

Homecoming



It was the first week of May 1967 when I first brought my daughter home to my mother's kitchen. The whole family, even my maternal grandmother and my great-grandmother, gathered in the kitchen to witness the homecoming. The reunion of five generations of women, all alive and well, was a momentous occasion! It was a wonderful spring day and the breeze entered the room, carrying the smell of lilacs. The huge old bush grew right outside my mother's kitchen window and the perfume of the lilac has always filled the room in the early spring. I have always associated family—in good times and bad—with lilacs, because the kitchen was where my family gathered and spent the day. As I remember those times, my mind smells the wonderful perfume and the memory fills my heart with a longing to share those times with my family once again.



The loss of Lyn Alan the year before had been the most heartbreaking experience I would ever have. Yet life had more or less picked up where it had left off. At seventeen, I was still a child myself. I was naive enough to truly believe love would make everything turn out right. I wanted another baby right away to fill my empty arms. Sug wanted

Homecoming

another baby, too. Partly because he wanted to be a husband and father, and partly to avoid the draft.

Before getting pregnant this time, I went to Dr. Frank Morrison, an obstetrician specializing in difficult pregnancies. The prescription he gave me helped me become pregnant within a few months. When he told me I was indeed pregnant, I quickly left his office, eager to tell Sug the good news.

Yet this pregnancy was quite difficult. I had to be confined to bed for weeks because my last baby had been born two months premature. Dr. Morrison told me that all pregnancies were different so I tried to separate the two pregnancies in my mind; yet I constantly feared losing this child. For weeks I lay very still in bed, waiting to feel the first tiny pain signaling my body's betrayal. I was certain I would have a girl. I sometimes allowed myself to dream of a beautiful daughter, only to find myself terrified of losing her. I passed the long hours in my bed alternating between overwhelming fear and sweet dreams, as I waited for my husband to come home. But Sug stayed away as much as he could, probably avoiding fears of his own.

Because of my extreme loneliness and impending due date, I spent the last month of my pregnancy living in my parents' home. My doctor's practice was in a neighboring town, and Sug and I found a house to buy. Daddy even helped get Sug a job at the Alton BoxBoard. I thought everything was going to work out. It was nice being home and getting a little spoiled by all my family.

One night, as the ten o'clock news came on, I went into the living room where my parents were watching TV. I had been to the doctor for a check up just that afternoon.

Homecoming

“Mom, I think maybe I need to go to the hospital,” I said. She was settling down to doze in front of the TV, as was her nightly habit. “Are you having labor pains, did your water break?” she asked. I answered no to all her questions. I told her that I felt like I was sitting on an egg, and having contractions but no pain. She laughed, “Well, you’re probably having false labor. Why don’t you go back to bed, the hospital would just check you and send you home.” I agreed and went back to bed. A few minutes later Mother came into my room, where I was trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable. “Daddy thinks I should go ahead and take you to the hospital,” she said. I got out of bed and quickly dressed.

During the fifteen-minute drive, I decided I would sure love a root beer float, so Mom and I stopped, bought one each, and brought them with us.

The admitting nurse at the hospital didn’t even let me finish answering her questions. She looked at me and said, “Your mother can finish filling out this paperwork, I think we’ll go ahead and send you upstairs to be checked.” When Mom finished and got upstairs, the nurses were wheeling me out of the delivery room with my baby girl. We named her Alandra, but called her by the nickname Landy.

My daughter was everything I dreamed of. She was the beautiful, tiny baby my arms yearned to hold. She had long black hair and caramel colored skin. Her only resemblance to her Irish heritage was her deep blue eyes and black eyelashes. When I softly tickled her lower lip, her lip puckered and deep dimples appeared in each cheek.



Homecoming

I had just turned eighteen in April and had never been around babies before. Completely lacking any experience, I nevertheless accepted a life-long commitment to this tiny person I held in my arms. On that wonderful spring day when I brought Landy home, my elders were full of well-meaning advice that I eagerly accepted. My daughter was so beautiful and flawless that I wanted to be perfect for her as well. It was a comfort to know that I would have the support and experience of these women through the coming years.

Landy cried that day, and I couldn't figure out why. I had fed and changed her; she was warm without being too warm. I held her close, and everyone laughingly agreed that I would spoil my child for certain. My mother advised, "Sometimes babies just cry to exercise their lungs and you will have to let her cry." My grandmother said, "Maybe she does not like her hands tucked inside the sleeves of her gown." Willing to try anything to make Landy happy, I took her hands with her beautiful long fingers out and she stopped crying.

They told me to put her bassinet in the kitchen so she would get used to noise. Of course I followed their suggestion, although I'm sure it was really because they wanted to look at her and coo like all doting grandmothers—in this case three generations of grandmothers. Again their suggestions were good, and Landy slept soundly and peacefully. She didn't even stir in her tiny bed when we ran the garbage disposal as we cleaned the dishes left from our celebration. My grandmother even commented on that fact: "She is such a calm baby, all this racket isn't even making her flinch."

Three generations of mothers proclaimed her a "good baby," and I, a new mother, was most grateful. It was a good

Homecoming

day, full of love, happiness, and hope for the continuity of the family—for there was the living proof that life moves on. All were happy with the celebration and I was pleased to be the one who brought everybody together. The object of our pride and unity was my little daughter, and the scent of that happiness was the lilacs in bloom.



Sug's cousin Denny Motley lived in a nearby town. His wife Linda was older than me, and an elementary school teacher. I had dropped out of high school after getting pregnant, so I had a lot of respect for her education. We became good friends and like many couples with little money, spent a lot of time visiting in each other's homes. Their daughter, Joy, was about two years old and had been born deaf. (During her pregnancy, Linda had been exposed to the measles, the three-day kind that everyone used to get. I was surprised that a childhood disease that didn't even make you very sick could cause something so severe.) I had never been around a child with a hearing problem, but Linda was always glad to answer my questions and taught me to talk with Joy. It was very important to talk to her on her level so she could see your mouth and learn to read lips, or speechread. So we spent most of our time—for as long as we could hold their attention anyway—sitting on the floor playing with Joy and Landy. After the kids went to sleep Linda and I played cards or just talked, sharing ideas and enjoying our time together.

Joy wore a hearing aid called a body aid. It was a bulky box of a thing, which she wore in a harness around her

Homecoming

chest. A cord traveled up from the box to a large button-like component in her ear. She could hear really well with it and her speech developed at a good pace. Whenever she was not wearing her hearing aid, she would run through the house screaming and laughing wildly. You had to laugh at her antics because she was enjoying herself so much; yet although I enjoyed visiting, I was sure happy to take my ringing ears and go home. I soon understood that Joy was just trying to hear herself. Like people who begin to talk louder and louder as they lose their hearing, Joy didn't realize how loud she was. When she wore her hearing aids, her voice was much more controlled and life was a lot easier on the hearing people around her.

Like any little girl, Joy wanted to hold my daughter and play with the live baby doll. The two girls looked like exact opposites: Joy was blonde and fair (she looked like a Dresden doll) and Landy had almost-black hair and a light olive complexion. When they played side by side, you were immediately struck by not only their differences, but by their beauty. Joy spent many weekend days playing sweetly with Landy. The play times they shared may have been the only time Joy ever approached a state of calm during her terrible twos.



When Landy was around five months old, I started to suspect that she was also deaf. I don't even remember what made me suspicious. But fear, like a cancerous worm, began intruding into my happiness. During the early part of my pregnancy I knew I had been exposed to the three-day mea-

Homecoming

sles while babysitting for my husband's nieces and nephew. There had been a measles epidemic and all the kids were getting them. The kids had not been feeling well, so I wasn't surprised when they broke out in a rash from head to toe. The next day I called my obstetrician, who asked if I had ever had the measles before. I replied, "Yes, several times." He said, "Well, the current thinking in the medical field is that a person can only get the three-day measles once, so your baby will not be at risk." I said, "Once! I have had them more than once. I know you can get them again." My doctor said, "Well, since you can only have measles once, you can't get the gamma globulin shot. But don't worry about the baby, it will be fine." So I put the thoughts and the worries out of my head. But the fears always had a way of returning, regardless of the comforting advice I received.

I tentatively broached the subject of my fears while visiting Linda and Joy one afternoon. "Linda," I said, "I think sometimes that Landy is deaf." Laughing, she replied, "From time to time all kids pretend they don't hear you." Shaking my head, I said, "No, it's more than that. I *really* don't think she hears." Linda gave my remark a little more consideration, but then said, "I'm sure you're wrong, it's just your imagination playing tricks on you. It's because you're around Joy so much." Then carefully selecting her words so not to hurt my feelings, she added, "And partly it may be because you lost the first baby." Giving in, I agreed she was probably right.

Voicing my suspicions for the first time relieved my fears for a while. Yet there were so many little things that I kept noticing—similarities to Joy, differences from my other nieces and nephews. I just couldn't shake the memory of

Homecoming

keeping the kids the day they broke out with the measles. A few weeks later Landy and I visited her pediatrician. Not only had Dr. Buzan been practicing pediatric medicine for many years, he had seven children of his own. If anyone would know if my daughter were deaf, he would be the one. I told him about my fears. When I told him I had been exposed to the measles during my pregnancy, he suddenly grew more alert. But he relaxed when I told him I had the measles as a child. Like Linda, he thought it was my imagination and new mother jitters. In fact, his remarks were almost identical to hers: "Because you lost the first baby, perhaps you are looking for something to be wrong with this one." When I assured him this was not the case, he said, "The best thing to do is to take her home and enjoy her. If you still think she can not hear when she's a year old, you'll need to take her to an ear, nose, and throat doctor."

I felt frustrated that he brushed my fears aside so lightly. I was sure he was laughing at me because I was so young. My anger flaring, I thought, I certainly do enjoy my baby. What does he think I want, a refund? But I did not speak these thoughts out loud. After all, he was the doctor. I felt frustrated because these experts were unable to see what was so obvious. I was embarrassed, angry with myself because they made me feel so inept at being a mother. I began keeping my fears to myself so people couldn't laugh or make me feel inadequate. My "experts" had refused to see, refused to look, refused to listen.

Months passed and I tested Landy using my own less-than-scientific methods. I unwrapped candy behind her back—when she turned around immediately, I cursed myself for being a fool and getting worked up over nothing.

Homecoming

But when moments later I would call her and get no response, I told myself, I know she is deaf. I was on an emotional rollercoaster. I shared my feelings with no one except my beautiful baby. I held her and told her about all of my worries; she responded by sweetly smiling and cooing. Much later I realized that Landy was feeling my step on the floor, and smelling the candy even before I opened it all the way.

We finally went back to the pediatrician for Landy's one-year check up. I was pregnant again and thought this fact alone should give me more credibility as a mother. It may have been overactive hormones, but this time I was armed with a grim determination to be taken seriously. I started our visit by saying firmly, "Doctor, I still do not think my daughter can hear." Dr. Buzan was a kind man and a very gentle doctor; my obvious distress did not put him off. He questioned me about why I still thought she was deaf, so I described all the ways I had been testing her. Finally he admitted, "I really can't tell if she's able to hear or not, there wasn't very much training in medical school for this kind of problem." I let out the breath I had been holding, my distress easing. Finally, we were finally discussing the issue! He said, "You need to make an appointment with an ear, nose, and throat doctor and have her hearing checked by a specialist." I thanked him for his honesty, and mentally I gave a sigh of relief—someone was listening! Now at least I might get my questions answered. Feeling better, when I took Landy home that day I felt more relaxed than I had in months.

I looked in the phone book, but it listed very few local doctors specializing in ear, nose, and throat. My daughter

Homecoming

and I had to wait months for an appointment. During the wait, I found little relief. I was unable to share my concerns with my husband; he spent little time at home. Sug said he was going “night fishing” but of course he never brought home any fish. Of course I knew the truth—I was just reluctant to voice it. I guess that I had always known that our marriage had been one of convenience; I wanted someone of my own to love me and Sug wanted to avoid Vietnam. Yet I was pregnant, had dropped out of school, and our daughter might be deaf. What was I going to do, get a divorce?

Even my mother and her wonderful kitchen with the lilac bush brought me little joy that summer. Our visits and conversations were lectures on sticking out a bad marriage, not about whether Landy could hear. My parents seemed reluctant to even consider the possibility of Landy’s deafness.

One day that summer my mother and I visited my paternal grandparents. They were both warm, loving, and generous people and I wondered if their feelings for Landy would change once we got a diagnosis. Grandma Loraine took in laundry and her kitchen always smelled like freshly ironed shirts. Catching her up on the latest news, I said, “I’m taking Landy to see a specialist. I don’t think she can hear.” Grandma looked up from the shirt she was working on and said, “Don’t tell Grandpa, it will just kill him. He just loves all the babies so much.” I had expected to make explanations to other people, outsiders, about my daughter’s deafness—but had not expected it from my own family. I decided right then that this was not another little family secret to be swept under the rug.

Homecoming

Getting up from my place at the table, I walked right in to my Grandpa's TV room. He was bouncing Landy on his knee and loudly singing "Ride A Cock Horse." (Grandpa Van Hoy was a bit hard of hearing himself.) When he saw me, he stopped singing and gave me his usual big smile. "Grandpa," I said, "I wanted you to know that we think Landy is deaf." He gave Landy a big hug and boomed, "Well, I wondered why she didn't pay attention to me when I talked to her!" Then he started bouncing her up and down again, singing even louder than usual. As it turned out, he was one of the more accepting people in the family.



A month after our visit to the pediatrician, I gave birth to my second son a month early. Although the nurses and doctors were pretty optimistic about his chances of survival, I was not. I felt like I was going into that delivery room not to give life, but to bring death. Lyndle Paul, III, weighed only four-and-a-half pounds when he was born. Even his name was bigger than he was. I had named him after his father and grandfather, who had died when Sug was just ten years old. I was going to call him Lyn, after my first son. But my tiny baby began to have breathing difficulties immediately after his birth. Looking tired and sad, Dr. Buzan came in to my room and said, "Mrs. Benjamin, your baby will probably not live though the night." I nodded through the fog of the anesthetic I had been given during delivery.

Two days later the baby gave up fighting for his life. He would be my last child and in my mind, his would be the hand that always encouraged me to be a better mother to

Homecoming

my only living child. I have always kept the two boys close to me in my heart and mind, and each time I kiss my daughter, I kiss all three of my children. Perhaps I lost the other children so I would be able to better devote myself to the challenges ahead. I didn't grieve so badly this time, but I held my daughter closer, fearful that I would lose her too.



Still recovering from the birth and passing of my son, I dressed Landy in her prettiest dress and little patent leather shoes, as though the way she was dressed would make a difference in the outcome. My stomach was in a knot during the fifteen-minute drive. I knew what the doctor was going to say, but still I prayed he would tell me I was wrong. As I walked into the doctor's building I held my baby closer. I fought the urge to stop and go back to the car, to take Landy home before the doctor could proclaim that she was deaf. I didn't want to hear the diagnosis, but I had to know! I kissed her little ears, remembering that when I was pregnant I had prayed she would have pretty ears (not her father's ears, which I felt were too big). I cursed myself because I had forgotten to pray that her pretty ears would work.

Dr. Bly was an older man and I am sure he was very wise for his day. After we talked of my concerns he put all his training to work. He had me hold Alandra on my lap and get her attention. He walked behind me and dropped a metal pan on the floor, then came back around to face me. Sitting down on a stool, the doctor picked up a heavy metal instrument that he called a tuning fork. It looked like a

heavy metal Y, like if you drew the Y in a square method instead of the pointed method we were taught in grade school. Striking it, Dr. Bly placed the long end of the Y behind my daughter's ear; she did not react. As he took it away he declared, "She's stone deaf." The good doctor (with all of his gracious bedside manner) then said, "Your baby most likely will never be able to talk, and probably will not get much education because of the limitations of communication." He went on to say, "She will probably make a lot of 'different' sounds. Someday she will probably make sounds in public that will embarrass you."

I have never told Alandra about the doctor's harsh words, keeping them a darkly hidden secret. I never wanted my daughter to think that I could ever be anything but proud of her. I still wonder how a doctor specializing in hearing problems could ever think such cruel thoughts, let alone repeat them to a parent. I have learned over the years that many people—even doctors—can be cruel with the things that they say. Today, I am quick to correct them for their ignorance and bad manners. But when I was nineteen, doctors and their education awed me; Bly's words cut me deeply. The doctor's final words were, "The condition is known as 'nerve deafness' and there isn't a way to correct it medically." This ended our one and only appointment. I thanked the doctor for his time, paid the bill, and left with my mind in a fog.

I was angry with the doctor—not for his confirmation of deafness nor his lack of compassion—but for the insensitive way in which he had given me the news. I was angry with God for making innocent little babies deaf, and for not giving the doctors the knowledge to correct it. I felt God

Homecoming

had made something so perfect when He made Landy, and then He looked at her and decided to take something away.

Yet I didn't feel as though my world had fallen in on top of me. Landy was perfectly normal in every other way, and she was a beautiful baby. I had felt tragedy before, with the loss of my two sons. I told myself that deafness, at least, can be dealt with. Although it was painful, it was not tragic. I knew that my life was going to be forever different, but somewhere deep inside I felt a tingle of excitement for that difference.

Now that I knew for sure, I had lots of things to do. My experience with Linda and Joy had taught me that nothing could be done to correct the problem, but that Joy could talk—so of course Landy would talk. As far as the educational aspect, I would prove the doctor wrong on that accord as well. I would teach her myself if necessary. Landy was only a year old but I could tell she was bright; I just needed to find the way to unlock all that intelligence.

That night I did two things. First, I called my friend Linda and told her the news. She gave me the phone number for the state's Crippled Children's Foundation, a non-profit organization that provided financial aid and other types of support to children with disabilities. Later, after I got Landy down to bed, I indulged in a good cry. Sug and I were sitting in our living room, staring silently at the TV. As usual, I received little or no consolation from my husband. He had become a cardboard figure in my life, only there when it suited him. Glaring at me, he said, "I don't understand why you're crying, we already knew that she was deaf." I ignored him. Through those tears I cried out the grief and the stress I had been feeling those many months

Homecoming

when I spoke to no one about my fears. I cried for Landy and I cried for me. I cried for two little boys who would never know my love. I cried for a marriage that was not what I dreamed of and I cried for a God who would turn His back on those I loved.

But that would be the only time I would give in to tears of pity and worry. As Paul Simon sang, I “turned my collar to the cold and damp.” Although there were tough times ahead, I resolved that any crying from then on would be tears of joy from our many successes. I would receive little support from my husband. I realized that evening that whatever my child’s future would be, it would have to be of my making.