

The author at
Lucy's grave seven
years to the month
after her death

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA LARSEN

loving lucy

A father
remembers
the daughter
who broke
his heart

by Liam Callanan

On Father's Day, Mary Grace, my five-year-old, will give me a card featuring many *M*'s, her favorite letter. Honor, my two-year-old, will give me an earsplitting wake-up shriek. And my first child, Lucy, won't give me anything at all.

Lucy's grave is in the children's section of an old urban cemetery in Washington, D.C. On the granite marker, underneath her name, Lucy Callanan, is a single date: February 19, 1998.

When my wife, Susan, and I arrived at labor and delivery that day, the receptionist gave us one of those little smiles medical people offer up when you both know that what's coming will be painful. In the examining room, Susan put on her gown and sat on the edge of the bed, her bare feet dangling. I was sent downstairs to do paperwork.

When I returned, the doctor arrived. She took me into the hallway and explained that, because of the circumstances, this could take some time—30 hours or more.

It did not. Because the next thing I knew, I was holding her, my daughter. It didn't happen that quickly, but almost. One minute we were in the car, the next we were alone in the room, just Susan and I with our first child, holding her, afraid to touch her.

She was beautiful. Lucy. She had fair hair and rosebud lips. And her legs—they went on and on. Babies are always discussed in terms of weight and length, but my daughter, fresh out, was already tall. I thought I would recognize her face from the sonogram, but I did not. It was not black and white, for one. It was beautiful, full color, cheeks, nose, chin, those lips, and eyes. The nurse took Lucy away, briefly, "to clean her up." As the doctor talked to us, she cried, the only time ever I've seen a real, live doctor cry.

Your daughter, she said: Of course, she died some time ago.

MY DAUGHTER DIED IN ATLANTA. WE HAVE NO IDEA OF the exact moment, but I will always think of Atlanta, where I had just landed on what we'd already determined would be my last business trip for some time. The baby was due in just a few weeks. As I left the airport, my pager buzzed. I thumbed through the message: "Call doctor's office. Cannot detect baby's heartbeat."

I didn't understand. Bad news, yes—but my wife was in the doctor's office. They'd take care of it, right?

Traveling with me was a female colleague, a mother, who read the message. "Oh, Liam," she said, and hugged me.

I started walking, then running. I boarded the same plane I'd just gotten off. I returned to D.C. in time to find Susan in an empty office, across the hall from the doctor's main suite. She was alone, the light off, hands in her lap, sobbing. "I'm so sorry," she said when I walked in, then could say nothing more. A nurse had to explain: During Susan's routine seven-month prenatal checkup, they had been unable to find a fetal heartbeat. The nurse tried, then the doctor, and then they knew.

The doctor recommended Susan be induced. Previously, one waited—weeks, possibly—for the body to realize the fetus had died, whereupon the mother would go into labor "like normal." Susan's doctor thought it healthier, mentally, to deliver the child immediately. So



then, the choice: Susan could be admitted that afternoon, or we could wait for the next morning.

I interrupted: Wouldn't a Cesarean be less traumatic? Susan could go to sleep pregnant, and awake not. The doctor shook her head. A vaginal delivery was the safest way to get the body to recognize the baby was gone.

Then right away, I said. Right now.

Tomorrow, Susan said.


Why? I asked. She didn't answer me until we were in the car, alone, driving home.

I want to be pregnant for one more night, she said.

SOON AFTER WE ARRIVED AT THE HOSPITAL the next day, the world divided in two, into those who knew what had happened and those who did not. A young nurse-midwife appeared in the room—she knew. A housekeeper entered to replace Susan's sheets (Susan had begun throwing up); the housekeeper did not know. Rather, she talked merrily about how sick her first baby had made her. Susan threw up again. The midwife ushered the woman out of the room and returned some minutes later with a long-stem yellow rose, silk. She affixed it to the outside of the door with white first aid tape.

After that, everyone knew.

"IT'S A GIRL," THE DOCTOR SAID, THE ONLY WORDS necessary to finally and truly break our hearts: It was the last time anyone would speak of our child in the



present tense. And, a girl: We were so sure it was a boy. So certain, we'd had the name ready to go. But then, the day before, just as we were drifting off into that last night of half sleep, Susan said: If it's a girl?

"If it's a girl," I said, because the name came to me that quickly, "it's Lucy."

And here she was, presented to us by the midwife with a defiant sort of pride. She didn't say it, but she made it clear: You have to hold her, look at her. She made us undo the blanket.

This sounds cruel, or revolting, but only if you have never been in such a room. Next to my wife, there was no braver woman in the ward that day than that midwife, who was methodically prodding us into recognizing, and becoming, what we now were: parents. Rather than thinking of Lucy as a stillborn, an asterisk, a baby who would receive neither a birth certificate (the form is titled "Record of Live Birth") nor a death certificate (one has to live in order to die), we should nevertheless think of her as someone who had, still, been born. Not stillborn. She existed. She was real.

We lost our nerve only when the midwife asked if we

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HREE DAYS LATER, THREE DAYS OF SUSAN'S breasts weeping milk when a baby anywhere—down the street outside, on the television—cried, three days of sympathy flowers perfuming our house to suffocation, three nights without sleep, I found the social worker's card and called. It was 3:30 in the morning.

"We've changed our mind," I told her voicemail. "We—we want the body—we want her. Lucy."

Because when I'd called the church to ask about a service, and the priest had asked where Lucy was now, I had to say I didn't know.

Because the anguished hour we'd spent with Lucy in the hospital not knowing what to do with her turned out to be not nearly long enough.

Because I now understood myself to be a father, albeit one without a daughter, and I understood that I had somehow failed a very early, very important test of parenthood: keeping track of your kids.

"I'm so sorry.... You called rather late," the social worker said when she called back, eventually working

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would like the hospital photographer to take a picture. "She is a beautiful girl," the midwife instructed us. But we couldn't meet the midwife's stare; no photo, we mumbled, sure that any picture would spur decades of nightmares. (It's only now we know that not having that picture has made us lose far more sleep.)

Eventually, the midwife left the room, and left Lucy with us. We held her, we passed her back and forth. But we didn't know what to do. She was absolutely still and silent, and as she was premature, weighed about as much as a bouquet of flowers. At just about the point where we were ready to scream—as painful as handling an inconsolable infant may be, nothing compares to the agony of holding a child who does not move or breathe—a social worker arrived. "What would you like to do," she asked me, "with the body?" No baby book had prepared me for this question. "If you like," the social worker said cautiously, "the hospital can take care of things." She waited. I nodded. She waited a little while longer. I stared at her, not realizing what I'd done. "OK," she finally said.

her way around to telling me that Lucy already had been cremated and "respectfully disposed of." She offered no more details.

I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN I SHOOK MY HEAD AT THE futility of cemeteries—all that land, all that expense, and for what? But now I knew exactly for what. Even without Lucy's remains, we needed a marker, a stone, something to point at as other parents might look at baby shoes or soccer pictures or all those things we would never have.

I had only one reference point for cemeteries, Mount Oliver, where relatives of mine were buried. So I started there. A weary woman sat at a gunmetal desk in a stone house just inside the entrance. She did not understand why I did not have the body. We studied each other a moment, and then my whole story tumbled out: the hospital, the autopsy, the social worker.

The woman's eyes briefly awoke. She led me to a far corner of the cemetery, where tall pines grew, and nodded to a stone marked simply with the name of our hospital. It was a communal (CONTINUED ON PAGE 210)

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grave, she explained, where our hospital customarily placed babies who had died.

So Lucy was here. Why hadn't anyone told us? The woman took me back to the gatehouse to confirm. But we came up with nothing, just the fact that remains had indeed arrived from our hospital that month. She had no record of a "Lucy." And then there was the fact that Lucy was a stillborn, and that there had been an autopsy; in short, Lucy might not

days, on Lucy's birthday. Every year, on that February day, we buy a brand-new crib, a new mattress, crib set, and car seat, and take it all to a small charity for needy moms. We'd discovered it back when we had been searching for a place to donate all the baby items we'd received before Lucy was born. While handing over the onesies and bottles, we noticed a handwritten sign above the office phone: "Do not take requests for cribs or car seats." A volunteer explained that people called all day for these things, but they never had any

would let us hear our child's heartbeat for the first time, and how reassured we would then be.

Susan gently cut him short and said, calmly, "The last time I saw one of these was when I learned our baby had died."

The doctor froze, and then, with his hand stalled an inch above Susan's belly, commenced a rapid-fire series of explanations for why we might not hear anything that day, nothing at all, but really, that was fine. And he had an ultrasound unit down the hall, so if the smaller device didn't pick up anything, we'd just wander down there.

Susan nodded. He touched the monitor to her timidly, as though he were lighting a fuse.

A thumping beat suddenly ran round the room. He looked up and beamed: "It's a girl!"

It was just a guess—it was too early to know for sure. Too early to know that it would be a girl, that we would name her Mary Grace, that she would astound and delight and sadden us, just a bit, because as she grew we would realize the full extent of what we'd lost. It was also too early to know that Mary Grace would gain another sister, Honor, two years later. And it was too early to know—or even imagine—that the day would come when we would smile, even laugh, on Father's Day.

It was too early for all of that, but there in the doctor's office, it was too soon for one more thing. The doctor began to remove the monitor. Susan stopped him. "Just—a little—longer," she said, and he nodded and lowered his head, and let the monitor beat on and on and on. Thumpthump thumpthump, it raced, wildly, steadily, while the three of us remained absolutely still. ■

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have been placed in the communal infant grave, but in another communal grave nearby. "Call the mortuary," the woman said.

"A stillborn, well," said the man who answered the phone. "That small, you see," he explained, as though we were talking about someone else's daughter, "when cremated, some babies just evaporate, they're all water, through and through." He said it twice, as though I needed convincing, as though Susan did, as though we had not cried enough to know this was true.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, I WAS OFFERED a big promotion at work, but I resigned instead. I turned in my pager, never having deleted the message about Lucy's silent heartbeat. Which left me with nothing: no message, no photograph, no remains, an empty grave.

We bought a plot at the cemetery so we'd have a place to visit on holi-

to give. People donated cribs rarely and new car seats never (they're not allowed to distribute used car seats).

It feels good to give, but it's still hard to leave their office empty-handed each year, my breath fogging in the cold, and think of the mortician's suggestion that Lucy evaporated into thin air, a tiny cloud.

Nevertheless, that thought gave me a title for my first novel, *The Cloud Atlas*, a book I started writing to find something in all that nothing, a book I dedicated to Lucy. People ask Susan who Lucy is—my first girlfriend?

No, my first girl.

AND MY SECOND?

A few years ago, we were back in the doctor's office. Susan was pregnant again, though this was not a happy visit. Just a few weeks along, she'd begun bleeding, off and on. The doctor, a new one, ushered us in and began to explain how a fetal heartbeat monitor worked, how it