

An intimate portrayal of the grief journey of grandparents.

**Forgotten Tears A Grandmother's Journey Through Grief**

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## INTRODUCTION

*I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do.*

Helen Keller

“She doesn’t have a heartbeat.” My entire life changed in the time it took for my son to utter those five words. As I’ve struggled to make sense of the events surrounding my granddaughter’s stillbirth, I’ve discovered that there is little written about the impact of infant death on grandparents. There is a great deal of information available on grief and bereavement in general. There is, fortunately, a large selection of written information on pregnancy loss, primarily written to assist parents in coping. There are even resources for helping children deal with the death of a sibling. Grandparents are usually given a page or two in a book. We don’t even rate an entire chapter. I work for the oldest and largest hospital system in my state, and the bereavement leave granted for a grandchild’s death is one day. It’s as though the bond and love and despair that we feel shouldn’t exist.

I have an extensive professional and personal background dealing with issues of death and bereavement. I served on the Board of Directors of my local Childbirth Education Association and taught prepared childbirth classes for many years, and dealt with issues of pregnancy loss. I’ve been working in the HIV/AIDS field since the beginning of the epidemic. I have personally attended more deaths than I care to count. I have provided bereavement counseling for partners and family members. I’ve taught workshops on bereavement to professionals working in the HIV field.

I also, unfortunately, have experienced the death of a sibling. My sister died quite unexpectedly at the age of thirty-two. She was living across the country from our family, so there were numerous frantic

## *FORGOTTEN TEARS*

and complicated travel preparations involved. She was in a trauma center on life support, and she lived for exactly one week. During that time I assumed the role of the strong and knowledgeable family member, consulting with the medical staff frequently, interpreting changes in her status for my parents and brother, and stroking her and holding her as she died. I believed that my strength was defined by the fact that I didn't cry. After the funeral, many people remarked about how organized and calm I was. I felt a sense of pride when I overheard relatives and friends comment on how lucky my parents were to have me nearby to take care of them through this ordeal. These words reinforced the image of the stoic face that I presented in public. It wasn't until years later, as I studied death and grief on a professional level, that I even began to think about the fact that I had never been given a chance to openly mourn my sister. All of my grieving had been done in private. People asked me often how my mother was doing, infrequently somebody asked after my father, but never did anybody comfort me for my loss of a sibling. Psychologists say that every loss is compounded by past losses, especially ones that aren't fully mourned.

None of this professional and life experience prepared me for the onslaught of emotions when my granddaughter died. My usual reaction to anything is to research and read everything I can find. As I searched the internet, going to web site after web site, reading book after book on pregnancy loss and bereavement, I found myself becoming resentful. Where was the information on grandparents? Where were the interviews with the men and women who were so eagerly anticipating this wonderful new phase of their lives? Where were the coping skills and resources for those of us who not only are grieving ourselves, but feeling absolutely powerless to alleviate our son or daughter's suffering?

In searching for some way to incorporate this event into my being, and to give lasting meaning to Maddy's life, I decided to write this book, using my journal entries as a starting point. I have dreamed of writing a book my entire life; this is the one book I never imagined I would write. One of the many gifts my granddaughter has given me is the impetus and discipline to write. I will try not to let her down. I

*A Grandmother's Journey Through Grief*

will tell her story, I will bear public witness to her life and the place she holds in mine, and hopefully, along the way, other grandparents will also find some peace.

The intention of this book is not to provide in depth medical information regarding the death of a baby. It is, rather, a book about the grief journey, specifically my grief journey. While it does contain very personal thoughts and feelings, I've attempted to explore the broader issues faced by grandparents, and to offer suggestions based on numerous discussions with other bereaved grandparents. Originally, I wrote from a general point of view, attempting to summarize my journal entries. As I reread sections I had written, I felt as though much of it sounded clinical, as though I was observing myself. That is, indeed, how I felt in those first weeks-as though I was watching from a distance. I realized that the only way to accurately portray what I was experiencing was to quote directly from my journal. I am, by nature, a very private person. I tend to keep things inside. The decision to share my journal entries was a difficult one. Many of the details may be as painful to read as they were to write. My goal is not to produce a pessimistic viewpoint, but rather to provide some insight into the complexity of the grieving process, and to help other grandparents realize that they are not alone. Friends and colleagues of grandparents who have experienced the death of a grandchild will be better able to understand how this event has affected and transformed us.

I want to clarify my use of the words birth and death. When referring to my granddaughter, because her birth and death were virtually simultaneous, I use the words interchangeably. Her situation was unusual in that she did not die prior to labor beginning. There was no indication of fetal distress during labor. Our best guess is that she died during delivery.

Although this book is written from the point of view of a grandmother, I am hoping that parents experiencing the death of a baby will read it also. Perhaps it will help them to realize how many people love their baby, and how intensely grandparents grieve. Ideally, parents and their adult children will be drawn closer by sharing a powerful bond-not just the bond of mourning the death, but

*FORGOTTEN TEARS*

the bond of acknowledging the love, hopes and dreams that resulted from the anticipation of the baby. At the very least, I need to register another voice asking that the experience of stillbirth be examined and openly discussed, thus giving parents, grandparents and other family members a safe, welcoming environment in which to grieve.

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