EDITED BY
PETER STANFORD

The DEATH of a Child

Afterword by
Dorothy Rowe

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Editor's Introduction

There is a park bench on Hampstead Heath where I walk the family dog. It is on my regular circuit and however often I stop and read its simple inscription, I am always moved. 'Riley Arthur Paterson Croft, 25 March 2005, lived 35 minutes – loved forever'.

Life, most of us come to learn, has few patterns, few things that we can expect to happen, but most parents still assume that their children will outlive them. For some mothers and fathers, such as Riley's, even that is taking too much for granted. They have to face the tragedy of the death of their child. Each year in the United Kingdom almost 3,000 youngsters between the ages of 1 and 19 die as a result of illness and accident. Every year 1 baby in 100 dies before, at, or soon after birth.

In this collection of a dozen essays, those who have lost a son or daughter tell their stories in the hope that, by doing so, they may help others facing or experiencing the same bereavement. And, that they might afford insight to those of us, among families, friends and loved ones, who watch their suffering, want so fervently to be helpful and supportive, but don't quite know how.

Mothers and fathers are joined in this collection by two siblings who contribute essays on brothers or sisters who have died. They give their perspective, again with the intention that reading their words may support others in similar situations as well as to inform a wider public.

My role as editor has been a backroom one, bringing together the contributors. The credit for what follows belongs entirely to the authors: for their willingness to share something so very personal

and intimate in public; for their courage in laying bare the emotional and psychological journey they and their families are still on; for their determination to celebrate the lives, however brief, of children whose futures were taken away; and for their honesty. Some write of how they have been able to go onwards and forwards with their lives after bereavement, others of their continuing struggle to cope with grief.

Each experience shared in this book is unique, but together, at varying lengths, they recall the death of much-loved and much-missed children from the loss of infants through miscarriage and stillbirth, right up to watching a fully-grown daughter with a family of her own die. They also address different circumstances, from physical or mental illness to murder and suicide.

The individual essays are followed by an Afterword on grief from psychologist and writer, Dorothy Rowe. And the collection begins and ends with poems by Seamus Heaney and Michael Rosen, both of whom have experienced the death of a child. A proportion of any royalties raised by this book will go to the Child Bereavement Charity.

Peter Stanford
London, January 2011

'Mid-Term Break'

Seamus Heaney

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying–
He had always taken funerals in his stride–
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble',
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

'Mid-Term Break' appears in Death of a Naturalist, *Seamus Heaney's award-winning 1966 collection, and in subsequent editions of his collected poems, all published by Faber and Faber. His brother, Christopher, was killed, crossing the road, in 1953 at the age of 3.*

CHAPTER ONE

'Carrot'

Carol Drinkwater

Carol Drinkwater is an award-winning actress whose many roles include that of Helen Herriot in All Creatures Great and Small. *She is also the author of children's books and a novelist, while her memoirs, based on the olive farm where she lives in the south of France with her husband, have been international best sellers. In 1994, she miscarried a longed-for baby girl, at 21 weeks, whom she knew as Carrot.*

A silent dawn is breaking on a stark, cold morning. The world north of here is blanketed in snow. I am huddled by a crackling log fire. No one else is present at our olive farm, no one except me and our trio of dogs. Soon it will be Christmas. My husband who is in China will have returned. My mother will join us, as well as Vanessa, one of my stepdaughters, one of the twin girls born to my husband and his first wife. Vanessa will be arriving with her three small children. Yes, the upcoming holidays promise a full house; a situation I enjoy greatly . . .

I rarely allow myself to dwell on the past. It is time ill spent. It serves nothing, in my opinion, but just occasionally, particularly during this season of Christmas lights, of family gatherings, the past creeps up on me, throwing up hoary pictures to set me off-balance.

I was in my mid-thirties and newly married to Michel, a Frenchman I had been living with for close to 3 years. Although I had made my home with him here in the south of France, I still returned regularly to England, still kept a flat in London and still worked as an actress while beginning to build a career as a writer. I was 13 weeks pregnant when the offer came in from the BBC. It was a one-off drama and mine was to be the lead female role. A fine cast was being assembled and the play was challenging. The entire piece was scheduled to be shot on location on the outskirts of Birmingham. The fee would come in handy too, Michel and I agreed, so I accepted the offer.

When Wendy, the costume designer, came to see me at my top floor flat in Kentish Town to 'talk frocks', I deliberated about confiding in her my physical condition and eventually decided against it. I had suffered several miscarriages in the past and although this child, this dearly desired little girl, was further advanced than the earlier losses, it seemed wiser to say nothing. I did not want to tempt fate by broadcasting the good news too soon. The BBC shooting schedule was a mere 3 weeks. If I paid attention to my diet, there was no reason why there should be any problem with my costumes.

By this stage, I was a little over 15 weeks into my pregnancy. My energy level was high, diet normal, save for an obsessive craving for tomatoes and no desire for wine, and I was happy. Beaming with joy, in fact. A slight protrusion of my stomach, crescent-bellied, and marginal increase in breast size was all that was visible, and as I am not a skinny bean, have always been described as voluptuous, I saw no reason to concern Wendy or the director. I will have completed my modest part in the shoot before anyone notices, I reasoned.

'God, you look terrif', purred Wendy when she arrived laden with bags and cuts of cloth. She and I had worked together

previously on several television films so she knew me a little. 'And so happy. I heard about your new man.'

She had wrapped a spaghetti of measuring tapes about my torso and had begun to jot down figures when the doorbell rang. I was not expecting anybody. In fact, nobody knew I was in town.

'Excuse me', I apologized and hurried to the door to press the antiquated intercom. It was close to 6 in the evening. 'Hello?'
'Flowers for Miss Drinkwater.' The voice was crackly.
The flat was at the very top of a scruffy building with a winding walk-up.
'Flowers?' I repeated, unsure that I had heard correctly.
'Yes.'
'Would you mind bringing them up, please? I am in a meeting.'
'Certainly.'

I popped my head back into the sitting room. Wendy was busy scribbling and sketching in her notebook.
'Sorry about this.'
'Flowers', she grinned. 'Lucky lady.'

I went back out to the landing and waited for the figure, whose steps I could hear plodding upwards from somewhere way below. 'Sorry for the climb', I encouraged. 'It's one floor down from heaven.'

The extravagant bouquet of red roses rounded the spiralling corner before I spotted the delivery man. 'Oh, they are glorious!', and then I was speechless. Standing before me, grinning wickedly, was my husband.

Michel was en route to Australia. Eager to surprise me, he had kept it a *petit secret* that he was changing planes in London with a 5-hour stopover. Instead, he had sped across the capital in a taxi with these magnificent blossoms and a gift to wish me well with the

filming, to remind me how very much he loved me, and how very, very proud he was to be the father of our little girl. The gift was a very delicate gold necklace with a tiny emerald set into it. It matched my wedding ring.

Tears sprang to my eyes. I am such a sentimental creature and a gesture as tender, as adoring as this crumpled me. Michel refused to come in, to have a glass of wine. 'Must dash. Plane leaving in three hours', and with that he was gone. From behind a forest of flowers, I watched him disappear down the winding stairwell. The father of my child. 'How romantic is that?!' squealed Wendy when I returned into the living room. 'No wonder you look so splendid.'

The film locations were all situated in and around Birmingham. I was staying with the rest of the cast and crew in a hotel outside the city centre, a rather nondescript establishment where you either crept off to your room and slept or congregated in the bar with other cast members late into the night after a long day on set. It was all part of a world I was very familiar with. I worked hard, long hours, enjoyed what we were shooting and felt no tiredness.

Before the third week, I was given two days off and decided to return to London, to get out of the hotel for a bit and catch up with friends. 'Back Wednesday night, please Carol, without fail. You are first call up on Thursday', warned the ever-vigilant first assistant. I assured him I would be there.

It was that night, or rather in the early hours of the following morning, those witching hours, when I lost our little girl, who for a reason I have never quite understood, I had nicknamed 'Carrot'. I opened my eyes into a heavy sea of semi-consciousness. A dull ache had girdled itself round my lower abdomen. It took me a minute or two to register the fact that all might not be well, that I was damp and sticky. Only when I rolled back the bedclothes did I see that the viscosity was my own blood.

Head swimming, I lifted myself from the mattress and made my way downstairs to the lavatory where it became clear to me that I was losing our baby, ejecting my longed-for little girl. I began to panic. I had to get help. A clock somewhere told me that it was not yet 5 a.m. I was groggy and not sharp or clear in my decision-making and more than anything else I wanted this not to be happening. I called a friend who lived close by in Primrose Hill, waking him, of course, and begging him to come over. He was with me within half an hour.

At the sight of me, Chris insisted we go directly to the emergency department at the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead. An idea I resisted. I found the home phone number of my gynaecologist who instructed Chris to put me in a taxi and escort me to another hospital in east London where he arranged to meet us.

I was barely able to stand upright, barely able to walk by the time we arrived. Without Chris's support and patience, I would never have negotiated my way through the damp, chilly morning into the emergency area. My specialist was there ahead of us, standing in a raincoat, collar turned up, waiting. His face, always so full of compassion, closed into a frown at the sight of me. He led me into a sulphurous-smelling cubicle, switched on a machine, the obstetric ultrasound, which began to hum happily, and instructed me to strip. Blood, clots of it, was everywhere.

Stupidly I begged, 'We will save her, won't we?'

Only the previous week, Mr . . . , known to me by his christian name, Trevor, had traced out with his finger on the monitor screen Carrot's minuscule bunched limbs, her beating heart, and we had marvelled together at the robust growth of the foetus. She, Carrot, had already become a living, breathing, comprehending person to me; she had become a companion I talked to, confided in. She had become my ally; a travelling companion for the long life that lay

ahead for both of us. Plans had been formulated in my mind and transmitted softly to the bulging promise that passed every second with me and had infused me with a joy and sense of satisfaction quite different to any other I had previously known.

Trevor made no response, merely insisted I lie down. The cold head of the ultrasound apparatus caused me to shiver as it slid across the flesh of my naked belly, scanning, homing in on the life of my baby.

'Nothing', murmured the doctor.
'Oh, thank heavens. I feared the worst.'
'I mean there is nothing there. No heart beat, no life, Carol. I am sorry to tell you but the foetus has not survived.'

He might as well have clumped me with a sledge hammer.

'Let's get you directly to the operating theatre and clean you out. We cannot risk infection.'
'I have to be back in Birmingham tomorrow. I'm filming.'
'Out of the question.'

I did not argue. In any case, Trevor was pulling off his jacket, rolling up sleeves, preparing to go to work. Hours passed, lost to me because I was sedated. I still have no memory of the anaesthetist and those hours have remained an abyss. The time it took in surgery to sluice out the remains of my little girl – my dreams of a family, children of my own – I cannot recall any of them. Later, in a private room, I awoke to folk in forest green uniforms wearing facemasks. I was confused but slipped conveniently back into deep sleep. That evening, awakening once more, I found Trevor at my bedside.

'All went well', he encouraged. 'Nothing sinister to report.'
'But is she . . . ?'

'Gone', he replied firmly. 'Get plenty of rest. I want to see you in a few days at my surgery.' He patted me on the arm and then quite unexpectedly, unconventionally, bent forward and kissed me lightly on my forehead. 'I am so sorry, Carol', and with that he was on his way, and I mine, as I descended back into my dark corridors of drugged sleep.

I was not sufficiently strong to travel, and emotionally I was a mixed bag, a knot of anxieties and grief, but the first assistant insisted that I was needed on location. I requested a word with the director who after a hiatus came to the phone, but I could hear he was stressed and needed no problems from the leading lady.

'I have lost a baby', I blurted out.
Silence. Unspoken accusations: *Why the – didn't you tell me you were pregnant*?
'Can you walk?'
'Yes, of course.'
'Then we need you back up here.'

And that was it. I was on the train. Rainy Birmingham. The same grim hotel. At reception I requested my key and to know whether the rest of the team had completed their day's shooting; it was close to 8 p.m. The pale-faced Brummy girl shrugged, 'Couldn't tell yer.'

I nodded and padded off to my room where I expected to find a call sheet with the time that I would be required in make-up the following morning. Nothing. I closed the curtains to create a well of darkness and lay down on the bed.

I had not spoken to Michel and that was uppermost in my mind. His hours in Sydney were the inverse of mine. During my brief stay in the hospital he had left two messages. I had found them when Chris returned me to my flat that very same evening. Yesterday. Was it really only yesterday? I had decided against sharing my loss, our

loss, with him at this stage. What could he do, committed to an intense work trip on the other side of the world? Why distress him? I would break it to him when we were together again, face to face. In the meantime, I would soldier on. In a little over a week, I would be back at the farm.

By 11 p.m., I had still not received my call sheet so, sleepless, restless, I decided to telephone the production office at which point I learned that I was not required the following day.

'Oh?'

'We have fallen behind due to bad weather. We'll give you an update tomorrow night.'

Oh.

And so it continued for several days, sitting alone at the hotel, seeing no one, doing nothing but thinking, cogitating, going stir crazy, sinking into a rising whorl of depression.

I had a sex scene to shoot. It was explicit and that was also preying on my mind. To make matters worse, the director and costume director had, during my absence, cooked up an idea, a new costume for the scene: a vulgar black lacy affair, all too revealing for someone as vulnerable as I was at that time. Fortunately, John, the actor playing my lover, was a longstanding friend. We had been at drama school together. When I finally caught up with him, I broke down and confided all. He hugged me tight and promised to take care of the situation, which he did. The black one-piece was ditched. We shot the scene, my last, and I was wrapped. Wrapped, finished, could go home.

Back at the hotel, John and I uncorked a bottle and proceeded to catch up on life. I drank too much and went to pieces. After almost a week of reining in my emotions, I shattered like glass. Other members of the cast arrived. It was not an evening that lives on in my memory as one to be proud of but the three actors in my