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My Father Died Four Days After My Daughter Was Born

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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My first daughter was born on a Thursday.

I cut the umbilical cord, my hand shaking, with what looked like plastic safety scissors. A misshapen head framing wide open eyes turned towards me. A rattle from the back of her throat turned into a full-body wail. She grabbed my index finger with her whole hand while the midwife checked her over.

When our tears dried, I called my mum to tell her that she had a granddaughter, Sonia. She picked up the phone and before she said anything, just by hearing her breathe, I knew my dad was back in the hospital. He had been in and out over the past few months so it wasn't unexpected. He had chronic lymphocytic leukemia and was trying to battle that with a body that had experienced three heart attacks, a quadruple bypass, a pacemaker and, just for good measure, skin cancer.

On the Friday we called my dad.

From one bed to another, I told him about Sonia. She was sleeping on my chest and let out a gurgle. “She said ‘Hi, grandad!’” said my dad, drifting in and out of sleep. I laughed because I thought he was kidding, but he brought it up the next day. “I heard her say ‘Hi, grandad,’” he said quietly. “She did,” I said.

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(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/heart-health-for-parents-and-conversations-about-health-history-with-kids>).

He was adamant that she shouldn't come into the intensive care unit. He didn't want to be the reason she got sick on her second day alive. He clung to me as I helped him back and forth to the washroom. “But I want to see my granddaughter,” he said. “You will, dad,” I promised.

I rushed home and took a picture of Sonia, printed it out and bought a frame from the dollar store. I put it in his hands so he could see her. I remember being surprised that she didn't look very cute in that first picture. Scrunched up into a tense little ball, she scowled and kept her eyes shut. Her skin felt slack and wrinkled as I changed her diaper for the first time. Her body was light as a feather, just a few bones wrapped in tissue paper, just like my father's.

My wife and I, eyes burning from lack of sleep, travelled back and forth along the highway from my parent's home to the hospital to our home, in a nervous triangle.

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On Saturday, we had to pull over on the highway because Sonia was crying so hard. Was she hungry? Tired? We had no experience with babies, and had no clue what was wrong. It turned out that the car seat harness was cutting into Sonia's umbilical cord which, because she was only 48 hours old, hadn't fallen off yet.

My wife struggled with breastfeeding, and tried to keep track of Sonia's sleeps, and her poos, and her pees, and her temperature and the colour of her skin, while I was only there half the time.

"My mum and sister were there and we were able to say goodbye as a family. It wasn't unexpected. But it cut deep."

On Sunday, my family divided our vigils into shifts so that at least we could get some sleep. Well, at least my mum did. I was on a pull-out couch with a wife and a newborn baby, so there wasn't much sleep to be had.

On the Monday, I was the only one with him when he started to struggle for breath. Soon after that, my dad's eyes were gone, and his body was mechanically gasping for breath. They took off the oxygen and topped up his morphine. He was no longer there. My mum and sister were there and we were able to say goodbye as a family. It wasn't unexpected. But it cut deep.

I can say from experience that the best analgesic for grief is hugging a baby. I got home that Monday night and picked up Sonia and we just melted together. There's a pretty powerful cocktail of hormones that fog your brain at a time like that, and I'm super thankful for every last one of them.

With a baby strapped to my chest, planning a funeral, hosting a wake or interring a cremation urn is actually not so bad. When people feel awkward in the presence of grief, they can just make fart noises at the baby and everyone feels a bit better for a moment. As one life wound down, another one grew right before my eyes. The symbolism was almost too obvious to acknowledge.

This mom believes that death should be talked about and not feared.

Watch the video (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/i-think-its-important-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-passing-on-the-next-world>).

That was nine years ago. Every now and then, we go and visit my dad's grave and the kids put pinecones on it and wander around looking at the flowers.

My daughter weighed around seven pounds when she was born and couldn't do anything on her own except cry and poop. Is it strange, then, to describe her as strong? Because when she was in my arms, she felt like the purest source of strength you could imagine. I don't know where it came from, but I'm happy she was there to help me through that time.

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