

FAMILY SECRETS

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This article was first published in *Humane Medicine*, Volume 9, number 1, 2009

Grandpa shakes me,
“Wake up Jake, let’s go check on Belle before you go to school.” I pull on my overalls and follow him.

Belle delivered her first calf two days ago and developed a fever after a long labor. Grandpa said last night,

“If she isn’t better tomorrow I’ll call the vet.”

It is foggy this morning and we can hardly see the pasture when we step outside of the house. I like this time of grey mystery before the sun comes up and the fog clears. Grandpa and I are silent and walk down to where we left Belle last night. We can see the calf standing but Belle is lying down, a bad omen. As we get closer it is clear to both of us that Belle died during the night, her legs are stiff and her eyes clouded. It is not the first time I have seen a dead animal. Grandfather likes to go grouse hunting and brings dead, bloody birds home for us to eat. My grandparents and I live on a farm where animals are born and die. It isn’t Belle it is her calf that gets to me. Grandpa pulls out his red bandana and blows his nose loudly. I gently touch the dogie. I know how lonely it must feel without a mother. After a long silence Grandpa says,

“Let’s go get breakfast, Jake, or you’ll be late. I’ll take care of Belle later. It was that infection that killed her.”

We can smell the coffee before we get to the house.

“Good morning, you two early risers.” Grandma calls from the kitchen.

“Belle is dead.” Grandpa answers. Grandma takes his hand and for several minutes looks at his face with a sad, serious expression. Then we sit down to eat. After a while I ask,

“Was it an infection that killed my Mom?” As in the past, I receive no answer to this question. Grandma says,

“Get your coat, Jake, it is time you leave for school. I’ll feed Belle’s calf as soon as Grandpa finishes his coffee.”

I leave knowing that my question will not be answered today, if ever. Here is all I know. My Mother died when I was born. My Grandparents tell me,

“Your father, sobbing, left for Alaska before your Mother’s funeral. We have not heard from him since that day.”

I have a picture of my parents next to my bed, on the back is written ‘vacation in Maine 1985’. My Father is tall, slim and has dark hair like I do. My Mother is beautiful with long blond hair and a shy smile. In the picture she is holding my Father’s hand. They are wearing jeans and sneakers and my father is carrying a rucksack. When I look at that photo I long to know more. What happened? Did I kill my Mother when I was born? Did she commit suicide and thereby drive my Father away? What happened? Why don’t I know?

I am in high school now and my grandparents talk less about my parents than they did a few years ago. We used to settle on the chintz sofa in the living room, evenings, after my Grandfather finished reading the paper. My Grandma would get the white album with my parents’ pictures from the hope chest where she kept it. Grandpa, squinting, would point to a picture of my Mother in a sport’s uniform and tell me,

“She played basketball, Jake, and was on the high school team.”

Then my grandmother would add,

“I don’t know who taught her, but she was an excellent knitter. Before she died she knit several baby outfits for you.”

Although I was not a baby any more, I would feel warm and cuddled when I heard that. Grandfather would add,

“Your Dad enjoyed jogging and liked to read history, politics and mysteries.

He was a junior high school English teacher. We loved your parents, Jake.”

I hear these stories over and over, it is as if my grandparents remember nothing besides these tidbits about my Mother and Father.

When I get home from school the calf is drinking formula out of the teat bucket Grandma is holding. I watch him suck eagerly and then brush him lightly since he has no mother to lick him. Since I have no chores right now I go up to the attic to read ‘Flatland’. I read for many hours in the attic in an old white rocker which I put in front of the window. From the small window I can see the smoke stack of the canning factory in town and at night I can study the stars without getting cold. Sometimes I daydream and look at the tree branches and the birds. The big willow next to the creek looks like someone who has just gotten out of bed with mussed up hair. Except for the space I cleared for the rocker the attic is stuffed with Grandma’s things, boxes piled high on top of each other, carefully labeled and dusty.

‘Flatland’ is a great book and it gets dark while I am trying to imagine the world without up and down dimensions. I am stiff and tired when I get up and on the way downstairs stub my toe on an old trunk. I am glad Grandma doesn’t hear my,

“Ouch, damn it, that hurt.” She does not like it when I swear.

From the jolt one of the locks of the trunk springs open, but I ignore it because Grandma is calling,

“Come to supper please, Jake.” I hobble downstairs. We are having hamburgers and peas from Grandma’s vegetable garden. She complains,

“Those rabbits drive me to distraction, I can hardly grow anything any more.”

In spite of her fight with the rabbits we have plenty to eat and I don’t go hungry. Today, we have home-baked chocolate chip cookies for desert. Grandma is a good baker, energetic, laughs a lot and is affectionate both to the animals and people around her. She is plump, grey haired and wears silver rimmed glasses for reading and close work. Grandfather talks less than she does, never raises his voice but is always teaching me about crops and livestock. This evening, at the dinner table of all places, he said,

“Don’t worry if a cow does not deliver the placenta or after birth for several days after calving.” After we finish eating we clean up, I feed the dogie, lock up the chicken coop and then go to bed.

The next day, when I come home from school grandpa is taking a break from plowing. He is sitting on the front porch of the old clapboard house with its fading yellow paint, swinging slowly back and forth while holding his big, blue feed store mug of black coffee. Grandma comes out of the screen door and I hear her say to my Grandfather,

“I’d sure like yellow again, if we can afford to paint the house one more time before we die, that would please me.” I hope they can get it painted, it needs it.

Grandfather sees me coming up the path and before I even reach the porch steps he says, “Do your chores, Jake, before you start reading.”

I give hay to the goats, feed the chickens, then go back to 'Flatland'. Going up the stairs to the attic my big toe reminds me that it is bruised. That brings the trunk to mind and instead of settling down on the white rocker, I open the trunk's other lock. When I lift the lid I notice a musty smell. I move the trunk near the window so I can examine its content. It is filled with piles of old newspapers from 1986, single pages and parts of pages, but also entire rolled up papers with melted rubber bands around them. There is the local 'Union Town Crier' and even the 'Springfield Herald' from a nearby larger town.

I settle in my chair and start to read some of the shorter articles. They are all about a pregnant lady who died in a car accident. I keep reading and put what I finish in the trunk lid. Then I pick up a page that has a picture of my mother in the middle. Now I read much faster because I realize that it is my mother who was the pregnant lady who was in a car accident sixteen years ago. Not until that moment did I know that my mother died because a drunk driver had ignored a red light. Why didn't any one ever talk to me about this? Why the secret? I stop reading, slam the trunk shut and give it a hard kick. Tears fill my eyes. There are many more papers in the trunk, but I go to my bedroom because I do not want anyone to see me with red swollen eyes. I get into bed, but am too angry to sleep. I doze and wake up because in my dream, I hear ambulance sirens and my grandmother weeping.

I am drawn to the attic and look at more old newspapers, fascinated and also afraid of what else I might learn. As I read on, the subject of the articles change. The journalists are describing 'a miracle of modern science', rather than a bad car accident. I do not grasp what the 'miracle' is until I come to a rather long article which names my mother and then states: 'Although she has been declared dead, her body is being kept alive by modern medicine until her child can be safely delivered'. That sentence is like a magnet, I read it over and over, start shaking and retching. My Grandmother hears me and comes upstairs. Pulling the blinds and handing me a warm water bottle she says,

"Why don't you go to bed, Jake. You must have eaten something that upset your stomach."

I cannot sleep. The thought of being incubated in my dead mother's body gives me the creeps. She never knew me, never knew whether I was a boy or a girl, never celebrated the day I was born. For months I was nourished in my dead mother's womb. The papers call her 'brain dead, in a vegetative state'. None of this makes any sense to me, I can in no way reason about it, can not come to terms with the reality of it. When I was born, I murdered my dead mother. I killed her, because after I was delivered all the machinery that had kept her heart pumping, her lungs breathing, was turned off. After hours of agonizing about the events surrounding my birth, I am exhausted and fall into a restless sleep. I do not see my mother, but hear her whisper repeatedly,

"I love you even though you killed me" and then, "No, you didn't kill me." I am afraid of this voice; afraid of my dead mother. I long for the mother in the hiking picture.

After I finish reading all the articles I put the papers back in the trunk and close both locks. My grandparents do not know that I have found the key to the family secret in that old trunk. The papers explain a lot and leave a lot unanswered. They point a finger at the same time at the drunk driver and at me.

I wish I had been a dead baby, had died with my mother, killed by the drunk, rather than to be rescued by a miracle of science. How could a body, my mother's body, have fed me and helped me grow inside the womb, and yet be dead? How could she not have felt pain? Did not think? What made her heart, her lungs continue to function? I am confused. I want to throw

something, break a dish, hit the wall with my fist, but I know none of that would help me understand. I cannot think of anyone who can explain this to me. I no longer go to the attic, because that is where the trunk is. I have stopped reading and talking, my grades have bottomed out. I consider telling my friends at school what happened to my mother, but don't, because I doubt that they know any more about dead bodies kept alive than I do, or can help me. My English teacher, Mr. Boldin, asks,

“Where is the composition that was due yesterday, Jake?” I tell him,

“I am still working on it” although I have not even been able to start it.

I can't seem to concentrate. I want to run away, but then decide that there is no 'away' from my problems, from my guilt, which burdens me, sits heavily on my shoulders. I am a murderer; when I was born my dead mother stopped living. I will be caught. I know that there is no atonement for me, no forgiveness for killing my own mother.

I do not want, do not deserve, to live. I have nightmares about being locked up in the trunk and unable to get out. When I cannot sleep at night because my thoughts go round and round, I think about shortening my life. At first this makes me tremble, but gradually I feel comfortable with the idea and know that it is my only way out.

My grandparents will be sad when I die. They love me and will miss me, but they both recovered from my mother's death. It will probably be the same after mine. They never told me about my birth, about my mother, they did not explain 'persistent vegetative state' or 'brain death' to me - those words I read in the papers in the attic trunk. Their secrecy convinces me that they also think that I killed my mother, that it was my fault that she died. I love my grandparents, but am also angry with them. The other day, I was coming down the stairs for breakfast, as my grandfather was saying quietly to my grandmother,

“Don't you think he is old enough we should tell him now?”

She answers, “Let's wait a little longer. It will upset him.”

They stop talking and lift their coffee cups when they see me. It is too late for them to tell me, I have discovered the truth. I am desperate. I can't eat or sleep, I can think of nothing other than my mother and my guilt. I lie awake many nights figuring out how to accomplish my plan, how to escape from my misery, how to kill myself. I consider a rope, but know of no hook strong enough. I am worried that if the rope gives way I will end up like my mother, dead-alive. I decide that I will use my grandfather's gun, the one with which he hunts grouse. I have never used it, but watched him shoot. Grandma keeps it loaded in case of intruders.

The day has come. I have not slept this hot humid summer night, am still awake at dawn. I am scared. Will I cop out? I take the gun from the hat shelf, next to the front door and quietly leave the house. I am going to go to the field where Belle died and in a few minutes my suffering will end. The murderer will get what he deserves.

Jenks S. “The lingering Image of Life.” *Medical World News*. April 28, 1986; 77-96.

‘Three years ago, physicians delivered a premature but reasonably healthy baby boy by cesarean section even though the infant's mother had been declared legally brain-dead two months earlier. Shortly after delivery, doctors ...disconnected the life-support systems and the mother stopped breathing....dying as some would later argue a second time.’