Our World Fell Apart, What Now?

For the Parents Who Lost, and Those Who Carry Them Through It.



Teresa Aires & Margarida Silveira Rodrigues

For Winnie and Rainy, there are no words to describe how much I ache for you every day. I will carry you until my last breath. Thank you for showing me love and the magical experience of growing you.

I will always be your mom.

For Laura, thank you for introducing us to your wonderful family who loves you immensely and thinks of you all the time. We promise to keep taking care of them as they would have loved to take care of you.

My name is Teresa and I'm Rainy and Winnie's mom. I was 28 when I became a mom and 28 when I became a mom in heaven. I never thought I'd write a book I wished no one would read. But here we are. If this book is in your hands, you have just found out that you or someone you love are going through something unimaginably painful. I am truly sorry and I wish that wasn't true. We're here for you.

My name is Margarida, I am Teresa's mother and grandmother to these two little ones who gave me the honor of being a GRANDMOTHER! To this day, I still hear Teresa's voice on the phone saying "Mom, Winnie is going to die…" Being present to those suffering can be very challenging. I was on that side and I hope this book helps you be present for these parents and for yourself as well.

We wrote this book because we lacked information about the hard steps we had to take and that you are about to take. In our process, we also realized how difficult it is to have safe support systems that parents can trust. We realized that many parents go through this alone and suffer alone, because the people accompanying them don't know how to do it (and how not to). Since we wrote the book together, we have general parts written by both of us, and parts marked "Mom Teresa" or "Grandma Margarida" so you understand when we are sharing our own experience.

This book is divided into two parts: one for parents and one for the support system. We recommend starting with the part where you fit best. If you are a father or mother, don't forget to share this book with the people who support you. Don't be shy, show them that this can also help them help you. If you want to read both parts to understand the other side's perspective, feel free.

Part I: FOR THE PARENTS

It also takes a village to grieve a child. So, before we start with what you are going through, take a moment to think about the people you could call or text at this time. Who would pick up? Who would make you feel hugged and cared for? Who can help with logistics (if you have living children, pets you need help with, etc.)? Now is the time to ask for help. If you are struggling with what people might say, send them this guide and ask them to read it carefully. Having gone through this experience, we have found that, in these situations, people listen when you ask them to. But most of the time, they don't know what to do or say and need guidance. It is not your job to give them that guidance right now (though you should voice your needs when it feels right). We created the second part of this guide so you can provide your support systems with the tools they need to help you. Let us do that for you.

CRASH COURSE: If you have 48 hours or less, start here.

(If you have more time, you can skip this part and read the rest of the book or you can take advantage of this summary and keep reading)

You don't have time to read the whole book right now and that's okay. Read this summary. Come back to the rest when you're ready.

How you're feeling. The world has stopped, nothing matters. Not the cold, not the heat, not the noise, hunger, or thirst, nothing makes sense anymore, or the absence of it does. An avalanche of emotions runs through your body and mind and it becomes hard to think, make decisions, or pay attention to what people are telling you. They're talking to you and the words hurt, the words take on a frightening size, you don't know what to do with them, you don't know what to do with yourself, you don't know how to believe what you've just been told. It's the most tragic, most unexpected news you never wanted to hear. And now? Now you are not alone. Choose someone to listen to you, to hold you.

Your body and your mind are about to split apart. Something deeply strange and rare is about to happen to you: your mind already knows what your body hasn't caught up to yet. Your mind is already aware of the storm and the tragedy, but your body is still growing a baby. Very contradictory feelings can surface in you within moments of each other. Let them in, notice them. You don't need to make sense of everything that's about to happen in the next hours or days, because all of it will go beyond what's reasonable, logical, or expected.

Your body. What you're about to go through is one of the hardest physical things a human body can do, and you're doing it while your heart is breaking. If you have access to a pelvic

floor therapist before birth (even one session), take it. They can teach you how to breathe through contractions, how to move, how to help your body open and relax rather than fight itself. If you don't have access to it or time/money for it, watch some YouTube videos on how to breathe through birth. From my experience (this is not medical advice), while in labor, walk as much as you can tolerate, use a Pilates ball if the hospital has one, and stay upright as long as your body allows. Gravity helps. Know that you will be brave in ways you didn't know you had in you. You might think not (I didn't think I'd be able to do it either), but you'll find the strength to take this final step on earth for your baby. And know that however you get through it (epidural, no epidural, on your feet, flat on your back, screaming or silent) is the right way, because this is how you move through it, and moving through is all there is right now.

What to bring. Pack sports bras, your own postpartum pads, slippers you can also shower in, your phone charger with a long cord, snacks you like, a water bottle, and a stool softener. Ask your doctor about milk suppressants now and ask for them the moment you arrive, then ask again, because everyone is overworked and things get missed. If you want something for your baby (a blanket, a hat, a stuffed animal) bring it with you. If you want photos, make sure someone in that room is responsible for taking them, because in the blur after birth you will not be able to hold that thought yourself. Bring trash or plastic bags for the chaos of leaving (easy way to pack quickly when moved to the birthing suite). Pack comfortable clothes to go home in. Don't assume the hospital will provide what you need.

Holding your baby. If you have any feelings at all about whether you want to hold your baby, listen to them. You're allowed to change your mind in either direction once you're there: parents who were certain they wouldn't want to hold the baby often do, and parents who planned to sometimes don't. Both are okay. But if you're not sure, ask for a photo: you can always choose not to look at a photo later, but you cannot ask for a moment back. Whatever you decide, make sure someone on your care team knows, so you're not caught off guard in the minutes after birth when your brain will be somewhere else entirely. If you have someone with you who will be by your side for this moment (your partner, your mother, or someone else you've chosen), ask them to make a list on their phone of what you'd really want to happen: a photo, being wrapped in a blanket, saying something, whatever your plan is. Try to have it written down, because in the moment your thinking loses clarity, and so does everyone else's around you.

Pain and sedation. Think now, before you're in it, about what matters more to you: being as present as possible, or feeling as little pain as possible. There's no right answer, but there is your answer, and it's worth knowing it before you're too far into labor to say it clearly. If

staying alert matters to you, say so out loud, early, and have someone with you who will repeat it when you can't. If you want everything they'll give you, say that too. Ask your care team what their protocols are because sometimes what they offer and what they can deliver in time are different things. Whatever happens, whether it goes the way you planned or not, is not a failure. You did not fail your baby by how you got through their birth.

The immediate aftermath. People will check in a lot in the first few days and then much less. The fog is real and it will last longer than the world expects it to. It does not need to last forever (I promise, I thought mine would and it did not). You do not have to respond to anyone, attend to anything, or be okay on any timeline. Your body was your baby's home, and it is recovering from something enormous. The one practical thing worth doing now, if you can: ask one person you trust to manage incoming messages/calls, so you don't have to. That's it. Everything else can wait.

When you have time, come back. There's more here for you.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of Our "After"

"I have to give you bad news," our doctor said in a quiet and calm voice. I thought she was kidding, I thought she was about to tell us she had mistakenly told us it was a girl three weeks before and we were actually expecting a boy. In fact, when I heard that I even made a joke. "It's a boy," I said. And she looked at me and replied "it's a girl. I have to give you bad news." My world froze.

Whenever I heard someone say their world stopped or froze, I thought it was a poetic way to express surprise. I didn't believe time could actually freeze, that it could wrap you in its devil arms and consume you in a way you never wanted to experience. But it was true. My world stopped all of a sudden and there was no coming back.

I can't tell you what her next words were. I can't tell you how she explained Winnie's medical problems to us. I have always had a remarkable memory and yet I don't remember. All I know is one minute my husband and I were exchanging looks because Winnie clearly had his month and she was playing with her hands close to her chin like we had seen many times before. And the next minute life as we knew it ended. Just like in our society there's a before and an after covid, for us the after Winnie had just begun.

After explaining the extent of what she knew, our doctor told us she had to finish the last bit of the ultrasound. I remember staring at the ceiling and then back at the screen where my daughter was still playing with her hands and seeing my entire life pass in front of my eyes. I also thought this was a poetic way of describing fear and sadness but not something that people truly experienced. And once again, there I was, seeing our entire life with Winnie, the thousands of plans we had made, all we had dreamed for our family, disappear in front of my eyes. It was like a movie screen showing old footage of a time now gone.

My tears kept sliding down my face as I silently observed my daughter and squeezed my husband's hand. In what world were we losing our perfect little girl? I remember the doctor asking me if I wanted to be seen by a brain specialist an hour later and after I accepted, she asked me if I wanted to wait inside. I could barely breathe. I felt like something was constricting my throat, my vision was going blurry. I asked to go outside, and I swallowed my tears until we opened the front door.

That's when I learned about something I also thought was a poetic way of describing feelings: the mom howl. The minute I opened the door and felt the fresh air, I heard the weirdest, most animalistic howl come out of my mouth. I couldn't believe that was me, I had never made such a sound, and I wasn't trying to make one either. But I howled. I threw myself

to the ground and sat on the concrete sobbing, crying, howling. That was really happening. My baby, my whole world, my perfect tiny daughter was dying and there was nothing I could do about it.

I had never felt that powerless. I'm a fixer, a go-getter, I find solutions to everyone's problems. I research my way out of anything. I think and think and think harder after that. And I find solutions. My grandma always said, "the only thing we can't fix is death" and that has always motivated me to find a way. It has always made me feel powerful because it means we can fix *almost* anything. But that almost matters. Because this was death. This was the unfixable, the unsolvable, the end of a wonderful life. And it was my daughter. And I, the fixer, could not fix the person I wanted most and had most dreamed of, and I couldn't do that even though she was inside me, being fed by my body, every single day.

When I say I would have done anything, I really mean absolutely anything. After all, the things I never wanted to do (vaginal birth, producing milk, giving birth with strangers and without my medical team), I was already doing. I would have cut an arm for Winnie; I would have given her my entire brain if that's what it took. But there was no way out of this. She was already dying.

I had never known heartbreak like this. I had never known profound despair. I had had my share of difficulties and deep emotional pain, but this unlocked a level of darkness I had never known and never thought I would. I wanted to escape myself, to go back in time and do whatever it took to fix this before it was too late. I wanted Winnie so badly and that was the one thing I couldn't have. That feeling of "there is nothing you can do or could have done" consumed me beyond my expectation. You would think it would consume me more if there had been something I could do or could have done. But the reckoning with the powerlessness of life broke me in a million pieces. I was nothing. I was meaningless, senseless. This was life and life happened and it had happened to me like it happened to many. I was not special.

Someone explained it so accurately, I'll copy it: you look left and right and make sure there are no cars when you cross the street and then an airplane crashes on top of you. You might think, okay I'll look up next time. But it's an airplane. You couldn't have run away fast enough, not crossing wouldn't have saved you. So, after I broke down and howled and cried and questioned everything I had done during my pregnancy, I made a decision. I might be nothing, but Winnie is everything and I will make her life and whatever time we have left count. I will empower myself through this and I will live this time with love. Because at the end of the day, none of this pain would exist without love. None of my suffering would materialize if not for love. And I couldn't possibly wish that love away. If she is love, so will I.

That realization gave me enough strength to cherish the last two weeks I had with her on earth. To experience every kick and punch with the greatest joy. To truly live every day like the last. To prepare for her birth and death. To come up with little meaningful things and to create a beautiful funeral. And now that she is gone and I'm often surrounded by pain, I try to channel that strength to honor her life the best way I can. To be a mom for her from here. To make her proud.

I don't always make it. The despair is still in me – don't kid yourself. I think it probably always will be. I can do anything, but I couldn't save my daughter. She was taken from me despite my best efforts. It's a kind of pain that hits me out of nowhere. At the parking lot before I'm to proctor a graduate exam, in the supermarket when I remember I can have ham again, when a sweet little girl asks to pet my dog. It takes me back all the way. I might be doing the most badass thing ever and all of a sudden, I'm nothing because I could do nothing.

But in between moments of nothingness, I exist and work on channeling the unimaginable strength my daughter gifted me with. That strength hasn't found the light at the end of the tunnel. It hasn't made its way out of grief. And it hasn't found happiness in the way people can when they overcome a challenge because this isn't a challenge to overcome. But that strength wrote this book, took a PhD exam two weeks postpartum, reached out to other grieving parents, got out of the house to work out, and never stopped living. And more than anything, that strength continued to carry love, to be love, and to spread love. For me, not becoming afraid of love because of the pain I know it can cause, has been the biggest win. Instead, I love fiercely and fully because I know how fleeting love before grief can be.

Chapter 2: What's Normal to Feel

Grief researchers have largely abandoned the idea of stages. This idea was developed many years ago by researcher Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who observed and spoke with people at the end of life, something important but not easily generalizable. What research has found instead is something messier and more honest: grief has no pattern, no predictable arc, no moment when you're supposed to be better. What most bereaved parents describe (and what we experienced) is closer to weather than to a road. Because grief doesn't move in a straight line. It doesn't move in any line at all.

Grief is like a fog that surrounds you completely: there are moments when it won't let you see a hand in front of your face, and other times the fog thins out, lifts, and you see more clearly. You never know when the sun is going to shine; you know it exists, but you're wrapped in dense fog, and in some moments, in a very dense, dark fog.

Mom Teresa: Some days are better than others. Some days feel more bearable than others. I've found that as much as I tried to find a routine and understand when I would be crying and not, nothing followed a pattern. Some nights I cried myself to sleep and woke up crying the next morning. Some nights I kissed Winnie's pictures and fell asleep quietly loving her. And some days I woke up feeling less heavy and then in the middle of the day, for no apparent reason, I'd burst out crying. Sometimes it was singing happy birthday and thinking I'd never sing it to her. Other times it was a frustrating situation that made me remember all I had lost. And other times it was just a bird or a flower that made me long so hard my heart hurt. I'll never stop missing Winnie. I'll never stop loving my kids in heaven. Every day, I'm slowly learning how to live life while carrying that.

As moms (dads too but moms have no physical choice in this) we're asked (sometimes demanded) to be brave all the time. Some hate medical procedures, others unwanted touch, others struggle with uncertainty, others with physical pain, everyone has something they've had to be very brave about during pregnancy. Because pregnancy can be beautiful and it can also be extremely hard and demanding on our bodies and mental health. When we find out we're losing a child, whether we have more or less time to prepare, we are again asked to be brave, to be strong for our child. And we do it because we're moms and we are/were their home and what more can we do? We find strength where strength didn't seem to exist and we fight for them. Some of us fight for whatever chance at a life they may still have, others fight to write the last part of their story on earth. We do it for them and we do it with them.

Then we break. There are many ways to break, and we don't all work the same way. But it's common to break after you've had to be so strong. I remember the days after Winnie's

funeral I lost it completely and I kept telling myself, “how can you not continue to be brave?” I was extraordinarily brave through every stage of Winnie's last days on earth and then death. And suddenly I felt broken, fragile, and unexcited to meet who I was becoming. I didn’t want to go home because home was Winnie. It was the place I decorated and planned for her, the place where I struggled through the first trimester with her and for her, and the place where I was looking forward to seeing her grow. I loved our home, I loved being home, but now home wasn’t home and I didn’t know if I could ever feel at home again.

Our apartment is not big. It used to feel cozy and warm and a nice place to rest. But when I first got home it felt absolutely huge because there was a Winnie-sized void that would never be filled. It felt like the wrong kind of home. I wanted it to feel welcoming and cozy, like when I hugged my mom at the airport after being away for months. Instead, it felt like hugging my mother goodbye at the airport: the same arms, the same warmth, but with leaving underneath it. It took a while for it to feel like a sweet home. And it still burns my heart to call Winnie’s room something other than that.

I wanted to honor Winnie by being happy because she brought so much joy to my life. I wanted to celebrate her life by building a big life here. But I was finding that all really hard because as much as she is love, that love carries tremendous grief. Everything felt pointless to me after the funeral. I loved my job and my research but now my PhD felt meaningless. I had a specific vision of finishing my dissertation and receiving my diploma with Winnie in my arms: I wrote my papers thinking about it when she was in my belly. I was so excited about that moment. But that future is now lost. Everything I had imagined for my future had her in it. And when that future collapsed, I found myself questioning futures I'd never thought to question, including the ones that are supposed to come after this life. I remember envying my grandparents because they were closer to death than I was and as much as I didn’t want to take my life, I longed for my reunion with Winnie and Rainy. And then I also questioned general things a lot: *is there even heaven, or will I be utterly disappointed when I die? Does Winnie love me? Can a baby love you back? Can she feel the love I’m sending from earth? Does she miss us? I don’t want her to miss us without me being able to comfort her…* Grief and confusion go hand in hand. I had to learn to sit with those odd feelings.

At this stage, you'll probably find yourself remembering what you went through over and over, needing to tell it and retell it, remembering new details, needing to write, draw, or simply talk. All of this is important and helps the process, because you're trying to process something that happened (and is still happening) to you that is simply too big. Repeating, revisiting, dreaming, having nightmares, it's all okay, let it happen. Look for someone who will listen and hold what you're feeling. Maybe the people closest to you, who lived through

this part of the storm with you, maybe someone else. Don't keep all of this to yourself, because all of this is enormous, it's too much.

Friendly Advice

Mom Teresa: I'm not sure I had strategies. What I had were instincts I learned to trust.

The first one was protecting my peace. I stopped scrolling on Instagram the moment I realized it was hurting me more than helping me. I stopped reading other bereaved parents' accounts when I noticed they weren't bringing me comfort but pulling me into fear and searching for evidence that things would be okay next time. They were bringing me into an endless spiral. While some people find solidarity in those stories, I found anxiety. And I learned that knowing the difference - knowing what feeds you and what drains you - is survival.

The second instinct was to let the feelings come without trying to understand them or time them. Anything could trigger my grief: a bird, a flower, singing happy birthday to someone else. There was no pattern and no warning, but for a while I kept looking for one as if grief was something I could schedule or predict. It's not. Eventually I stopped trying to manage it and started just letting it move through me when it came. That didn't make it hurt less. But it stopped costing me the extra energy of resistance. And I know this isn't easy for everyone because I have always struggled with this "sit with the feeling." I'm solution oriented; I fix things and just like I couldn't "fix" my daughter's life, I also couldn't fix my way through grief.

The third instinct was to find small occupational therapy tasks that I used to enjoy doing. And no, it wasn't as rational as it sounds. I simply did what I felt like I could manage doing. I wrote a lot to Winnie. Not about her, but to her. Letters about what I was doing, what I was feeling, things she had done in my belly and places we had taken her that I wanted to remember. I sewed her a blanket with her name on it. I made jewelry to give to my nurses. I tended to the orchid that bloomed the night she was born. These things weren't therapeutic exercises I read about somewhere. They were just ways of staying close to her, of keeping my hands in conversation with my love for her when words weren't enough.

And I kept talking about her and singing to her - for a while in my belly and then I just sang to the sky. I refused to let grief become silence. Winnie is not a subject I protect people from. She is my daughter and saying her name out loud is one of the few things that still feels like the right size for how much she matters.

None of this is a prescription. What worked for me may not be what works for you. But if there is anything I'd offer, it's this: pay attention to what brings you closer to yourself and to your child and move toward that. Pay attention to what pulls you away from both and give yourself permission to step back, without guilt, without explanation. Your grief is not a problem to be solved. It is love with nowhere to go *yet*. Let it go somewhere.

Chapter 3: The Day Of

Birth

It's difficult to write this section because besides being emotionally challenging, it's also highly uncertain. We don't know your situation or what will happen. Many factors influence this: where you live, how old you are, if you've given birth before, your baby's gestational age, how much time in advance you have before your baby is born, etc. There is no secret recipe to ace birth. Instead of telling you what to do and how to do it, we've decided to share our experience. We'll tell you what worked and what didn't and we'll ask you questions so you can reflect on it and decide what's best for you.

Pelvic Floor Therapy

Mom Teresa: I was very supported by my husband and parents (my siblings as well but they didn't have birthing experience). But I had a significant gap of knowledge: vaginal birth. My mom had three c-sections (though she labored for 24 hours with my brother, he came out through her belly) and I had planned on having a c-section. I won't go into the reasons for this, but it was my choice, I had made it a long time ago and I never thought I'd have to deliver vaginally. I know some say women know how to give birth instinctively and that may be true for some women (lucky them) but it wasn't true at all for me and if it wasn't for my preparation, it would have been a lot harder.

I knew there were many resources for this, but my daughter was dying and I didn't know how long I had. I certainly didn't have enough time to go through birthing classes, and I also really didn't want to join one of those classes with excited parents when I was hurting so deeply inside. What really (cannot emphasize with enough "reallys") helped me was pelvic floor therapy. I only had time for two sessions, but they prepared me incredibly well. I learned how to stretch and open my hips in the days before birth and during it, I learned how to breathe through it, I learned how to relax rather than push, and I learned how to labor. This last part was particularly important to me. I wanted to hold my daughter, and I knew I had limited time with her, so I wanted to make sure she came out as smoothly and quickly as possible. Pelvic floor therapy taught me the importance of walking, how to use a Yoga ball (I gave birth in a public hospital and they had a few), what to do if there was no Yoga ball, and if I had to lay down (I did because I got dizzy 8 hours in), how to lay upright so gravity would help. They also taught me how to breathe through contractions. And I took the time to ask a million questions. (Thank you, Sara, for your patience)

I was so prepared after two sessions that the hospital nurses were impressed about how fast and well I was progressing. But I won't sugar coat it: it was the hardest physical thing I've ever done. And I know not all bodies are the same, so it might be easy for you or even harder and more deliberating than it was for me. I simply allowed my body to do what it needed (including laying down when I started throwing up from the pain), but knowing how to guide my body through labor was incredibly empowering in a process where I had felt totally powerless.

Pelvic physical therapy can be expensive, and not everyone can afford it. Fortunately, there are many online resources you can use for free to learn how to breathe and what to do during childbirth. Make sure to verify that the people you are following are certified for that.

Reflection Points:

- Do you know how to give birth?
- Do you know what you would like it to look like?
- Who do you want next to you?
- Do you know the hospital's protocol?

Prepare What You Want

Mom Teresa: Think about what you want and need. What's right for you and your partner. You didn't get to choose not to hear your baby cry but there are smaller choices you can make now. In our experience, when labor starts your head can get quite murky and make it harder to choose what you really want. If you can, take time to think through what you'd like, what matters most to you, what you feel called to do.

For me it was fundamental to hug her (which meant I could not be sedated), for my husband, it was very important our daughter was baptized. Our church chaplain told us baptism is for the living, so we – the living – could do that once she was born, if we wanted to. My mom made sure BAPTISM was written on her list and I made sure to add a post-it to Winnie's blanket in case I'd forget. And I forgot. When my mom came in the room, after I gave birth, I was overwhelmed by love for my daughter. I was taking in every inch of her and engraving it in my brain. And I forgot to baptize her. But my mom pulled out her list on her phone and reminded me. We baptized Winnie Lobo Aires.

Your hospital will have specific rules on what and how much you should/can bring. But we've found that we missed many items we expected to have there. Here are the essential items that helped us at the hospital:

- **Sports bras:** I'm tiny and I was given a one size-fits-all gown that did not cover me at all times. Having a sports bra allowed me to walk around the halls and move without worrying about being naked in public.
- **A sweater:** I brought my husbands' sweater and sprayed a ton of his cologne on it; this was incredibly comforting when they took Winnie from my chest and I was left with an empty womb. It also helped when I got cold after birth and during the night.
- **Postpartum diapers or whatever pads you think will help:** my hospital gave me underwear made of a net and a ginormous pad to put on it. The two things didn't stick together and I often found myself with my pad out while walking. You want to go home in something comfortable, so choose these wisely and don't assume the hospital will provide them for you. If they do, great :)
- **Slippers or flipflops:** anything you can walk in and shower in.
- **Phone charger with a long cord**
- **Snacks you like:** I really struggled with hospital food because I have a lot of food intolerances they could not accommodate. You do not want to be hungry while in labor or after it.
- **Water bottle:** you need to hydrate during and after labor.
- **Stool softener:** your hospital might give it to you or they might not. This was a big struggle for me after birth because feces can make your perineum very sore.
- **Milk suppressants:** depending on how much time in advance you know you'll give birth (for some it's a surprise, some know their babies have passed), asking your doctor to prescribe milk suppressants goes a long way. My milk came in fully a few hours after birth. This was physically and emotionally painful and something I was totally unprepared for. I had to go back to the hospital after being discharged and get a second dose and I had milk for over two weeks.
- **Comfortable going home outfit**
- **Your phone and your partners' phone:** this might seem obvious but if you want pictures of your baby, make sure to bring them to the birthing suite (if allowed). Having digital photos of our Winnie has helped us and comforted us tremendously.
- **Trash (or plastic) bags!** This one will surprise you, but when it came time for me to be transferred to the birthing suite, my mom was left with a million things we had brought and were spread out in my bed. She had to rush through the outside corridors of the hospital to get to me and wasn't allowed to leave our things behind. If you've backed in 5 minutes in a hotel, you know nothing that once fit in your bag fits in it again. My mom had to use a dirty trash bag to get our things and run to me. I really wish I had packed two or three trash bags to make her life easier.
- **Earplugs:** if you're on a mixed maternity ward, this can matter a lot (other babies crying nearby). You can also be in a non-maternity ward but have a snoring roommate (or one screaming in pain) while you're trying to sleep.

- **Nipple pads/cream:** even with suppressants requested immediately, there's often a window before they take effect where things leak or ache. My milk came in after I left the hospital (I left 14 hours after birth). If you're staying longer, this might be worth considering.
- **Whatever you want for your baby:** you might not want to bring anything, you might not want to see your baby. But if you do, some things helped us bring peace to our hearts.
    - **Blanket**: Once we knew Winnie was dying, we got her a pink blanket and I sewed her name on it. I hadn't sewn in 14 years, and I was never particularly good at it. But it was all I could do for my baby, and it made me happy to be able to. I did it while she kicked and I hold those memories dear. She wore this blanket in my arms and then we cut a tiny piece of it to keep. I used that piece to put under a see-through rock in a ring.
    - **Hat**: I had bought a Winnie the Pooh hat a long time ago and I was so excited to put it on her when she was born (Winnie was always Winnie, boy or girl). So, I brought the hat anyway.
    - **Lovey**: I had bought Winnie the cutest bunny lovey when the doctor suspected she was a girl. I had dreamed of seeing her sleep with it as a baby and a toddler. I brought it to the hospital and gave it to her when she was born. I then bought myself a matching lovey that was a bit bigger for me to sleep with. This lovey has brought me a lot of comfort at night and in the early morning when I used to feel her most in my belly.
    - **Socks**: some people want socks for their babies. I didn't do this but it's another option.

Optional:

- **A book or magazine:** to be honest, I never opened the book I brought, I was in active labor the entire time and I was discharged 14 hours later. But I think it's important to bring something to keep you occupied in case labor takes longer or pauses or if you must stay in the hospital longer than you expected.
- **Compression socks:** I loved having mine and being able to walk around and labor without swollen legs and feet. But this is not for everyone, if you can, talk to your care team about it. I brought mine even after I was told they'd be provided. Health workers are extremely overwhelmed with work so I've found it best not to assume they'll provide things and bring them myself.
- **Eye mask:** I always sleep with one so this was not optional for me.
- If your partner can stay with you, make sure they have toiletries, a change of clothes, their own snacks/water, and whatever else they may need.

- **A notebook:** I brought a notebook my husband had bought me a year before and I had started using to write to Winnie.
- **Psychological support:** Many hospitals have psychologists who specialize in grief and can help you. If they don't have any, or if that doesn't feel right for you, seek help outside the hospital. This is too difficult a time to go through on your own.
- **Contact for hospital social worker or chaplain**, if offered and if needed: most hospitals have people in place for this and in many countries, this is a right.
- **Dedicated box or pouch for keepsakes specifically:** I brought a special bag, and the hospital gave me a memory box.

Reflection Points:

- What's going to make you feel more physically comfortable, even if it seems like a small or silly thing right now?
- Is there something you want close to you (a smell, a fabric, an object) that connects you to someone or something outside this room?
- What does your partner need?
- Are there decisions about your baby you already know you want to make (seeing them, not seeing them, dressing them, not dressing them) that you can think through calmly now, instead of deciding in the moment, with no time?
- Do you want to bring something for your baby to wear or have with them?
- Do you want to keep something physical from this experience? If so, do you have somewhere to put it that isn't a trash bag?
- Is there someone you want present (or someone you need not to be)?
- If you forget something important in the moment (and you very likely will), who can hold the list for you?

Choosing to Hold (or not to hold) Your Baby

Mom Teresa: I had no doubt in my mind I wanted to hold my baby. I longed for Winnie and I needed to have her in my arms. There was never a question in my mind. But that's not for everyone. It can be difficult to see a baby that small, to not hear your baby cry when they are born, and to hold them for a few moments before they are taken away. This is something you should consider carefully, if you have time to prepare. Most places allow you to hold your baby. Make sure to voice your needs when it comes to this.

And if you decide one way ahead of time and feel differently in the moment, that's okay too. You're allowed to change your mind, and it doesn't mean you didn't know yourself

or didn't plan well. Plenty of parents who were certain they wouldn't hold their baby end up wanting to once they arrive, and plenty who planned to hold decide against it in the moment. Either way is right if it's what you need. I had decided not to see my baby before cremation, and I am happy I changed my mind when that moment came. Give yourself permission to do what feels right in the moment.

(If you don't want to read about my personal experience holding Winnie, skip ahead to the paragraph that starts with "I'm grateful beyond words' below.")

I cannot choose one moment as the most beautiful moment in my life because I've had many and it wouldn't be fair to the day I told my husband I was pregnant, the day we got married, the moment my parents and siblings found out, etc. But having Winnie in my arms is among those number one moments. I have never experienced anything as beautiful and peaceful as that. And as crazy as this sounds (because if you read below you'll learn I didn't get an epidural), I would labor and give birth all over again tomorrow if I got to hold her for one more minute.

Our Winnie came out sweet and kind. Her hands were folded under her chin, her face as peaceful as could be. We had seen her play with her hands like that during previous ultrasounds and I remember how excited my husband was to see that. He thought that was the cutest gesture ever. And she came out like that. She had her daddy's chubby cheeks, his nose and his mouth. A total photocopy of the person I chose to spend my life with. I remember lifting my head to see her and finding the most perfect human laying between my legs, on my bed. They clipped her cord right on my bed, put her on a blanket and gave her to me. My heart was full of light and love. I had never experienced anything as powerful and tender as that. I touched her little hands and put my finger between her left hand. I touched her lightly with my fingers, her skin was soft and smooth. I felt a sad happiness and profound serenity.

My mom came into the room shortly after I had her in my arms. I was so excited to show her my baby, her granddaughter. I think if anyone watched that scene, they wouldn't believe my daughter hadn't taken her first breath, I was just so happy and excited to hold my baby. She is perfect.

Granted, I had had time to prepare for the moment she'd come out and not cry. This wasn't a surprise to me. I had known she was dying. I think that made this moment easier on me. That, and the fact that I had never given birth before and didn't feel the absence of milestone objects and moments, like lack of the CTG monitor or a crib in the room.

Meeting Winnie will forever be engraved in my heart. My mom helped me put her in the pink blanket I had sewn her name on, and we gave her the stuffed animal we had bought her. She looked like an angel. My whole heart in a tiny human. My mom took a million photos – 121 to be exact – and these photos would become life savers as I processed everything and continue to remember my sweet Winnie girl. Today, I feel immensely proud to look at them and relive those sweet moments.

I was in and out of sleep because I had felt all the physical pain and her birth was an enormous relief from that at 2am. Every time I'd wake up, I'd ask for Winnie and see her in my arms, the sweetest sleep I ever had. I talked to her, I told her I'd spend the rest of my life missing her, that I would honor her memory, and that I'd tell her future siblings about her. We facetimed my husband who was with my dad and they got to meet her too. I was so very proud of my little piece of heaven. I had never even dreamed of a love so big it travelled through all the hospital walls and surrounded me in the sweetest peace. I had never felt so at peace.

(If you skipped ahead, this is where the personal story ends. Welcome back.)

I'm grateful beyond words for this moment. I didn't know I could feel deeply sad while also holding so much hope and peace for my girl in heaven. I understand there are many reasons why not everyone has this opportunity. I hope your birth is whatever brings you peace and comfort.

A note on photos: our hospital vowed they always took photos and kept them for a year and I signed all those consent forms. They asked me if I wanted them and I said yes to everything. Yes to the memory box and the photos and the holding. When it comes to things to keep, I think it helps to keep your options open. You never have to see the memory box or the photos if you don't want to, but you can't ask for them after your baby is gone. Even though I said yes to the photos and the hospital pamphlet specifically said they'd photograph our baby, the photo never came (I now know they had lost their camera that week). If you can, have someone take a photo (or several photos) so you have options later. When you're in the thick of birth, it's hard to think straight (I hallucinated after birth). Make sure you have someone guarantee those options for you. You might choose to delete the pictures a week later, but you'll get to make that decision. I've seen the hurt from not having the option and it's not something parents should have to deal with on top of everything else. If you're absolutely sure you don't want pictures, let them know ahead of time and at the time (if you can remember). I've also seen parents not like that someone other than them has photos of their babies.

Reflection Points:

- Do you think you'd regret holding them, or regret not holding them? Which feels heavier when you imagine looking back in a year?
- What specifically are you afraid of at this moment? How they'll look, how you'll react, that you won't be able to handle it? Is that something you can ask your care team about in advance, so you're not surprised?
- Is there a middle option you haven't considered (holding for just a few minutes, holding once they're wrapped, having someone else hold first, seeing without holding)?
- Who do you want in the room, and who do you not want there?
- If you do hold them, is there anything you want to do or say in that moment (sing, talk to them, say their name out loud) that you'd want to have thought about beforehand rather than decide in the moment?
- Do you want photos either way, and if so, who do you trust to take them?
- If your partner feels differently than you do about this, can you each make our own choice rather than needing to agree?
- What would make you feel, afterward, that you did right by them and by yourself?

Pain Killers and Other Drugs

This will depend on your hospital's protocols. But if your baby will have passed before they are born, you'll likely be offered more pain killers. How you manage your pain is up to you and you shouldn't feel bad either way. This process is difficult enough (physically and emotionally) and there is no need to make it harder. One thing to consider is how sedated you are comfortable to be. Unlike another birth in which your child will cry into your arms and you can get some rest and see them again a few hours later and every hour after that, in a situation like this, you will have limited time with your baby. There's no right or wrong here and people experience pain in very different ways. But, if you have time, you should consider what's right for you.

Mom Teresa: Do you know how you react to pain killers and light sedation? I know paracetamol doesn't work for me (it never has) and sedation knocks me out completely. For that reason, I advocated for myself and begged my nurses not to give me any sedatives. When they needed my body to relax a bit more so I could dilate further, they asked if they could give me something to make me sleepy and I only accepted half a dose. Not because I wanted to play hero, simply because I know from experience that light medicine has a huge effect on me and my number one goal that day was to be fully awake and aware to hold my daughter.

I explained this to my nurses and they were very understanding. My mom was also fundamental here. Because as much as I could advocate for myself in the beginning, when pain got tough, I could barely speak and she made sure everyone knew I wanted to be awake and present. She also made sure they knew my body is very much affected by sedation. And when the time came to hold my daughter and I was in and out of sleep for a bit, she helped me wake up, took pictures, and recorded those moments so I'd have them forever.

Will they offer an epidural? Most places do, but you should know sometimes it doesn't happen even if they offer it. I wanted an epidural and I said so from the minute I started laboring. I kept asking for it after. My hospital had told me I had the right to get an epidural but was unable to provide me with one. I've never experienced as much physical pain in my life as the hours before Winnie's birth and during it. I'm not saying that to scare you but I always find it annoying when people downplay what they've been through and I find out the hard way. So, here it is: it was horrible and I got through it. You will too.

I should say labor/birth offered something else too: a strange kind of relief. Grief has no edges. It's everywhere, all the time, with nothing solid to push against. Physical pain, as brutal as it was, had edges, a rhythm, a peak, something to brace for and get through. For those hours, my body screaming in pain gave my mind somewhere to go besides the unbearable fact of not seeing Winnie grow up. I'm not saying I wanted that pain, or that I'd choose it for its own sake. I'm saying that, for a little while, it gave me something finite to fight when everything else felt infinite and impossible to fight at all.

If your instinct runs the opposite way, if staying alert sounds unbearable rather than necessary, if what you want most is to be as numbed as possible, that's not avoidance, and it doesn't mean you love your baby any less. Some of us get through unbearable things by feeling everything as clearly as we can. Others get through it by feeling as little as possible, and just getting to the other side of the day is enough. Neither one is the braver choice. And if you don't get a say at all, if your body or the medical situation decides for you, that's not a failure either. However you get through it is how you get through it, and that's enough. If you can, discuss your options with your team. In my experience, no one wants to make you endure any more pain that the situation brings itself.

Reflection Points:

- Do you know how you typically respond to pain medication or sedation, from past experience?
- What matters more to you right now: staying as alert as possible, or minimizing physical pain as much as you can?

- If you had to guess, which would you regret more afterward: being too sedated to remember this clearly, or going through more pain than you needed to?
- Have you asked your care team what their specific protocols and timing cutoffs are, so you're not caught off guard?
- Who do you want in the room who can advocate for your wishes if you're not able to speak clearly at the moment?
- If things don't go the way you planned (the epidural doesn't happen in time, the medication doesn't work the way you expected), what would help you afterward, in processing that it didn't go as planned?

Post Partum

Mom Teresa: I hope this is not true for you, but I'm afraid you'll find that after birth, people tend to forget relatively quickly. Friends check in less and doctors are used to giving women 6 weeks to recover before they see them again. In many stillbirth cases, doctors don't even schedule post-partum appointments. I've read theories and research on the 6-week mark and whether that's still what doctors should do (that deserves its own chapter in a book or a whole book). But in any case, if you have a living baby in your arms, that appointment is likely the last thing on your mind. You're sleep deprived, taking care of feeding and diapers and cuddles and soothing. Your body is changing fast and your hormones are all over the place. But when your baby dies, you have all those physical and psychological changes without the baby. It might seem easier, but I've found it very hard to take care of myself, allow myself to rest and heal without a baby. Because it feels weird not to go about your life and it feels odd for other people that you are not resuming your life. People don't think about the fact that the 6-weeks is for baby AND mom. Don't push yourself. Your body was your baby's home. Be kind, your baby's home is recovering.

A few practical things:

- Book a postpartum appointment (if they don't schedule it for you, and don't assume they will).
- Talk to your care team before birth about what you can and can't do afterward. In my experience, there's little conversation about this when you don't have a baby with you, but not having your baby can tempt and even enable you to do a lot of things that normally wouldn't be a good idea (like going in the sea or a pool, jumping straight back into intense exercise, filling your time and your head with plans, etc.).
- If you have the chance to do pelvic floor therapy, take it. It can matter a lot for recovery, especially if you want to get pregnant again soon after.

- Give your body time. Time doesn't heal grief, but time does heal your body. Go slowly, give love to the body that was your baby's only home, and be patient with yourself.

Going Home

Mom Teresa: Nobody prepares you for the door. You'll have packed your bag, maybe someone will have cleaned the apartment, maybe someone will have filled the fridge, and none of it will matter the moment you step inside and feel the size of what's missing. I remember walking into our apartment and feeling how enormous it had become. It felt completely wrong, like it had reorganized itself around an absence while I was gone. I loved being home. Suddenly home was the hardest place to be.

I stayed with my parents during the first postpartum week. We had never prepared for postpartum, not in the in-depth way you might when you're in the third trimester. We both felt more comfortable having help and my parents had enough room for us. This was incredibly helpful when my milk came in full force (and I had no idea what to do) and it also provided substantial emotional support. But I know this is not for everyone.

There is no right way to go home. Some people need to walk straight into the room they had been preparing and cry in it until they can breathe again. Some people need to avoid it entirely for a while, door closed, not yet. Some people need every trace of baby things gone before they arrive; others would find that unbearable, like the house had already moved on without them. If you have someone who can ask you what you need before you get there, let them ask. If you don't know the answer, that's okay too. You're allowed to walk in, sit down, and do absolutely nothing for as long as nothing is all you have. Your body just did something enormous. You just lived through something that will take years to fully understand, and you might not understand it ever. The house can wait. The laundry can wait. Everything can wait except you.

Death

Mom Teresa: I don't think I'll live enough years to explain the depth of pain and grief that comes with your child's passing. I've always expressed myself better in writing, but this is the odd case in which I think pictures do a better job than words. My brother took a photo of me in the last moments of goodbye after the funeral, and nothing has ever captured my pain more than that photo. If anyone ever tells me I'm not a mom, I'm pulling up that photo. I sang Winnie's song (the one I sang every other day of my pregnancy) one more time while tears flooded my face and my little sister hugged me. I never wanted my little sister to go

through this. She was so excited about having a baby niece to play with. She had already scheduled specific days I needed help with Winnie after she was born. I wish I could take away the pain from deleting that from her calendar. I wish she never had to lose her innocence like this. And yet, there she was, embracing me in my time of need. Letting me know she was present and singing with me the song we dreamed of singing every night next to Winnie's crib.

No loss is like another, and I felt this in my skin during this pregnancy. We lost Winnie's twin brother Rainy at 7/8 weeks. My Oura ring had noticed something off with me three days prior. And suddenly my pregnancy symptoms had decreased. I knew something was off before I saw the blood in my underwear. I was very attuned to my body and I knew something wasn't okay. We didn't know we were expecting twins, but I knew I was miscarrying our baby. Even though people thought it was my anxiety speaking, we had confirmation at 9 weeks. Rainy hadn't made it, but he had existed and we had loved him. He was still our son. And this loss was different from Winnie's. It took me holding her to be able to express it without guilt. Rainy is just as much our child, but we didn't have as much time with him, we didn't plan as much for him, and we didn't get to see him and hold him. My mom said it better than I ever could: Rainy was an unfinished life project; Winnie was a whole life lost.

I never ever thought I could experience the depth of emotional pain that came with my daughter dying and still stand and still walk and still exist in the world as a person. I did it for her. I did it so she'd be proud from heaven. I did it for my husband who was hurting just as much. And I did it for my parents because I now know the price of losing a child. And I did it for myself so I could honor Winnie's life as much as possible.

I have felt desperate, desolate, profoundly sad, deeply grateful, in love with my daughter, and completely lost in life. I have felt better sometimes, more present in my life, and totally lost the next minute. I have felt fake in interactions with people where I tried to seem more put together than I was and I have felt embraced and cared for when given space to share my daughter with the world. More than anything (and my therapist would be damn proud to read this) I have felt capable of just feeling. Just sitting with the feeling, observing it and not doing anything to change it. Just experiencing the deep love I have for Winnie which now also manifests itself in profound grief and longing.

Give yourself grace. Hug yourself and your loved ones. Allow yourself to just be. Feelings will come and go anyway; I've simply found it easier to deal with them without fighting them. Sadness won't go away just because I want to. So, I welcome it, feel it, and let it go. Every feeling is an acknowledgment of Winnie's life and how much she means to us.

Funeral

Mom Teresa: Funerals are for the living, not for the dead. I've said this for a long time and I learned the truthfulness of this sentence when I took a class in college called "Death and Dying."

I believe in heaven and I believe your child will probably meet my twins. Whatever you believe in, funerals are rituals that serve to help us cope with something we cannot control: death. There is no right or wrong in these situations. Countries will have different rules about this, and you'll likely need to follow them. But the rest is yours to decide. If you want a funeral, do it. If it feels unbearable and not something which will help you, skip it. If you want a religious service, go for it. If you'd rather come up with your own thing, that works too. I'm sure your child just wants you to find a way to move through.

We chose to hold a funeral for Winnie and Rainy. We didn't have to, under Portuguese rules. But we were allowed to, and it felt like the right decision for us, even though it was an extremely hard one. That brings more decisions and logistics with it, and I want you to be ready for that. You have to choose between cremation and burial. If you cremate, where will you keep them? What kind of funeral or ceremony do you want? Who do you want there? What do you want to do or say?

Through all of this, please don't feel pressured to follow social rules. A widow is someone who loses a husband, an orphan is someone who loses their parents. There's no word for someone who loses a child, because it shouldn't happen. You shouldn't have to bury your children, but if you're reading this, you're part of the terrible club nobody wants to belong to. So choose what's right for you and your partner (and your living children, if that's the case). Don't give in to pressure to invite this or that person who won't help you heal. What do you want to get out of this? What would make it meaningful to you? Would you rather skip it all? Would that make you feel lighter?

We held a funeral for Winnie and Rainy. We invited the smaller of the village that would have helped raise them. We planned every detail with our priests. I decided to sing them a song committing them to Mary and my husband stood next to me during it. I chose to make keychains and necklaces for everyone who came. We invited our family to write them a letter which we keep in their memory box. This helped us cope. It helped us grieve. But it might not help you. Do what makes sense.

Side Notes: In Portugal, there is a subsidy for funerals, especially for those of minors. You have to pay the money upfront (and not everyone can), but you can be paid later. Your funeral home should be able to handle this. Ours did and we're incredibly grateful for all their

kindness in the process (they're called Caminho de Luz). In Portugal (maybe in other countries as well) the death certificate can be painful to receive, and I'd like to warn you about it. Because of complicated laws, if your child doesn't take a breath, they are not granted a juridical personality. That means you won't have an official document with their name. Their death certificate will say, "dead fetus of MOM's FIRST NAME and LAST NAME." This isn't something the funeral home can avoid. I didn't expect this to hurt as much as it did, but it burned through my soul to see those words and for no one to ask our baby's name. I made sure to tell everyone throughout the process so at least I got to put it out there in the world. I write it everywhere I can (for example, a coffee order). But it hurts not to have something official with her name on it.

Reflection Points:

- Do you want a funeral or ceremony at all or would skipping it feel like relief rather than something missing?
- What do you actually want to get out of this? Closure, a sense of ritual, just doing right by them?
- Cremation or burial? And if cremation, where do you want to keep them, or do you want to keep them at all?
- What kind of ceremony actually fits you? Religious, secular, something you invent yourselves?
- Who do you want there, and who do you not want there? And can you say no to someone without guilt?
- Is there a place that matters specifically to you (somewhere tied to them, to your families, to where you imagined raising them)?
- Is there something you want to do or say (a song, a letter, a prayer, a symbol) that feels like it's actually yours, not just expected of us?
- Do you want to give people something to hold onto afterward (a keepsake, a letter, a way to participate) or do you want this to stay entirely private?
- If you have other children, do you want them included, and in what way?
- Do you and your partner want to plan this together as one shared thing, or might each of you need something separate too?
- What does your country or region actually require legally, and what's genuinely left up to you once you know that?
- Is there a timeline you're working within (cremation logistics, religious requirements) that you need to ask about before you can decide anything else?

Chapter 4: The Body's Physical Grief

Mom Teresa: Sugarcoating aside, postpartum without a baby in your arms is a huge brain f*ck, honestly. I wish I had prettier words for it. But it's a hormone crash, possibly milk coming in, body changing quickly, and the one reason you're going through this (you wanted this baby) is gone. I remember crying so much the corners of my eyes started developing an eczema and a small vein in my eye burst. I also remember telling myself, "if postpartum moms go through the so-called 'baby blues' while holding a baby, there is no way I can stop crying right now if I don't even have my girl in my arms."

Postpartum takes a huge toll on your body. Add grief on top of that and you're about to discover a painful combination. I won't say the grief gets better (the postpartum hormones definitely do and that helps), but life gets bigger. And slowly but surely you have the ability to continue building a beautiful life and carrying this grief as another part of you and/your journey, however you want to see it.

There are two metaphors that I learned when we lost Winnie and that helped me move through and carry grief in a more manageable way: the glitter metaphor and the box metaphor. Grief is like glitter. In the beginning, it's absolutely everywhere: on your hands, in your hair, on every surface of your life. You can't eat without it. You can't sleep without it. You can't have a conversation without it getting into everything. And at some point, you start trying to tidy it up, because you have to function, because the world keeps moving, because you're exhausted. And for a while it seems like you've made progress. And then you move a piece of furniture. Or you find an old message. Or you hear a song in the supermarket and suddenly there it is: a tiny piece of glitter catching the light, and you're right back in it. That's not failure. That's just how glitter works. It doesn't disappear. It settles. It becomes part of the fabric of your life rather than the whole of it. And one day (not today, maybe not for a long time, but one day) you'll find a piece of it and instead of it only hurting, it will also remind you of love. Of who you love. Of who you are because of them and of that love. Maybe you'll smile in that moment and maybe you'll remember the glitter. I hope that moment brings you peace.

There's another way people describe how grief changes over time: a ball in a box. In the beginning, the ball is huge. It fills the whole box. Every time the box moves, the ball hits the pain button on the wall, constantly, unavoidably, relentlessly. Over time, the ball doesn't shrink because your child doesn't shrink and neither do the love and longing that they brought to your life. But the box gets bigger. Life grows around the grief. And the ball hits the pain button less often, not because it's gone, but because there's more room now. There are

whole stretches where it doesn't hit at all. And then it does, and it hurts just as much as it ever did. But those stretches of room get longer. That's what moving through looks like. You won't forget, in fact you might remember them every day and carry them everywhere with you. But the pain will be triggered less often. You will carry them with you into every bigger version of yourself you become.

Grief can often feel very abstract and up in the air, not only for those who experience it but for those who witness it. But grief becomes biological in the ways our bodies respond to it. So, what's actually happening in your body, right now? (You can skip ahead if the science isn't for you right now, but know this: what you're feeling is neurological, cardiovascular, and physical. It is not just in your head.)

What you are feeling is not just emotional. It is happening in your body, in your brain, in your nervous system. When you lose someone, your brain's threat system activates as if you are in physical danger. The amygdala (the part of the brain that processes threat and emotional response) goes into overdrive, while the prefrontal cortex, which normally regulates your emotions and helps you think clearly, loses some of its ability to do that job. Brain imaging research on bereaved people has shown that the amygdala shows significantly greater activation in response to death-related stimuli compared to non-bereaved controls, and that this amygdala activation correlates directly with the intensity of a person's grief (Fernández-Alcántara et al., 2020). This is why grief can make you irritable, rageful, or unable to concentrate in ways that feel completely out of character. It isn't weakness. It's your brain overwhelmed, with the regulating part temporarily outpaced by the alarm part.

Your body also floods with cortisol (the stress hormone) and sustained high cortisol further impairs memory and emotional regulation (Hopf et al., 2020). Neuroimaging research has shown that grief activates the same neural pathways as physical pain: when mothers who had lost an unborn child were shown images of babies, it produced activation in regions associated with physical pain and the maternal attachment network, not metaphorical pain, but the same circuits that fire when your body is actually hurt (Kersting, et al., 2009). The numbness many people experience, the feeling of being cut off, unable to feel anything at all, is also a physiological response, not a failure to grieve. When the system is overwhelmed beyond what it can process, the nervous system shifts into a protective shutdown (Hopf et al., 2020). It is the brain's circuit-breaker. It doesn't mean you don't care. It means your body is trying to protect you from being destroyed all at once.

Grief is also a cardiovascular event, an immune event, and a sleep event. Research found that the risk of a heart attack was elevated more than 21 times in the 24 hours following the death of a significant person (Mostofsky et al., 2012). Broken heart syndrome

(takotsubo cardiomyopathy, a transient weakening of the heart muscle triggered by emotional shock) is a documented medical condition, not a metaphor (Movahed et al., 2025). A systematic review found that bereaved people show higher levels of systemic inflammation, changes in immune cell function, and lower antibody response to vaccination compared to non-bereaved controls, meaning grief can literally lower your body's defenses (Knowles et al., 2019). Sleep is almost universally disrupted in bereavement, and higher grief intensity is associated with more frequent and severe sleep difficulty, which in turn makes grief harder to move through across the days and weeks that follow (Lancel et al., 2020).

All of this applies to both parents and anyone grieving with them. The physiological research on fathers and partners after perinatal loss specifically is limited (this is a gap in the science, not a gap in the reality) but what exists shows that bereaved parents, regardless of who carried the pregnancy, face elevated risks of ischemic heart disease and heart attack in the period after a loss, with the highest risk in the first week (Wei et al., 2021). Your body is not betraying you. It is responding exactly as it should to the most devastating thing it has ever been asked to carry. The pain is real, the exhaustion is real, the way your brain won't work the way it used to. All of it is real, and all of it makes sense. You are not falling apart. You are a person in the middle of something enormous, and your body is doing what bodies do: trying to keep you alive until you can breathe again.

For partners of the pregnant woman, this time comes with its own set of challenges. They are trying to be supportive often without knowing how to, they are experiencing their own kind of loss and grief, and the world recognizes their pain even less than it recognizes the mom’s. It can be hard to ask for time off when you don’t have a baby in your arms. I remember my husband struggling to take a medical leave after our doctor (who deserves an entire chapter in this book for the exceptional doctor she is to her patients, we call her Saint Dr. Margarida) concluded he shouldn’t be working in his state of mind. I was five days postpartum. I remember telling him, if our daughter Winnie was alive, she’d be five days old. You would never feel bad for being gone with a five-day old baby. But it was harder to remember that I have a physical five-day old wound and he had an emotional one too. A wound so deep you need time and care to move through it. In many countries you have a right to take that time off. This is not a favor the company is doing you. It is a physical, psychological, and medical need. Take it seriously.

DO NOT SKIP - Important note: Because grief activates all these systems at once (the stress response, the immune system, sleep, heart, and the brain's ability to regulate emotion), it takes real time for them to restabilize. This is not a mindset problem or a matter of trying harder or pushing through. The same cortisol that floods your body in acute grief is

the cortisol that impairs your hippocampus (the part of your brain responsible for memory and learning). The same amygdala overdrive that makes you emotionally volatile also makes it harder to concentrate, to hold a thought, to find a word you've known for years. This is why going back to work can feel not just hard but actively cruel, because you may sit down to do something you've done a thousand times and find that your brain simply won't cooperate. And that loss of competence, on top of everything else, can feel devastating. You haven't lost your mind. You haven't lost your abilities. You are running a system that is under extraordinary load, and some things must wait. Give yourself (and ask others to give you) the time and patience that any physical recovery would warrant. Because that is exactly what this is.

Chapter 5: Navigating Other People's Discomfort

Mom Teresa: I have found that people become even more uncomfortable hearing our story than hearing a story about someone whose living child (not baby) died. Perhaps it's just my experience but I have found that losing one's living child is quite rare and hard to relate to. It's easier to think it won't happen to you. But though stillbirth, perinatal loss, and miscarriage are not as common as birth, they are a lot more likely than child loss. And so, people freak out and try to find ways to tell themselves they are not next.

My grandmother lost my uncle in the third trimester. I remember hearing this story when I was young and when I got pregnant, I remember finding reasons for why that story didn't happen in modern medicine anymore. I too wanted to make sure there was some reason this wouldn't happen to me. So, I get it, I get the questions and the details, and the platitudes that serve as reassurance to them but not me. People are trying to cope with your loss, so it doesn't affect them or scare them. And that's human nature.

But it being human nature doesn't mean you have to put up with it all. I silenced many phone calls, responded to many texts with hearts and without words, and avoided certain places so I could respect my peace. You should do what feels right to you. If there is a time in life to be selfish, this is it. And honestly, I don't even like to call it selfish because it's totally fair to protect yourself and your space. Take your time and do what you need to do.

People's discomfort is about them, not you. People go quiet, change the subject, avoid you, or overcompensate with cheerfulness, not because they don't care but because your grief confronts them with something they can't fix and can't control, and most people are deeply uncomfortable with both of those things. You end up managing their awkwardness on top of your own pain, which is an invisible tax nobody talks about.

Then there's the "do I tell them or not" calculation. Every new interaction (a shop assistant, a colleague, a distant acquaintance) involves a split-second decision about whether to say anything, how much to say, whether you can handle their reaction right now. That's exhausting in a way that's hard to explain to someone who hasn't done it. You'll find what's right for you with time. There's no right or wrong, but the first few interactions will be painful.

Lack of acknowledgement comes with its own pain. We remember texting someone who could help with the funeral and them answering without acknowledging the pain of the situation and our loss. We also remember calling a different hospital to book a postpartum appointment and them not even acknowledging that this would be a different kind of

postpartum. Know that you are not alone in this and that people often don't mean any harm. It's their way of dealing (or not dealing) with something that stirs up a lot of pain for them.

And finally (though we know it's not finite), there might also be people who disappear. Not the ones who say the wrong thing, the ones who go silent because witnessing grief is too uncomfortable for them. That specific absence, from people you expected to show up, can be its own separate wound. Give yourself permission to exit. You don't owe anyone your story, your composure, or your energy in any given moment.

Things People Say and How to Protect Yourself from Them

Mom Teresa: You will hear things. Things that cut deeper than a paper, things that confuse you, things that make you want to laugh at how wildly off the mark they are, and things that will make you feel more alone than if the person had said nothing at all. And you will probably smile and nod, because that's what most of us do - because we're exhausted, because we don't have the energy to educate someone in that moment, because we know they mean well even when it doesn't land that way. I smiled and nodded through every single one of these. But here's what I actually thought. I'm sharing this not so you can use my comebacks (though you're welcome to) but so that when it happens to you, and it will, you know that your reaction makes complete sense. You're not being uncharitable. You're not being ungrateful. You're a parent who just lost a child, hearing something that doesn't come close to touching what you're actually going through. That's not on you.

So, here's my list and here's my brain, unfiltered, because you deserve at least one place where nobody's pretending any of this is okay:

At least you know you can get pregnant. Right, I can, my body is incredible. Yet Winnie's gone and that's all I wanted and can think of.

It didn't take you long to get pregnant so I'm sure you can do it again. Sure, if we don't have one of many possible genetic incompatibilities that may have led to this. If we can both think about nine months of anxiety not knowing if our baby will take a breath. Also, study up friends, getting pregnant once does not guarantee future success. Biology is much more unpredictable than that, you should get a fertility check and learn more about it.

God knows what He does. OR God has a plan. God's crying with me right now, holding Winnie in His arms and trying to comfort me. He did not want this to happen. If your God wanted this to happen, then I'm very sorry you chose that God.

God needed to call her to Him. Ah, ya think? I understand life's unpredictability is much too painful to deal with and face. I understand you may not be able to hold that unpredictability in your brain. I also understand you're freaked out by my situation and want to assure yourself it would never happen to you. But it might. And if it does, I won't tell you God called your baby because He would never. My God is good. Also, God gave us free will. Free will comes with a price, nature does its thing and God doesn't get to intervene when it gets tough. If He did, would there be wars? Kay, bye.

Everything happens for a reason. You're right. This reason was a celular problem that did not allow our daughter Winnie to take her first breath. Sometimes the reason can be people's stupidity like your choice of words.

I'm glad at least you hadn't bonded. Oh, my Lord, have you ever been pregnant? Your whole body changes in a second and it keeps changing. And then they start kicking and punching and they start responding to your voice and your husband's voice. And you plan everything for them, everything around them. And then you hold them in your arms. If that's not bonding to you, I don't know what is, but you don't get to decide I didn't bond.

It was better this way. It's horrible to raise kids with diseases. In what world was it better this way? In what world am I supposed to bury my child while wearing postpartum diapers? Better would be holding her every day, better would be seeing her grow, better would be having her be mean to me as a teenager. This is not better. It's life and it's damn hard.

You'll try again soon. Sure, we might. Will that erase our dead children? Will it bring them back? Hell no. After you break a foot, it gets better one day, but is it ever the same foot that's never been broken? Get an Xray and you'll see.

She's in a better place. A better place than her mom's arms? A better place than being loved on by her dad? Also, heaven might be a better place than earth but I'm still here.

You need to be strong for your wife. (I didn't get this one, my husband did and it has toxic masculinity written all over it. I don't need him to be strong for me. I don't need him not to break. We got married so we could break together, if needed, not so I'd have a crutch.)

Time heals all wounds. If time healed all wounds, you could cut off your leg and it would grow back. Because you might think it's a stupid comparison, but I formed a new organ (called placenta) that fully sustained my daughter until it no longer could. I literally have a void in my womb and even if I have another baby, that void will never be filled. That void is

called Winnie. This one we got a lot. But time doesn't heal all wounds, not when it comes to grief. Life grows larger with grief, but that grief doesn't go away.

You have your whole life ahead of you. That's the problem. As dark as it may sound, in the first days/weeks after Winnie died that's all I could think of. How can I live a whole life before seeing her again? Like I wish I was 80 and would see her in 10 years. But at 28 being told I had my whole life ahead of me to long for my daughter and not be able to see her was a lot, to say the least.

It makes me sick just thinking about it. Great, thanks. Imagine how it makes *me* feel. And thank you for reminding me I should be thinking about your pain.

You'll be a mom/dad one day. Okay, this one I did answer directly. I know most people don't mean to hurt but this one cuts through your skin and gets into your bone. I AM A MOM. I will always be their mom. I hope to have living children I can raise on earth, but I am a mom to two children in heaven. Their names are Rainy and Winnie.

I know this section got a little spicy. I won't apologize for it. I spent a lot of energy in those early days smiling at things that broke me a little more each time. If this book gives you even one moment of feeling like someone gets it, like your reaction was valid and you're not alone in having it, then it was worth writing every word. People are trying. Most of them love you and have no idea what to do with that love right now. And you don't have to make it easier for them. You don't have to show gratitude for something that hurt you. You don't have to correct them in the moment, and you don't have to forgive them on any timeline either. What you have to do is protect yourself, your energy, your grief, your space to feel what you feel without managing anyone else's discomfort on top of it. That's not selfish. That's survival. And right now, survival is enough.

Chapter 6: Naming What Was Lost

Naming Your Baby

Do you want to name your baby? Have you named your baby? What does naming your baby mean to you? For some parents the name is everything, it makes the baby real to other people, gives them something to say out loud. For others, naming feels too final, or too painful, or they simply didn't get the chance to decide. There's also the question of *whose* name it is: joint decision, one parent's call, a name picked before any of this happened. Once again, there is no right answer. But there is one that is right for you. What does that look like?

Mom Teresa: My husband and I had decided even before I got pregnant that we would choose cute English names for our babies during the pregnancy (because I had had a long list for the longest time) and give them a name in Spanish (my husband is Colombian) once our baby was born. We decided this for two main reasons: 1) we had very few Spanish names we agreed on, and I loved the idea of using my English list, even if unofficially, 2) we didn't want people's many opinions when we told them the name and were still pregnant. We figured we'd get less comments if our baby was already registered. So, Winnie was Winnie since I found out I was pregnant. Boy or girl, our baby was Winnie. The name became absolutely perfect once we found out she was a girl because though the name works for both, it was on my girl list. Throughout the entire pregnancy I had said Winnie would always be our baby's nickname and less serious name. If she had been born alive, I'm sure her Spanish name would have worked eventually, but she was always Winnie for us. Having a name helped us tremendously and being able to say her name out loud in public is still one of my favorite experiences. When people ask for my babies' names, my heart swims in joy. Having a name also helped family and friends pray for and to someone specifically.

When we found out we were losing Rainy we didn't know we were expecting twins. But you could see both embryos on the ultrasound for weeks. And I had experienced it as a loss because I was sure I was miscarrying, I just didn't know we had two babies in there. We named Rainy because rainbow babies are those that come after loss and we figured Rainy could empower their sibling to stay strong in my belly. We wanted our baby to have a name, and we wanted to tell Winnie all about Rainy. We never thought they'd be together a little over four months later.

But having a name might not be the right choice for you. It can make what's happening more real because it helps give your baby an identity. You might not want to do that and that's okay. Whichever feels right to you is what you should do. Not naming your baby

doesn't mean you loved them any less, or that this mattered any less to you. For some parents, a name makes the loss heavier to carry, not lighter. It can feel like attaching a name pins down everything you imagined for that life, everything that won't happen now, in a way that's too much to hold right after. For others, there simply wasn't time, or clarity, or agreement, or the loss happened too early for a name to have ever entered the picture. None of that makes your baby less real, less yours, or less loved. You don't owe anyone a name to prove your grief is valid.

Reflection Points:

- Do you want to name your baby? Not "should you," what do *you* actually want?
- If you want to name them, who gets a say: is this a joint decision, or does one of you feel more strongly?
- Did you already have a name in mind, from before any of this happened?
- Does that name still feel right, or does it feel like it belongs to a different version of this story?
- What would having a name give you? Does it make this more real in a way that helps, or in a way that hurts?
- What would *not* naming them protect you from, if anything?
- Do you want other people to know your baby's name, or is it only for you and your partner?
- Are you making this choice because it's what you want, or because you think it's what you're supposed to do?
- If you don't name them now, is that a closed door, or can you revisit it later? And do you need to decide that today?

Naming the Loss Itself

People reach for one word when something like this happens: *loss*. "I'm so sorry for your loss." It's said with good intentions, and most of the time it's the only word people have, because most people have never had to learn the others.

But miscarriage, stillbirth, neonatal death, medical interruption, and the loss of a twin in a multiple pregnancy are not the same experience. They happen at different points, they're treated differently by hospitals and by law, they come with different physical realities, and they carry different weight in how (or whether) the world around you recognizes them. A loss that happens in early pregnancy is often treated as something almost private, something you're expected to move past quietly. A loss that happens after birth, where you held your

baby, see their face, know their weight, is acknowledged more visibly, even though both are the loss of your child.

This means you might find yourself doing something exhausting: explaining, or correcting, or translating your own grief into language other people can understand. You might find that one of your losses gets sympathy cards and casseroles, and the other gets silence, even from people who know.

(Skip ahead until the next section if my experience of losing Rainy is hard to read.)

Mom Teresa: I lost two babies. Rainy, my son, was called a vanishing twin but he didn't vanish as much as people think. We saw him at 7 weeks as an embryo next to his sister. At 9 weeks Rainy was still there but no longer growing. But we saw him. He existed. So, when people, with the best of intentions, told me to move on because vanishing twins are common and this was "just a pregnancy that didn't develop" (god forbid calling him an embryo), I nodded but rolled my eyes internally. I have a son I didn't get to hold but who I felt as my hormones rose, who I hoped for and dreamed of, and who I saw in ultrasounds.

But with Rainy there was no body to hold, no goodbye, no particular moment. It was a quiet grief that I carried throughout my pregnancy, but which was "frowned upon" when mentioned. People found it odd I wanted to mention Winnie had a twin and I promised myself I'd tell her all about him and honor her brother's life.

Winnie was born at six months, held in my arms, named, blanketed, baptized, and kissed many times. We know her face and have 121 pictures of her. She looks exactly like my husband and she is the more respected loss of the two in our society. People tell me I have an angel in heaven, and I know I have two. But I also feel these two losses differently. I imagined a whole life for Winnie; I couldn't wait to see what she would do and choose and who she'd become. I felt and saw her kick for weeks. I held my baby tight and felt incredibly proud to be her mom. I didn't have that physical experience and bonding experience with Rainy but they're both mine. Two losses, in the same pregnancy, that look nothing alike.

I've had to decide, more than once, whether both deserve the word "loss." Whether Rainy's loss is smaller because there was less to hold onto, or whether it's its own thing entirely, with its own grief that doesn't need to compete with Winnie's. But I am *their* mom. Both are my babies even though I only got to physically experience one of them. And still, I miss Winnie more because that physical connection, the morning and night kicking interactions, make my heart skip a beat when I hear her name. I love them both.

You don't owe anyone the distinction. You can use "loss" for both, or different words for each, or words nobody else would recognize as grief language at all. The only person who needs your language to make sense is you.

Naming Yourself

Am I a mother? A father? How many children do I have? This is the one that follows people around for years. The small-talk question that has no safe answer.

There's no single way people answer it. Some round down, because explaining feels heavier than the silence that follows a half-truth. Some tell the full story every time, even to strangers, because erasing their child feels worse than an awkward pause. Some change their answer depending on who's asking: a stranger in a checkout line gets a different version than a lost friend. None of these is wrong. The question doesn't go away, but how you meet it can change from one day, one person, even one mood, to the next.

Mom Teresa: I remember once asking my parents: what will you say if an old friend stops you on the street and asks if you're grandparents yet? *(Winnie and Rainy are my parents' first grandchildren.)* There's no right answer for them either (though I'd be lying if I said one answer doesn't hurt more than the other), but life and society will often force them to choose one anyway.

I still don't know what my siblings say if someone asks if they're an uncle or an aunt, and maybe I haven't asked because I'm afraid their answer will hurt. But I've decided not to ask, because each of them is also grieving, and I'm okay with however that looks for them. If it helps them to say "no," that's alright. I know they love Winnie and Rainy deeply in their hearts.

My experience is different from theirs. I am a mother, and when asked, I say I have two kids in heaven (if I ever have children on earth, I'll say how many I have on earth and how many in heaven). This works for me. It may make people uncomfortable (I've seen it happen, actually) but it's not my job to make them feel more comfortable about all that was taken from me. So yes, I'm a mom. And a proud one at that.

You get to decide your own answer, and it can change depending on who's asking and how much you want to say that day.

Naming What Else was Lost

Mom Teresa: Shortly after we started dating, my husband and I were thinking about where we'd take our kids, how we wanted to raise them, what we would say if this or that thing happened. We wanted to raise happy, resilient, and kind children. We studied how to balance gender roles and raise strong independent children that were not held back by societal flaws. We dreamed of places we would take them to. We discussed names before we even started trying. Our kids were always part of our plan.

So naturally, from the moment I found out I was pregnant (at 3 weeks and 5 days, thank you Oura ring), my husband and I had a million ideas and dreams. And so did our family and friends. Everyone was excited by our baby's arrival. Most people were supporting and comforting when Rainy died (though we still got a million "meant to be/happens often" comments). And most everyone felt reassured that one twin dying had to mean the other fraternal twin would make it. In what world would we lose two children?

When your child dies so does their future and, in a way, so does *your* future. Because your future had them in it. Whether you had made proper plans like maternity/paternity leave and booked actual trips with them or you had simply dreamed such a happy existence on earth, your baby's future was something you could see and grasp. And suddenly it wasn't. When you lose a baby, you lose the future you'd built around them, the parent you were going to become, the version of your family you'd already started living in your head. It's more abstract than losing the baby, but it hurts too. This grief is not only about a person who has gone from earth but about a whole imagined life, about a million milestones that will never happen, and about the uncertainty of what happens then.

Nobody sends a card for the future you lost. There's no ritual for grieving a maternity leave you'll never take, a school run you'll never do, a version of yourself you were already becoming. But you might feel that grief just as deeply, I know I have/do. Because that grief is just as real and it doesn't need anyone else's recognition to count. You're allowed to mourn the whole imagined life, not just the baby, because for you they were never separate.

Chapter 7: When to Seek More Help

Most of what you're feeling right now doesn't need fixing. It needs time, and people who can witness it without flinching. Though it may feel like one, grief this big is not a malfunction, it's the appropriate response to something unsurvivable happening to you anyway. So, before anything else, I want to be clear: this section is not suggesting that what you're feeling is wrong, or too much, or in need of intervention. It's not. But sometimes grief becomes something more than grief. Sometimes the weight of it stops you from functioning in ways that aren't getting better, or it turns into something that has a name beyond loss (trauma, depression, anxiety) that's taken on a life of its own. And sometimes you just need more support than the people who love you are equipped to give, not because they're failing you, but because this is bigger than what love alone can carry.

Mom Teresa: I had a therapist before we lost Winnie and Rainy, which meant I didn't have to find one in the middle of the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I already had someone who knew me, who I trusted, and who I could call. I know how lucky that was. Not everyone has that and finding the right person when you're already underwater is genuinely hard. But it's worth it. And if you didn't have a therapist before this, know that it can take more than one try to find someone right for you (it's a bit like dating, the first one isn't always the one).

Besides the therapy I already did on my own, the hospital also offered us joint sessions: a therapist for me and my husband together, separate from our individual support. I wasn't sure what to expect from that, but what it gave us was something I hadn't even known we needed: a space to see where the other person was. Grief doesn't move at the same pace for two people, even two people who loved the same baby. Those sessions helped us meet each other where we were, instead of assuming we were in the same place and getting it wrong. The sessions also helped us grieve because the therapist was specifically trained on grief and offered a lot of support for this time of our lives.

A few things worth knowing before you start looking:

- A grief therapist and a perinatal loss specialist are not the same thing. Someone who works with loss in general may not have experience with pregnancy and infant loss specifically. It's worth asking, before you commit to anyone, whether they have worked with parents who have lost babies. It's not an unreasonable question and a good therapist won't be offended by it.
- Couples support is its own thing too, separate from individual therapy, and worth considering even if both of you are doing okay individually, because "okay individually" and "okay together in this" aren't always the same. And though many

couples report feeling closer and stronger together after this, grief this big takes a considerable toll on a marriage and should be cared for.
- If someone (who is licensed and able to do this work) suggests medication, that's not a failure. Trauma and grief can do things to your body and your brain that therapy alone can't always reach. Both can be true at the same time.

Reflection Points:

- How are you really?
- Are you functioning, not fine, but functioning? If not, is that changing at all, even slowly?
- Are there specific symptoms that feel different from grief (panic, flashbacks, intrusive images from the birth, numbness) you can't shift?
- Do you have someone you trust to talk to, who can actually hold this? If not, is that something you want to change?
- Have you and your partner checked in with each other lately, not about logistics, but about where you actually are?
- If you already have a therapist, have you told them the full weight of this?
- Are you ready to look for support, or do you need a little more time first? And is that okay?
- What would "more help" actually look like for you? Is it talking to someone, or is it something else (a support group, other parents who have been through this, something less formal)?

A Few More Resources:

Books

- *It's OK That You're Not OK* by Megan Devine. Written by a therapist who also experienced devastating personal loss; challenges the idea that grief should be overcome, and instead proposes building a life alongside it rather than past it. Not perinatal-specific but widely considered one of the most honest grief books available, and very aligned with your book's whole ethos.
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- *The Baby Loss Guide* by Zoë Clark-Coates. Practical and compassionate support with a day-by-day resource to navigate the path of grief.
- *Still A Mum: A Story Of Modern Grief And Life After Loss* by Meagan Donaldson. About the loss of Meagan's daughter, Violet, at 23 weeks.

Podcasts

- **Grief Works**: Julia Samuel. Hosted by a grief psychotherapist with over twenty-five years of experience working with the bereaved; features stories from those who have experienced great love and loss.
- **Still A Part of Us**: a place where moms and dads can share the birth story of their child who was stillborn or who died in infancy.
- **Dad Still Standing**: specifically for dads who have suffered baby loss.
- **The Worst Girl Gang Ever**: focused on miscarriage and baby loss; also has a companion book.

Online support (in English or Spanish)

- **Postpartum Support International (PSI)**: offers free virtual perinatal loss peer grief support groups for parents who have experienced stillbirth or early infant loss, led by trained peer facilitators. Virtual so accessible from anywhere.
- **Star Legacy Foundation**: virtual grief support groups for family members who have experienced pregnancy or infant loss.

Apps:

- Natal by Nancy Anderson: has a wide range of different exercises for post-partum recovery and pelvic floor recovery.
- The Vagina Whisperer: offers a broad range of pelvic floor content.
- Sybil: specifically for the care of mothers who have lost their babies with many resources inside.

Funeral Home: We can only recommend the one that helped us (after we contacted many). It's called Caminho de Luz (in Lisbon, Portugal), and they were extremely attentive and professional throughout the entire process.

Chapter 8: How Long This Lasts and How People Outside this Forget It

In case no one has told you this directly, let us say this: the world is going to keep moving long before you're ready for it to. The people around you will return to normal life in days. Some in hours. Not necessarily because they don't care (some of them genuinely do), but because their lives didn't stop. Yours did. They are not grieving. You are. That's one of the most disorienting things about grief: the gap between what happened inside you and the pace of everything outside.

There is no correct timeline for these losses. There is no week by which you should be "over it." And you won't be, not because you're broken, but because that's not how this works. You don't move on. Moving on implies leaving something behind, and you're not leaving anything behind. You're carrying it forward with you, and learning, slowly, how to carry it without it crushing you every single moment. That's different. It’s called moving through.

You carry grief because you carry love. It's not more complicated than that, and at the same time it's the most complicated thing in the world. You don't stop loving someone just because you don't see them every day, or because you stopped seeing them. Have you ever heard someone ask, "do you still love your grandmother?" just because she died twenty years ago? Love doesn't have an expiration date. Our society can recognize this, and so it doesn't ask inconvenient questions like that. But it's harder to recognize that grief works the same way. Grief is the other side of love. It doesn't have an expiration date, because it will keep going with you for as long as you keep loving the person who left. Maybe this idea is harder for our society because, on one hand, we grow up avoiding pain, and on the other hand, grief has such a visibly painful initial period that it's easy to believe it ends after that. But don't forget that love also has one or several periods of intensity, and it doesn't disappear after them: first romantic encounters, your brother defending you without thinking twice, your best friend showing up at your door unannounced on the worst day of your life, your father dropping everything to make it to your presentation. These moments make you feel more love, but you don’t stop loving when the moment ends. Grief works that way too.

And grief is as universal as love: everyone, sooner or later, carries grief, because everyone, sooner or later, loses someone they love. Just like love, grief doesn't weigh the same for everyone, and it isn't the same in every loss. Some loves are bigger than others. So are some griefs. That, too, is moving through: continuing to love with no expiration date.

Moving through comes in waves. Some you can see coming, like the due date, the first Mother's/Father's Day, the moment someone else announces a pregnancy. Others catch you completely by surprise: months later, in a supermarket, in a meeting, on an ordinary Tuesday when nothing special happened, and somehow that makes it worse. Like the ocean – vast, immense, non-linear – never fully still, love and grief keep moving inside us long after the surface looks calm. Then, suddenly, a wave comes and you feel the pain and longing and sad happiness again. The wave doesn't mean you're moving backward. It means you're human, and that this loss is real, and your body and your brain haven't forgotten it, even when everything around you acts like you should have forgotten by now.

What makes it harder is that the people around you often don't know this (or they forget it). The colleague who sent a kind message the first week and then never mentioned it again isn't being cruel. They've just moved on while you are moving through. The friend who checks in less as the months go by isn't abandoning you. They genuinely think you're probably doing better. People tend to assume that time means healing, in a straight line, at a pace they can observe. It doesn't work like that. Some of the hardest moments come later, when the support has thinned out and the world has decided you should be fine.

You don't have to be fine on other people's schedule. You don't owe anyone a recovery arc that makes them comfortable. What you can do (if it helps) is manage your own expectations of other people rather than waiting for them to get it right. Most of them won't. Not because they're bad people, but because they don't know what they don't know. The sections of this book written for your support system are partly an attempt to fix that. But they can only read it if someone puts it in their hands. Don't be afraid to.

Going Back to Work and Deciding What People Get to Know

At some point, you'll go back to work. Or you won't, for a while. Or you'll work from home in a way that lets you cry between meetings and nobody has to know. All of these are valid. There's no right answer about when or how, only what you can manage, which will change week to week and sometimes day to day.

What does matter is that you go back on your terms as much as possible, not on a timeline that suits everyone else's discomfort with your absence. If you can, think about what you want before you go back. Not what you think is reasonable, not what you think people can handle, but what would *actually* make it survivable for you. Do you want people to acknowledge what happened, or do you want to walk in and have it be a normal day? Do you want one person at work who knows everything, so you don't have to explain yourself from

scratch every time? Do you want people to leave you completely alone, or does the distraction of normal work conversation help?

You're allowed to want any of those things (or some we didn't write about). And you're allowed to tell people what you want. You don't owe anyone details. You don't owe anyone an explanation of your grief or your timeline or why you're not okay yet. What you're doing when you send that message isn't asking for permission. You're setting terms. There's a difference.

Mom Teresa: Exactly two weeks after I gave birth to our Winnie, I was doing a PhD annual assessment. I felt utterly broken inside and out, I thought I looked like I had seen death (and I had in fact), and I was barely making it through the days. I was given the option and advised to delay this assessment. It would have been fine for my PhD. But to me, what made sense at the time, was to have something, *anything,* move in my life. I wanted to do this and honor Winnie, who I am sure would have grown up to be a strong independent woman. I didn't need to do it to honor her, not doing it wouldn't have been a dishonor either. But I felt like that was what worked for me. And so, I voiced my needs and my annual assessment took place anyway.

I should say a few things helped here: 1) I had prepared what I was presenting and saying before we found out Winnie was dying. That means the cognitive toll my grief was taking on me wasn't relevant for the preparation, only for what I would say. 2) This was online so I didn't have to chitchat with anyone in the halls, think about what pants would fit and still look professional, and I could completely melt down the minute the meeting ended. That was the only work thing I did that month. The takeaway here isn't to force you back to work but to have you think about your needs and to make you voice them, so you protect your peace and your space.

Remote work, if you have access to it, can be genuinely useful in this period - not as hiding, but as control. Control over your face, your tears, your space, your ability to step away for ten minutes without anyone watching, and control over the many questions and comments people may have. The commute alone can be depleting when you're this raw. If you can work from home some or all of the time, it's worth asking for, even if you've never asked before. This is a legitimate reason.

Another useful thing you can do – if you have the capacity for it, and not everyone does, and that's fine – is send a message before you come back. An email, a message to your manager, something written rather than spoken so you don't have to hold it together while saying it out loud. You can say what happened, at whatever level of detail you choose. You

can say what you need. You can explicitly ask people not to ask you questions. You can ask for specific things: being left off certain projects, having a private space when you need it, not being CCed on announcements about babies or pregnancies for a while, whatever it is. Whatever works for *you.*

Some days work will be a relief. Something to do, something that requires your brain to be somewhere specific, something that isn't grief for a few hours. Let it be that when it is. And other days it will be completely unmanageable, and you'll need to leave, or cancel, or sit in the bathroom or in your car for longer than is strictly professional. That's allowed too.

The people you work with will mostly not know what to do with you. Some will say the wrong thing. Some will say nothing, which often feels worse. A few will get it right, and those people are worth keeping close. But most of them are going to be awkward and imperfect and occasionally accidentally awful, and you're going to have to decide, repeatedly, how much energy you have to deal with that on any given day. Sometimes you'll have none. You don't owe anyone details, but you can choose to give them on your terms.

Reflection Points:

- Are you going back because you're ready, or because you feel like you should? Is there any way to buy yourself more time if you need it?
- What is the one thing you most need from your workplace right now?
- Is there one person at work you trust enough to be honest with?
- What's the thing you most don't want to have to deal with — and can you ask for it to be removed, even temporarily?
- Do you want people to mention what happened, or pretend it didn't — and have you told anyone which one?
- What would make a bad day at work survivable rather than devastating?

Chapter 9: Supporting Your Living Children

Grandma Margarida: If you have living children, your heart, your whole self, and your time will certainly be divided. Your living children can be part of the solution, but at certain moments they'll also be part of the problem. How do you tell them? How do you react in front of them? How do you answer if two questions come up? What if a thousand come up? Where do you find the strength to laugh and to cry? To move forward and to pause?

It's okay if all of this happens, and if at the same time you don't know how to manage so much all at once. What used to feel organized in your life is now chaos. The simple routine of your other children now runs straight into your capacity to function. If you don't have the strength for yourself, how are you supposed to have it for them?

Ask for help! Look for someone who can take them out, who can support them and, in doing so, support you too. Children live through these moments very differently from adults. Every child lives it differently, and if you have several children, each one is probably on their own path through it. The science on childhood grief confirms what you've probably already felt in your body: what protects a child most in moments like this isn't you having the right answer for everything - it's having an adult they trust available to them, and feeling safe, physically and emotionally. So, asking for help isn't failing as a parent. It's often the most effective way to protect your children.

I'd suggest paying attention to each of them, in their own way, and not forgetting yourself. Answer each child's questions, but don't explain more than they're asking to know. And remember that age changes everything. Up to age three, a child doesn't yet have a concept of "forever:" the child feels the absence but doesn't understand it as permanent and is comforted more by routine and being held than by any explanation. Between four and six, magical thinking sets in: the child may believe death is reversible or silently fear that it happened because of something they did, or that you could also die at any moment. This is why, as much as it hurts, it's better to say "died" than "went to sleep" or "became a little star." Euphemisms, said with all the love in the world, can leave a child afraid to fall asleep, or waiting on a return that never comes. Between seven and ten, the child already understands that death is permanent and will ask very concrete questions (what happened, what happens to the body, among others) and this is the stage, more than any other, where it's worth sticking to the rule of answering only what's actually asked. From around ten or eleven onward, understanding starts to resemble an adult's, and it's common for them to want to take part in rituals like the funeral: ask them what they want, rather than deciding for them.

The details of a death, a funeral, where the body goes, etc. can be calming at one age and terrifying at another. If you're unsure how to handle it, look for a child psychologist and tell them a bit about your child, so they can help you find the right way to talk to each one. Two essential points: don't give details they haven't asked for and remember that young

children hold the world of reason and the world of imagination in their heads at the same time, and both live there just fine, side by side. And if you notice the sadness isn't lifting (if the child stops eating or sleeping normally for weeks, regresses into behaviors they'd already outgrown, or a change sets in and doesn't ease with time) don't wait. That's a sign to seek specialized support, not only when you yourself have doubts.

Let your children go back to their routines and try to use the moments when they're not around to be fully present with your own feelings, and with your partner's (with whoever has lived and is living this pain alongside you). When irritation and impatience show up, remember that you're not impatient with the other person, you're impatient with life, and with the cruelty of what you're feeling.

Love and give your whole self, body and soul, to the children you have on earth and, together, celebrate the children who are in heaven!

Chapter 10: Honoring Your Children in Heaven

You might not believe in heaven or afterlife. You might have your own version of where your baby went. Heaven is our version and it doesn't have to be yours. But it was impossible for us to title this section "honoring your dead children" so we used our version of this. In reading this, replace heaven with whatever makes sense to you.

Surprise, surprise, there is no right way to do this either. Honoring a child you didn't get to raise is something you figure out as you go, often without a map, often by accident. You find yourself doing something that helps and you realize that's what it was, that's your version of this. Nobody hands you a list. And even if they did, the things that help one person might feel hollow or wrong to another.

Mom Teresa: What follows are some of the ways people find to carry their children forward. Not prescriptions. Not things you should do. Just a range of what's possible, so you can recognize what might be yours.

Objects and keepsakes. Some people need something physical to hold, not instead of their child, but as a way of keeping them tangible in the world. This might be hospital keepsakes: footprints, a lock of hair, the blanket they were wrapped in. It might be something you make or commission (jewelry, art, something that incorporates a piece of what existed). It might be a fireproof box, a dedicated drawer, a shelf where things live together rather than scattered in a drawer somewhere. It might even be a stuffed animal like the one they would have had. The object itself matters less than what it holds for you.

Photographs and visible presence. Keeping your child visible (in your home, in your phone, in the places you inhabit daily) can be a quiet act of insistence. This was very important to me, because it said: this happened, my daughter existed, and I'm not pretending otherwise. But I didn't have other living children to consider when doing this. And though this brought me a lot of comfort, that is not true for everyone. Some people prefer to keep it private and look at photos only when they need to. Some people put up photos immediately. Others need time before they can look. Some keep them private; others want them where anyone who enters the house can see them. There's no correct version of visible.

Rituals and marked dates. Due dates. Birthdays. The day you found out. The day you said goodbye. Some of these days will find you whether you prepare for them or not. Creating a small ritual for those days (something you do, somewhere you go, something you say) can give the grief somewhere to land instead of just hitting you. It doesn't need to be elaborate. It just needs to be intentional.

Using their name. Saying their name out loud, especially in public, is one of the most quietly radical things you can do. It insists on their existence in a world that will often try to quietly erase it. You don't have to explain yourself every time you say it. You can just say it. I have loved doing this and I cried when our church prayed for Winnie and Rainy using their names without us having asked for it. I cried of joy and of grief because they were acknowledging my children in public. But this is not for everyone. Some babies didn't have names and their parents preferred to leave it that way. Some parents say the names in their heads but do not want to say them out loud. This really is the time where you do you and nothing could be more appropriate than that.

Future acts in their name. Sometimes honoring looks like something that doesn't exist yet (a scholarship, a donation, a cause, something you'll do someday in their name). These aren't about replacing what was lost. They're about letting your child's existence mean something in the world beyond your grief. You don't have to know yet what that looks like. The intention is enough for now.

The small everyday things. Not everything is a keepsake or a ritual. Sometimes honoring is doing things that you think would have made them proud or doing them in their memory. I found myself buying happy colors for her and almost never wearing black. I also kept singing the songs I sang when she was still in my belly. I sang them happily and I sang them crying. But I sang them anyway. For me, it's about carrying them in the ordinary days, not just the marked ones. And doing so, if and how it brings you comfort.

I have photos of Winnie and me pregnant on my bedroom wall. We have a photo of me holding her in the hospital in our living room, because this was a proud and happy moment for me and I want it to be where our family gathers. I have a ring I wear that holds a piece of her blanket under the stone. I have a fireproof, waterproof case for her things, because even now, something in me needs to know they're protected. My husband carries something too, in his own way. I bought myself more pink clothes after she was born. And I'm writing this book. That's also honoring. That's her being the reason something exists in the world that might help someone else get through what I'm getting through. If I ever create a scholarship, it will be in her name. I don't know when. But I know I will.

You'll find your own version of this. It might look nothing like mine. It might be quieter or louder, more private or more public, more focused on objects or on acts or on language. You might do one thing or twenty things. You might do something that makes no sense to anyone else and makes complete sense to you. That's the right one. The only question worth asking is: does this help me carry them forward? If yes, that's enough.

Reflection Points:

- Is there something you're already doing (even something small) that you haven't recognized as honoring yet?
- Is there something you want to do but haven't let yourself yet? What's in the way?
- Is there a date coming up that you haven't prepared for? What might make it survivable, or even meaningful?
- Is there someone in your life who could share a ritual with you, if you wanted that, or do you need this to be private?
- What would it mean to you for your child to have a presence in the world beyond your grief?

Chapter 11: The Future

Nobody tells you that grief has a future tense or that the future has a past tense. That at some point, while you're still in the middle of surviving what happened, you'll also have to start reckoning with what comes next. The due date. Other people's babies. Whether you'll try again. None of it asks your permission before it arrives.

The Due Date

Your due date will come. And the world will not know to mark it. The people who sent flowers in the first week will have moved on because their calendars don't have the date yours does. You might wake up that day and feel it before you even remember why. Your body often knows before your brain does.

Mom Teresa: I haven't reached mine yet as I write this. I don't know exactly what it will feel like. But I know it's coming, and I know I'll feel it, and I think naming that – before it arrives, while I'm still on this side of it – is worth something. Because if you're reading this before your due date, I want you to know that day is allowed to be hard. You're allowed to mark it however you need to: a ritual, a meal, a place you go, a day you take entirely for yourself. Or nothing at all, if nothing is what you can manage. The world won't stop. You're allowed to anyway.

Other People's Pregnancies

This one is sustained and invisible and nobody prepares you for how long it lasts. A friend announces her pregnancy. Someone in your group chat posts an ultrasound. You get invited to a baby shower. And you love these people (you genuinely do) and something in you goes very quiet and very far away, and then you feel guilty for going quiet, and then you're managing your guilt on top of your grief on top of trying to be happy for someone who deserves your happiness.

Mom Teresa: I stopped scrolling Instagram early. Not forever, just until I could. I gave myself permission to not attend things I couldn't attend, to mute people without explanation, to be happy for someone from a distance when being happy for them up close was more than I had. That was how I survived. You don't have to show up for every announcement with your whole heart when your whole heart is already somewhere else. Give what you can and protect the rest without guilt.

One thing that helped me was telling people directly how I wanted to handle it. I posted on Instagram asking my friends not to hide their children or their joy from me, that seeing their babies didn't break me, that I could hold their happiness while holding my own grief, and that protecting me from their lives wasn't what I needed. That was true for me. It might not be true for you, or it might be true some days and not others. But the point is I got to say it, and saying it meant I stopped dreading what my friends and family might assume and it means they stopped tiptoeing around me not knowing what I wanted.

Still, several interactions with friends' babies and with pregnant friends squeezed my heart tightly. I had friends who were going to have babies around the same time as me, and following their pregnancies was happy and hard at once. I was so glad they weren't living through what I was, and at the same time I wished I could have lived what they got to live. I remember the joy of getting to hold a friend's baby and being grateful she'd opened that door for me. I also remember the ache of knowing Winnie would never reach that size and weigh that much. Grief is a constant duality.

You're allowed to tell people. If there's something you need from the people around you (more space, less space, the photos, not the photos, say the name, don't make a big thing of it), you're allowed to tell them. People almost follow your lead when you give them one. And doing so can help you stop carrying the invisible weight of wondering what they're assuming, and they stop tiptoeing around you not knowing what you need. One honest sentence from you can do more than months of them trying to guess right.

Future Pregnancy

Mom Teresa: I can't write this section from the other side because I'm not there yet and we still have a long way to go (because of our specific situation). That waiting is its own kind of hard. I can't even get to the fear of being pregnant again because I'm still waiting to know what being pregnant again would mean.

What I can tell you is that the wanting and the terror tend to arrive together, and neither one cancels the other out. You can desperately want another baby and be absolutely terrified of another pregnancy at the same time; terrified of the hope, terrified of your body, terrified of the nine months of not knowing. That's not a contradiction. That's what this does to you. And if you're waiting, like I am, for an answer before you can even begin to think about next steps - that limbo is real and it's exhausting and you're allowed to say so.

I think trying again or choosing not to try both take a lot of courage and love. If you've decided to stop trying, I'm sending you a tight hug, and I hope you find whatever future

you're building toward warms your heart. If you've decided to try again, I'm sending you a lot of strength, and I can already imagine the duality of the months ahead.

Dear parent,

We don't know where you are right now as you finish reading this. We don't know if you're days out or months out, if you're in the thick of it or just starting to find your footing. What I know is that you're still here, which means you've already done something incredibly hard. And you've lost someone incredibly big. You've carried love in your heart and in your womb and you've had to let that love fly. You've had a baby or you're about to have one. You are a parent. Now and forever.

If no one has ever told you, we will: you don't have to be okay. You don't have to be moving through it at any particular pace. You just have to keep going, in whatever way that looks like for you today. Your child was here. You loved them. You carried them. And you did the hardest thing a parent can do: you watched them go. You have been incredibly brave, not because you wanted to but because you had to. We wish you didn't have to; we wish life had turned out with us holding our babies. We didn't have those choices, but we did choose to carry them until the very last moment possible and to love them forever. We can now choose to honor them, make them proud, and make life big and beautiful.

Some days honoring them will feel like the most natural thing in the world. Some days it will feel impossible, and you'll just be trying to get through to the next hour. Both are true. Both count. We wrote this while missing Winnie and Rainy every single day — some days with peace, some days with a grief so heavy we couldn't see past it. If you're in the heavy days right now, we wrote this for exactly you. We hope you find peace and comfort and that you find how to carry your grief.

Part II: For the Support System

It also takes a village to grieve a child. If you are reading this, someone has chosen you to be part of their village. We won't sugar coat it: it's going to be difficult and painful and honorable all at once. Your role in this process is fundamental to these parents (and their living children, if that's the case).

We wrote this part because after going through this experience we have learned two things: 1) it's incredibly difficult to understand if you haven't gone through it and very easy to say the wrong thing. 2) People are empathetic in these situations and willing to learn but most don't know what to do or say. That's normal. We wish no one had to go through this situation, but if you're here, you want to learn and we thank you for it.

A parents' support system in this situation is tremendously important, and you will fill that role now. Make sure to take care of yourself too and find help, if you feel the need. Situations like these can take a great toll on support systems and you shouldn't do it alone.

It's okay to not understand what they are going through and how they are choosing to cope with it. It's not your job to get it. If months ago these parents bought a very ugly car that fit their budget and made them really happy, you probably shouldn't say anything either. You let them enjoy their car and keep your thoughts to yourself. This situation is nothing like buying a car but it is very personal. It is incredibly challenging to cope with. So, unless these parents are putting their lives or others' lives at risk, keeping your thoughts about your process to yourself is the best course of action. They chose you because they think you can support them. Unless they asked for your opinion, your role in this situation is to support their choices the best you can. But their choices are theirs to make.

Why are we making such a big deal out of this? Because we have experienced it and seen countless others experience the painful isolation that comes with these processes. The thing you said because you think helps might help YOU cope, but it might hurt them further. It's crucial to understand what they need and what they don't. Perhaps your role in this is to look after their living child, perhaps it is to feed their pet, perhaps your role is simply to cook. Maybe these parents want you to accompany them to the funeral or the cremation or to help you prepare the ritual that makes the most sense to them. Your role is mainly to be selfless in this situation and adjust to their needs. They have trusted you enough to send you this pdf, make sure you help meet their needs in this situation. We understand you might also have needs in this situation and that is why we have dedicated a section to how you can get your own support system. But right now, that support should not come from these parents. So, sit

with them, listen to them, read their texts carefully, and genuinely ask “what can I do to help?” And then do what they ask. We provided a list of things they might need help with. In case they don’t know how to answer, you can offer them this list and ask them what they might need.

Before they get home (immediate):

- Clean out the fridge (tragedy often lingers in food left forgotten and gone bad in the fridge)
- Stock the fridge before they get home
- Wash the bed linens before they get home
- Water the plants
- Take care of the pets
- Break the news to your shared circle of friends or family
- Contact funeral homes (if applicable)
- Manage notifications and social media (mute pregnancy apps, hide or archive old posts, pause friends' pregnancy announcements on their phone, if asked)
- (if and only if they want this) put away the baby's things before they get home

In the days and weeks that follow (ongoing):

- Cook home-cooked meals so they can eat easily (post-partum meals are essential)
- Leave necessary groceries at the door without letting yourself in uninvited (they love you, but right now they may need to protect their space)
- Pick up/drop off their living children at school
- Plan something fun to entertain their living children (this gives the parents room to cry and grieve together, and also to handle the logistics that need handling)
- Run errands for them
- Coordinate messages from people asking about them
- Be the single point of contact for updates, so they don't have to repeat the news to every person who asks (this can blur together with "coordinating messages," but it's worth naming explicitly as its own role - a lot of people don't think to offer for this specifically)
- Handle bureaucracy on their behalf, if authorized (you may need power of attorney drawn up by a lawyer or notary) - things like the death certificate, insurance companies, submitting parental leave paperwork at work. This is brutal administrative work for them to have to do while crying.
- Contact their employer to sort out leave, so they don't have to do it themselves
- Help return or cancel baby-related purchases (crib, stroller, registry, prep classes)
- Drive them to follow-up medical appointments, so they don't have to drive themselves afterward

- Bring household supplies beyond food (toilet paper, cleaning products, toiletries are often forgotten because everyone thinks of food)

Chapter 1: What it Means to Be a Support System

Grandma Margarida: I'll start by telling you how my experience as a support system began. When the storm fell on me, I felt myself being dragged into a river where the water was rushing at a mad speed. I needed to grab onto a bank, onto any piece of driftwood, I needed answers to the thousands of questions pushing me down toward the bottom of the river. Just one answer would have been enough. This book would have been an enormous help to me. Maybe for you it's nothing more than a small piece of driftwood to breathe on before being pushed back down toward the bottom of the river, but just breathing already helps. In seconds I went from a radiant light into a terrifying storm!

As soon as Teresa and her husband got pregnant, I told them I would be wherever they needed me, to whatever degree and in whatever size they wanted. I confess I never, ever imagined the scale of what I was saying, the size of the commitment I was making. My role was sweet, it was pink, it was blue, it was light. And in a second I no longer knew what it was, but one thing I did know: my role would be whatever it took to reduce even a single drop of my daughter's and my son-in-law's suffering. Everything within my reach, even things that felt like nothing. Before walking into the hospital, on the day of the birth, I heard from a doctor friend the exact thing I most needed to hear: "Margarida, you can do this!" I can do this! I repeated it to myself. I don't know what exactly, but I can do this, because everything I didn't want had already happened.

Even with all my training in clinical psychology, I didn't understand at first that my mind had no room left to be clear, to hold onto strategic thought, and after learning that Winnie was dying, I went and gave a training session. A three-hour training to a wonderful group, a training given in the middle of a river where the water was rushing at enormous speed and I could barely keep my head above it. Those three hours felt like three days! And at the same time, I wished those three hours wouldn't end, that they wouldn't carry me back to the river where I now had to swim in the middle of an enormous storm.

I learned that what Teresa and her husband needed most was my presence and my embrace. Not words, just the certainty that together we would keep going, and step into the center of the storm without the faintest idea of what that would look like.

When I realized that the baby had died, that her body couldn't hold on any longer, I steadied myself by listening to Teresa sing the lullaby she had sung to Winnie her whole life. I, too, was rocked in a river that was now even fuller, because my tears were filling it too. I realized that perhaps the hardest moment I had lived until then was arriving: the birth of my little granddaughter. I had been given the honor of standing beside my daughter while my

husband stood beside our son-in-law. Winnie's parents had decided it that way, and I, almost without realizing it, was destined to rock my dear granddaughter without hearing a single cry, without a blink of her eyes, without a movement of her hand. That was how the most dramatic moment of my life unfolded - and it brought me a peace I never imagined. It was the moment when together, mother and grandmother of Winnie, we grasped the full size of the tragedy, the pain, the grief. We joined a video call with her father and grandfather, and together we cried and held our dear little girl. Teresa spoke, whispered the whole world into her daughter's ear, held her, kissed her, and fell asleep with her little girl in her arms, woke again and fell back asleep in a sleep that seemed like it didn't want to end. I felt so complete, I felt like a grandmother for the first time. Winnie had just given me something no one could ever take away: I was now, from that moment on, a grandmother. I took so many photographs of little Winnie, and if I could go back I would have taken even more, because each one is now a relic, the one image I replay a thousand times over.

The next moment was perhaps the loneliest moment I have ever lived. The nurse took Winnie from her mother's arms, Teresa sank into the deepest sleep that pain could give her, and I was left there, at 4 in the morning, alone, simply alone. No clinical experience, no knowledge, could have prepared me for that moment. I cried without any control, without any restraint, without knowing how to stop. That moment was immense, and at the same time it was so entirely mine, maybe the only moment that belonged only to me in that whole river of torment. A wild peace was washing over me, and it felt so at odds with the river I was in. My granddaughter was now carrying me in her arms, asking me to help her carry her mother, and that's what I've done, to this day. I try, at all costs, to carry out the mission little Winnie asked of me. "Grandma Margarida, stay with me in my parents' heart." My love, I will do my best so that we always live there together, I feel your presence so clearly, so close.

Chapter 2: What Grief is Doing to Their Bodies and What That Means For You

You may have noticed things that are hard to explain. They can't find words mid-sentence. They forget things you told them an hour ago. They snap at something small and then fall apart about something else entirely. They seem fine one moment and completely unreachable the next. This isn't personality. This isn't them handling it badly. This is their brain and body under a load that most of us will never fully understand from the outside and knowing what's happening can change how you show up for them.

Grief is not just emotional. It is neurological, cardiovascular, and physical. When someone experiences a loss like this, the brain's threat system activates as if the body is in physical danger. The amygdala (the part of the brain that processes threat and emotional response) goes into overdrive, while the prefrontal cortex, which normally handles emotional regulation, focus, and clear thinking, loses some of its ability to do its job (Fernández-Alcántara et al., 2020). The body floods with cortisol, the stress hormone, which further impairs memory and the ability to regulate emotion (Hopf et al., 2020). Neuroimaging research has shown that grief activates the same neural pathways as physical pain, not as a metaphor, but literally the same circuits (Kersting et al., 2009). And when the system becomes too overwhelmed to process what's happening, it can shift into a kind of protective shutdown which is what emotional numbness is. Not absence of feeling. The circuit-breaker tripping to prevent total overload.

Grief also affects the heart, the immune system, and sleep. Research has found that the risk of a heart attack is elevated more than 21 times in the 24 hours following the death of a significant person (Mostofsky et al., 2012). Bereaved people show higher levels of systemic inflammation and lower immune function compared to non-bereaved controls (Knowles et al., 2019). Sleep is almost universally disrupted, and worse sleep makes grief harder to move through, which makes the next day harder, which disrupts sleep again (Lancel et al., 2020). This is a physical event. The person you're trying to support is not being dramatic. Their body is in crisis.

What this means practically is that some of what you might interpret as them being distant, difficult, forgetful, or ungrateful is not about you and is not a choice. The memory problems are real (cortisol impairs the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory and learning). The inability to concentrate is real. The emotional volatility is real. The days where they seem like they're coping and then suddenly aren't, that's real too. You cannot logic them out of this or encourage them through it faster. What you can do is stop

interpreting their symptoms as signals about your relationship or your support and start understanding them as what they are: a body trying to survive something devastating.

There's a way of thinking about grief over time that might help you understand what you're witnessing and what your role in it is. It's called the ball in a box. In the beginning, the ball (the grief) is enormous. It fills the whole box. Every time the box moves, the ball hits a pain button on the wall, constantly, unavoidably, with no warning. Over time, the ball doesn't get smaller. The love doesn't shrink. The loss doesn't shrink. But the box gets bigger. Life grows around the grief. And the ball hits the pain button less often, not because it's gone, but because there's more room now. There are whole stretches where it doesn't hit at all. And then it does, and it hurts just as much as it ever did.

Your job is not to shrink the ball. You cannot do that and trying to will only make them feel unseen. Your job is to help the box get bigger — to be part of the life that grows around the grief. To show up in ways that add room rather than demand that the grief take up less of it. That's what good support looks like, and it's quieter and less dramatic than most people expect. It looks like presence. Consistency. Not flinching. Staying when it's been long enough that most people have left.

Chapter 3: What to Say

Mom Teresa: There's no magic thing to say. Having gone through this, my favorite things to hear were "I have no words" or something along those lines, because truly I know you don't. And, unless you went through it, it is very hard to grasp the depth of our pain and always impossible to lessen it. I also appreciated the people who listened to me talk about my babies. I loved the people who asked me for their names and said it out loud. I know it may sound simple or even silly, but to me, it meant the world. It meant people recognizing and honoring their existence, it meant people celebrating their lives. And it made me feel like the proudest mom. If you can, ask for their names, say their names, and let them share their memories with them and their hopes for them. If they don't want to share or talk, respect that too.

I can't even begin to explain how hard it was to go somewhere where people didn't know what had happened to me and just assumed I wasn't a mother. After giving birth, my body changed in ways that only someone who's been through this recognizes (if you know, you know, it's hard to explain). And, as strange as this might sound to someone who hasn't lived it, in those first days, I wanted it to show. I wanted people (at least at the beach) to know that I'm a mother. This might help you understand how important it is for some parents to hear and see their children recognized as part of this world. Obviously I'm not suggesting you start commenting on people's bodies. But I hope this helps you find ways to let a mother be seen as the mother she is, in whatever way feels comfortable to her (and the same goes for fathers). Don't let the loss erase her motherhood in public.

I think most parents don't expect you to fix their pain. You don't have to fix how they feel, you don't have to make it better, you just have to not look away. Acknowledge what they are going through, ask how you can be there for them (and really be there, if you're just asking to be polite, don't), and honor their children in whichever ways feel right to them. The freezing feeling you get when someone tells you a story like this is quite normal. You don't want other people – much less your loved ones – to suffer. It's okay not to know what to say and it's okay to take a moment. Be there for them, offer to sit in silence while they cry, to hug them if they need it. These people chose you as their support system, they know you care and they know you know them, show up for them.

I had friends showing up in very different ways. One friend crossed the ocean to be with me a month after Winnie was born. Another friend showed up quietly, the day after we found out Winnie was dying, when I went to the gym to breathe fresh air (I go to an outdoor gym) and stretch my hips for birth. That friend arrived shortly after me. He had found out

through text, and we hadn't seen each other since. He is one of the most (if not the most) talkative people I know. He is always happy and excited, cracking jokes at the gym. He always has something to say. That day, he said hi to me and sat on the bench where I was lifting. He sat with me and stayed silent for what felt like an eternity. I had never seen him so quiet. He didn't know what to say or do so he showed up in the way he knew. He sat with me and he showed me he was there. It meant a lot and cost him no words. Don't worry about the right thing to say. Nothing you say will fix it or bring back their child. Sit with them, be present, show up.

Don't Forget the Partner

It's easy to remember the mom who will give birth and go through tremendous physical pain without hugging her baby forever on earth. But next to that mom is a partner who is hurting too. They might not show it as much or at all, but they are in pain and they also need help. Telling them to toughen up doesn't help (more on this below), no one goes through something like this without having toughened up. Trust me, you toughen up, you become brave, and you still crack and break and cry and grieve. Pay attention to the partner, give them space to share their feelings and cry. Allow them to show their pain and acknowledge it.

Mom Teresa: Well-meaning friends told my husband he had to be strong for me. They didn't realize that besides losing his daughter, he was terrified he might lose his wife. I had never given birth before and there were risks associated with my situation that made this all the more terrifying to him. He knows about strength; he is the most resilient human being I know. But he needed them to care for him, to let him break, to give him space to be scared and be held. And sadly, men are still usually worse at showing up for each other in meaningful emotional ways. So, check on the partner, don't settle for superficial answers, show up for them, sit with them, and give them space to grieve.

A Note on Timing

Mom Teresa: I had seen this before with adult losses, but my husband was surprised to learn that six days postpartum was enough for most people to assume he was okay to resume his life. I'm not sure who would assume that if we were holding a baby. But we weren't. So, we must be fine.

In as much as you can, give people time and space to grieve. I remember my husband telling our priest that he was afraid he'd go back to work and have everything piled up on

him. And our priest responded, “if you don’t grieve and take time now, you’ll go back to your personal life one day and everything will pile up on you.” You can’t skip steps when it comes to grief. Well, you can, but you’ll pay for it later. In as much as you can, allow these parents to take time to rebuild themselves and heal. They will never stop missing their child, but they need time to process their loss, to take care of logistical matters, and to just exist.

I remember that after the funeral, five days post-partum, I had my first day of simply existing. I had never before felt the need to simply be, to simply get through the day, to simply survive. And suddenly there I was, floating through life while my shattered heart searched for light. I can't explain how important it was to me that my PhD advisors gave me the time to simply be, to simply hold my husband and our beloved dog, and let the light come back in little by little.

It’s easy to forget about someone’s loss when it’s not yours. But you don’t move on from this grief; you move through it. In the first few days everyone calls. Parents’ home might be filled with meals and flowers, notes and wishes. Then weeks go by and only the close people remember. Work starts calling asking when they’ll be back. They might be feeling completely wrecked but society has moved on (not through) and expects them too as well. People no longer remember they are parents (unless they have living children). And the most difficult time in their lives is now a story people tell their friends when talking about pregnancy loss. But the parents never forget. The brain fog takes time to go away and so does the blurriness of days. Yet people have stopped asking about their baby, there is no belly to greet or check on. And that silence is louder than a howl.

Remember to say the babies’ names after month 3, month 6, month 9, years later. Don’t make these parents to be the only ones to keep their children’s presence alive. They have a whole life of milestones no one thinks of, but they will feel deep in their souls. They’ll have missed birthdays, graduations, driver’s license appointments, and all the things they hoped for their child. Help them keep the memory alive as much as they want to. And keep checking in on them. Their hearts haven’t stopped longing, and their heads haven’t stopped thinking about their child. They might look put together – after all, that’s what society demands of them shortly after loss – but their child hasn’t returned. They never stopped hurting.

When They Go Quiet

Sometimes the person you're trying to support will go quiet. They'll stop responding to messages, take days to reply, or say they need space. And you'll be left trying to figure out what that means and what you're supposed to do with it.

Here's the honest answer: it depends. Some people need genuine silence: to close the door, to not perform *okayness* for anyone, to have a few days where nobody needs anything from them including a response. That's real and it's valid and the best thing you can do is respect it without disappearing. Send one message that says *I'm here, no need to respond* and then actually don't require a response. Don't send five follow-ups. Don't show up unannounced. Trust that they know you're there and let them come back when they can.

Mom Teresa: But sometimes quiet isn't about needing space. Sometimes it's about not having the energy to manage the conversation that might follow. If someone has said the wrong thing repeatedly, or made the grief about themselves, or pushed for updates on how they're doing - the grieving person will often go quiet not because they want to be alone but because that interaction costs more than they have. I didn't push away the people closest to me. But I did create distance from the people whose comments made things harder. That wasn't me needing space from everyone, it was me protecting what little I had left.

So, if someone has gone quiet on you specifically, it's worth asking yourself honestly: have I been showing up in the way they needed, or in the way that felt natural to me? Not with guilt, just with honesty. Because the answer might change what you do next. And if you genuinely don't know — you can say that too. One simple message: *I've been thinking about you. I'm not sure if I've been getting this right. I'm here whenever you want me and I'll follow your lead.* Then follow their lead.

Grandma Margarida: Throughout this time, it's been important for me, as a grandmother, to approach the parents only after re-balancing myself. I do that exercise daily. I know that I, too, am grieving, and that I need to live my own grief in order to be present for theirs. I usually start the morning with 30 minutes for myself: I look at the sky, I smile at my little granddaughter (sometimes at my little grandson too, who gets forgotten more often, because for me he was a breath of life), and I promise her, once again, that today we're going to walk a little further together, to see the sun shine in her parents' hearts. I name my feelings, I don't mind if they repeat day after day or if they contradict each other, I hold them anyway. Then I talk to myself, and together we decide how much room to give each feeling throughout that day (a permitted dose for that particular day) until the end of the day arrives and I can meet myself again. Then I choose one good moment that's going to happen that day; often it's been something as simple and small as: today I'm going to walk 20 minutes by the river. Then I start the day certain that I'll manage it.

Some days, after this whole process, so neat, so regulated, so guided by my training and experience, disappointment with myself comes anyway. There are still days when it seems like the hours won't move forward, when one small word from someone else deepens

the wound. I notice that, especially with work matters, when someone is stuck and fixated on something so trivial and so petty, it makes me want to scream and say, "Don't make life miserable, don't treat it badly, let other people live and enjoy the small or big good moments."

I try to help my granddaughter's mother and father find a way to be happy while they live through this pain. Some days I have more imagination for it; other days I just show them that I'm there, simply there. I have an enormous concern that my son-in-law understands that I'm there for him too, not just because he's my daughter's husband. I'm there for him the same way I'm there for her. He is her support and she is his, they are an extraordinary support to each other, but he is also pain and fear in the first person, and it's important to hold the one who holds others, and to make space for the one who makes space for someone else.

Never in my life have I had so many moments in a row where I felt that what I said meant nothing, contributed nothing, was so insufficient for the moment. Many times I chose to simply be there, to hold, to look, and to cry together.

If I could go back, I would change the moment when I reacted with such unease to my daughter's wish to hold Winnie, already gone, in her arms. I confess I felt a chill run down my spine, a feeling of fear and refusal. "What do you mean?" Today, I remember that moment with tremendous peace and happiness. Winnie's father chose to be there online, supported by Winnie's grandfather, and I had the opportunity (which at first felt like an impossible iceberg to climb!) to stand beside my daughter with her daughter in her arms.

Chapter 4: What Not to Say and Why

Mom Teresa: The list we're about to show you might be uncomfortable to read, but we hope you'll keep it in mind the next time you make a comment, or hear someone else make one. This is a list of the things people said to us, and what we heard, when we found out our daughter was going to die. Most of the time, these were people who wished us well and loved us; they didn't say these things with bad intentions, just out of a lack of information. We're also sharing what went through my head, the things I held back and didn't say. We're not sharing this to make you feel bad, or to suggest you've already said the wrong thing. We're sharing it because the gap between what people say and what parents hear in these moments is enormous, and most people never find out that gap exists. You're reading this because someone trusted you enough to put this book in your hands. So, consider this your window into a conversation that most people in a support system never get the chance to have. Read it, remember it, and then keep supporting them. After this (non-exhaustive) list, we'll leave you some tips that can help.

We've grouped these comments by theme, so you can see the pattern behind them, not just the phrase itself.

Comments that erase the child or the bond

*Well, at least you hadn't bonded yet.*Good God, have you ever been pregnant? Your entire body changes in a second, and keeps changing over the following months. Then they start kicking and punching and responding to your voice and your husband's voice. And you plan everything for them, everything around them. And then you receive them into your arms. If that's not bonding, I don't know what is.

I*t was probably for the best. It's awful to raise children with illnesses.* In what world was this for the best? In what world am I supposed to bury my daughter while still wearing post-partum diapers? Better would have been holding her every day, better would have been watching her grow up, better would have been her being an annoying teenager with me. This is not better. It's life, and it's a hard piece of sh*t.

You'll be a mother/father one day. Okay, this one I answered directly. I know most people don't mean to hurt with this, but it cuts through my skin straight into the bone. I AM a mother. I will always be their mother. I hope to have living children I get to raise on earth, but I am a mother to children in heaven. Their names are Rainy and Winnie. Saying this erases the children I already have, as if motherhood were something that hasn't started for me yet. I became a mother the day I found out I was pregnant. From that day on I changed

my life and oriented myself around the two beings growing inside me. I didn't stop being a mother because they stopped existing; they simply exist in another dimension.

Comments like these try to shrink the pain by shrinking the baby's presence in the parents' lives and the strength of their bond (or even shrinking their capacity for presence in the future, like the comment about illnesses). But this doesn't shrink the pain (in my experience, it grows it, and it irritates). There was love (there is love), there will be pain. Trying to minimize what this baby was, or how long they lived, will not make these parents feel calmer or happier. This child is real to them (if not, you wouldn't have been given this book), respect that. Honor that.

Comments that replace the loss with the future

At least you know you can get pregnant. True, my body is incredible. And Winnie died, and that's all I can think about. Comments like this focus on the future, but more than mourning the future, I mourn Winnie. Even if it's not the intention of the person saying it, comments like this made me feel like people were ignoring Winnie, and that only increased my pain.

You didn't take long to get pregnant, so you know you can do it again. Sure, as long as we don't have one of the many possible genetic incompatibilities that may have caused this. As long as we can both stomach nine more months of anxiety not knowing if our baby will breathe. Also, friends, study up: getting pregnant once doesn't guarantee future success. Biology is far less predictable than that; you should get a fertility check-up and learn more about the subject.

You'll try again soon. Sure, we can. Will that erase our dead children? Not a chance. After you break a foot, one day it heals, but is it ever the same foot that was never broken? Get an X-ray and see for yourself.

Comments like this treat the loss as a logistics problem you can solve by trying again, but what I lost wasn't a pregnancy, it was Winnie, and nothing and no one replaces Winnie. Losing a child is not a failed attempt; it's the death of someone who was deeply dreamed of, thought about, and wanted. Getting pregnant again can bring joy, but it doesn't erase the grief or the pain, because it can never erase the child who died.

Comments that search for a reason or a meaning

God knows what He's doing. Or G*od has a plan.* God is crying with me right now, holding Winnie in His arms and trying to comfort me. He didn't want this to happen. If your God wanted this to happen, then I'm very sorry you chose that God.

God needed to call her to His side. Oh, ya think? I understand that the unpredictability of life is too painful to face and deal with. I understand that maybe your brain can't handle that unpredictability. I also understand that you're scared by my situation and want to reassure yourself that it could never happen to you. But it can. And if it does, I won't tell you that God called your baby, because He never would. My God is good. Also, God gave us free will. Free will has a price: nature does its work, and God doesn't intervene when things get hard. If He could, would there be wars, or natural disasters? Alright then, goodbye.

Everything happens for a reason. You're right. That reason was a cellular problem that didn't allow our daughter Winnie to take her first breath. Sometimes the reason can be people's stupidity, like your choice of words.

She's in a better place. A better place than her mother's arms? A better place than being loved by her father? Also, heaven might be a better place than earth, but I'm still here.

These comments come from a need to make sure there are reasons for everything, and that we don't live in a world where horrible, random things happen. At the same time, this gets tangled up with some people's beliefs. For Catholics (this happens a lot in Portugal so a lot of the comments I got came from that): Pope Leo himself made clear that God doesn't choose or want these things to happen. For those who aren't Catholic: even if you believe this, saying it doesn't help. It can even turn parents against a God who supposedly wants or chooses for them to lose their child. For an outsider, it can be comforting to think that God knows, so there's nothing to be done, and probably (because of that) it won't happen to you. But for these parents, it brings no comfort at all to think that someone decided this for them, and that's why they lost their children.

Beyond that, searching for a reason is often more about your own need to find order in chaos than about what these parents are actually living through. Some things happen for no reason, and these parents are learning that right now. Even if it brings you comfort to think there's a reason, and that you're therefore safe, don't say that to these parents.

Comments that assume grief has a deadline

Time heals all wounds. If time healed all wounds, you could cut off a leg and it would grow back. You might think that's a ridiculous comparison, but I grew a whole new organ, called a placenta, that fully sustained my daughter until it couldn't anymore. I have a literal emptiness in my uterus, and even if I have another baby, that emptiness will never be filled. That emptiness has a name: Winnie.

You have your whole life ahead of you. That's the problem. As bleak as it sounds, in the first days and weeks after Winnie died, that was all I could think about. How am I supposed to live an entire lifetime before I see her again? I wanted so badly to be 80 years old and see her again in 10 years. But being told, at 28, that I had my whole life ahead of me to miss my daughter and never be able to see her was too heavy to carry.

Comments like this try to soften the pain by redirecting parents toward life, but this is a time to feel the pain, not run from it. On top of that, time doesn't heal all wounds, not when it comes to grief. Life grows bigger around grief, but the grief itself doesn't disappear. Turning grief into a matter of counting years ignores the fact that the pain isn't measured by the time we still have, but by the time we will never get to have with our child. Psychology finally shows us that grief isn't something you get over (not even with time), it's something you carry for the rest of your life. It's hard, but it's true, and it doesn't stop being true just because someone says time heals it.

Comments that make it about the person saying them

I feel terrible just thinking about it. Great, thanks. Imagine how I feel. This, or any version of turning the subject onto yourself instead of onto the parents living through it, isn't helpful.

You have to be strong for your wife. (I didn't get this one; my husband did, and it has toxic masculinity written all over it. I don't need him to be strong for me. I don't need him to never break. We got married so we could break together if we needed to, not so I'd have a crutch.)

Comments like these ignore what these parents are feeling. Parents in these situations need to be cared for. They shouldn't have to think about how they're making you feel, or what they can do to lessen your pain. Right now, it's your turn to be their support system, not the other way around. We'll talk more later about how you also need a support system of your own, but for now, know this: it's not about you (and I say that with love).

Yes, I know, I got salty. But I never said any of these things – though I wouldn't blame you if you did. And I know people say these things for two main reasons: 1) they don't know what to say, and it's easier for their brains to retrieve platitudes and clichés than it is for them to deal with the discomfort of having to think through a helpful thing to say. 2) They're protecting themselves. Situations like these scare the hell out of people. I always say when I tell my story I can almost see a headline in people's foreheads saying "NEW FEAR UNLOCKED" because you never want to think this happens. And so, they say something to help you AND to protect themselves from thinking it could happen to them. 3) It's incredibly

difficult to live in an unpredictable world. As humans, we look for certainty wherever we can find it. It's much easier to find a greater reason for something to have happened than it is to deal with the knowledge that life has random things you can't control. Having to reckon with life's unpredictability is a hell of a challenge and most people aren't equipped for it in a normal day in the life.

Grandma Margarida: As a grandmother, I was lucky to have friends and family around me who understood me. Actually, I don't think it was luck, I think it was care in the choosing. It's not a question of choosing the best people, but of choosing the ones who, in that moment, happened to be closest to me for some reason.

I remember a friend I hadn't shared much of life with in over 30 years, someone we'd only recently reconnected with, who was with us three days after the news came crashing into our lives. From then on he was a constant, careful presence, giving us space and offering availability and understanding. I also called two friends, messaged a few others, and noticed how differently available each of them was. I stayed close to the ones who seemed to have the physical and mental availability for what was coming.

Some people don't have that availability, because they stay caught up in telling stories about what happened to them, trying to fit the pieces into their own world, and that rarely helps. In that moment, I was living through something completely unique, similar in many ways to other stories but unique because each of us is unique, and our children, and our context, are too. And in that moment, maybe for the third time in my life, I needed to be heard, to be actively listened to, to have people read my messages and tell me "I'm here."

On the morning my granddaughter Winnie died, the world had collapsed, the river of storms had flooded my whole space, and I smiled to learn that a borrowed brother had landed and come straight to hug my husband and my son-in-law, who were there with my youngest daughter, my son, and his girlfriend. They all had lunch near the hospital, not knowing what to say, not tasting the pizza they were eating, but knowing the taste and the value of a strong hug. I was beside Teresa, sharing whatever small part of her suffering I could carry, and I smiled knowing they were hugging each other on the other side of the street.

The power of a hug is something I'd like to explore more, in a society that still hugs so little. When everything falls apart, when only the pain is left, the hug, just the hug, with no words, no conditions, no lessons and no messages attached, only the hug can truly nourish a soul, a being that is broken on the inside and alive on the outside.

In my profession I listen a great deal, I support a great deal, and I reflect a great deal on each person's process and their singularity. I'm amazed by the singularity of every life, how one small detail makes every situation unique. In this moment I needed, and still need,

that for myself. I didn't look for it in a clinical way, but as someone who is a friend and capable of offering it. I felt some pain in bringing friends into this, I don't like sharing pain, but I had to. The pain was, and is, too big for my husband and me to carry alone, along with our children. It was good to have my siblings and to have the friends we chose.

We chose some for the front line, the ones we shared day to day life with, some days hour to hour, and who carried us in their arms more than once. We chose others for the second line, giving them more space to discern things and give us clarity in what we were feeling. This choice wasn't nearly as organized as it might sound here, because nothing else in our lives had that kind of clarity either, but I feel it was important to keep the number of people involved contained, so that with them there could be a dialogue that supports and builds, and not a news broadcast. I didn't want to be receiving this news, let alone sharing it randomly with the world.

The process is still ongoing, grief still surrounds us, and what hurts most right now is when people tell me, "she has to move forward, don't let her fall into sadness." What does that even mean? What is falling into sadness? Sadness and pain are part of this and they need to be lived. There are hours when it hurts a great deal, hours when it hurts less, and honestly what I try to do with my daughter and son-in-law is help them accept the sadness and not be afraid to live alongside it, to give it the space each of them needs, and to fill the rest of the space with whatever they can. They are not falling into sadness, they are getting up, day after day, to live within whatever is possible of the pain and the rebuilding.

Beyond supporting their ability to coexist with sadness, I was careful about how I let each person into the subject, trying not to leave room for comments that cause pain. Of course sometimes they happen anyway, but I told myself that if they did, I would push back against them with everything I had. The comment that hurt me most, the one I found myself shouting back at within seconds, was: "this is what God wanted, if He did this it was for a reason." I am Catholic, I live with Christ by my side, and I heard Him say, "shout it out loud that I am as sad as you are, I never wanted this." So I did, several times, and I think I've managed to leave some peace behind with the people who say it. They walk away hearing about a Christ of love, made of love, who never, ever wants to cause harm to anyone.

Now that it's almost been a month since our little granddaughter's death, there are some things I'm afraid of. I'm afraid people will forget that the pain doesn't disappear after 30 days. I'm afraid of needing to be held and finding him less available. I'm afraid of the high days and the falls, and of not knowing who I can count on, because little by little everyone goes back, rightly, to their own world, their own causes, their own complicated lives. At this stage, we need to look for more independent structures to help us fill the gap in the coming months. At this stage, I'm going to look for psychological support for myself, to make use of this window of time and rebuild some of the pieces that have grown more fragile.

Sometimes, I'll have to remind the people around me that functioning and being okay are not the same thing.

What to Say and What to Do

After the list of what not to say, it's normal to be left with the question: so what do I say? The good news is you usually don't need to find the perfect phrase. You need to show up, to name the baby (if the parents want that), and to make it clear you're not going to disappear. Here are some ideas, organized by the same themes as the previous list, so you can feel the contrast between what hurts and what helps.

Name the baby, don't erase them: To whatever extent the parents want it, say the baby's name. You can ask about the baby, talk about the plans these parents had, what they miss most. You can say you were thinking of their baby on a particular day or occasion. And you can say you'd like to know more about the baby, if they want to share. Let them decide and follow whatever they decide about how present they want this baby to be.

Acknowledge the loss, don't rush toward the future: Instead of pointing to what might still come, focus on what happened. "I'm so sorry. This is an enormous loss." "I don't know what to say, but I'm here." You don't really need the right answers, you need to acknowledge the sheer size of this loss and what it means to them.

Don't look for a why, stay in the randomness with them: You don't need to explain anything, or make sense of anything. You can say "This shouldn't have happened." "There's nothing that makes this any less unfair, and I'm so sorry." Keep in mind it may be important for them to have medical answers about their child's death (that's normal, and can matter a great deal for their future), but that's different from an abstract answer from the universe. Remember how random this is, how it shouldn't have happened, how nothing justifies it, nothing makes it easier. It's important that you learn to be comfortable (or to live uncomfortably) with that reality.

Don't put a deadline on it, show up after everyone else has already disappeared: Support tends to be strongest in the first week and then fade. Mark the due date on your calendar, the first anniversary, a Mother's/Father's Day. Send a message on those days. "I know it's been a few months, but I was thinking of you both today."

Keep the focus on them: Avoid "I don't know what I'd do" or turning the conversation toward how this makes you feel. If you need to process what happened, find someone else, not the parents living through it. And choose action over an open-ended question: "I'll bring dinner over at 7pm" helps more than "do you need anything?", which forces them to decide and to ask, two things nobody has the energy for right now.

How Long This Lasts and How You Might Forget It

Here's something that probably no one has said to you directly: you are going to move on before they do. Not because you're a bad person. Not because you don't care. But because your life didn't stop. Theirs did. And that gap - between what happened inside them and the pace of everything outside - is one of the most disorienting things about grief. You are living proof of it, every time you have a normal day.

We're not saying this to make you feel bad but so you pay attention. This matters because the way most people support someone who's grieving is front-loaded. The first week, you show up. You send messages. You bring food. You check in. And then, gradually, because life keeps moving and they seem to be coping and you don't want to keep bringing it up and making it worse; you pull back. This is almost universal. It's also one of the things that hurts grieving parents the most.

There is no week by which they will be over this. There is no point at which this becomes a thing that happened rather than a thing that is happening. They are not moving on. They are moving through, and moving through comes in waves, some of them predictable (the due date, the first Mother's Day, another pregnancy announcement in your group chat) and some completely unpredictable. A supermarket. An ordinary Tuesday. Months later, when you'd long assumed things were better.

The waves don't mean they're going backwards. They mean the loss is real and the love behind it is real and neither of those things has an expiry date. What you can do is stay in it longer than feels necessary. Check in at the three-month mark when everyone else has stopped. Mention the baby's name months later, not to reopen a wound, but to acknowledge that you haven't forgotten either. Ask how they're doing on the days you know will be hard. You don't have to say anything profound. You just have to keep showing up after the world has decided they should be fine.

When They Go Back to Work

If you're a friend or family member, you might not see much of this directly. But you'll notice it: the person who seems like they're coping because they're functioning, who's back at their desk and answering emails and present in meetings, and who is also quietly falling apart between all those things. Functioning and fine are not the same thing. The reason most people get this wrong isn't that they don't care, it's that the brain reads competence as recovery. Someone who shows up, answers emails, and gets through a meeting without visibly falling apart looks, from the outside, like someone who is doing better. But that's not

what's happening. That person is using every bit of available capacity just to be present, with nothing left over, holding it together for the hours they have to and then not holding it together the moment they don't.

If you work with this person, if you're a colleague, a manager, someone who shares an office or a Slack channel, this section is specifically for you. When they come back, your job is not to make it normal. It already isn't normal. Your job is to make it survivable. That means: acknowledge what happened, once, clearly, without making them respond to it at length in the middle of the open office. Say you're glad they're back and that you're sorry. Say the baby's name if you know it. And then follow their lead entirely: if they want to work and be left alone, let them work and be left alone. If they want to talk, let them talk. Don't assume which one it is.

Don't ask how they're doing in front of other people. Don't forward the pregnancy announcement that came in while they were out. Don't make a joke to lighten the mood. Don't say you can't imagine, or if you do, don't stop there, because stopping there makes it about your imagination rather than their reality.

What you can do: ask them privately, before they come back, if possible, what would make it easier. Most people won't think to ask this. Being asked is itself something. And if they tell you something specific (don't CC me on baby-related things for a while, don't ask me questions in front of the team, let me leave early on Thursdays) do it, and don't make them ask twice. Same thing if they tell you they want to be CCed on baby announcements. Let *them* decide.

Some days work will be the thing that holds them together. Some days it will be completely unmanageable and they'll need to disappear for a bit. Your job on those days is not to notice, or to notice and say nothing, depending on what they've told you they need.

Before the person you love goes back to work (or before your colleague returns) it might help to ask yourself:

- Have you actually told them you remember? Not just once, at the beginning, but recently?
- Do you know what they need from me right now, or are you assuming?
- If they're a colleague: have you asked them privately what would make coming back easier?
- Are you checking in less because they seem fine, or because you actually know they're fine? Those are different things.

- Is there something small and specific you could do this week — not to fix anything, just to show you haven't forgotten?

Chapter 5: Supporting Both Parents (and Their Living Children, if that’s the case)

The Mom

Grandma Margarida: I had to pause for a few minutes trying to figure out what to write here. I can't put into words the feeling of watching a daughter suffer in the deepest part of her being. Watching a daughter stop dreaming, stop feeling her baby, stop seeing the sunlight shine. Watching her collapse into her husband's arms: both of them crying together without the strength left to stand back up.

When the news arrived, I was alone with my husband, and we both said, "let's go to them." On the way there, my husband was more fragile than I was, and I remember telling him, "My love, we're really going to have to be strong, and together we'll manage." I remember calling my youngest daughter right away, making sure she wasn't alone before hearing the size of the storm that had just arrived. I remember her voice losing its strength, speaking to her brother, and within minutes they arrived at the doctor's office where my daughter and son-in-law were.

This mother needed presence and an unconditional embrace. It was very important to be there for her. No excuses, no "ifs" to leave her alone in that moment. Of course I knew she wanted me there, because we live in that kind of balanced presence, we live our daily family life with room and time for each person. But it's also important not to force our presence on someone.

Teresa is very determined, but I didn't know how determined she would be in this moment, especially since I had never imagined this moment at all. For me, it has been very important to let her set the path with her husband, and to have my husband and I simply be there to support them. She is the mother, and hers is the biggest and most painful place in this whole process, a pain of such a size that there's no way to make it any bigger. She's the one who has to decide what she wants and doesn't want to happen, and that's how it's been. I've tried to give voice to her wishes, her choices, I've come to understand how much the two of them talk through every subject, and I've seen how much calmer she feels when she realizes that my role, and the role of everyone around them, has been to understand what she wants.

There's no room to judge, no room to have opinions about someone else's pain. What's mattered to me has been walking alongside my daughter, step by step, day by day. At

this stage, that also means sometimes not being there, so that the two of them can find out for themselves that they're able to walk again without our arms holding them up.

Teresa's capacity to transform this pain that arrives every single day, her capacity to love, and the calm with which she does it, leaves me amazed every day. She tells me her face is swollen, maybe from post-partum fluid retention, and I went along thinking the same, because it made sense. Last night I realized her face is a mirror of her night, of the less visible moments of her day, it's the expression of the tears that keep falling every day.

I told the two of them something that I hope has been helping: "When you're angry, when you're irritated, when you feel like screaming, remember you're not angry with each other. The other person is the presence of the pain, but they are not the pain itself, that comes from somewhere else." It's important to let these parents name their feelings regularly, and to share them without having to worry about anyone else's feelings.

There are many kinds of pain: the pain of what happened, the pain of the lost dream, the pain of an uncertain future. Each pain needs its own care, and that has meant Teresa talking about each of these subjects almost daily, and it's now been almost a month (at the time I'm writing this). For me, it's been important to be there to listen, to share, to go back over possibilities and moments with her. She knows the world has moved on, and that not everyone walking alongside her is able to keep coming back to this place regularly.

I know how important it is for Teresa to move at her own pace, at the pace the two of them need, and I know how important it is to believe that each of these phases will transform into the next one, and that there's no way to rush them. I don't forget that rushing someone else only deepens the wound and shrinks the hope that it will one day heal, leaving behind a mark that no one wants to erase.

It's a kind of madness to watch a daughter suffer like this, and it's an enormous joy to watch her rebuild herself for the sake of her own daughter.

The Other Parent

There's a script that gets handed to partners almost automatically in situations like this, and it goes something like: be strong, hold it together, take care of them (the pregnant person). It comes from people who love them. It comes from colleagues, from friends, from well-meaning family members who show up and instinctively turn to the pregnant person first. And the partner absorbs it, often without even realizing it, because someone must hold things together and they've just been told that's their job. So, they make the phone calls. They handle the logistics. They answer the door when you come over and ask how their partner

is doing. And somewhere in the middle of all of that, they forget (or never get the chance) to fall apart themselves. And here's the thing: most people never notice. Because a partner who is performing coping looks, from the outside, exactly like a partner who is coping. And so, the calls and the check-ins and the meals go almost entirely to the pregnant person, and the other parent gets a hand on the shoulder and an assumption that they're doing okay. They are almost certainly not doing okay. They lost their child too.

It's an instinct to check on the pregnant person first. That's natural. She carried the pregnancy. She went through the birth. Her body is the one that's changed, that's recovering, that's leaking milk for a baby who isn't there. She is often the most visibly devastated person in the room, and so she becomes the center of everyone's attention and concern.

The other parent (the father, the partner, whoever that person is) often becomes invisible in this. This is a problem. Not because the mother doesn't need that support, but because the other parent is also grieving, often just as deeply, and is simultaneously expected to be the one holding things together. They might be the ones making phone calls. Handling logistics. Being strong at the funeral so someone is. Answering the door when you come over. Asking how she's doing and forgetting, in the middle of all of it, that anyone has asked how they're doing.

Sometimes they're not even asked. Sometimes people assume they're coping better, or coping differently, or that they need less, and sometimes the other parent internalizes that assumption and performs coping even when they're not. Because someone must. Because there's no space for two people to fall apart at once. Because grief that isn't the mother's grief is sometimes treated as secondary, as support rather than as its own real thing.

It isn't secondary. They lost their child too. So, when you show up, show up for both. Ask the other parent directly how they are, not just how she is. Send them a message of their own, not just one addressed to them together. Check in on them specifically in the weeks and months that follow, because the support that does exist tends to go almost entirely to the mother and they are likely getting very little. If they tell you they're fine, you're allowed to say (gently, once) that you're asking for real, not for the polite answer. And then respect whatever they give you.

They may grieve differently than she does. They may grieve more quietly, or more privately, or in ways that look from the outside like not grieving at all - going back to work faster, making dark jokes, not wanting to talk about it. None of that means they're not devastated. It means people express this differently, and the ones who express it less visibly are often the ones who get the least support. Pay attention to that gap.

Grandma Margarida: Supporting my dear son-in-law, Teresa's husband, has perhaps been an even bigger challenge than supporting my dear daughter. Between me and Teresa there's a natural symbiosis: she looks and I know, she sighs and I understand, she suffers and I suffer for her too. Supporting someone I've known for less time isn't as natural. I'm afraid of getting it wrong, and I know that in moments like these, mistakes hurt like they've never hurt before. I try to understand and to observe, I try to be present and to show him, to tell him, that I'm here for him. It has to be said out loud, it's not enough to assume the other person already knows. He needs to hear: "if you need anything, call me anytime," and "how are you doing today?" I don't expect him to answer me with the same depth my daughter does, but I hope he hears it with the depth of someone who is here for him, for being him, not for being Teresa's husband. He is a father, and that is a place of immense pain, immense uncertainty, and in many moments, immense powerlessness.

It meant a great deal to me to know that every time he was without Teresa, my husband was there for him. Mother-hen that I am, I told my husband, "when it's just the two of you, be there for him, take care of him without worrying about doing too much." It was fascinating to hear afterward how my husband, the baby's grandfather, took on that role, how he cared for him, and how this time made him love his dear son-in-law, father of his granddaughter, even more deeply.

On the day Winnie's parents got the news, we arrived within minutes, and shortly after, my son and his girlfriend arrived too. I think that was the moment I saw my son-in-law most lost, most disoriented. We gave a collective hug, only the body knew what to do in that moment. While we were waiting for the second ultrasound, he went off with my children to look for food, and I felt that in that moment they were carrying him in their arms. I don't know what they talked about, but I think it mattered enormously to him, just seconds after the bomb had dropped, to be carried like that by people close to his own age, people who usually come together to laugh, and there they were, crying together in silence.

Their Living Children

If this family has other children (older siblings who knew a baby was coming and now it isn't) those children are also grieving. And they are almost certainly being forgotten in the support that's flowing toward their parents.

This is understandable. Adults in crisis are the obvious priority. Living children are often assumed to be resilient, or too young to understand, or shielded enough that they don't need the same kind of attention. Sometimes they are young enough that it's genuinely hard to know what they understand. But even very small children feel the atmosphere of a house

that's in grief. They feel their parents' distress. They feel the absence of something that was supposed to arrive and didn't. They don't need to have the right words for it for it to affect them.

The support system doesn't always think to acknowledge those children directly. People come over and talk to the parents and don't know what to say to the kids, so they say nothing. Or they say something bright and deflecting, something that treats the child as someone to be managed rather than someone who is also going through something.

You don't need to have the perfect conversation with a grieving child. That's the parents' job, and they're doing it while barely holding themselves together, which is its own kind of impossible. But you can acknowledge the child exists. You can ask them what they've been up to. You can bring them something small - not as a distraction, but as a signal that someone sees them. You can say, if it feels right and the parents have told you what they're telling the child, something simple like: I know things are really sad at home right now. I'm thinking about you too.

That's enough. You don't have to fix it. You just have to not make them invisible. When you're thinking about how to support this family, ask yourself:

- Have I checked in on the other parent separately, specifically, as their own person?
- Do I know how the other parent is actually doing — not the version they're performing for everyone else?
- If there are older children: have I acknowledged them at all, or have I only been talking to the adults?
- Is there something small and concrete I could do that's directed at one of the people who's probably getting the least support right now?

Grandma Margarida: In my clinical experience, what surprises parents most is that young children don't live grief as a continuous state, they live it in bursts. They cry, they ask questions, and five minutes later they're playing as if nothing happened, not because they didn't feel it, but because they process first through action (through the body, through play, through doing) and only later, sometimes much later, are they able to process it through words.

While the words still aren't there yet, it's through play that the child works out what they can't yet say. Up to age three there's no concept of "forever": the absence is felt in the body, in a broken routine, in the missing embrace, not understood as a fact. From four to six, magical thinking sets in: the child may believe death is reversible, or fear, without saying it, that they caused it, or that it will happen to someone else they love. This often shows up in

play (dolls that "die" and then "wake up"), and that's not a sign of confusion, it's the action doing the work that words still can't do. From seven to ten, they already understand that death is irreversible and become very concrete in their questions. From pre-adolescence onward, their understanding starts to resemble an adult's.

What clinical experience adds to what the books say is this: age gives us an average, not a certainty. Every child processes at their own pace, and the same child can come back, months later, to questions that already seemed settled, especially at new developmental stages.

The most common thing I see is parents confusing protection with withholding information: excluding the child from what's happening, from the funeral, from the conversation, thinking that spares them, when in practice, the gap left by missing information gets filled in by the child's imagination (which is usually worse than reality). The second mistake, even more common, is parents hiding their own emotion in front of their children, believing that "being strong" means not crying near them. The child feels the mismatch between what they see and what they're told, and that creates insecurity, not protection. Showing sadness, with some restraint, teaches them that they're allowed to feel sad and still keep standing. Then there's the opposite mistake: out of anxiety to "do it right," explaining more than the child asked, answering questions they haven't even asked yet. And finally, misreading the signals: assuming that because a child is playing, laughing, or seems to have "forgotten" shortly after the news, they're not feeling anything, when that's exactly how a child processes things first. A child often starts with action, with the body, and only later (and not always) with words.

For an older child, knowing the truth is essential. This child needs to know that the baby died. From there, you don't need to find any other perfect words, you just need to be available for whatever question comes next, whenever it comes, even if the answer is "I don't know, but I'm here with you." It's the truth, spoken plainly, and your presence afterward, that hold this child steady.

Chapter 6: Getting Your Own Support System

Nobody tells the support people that this is hard for them too. The entire cultural script around grief assigns roles clearly: the grieving person is the one who gets to fall apart, and everyone around them is the one who holds things together. You stepped into that role, maybe without even deciding to, maybe just because you were there and you love them and what else were you going to do. And now you're carrying something heavy, and there's a decent chance no one has asked how you're doing with it.

So let us say it directly: this is allowed to be hard for you. Witnessing someone you love go through something like this is its own kind of devastating. You don't get to grieve the baby the same way they do - it's not your loss in the same way, and it's important to hold that distinction - but you are grieving something. The future you'd imagined for them. The person they were before this. The helplessness of being close to someone in pain you cannot fix. That's real, and it costs something, and pretending it doesn't will eventually catch up with you.

The risk nobody talks about is burnout. Not the dramatic kind where you collapse, the quiet kind where you start dreading their calls, or feeling resentment you immediately feel guilty about, or going through the motions of support while feeling increasingly hollow inside. This happens to good people who care deeply. It happens precisely because they care deeply and have been giving without anyone refilling them. It doesn't make you a bad friend or a bad family member. It makes you a person who has been running on empty for too long without noticing.

If you're starting to feel any of that (the dread, the resentment, the exhaustion, the sense that you have nothing left to give), don’t ignore the signal and push through harder. That signal is telling you to get your own support, before you burn out entirely or before the resentment starts leaking into how you show up for them.

Practically, this means finding somewhere else to put it. Not onto them, they cannot hold your grief about their grief right now and asking them to would be a reversal of the support flow that could genuinely hurt them. But somewhere. A friend who isn't as close to the situation. A therapist, if you have access to one. A partner. A sibling. Someone who can hear "this is really hard and I'm struggling" without it becoming one more thing the grieving parent has to manage.

It also means being honest with yourself about your limits. You do not have to be available every hour of every day. You do not have to answer every call the moment it comes

in. You are allowed to say - to yourself, first, and then honestly to them if needed - I'm here for you and I also need to take care of myself so I can keep being here for you. Most grieving people, if they love you, will understand this. They know they're a lot right now. What they need is honesty, not martyrdom followed by disappearance.

And it means letting other people share the load. If you've become the primary support person, look around and ask whether that's because you're the only one available or because everyone else quietly stepped back and let you take it. If it's the latter, redistribute. Not by abandoning them, but by actively pulling other people in. Suggest a rotation of who checks in when. Make a group chat. Ask someone else to bring dinner this week. You are not the only person who loves them and you should not be the only person showing up.

Before you keep going, ask yourself:

- When did someone last ask how you're doing with this — and did you answer honestly?
- Are you starting to feel any dread, resentment, or emptiness around this role? If so, have you told anyone?
- Where can you put this that isn't onto them?
- Are you carrying this alone when you don't have to be?
- What do you actually need right now, and is there someone you can ask for it?

Chapter 7: When You're Also Grieving

Grandma Margarida: I don't know the day I began grieving, but I know the day life changed forever, the day my messages of hope and reassurance stopped making sense: "don't worry, love, it'll all be fine, look, with me it went like this…" No. None of that made sense anymore. Everything was going wrong, very wrong. The first thing I lost was clarity. I wanted clarity, I wanted to make decisions, but I had no clarity. I wanted to be support, I didn't want to be the one being supported, but I needed an embrace the size of the whole world.

My little granddaughter Winnie wasn't a project; she was a dream come true. She was already there, already part of our life, our days, our worries and our joys. She already had her own little personality, her own way of sucking on her hands, she had made me a grandmother, and I was nothing but pride, nothing but lightness, and inside me grew a space in my heart the size of the world, a space she filled day by day. And now what do I do with that space, which was and still is enormous? In that space there used to live a little girl spending afternoons with her grandmother, us walking by the river, me telling her stories about her mother, starting a mission I want so badly: to be a grandmother. I had the best grandmothers in the world, I watch my own mother be the best grandmother in the world, and I want so much to be one too.

When I rocked Winnie in my arms, I promised her that her place in my heart would stay there forever, and I asked her to help me be her grandmother in heaven, to help me hold her parents. When I held her, I felt that my life had changed forever, that fear had claimed a place all its own, that disappointment had found its own space and its own time. When, later, my daughter held her and the two of them slept in my arms, I felt like I was carrying the whole world, a world with no meaning. When the nurse took little Winnie away, I understood that in that moment I had only two paths: drown in the tragedy or rise out of the despair. In the middle of the loneliness and the night, I chose the second, and I promised my granddaughter that I would love, love for myself and for her. I promised that until another grandchild came along, I would dedicate myself to caring for others going through the same pain, and here I am, available for whatever you, reading this book, might need.

I keep my grief and our grief very separate inside myself. My own grief I keep in a place that's very much my own, still barely explored, that I visit from time to time and that I still fear going into. Our grief is the one I live with my daughter, my son-in-law, my husband, and my other children. Our grief, I feel, has layers, very different feelings within it. I feel we're

living it with enormous peace and enormous love, with no rush for some and a bit of rush for others. I try hard to make it clear to everyone that whatever pace each of us needs is okay.

I hear my daughter go back over every moment, imagine a thousand scenarios, go back over them again, imagine a future that, in this case, is still so uncertain. I watch my son-in-law look at her and listen to her, ask questions, and hold her tenderly when there's nothing left to add. I see hope and the will to move forward in my husband and my other children. I find myself going back over so many moments too, wanting to have hope without having it yet, wanting to be part of the solution and fearing being part of the problem, taking care of others and letting myself be cared for.

In these hard moments, it helped me to think that there's a time for everything: a time to be afraid and a time to believe, a time to be strong and a time to falter. When I prepared myself to be with them at the hospital, I told myself, "this is a time to be strong, to believe, to climb mountains, go steady and give your best." I didn't want anyone to wish us luck, if luck exists, then we were in a run of very bad luck, but I did want people to wish that we'd give our best. In the double role I had, I often forgot, there in the hospital, what it meant to be a grandmother. I was there being a mother: mother to my daughter who was suffering, mother to my daughter who was singing to her own daughter, mother to my daughter who I didn't want to leave alone for even a second. I only became a grandmother when I had our little one in my arms. That's when I loved as a grandmother, rocked her, dreamed, whispered into her ear how much I love her. I was deeply afraid of losing my daughter too, because her life was at risk as well.

I think the moment I lived with the most ambivalence was when my son-in-law, standing beside my husband, said goodbye to his wife as she was wheeled in. As soon as she went ahead, he turned to me and said, "promise me you'll bring her back." I looked at my husband, and I wanted so badly to lie to him and say, "Of course, it'll all be fine!" But I knew her life was also at risk. I wanted so much to reassure him, but I couldn't do it in good conscience. Those might have been the hardest words I've ever had to say: "I can't promise you that." In that moment, I became aware that things could still get worse, more dramatic, that from one minute to the next I could lose both my granddaughter and my daughter. I held onto life with everything I knew, and I was a full-time mother. I'm grateful I got to live through that torment beside her, beside him, with my husband and my children and my son's girlfriend there, all of them ready for anything.

Being a psychologist in these moments was an enormous help. I was able to use many of the tools I have, I was able to give others strategies, and I was able to make the process itself a little easier. I'm grateful for this profession and this experience, because I think

without it everything would have been far harder. It was easier to put what I know to use for others than for myself, but even so, it was possible to be a mother, to be a grandmother, to be myself, and to be a psychologist, all at once.

Maybe the hardest thing now is grieving a granddaughter the world barely knew, and I knew so well. The world didn't mourn her, and I hear her crying inside me. In a world where "IT'S OVER NOW" is the phrase that brings people together, the idea that "IT ISN'T OVER" feels strange and uncomfortable. If you're living through this moment, accept that you're living in these two worlds in parallel. There's no way to slow the world down, no way to change what binds it together, just as there's no way to speed up your own. Accept that in some moments you live in one world, and in other moments you live in the other, and that's okay.

If you're a pillar, someone on the front line of support, don't forget the people walking beside you too. I felt how hard it was for my husband, for my other two children, and for my son's girlfriend. We couldn't all be everywhere at once, we didn't want to smother Teresa and her husband, and we didn't want to leave them either. Managing being present while also giving space isn't easy.

I felt it was especially painful for the grandfather, my husband, to give up the space he wanted to occupy. I felt my husband's pain, he wanted to be with me, wanted to hold me, feared the impact all of this would have on my health, and at the same time accepted the place that had been given to him. I heard him say, "I would have loved so much to hold our granddaughter," and I felt the size of the pain in those words. I felt, and still feel, the need to support him, to help him live this grief, this so deeply dreamed-of dream, this uncertain future, this positive energy of his that breaks down sometimes. I'm on the front line, and because of that I also feel the need and the responsibility to turn sideways and backward too, to support the people who support me, who support us. He wanted to have been there for his granddaughter's birth, wanted to have held her and rocked her, wanted to have spoken into her ear, but his place was somewhere else, and he accepted it with all his love. Giving your place to someone else is also an act of love. He was a pillar for my son-in-law, and my children were a pillar for my husband. This network, this interweaving, where you can no longer tell who's supporting whom, is wonderful, and essential.

Mom Teresa:

Dear support system,

Thank you. You showed up. You learned what they needed and you showed up. That's not a small thing. Most people don't know how to and you tried anyway. You're going to get some of it wrong and so will everyone else, and that's okay as long as you keep showing up. The person you love doesn't need you to fix this or say the right thing every time. They need you to still be there six months from now, saying their baby's name like it's the most normal thing in the world. Because it is.

My mom was my rock. She was my husband's rock, and she ended up being a rock for friends we met along the way as well. She was a grieving grandmother and she still showed up. She showered us in love (and my husband in food), she was present every moment, she asked what we needed, she respected our wishes, and she honored her granddaughter every step of the way. I don't honestly know how we would have gotten here without her. I also know that took a huge toll on her. That she cried alone many times and that she tried to act as a psychologist when she just wanted to be a mom and a grandma. So, if you're anything like my mom, please get support for you too, reach out to friends, and do some self-care. I now know what it's like to want to save your daughter from all the wrong in the world, I can't imagine trying to do that for my daughter and my granddaughter at the same time.

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