

EXCERPTS from *Out of Grief, Singing* by Charlene Diehl

Wednesday, November 22, evening

When Denise bounded into my room late in the afternoon, she announced that they'd found a slot for my emergency surgery at 6:30. She was excited because she wouldn't have gone off-shift yet, and could attend at the delivery. I am flooded with gratitude—I feel stronger and safer with her nearby. As I will learn, it's one of the truths about serious illness: strangers become your intimates. Sometimes that proximity sturdies you, sometimes it injures you. For me, Denise is an ally, someone who sees through the complicated panic of this situation and finds me, a woman with fear, a woman with resources.

And now, for the first time in my conscious life, I'm in an operating room. It's cold in here; at least I'm cold. I'm nervous, too. What will it feel like to have a baby cut out of me? The room is white, bright, cluttered with its million unnamable instruments. I'm jittery, but I'm focusing on my tasks. I have to stay calm. In a way, staying calm is all I can offer my sick baby. It's precious little. Teetering on the lip of this enormous event, I'm determined to be present.

The anesthetist, gentle and funny, helps me heave my legs over the side of the bed. He asks me to hunch my back and stay perfectly still. This part, I know, has its risks: all those prickly vertebrae evolved for a reason. He will ease his long needle between the bones, through the outer sheath and into the cord itself, numb sensation from mid-body down. A spinal block. I shiver with the chill of nerves, remind myself to breathe. *I can do this, I can do this.* I find myself whispering—this is my mantra, my participation in this inexorable story. The anesthetist hums country songs. The room is silent while he prepares.

Then Bill coos softly; his voice lifts me into my courage. I hunch myself over the inflated ball of my womb, opening up my back in readiness. Suddenly I have a vision of my grandmother with her dowager's hump. My grandmother: mother of thirteen, graceful in poverty and difficulty, a woman of generosity and fortitude. I push out my spine, connect myself to my mother's mother, to my mother, to all the mothers. Our maternal bodies at the mercy of forces we'll never quite comprehend.

The drug slides in, I'm rolled back and strapped onto the bed. I'm relieved by the straps, to be honest: as the numbness spreads, I am losing my ability to balance. I can't feel myself. Or that's not quite true—I feel huge. I laugh up to Bill: *My legs are enormous, I have elephant legs!* He's at my head, determined protector, steely with intensity. He rests his hand on my shoulder, peers over the curtain that drapes across my chest.

The cast of characters is in place. Behind that curtain, act one is about to begin. I breathe awkwardly into the oxygen mask, gaze up. Denise is at one side, Bill at the other. We're set. I can feel pressure on my abdomen: *the incision*, I think. I'm uncomfortable, but I don't feel pain. The blood pressure cuff wrapped around my folded arm inflates frequently, and the holes from yesterday's blood samples strangle and throb. I'm irritated by these intrusions—they distract me

from the real event. I am inside now, willing my power into the small one who is about to make an entrance.

My chin begins to wobble violently, knocking my teeth against one another. I make an effort to relax myself. The banging stops, then starts again. I feel frustrated—obviously I'm not managing my nerves. Denise bends over, asks me again how I'm doing. *I can't stop my teeth from chattering*, I say. She smiles, squeezes my shoulder. *That's the drugs speaking*, she says, *you can't do anything about that*.

She and Bill are increasingly absorbed in the process beyond the curtain. Later, Bill will say proudly that he's one of the only people who can say he loves me inside and out. *The layer of fat just under the skin is like a string of pearls*, he will say; I will be both repulsed and grateful. The abdominal pressure is taxing, perhaps because it is so abstract; I can't tell what is happening, or even where. I'm surprised by the whoop of excitement as the baby, a tiny girl, is lifted from my body. A huge hand holds her near my face for a brief moment before whisking her to the warming table and the ministrations of the NICU team.

She has pre-dawn eyes, deep blue and clear. She takes my measure as I take hers. We gaze across the gulf of air and challenge, assert our collective will. Both frail and tough, she is an ordinary miracle: a newly-minted human. She is my daughter.

I laugh and cry, the world careens off its moorings, time stops to mark this arrival. My laughter silences, for a moment, the violence of my rattling teeth, the wheezing of the blood pressure cuff, the orchestrated traffic of the many workers here. Bill has followed his daughter's magnetic trail to the warming table. Alone, strapped to this strange narrow table, I am released into my awe. A birth.

Denise leans down, quietly reviews the post-birth tasks with me: remove the placenta, repair the incision. The pressure is suddenly excruciating, and I feel nauseated by the heavy hands digging and digging. I am small and weak and worn out, unable to tolerate these last intrusions. It takes forever for them to finish.

In the recovery room, Bill and I gaze at the Polaroid photo of our exquisite baby. We are awed by her steady gaze, the small rose of her lips. Denise, scrubbing alongside another nurse, remarks on her mouth, on the wooly halo of hair, the balance of her features. We are drunk on the photo. We look and look, try to comprehend the fact that this being, this extraordinary wee soul with her hat askance, has made us a family.

There's a carnival feeling in this room as the nurses wash up and put things in order. It feels odd to be in a bed parked in a room that's so unlike a resting place, and yet I am comfortable enough. The noise and chatter siphon away the tension of surgery. This is a time for joy—worry will come soon enough.

The nurses ask what we will name her. *Chloe*, we say with absolute confidence. We've carried this name for a few weeks, and she fit it beautifully when she arrived. Bill and I confer

quietly, then ask Denise if we can give Chloe her name too. She blushes, sputters in surprise. *Chloe Denise*, our perfect baby.

Later I will discover that we've settled on names which mark out the reach of growth and chaos, the body in the world. Chloe means a *green shoot*—it reaches back to Demeter, the goddess of the green world. Denise comes from Dionysus, the god of ecstasy. It's a tall order, to fold growth and dissolution into a small body. Then again, it's the tall order we all face, the human challenge—painful, exhilarating, a whirl of flesh and dreaming.

The adrenalin of the occasion begins to fade and I sink toward exhaustion. Denise slips a needle into my intravenous line. *Morphine*, she whispers, drug of choice. *I'll check on you when I'm back in a couple of days. Rest and mend. You have a daughter!*

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Thursday, November 23, afternoon

The hours of Thursday crawl by, and I work to shake free of the drug haze. I'm rewriting the notion of confinement, I think in my lucid moments—I'm stranded in a hospital bed leaning toward an infant who is only hallways away but far beyond reach. I am thankful when Bill's face emerges into my barren hours, but he too is under siege, overtaken by a fear so fundamental it reframes his being. He brings me gifts: reports, numbers, tendencies, likelihoods. No matter how hard I listen, I can't quite hear what he is offering.

Every hour is a drama in Chloe's precarious life. Her unsuspecting body has come hurtling into a world of challenges. Breathing is a struggle; she needs the oxygen mask. A gavage tube snakes up her nose and into her stomach, carrying energy to fuel her body's effort. Heat to warm her tiny body rises up through the soft flannel under her. Breathing, feeding, staying warm: the daily work of being alive is an endless mountain-climbing expedition. That's all I know for certain, all I can grasp.

Life, for such a small and fragile being, is a series of small gains and terrifying eclipses. Or perhaps for her, life is only a series of taxing bewilderments. The people arrayed around the monitors celebrate the gains, hold their breath through the eclipses. We assign the meaning to the shape of this life—*she's making good strides, she's having more difficulty*—and invest ourselves in the version of a future we are obliged to choose. Each time you enter the NICU, you pass a wall of pictures, photos of the children who've blossomed from the other distressed seeds who once lived here. It's possible; it happens all the time.

I participate in this dream, of course I do. I celebrate the doctors with their gentle hands, their extraordinary skills. I celebrate the nurses who stand guard, day and night, their gestures shaping a life lived with unremitting intensity. I sit in my room, dreaming of a child who will romp across the pastures of my childhood, flop down in dandelions so thick they carpet the world yellow.

I dare to hope, but I dread that hope too. *What if she dies?* That's the question that hangs like attic dust in the air, the question that neither Bill nor I can speak, the question that suffocates our friends, our families. Unspoken but present, it frightens us out of our wits.

Another question hangs like a wraith behind that one: *What if she needs to die and can't find her way?* It haunts me, but I know I will never place it in anyone's ear.

Hi, Mom?

Hello, honey. I've been waiting to hear from you. How are you?

Okay, I think. No—actually no. I don't know.

I'm awake again, and the room is painfully bright, sun streaming across the covers of my bed. The time is out of joint, as Hamlet would say: the sky should be lowering, reflecting back my clouds of tension. My belly is a mutiny of damaged muscles. It takes practice to remember to move with your arms.

Um, Mom? I need you to come.

I wondered if you'd like me there. I'll call the travel agent's office, get things arranged. I should be there tomorrow or the next day.

I have been untied from my life, my ravaged body beached here in this sun-drenched nightmare. Dread is my ghost.

Mom? I need you to come now. I'm not sure—

I'll call now. I'll be there as soon as I can.

My mother, my mother. She will comfort me. She will wrap her strength around me, soothe me through my nightmare.

Sorry, Mom. I know it's awkward—

Don't worry, honey. Just hold on: I'll be there soon.

Sun. Fear. Yearning.

Mom? Thanks. I love you. Give my love to Dad.

We love you too.

Even though I am swallowing clusters of pills every few hours, my blood pressure continues to careen out of control. My abdomen screams, my head aches, I am shaky from the morphine—I feel grim. Still, my desperation to be with my baby overpowers my ravaged body. Bill helps me navigate five excruciating steps to the wheelchair, then wheels me through a maze of hallways to the neo-natal unit. He has spent the night at Chloe's isolette, and the morning hours too. His human physiology training gives him an unusual comfort in this place—he asks intelligent questions of the care team, adds his energy to theirs. He is not put off by the machines and noise. *It's a place that never sleeps*, he tells me, and I can feel the wonder in him.

It's not so much the activity I dread, but the formality, the necessary distance that fragile health dictates. This is a baby I will be able to look at but not hold, a baby who is cared for by

people who know better than I how to meet her needs. The equation is clear, but the math is painful.

He leads me through the scrub routine: there's a hand-washing protocol, then we don gowns and slippers. I'm grateful to have him as my guide. I am a stranger, but already he moves with assurance. The wheelchair is awkward, bumping through the swinging doors into this crowded room. He's right—it is a noisy place, well-lit and intensely busy. We wind through the maze of isolettes, and we're there. The circle of caregivers shifts to accommodate us. Bill helps me stand, introduces me to the team, then turns his attention to the monitors to see how the baby is faring.

I hardly register the names of the doctors and nurses—I am compelled only by this baby they attend to. I want to absorb everything about her, everything about this moment, this place. I commit her to memory there in her present home, an open isolette warmed from beneath and ringed by monitors and attentive faces. In the top corner sits the floppy-eared bunny, at the bottom, her name, penned on the back of a warranty card by a friend who made the midnight drive to support the new father.

I sink into the look of this lovely child, my own daughter. She is narrow, and red as raw salmon. I see her strong limbs, determined face, long feet and hands, feathery hair like flames from a black sun. Tubes snake into her nose, and IV lines are taped to her body. She is small, about as long as my forearm, but she commands her space and the attention of the people gathered around her. She is powerful, she is compelling. And she is absolutely separate from me.

She is also very busy. I can feel her, mounting her own resistance against the possible influx of blood that could drown her tiny lungs. Being alive is work, hard work. I shudder to think how the tube in her nose, the IV lines in her feet, in her scalp, must have hurt on entry—an unwelcome welcome to the world.

I gaze and gaze, even as my own body begins to crumple from the effort of being upright. I tunnel deep into this exact moment, my witness to this determined, passionate spirit. Then I collapse into the wheelchair and Bill wheels me back to my room. I struggle up onto my bed and fall back against the pillows. When I close my eyes, I can see my beautiful, challenged baby. Someone in that relentlessly busy unit has taken the time to paste hearts onto the monitors taped to her tiny chest. I am struck dumb by that small and very human gesture.

Thursday, November 23, evening

As darkness falls on our first full day as a family, Chloe crosses a momentous line: at twenty-four hours, her chances of survival improve dramatically. Bill sits at the edge of my bed and reports that the NICU team is jubilant. It amazes me to think that people who were strangers to us yesterday have invested so much of themselves in our baby. They have allied themselves with her stubborn will to live—her life *matters* to them. I am thankful, I am relieved, but I am not quite strong enough to celebrate. I am haunted by dark futures, dizzied by the precariousness of this three-legged waltz.

Around midnight, my mom arrives, whisked along dark highways from the airport an hour away. She enters my room and it calms me immeasurably. She sits next to me and strokes the hair back from my face. I tell her where I am, where I've been, where I might be going. We talk quietly in the dark. She soothes her adult child, and I find my way toward sleep.

Friday, November 24

By the time daylight announces Friday, I am nearly blinded by the ache in my head. The nurses wheel my bed into a single room just off the nursing station so they can keep an eye on me. They bring in a cot for Mom.

The doctors come and go, check my vitals, register their concern about this pain. I see them wondering if it's psychosomatic—I wonder that myself, lying in my dim room. Could a person invent pain to protect her from being with a sick baby? Could a headache like this be fashioned from dread? I haul myself into a sitting position, guilty and anxious, and will myself to make the trek to the NICU. But I am no match for this headache. Before I get settled in the wheelchair, I am overcome, and have to lay myself down again.

Time is stretched by effort. I can't bear light, I can't bear noise. Mom closes the curtains against the wan November light, sets the photo of Chloe in amongst the first bouquets of flowers on my bedside table. Friends begin to call, and a few drive down to offer support and share worry. Mom intercepts them in the hallway, brings their care back to me in small pieces.

She spends a few minutes with Chloe, then comes back to lay a cool cloth on my forehead. She shares her visit to the NICU, she offers news from home, she tells me stories from my childhood. She moves around the room, her pendant chiming gently in the low light. When I can't settle, she reads to me. Though I am too ill to concentrate, I can hear, and the contours of her voice are as familiar as childhood. I follow her soothing trails through pain-addled hours.

The nurses and doctors begin to speculate that I might be suffering from a spinal headache, one of the risks associated with the spinal block procedure. Occasionally the needle which channels the numbing drugs into the body leaves a perforation of the dura, a membrane within the spinal column, and the spinal fluid leaks out. When the body is upright, the fluid drains down, leaving the brain scraping against the bony skull. Spinal headaches are not common—about one chance in 200—and will often correct themselves with a couple of days of bed rest. The alternative to waiting is a procedure called a blood patch: the anesthetist deposits a few drops of blood at the injured site where they can form a scab, stopping the leak.

The doctors are uncertain. My blood pressure is not only elevated, but also resistant and hard to control. The medication is aggressive, so perhaps that's the culprit. There's no shortage of emotional challenge in my present situation, no doubt that's contributing. A blood patch has its own risks, so they're reluctant to order one until the picture is clearer. They make notes, consider options.

All I know is that I am struggling—or, more accurately, being leveled by a steam roller, or being wrung out, cell by cell. This headache is enormous, unthinkable. It crowds out every

other sensation. A Polish doctor arrives unannounced, offers to share her training in acupuncture. I feel the million hair-pokes in my back and legs, and fall deeply asleep. My mother sighs with relief, steps out for a walk in the fresh air. An hour later when I awake, the headache is back, grinding away. We both sag with disappointment.

I lean toward my struggling daughter, mere minutes from my room. A universe of illness divides me from my life. I am pinned to my bed, an aching body huddled in a nest.

My mother attends to me.

With his unusual mix of tenderness and training, Bill is better at finding his place in an NICU than most first-time fathers. All his years of anatomy and physiology study arrange themselves into an elaborate mosaic around that tiny isolette, and he assumes his position, a passionate man undertaking a vigil.

He gets to know the team who care for Chloe. He has tremendous respect Dr Shah and Dr Schmidt, her primary neonatologists. They are intense, meticulous, decent. They fold him into their decision-making, honour his connection to this small being. They also care—about the baby, about him, about the demands these difficult circumstances make on all of the people circled around this baby. He meets Helen, the NICU social worker, who impresses him with her warmth and sensitivity. She feels like an ally, someone who knows where he is.

He shares time and tasks with a constellation of neonatal nurses. They answer his million questions, map the experience in their hands onto the knowledge in his brain. They interpret the readings on the machines, they explain the outcomes of their various interventions. They also urge him to go for walks, for food, for sleep. Mostly he will refuse. Occasionally, he will grab a coffee and a misshapen sandwich from the canteen downstairs and then drop in on me, speedy with adrenaline, as he returns to the unit. One nurse threatens to evict him from the NICU if he doesn't go away and take a proper sleep—after all, there are sleeping rooms in this hospital for family members like him. He is so afraid of her that he actually sleeps for five hours straight.

He is compelled, driven. He has exchanged roles with me and will be present to this baby now, the way I have been present all the other days of her life. If you asked him, he couldn't articulate this need. It possesses him, he's in its thrall.

When the intensity around Chloe's isolette becomes overwhelming, he redirects his worry, cutting snowflakes and linked people from colored paper he buys at the drug store downstairs. I will tease him about his decorating style. We will smile toward one another, flinching away from the pain of it. *I needed to—it was her home*, he will say.

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Monday, November 27, afternoon

A brain-ache hijacks you, flies you far from yourself and into a miasma of pain. Three days, four days, five—time is elastic when a body is in distress. When the doctors decide to schedule a

blood patch for Monday afternoon, Mom and Bill are visibly relieved. I am almost too exhausted to feel hopeful. I am wheeled into the prep room, and lie on my gurney. The wait is long, or perhaps it is not. I wake, I doze, I wake again. I am desperate for relief, but I no longer have the energy to be impatient. All of us in this hospital need attention—waiting is what we do.

When I finally am wheeled into the theatre, nervous and fragile, I am surprised to see the same anesthetist. I liked him from the start—his manner in the delivery room, off-hand and witty, is sharp in my memory. Just like that, I am released from being merely a woman suffering a headache to a woman who has experienced the momentousness of a birth. I feel lifted up.

He reaches toward me, rests his hand on my shoulder. *I have never had trouble with that needle*, he says. *I'm so surprised—I'm so sorry*. Another compassionate stranger, his sympathy almost makes me weep. He explains the procedure briefly: he will draw a few drops of my blood, then slide the needle between the bones of my spine and deposit them at the site of the spinal block. The blood will form a scab, and if what I'm suffering is a spinal headache, the leakage will stop. When the spinal fluid is restored, my brain will be properly cushioned and the throbbing will subside.

We settle into the task at hand. It's painful, yes, but blessedly brief. Then he squeezes my shoulder again, wishes me a fast recovery, and disappears into the fray. I feel wretched, but I feel hopeful too. It's a welcome change.

The recovery room is like a summer camp gone wrong—dozens of beds with moaning bodies, perky nurses weaving through, checking and charting. I withdraw, will myself to become invisible in this public zone.

A blood patch? the nurse sings out, glancing at my chart. *Oh, you've had a baby then!* I gasp. She knows only what is printed on that paper, but I am stunned by how invasive her question feels, how callous. I fold into myself. I have had a baby, yes, a small, perfect baby who is near me and far from me, climbing the mountains of her own little life.

I'm suddenly furious: I don't want anything to do with any of them—their can-do attitudes, their casual trespasses. I don't want to be parked here in this muttering sea of illness, aching and fearful and exhausted.

I feel exposed, my skin pried back, the heart's muscle leaping away in surprise. Stranded on the bed, I will the minutes to pass so I can be wheeled back to safety.

Tuesday, November 28, morning

I sleep for hours, Monday evening and all through the night, my body working to restore itself. When Tuesday dawns, the headache has cleared. After days of unremitting pain, this release is a miracle: I can raise my exhausted body into an upright position, I can take a few steps on my own without collapsing, I can talk, I can breathe, I can think. I'm weak and unsteady, but at least I can imagine my way toward the next hour. I am flooded with relief.

Everyone is excited for me. Finally I will be able to join the brigade of watchers at the edge of Chloe's isolette. Six days. She has navigated six precious, demanding, miraculous days.

By all accounts she is stronger after so many storms. Each one brings us all closer to hope and expectation.

I align myself with this fighting spirit. At the same time, it shames me to know that I am afraid of the place she lives, afraid of the demands it places upon our human need to reach one another. I fear I will fail at this version of mothering. I have missed her life with its hushed moments and command performances. I only know her eyes, her narrow, red body—I'm not sure that is enough.

Mom takes me to the NICU in a wheelchair. I compose myself, breathe into my anxiety. We scrub, then enter the bustle of attention. I feel I'm intruding, though the strangers around Chloe's isolette welcome me warmly, reshape the circle to include me. I gaze at the red baby, wonder that she could be mine. Hands move deftly around her body, attending to lines and wires. They wave invisible magic wands, dare the impossible. I am mesmerized by the bewildering fact of this child's life.

Voices circle around me. I struggle to grasp the details of improving health, of amazing resilience. I am absorbed by this baby, this stubborn, determined baby. My hand slips toward hers, nestles against her tiny fingers. I long to know this child, to fold her into myself. I long to be her mother.

I lean my broken body toward her, my magnetic north, and begin to sing. I fold my voice into the smallest envelope, send it through the relentless beeping and buzzing of the machines in this space, the rustle of hands and shoes and clean smocks. I sing through my fingertip, send waves up her bruised arm. I am determined to find her. I am seeking her heart, sending an ancient love letter from mother to daughter. I sing her my astonishment, my anguish, my apologies. I sing her my hope, I sing her my dread, I sing her my blessing. I sing her a mother in a painful world. I sing her a mother.

The caregivers around Chloe have shared their optimism and confidence, but I sense something else, a pending change in the weather. Then this small being arches her back, and concern telepaths around the isolette. The nurse looks at me pointedly and declares that Chloe can't handle extra stimulation.

I am aghast. My voice ties itself into a knot at the back of my throat. I pull my hand away, and remove myself from the circle. This is a place for the medical team who knows this baby's body so intimately. It is not a place for a longing mother.

I close my eyes against the tubes and wires invading her body, the effort of breathing. These crests of danger have shaped her days, and the days of her caregivers, since she was born. Where is my place? This is not mothering as I've imagined it. I wonder if I have the stamina. I stand back and watch my baby's heavy work. Then my mother wheels me back to my room. I weep silently through the maze of hallways.

Tuesday, November 28, afternoon

Back in my room, I take another clutch of pills, have some food, remind myself that this crisis is one of many. We're running a marathon rather than a sprint—we all need to manage our energy reserves. Mom heads to the NICU so that Bill can make a quick trip to the cafeteria. I do my best to rest. Despite my resolve, I can feel the dreads taking over. I'm like a child falling down a well. I wait for Bill to swing by with his lunch. He will put solid ground under me again.

A stranger's head leans in the door, announces that Chloe's distress is intensifying, then disappears. Suddenly, I am frantic. I struggle into the wheelchair. When Bill appears a minute later, we race across to the NICU. Now panic is my demon-partner; it steals my breath, bangs my heart. We race through the scrub-in, find our way through the maze to Chloe's isolette. The doctors and nurses cluster, each person drilled to the task at hand. Skill, intuition, determination: their hands fly like strung birds above the laboring baby. I watch, stunned by fear.

Dr Jay pulls back, turns his body to locate us. His eyes announce the severity of this moment. *This is our preparation,* I think, but I can't imagine what is next. He steps over to us, explains that Chloe has internal bleeding which is not responding well to their interventions. The situation is critical. He disappears into the dance of arms.

He emerges again, moments later, comes swiftly to speak to us: *She's bleeding, her lungs, I don't think she can make it through—*

His voice, his hands: he holds us to him, speaks to our deeper selves. We nod, dumbly, lean into his compassion.

We can continue if that's your choice, he says, *but I really think—*

The air drains from the room. Now I truly am falling down the well. I hear the echo of damp brick walls, feel the splash of water below me. I will go down, down. I will never move out of this deep place. Nothing will reach me. I will die, slowly, at the bottom of my sorrow.

No—

We speak simultaneously, our voices startle us.

Don't prolong— If— No—

There are no words to initiate death. We fashion our ache from silence, relieved by its sturdiness, its subtlety.

His hands, mourning doves, fly into our pain, settle on our shoulders to rest. He stands with us, quiet, respectful.

Do you want to hold the baby? he asks.

My back hunches up to save my heart from a hurt it cannot sustain. The arms above the isolette change their choreography. They swiftly detach the array of wires and tubes, unplug the red body. Bill circles his arms around me, and together we reach and reach, we reach to hold our dying daughter.

We stand, Bill and I, circled into one another, folded around our baby. Someone leads us, gently, to the room at the edge of the NICU, the quiet room. My mother follows us. The air is blue, dense and still. We ease our bodies into the soft furniture, practice the feel of arms around her failing body. She spans the length of my forearm, palm to elbow. She is small, but she is

definite. We are struck by the potency of her, the strength of muscles exercised by pain, the perfect definition of her parts.

It occurs to me, suddenly, that I have never been in the presence of a dead person. Will I be afraid? Will I be sickened? I feel awkward and stupid, inept, ashamed. I stammer my apprehension and pass through the wave of fear. Then we sit in silence, awed by the passage. The child, this utterly beautiful girl child, settles softly in my arms; her father reaches around us both, holding us to him. Her little heart stops—at some point her heart stops—and we continue to sit, an aching family in an impossible embrace.

Death is what it is: a quiet, mystical cataclysm. We sit in the blue light, weep and wonder, speak gently into the velvet air. It's a physical relief to have her tiny body in contact with my body. I feed the deep reaches of my belly with breath. We define a shape for our family in these moments of holding, we claim her body for our own.

Minutes pass, maybe hours, and I am surprised by the intensity of the calm here at this point of catastrophe. Something leaves, and our wishful selves fly after it. But something stays too, something clear and ringing, something indelible. I will spend my life discovering what it is, this deep, true thing.

It's hard to say, exactly, when a death is finished. The doctors and nurses come, by ones or twos, carrying their pain and defeat awkwardly. They sorrow for us, but they also sorrow for themselves.

They come and sit with us, these exhausted, compassionate people, and we are quiet together in the blue light. Everything has imploded into this minute, this space: the world is here, circling around this child's small, cooling body. We nourish ourselves in the calm, prepare for the long climb out of the well.

At some point, we are spent from the work of attention. A nurse lifts Chloe from our arms, small treasure, and we make our way back to my room. We are mostly numb. Shock is a natural anesthetic, that's part of it, but also this revision of our reality is so profound that we no longer quite know who we are. It takes clarity to perceive what is broken.

Helen comes with us, I'm glad of that. We are walking through a new land, and she is a steadying guide. We enter the crowd of flowers and I am suddenly exhausted and fragile. I need medication. I need rest. My body is not sturdy.

I collapse into my bed. Bill perches on the edge, takes my hand. Helen pulls a chair alongside us. *Where's Mom?* I say, suddenly anxious. *I thought she was with us.* My mother—I can feel her imprint in that quiet room with the dying baby, her imprint here in my room too, caring for me through the long hours of illness.

She stayed behind, Helen says. She has her own messages for that little granddaughter. It's important, Charlene—and no, she's not alone.

I think of my mom braving her way through these days of mothering me through my pain, and folding the fiery spirit of this granddaughter into her life story too. She and Dad know better than almost anyone what it means to agonize over a fragile baby: their first child was born with spina bifida, and lived on love and determination for almost a year, months longer than anyone had predicted. They were young when they crashed into her death. I have the advantage of ten more years of living, and of parents who have walked this path ahead of me.

Helen and Bill and I let the afternoon settle around us. We talk, we weep, we tell each other small stories. She answers our questions, but mostly she shows us what we carry forward. Chloe's life was brief but her days do have their narratives of triumph and connection. We have a cast of people who have brought their skills and their passion to the aid of a struggling infant, and to her mother as well. We have our families, and we have our friends, all of them ringed around us. We have one another, and we have ourselves. *You are strong*, she says.

She looks around my room. *The flowers here are beautiful*, she says. We gaze at the riot of blossoms, breathe in the scent.

Her voice becomes gentle. *Walking into an empty house can be a very painful moment for parents who've lost a baby*, she says. *You will find many ways to bring Chloe home, but you might begin by carrying in an armful of flowers.*

Tuesday, November 28, evening

The afternoon drifts by. Mom and Bill each go off to make the first painful calls, unleashing our sorrow into the bigger world. I can feel all of our people, staggering with the weight of it. Nurses move through my haze, checking my recovery—with my daughter no longer here to anchor us, they are anxious for me to be well enough to leave. We all feel the press for privacy.

My room is a sanctuary in the falling darkness. Mom and Bill and I eat together, we talk, we weep. We have been released from clock and calendar, and the flowers accompany us in this swirling, sorrowing present. Eventually Bill climbs into bed beside me, Mom stretches out on her cot, and we allow our exhausted bodies to rest.

Wednesday, November 29, morning

The morning is a blur of final visits from doctors, and arrangements for my discharge. Helen, clear-headed and compassionate, helps us think through all the complex decisions that attend a death—the question of autopsy, and the possible futures for the small broken body resting I have no idea where. I put my mind to each of these things, but abstractly—I'm a chilled amphibian.

Sometime mid-morning, I look at Helen across the wide, cold valley, and wonder how I can possibly go back into a classroom. I feel my students with their intent faces, I feel the effort it takes to animate the conversations that happen in those classrooms. I can't imagine where that

energy would come from—I can't imagine caring enough to find it. *I don't see how I can do it*, I say.

You don't. She says it simply, then pauses, reading the electricity in the room. *Take your maternity leave, Charlene. Find your way through your sorrow, then do whatever is next. You'll know.*

I'm startled. It hasn't occurred to me that a woman with no baby could take maternity leave. It's a conundrum that exceeds semantics: am I a mother if I have no child?

As the morning ends, Bill faces the horror of a nearby funeral chapel. The trite river scene in the entrance offends him, as does the programmed sympathy of the chapel director. No one can fathom the loneliness, the exhaustion, the distress in this bereaved man. We have settled on cremation—Bill sets his jaw and picks through the details for a fire he can't bear to consider. I'm relieved that he's clear, decisive, able to act on our behalf. I have some inkling of the cost.

In his absence, I gather my few things. For the first time in days, I put on real clothes. I'm alone, and testing the experience. Mom has gone down to the drug store to find a journal she saw a few days back. I expect she has taken a walk outside as well—she will be desperate for some space for her own sorrow.

I roll my bed into the upright position, eat my lunch, doze away the minutes. I am, I think, ready to go home. I imagine the quiet there, both solace and reproof.

Wednesday, November 29, afternoon

Five or six people, maybe more, suddenly appear through my veil of waiting. I feel a clutch of anxiety, then recognize a few of their faces. Dr Shah, Chloe's gentle, dark-eyed doctor. Dr Schmidt, another neonatologist, petite and impeccable. The bleary one, I realize, is the nurse who spent so many hours attending the baby. She was off yesterday—the news devastated her when she came on-shift this morning. My eyes drift from face to face. I try to imagine who these people are. It occurs to me they may be making the same effort.

These caregivers have carved time out of the intense demands of the NICU to come to me, their faces drawn with grief and exhaustion. They gather around the bed, summoning strength, summoning breath. Summoning details about Chloe—the way she held her fists, the shape of her mouth, her tenacity. They speak, and then silence emerges from sound, swallows them into the ache of memory. They are struggling, these people: their skills and determination and imagination have been outmaneuvered by death. Failure hunches their backs, makes awkward their idle hands.

I do not see failure. I am moved by their willingness to come to me, a woman who's been absent from the bedside of her baby, with stories of her baby's short life. I know, suddenly and certainly, that these people have loved, have *cherished*, our baby. It stuns me. Stumbling, I name their gifts: compassion, patience, fortitude, generosity, humor, grace. Together we begin to comprehend the absolute beauty of a life of days, release ourselves into mourning.

My mom arrives with the journal, and before they return to their work, each of these visitors writes a note. They speak their sorrow and sympathy, they speak of work and joy and courage. They have no answers. *In my country*, Dr Shah writes, *we believe that it's not the length of the life that matters, but the size. Your daughter's huge spirit moved us all.*

In minutes, they have gone, and hours from now, we will have left too. What remains: the feel of them, circled around my bed, a ring of grieving strangers, generous and bowed with loss. The baby's other family, foreign and familiar.

Getting into the car is far more challenging than I've imagined. Even with my abdominal incision healing well, a week is scant recovery for muscles and tissues. The car seat is lower than the wheelchair, and you have to lift your legs to swing them inside—the task almost bests me. I get my body settled, and set about finding ease for the rest of me too. At least I feel safe here in the company of loved people, all three of us breathing air saturated with roses and lilies.

We have over an hour's drive to get from Hamilton to Waterloo. Every bump, every lurch, every adjustment in speed rattles up through my body. Still, it's amazing to be out—I feel like a small creature blinking in sudden light. The streets are fast and busy, then we break out into the stretch of fields, the periodic scatter of village storefronts. I watch these displays through the car window. I'm moving through an expansive movie set, the landscape of a dream. I am remote, disconnected from the lives humming along to unseen directives.

I feel like Eurydice, stripped of her reality, her dreams, her self, beginning the arduous trek out of the underworld. She cannot see, but she can hear—faintly—the compelling music of living and loving. Her task is to trust, her task is to follow.

Bill and Mom and I drive through the late afternoon light. One week ago, we first laid eyes on our baby, our fiercely beautiful, fiercely alive Chloe. Now we watch lives fly past the windows, and wonder how we will navigate our own versions of return. We steady the trembling flowers in the back seat. We speak now and then, and we listen to our own thoughts. Gradually, we make our way home.

We finally come to rest in the driveway, three aching people and a million blossoms. I struggle up steps with an armload of white lilies, shooting stars for the plain earth.

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Sunday, December 3

Since our return to Waterloo on Wednesday, people have been calling with sympathy and concern, with tenderness, with offers of anything a body could need: nourishment, time, company, beauty. Bill and I realize we need to make an occasion for all of these people to find us, to find each other, to find our missing daughter. Bill posts notes in our university departments. He calls close friends with lists of people to contact. He invites people as they call. *Sunday afternoon, at our home, please come.*

On Sunday morning, Mom and I tidy the upstairs bedroom, bring up the miraculous bouquet of white lilies which continues to outlive itself. We set out the journal and a pen alongside a letter I have written, a brief version of a brief life. We lay out the tiny wristband—it fits my thumb precisely—and the tape measure torn raggedly at 13 ½ inches. We lay out the white dress she wore at her death, the small knitted hat she wore at her birth. We set out her footprints, her handprints, the paper decorations from her isolette, the floppy-eared bunny. Small details, painfully intimate. I attend to these things, position and reposition them, try to find a shape, a context. I want, more than anything, to make these small things beautiful. They must be worthy.

It's context, really, that I long for, context so that I can comprehend where I am. In the wake of this birth, this death, I cannot understand what has happened, I cannot understand what it means. My arms ache with lack of this daughter, and I cannot reach her with words or dreaming. I am filled with dread that the few precious threads I grasp so tightly will fade and be lost to me. I wonder what I will know as the days gather themselves into weeks, months, years. I wonder what I will lose and what I will find.

On this Sunday morning, all I can do is prepare myself for this day. I have written what I can about the short history of our travels. I have gathered and grouped the small things, then added the scent of lilies. I have slept to restore my ravaged body, then dressed myself in proper clothes. I have done these things because they are right, they are the rites.

I have done these things because they distract me from what is ahead: waves of sympathy, the awkward pain of friends and colleagues, the endless assault of proximity.

When people arrive that afternoon, the house smells of warm spices—cinnamon, cloves, allspice. Our parents meet people at the door, invite them in. *Take your coats upstairs to the bedroom*, they say. *And please take a moment to sign the journal with a note for Charlene and Bill. Yes, a few of Chloe's things are up there as well. Then come down for mulled cider...*

Hesitation, relief: anxious bodies arrive and are unfolded into the space, the occasion. Each one moves upstairs, grateful for privacy to cushion this meeting and farewell. I will read their notes, later, and they will break me open: people I know well and people I hardly know, all speaking simply, directly, gently, sadly. These persons, in the quiet of that space, have touched the small wristband, wondered at the hat, the tape measure, the tiny hands and feet. They thank us for introducing our daughter; some address her directly. They speak about hope and fear and sadness, they speak about dignity and courage. The notes are unnerving, profound. I will read them, off and on, for years. It will surprise me, each time, that this baby actually exists for these speakers, that in spite of her private, solitary life, she also has a public self, a self far exceeding my reach.

Our friends carry their ragged pain up the stairs, and come down calm, one after another. They find a cup of warm cider, speak with one another, then wind toward Bill, toward me. Fear cracks away, frees their sorrowing selves to meet us here on this small island of warmth.

A colleague stoops toward me, shyly offers his sympathy. I urge my body upright, embrace him, embrace his wife. This is what we all need, over and over: the solid contact of living bodies, and forgiveness for our ridiculous failure to offer solace to one another. As I collapse into my seat, I realize I haven't accounted for a body only a dozen days from surgery. I don't have the strength to sit and stand, not repeatedly, yet I cannot forego this contact. I make my way across to the rocking chair by the room's entrance. I will be able to reach up and embrace from there, and people can crouch beside me to talk.

I learn later that one of my friends arrives, then flatly refuses to enter. After a bit, she comes into the warm house, braves the ghost of our gone baby, and the ghosts of children she mourns but will never bear. As the afternoon slows, she and her friends sit in a ring around my chair, and ask me to tell my whole story. For a suspended half-hour, their company will lift me into language, into narrative, into the miracle and terror of this event which threatens to capsize me. I feel their open hunger for this baby, their uncomplicated welcome of her tiny, secret self.

Our house fills to bursting with people. Something over a hundred friends—how can that be? The space crackles with energy, generosity, courage. We share words, and we step over into territory where words cannot follow. We approach and retreat, braving the intimacy of sorrow. We connect, simply and deeply. We are a community of grieving people, and we gather, supporting one another in an effort that feels too big for any one of us. My dad will say, tonight at supper, *These people all came for you, for Chloe*. He will shake his head, amazed.

It is demanding, this afternoon of contact, and before sharing a meal with the friends who stay to help clean up, I collapse into sleep. Shreds of laughter filter up into the bedroom, speckle my sleep with hope, with comfort. The lilies sing gently in the low light.

Tuesday, December 5

On Tuesday, I take myself to Christopher's design studio. I leaf through binders of paper, relieved by their exotic names, the polish of their surfaces. My mom is here, I'm glad of that. She is able to watch me fold up and unfold again. She seems to have confidence in me. By moments, I have it too.

I am here to invent an announcement of Chloe's death, a birth announcement that can do double-duty. Christopher, I know, will make it beautiful. He aches for me, he aches for Bill, he aches for our small daughter. He's a good man, this friend, and today's task requires of him a complex dance: approach the mourner, protect the mourner. He's gentle but sunny—that releases me into my task. I flip through binders of paper, and keep returning to parchment. There's something ethereal, fragile, lovely about parchment, yet some density too, echoes of scrolled announcements, biblical injunctions, meticulous record-keeping by solitary scribes in some other time and place.

I've brought the inkprints of Chloe's feet, perfect prints of perfect feet, unutterably small. They signal, better than anything, the extremity of this place I'm inhabiting. How could any feet be this tiny? Could the fierce, spirited baby, the baby who has died, have had feet this tiny?

Perfect, human feet. How could I be a mother of a child with feet so tiny? How could the wearer of these feet be dead? How could I be the mother of a dead baby? I skitter toward the feet, I skitter away from them.

I try not to think about this part: the footprints were made after Chloe died. A nurse, gentle hands cradling this lost body, washed her, dressed her, photographed her. She printed her hands, printed her feet. She did these things, last rites, out of respect for this baby, and for her father who stood watch hour upon hour, for her damaged mother, for the grandmother who hovered between the baby and her own daughter.

I think of that nurse, there in the quiet room with my mom, each of them mourning the dead infant. I imagine them engaging in gentle talk, practical woman-talk, buttoning small buttons, coaxing cool feet onto an inkpad. Both of them will have marveled at the sturdiness of a body so small, and the quiet finality of death. My mom, surely, held my baby and thought of her own gone baby, of all that she hadn't been allowed to do or feel or say all those years ago, the great weight of silence around infant death. My mom, finally allowed to visit old bruises, to offer herself and these small beings the grace of attention, the human longing for dignity, respect.

I hold the inkprints of Chloe's feet, and I keep returning to the pink parchment. I resolutely refused pink myself as a child—I was too proud for pink, too sensitive to the unstated equation of femininity and weakness. But now I know something else: a premature baby has so little fat that the narrow arms and feet, the round belly, the ears and fingers and neck and ankles are ruddy, the deepest pink. The blood that streams furiously around the tiny body is scarcely below the surface, boiling with resolve, on an imperious mission to feed, defend, rescue. How could I choose green, or beige, or burgundy? Pink is a softer-than-Chloe color, but it's her color. She spent her days naked, wearing her skin bravely and with determination. I know now that pink is a tough color.

Christopher hovers, solicitous, anxious to put his skills to use. He scans the footprints into his computer, clucks over their perfection, then busies himself in the next room. I sit next to my mom and reel into fathomless sorrow. How can I announce the death of our daughter? Are there words for death?

I can't do this, I weep, I can't do this.

The pen in my hand writes Chloe's name, her birth date, her weight. The pen stops, I struggle for air. The pen writes, *She was a surprised package*—yes, that's exactly it. The muscles of my face contort. The pen writes, *She earned her wings in the quiet of the afternoon*. The pen marks and marks, scratches meaning onto a scrap of paper. I hunch over the pen in breath-holding agony.

Christopher returns, gently takes the scratches and enters them into his computer. He moves the perfect feet around, a bodiless dance, finally sets them at the bottom of the page. The text bends and curves, makes a lifepath of six days.

We will send this beautiful note with its bravely dancing feet, this missive of birth and death. Readers across the country will open it, their hands quivering slightly as they hold this

parchment with its words that spell a life. The will glimpse the promise of death for each of us, the possibility of beauty.

I fall asleep that night and dream of Uncle Bob. Even in my dream, I know he is dead—we reach toward one another across the border that separates the living from the no longer living.

The two of us talk lightly, lovingly. He has come to tell me something, but first he asks, *How is it for you?* In the way of dreams, I tell and tell—*I have lost my baby, I am in anguish, I cannot breathe, I have lost my baby.* The words float free of me, uninflected. I tell because this man knows. He has mourned, he has been mourned. Even as I weep out my heartbreak, I pay attention. This is an audience, I will miss none of it.

When the dream is ending, I am buoyed toward consciousness by his voice. *All things will be well*, he says, *all manner of things will be well.* The phrase circles and circles, a litany to move me into another day. I blink into the early light, calm and determined. I will hollow out a space for this gone child, this fiery spirited daughter. She will dance as far as my memory can reach.

I am certain that my uncle's muscled arms are sweeping her into the air in the way I remember so clearly. She shrieks with joy, learning the glory of flight and falling.