie from lack of sleep. I would walk into a room and wouldn't know why I had gone there. Sometimes I would open my mouth to speak and wouldn't know what I had intended to say or, other times, words that barely began to express a thought would hang, suspended, and neither I nor the person I was talking with could do anything to complete the unfinished remark. I asked my neighbor of two years what his name was. I watched people look at me, a zombie, and I wondered if there was any difference between grief and insanity.

Mostly, those forays into the world were like dodging into and out of a battleground, and I felt way under armed. I went to the grocery store for bread, milk, taco shells, and hot dogs. I collected everything except the bread. When I turned the grocery cart into the aisle where the bread was shelved, I saw a kelly-green infant seat cradling a newborn. The seat rested in the mother's grocery cart. To pick out a loaf of bread, I would have to push my cart past the baby in the infant seat. I decided that we did not need bread that week; we would do without.

On a Sunday, I went downtown to the Central News and Card Shop. I selected several more boxes of stationery for what had become my ongoing occupation – writing thank you notes for food and flowers and money that kept arriving. The woman behind the counter recognized me. Her grin was wide and happy. 'You had the baby, I see. What did you have?'

'A girl. But she died.' She apologized for not knowing, for bringing up the subject. I told her, please, not to be sorry. I was grateful that she had acknowledged what many people avoided mentioning.

Leslie Plaster shopped at Big Star where I bought most of my groceries. We were acquainted because our husbands were

foresters who worked at Weyerhaeuser. Leslie and Alan sent a hanging plant after Sarah died. The tiny heart-shaped leaves cascaded from the basket in thick emerald green clusters. The plant is appropriately named baby tears. I saw Leslie at the meat counter as we sorted through packages of ground beef. When she asked how I was, I wondered if she really wanted to know.

‘I haven’t seen you since the funeral,’ she added. Her eyes met mine. They did not seem afraid of someone else’s pain. They did not look away; they searched for answers or a communion of souls.

I told her about my dreams of holding Sarah in my arms and of waking up. She did not look away. I told her that missing Sarah was not just in the morning; it was all the time. She did not look away. She listened to my description of sorrow. She listened without judging me or my emotions. She didn’t try to fix me, as others had, or tell me that it couldn’t be *that* bad, or tell me that Sarah’s death was God’s will or in God’s plan or that He needed another angel in heaven or that I could have another baby – none of which helped. She just listened, affirming me and the journey I was on. I thanked her for the visit, picked up my package of ground beef, and knew I would carry that moment forever.

Alone or in a crowd, I would feel something on the back of my hand or on my arm or just above my knee. I would look to see my own fingertips moving ever so gently. The touch was light, much as I’d use to stroke the feverish forehead of a sick child. When I first noticed my fingers brushing my skin, I thought I must have been trying to soothe myself.

Molly and Emily would play too quietly in the playroom in those early weeks after Sarah. They were too good. I was relieved they did not need me because I was too busy avoiding the black hole to tend to them much.

I nicked a fingernail and the ragged edge threatened to snag a stocking or worse begin a rip that would take the whole nail off at the quick. I dug through my purse until I found a nail file, settled into the comfy chair in the living room, and began to smooth the ragged edge with the fine steel file when my eyes started to burn. A couple of weeks earlier, I’d filed my nails and Sarah was making little bulges pop up on my stomach, hard little knots made with her feet or elbows or knees. Tom and I lay in bed that night and watched the movements and imagined the shape of the baby’s body. Tom put an ice cube on my stomach, and we laughed as the baby squirmed to find a warmer spot. If I filed my nails again, I

would sever another connection to Sarah; I stopped filing.

My mother asked, 'If I were to take you out to dinner, what would you like to eat?'

'I'm not really hungry, Mom, but thanks.'

'Honey, I know you're not hungry. But if you were, what would you like to eat?'

'Flounder. Do you remember when I was pregnant, I couldn't get enough fish?' Normally I don't eat much fish – just during Lent. Although I hadn't attended Mass on Sundays in years, I still abstained from eating meat on Fridays during Lent out of habit. Fresh flounder here on the coast is the best. Yes, flounder, if I were hungry.

'Tonight, let me pick you up – you and Tom and Molly and Emily,' my mother told me. 'I'll take you all to dinner. I'll pick you up at 5.30.'

We went to a favorite fish house, the one we go to to take someone out for a birthday dinner, the one with white cloth tablecloths and napkins, the one with fresh flowers on the tables and candles and soft music. My plate was full of fillet of flounder, a baked potato yellow with butter, and fashionably long green beans adorned with slivered almonds. Paprika was sprinkled over the feather-like folds of the flounder's white meat.

'If I felt like getting better, I would eat,' I told my mother.

'Pick up your fork,' she said, not as a mother would to a young child, but in a coaxing, firm manner – not a matter for discussion. I picked up my fork and ate what tasted like cotton.

Grief, like the humidity of August in the deep south, permeated all my pores, it invaded my mind and my emotions, diminishing my joys and intensifying my fears. Like the waves at high tide that cover the hot sandy beaches as they stretch toward castles of sand to break them down, grief pounds incessantly, wallowing out my spirit, my sense of optimism and my hope.

I was hove to as the storm raged on. Yes, I was battered by grief, but what I didn't know at the time was that I was doing more than reacting to the storm – I was working, doing some of the hardest work I'd ever done. Part of the job of grieving is to make sense of the senseless, to find a reason to go on, to answer questions like: Why am I here? What's important? What do I want? Before I die, what do I want to have accomplished? Grief tore me apart, and as I put the pieces of me back together in a new and redirected order, I was more firm on some issues, more open on others, less judgmental. My fears were different. I found extraordinary in the

ordinary and gratitude for all I had, my family, my children, Tom. These would be years in the coming.

## 13. A solitary journey

Most bereaved parents suffer from marital difficulty within months after the death of their child.

*The Bereaved Parent*

Tom's boss, Thurston, called me June 6, one month to the day after Sarah was buried, the day the hourly workers refused to sign their contract.

'T, how are you holding up?'

'Thurston, there are days I think I'm going to make it, and there are days when I don't think I can bear the pain.'

'Sweetheart, you're in our prayers. We're looking after Tom here at work and thinking of you. Look, something's come up. I'm asking you first. If you say, no, that's it. I won't ask Tom. And there won't be any problem – either way. Understand?'

'I can say yes or no. But what am I saying yes or no to?'

'You've heard about the possible strike at the mill?' Thurston asked.

'Sure, Tom took the bus-driving course in case we had a strike.'

'Well, we do. Salaried workers, for now, are taking over the jobs at the mill. We need Tom to do his job and, if you okay it, to drive a bus and work at the mill some, too. Can you manage evenings and weekends by yourself?'

'How long do you think this strike will last?'

'It's anybody's guess.'

'Tom wouldn't feel right not doing his part if everyone else is working extra hours. Sure, Thurston.' Tom and I had known the hourly workers might strike; we'd known long before Sarah's birth and death. We knew, also, since Sarah, that it would be difficult for both of us if he worked so many hours. The up side was, Tom would be paid overtime.