

from the '60s. It was now this outgoing woman-child's turn to tutor her timid aunt in the art of being festive.

The Dream

In the first few months, on my scariest nights I would hold on to the brass headboard of my bed, afraid of being swallowed by the darkness. Was this the darkness Carlton gave in to? The thought made me grip the cold metal tighter.

But in the middle of May, about four months after his death, I had a dream. I remembered no images, only sounds. I was to pick up my son and a friend from a church activity, but Carlton called in a somewhat raspier version of his voice, "Mom, here's the deal. I want to stay tonight. The team is playing and we missed the last game. I can get my medallion some other time."

I awakened suddenly, looking around the dark bedroom for the familiar voice, frantic to know what it meant. He loved baseball. Had he found the perfect team? Was "missing the last game" a reference to his first suicide attempt? Was it important for me to know he had chosen to spend the night at church? The voice in my head was asking too many questions.

Then there was mention of a medallion. What was that about? Was he given the impossible role of family hero, the only child of a first-born mother and an only-child father? The first grandchild on either side. By

the time he was four months old, his father and I separated and Carlton had little contact with him. What did I do wrong? What should I have done differently? When he was seven years old I remarried and he was adopted by my second husband, Matt, who was also the first-born of his family. Carlton then became the first grandchild for Matt's family. There were so many expectations riding on those broad shoulders of his. What should I have realized earlier? How could I have known? And he said he can get his medallion some other time. What in the world did that mean?

I grabbed my pen and notebook. I needed something wiser than this questioning voice in my head to talk me through these mounting fears.

What did I do to my precious son?

*You only did what you knew.
Generations of family experiences
and birth-order responsibilities as
you understood them.*

*But I've made so many mistakes.
How do I go on? What do I do
now?*

*Well, tell me what you have been
doing.*

*I gave a family memorial service for
Carlton. A chance to come together
privately, away from the well-meaning
public and friends.*

That's good, what else?

Well, then I pulled away from my immediate family.

That's OK.

I didn't have the energy to take care of anyone but me.

I said that's OK.

I tutored Avery. There were lunches with my brother Buddy at George's Grill. I babysat Jake and Laura Beth.

All very good.

That was easy. I knew how to do those things. But the rest of my family...

What about them?

Well, Buddy brought my daddy by on Valentine's Day to give me a rose. I remember holding tightly to him in my driveway. I felt like a little girl.

That makes sense.

But I can only talk to brother Bruce through e-mails. He seems so overwhelmed. And I'm avoiding Mother altogether. I'm afraid they'll take too much energy.

That's OK for now. You're doing the best you can. They'll understand. Things will change when they need to.

I'm volunteering in Leah's classroom again. I know how to help there. And meeting my teacher friends on Fridays feels comfortable enough. But some of the friends I haven't been in touch with lately scare me, and I'm not sure why.

Don't push yourself if you're not ready. You'll understand when it's time.

I meet with my writing group every Sunday afternoon. I know how to participate there.

It sounds like you're doing just what you need to do.

Really?

Sure. Just do the best you can and keep talking to me.

And who was I these first months of darkness? I was still the daughter, the sister, the aunt, the mother, the teacher, the friend, and the writer. And in time, as I felt ready to step back into the light that is life on Earth, I found new ways to know who I am and where I belong. I just kept talking to my notebook.

Ashes

A soft voice on the other end of the line told me the package containing my son's remains had finally come

from a crematorium in California and I could come pick it up at the local funeral home. I went that afternoon.

But when I got home I put the unopened package on the table next to his framed marathon picture. That was enough courage for one day. Something didn't make sense. The picture and the package couldn't be the same person. For days all I did was walk by the table and assess my strength. I couldn't do this by myself; I needed help from my pen.

I can't open the box. I'm too scared.

That's OK, sweetie.

But it needs to be taken care of. I need to move on.

Relax, Laura. You'll know when you're ready.

So I continued to scribble in my notebook, and several days later I found myself opening the package. Inside was a brown plastic rectangular box, not the imagined burial urn. Nothing good enough to hold my beautiful son. I took some deep breaths, then unsnapped the plastic box, untwisted the tie on the plastic bag and touched the light gray powder. This can't be Carlton. Twenty-seven years of flesh and blood could not be so easily reduced to an ash-filled baggie. I found official papers from the crematorium tucked inside the fine dust, and little lumps of bone, and oh, dear, a string and metal tag etched with his name. A toe tag. My mind traveled to images from the

movies, then back to the reality of my living room. *Breathe*, I told myself.

For several days I just practiced opening the box, looking at its contents, touching it, and wondering if I would ever be able to let it go.

My plan was to scatter Carlton's ashes on the Caddo Lake Nature Trail, where I had gone just two days before his death, desperately seeking my own peace. On that troubling day, within minutes of feeling the firm footing beneath me and inhaling the fresh air all around, I had found overwhelming connection. A tingling sensation ran through my body and warmth surrounded me. I was a completed circuit. As I continued walking, allowing balance to settle back into me, I came upon a clearing. A dozen tiny songbirds — nuthatches, chickadees, and finches — flew through with much rejoicing. Yes, I thought later, replaying the amazing scene over and over in my head. That was where my son, once the head chorister for the Shreveport Boychoir, would find rest.

It took several weeks and much journaling before I could separate the gray ash in the brown plastic box from my image of Carlton. I chose to go to the Texas state park alone, afraid of the energy I might need if anyone else was with me. The 45-minute drive gave my spinning mind time to let go of any last-minute doubts. At the entrance I told the park ranger I wouldn't be there long, and she waived the \$2 day fee. I claimed this as assurance that I was right where I was

supposed to be and drove down the steep park road to the trail's parking lot, turned off the engine, climbed out of the car with the box, and hiked to the place where the songbirds flew.

Once there I stood on the path, looking into the sunlit clearing, deeply breathing in the fresh air, and steadying my shaking hands. Then I unsnapped the box and took out a handful of ash. This was hard. My heart was pounding. The act of physically letting go was different from the release of spinning thoughts. Tears streamed down my face as I tossed one tentative fistful after another and watched the powder drift through the air and land among bamboo, decomposing leaves, and dirt trail. But halfway through the task I had stopped crying. The tingling and warmth returned, and the event felt incredibly powerful. I was now slinging the dust higher and letting it scatter farther, as if in celebration.

When the box was empty, I turned my attention away from where the ashes had fallen to the other side of the trail. There was a tree stump covered in resurrection fern, another sign for me that this truly was a place of profound connection. Mother Nature — the perfect setting for my child to find rest.

Raising a Princess

Princess, a scruffy, white and apricot terrier poodle, lies sprawled in a comfortable puddle on my lap while I write. She's my puppy alter ego.

By the time the little dog was four years old, we had each settled into a routine, our boundaries more or less defined. But the first two years were a struggle. I forgot how much constant attention a puppy demands, as I battled a personality as stubborn as my own. Her annoying chewing and yapping were a continuous challenge. Housebreaking the pup made Carlton's toilet training seem easy, and she was as hard to bathe and groom as that wiggly boy once was. Some battles I won; some I learned to give in to, calling them a truce of sorts. She goes outside to pee now, but her stuffed Beanie Baby toys are strewn all over the house.

Although still much like a small child, she has been very good company on this difficult journey. Princess is so tuned to my moods I wonder how she reads my mind. If I feel closed-in and antsy, the fluffy dog stands on her hind legs and whines for a walk. If I am lonely and at loose ends, she jumps into my lap. When her rough pink tongue begins licking my face, my first impulse is to push her away. But if I hesitate for a moment and allow the affection, I realize it's what I really wanted.

I pushed Carlton away, too. After a full day of teaching fifth graders, I'd pick him up at daycare and we'd head home where I'd immediately collapse on the sofa. He would then climb into my lap, ready for attention. A setting much like my times with Princess. I didn't have enough energy for the busy little guy. I couldn't see his needs; I was so overwhelmed by my own. A current of anxiety ran through my body as I wrote this, reminding me of another feeling I once had.

On the Saturday morning I believe Carlton was conceived, there was warmth in my womb. It was a stirring, but not an anxiousness. More like an assurance. I knew I was pregnant six weeks before a doctor's verification and before home tests were available. His father wasn't pleased and wanted little to do with this growing presence. I had used a foam contraceptive, I reasoned, having been the one responsible for birth control. We were not planning to start a family. But I couldn't let this new feeling go; I felt him stir.

I also remember having painful cramps late one night when I was six months pregnant. Afraid of what they could mean, I spent a long time alone in our tiny bathroom, crying and bargaining with God for a healthy baby. Three months later seven-pound, fifteen-ounce Carlton arrived.

Princess is another assurance, another chance. It's not an inner stirring this time. She's the frisky outer puppy inviting my inner puppy to come out and play. She

chases squirrels through the backyard and barks at the neighborhood cats, who sit calmly watching her tirade from the top of the cinderblock fence. I wonder with chagrin if I'm that stubborn about things I have no control over.

Princess takes naps, lying draped over the top of the sofa or completely relaxed on her back in the middle of the living room, her pink tummy exposed. So trusting of her surroundings. I envy that.

It takes effort to balance both my notebook and an eight-pound dog in my lap when I want to write. These task-driven times trigger my impatience. Yet when I stare at the blank page, clueless what to do next, her attention offers a solution. Do I tell her enough how important she is?

Carl Jung said the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect, but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.

As my mind jumps around looking for impossible answers for past regrets, the scruffy princess encourages my creative energy, urging me to let go and participate, and reminding me of my own royal opportunities.

My Living Room

Most of my journaling takes place on a hide-a-bed sofa in the middle of the living room. Sitting here picking at pink and blue threads on the back cushion as I wait for formless thoughts to take shape, I imagine how this material was made. Overhead there are two large rectangular skylights, added soon after moving in, when we realized how dark this room was, even in the middle of the day. When I stretch out on this book-and-paper cluttered sofa with the fluffy dog on my lap and a Mary Englebreit woven throw covering my feet, I can watch clouds and birds pass above me.

Stacks of ongoing projects in this room make it a mess, something I would have worried about once upon a time. Now I just shrug it off as my natural state, knowing that when things get too messy even for me, I'll have a spontaneous burst of cleaning-frenzy energy and begin stirring things up.

Large watercolor paintings by two local artists hang on the walls. There are prints of school children in classrooms, flowers and birds, a Habitat for Humanity poster and one on childhood hunger. Images reminding me who I have been. A dozen silver- and gold-framed pictures of children sit on my small roll-top secretary. It is as if Carlton, my nieces and nephew, special children from school or church, and the child of a dear

young teacher-friend are poised nearby to "watch" as I write.

Two bookcases are crammed with a diverse mix of books on the subjects of education, women's issues, politics, nature, and spirituality. Some were signed by the authors when I, eager to be in the company of writers, attended their lecture or workshop. There are also some favorite children's books, both from my childhood and classroom.

My maternal grandmother's anniversary clock sits to the right of the sofa on a side table that was also hers. My grandparents bought it in the '30s. It isn't presently working. Perhaps our connection does not run on Earth time. Her corner hutch near the skylight displays crystal goblets ringed with silver, presents from my 1974 wedding. On one shelf are pictures of my grandmother and Carlton, each as young children, along with two angel figurines. They shared the birth date of November 28.

Carlton's Raggedy Andy doll sits in a small wooden student chair just under the side table. Another "child" watching me. A dining table and chairs bought from a friend for a bargain price fill the dining area of the room. Two of the nicer pieces in here, an oversized dark blue upholstered chair and stained-glass buffet, were obtained at another friend's garage sale. In one corner, a threadbare rocking chair with a pinned-on lace doily covering one of the more obvious worn spots accumulates stacks of books and papers. This rocker is

identical to the one in which my dad spent much time in the den of our family home.

On top of the larger bookcase a light blue ceramic parakeet, three painted wooden birds, a tiny brass owl, and a pair of brown clay doves perch among an assortment of birdhouses. My maternal grandfather's field glasses anchor one corner. Perhaps, because I often say God speaks to me through birds, it seems logical to have them above my writing space ready to impart their special messages.

But there's something else in this room that may go unseen to the casual observer. Conversations of family and friends continue to vibrate in the air. And there are faint images from this setting's past. I can see Carlton on the edge of the rocking chair playing Nintendo for hours — his beginning fascination with computers. Did I notice then how intensely he worked at manipulating the data on a baseball game, allowing him to design his perfect team? My dad, in his own rocking chair, would watch baseball games on television with the same intensity. He was part of a partnership obtaining the first television station license for Shreveport in 1953.

Many evenings this dining table waited, spread for the family meal. But anger and sadness from comments or facial expressions challenged any illusion I might have had of a Norman Rockwell setting. I wanted to recreate the stimulating dinner conversations I

remembered as a child. Perhaps I did. The table now holds a clutter of papers and books.

The memorial service with Carlton's family plays through the air, reminding me of our coming together. I can see where everyone sat and hear what we said, each trying in our own way to connect. Here on the sofa Avery and I studied history as we learned of each other. I was discovering common ground and becoming less attached to my idea of how things should be. And this is where I continue to talk intimately to my notebook, gaining confidence to be a participant beyond these walls again.

There are so many kind words, angry words, sad words, and unspoken words swirling around in here. Sorting through all this noise can easily overwhelm and agitate me when I try to grab hold of it. But warm sunbeams shine through the windows in my ceiling, cutting into the chaotic sound waves, brightening the room, and beckoning me to let go and look up. I watch the drifting cloud wisps and soaring birds, and my rapid, shallow breathing and racing, jumbled thoughts slow down. A sense of calm works its way through my anxiety. I pick up my pen and notebook, ready again to see the words from within.

Walks in the Park

Princess jumped up and down the sofa and whined while I wrote in my notebook.

"Do you want a walk or something?" I asked impatiently, and she headed for the kitchen door.

Now I had no choice; I made the mistake of asking. To ignore her would bring more whining, and I wasn't sure how much more I could tolerate. The weather had been cool and damp for several weeks as winter in Shreveport wound down, so I had postponed our daily walks. But the day was brisk and we were between showers when I drove to a nearby city park to walk the all-weather path around tall trees and an algaeed creek. I pulled into the parking lot and opened the car door. The fresh pine smell took me back to the Girl Scout camp I loved as a child. Maybe the frisky dog's idea for a walk was a good one.

My writing life craves daily walks. The sedentary schedule of sitting on a sofa all day was quite a change from keeping up with twenty-five active children in a classroom. My body wanted more stimulation.

Most mornings I begin with a solitary hike in the park near the Red River, circling through grassy wetlands on the concrete road, when it is not underwater after a particularly rainy season. Water birds get their breakfast of crawfish, bugs, and small fish before they start their day, and the sights and sounds of a morning routine inspire me. There have been some regular walkers here — a friendly woman and her big black lab, Lucy; a timid man with earphones and a hurried gait; and several runners. We

acknowledge each other with our standard ritual of a smile or small talk as we pass.

Another trail, through more manicured gardens behind an art gallery, is good for hikes later in the day with a small, scruffy dog, except during the height of azalea and dogwood season. Then, every bride and Easter-dressed child stand posed beside the brightly colored spring flowers. My friendly Princess is all too eager to take her place in their picture.

Sometimes my morning walks take me to the track at the elementary school I attended as a child, while students arrive on campus. Or, later in the morning, to the park down the street from the first little house Carlton and I called our own.

Each location fills a different need. Sometimes I walk to be on a schedule, for my former teacher self. Sometimes a walk offers material to test my observation skills, or helps me break from a cycle of anxious, spinning thoughts. But often it is just a calming assurance that there's a grander plan than any I could imagine between the walls of my living room. Something deeper, something I couldn't quite identify, but something that might become clearer in time.

I watch one season transform into another and listen for rebirth within myself. Staying present during this daily journey moves me through past fears and away from future concerns. And the day a flock of tiny bluebirds flew out of a tree I passed, I remembered this is the magical walk called life.

Carlton's Stuff

Michael, Carlton's friend in California, called to offer help, sparing me the overwhelming task of vacating his apartment. I was grateful. I did not want to go to California at that time. Michael notified friends and business associates of Carlton's death, distributed clothing and furniture to local charities, then packed up his books, tapes, and movies to ship to me. He also sent Carlton's powerful computer.

Within days of our phone conversation, eight big boxes arrived. The young UPS guy was eager to chat with me about receiving such a mother lode until I told him they were from my son, who had died. He quickly departed. The boxes sat stacked in the middle of my narrow kitchen, which was as far into the house as the delivery man had permission to set them. Over the next few days I moved them one by one to Carlton's old bedroom.

One box was much lighter than the others. I opened this one first, thinking there might be something inside I should take care of. It contained correspondence, bills, and tax records, and it was overwhelming. I had no idea where to begin and hurried out of the room just to catch my breath. The next day my brother's lawyer friend told me not to worry about sorting through it; just wait a while. So I practiced waiting,

turning to my notebook when I couldn't do it by myself. A couple months later when a creditor called asking for Carlton, I told him he had died. The creditor put me on hold to listen to the Carpenters sing "Close to You" while he checked the computerized public records. Returning several minutes later he notified me that "Carlton" was now released from any outstanding debt. I felt my own release. That was all the permission I needed to bag up the shoeboxes of papers and envelopes and carry them to the curb on trash day. That part was over.

Another box was packed with audiovisual materials. Avery eagerly claimed the DVDs one night during tutoring since I didn't have a DVD player. *The Lion in Winter* and *Pretty Woman* are movies the cousins now share. I picked through his assortment of videos, audiotapes, and CDs, recognizing some as part of the collection I had heard drifting from his bedroom at night before he left Shreveport. There was a diverse mix of movies and music, and I smiled when I found some that I also own. Digging through the titles I imagined what was going on inside him when he had watched and listened to this assortment. I held on to the ones that interested me and took the others in a big box to Mother's house for the rest of the family to go through. As far as I know, they are still over there in the box, untouched.

The other boxes were heavy with the weight and smell of books. Carlton, like me, was an avid reader.

Included were science fiction, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Irving. I recognized some from discussions we had during phone conversations. Some might have been assigned reading from past college classes. Others didn't seem to make much sense. Maybe they were book club selections, sent automatically when the monthly order form wasn't returned on time. At least that's how I accumulated some of my own collection. I was trying so hard to figure his life out. What did these books tell him? How did he connect?

I repacked several boxes for a local book bazaar, took a Bible and book of poetry to Mother, and kept a box for myself. In time, Uncle Buddy got the baseball books.

Movies, music, books — these were interests my family shared and expressions I could relate to.

Then, a few weeks later, the computer arrived. It was packed in three big boxes, left just inside my living room near the front door by a different UPS guy, again for me to carry box by box back to his bedroom. I couldn't open it. According to Michael, it was an impressive state-of-the-art computer, and my own little laptop was rather limited. But it was too much a part of the Carlton I didn't know. It was his passion and obsession, and it scared me. It was something I couldn't connect with, so it loomed still securely packaged in the middle of his old bedroom.

One evening when my friend Linda and I went out for supper, she mentioned her computer had crashed.

She was teaching education courses at a local college, and a working computer was essential. I immediately thought of the unopened boxes and offered her Carlton's computer. At first she took it as a loan, in case I might want it back someday, but after a month when I still had no interest in it, I knew it was for Linda, whom I claim as my "big sister," and I let her buy it from me. She knew Carlton as a baby. We met at a church singles program after I moved back to Shreveport in 1976. Her two daughters, collectively called "GinaCindy" by Carlton, sat with him in church while Linda and I sang in the choir together. This part of Carlton will be safe with Aunt Linda.

Bit by bit I dispensed of my son's belongings, hoping to know him better as I handled his possessions. He offered such a diverse set of clues. But I knew I was not really learning about Carlton. He was not a collection of things. I have been learning about myself in his life. One box at a time.

Caged Birds

A female albino ring-necked dove perches in a cage on my sunroom's tiled floor. The bird is the last remaining animal from the science class I taught at Stoner Hill Elementary School. She was the mother of six babies who hatched, were fed, and learned to fly in the presence of many junior naturalists. The father bird died, after conscientiously doing his duty, sitting
