



Grace

Grace Watkins
30 April 2003

Trish and David are Australian expatriates who lived in Singapore for three years (they have just returned to Australia). They had tried for many years to start their family and were overjoyed to conceive Grace. Trish struggled through the early months with terrible morning sickness, but as her due date approached their excitement mounted. Worried about the SARS epidemic sweeping the region, they decided to travel to Australia for Grace's delivery. But their dreams were shattered when their longed-for daughter suddenly died at 38 weeks of pregnancy. David refers to their experiences as a "long, hard journey".

Written by David Watkins, Grace's father

In the months shortly after 30th April 2003, many people asked me the simple questions, "How's Trish? How are you coping?" Simple questions—but questions for which there was no answer. No words could describe our experience. And later, the only way I could respond was to say that it is a long, hard journey.

And sadly, it is a journey without end. In the year in which we die, we will have both celebrated and mourned Grace's birthday. It may be her 3rd birthday or her 43rd birthday but we will always remember Grace.

We will remember her mother's bulging tummy, how vigorous and active Grace was, we will remember our excitement and our anticipation.

And we will remember the shock, the disbelief and the numbness.

And we will remember her beauty, her smell and her warmth. We will remember the peace and calm she brought us when she entered the world.

We will remember the sadness, the loss, the emptiness—and worse, we will constantly live these emotions.

On 29th April 2003, Trish and I looked at a lifeless screen—the ultrasound image that should have shown our active, healthy Grace—but she was quiet, still and dead.

At that moment, I felt as if I had tumbled into a black hole and all around was darkness. Like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole. So much is unknown—when will we stop falling? Where will we land? Will we find a way back?

I remember thinking—What will happen to Trish? Being a mother to our little baby was her sole goal in life at that time. And in that moment, so began our long, hard journey.

Over many years, we have learnt patience. Making a baby is not as easy as we expected. In the period after Grace was conceived, we lived through a traumatic and stressful period. Trish's sister Gemma was in a terrible car accident and, despite expectations to the contrary, she lived and recovered. And at the same time, Grace lived and grew.

By Christmas of 2002, we started to believe that we would this time become parents, that we would have our own little baby. Trish was now about 20 weeks pregnant, the unpleasant morning sickness had stopped, a New Year was ahead of us—this was the year in which our baby would be born.

We wrote a diary for our little one—to record our excitement and our hopes. I wanted our little one to grow up knowing that anything was possible—that there were no limits to what she could do.

Due to SARS, we returned to our home of Sydney to deliver our baby. We left Singapore when Trish was about 35 weeks and remained in self-quarantine for a week. We had a 37-week check up with our Sydney doctor—everything was fine. Then our world changed forever when we went in for a normal 38 week check up on 29th April 2003. There was no heartbeat. How could this happen? Surely at this stage, babies don't just die?

That evening, we met Deb. She is a counsellor who specialises in working with people who have lost little ones. She explained what our baby might look like—how the skin may have blistered depending upon how long ago she had died. We felt sure that our bub had been alive just 24 hours ago as Trish had felt movements the previous night.

The next day, Trish was induced. We arrived at the hospital early in the morning and Trish delivered our beautiful baby girl at around nine that evening.

I had anticipated that the moment of birth would be the culmination of the terrible process, a horrific moment—but it was not. Grace was perfect in every way. Beautiful face, wonderfully warm, chubby legs, her eyes shut—she looked like a perfectly contented, sleeping child. We were filled with a calming sense of peace and love. Even in death, Grace could bring us love.

Our parents joined us soon after and Deb unobtrusively orchestrated a normal newborn routine. We bathed and cleaned Grace, we dressed and we held her. We took lots of photos, we took her handprints and footprints and we cut a lock of hair. Grace will be with us always. We smiled—we did not cry. Grace was blessed by a priest. It was a lovely time. We had so little opportunity to be a family together with Grace and this was a wonderful family time.

Exhausted, bewildered, uncertain—we fell asleep that night with Grace in a cot next to our bed. Mum, Dad and our baby.

The next morning, I kissed Grace. I was shocked that she was ice cold. But I discovered that when I held her hand in mine, her body would warm up. We could give her warmth.

Some of our siblings came that morning to meet their niece. There was much sadness and many tears—mainly from our siblings. We had already lived with the reality of her death for a day (it seemed so much longer) and we had enjoyed the lovely evening last night with Grace. At that stage, we became the strong ones to help our siblings deal with the loss.

Later that day together with Deb, we began to organise where we would bury Grace. We began planning her funeral Mass. We were in a state of shock that this was the reality that we were dealing with—but there was now so little that we could do for our beautiful girl, and we knew that a loving farewell was a gift that we could give. So we put our emotions and energy into that.

The next day, Trish's sister Gemma came to the hospital to meet Grace. I can still see Gemma entering the room in tears—but by the time she had walked to the cot, Gemma was smiling, looking lovingly at her niece and then cuddling her. Even in death, Grace could bring pleasure.

The evening before the Mass, we visited Grace again, together with Deb. We held her, we washed her, we dressed her, we wrote her a letter, we filled her little coffin with roses, gum leaves and a toy. The time had come to say farewell and we placed her lovingly in her little box. We sealed the lid. How could this be happening?

Grace's Mass was on 5th May 2003. Trish and I delivered a eulogy. The depth of our pain was a reflection of the strength of our love for Grace. I recall sitting in the church towards the end of Mass, not wanting to leave. It was warm inside and raining outside, there was beautiful music and we were with family and friends. The same people we had intended to invite to her christening. But our reality was that we had to leave for a cemetery.

We carried our little one out of the Church and together with the priest, the three of us went to the cemetery and placed our little one in the ground.

The pathology report on the placenta indicated that there was some clotting. A very uncommon occurrence that could not be explained and that would not be expected to recur.

We have cried, we have despaired, we have asked why, we have laid awake, we have wondered if life is worth living, we have seen doctors, we have sought help, we have felt the presence of Grace—we have struggled to endure. It is a journey that no words can describe and that no one who has not trodden that path can begin to understand.

As a husband and a father, there are two terrible pains. The loss of a child—experienced as a man. Then there is the pain of seeing my wife experience the loss of a child—experienced as a woman. There is a depth to the pain that Trish feels that even I cannot understand. I look on and see my wife broken, pained, destroyed—and there is nothing I can do. I am powerless.

My creed—that I must have recited thousands of times—is that “We will be OK.” It is not very poetic, but it is unshakeable.

In all of the terrible sadness and loss, I have found some slight comfort. I have thought that as I lie on my deathbed, I will be excited by the prospect of meeting our child. Of seeing our beautiful Grace. We have suffered a huge loss to be deprived of her life and of her being part of our lives, but in the time of death, she will await us. And at last, we will be able to find some peace and happiness together with our little girl.

Another time, I imagined dancing with Grace as a little girl, maybe seven years old. Happy, carefree, smiling, laughing. And I thought that many parents and fathers would look back on such days and wonder where did all of that happiness go. Life changes as parents age, as children grow up. And for some, life changes in a way that hardens and harms relationships. But for us, we will not experience the loss of love or the lack of care. She is forever our beautiful Grace. She does not change. She remains beautiful. Whilst we have not had the joy of dancing with a seven-year-old Grace, what we have in our hearts and memories can never be tarnished by subsequent events. She is and always will be the perfect daughter.

I remained forever hopeful. I could not accept that our life would not come to a better place. I remember the day after the Rugby World Cup final, 23rd November 2003—this was to have been the weekend of our child's Christening in Sydney. We had planned how we would travel from Singapore to Sydney, bringing our six-month-old baby to her country for the first time. I would go the Rugby World Cup games in the last week of the tournament. I had imagined placing our baby on the ground—the land of Australia—as we left the airport terminal. I had imagined taking her to Balmoral Beach and running her fingers through the sand. I felt desperately sad—life seemed to be without joy, something to be endured rather than lived. I felt as if I were holding my breath—waiting—focusing on doing all we could to achieve the only thing in life that we wanted and needed. But no matter how hard it was, I resolutely refused to accept that we would not have another child. I remained convinced that we would have more children and that Grace would always be our first. Our other children would not erase the pain of the loss of Grace—that pain will be with us till our deaths. But our children would bring joy again to our lives. They would provide a counter-weight to the terrible pain and loss.

As I write this in February 2005, Max and Sophia are peacefully asleep in their cots. Happy, loving and wonderful children. We adopted both Max and Sophia from the same orphanage in Cambodia. We are so lucky, they are so lucky. It is a wonderful outcome—all brought about by Grace. If Grace was with us today, we would never had met Max and Sophia. Coincidentally, Max was born on the same day we buried Grace.

And Trish is about four months pregnant. It was a joy beyond words when we found out that we were pregnant. But nine months is such a long time to cope with the anxiety of another pregnancy. Will it all be all right this time?

I am optimistic. I know that a happy and healthy baby will be born in the middle of this year. Our children will be all loved, loved always—all four.

The following poem was part of our eulogy for Grace:

Grace

You were nurtured, loved, welcomed, anticipated
Over nine months, by so many
And in an instant, you are gone
We cannot understand why
How could anyone want you and love you more than we?
We have just one need
That cannot be met
That you were with us now
In too short a time
You gave us love, strength and hope
You were beautiful, perfect, peaceful, graceful
You made us a family
We have
Layers of loss
Forever sadness
Empty hands
And aching hearts
The intensity of our pain
Is only a reflection of the depth of our love.