

## Unthinkable Task

Stalling, I stare out my bedroom window at sinister black trees. Bleak sky. No sun. Three weeks ago, these trees were on fire—explosions of orange, copper, crimson, gold on a storybook blue sky. Lit by a luminous sun, fluorescent leaves fluttered with strobe effect, some floating to the ground. Notes of burning foliage wafted through the open window. Struck by the glory of fall, I lingered here, as before a campfire.

Now, except for a few tattered leaves, the branches are bare. Shivering, I turn. I sink to the carpet, where I sit cross-legged, surrounded by boxes of loose photos and family albums pillowed in fabric and trimmed with lace. Two trifold poster boards lean against my bed, blank and inescapable.

I reach for my reading glasses, then drop my hand. I don't want to see these photos up close. Sharp images slash.

Therefore, I sort through fuzzy pictures of my three children as swaddled infants; chubby, smiling toddlers; grinning school kids; and lanky teens, willing myself not to remember, not to feel.

There's too much to do in one week. I must select the luncheon menu, table linens, and music. I must decorate the church fellowship hall with Chinese lanterns, white string lights, votive candles in crystal bowls. I must also write a eulogy, for as little as I know, I know more than anyone else. This is the most pressing task. It precedes writing an obituary, scouring the Internet for a cremation urn that doesn't scream funeral, displaying a collection of Rachel's paintings on easels around the sanctuary.

On October 14, 2012, my only daughter Rachel had fallen into a drug-induced diabetic coma. Her boyfriend called 911 but did not follow the ambulance to the hospital. I would learn that paramedics carried her stretcher down the three flights of perpetually dusty stairs in her Bristol, Rhode Island, apartment building, past broken windows held together with duct tape, past her lovely paintings, hung on each floor, I often thought, to offset the squalor.

Rachel arrived at the hospital ER unconscious and alone, to the perplexity of the attending physician who found my number in her cell phone.

She died on November seventh and was cremated the next day.

Two days later, my ex-husband Perry suggested we hold the memorial service on November 17, so it wouldn't interfere with Thanksgiving. My husband Phil agreed. I told them I needed to grieve. They said I must think of our guests.

Therefore, I search through albums and boxes for photographs of Rachel from every phase in her life to arrange on the boards in some meaningful order. Her sweet face smiles up at me in photo after photo. Blond bangs and pigtails blur. I wipe my eyes and nose, swallowing the pain rising in my throat.

How is it that the mother, the one most crushed by the death of the first child she carried and bore, must plan the service? But who else could? My mother and three sisters are in Wisconsin booking flights. I can't

entrust these preparations to Perry or our adult sons, Matthew and Ryan, or Phil and his adult daughters, Nikki and Krissy. No one knows Rachel's tastes like I do. No one but her mother would get every detail right.

Our dear neighbor Maria had offered to help.

"What can I do?" she asked, appearing at our front door with red eyes. Though Maria always had a heaping plate, she was the first to help someone hurting.

"I've got it," I lied, my own eyes dry.

What must friends and neighbors with pained faces and wet eyes make of my blank face and dry eyes when they bring casseroles and flowers? My heart feels frozen like it's been shot with Novocain. Only, unlike the dentist's numbing needle, this anesthetic lasts days.

Maria stood her ground until I gave up half the food and agreed to let her print the programs. The day of the memorial service, I would find her stunning flower arrangements—mums and gladiolas in rich autumnal tones—displayed on the altar and banquet tables.

I organize the photos into piles: infancy, siblings, vacations, school. I should be drafting Rachel's eulogy. Shaken guests at her memorial service will want answers. They will want to know why a bright, beautiful young woman suffered and died. But that will require focus. That will require reading glasses. Therefore, I stall.

A photo of Rachel taken a day after her birth—fat cheeks, doll lips, eyes sealed in post-fetal sleep—arrests me. As I pick it up, its colors bleed. In spite of myself, I flash back to her birth.



Pacing on Independence Day during the Bristol parade while bands played patriotic tunes and fireworks popped and whistled. Pain ripping from pelvis to spine. Pushing so hard, arms braced against cold steel bars, I feared rupturing something. Perry enthralled, watching from the foot of the bed with the doctor and nurses, till the doctor snapped, "Go back to your wife."

I didn't care where he stood then. I had once adored his sense of humor, his tender blue eyes. But that man walked out when the smell of fresh coffee nauseated me one morning. I assured him he'd be a wonderful father, but his eyes dodged mine. The bigger I grew, the more he withdrew from me. So, this moment was mine. I would have my prize.

Bearing down for the last time, I commanded every muscle and cell of energy to push, and though I tried not to scream, the sound escaped, along with something warm and solid that slid out from between my legs. A foreign smell of birth filled the room.

"It's a girl!" the nurses sang, incomparable joy washing over me.

The doctor swung my infant daughter onto my chest, cord still attached. She did not cry. Her alert blue eyes passed from me to Perry and back to me.

Hands whisked her away, then returned my sleeping infant, wrapped in pink flannel. She received a perfect Apgar score, which one nurse had not seen in twenty years. As I breastfed my newborn, I studied the delicate eyelids and blue vein on her fair brow. Blond duck down hair, wintry pink skin. She could not have been more exquisite.

After feeding, as I stood her on my chest, she opened her blue eyes. Her mouth also remained wide open, head bobbing like a baby bird seeking more food.

While amused, something about the dark pink mysteries inside her mouth arrested me. Her outward perfection was already too much. I couldn't begin to fathom God's inner workmanship—the number and wonder of all her perfectly working parts. While I was marveling at the miracle of human life, her mouth somehow found the stretch of skin between my forefinger and thumb, and she noisily resumed sucking.

Smiling, I pressed her to my heart.

I named her Rachel Grace after God's grace because I didn't deserve this child. Hadn't I stopped trusting Him, stopped counting the days till her birth—allowing myself, I supposed, to be sucked into the undertow of Perry's fears? But that was grace: getting something outrageously wonderful when you least expect it.



Sitting on my bedroom floor, I stare at the photo of my flawless infant, struck by how far Rachel had fallen from that state.

How had this happened?

I repeat this question the night before Rachel's memorial service while scrambling to finish her eulogy. I can piece together the facts, what I think occurred, but the truth is buried in her journals, which I have not yet read. I had promised myself and my mother that I would wait. Wouldn't scanning some entries help me understand Rachel's struggles and write a truer speech? Besides, I've included a sample of her adolescent voice, and I'd like to balance it with her adult voice. I snatch two volumes from the storage cabinet in Rachel's room where I'd stowed her journals.

What I read appalls me. Flipping page after page, I search for some positive words that capture the spirit of the young woman I thought I knew. The text is jarring and dark. Tears streak my face, grotesquely distorting words. My heart pounds in my ears. If I continue, I will not be able to complete my speech, much less read it tomorrow. Abandoning my plan, I return the journals to their dark cabinet. I work until my speech is acceptable. It's not perfect, but it provides context and tells Rachel's story, which pleases me. At the same time, my heart feels heavy, like I've failed my daughter by oversimplifying her demise, making assumptions, and drawing conclusions about things I do not know.



The next morning, as I stand at the podium in Middletown Baptist Church, I am struck by the sheer volume of people whose sober eyes lock mine. I begin by thanking them for their beautiful cards, words,

meals, tears, and other loving gestures, which I tell them have sustained my family during this tragedy. Then, with trembling hands, I read my eulogy:

“Rachel was diagnosed with diabetes her first week of high school. She was barely fourteen. Because of her whimsical personality type—she hated rules and schedules—this was a difficult disease for her to manage, as she explains in an excerpt of a letter to her Aunt Dolores and family, written shortly after her diagnosis:

*Dear Dolores, Dale, Ben, and Emma,*

*Sorry it's taken so long to write. I've been making up tons of schoolwork and adjusting to my new schedule. These past few weeks have been so hard. I guess I was in denial at first. I kept thinking, "This has got to be a dream. I'll wake up any minute now." And when I finally didn't, it all just fell on me—I would be controlled by this illness until the day I die. I'm the kind of person who, well, used to live very freely—and it's like now I have all these restrictions. I can't live the way I want to, and, well, it pisses me off because I want to eat sugar. I want to sleep late. I want to pig out at buffets. I want to go trick-or-treating . . .”*

I tell the mourners how, as a result of her strict diet, Rachel developed an eating disorder (ED), bulimia nervosa, which would control her life. Several times a day, she secretly gorged on junk food, vomiting to avoid weight gain.

Rachel attended multiple ED rehabs, including one of the finest Christian facilities in the nation. Days after her discharge, at age twenty, she relapsed. She could have used the tools she'd acquired to fight her bulimia. However, this would take time; it would require discipline and consistency. Instead, she took the easy route, using heroin to suppress her appetite. This triggered a downward spiral, replete with multiple arrests and imprisonment for possession.

I share how, after many years, Rachel recovered from heroin; however, she traded it for alcohol and prescription drugs. She also remained enslaved to bulimia. Her body image so consumed her that she discovered another risky way to lose weight, by restricting her insulin. This cost her dearly. She acquired neuropathy, excruciating nerve damage, in both feet. Still, she continued to practice her EDs and self-medicate, resulting in a fatal overdose.

“Despite Rachel's addictions, she loved life, especially simple pleasures, like sunbathing, writing, reading good literature, and playing with her Boston terrier, Lola. She also loved to make people laugh with her irreverent sense of humor. As you can see from Rachel's paintings displayed here, she became an accomplished artist, whose work was exhibited in fine dining restaurants in Bristol and Newport.”

I close my eulogy by telling the audience how much I will miss my daughter. As I walk off the stage, relief trickles through me. This hard task is over. At the same time, a strange weight descends, like it had the night before. Sitting beside Phil and our children in the front pew, I cannot help thinking I let Rachel down. I did not tell her true story.