

The Day Our World Shifted

Why am I writing?

I am sitting here looking at the empty computer screen wondering where to start and how to start – and I have decided that the best thing to do is to say why am I writing this. The truth is that I am not quite sure – there are a myriad of possible reasons. Perhaps it is for Callum – to help him to put us into perspective and to make sense of that long ago hot summer when there was a baby... perhaps it is for any children who come along later to help to explain us and who we are and what we have been through...perhaps it is for our family and friends who have helped us through all of this...perhaps it is for Paul to share what I have been thinking and feeling---perhaps it is for Caitlin so that she is remembered in a special way...perhaps it is for some unknown person who is going through a similar thing to us and who I offer this to so they can see they are not alone...perhaps it is for me, to help me put my thoughts in order...or perhaps it is a combination of all of these and I am simply writing this because I want to share what it has been like and how we have survived. Primarily I want this to be a story of survival and celebration – that is a celebration of the short flare of beauty that was Caitlin and of the love that she has surrounded us with. It is a survival – we have survived as a couple, a family and as individuals, in some ways it has helped us to find out who we are and where we fit with each other and in the world.

Don't get me wrong – I would give anything for this to have all been some horrible nightmare, I would love to be able to get up from this desk and walk over and pick up my little girl and give her a cuddle, to tell her that I love her and to have the world as it was on January 25th. But that is not going to happen – nothing will ever be the same again because at about 6am on January 26th the world shifted and tilted. This small story is about what happened on that day and the days following and how we came through.

The 'Gathering'

It was a disgustingly hot summer – day after day of stinking hot weather but that wasn't getting us down – in fact even Paul falling through the ceiling just days before the whole family was to arrive couldn't get us down. Everything was perfect – Caitlin had just joined us and life was good. Callum was coping fairly well with the new addition – he was a little jealous at times but mostly he was ok...Paul was just back at 'School' for the third year. We knew it was going to be a tough year for him as it is billed as the hardest year of the whole degree – but that was ok, we knew that with some perseverance and dedication he would get through. Nothing could go wrong.

Mum had turned 70 on 16th January and we had never been able to spring a surprise on her. This year we decided we would try – we had been planning this for over twelve months (ever since I had a panic attack last year when I thought it was her seventieth). Anyway, the invitations had gone out and everything was in place. We had even managed to talk Josie into coming over for the party – the first time all four of us had been together since our wedding in '94. It was just perfect. We arranged a barbecue on the night of the 24th to celebrate Josie's birthday – Carmel, Geoffrey and the boys had arrived and Johnna and Brandon (honorary family members) came over as well. It was a great night – shame about the microwave blowing up but small dramas always surround family occasions. We all decided that we were too impatient to wait for Mum's surprise on Saturday afternoon and so we called Marie and Michael and talked them into meeting us at Goolwa on Australia Day so that we could all walk in on Mum at the Australia Day breakfast and give her the surprise of her life. We were so excited, it was going to happen – for the first time ever we had one up on Mum.

Thursday was a day of planning and shopping (and avoiding the heat). Caitlin had been a bit scrappy all week so I was pretty tired but nothing was going to stop the enjoyment of this weekend – I was sure that I could catch up on all my sleep next week. That night we gathered at the caravan park, Callum played with his cousins, Caitlin looked a picture sleeping on the big double bed – arms thrown up over her head, lying back breathing easily, not a care in the world. Paul still couldn't corner Geoffrey to drink the Bundy – but they figured they would do it sometime over the weekend.

We didn't stay late that night, I was so tired after tending to Caitlin throughout the previous night and I guess the heat was getting to all of us. Then there was the next day – the big surprise, the gathering of the girls in Goolwa...couldn't wait to see Mum's face. I remember looking at Caitlin when I got into the back of the car – she was laying back in the car seat, hands on her stomach with those beautiful fingers splayed out, she looked so peaceful and comfortable – I couldn't take my eyes off her and I just wanted that moment to last forever (which in some ways it will now as that picture is etched into my memory...be careful what you wish for hey???) She was wearing the Dumbo suit – I had bought that for Callum but it never fitted him – always too small. Caitlin was such a fine little thing, though Paul really wasn't sure about putting his daughter into clothing with Dumbo emblazoned on it...although secretly I know he adored it as much as I did.

The Last Night

That was a long night – or so it seemed at the time, now I wish it had been longer. Caitlin was still comfortable when we first got home so I put her straight into the bassinet which I then placed between me and the window. Paul was as tired as I from the previous night so I decided that I would tend to her if she was restless again – no need to have both us running on empty. Besides, he could drive to Goolwa the next day and I would have a sleep in the car. We slept for a short while – then she was awake and apparently hungry – we went out into the lounge room where I tried to feed her, once again she only took one breast and was not really comfortable latching on. I thought it was the weather – it was so hot and uncomfortable that it really was not surprising that she was a bit crabby. One breast every two hours was the same as two every four wasn't it? She slept again – but was quite restless, she had the wriggles up. I remember thinking 'just like your big brother – wriggle and tigger all night long.' It kept me on the surface of sleep though and when she woke up again at about 1am I was very tired – tried to feed her and she wasn't interested but she wouldn't settle. By this time I had moved the bassinet away from the window as the breeze was a little cool and I didn't want her to catch a chill.

I had a little panic then, she wouldn't settle and like the night before, I simply wanted to cry. The previous night, for no apparent reason I had sat up in bed, holding Caitlin and crying my eyes out – Paul had been disturbed by this and asked me what was the matter – I couldn't put my finger on it, just a sense of dread and indescribable sadness. We both put it down to a touch of sleep deprivation. I really wanted to take Caitlin down to Emergency at that point – don't know why as to all appearances she was just a little crotchety, not ill. Paul and I talked about it and decided it was not necessary (and in retrospect I am truly glad that I take her down that night, they would simply have looked at her, said she was fine and sent me home – a waste of our last few precious hours). Instead I called the parent help line. The only response was a machine, I hung up and decided to go to bed.

Caitlin still wouldn't settle so I tried the help line again – still only a machine but this time I left a message. I was no sooner lying down that the phone rang and I had a lovely, long chat to the nurse – she told me that I sounded like I was a perfectly sane mother who was simply dealing with a child who was distressed by the heat. We talked about what had been happening since the Tuesday when she first altered her eating habits and about how she had (or rather hadn't) been sleeping and about what had been happening in general. She suggested that I wrap her in a light wrap to help her sleep and that at the very most she may have a sore throat. In fact while we were talking Caitlin took to the breast and had quite a good feed. I was then able to get her back to sleep.

At about 4am she woke up again – I tried to feed her again and this time she took both breasts. She ate with her old gusto – I was so happy, thought maybe half the problem was me and being uptight and worried about nothing!! I put her back down but was only for less than half an hour – she was restless again. I thought perhaps she had a sore tummy after the huge feed. I got her up and moved into the Family Room where we have a three-seater lounge – it had really cooled off by then so I lay down and wrapped us both in the cotton cover that is over the lounge. She was happily dozing on my stomach and to be honest, whilst I wasn't in heaven I was just next door. Even though I was pretty well exhausted by then I was so happy and contented – thinking it doesn't get much better...my husband and wonderful little boy asleep in the house, my sisters all here, about to surprise my mum and a lovely warm little bundle asleep on me. I felt secure, loved and happy down to my toes. But then she started to get restless again – it was close to 6am so almost time to get up and start the day properly. It looked like some of the extreme heat was lifting, besides it is always cooler in Goolwa so it should be a good day. Besides, I had a guaranteed 50 minute sleep in the car on the way to the big surprise.....

.....and then the World Shifted

I went into the Lounge Room, put my feet on the coffee and rested Caitlin on my knees. She was sleeping again but just as Paul walked into the room I noticed that she seemed to be breathing with her whole upper body, her eyes were shut but she appeared to be concentrating on her breathing. I pointed it out and we were both a little worried – Paul said he would take over from me for a while and I gave her to him, we were debating whether we should really go out for the day or take her to the Doctors...perhaps we'd wait for half an hour and then decide.

Caitlin started to cry again – sore tummy by the sounds of it. Paul tried to put her into the rocker but she wouldn't have anything to do with it...really crying now. So he moved back into the Lounge Room,...perhaps we ought to take her to the Doctor – no, she is simply a bit cranky, Callum used to be like this all the time.....Paul sitting on the couch with her, crying, crying, crying. I'm in the kitchen emptying the dishwasher, then she sounded like she was calming down – crying slowing down....crying stopped.....I poked my head around the corner, Paul sitting on the couch looking down at Caitlin, no chest moving, she looks different, a little too relaxed.....'is she breathing?' I say.....'Not right now' her says...'Shall I call an ambulance?' as I reach for the phone, waiting for him to say that it was only for a moment, expecting him to tell me not to overreact...dial 000...look in at Paul, he has her on the couch breathing into her mouth and nose, good, remember that with babies your mouth goes over the mouth and nose not just the mouth, shallow breaths...'police, ambulance or fire' a voice says....'ambulance'....For some reason I am out of the front of the house now, a voice asking what is the problem...'my baby, my baby isn't breathing'...'where do you live'....I tell him, please hurry...I look inside, Josie is up now, standing over the couch, wringing her hands.....I think that I didn't know that people did that in real life...'is there a heart beat?'....Paul, Paul, Paul....is there a heart beat, he wants to know if there is a heartbeat....'.....'Yes, I think....a faint one....' I think this man sounds just like the one on the add.....this isn't real....it's ok, Paul will fix her....breath for my little one, breath my little one, breath for my little one, breath my little one.....

Action needed, give the phone to Josie, get dressed. Get clothes for Paul, my turn now.....mouth over nose and mouth, yes, shallow breath, yes....Didn't know that it made that crackling, bubbling noise, recuss Annie never made any noise only a click in the chest.....Paul dressed now back to him.....Where is the ambulance we heard the siren, where is it???? Josies starting to berate the man on the phone – where are you? Think I'd better talk again, she is my child, I should be doing something.....breath for my little one Paul, breath my little one, breath for her, breath, breath for her, breath.....Must be close, Paul takes her to the end of the drive? No he decides that's silly, rushes back up again.....where are they? I'll wait down the bottom, attact their attentionthe calm voice on the end of the phone, still sounds like the one on the adds, calming me, soothing me, assuring me, they won't drive up but they grab their bags and race up the driveway, at last I think they will fix her, everything is okay now.

But why is there no heartbeat? Why do they all look so grave? Ok, organise Josie to call everyone – call Mum and Dad, ruin the surprise – Mum asks Josie why we are with her in Perth? No she says, she is here – get Dad, tell him.....tell him that there are two ambulances.....Call Carmel, tell her..no the phone is off, call the caravan park.....what is the name of the caravan park? I think one of the ambulance men knows. Find Marie and Michael- at the Church, they will be in the carpak.....not yet but should be soon.....Please write down your daughter details, name etc....I write it all down, birth date, private health number, everything.

She is so small, four men around her – things in her nose.....needle in her leg to pump adrenaline into her. Paul told me about that – isn't that bad? Isn't that serious? Where is her heartbeat? Wake up my little girl...car key, I must give Josie car keys – look after Callum Josie...can't we go in the Ambulance? No?? Ok, room for one – I'm in the front of the empty ambulance, Paul has to drive the car down, why can't I be with her? Why no room? She is only tiny? Is she breathing yet? What's happening.....breath my little one.....

At last at the hospital, Paul is there at the same time – ushered into a room, nice room, didn't know this was here....where is she? Can we see her? Midwife comes in, I feel sure she has good news – I ask her if she has a heartbeat, is she breathing yet? She looks at me, I know the answer is no, but think it is only a matter of time.....Cannot bear to think the unthinkable...time passes, drags its heels, we're alone again, then we're not, no news, alone again...dragging time...is Callum up yet? Should we have spoken to him before we left? ...Waiting...finally a doctor, I have a suspicion, his face is so sad...why I scream why????! She's gone...the world just shifted.

The First Day

People coming in and out – a big male nurse with our little one, she looks so small.... can't touch her sorry, don't want to feel how cold she is, I know she will feel cold. Paul holds her – I touch the hat. They take her away again...Mum and Dad, the girls, Mark, Daniel and Michael, Johnna and Brandon – all there, in and out, tears.... rivers of tears....will we ever stop crying???? We have to see the police, they will be here soon, statements must be given, autopsy performed...I am determined to be reasonable, these people have an awful job don't make it any harder. Show them that you are made of strong stuff hold on to Paul's hand – don't let go.

We are asked whether we want to be put in touch with SIDS counsellor – yes we say, already we know that we can't do this alone. I see my family, I know I won't be alone. I look at Paul, hold his hand, together...tears and more tears...A policewoman comes in and explains why the statements. That's ok we say...be reasonable I think, help them. Do we want to put this off? Do it later? NO, I say, do it now – it's fresh, the pain is as bad as it's going to get I think, rehashing it all next week will just drag it all out...do it now.

I give the statement, I was awake with her most the night so I tell the story. She doesn't understand 'persnickety' so I say she was cranky.... details, details, details, Paul is holding my hand, Mum and Dad are there....it's so damn cold. They ask me if I would like a rest.... NO...I can do this now. She's in shock says Mum – please will someone get her a blanket. Mum wants to protect me....how awful I think, she is revisiting her own nightmare, now I want to protect her....

More details – please read this and sign it. I do, then I have to identify her – to the room. Big policemen with guns, big bed – tiny baby, oh my little girl you are the wrong colour and so still and quiet. I can't look, I can't do this...yes that is my girl...surrounding me they get me back to the room. Then it starts – the pain, the physical pain – she is hungry I think. Then, no, she doesn't need it....what am I going to do with this milk???? Someone please stop the pain.

A plainclothes policeman now – more questions another statement. Goes to use the Bible to lean on when he is writing, sees what he is doing and picks up the phone book again – why am I noticing all of these strange things???? Doesn't Paul have to give a statement too? No, that is ok, all is done. He does to look at her and comes back – questioning (accusing??) what is the hole in her leg?? The adrenaline, the ambulance put that in...oh, he says...Now, we have to let her go. They bring her in, lovely carry cot covered in a quilt, little hat and lovely wrap...wrong colour, she is blue. To me she looks so cold...I still can't hold her. Paul holds her, looking at her his eyes look lost, his heart is broken (will I ever be able to mend it??) I touch her little head through the hat, they tell me to touch her face – tiny touch with my finger, I knew it!! Cold!! Can't do it, only kiss her head. SIDS man there organising us. Paul goes back to the house with the policeman to take video, collect her bedding and clothes – the Dumbo suit is some form of evidence now.....

At last time to go, time to leave the hospital – I am crying and crying and crying...I hurt, my heart has a hole in it, will I ever recover? My world has shifted, nothing will ever be the same again, my little girl has gone – who am I now????

I feel myself trying to pull together the shattered pieces of my being – this morning I had a beautiful little girl, now I don't. Whenever someone asks me how will I define success in my life I always answer that it is by the type of mother and wife I am...how can I be a successful mother when I let my daughter die? I can't let myself think about that now, it is time to gather the shattered pieces and work out how to get through each minute, no each second, let alone the rest of my life. There is now so much time without Caitlin – stretching out before me, never again will she be here. I remember on my wedding day thinking that this is a turning point, from now and forever I am with Paul...then when Callum was born the same thing, the world shifts and makes room for another person, that is a wonderful feeling. Then Caitlin came along – shuffle my world around again, make room for another person – that is easy, always room for one more. Now she has gone, how can I live with that hole there? I know it will never fill, it is like a gaping wound – open and raw.....

Johnna drives me home – I can't talk, I know that she and Brandon are crying as well – so many tears, such a tiny girl. I want to comfort them, but how can I? Home again, so many people there – I feel disjointed and I have an urge to tidy, to put all of her things away but if I do that, then she is gone...I talk to the policeman again – don't know what about, think he is talking platitudes. Someone gives me a coffee – where's Paul? Ah, here is, beside me....where is my boy? I want my boy....he is off with Harry, Tom and Jack he will come here soon. Mum says I must have a shower, I must get rid of this milk....I know I have to try to stop it from being there but it is my last living link with her, part of me wants to keep it all, by breasts crying with the rest of me.

I shower – I cry and cry, more tears than the shower....out I come, Callum is here. Her runs up the driveway, he knows there is something wrong, he looks scared – I can't have that but I just want to hold him. He lets me, sits silently on my lap, confused and sad but he doesn't know why. What are going to tell him? I know I cannot let this scar him. I look at Paul – his eyes reflect my agony. How can I take that look out of his eyes? How can I repair my family???

It is a day of coming and going – James and Viv come and just hold us, Aunty Jean and Uncle John – more tears, more hugging. Johnna and Brandon are here all the time – they were (are) her Godparents as were Marie and Michael, they are torn and shattered as well. Mum and Dad talk of funeral arrangements – I know we have to deal with that but it is so hard to think of her in the ground.

I feel like I have to do something – I have to call people and tell them. Margaret from work – the shock in her voice, she asks the questions we are all asking....why? How? What? We call close friends, a simple statement 'Caitlin died this morning' – their world shifts a little as well – no-one ever believed that something like this could happen to anyone we know – it always happens to others, not to anyone we know.

I feel like I am at the centre of a whirlpool – all around me is out of control, chaos surrounds me but I feel oddly calm – there is a certainty that somehow I caused this, somehow I could have prevented it...how can I live with this feeling? Paul is the same, he is convinced it was him...she died in his arms, I tell him no in no way is it his fault – and in my certainty that is not his fault, that he could have done nothing is the seed of my sanity and the seed of my recovery. If Paul is blameless then I must be too, surely???! I have to believe that I am a good mother, how can the certainty that I did all I could sit so comfortably alongside the certainty that I should have done more? I am soon to learn that this is my new state of being, this is how I will now go on ...gradually I will let go of the guilt but a germ, a seed, a taste, a hint of guilt remains.....

There is more talk of the funeral – I agree for Dad to talk Mr James, the funeral director ...appointment for Sunday. Paul and I are like sticks floating on a river – we drift along with the flow – moving apart but continually bumping back together...a look, a touch, a word – we will do this together, we will be okay. At some time during the morning we sit and talk, we know that we have no clear way out of this nightmare but to stay sane we have to set our sights beyond today. We decide that where we want to be this time next year is either pregnant or trying to get pregnant. This is not to replace Caitlin, this is to symbolise hope, to indicate that our family will go on. The big, unanswerable question is how on earth are we going to get there?

We decide that day that we will talk, we will share and we will carry each other through this. We will protect Callum – we will make sure that this does not damage him – our family is strong. It will stay strong. I can almost feel our love as a tangible thing, tying us together like a golden cord. But I feel so sad, so lost, so bruised – I am exhausted.

Johnna has brought me something to help me sleep – I decide to take it, the world is a little harsh right now. My mind has been racing, whirling and twirling – still a sense of shattered pieces. I lay down on the bed, slowly the whirling stops. Someone comes into my room – I have no idea who, I am drifting off....oblivion for a little while is nice.

I wake later, the sun has shifted, I can still hear voices outside....I lay there thinking, wondering, feeling detached from the world and a little lost. I gather my strength, I am beginning to learn that each time I wake up there is a moment of peace and then reality hits, I have to consciously gather myself, pull my thoughts into focus and arm myself to face the battle that is daily life.

James and Viv have organised dinner – a massive bowl of salad, lasagne and garlic bread (I am certain I will never eat lasagne again). I sit down in the kitchen and try to eat, I just want to be alone....no, I want to be with Callum and Paul and everyone else....no I want to be alone...my mind will not stop swirling and twirling.....I send people to check on Paul, I am desperate for him to eat, please make sure he is eating. He is intent on looking after everyone, I want him to stop fussing and let them take care of him,. Michael and Diane arrive – more silent hugs, what can they say? What can anyone say?

People begin to drift off, time for us to wind down and stop for the night. I am scared, I don't want this day to end – this is the last day that she was here with us, tomorrow begins the days which are empty of her. I am not ready for that....I can't remember that , I know Josie was here, I know it was the first night that I began my attack on crying ourselves to sleep....I know I took sleeping tablets....I don't know what happened though.

I do know that we began the pattern of many nights to come – Paul and I retreated to our bedroom and talked quietly – one or other of us crying. But I refused to let us go to sleep with tears in our eyes – crying yourself to sleep is a lonely occupation and I will not let us be lonely in our grief, we are together we have to share it. Some nights we would talk for hours, some for only a short time....the first night, who knows? I do know we were sad and lost and scared. Fear was there with our grief, I was scared that I couldn't cope with this, this was a massive hurdle to get over and people need something special to survive something like this....did I have that?

The other question we kept asking ourselves was what did we do to deserve this? Were we too complaisant? Too cocky? Did we fail to appreciate just how lucky we were? Were we careless? What did we do wrong? We had a need to make ourselves the centre of this, we felt that it had to have been our fault....it took a long time for us to come to terms with the thought that it was simply random fate, things happen without us causing them. There must be a reason, but we are yet to find it.

Day one was over, the next day was to start without her – could we go on????

Day Two and Beyond

We woke early, I lay in bed and watched the sun rise, walking myself through all that had happened the morning before, I relived it all, I knew moment by moment what happened. Callum woke up – I breathed a sigh of relief, never again have I been certain that he would wake up in the morning. Day 2 began our new life – each day I lay there waiting to hear Callum's first morning noise, when I do I say thank-you. I can't remember details from that day – just a set of images. I know we gathered together a lot of the things we had for Mum's party and packed them – Marie and Michael came and took some of them. Then we drove to Goolwa – it was about getting us out of the house and helping us survive the day. I felt out of touch with reality, confused and lost.....

We arrived in Goolwa to the news that the autopsy had been performed, no answers though beyond the fact that it wasn't SIDS and wasn't anything to do with the heat (that was a relief, I had somehow been certain that we had overheated her....) but no answer, it could be months before the results came in. Paul spoke to his family – Kellie, his Mum and Dad and Chris are coming. A day of talking and planning. Mum and Dad asked all the hard questions – how do we want the service to be? Do we want a viewing? Initially I said private service and no viewing but Mum spoke of the fact that she never was able to say goodbye to Anthony because she couldn't see him or go to the service, she told me about the gap that was never filled, the goodbye that was never said and the regret that never left her. I decided that we would have a full service and a viewing.....

We had Mum's cake that day, sang happy birthday, I felt as though we had stolen her day, hijacked the 70th birthday, a whole year of planning for the party that was never to be. But at least it meant that my family was around us to protect us, cocoon us and share our loss – there really is something to be said for those cultures in which people get together and wail and mourn together. I think if I had been alone during those early days I would not have been able to cope, I would have sat and cried and felt sorry for myself – my grief would have been too much of a burden to carry.

Then of course there was Callum – I just had to look at him and I was able to smile through my tears. Paul and I once again caught by the ebb and flow of the day – joined by invisible threads, always looking, touching, speaking...together.

We all went to the beach that day and I remember half of the family was up on the beach, the other half was in the water, I stood in between the two groups, alone yet surrounded by others and protected by their love. I put my face into the wind, felt the breeze on my face, heard the noises of everyone talking – children squealing in the surf....I caught a glimmer of the future, I knew it would be alright, different but alright....how can I find that peace??????????

The overwhelming impression of those early days is one of being set adrift from the real world – I was functioning and living somewhere outside of and beyond every day normality. I would look at people who were simply going about their day to day lives and want to grab them, shake them and yell at them....'how dare you????' How could they continue functioning when such a tragedy had happened? Surely the whole world should stop and mourn with us? Every now and then I would catch a laugh, and feel guilty. What are the rules for times such as these? What should I do?

Each night Paul and I would hide away in our room – cry and talk and share. Keeping each other together, holding on to each other and our family. I went shopping on the Monday – I was determined to get something special to wear to the funeral....I was concerned that this was vanity but the real reason was that I simply had to look my best for our girl, I would have bought special outfits for so many occasions in her life which were never going to happen now – weddings, graduations, prizes....I also knew I had to speak at the funeral but when Paul told me that he was going to carry the casket I panicked – I was scared for him as it was such a hard thing to do. But he told me that he could never speak at the funeral but he knew it was something I needed to do – so carrying her out was something he needed to do, so I agreed.

We asked the Grandmothers to speak for her – Paul's Mum didn't want to but Mum did, said she would do her proud (and she did). Johnna and Brandon and James and Viv were marvellous – checking that all was okay, helping us with food and other things that I simply was incapable of. James and Viv even brought us a load of wood for the winter – they felt that they had to something for us but knew there was little they could do, no-one could take the burden from us, it was ours alone. We felt loved, surrounded and protected.

I went to see the Doctor – got something to help me sleep and the pill to help stop the milk...gradually it dried up, I wanted to cry when it was gone as it was last really tangible link with her. But I knew that if I didn't stop it would become unbearable and I wouldn't be able to move forward.

People coming and going, phone constantly ringing, a house full of flowers. I didn't know how many friends we really had until now, I am moved. Paul is uncomfortable with the flowers as they are only fleeting – just after he says this two live rose bushes arrive.....

Callum is our little eye in the centre of the storm. He asks after Caitlin – where has his baby gone? We tell him she is with the angels, he has no idea. We go to Daycare to talk to them about it and to ask them to take him back early – help him to get back to normal life. They have such a responsibility for him...we trust that he will be all right. He still wants his Bella Baby, he is confused and has lost the blind faith that when we leave we will come back, he cries when we leave, everyone who leaves the house is earnestly asked “will you come back later?” We are determined that he will get his innocent belief that life is simple and good and that people do come back.

Pauls’s family is now here – the house is full but at the same time it is empty - there is a bassinette that should have a baby in it now put to one side, empty. I can feel the physical lack of Caitlin in my arms – like I have put down a heavy load and can still feel it weighing down in my arms.

The viewing comes – we know it will be hard but we have to go. We only want family and Johnna and Brandon and James and Viv there...it is a private, quiet time. Paul and I go in first – she is so tiny, like a little doll, not quite our Caitlin at all. She looks so tired, bags under her eyes and her mouth is not quite right. I hold on to Paul and cannot take my eyes off the beautiful little doll. Everyone comes and goes – Paul’s Mum and Dad see her for the first and last time...that must be so hard. Callum is not to see this part, it would only confuse him, we know he is waiting outside for us. I want to see her party dress but she is wrapped up in a shawl – I am glad they have done that because she could only rest when she was wrapped, I don’t want her to be restless or cold...I can catch glimpses of the dress under the shawl – I remember buying it, lovely pink party dress for the birthday party – every girl needs a party dress I tell Paul, he laughs at me but I can tell by the twinkle in his eye that he secretly agrees and can’t wait to see her in it. Now we never will, if I had known when I bought it that it would be her last dress I would have been devastated, horrified – not my girl, she was going to live forever.

Finally we know we have to leave her – I know I must go but I can’t tear my eyes away...my beautiful little angel....I want to hold you, kiss you, smell you but I know that you are not you any more, the essence of you has moved on. Tomorrow is the funeral – how will we survive that?

I cannot say anymore about that night – it simply came and went and then it was time for the final farewell. I take care with my hair and make up, I want her to be proud of us. It is the last time we can do anything for her. We arrive – it is a lovely place, so many people coming up to speak to us, so many sad faces, so many tears....We move in, the casket is tiny, I have a sense of being surrounded as I feel the room fill up behind us. There is a priest – can’t remember his name, I know he was very nice and that he smelt of cigarettes...such a tiny little casket, she is alone up there....Now I have to speak, can I stand up? Of course I can....Stand tall and proud – look at those people.....here is what I said:

Since last Friday morning both Paul and I have gone through every conceivable emotion, from anger and despair right through to moments of joy as we turn from asking why there was this terrible tragedy and look at the special gift that was Caitlin. Both Paul and I want everyone to focus not on the tragedy that was Caitlin’s death but on the blessing that was her life, to do otherwise is to turn her very being into something that was negative and she was just too beautiful to be negative.

Caitlin has shown us the beauty in the people that surround us – during my pregnancy we felt the excitement and joy of our family and friends, when she was born there was celebration at every turn and whilst she lived, every single person who saw her smiled – even total strangers stopped and looked or spoke to us. In a world where everyone is cynical and people do not approach others just to share the joy of the day, Caitlin broke down the barriers and made it okay to stop and smile and exchange a word with a stranger. With her death we have had a further humbling lesson – the support and love that has surrounded us since Friday has truly kept us going – once again, Caitlin has revealed the beauty in the

world. I spent most of Thursday night and Friday morning cuddling, singing to and soothing Caitlin, then in the strong and loving arms of her Father her big heart gave out and with a sigh, she left us. We will always miss our bella baby Caitlin and will never forget her. At the same time we give thanks for the wonderful support and love we have experienced from all of you, our family and friends – without you, this would be impossible, you have helped to make the unendurable endurable.....thank you.

Callum's bella baby Caitlin is now with the angels and is Harry, Tom and Jack's special star – she was a beautiful little girl and is now a guide and protector for us, surrounding us with the love which we gave her.....

Then I read from the Little Prince:

“In one of the stars I shall be living

In one of them I shall be laughing

And so it will be As if all of the stars

Were laughing When you look at the sky at night.”

I asked everyone to think of her when they looked at the stars....I was so grateful that Paul was standing there behind me, holding me up, that our family and friends were there to support us....that Callum was there to indignantly say “But Caitlin is gone.....”

Mum spoke then – it made me cry anew, it reminded me that this is not just our loss, everyone is touched by this, Caitlin has taken a little piece of many with her.

Soon, it is all over, time to move out. Paul picks her up and leads us all out, standing tall and strong – I am so proud of him, of his strength and dignity. She is placed in the car, Harry is crying, crying,....Tom wants to know whether Caitlin has her seatbelt on...everyone is trying to stop Harry and hope I don't hear Tom. I want to turn and tell them all that it is okay, she was a small innocent child so there should be noises from other small innocent children around her. I can't turn though, I hold on to Paul and stare at the casket – so tiny in that big car...At last we move forward, a long line of people, following slowly as we wind our way through the grounds of the cemetery. We pass the children's cemetery – all those toys and windmills...all those dead children...why are there so many? It doesn't seem right.

We are there now, time for a final goodbye.... there is the hole in the ground...I dread seeing her go down there where it is damp and cold and beyond my reach. But know she has to go – oh my little girl, why? This can't be real, it can't be happening to us...it is like really bad tear jerker of a movie, soppy plot, too sad to be real. But no, it is real, the hole in the centre of me tells me it is real. I cannot stand up – somehow I end up on the chair, Paul crouching beside me, I see her lowered, goodbye I silently say, be safe and at rest. They are saying something to me – I cannot believe they actually want me to look down there, is that just to reinforce how far down in the darkness she is? No thank-you I say...but she insists...no thank you...are you sure...I don't want to look down there I hear a child's voice wail and then realise it is mine. Later so many people tell me they wanted to leap forward, protect me and tell her to leave me alone. Time to go now, I want to leave this place – I know I will return when I am ready but right now it is just too sad and it hurts too much. We walk back, a long line of people want to talk to us – everyone speaks to us, hugs us, tells us how moved they are, support us....anything we can do, anything at all...so many tears.

Slowly it quietens down, is that me talking and even smiling? Am I really speaking to all of these people – look at Paul, So strong, so sad, so torn...there beside me, touching my hand and fingers, never much further away than an arms length. We're going to be strong.

We go for lunch – all I remember clearly is that Callum had spaghetti bolognese, and Jack's chips, and Tom's chips and Harry's chips!! He is happy. I am so proud of my boy.

Home again. I sneak away to my bedroom – like a storm it washes over me, I cannot bear this any more, I start to cry then sob then I am uncontrollable....how can I possibly go on from here? Where is my girl? Marie is there, Paul is there then Mum is there, out to the couch in the middle of all the noise, she sits on the floor, I lie on the couch. Two or three hours of sleep – Mum doesn't move, she protects me and takes it from me long enough for me to recharge and be able to pick up my burden again. That night, dinner is brought over by our friends – we all share food together. Paul and I wander through the throng – lost, how are we to pull ourselves back into the world? I spot the sunset – it is pink, I get Paul, we stand out the front and watch the glorious pink sunset. She is saying goodbye in the only way she can – a burst of beauty and then it is gone, we could feel her there with us...somehow we feel an element of peace. Then back to it all – the aimless wandering.

We all go to Goolwa the next day – across to Granite Island....but oh, it is so hot and although everyone tries to carry on, the loss, the emptiness and the sadness are still there. Then the goodbyes start – Carmel and the boys are on the road the next day. I hold on to Carmel, don't want to let go, don't want anyone to go but I know they must. Then Josie to the airport – more tears, more goodbyes...Paul's family...this is now the patten of our days. We now have to survive on our own...but we know we are not alone, we have our friends and there is always the telephone and then of course, there is each other. Each day is another one without her, each day we have to learn anew what life is now like, each day we learn a little more about who we now are because none of us are the same people we were before.

Life rolls on, we are in it but not in it. We see what is happening but don't really participate – there is a bubble surrounding us and protecting us, we don't really feel. I go back to work and Paul goes back to school – we have decided that to place the burden of a legacy of destruction on a four week old baby (destroy our life, destroy Callum's life and happiness) is unreasonable. She cannot, will not have negative legacy – we still do not know what her legacy was but it was not everlasting sorrow.

Life gradually gets better – we appear to approach normal, whatever that may be. I feel like a stronger yet softer person. Paul has to confront many demons at the hospital, but he comes home and talks them through with me. Most days are ok, some days are awful. Mothers Day was devastating, I cried and cried. The bubble persists, protecting us but it is thinning – slowly the outside world begins to seep through and touch us again. I cannot say when or how (or even if) the bubble lifted, but slowly we emerge and as a family we move forward.

I can feel her around me, helping and supporting me. She will always be with me, always be a part of me. She has helped to make me who I am as an individual and Paul and I who we are as a couple. Callum now knows that when we go away we will come back, sometimes he says that he wants his baby back and is a little confused but we think he has emerged in one piece.

Where to now? Who knows – we realise that some days will be sad days and other happy; we accept that crying is ok – but so is laughter; life will move on, our wounds will heal but the hole in our hearts will never fill. But that is simply how it is, we now know that it is possible to live with a tragedy we will survive. No...it is more than mere survival.....we will be happy and we will be strong. Bernadette ©