The End of When

Chris Bobel
Storying Motherhood

SHEENA WILSON AND DIANA DAVIDSON
Telling Truths
Storying Motherhood

EDITED BY
SHEENA WILSON AND DIANA DAVIDSON

2014

DEMETER PRESS
**The End of When**

CHRIS BOEEL

JANUARY 7, 2011

"Shit. Shit. Shit. SHT. SHIIIIIIIIIIT."

As loud as I can, I hurl the expletive, each staccato repetition gaining force and volume, the sound bouncing off the interior walls of the car as I somehow, mindlessly, steer its mass through suburban traffic.

I am out of control. I know I am out of control. I am screaming so loudly at my eight-year-old that my throat is raw. She is wailing in the back seat. I hear her, and somehow, her cries make me madder. As I scream, I grip the steering wheel and lean forward.

And as I do, the internal monitor that polices my parenting makes a pitiful attempt to soften the explosion. I introduce members of the animal kingdom into my irrational tirade: "Dog Shit. Cat Shit. Turtle Shit. SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!!!"

Of course, it doesn’t matter what I say, whose shit I invoke. We both know that this outburst is especially wrong, its damage irreparable. And I know that I am discharging years of pain and fear and worry and nearly fifteen months of searing grief at the expense of my little daughter. And yet, I can’t seem to find the reigns.

I am angry because, after much deliberation and negotiation with a hunger-induced cranky kid, we finally settled on a place to eat out while shopping. Zoe, like many kids, is very finicky about what she eats, but her particular selectiveness is exhausting and ever-shifting. No sandwiches, but she will eat bread and cheese. Only hard cheeses, and if they are not adequately aged, they are rejected. And I won’t even get into the bread criteria. Only unsweet-
ened soy milk since milk products are banned (this is recent). No pepper, ever. The other day, she refused to eat the honey because it was not raw and wild.

I am living with a precocious eight-year-old Foodie and, on a meal-to-meal basis, it is infuriating and deeply impractical.

We finally settle on a place. I am worn down. We walk in, sit down, and she begins to pout. She won't order.

"Why not?" I ask.

"This place smells funny."

"I don't smell anything," I reply. I strain to coax her into choosing something to eat. I say, "Maybe it will distract you. You are clearly very hungry. We don't have time to drive to another place. You need to make the best of it. C'mon Zoe."

I quickly order and eat. My daughter sits and fumes. I eat and fume. I hold my tongue, but I am pissed. By the time we get in the car, I can't contain myself and I tell her off. And she fights back and the essence of her defense is that I did not try to accommodate her. What a total brat, I think. This has to stop. And I lose it.

We finally pull into the driveway at least thirty minutes late. I got lost. I can't rage and drive efficiently. I rush out of the car, slam the door, and leave my tear-stained daughter in her pink princess booster seat. I notice only a twinge of guilt, only a millisecond of hesitation. I am not done.

I stomp through the house in search of Thomas, my partner, Zoe's father. He is in the office (quietly studying mathematical formulae) and I unload my words out of my mouth, my hands jabbing the air. I tell him about Zoe in the restaurant. And then, suddenly, I tell him about the skull.

I describe a video of what happens in a crematorium, the one I found on YouTube when my curiosity got the better of me. I tell him what I learned: after the body is burned to ash, the worker smashes the skull to tiny fragments with a shovel. And I tell him that I opened the box of ashes.

But I don't tell him the whole story. I don't tell him about what it was like to open that box because I don't expect he will want to hear it. What he does know is that my pain always becomes a weapon that wounds. Besides, Zoe is still in the car and I can't really indulge a pointless bid for his sympathy when I've just damaged her. I just need to tell the permanent holes I have cut out. This is what I needed to tell.

After fifteen months of avoiding cheap maroon plastic box after box, I order label typed with her name that's not it, really. That's me. I'm horrified, maybe? I don't know. That Saturday morning we were rink. I was restoring the hourglass candle of Christmas ord memorial candles, the little scone, the small earthen green made for me. And I was done. It was easy to remove. This on? I accepted. I removed all it took? I gingerly open plastic bag filled with light tie. I read it was supposed crepancy made me uneasy. "A twist tie. A twist tie, to a nameless, faceless crema seventeen-year-old daughter. You need to know her name. An embossed seal?"

Yes. I suppose I was. Th
damaged her. I just need to tell him enough so he understands the permanent holes I have cut out of our surviving daughter.

This is what I needed to tell him. This is the whole story.

After fifteen months of avoiding it, I studied the exterior of the cheap maroon plastic box affixed with nothing more than a file folder label typed with her name and “dates.” I felt revulsion. But that’s not it, really. That’s my child in there. I was not repulsed. Horrified, maybe? I don’t know why I was drawn to the box that Saturday morning when Zoe and Thomas were at the ice rink. I was restoring the house to its pre-snowmen and red-and-green-candle Christmas order. I looked at her photos, the green memorial candles, the little statue of Buddha my friend Judy gave me, the small earthen green pot that one of her friend’s mothers made for me. And I was drawn to the box. I picked at the label. It was easy to remove. This surprised me. An invitation to go on? I accepted. I removed the label, thinking to myself: that’s all it took? I gingerly opened the box, peering inside to find a plastic bag filled with light grey ash, closed with a white twist tie. I read it was supposed to be more white than this. The discrepancy made me uneasy. I said out loud, a bit self-consciously: “A twist tie.” A twist tie, methodically grabbed from a cache by a nameless, faceless crematorium worker to close the bag of my seventeen-year-old daughter Gracie’s ashes. Gracie is her name. You need to know her name. Was I expecting a gilded ribbon? An embossed seal?

Yes. I suppose I was. That’s my daughter in there.

October 17, 2010

By now you want to know what happened. By now, you want to know if this could happen to your child. Gracie was travelling to Arches National Park in Utah on a field trip 2,600 miles from home. Fourteen girls, one SUV, one van, two staff drivers. While travelling at over 70 mph, the driver of Gracie’s vehicle tried to get the attention of the other driver and lost control. The vehicle rolled three times. One girl died immediately of head trauma, still secured in her seatbelt. Gracie, wearing only her lap belt, was ejected through her window. She landed among the sagebrush on the stony earth, her head gushed blood.
We left for Utah in a panic, desperate to be with our girl. We tried to explain to Gracie’s little sister Zoe what happened in the sparsest possible terms. I remember thinking to myself, There is no way she can grasp what I am saying; I cannot grasp what I am saying. We called Gracie’s teenage brother, my stepson Craig (who lives with his Mom in another city), and we called her aunts, her boyfriend, our closest friends. I don’t remember what I said in those phone calls. I only remember standing in Terminal B of Boston’s Logan Airport with the phone against my ear.

It took us an excruciating twenty-one hours to reach Gracie in the ICU. When we arrived, the neurosurgeon explained that the damage to her brain meant she would not recover. He smiled awkwardly when he told us. I hated this grimacing man, this evil messenger. As soon as he left, I excused myself and found the restroom. I closed the door and muffled my wails with my hands. Collapsing to the floor, my nose bled all over the cold white tiles.

Two days and several corroborating medical opinions later, we broadcast to everyone we knew: Please help us say goodbye to our girl at 10:00 pm EST. We surrounded her (and ourselves) with her art, photos, and beloved foods. We played her favourite music. Together, we bathed and dressed our precious broken daughter, preparing her (and us) for her last breath.

The nurse extricated the breathing tube. Gracie coughed, producing hideous orange phlegm. My hands fluttered around her anxiously. Her coughing clashed with my fragile understanding of her irreparable injuries. Vomiting seemed so odd. I climbed into bed with her and whispered, stroking her sweet face, “It is okay. We are here. It is okay to go.”

But of course it was not okay. It will never be okay.

Forty-five minutes later, she was gone. We called Craig. He was quiet, saying little, and then posted to Gracie’s Facebook wall, “I’m shattered in a thousand ways. I can’t even believe that you’re gone, that this is my reality. I love you now and I loved you the day I met you. There’s nothin’ now, there’s nothin’.”

Our girl’s dying took forty-five minutes—the same amount of time it took me to push her into the world seventeen years and twenty-one days earlier. A devastating symmetry.
January 7, 2011

Fifteen months later, I prepared to hold Gracie again. I was terrified. I removed the twist tie and opened the bag. As I did, ribbons of dust wafted upward and I could see them, illuminated by the sunlight pouring through the dingy windows of our little study. I watched them in slow motion and they reminded me of the sketches of smoke depicted in illustrated children’s books. I could see the shapes so clearly, curling upward. I actively resisted seeing the beauty. I reached into the smoky tendrils, panicked that some of Gracie was escaping. No! I thought. Not yet. I smelled the ashes and brought my hands to my face. Self-consciousness crept in: was I being melodramatic? And then a counter thought abutted: if drama was not appropriate as I encountered the charred remains of my own child, when was it, and I began to feel entitled. I smiled at this recovery, seeing myself with strangely rueful eyes as the bereaved mother.

I could taste ash in my mouth. I can’t describe the sensation, or maybe I don’t want to. I panicked again, this time worried that I wouldn’t be able to keep this taste of my daughter in my mouth for long. Saliva and eating and drinking and breathing all would soon degrade my daughter. She was slipping away from me. She is always slipping away from me.

I retied the stupid twist tie and took the bag out of the stupid plastic box to study it. I had been warned about the bone fragments. There they were. So small. I wanted to reach in and touch one or two. I decided that I would keep some of them. Later. Not now, I thought. This is enough for now.

It was too much, as my explosion at my youngest daughter later that day evinced. Here is the truth baked down to its hardest, undeniable kernel: I don’t know how to parent one child while grieving another.

September 10, 2013

Soon after Gracie died, caring and kind people offered hope: “That little girl will save her” and “At least she still has Zoe.” Sometimes these well-meaning words were spoken to me, but most times they were overheard or reported back to me. This naively hopeful sentiment is offered by those who want to light my way
out of my darkness. But these words are not true. There is no way out. There is no light.

Like so many other parents, I sang to my children: “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.” These words haunt me today. They mock me. Someone’s momentary distraction took my sunshine away. Someone extinguished the light.

My beautiful, creative, wise, vulnerable, sensitive girl is dead and now my world is dark, hostile, treacherous, hollow. Three years after Gracie’s death, I sometimes sob so hard I cannot breathe, suffocated by what Gracie will never see, never do, never be.

I am triggered easily, by seemingly everything: flip flops, chocolate chip cookies, teenage girls with long brown hair, siblings teasing one another, prom dresses, college admissions brochures, pregnant women. Zoe has triggers too. In school, two months after the accident, Zoe wrote: “I have a dream that everyone stop driving cars because then there will be no more car crashes.” At first, Zoe raged and exploded. She threw full throttle fits because we offered her the wrong kind of pasta or because her Papa made a stupid joke she didn’t think was funny. She threw objects at her Papa, and once, at a teacher. She is still unwilling to fall asleep alone. We indulge her, because we can. And, naturally, her litany of food issues are a bid for control in her chaotic, pained life. Someone took her big sister away.

We joined a grief support group—our new tribe of the permanently marked, the interminably miserable. Ten, even twenty years later, there is no “moving on,” the others tell us. There is only resigned survival. Eight months after Gracie’s death, Craig graduated from high school. We flew to Cincinnati to be with him, to cheer his accomplishment, but our pride battled with our loss. Gracie’s absence filled the room; her silence muted the applause. Someone took our sunshine away. And now, the sky never changes; it is gray every day.

After Gracie died in the ICU in Utah—actually, when we decided to withdraw life support—how much I wanted to get home to Zoe, to our home, to our community. I was weary from enduring this catastrophe in a strange place with strange people. I wanted to hug my Zoe and be reminded she would “save me.” Now, I know that someone needs legacy, from the destructor for which I take full respon.

sibility, her irreplaceable brain death, happened to her could have killed you. Don’t. I feel responsible for how she died doing the job, a mother’s single most impossible job.

I failed at that job, and in charge of keeping another anyone trust me with this my credentials so lacking more when with Gracie: ‘drive, when’ you graduate, ‘when’ you have your own day. This is, above all, my mine. But it does not stop that I cannot bring myself The end of when is total. powerful, it blocks out the bereaved mother, most despairing place where the luxury of hope with the child for even the description “s her by her sister’s death: to protect her. I fail and and mundane.

I am, at my core, utter.

When Gracie died, so future, to propel myself Zoe, of living, breathing Zoe, I feel utterly disab the perfect little person me” then I am beyond
my Zoe and be reminded of what was left. I thought having her would “save me.” Now, I know that she cannot save me. Now I know that someone needs to save her, from me, from her sister’s legacy, from the destruction that we live in, every day, a destruction for which I take full responsibility. Please do not point out that I was not driving the car that rolled and ejected my daughter, leaving her irreparably brain damaged. Please don’t tell me that what happened to her could happen to anyone. Please, oh please. I beg you. Don’t. I feel responsible because I am Gracie’s mother. The facts of how she died do not touch this reality. After all, a mother’s job, a mother’s single most important job is to keep her child alive.

I failed at that job, and yet, somehow, miraculously, I am still in charge of keeping another child alive. But how can I? How can anyone trust me with this sacred task? I know I don’t trust myself; my credentials so lacking, so devastatingly lacking. There is no more when with Gracie: ‘when’ you grow up, ‘when’ you learn to drive, ‘when’ you graduate high school, ‘when’ you go to college, ‘when’ you have your own place, ‘when’ you are a parent someday. This is, above all, my daughter’s tragedy. And also, of course, mine. But it does not stop there. What multiplies this devastation is that I cannot bring myself to imagine ‘the whens’ with Zoe either. The end of when is total. The shadow cast by Gracie’s death is so powerful, it blocks out the sun. It is grey every day.

As a bereaved mother, I found my bottom, the absolute darkest, most despairing place within me. In the early days, I allowed myself the luxury of hope when I reached toward Zoe, my surviving daughter, the child for whom I am still responsible. But see how even the description “surviving daughter” marks Zoe, defines her by her sister’s death? It is inescapable, of course, though I try to protect her. I fail and I fail. And my failures are at once grand and mundane.

I am, at my core, utterly, hopeless.

When Gracie died, so did my capacity to look ahead, to see a future, to propel myself toward tomorrow. For me, the parent of Zoe, of living, breathing, growing, changing, wonderfully vibrant Zoe, I feel utterly disabled by the end of hope. And I know that if this perfect little person I love as much as her sister cannot “save me” then I am beyond saving. And so, whither poor Zoe?
How does a parent do her job when there is no hope? Parenting is an exercise in forward motion; it is nothing if not relentlessly dynamic, churning toward WHEN. Parenting is a focus on the present with an eye, always, on the future. Our job is to grow our kids up. To keep them alive. We teach them manners so that they can get along with others we will never meet. We impress upon them a work ethic, a sense of self-worth, an appreciation for nature, human connection, humility, self-care—all of life’s lessons are, at their root, survival skills, a tool kit for a life far beyond the one we share with our charges. A parent enlists in the job of guiding a human being through their life course until the day they, the parent, dies.

Of course, my rational brain knows that the odds are in Zoe’s favour, that in all likelihood, she will grow up, she will outlive me, she will have “when.” But I cannot afford to assume this for her, or, for me. Keeping my absence of hope from her is exhausting. I know that her sister’s death cannot be Zoe’s burden any more than it already is. I know that Zoe is entitled to her life, her mistakes, her life lessons, her joys, her own fears. Her own life journey must not be inescapably inflected with the horror of her sister’s life cut short. She is not only Gracie’s sister, after all. I know this, but I can’t feel this. I know this, but I can’t yank out what Kathryn Stockett’s character Minnie, the maid who stoically mourns her dead son in The Help called “a bitter seed ... planted inside me.”! Gracie’s death planted that seed in me and it is as permanent as Gracie is not. Sometimes the seed expresses itself as rage, sometimes as expletive-hurling rage. Sometimes, it channels despair, or a deep abiding sadness. Or cynicism. The seed is potent and I fear it will sprout soon and take over.

Zoe deserves better, simply because she is HERE. And I, her mother, must fight that bitter seed. I know I cannot exterminate it any more than I can bring Gracie back, but can I temper it somehow? Can I contain the weed it wants to grow in my heart, crowding, and ultimately strangling joy, gratitude, comfort, tomorrow? I don’t know. I don’t know. Others have survived much, much worse. The brutal torture and murder of their child. The death of multiple children. But I must arrest this almost ritual listing of ‘it could be worse’ because that is a game for the rational and grief cannot be reasoned with. I know it is possible to survive and to hope again.

People do every day. And I to imagining ‘when’ is lin somehow, surrender and t

February 20, 2012

I spent a few days in my asphalt: path that hugged the Cu and voices to my left and the overpass. It was a ma little boy, fully equipped with boots. Father and son, I am hands here...feel that?” but metal girding below. A g to something new, foste was cynical.

The bitter seed inside me to myself. You will pour man, showing him the path, and in two to three.

Then jealousy consists them. No. He will grow.

His father will watch him.

I kept ahead of them, in the half-frozen river. I in beneath, but not before lattice and jumping, kno woven into this death st

Dad and son began to one another. Dad points over our heads. Of cour
People do every day. And I know that the key to moving forward, to imagining ‘when’ is linked to not denying this horror, but to, somehow, surrender and tap into a place beyond knowing.

February 20, 2012

I spent a few days in my friend’s rented winter home in Maine. She uses it as a base for ski weekends. I used it to escape, to be completely alone. I wanted to tear off the mask I wear—the “I am fine, I am coping,” the custom-made mask that bereaved parents wear in the world. I tried to let the pain flow. I brought Gracie’s journals (she filled 37 of them, from age five to seventeen) so that I could be with her, their pages serving as permission to experience the presence of her absence.

While there, I took several walks. During one, I followed an asphalt path that hugged the Androscoggin River. I heard a shuffle and voices to my left and I startled. There were two figures under the overpass. It was a man in a Carhartt jacket and knit cap and a little boy, fully equipped in snowsuit, winter hat, gloves and snow boots. Father and son, I assumed. And I heard the dad, “Put your hands here... feel that?” as the cars rumbled above, vibrating the metal girding below. A good daddy, I thought, exposing his son to something new, fostering his curiosity. But like quicksilver, I was cynical.

The bitter seed inside me gained strength: It won’t matter. I think to myself. You will pour your energy into rearing this boy into a man, showing him the world, answering his questions, guiding his path, and in two to three seconds, he will be gone.

Then jealously consumed me, my feet moved me further from them. No. He will grow up, this little boy in a navy blue snowsuit. His father will watch him transform into a man.

I kept ahead of them, winding my way to the bridge that crosses the half-frozen river. I indulged my urge to study the moving water beneath, but not before I pictured myself climbing the wooden lattice and jumping, knowing that there were too many unknowns woven into this death strategy to render it remotely viable.

Dad and son began to cross the bridge near me. We stood near one another. Dad pointed out the little prop engine noisily cruising over our heads. Of course, it is a parent’s instinct to point this out,
to say “Look at this, did you notice that?” We do this because we want to teach our children about the world, equip them with facts and keen observational skills. Why? So that they survive. Well, or thrive. We assume they will survive. Don’t we? Really?

I moved on, wanting to remain a mere voyeur, not the least bit interested in small talk or even the quiet collusion of parent-to-parent. I did not want to be a parent right then. More precisely, I didn’t want to be the parent I have become. The parent of the dead child. The parent who failed, now hopeless.

But in that moment, I felt curious and envious and wistful for those innocent days of lazy moments with an impressionable child who wants nothing more than his parent’s undivided attention. As I indulged this longing, Dad and son prepared to roll down the grassy hill. Just the right size for such a small boy (he couldn’t have been more than three) and I couldn’t resist smiling as I watched Dad correct his son’s form. Dad demonstrated the ideal hill rolling posture, and off he went. Fun dad. No educational value here, just ecstatic abandon. And a good story for when they got home, peeling off their mittens as the hot chocolate simmered.

When I encountered a dead end, I reluctantly turned around and passed the rolling pair. I didn’t want to smile at them, because the smile felt like a lie. I know too much. I know how precious this is, or at least, could be, and I didn’t want to betray my own life, my own desperate reality, with a simple nod and smile implying ‘aren’t you cute.’ I wanted to say something unkind. Something like, “He might die. He might get flung through a broken window. Someone might smash his skull, baked at 1400 degrees Fahrenheit, with the back of a shovel.”

Of course, I didn’t. As we passed, I whispered a hopeful prayer to myself, for the little boy in the snowsuit and his father: Please grow up.

The bitter seed feebly resisted.

NOTES