

# BABY GOODBYE

WE WALKED IN TOGETHER. John's right arm was around my waist, as if to support me. I held Maggie. She wore her pink lace dress, which had dark purple grape juice down the front from a spill in the car. Pink was not the appropriate color, but Maggie didn't have black. Justin followed behind us. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was staring at his reflection in the shine of his shoes. He'd been doing it all evening.

The funeral director approached us with such perfect elegance it was as if she were a floating ghost. Her course, gray hair was tied into a tight bun at the nape of her neck and she wore a freshly pressed, black suit. The edges of her lips turned slightly upward while her eyelids drooped over her gray eyes. I wondered how many years of mortuary school it had taken her to learn to smile like that.

John extended his left hand to the woman. I nodded politely. The woman offered her condolences and sympathy for the death of our daughter and then promptly explained the schedule for the evening.

"Friends and family will arrive from six until nine..."

Her voice was high and airy, like an F sharp note of a flute. "Flowers can be placed

in front of the casket and cards in the two baskets near the doors..."

Maggie fidgeted in my arms and reached toward the diaper bag that hung on my shoulder. I found her pacifier and took it out and put it in her mouth.

"The service will begin..."

Maggie continued to fidget and whimper. I hoped John paid attention to the woman. I gave Maggie her cup of grape juice, and I made sure the lid was secure, Lord forbid she have another spill. The flute-voice played like a sorrowful melody until it ended with "Again, I offer my sincere condolences and sympathy."

She had added the word "sincere." I would have laughed out loud if I hadn't felt John's arm gently lead me to the room with the casket.

We walked through the sparkling-clean glass double doors and into the large open room with its ornate, twelve-foot high ceiling. It smelled like lilacs and old-lady perfume. Maggie began to cry and I told John that I would have to change her diaper. He gently rubbed Maggie's cheek with the side of his thumb and gave me a sad smile--a smile too much like the one the funeral director

wore. I turned away quickly. I left John and Justin in the room with the casket, and took Maggie to the bathroom.

By the time I stepped out of the bathroom, with Maggie on my hip, a long line of spectators had formed. They all waited to look at our family and give us their sad smiles, and to look at the little girl asleep in the casket. There were friends from church, neighbors from down the street, Sunday school teachers, coworkers from John's office, my sister and my mother and the in-laws. All there to "offer their condolences and sympathy." They made me sick.

I sat down on a stiff, mauve sofa with Maggie on my knee. Justin saw us and sat down beside me. His arms were crossed in front of his small, seven-year old chest and his eyes were red. He had been crying. I followed his gaze past the crowd and into the room with the casket.

In front of the polished wooden box, I saw the back of John, his spine curved like a "C" and his head hung below his shoulders. His body shook in heavy sobs. He wiped his tears with the back of his hand. I watched him weep from where I sat in the lobby. I envied his grief.

Maggie fell asleep against my chest, and

Justin rested his head on my shoulder. The crowd began to leave the funeral home, and left their flowers, cards, and sad smiles. I caught John's gaze, and raised my brows, saying, "We should leave," without actually saying a word. He took Maggie from my arms. She stirred and then sighed against her father's shoulder. Justin stood up beside his dad. He was a miniature of his father. Dark blonde hair and large, brown eyes that could tell a story without saying a single word. Now they said, "I need to sleep and to wake up and have everything be normal." I stood up and smoothed out the creases in my long, black skirt. I took a step toward the exit door. John stopped me with his free hand.

"Christy," he looked at me with his big, telling eyes. He gently squeezed my arm. "Go tell your baby good-bye." He nodded toward the room with the casket, and then took Maggie and Justin out to the car.

I didn't like to be ordered like that. I felt like a child, who was being instructed by her parent. I wanted to stomp my foot and say "No!" I stood frozen in the funeral home lobby. I was angry and alone, but I knew he was right.

I looked toward the room with the casket, and then found my feet moving forward, through the sparkling-clean glass double doors, into the room with the ornate, twelve foot high ceiling, and right up to the polished wooden box that cradled the sleeping girl all the people had come to see.

The girl had blond hair, which curled at the ends and skin that was light tan with rosy cheeks. Her smile looked pasted on, like the one the funeral director wore, and John, and all the spectators. Her eyes were shut and lashes spread like a fan; she looked like an angel.

But she was not my daughter. She was not my little Emily. She was just a doll wearing a wig and make-up. Not my daughter. My daughter was bald with little tufts of yellow hair behind her ears, and four long scars on the back and top of her scalp. Her skin was white like a sheet of unused paper, with blotches of red under her eyes. And her smile--that was the real difference--my daughter's smile was wide and toothy just like John's. She almost never smiled without laughing too. There was none of this slightly-upturned-edges kind of smile stuff. Never. And her eyes. They were blue with dots of green right around the pupil. They were blue, like mine. This child lying in the casket was not my daughter.

I remembered the first time I saw her blue eyes. The nurse put my newborn baby in my arms and she opened her little lids to peer up at my face.

"She has blue eyes, just like yours." John said, with tears in his voice.

"Blue eyes don't last." The nurse replied.

She scribbled some notes on a clipboard.

"She has blue eyes because she is newborn, but in a couple weeks, they'll turn brown, like her father's."

But my baby's eyes stayed blue. Even after all the tests and treatments, when all the life in her face seemed to wash away slowly, her eyes stayed blue.

She was one and a half the first time she was tested. She had had a few seizures. The doctors were concerned and put her on medication and ordered tests. John held her while they put a sedative I.V. in her chubby little arm. She screamed and cried with big, wet tears, which I wiped with a tissue, and then I had to wipe my own. She fell asleep in his arms and then they strapped her down to a stretcher, a stretcher that was meant for a patient four times her size. Then she went into a narrow cylinder that hummed like static

on a radio. John and I sat on the two chairs twenty feet away and watched our baby through a big glass window. Only John spoke--just two words--he said,

“God knows.”

Then he held my hand and we prayed together without saying another word.

So I suppose God knew my baby had a cancerous tumor in the left side of her brain. He must have known that she would have brain surgery at two-years old and that the doctors would tell John and me that our baby would probably not live to be ten. God knew how we'd cry together until night turned to morning, and how we'd pace the kitchen, as we wondered how we would pay for the treatments. God knew that I would watch my baby grow little and suffer slowly. God knew, and he hadn't done anything to stop it.

I studied the small figure in the casket. I watched her chest to see if it would rise and fall like the breaths of a sleeping child. I watched her eyes to see if they'd flicker open and stare at me with their empty sockets. But no movement came.

She was tested in the narrow cylinder every six months after her first surgery. It became routine. Each appointment she'd be

tested, and the doctor would say,

“Things are looking very good.”

My baby grew into a little girl with straight blond hair pulled into to sloppy pigtails and big blue eyes that sparkled when she giggled and while held her baby brother. When I would pick her up from preschool she'd race down the hallway and wrap her arms tightly around my legs.

“I'm so glad you're here, Mommy.” She'd say as she buried her face in my thigh.

Then, on the night before her fifth birthday, I woke up to the sound of a soft whimper. It was the kind of sound that only a mother wakes up to. My baby was curled up at the foot of my bed. She cradled her head in her hands.

“Mommy,” she said through tears. “My head hurts so bad.”

And so it happened again. The pain, the tests, the surgery, the treatments, the gag-tasting medicines, and the tears, all over again.

My cheeks were still dry as I leaned over the casket. I had grabbed a tissue from the box on the fancy pedestal before I walked into the room. I had thought I might need it. But it lay limp and dry in my palm. Footsteps sounded behind me. I didn't turn around; I knew who it was by the purposeful click-click of her heels.

"Excuse me, ma'am,"

Her stiff and cold hand rested on my shoulder.

"We have a comfortable, secluded room down the hall if you'd like to sit for awhile. The funeral home will take care of the flowers and cards."

I wanted to turn toward her and spit. I wanted to grab her fragile, wrinkled hand and crush it with all my strength. Instead, I simply looked into the casket and said,

"May I stay here for a while longer?"

"Well, yes." The funeral director paused. "But I'm sure you'd find the room down the hall very comfort-"

"May I stay here!" I almost yelled. I felt the woman's hand lift quickly off my shoulder. Her footsteps clicked sharply out of the

room. As I turned and watched her leave, something through the windows of the front of the building caught my eye. Our mini van was parked in front of the funeral home. Despite the distance, I could see John sitting in the driver's seat with Maggie on his lap. She was playing with the blinker switch. Justin sat in the back playing with his Game-Boy. I turned back around and faced the casket in front of me.

My baby, Emily, had her second surgery when she was five. She had to be held back from kindergarten because she had missed so many days. John and I tried to make life normal for her. She was able to go through most of first grade. She sang a solo in the Christmas pageant. We took a vacation to Disney World. Then her third surgery came when she was seven and a half. After that, things were different. My baby lost all her hair because of the treatments. She was put on a diet and lost weight. Her muscles became weak and it was difficult for her to walk without having something to support her. Her skin became thin and soft like an old lady. I started home-schooling Emily in second grade. I made a schoolroom in our basement with a desk with a soft reclining seat and a clean white board. I went to home school conferences and bought the best materials I could. John took us on short car rides throughout our county. Though it

wasn't much, my baby would always sit in her seat and look out her window with wonder in her big blue eyes. And I sat in my seat and looked at her. I cried often, then.

I did not like to think about this. I could feel the tightness of my throat, like a snake coiled around my neck. I closed my eyes from the view of the girl in the casket and looked at the blue-eyed girl inside my head. But she was dying.

She was ten and five months when she had her fourth surgery. It was late September, the time when most ten year olds are off at school during the day. After the surgery, her home became a beige colored room with a window, T.V., and table full of flowers and love notes. We came to see her and eat dinner with her every night. Maggie came with us; she had been born several months earlier. We did this for weeks and weeks and months and months.

My world started to spin--the real world in which I stood in the huge open room of the funeral home. My hands gripped the edge of the casket with such fierceness that my knuckles turned white. My forehead felt like a stretched rubber band that was ready to snap.

On Emily's eleventh birthday I went early

to see her. John was coming in half an hour with Maggie, Justin, and the cake. I carried a brown paper bag full of brightly wrapped presents, streamers, crepe paper, and balloons into her hospital room. I set the bag on the table and walked beside her bed. Her skin was pale and yellowish. Her eyelids were so thin they were almost transparent. She was wearing a pink and red knit hat and matching slippers, which stuck out from the edge of her soft fleece blanket. I brushed her forehead with the tips of my fingers.

"Happy Birthday, Emily." Her lids fluttered open to reveal her bright blue eyes. She smiled widely.

"Hi mom." She said with a voice so weak it was hardly audible.

"How does it feel to be eleven years old?" I asked. Emily smiled but said nothing. I continued to stroke her forehead and cheek with the tips of my fingers. We were silent for a while, just gazing at each other with our like blue eyes.

"You don't have to worry for me, mom." Emily broke the silence.



“Of course I do, honey, you’re my baby.” We were quiet for a few more minutes. Only the steady beeping sound of Emily’s heart monitor filled the space between us.

“I’ve always known I was dying.” Emily said as tears filled her eyes. “I’m not afraid.”

“Don’t say that,” I whispered, “You’re not dying, you’re gonna get better.” I paused. “You’re gonna get better.”

“Mom,” Emily paused and stared into my eyes. “It’s okay.” A tear trickled down her cheek slowly. “Don’t you know how much God loves me?” Her soft voice cracked with emotion. “Don’t you know?” I nodded but could not look in her eyes. “Jesus came so I can really live. He came so I don’t have to die, not really.” She spoke with such sincerity that her voice strained.

“You’re gonna get better.” I said.

I tried to smile back at her.

Minutes later, a nurse came into the room to check on Emily. She wrote some notes on a clipboard. I looked through my paper bag and pulled out the birthday decorations. I draped the bright blue crepe paper over the window and taped two balloons at the top corners. I gazed out the window at the busy

city streets and the clear open sky. Bells from a church down the street chimed the nine a.m. hour. Each clang seemed to echo a low, vibrating misery that mourned the change the new hour would bring. When the bells finished, there was silence in the room. I held my breath to listen. The steady beeping of Emily’s heart monitor had slowed to a quiet hum. Everything inside me froze. I turned around and saw the lifeless line stream across the monitor screen.

“No,” I heard myself whisper. “No, it can’t - she can’t - not yet-” I rushed to the side of her bed and grabbed her still-warm hand. “No!” The nurse beside Emily’s bed checked the monitor, and then Emily’s pulse. I saw concern etched into her wrinkled face. She looked at me with sad eyes and nodded her head.

“She’s gone.” She said. Gone.

I looked at the little blond haired girl lying in the casket; she was not my baby. My baby was at home, on her bedroom floor with her feet dangling in the air behind her while she sang along to her CD player. My baby was in the hospital bed, with tubes down her nose and in her veins, in pain but still smiling with her big blue eyes. My baby was in heaven, in the daddy arms of her sweet Savior Jesus. My baby was dead.

I leaned my head against the hard,  
wooden casket and buried my face in my  
hand.

“Baby, good-bye.” I whispered.

The muscles in my face crinkled and  
contorted and my lower lip twitched. I  
gasped in a gulp of air, then another. A tear  
spilled out from the corner of my tightly  
closed eye. It felt cool against my tense  
cheek, like a sweet kiss.

*—Lydia Wetzel*