

Lila

I didn't just lose the love of my life; I lost my best friend. My heart feels like it's broken into a million tiny little pieces. I think about how I'm going to move through life without George, and it seems like a task so far beyond me. Just the idea of it makes me feel like I'm suffocating. If I can't even force my own breath in and out of my chest, how am I ever going to be able to care for my two girls?

I look at Meghan and know the pain in her heart is as great as mine. She and her daddy were born of the same soul. They were alike in a thousand ways, ways that I don't even understand. When her heart was broken, it was George, not me, who could comfort her. With him gone, what is she going to do? I hope she will turn to me, but the thing is, I'm not like George; I don't have the way with words he had.

I think back on that terrible summer when Clancy disappeared from our backyard and remember how George's broad shoulders carried the agony of it.

Clancy was Meghan's dog, a gift from her daddy on her tenth birthday. George and I had argued about it, me saying she didn't need a dog and him saying that was exactly what she needed. "Meghan keeps to herself too much," he said. "Having a dog will help bring her out of her shell." He was right. She loved that dog more than you'd imagine possible. When I

heard the school bus rumbling down Baker Street, I knew seconds later she'd come barreling through the kitchen door and head for the backyard to check on Clancy.

The day he went missing, I was busy making cookies for the church bake sale, and he was underfoot, so I opened the screen door and let him out. He was five at the time and knew to stay in the backyard.

Meghan came in from school and headed for the backyard. When Clancy wasn't there, she went through the house calling his name, checking the closets and looking under the beds. Once she realized he was nowhere to be found, she ran into the street calling his name. By then, huge tears were rolling down her cheeks.

I panicked and called George to come home from work. That night he and Meghan scoured the neighborhood for miles in every direction. Long after dark, they continued, going from street to street, calling out Clancy's name. It was almost midnight when they finally returned home empty-handed. According to George, they'd gone all the way around the lake and searched the wooded lot behind the ballpark.

As he was telling me of all the places they'd looked, I kept thinking, I should have gone outside to check that the gate was closed.

We went through months of heartache and anguish. Every evening Meghan and George went out at the same time they would have walked Clancy—only instead of walking the dog, they went up and down the streets calling his name. They looked like two sad shadows stuck together. Back then you could almost see the heavy cloud of sorrow hanging over our house. In the still of night, George and I would be lying side by side in the bed and we'd hear Meghan's mournful sobs. That just about tore holes in my heart.

Clancy was never found. It was as if he had simply disappeared from the face of the earth. I knew we'd never see that dog again, and I suspect George knew it also, but as long as Meghan held out hope, he was there for her. There's no replacement for a daddy who will do things like that.

I'm not nearly as worried about Tracy. Yes, I know she will miss her dad, but she's a free spirit. She goes where the fun is. She'll mourn for a while, then move on. Up until now I was that way myself, but now . . . I doubt such a thing is possible.

Birth and death change a woman. Birth fills a woman with the joy of life, and death takes back all that was given.

When Tracy was born, I went from being a young woman with few cares to being a mother—a woman responsible for another life.

She was our firstborn, and she clung to me from the day we brought her home from the hospital, but with Meghan it was different. When she was colicky or teething, the only one who could soothe her was George. On nights when I could barely keep my eyes open, he'd take her in his arms and walk the floor until she finally quieted.

There are times when I wonder if Meghan remembers those nights, if perhaps that was when she and George formed this unique bond they had.

Last night I saw her sitting in George's office. Hunched over in the chair as he used to do, she looked like a shadow he'd left behind. I stuck my head in the door and suggested maybe it was time for her to go to bed.

She said, "I can't, Mama. I've got to do this. The Snip 'N' Save is the only part of Daddy I've got left."

I swear I could almost hear my heart cracking open when she said that. I wanted to say this wasn't your daddy—he was a thousand other things, but not this. The thing is, I could tell by the look in her eyes that she wasn't going to believe that any more than she believed I checked the back gate that day.

Meghan doesn't give her trust easily; you've got to earn it. George did, and now it's up to me.

I pray that I am up to the task, but the sad truth is I don't know if I am. George would know, I tell myself. George would know, but George isn't here. That thought comes back to me a thousand times a day, and each time it leaves another hole in my heart.

Perhaps I'm feeling sorry for myself, and right now that's a luxury I can't afford. I'm a mother with two girls depending on me; I've got to stay strong for them. I'll do whatever is necessary to keep our family together and give my girls a chance at the kind of happiness I've known.