

How Still We See

Kim Kile

KATE

As she walked to Room 810 at the end of the hospital hallway, Kate noticed the quiet first. She heard no nurses with clanging medical carts, no noisy families pushing the limits of visitation hours, and no encouraging words like “Just one more push!” coming from behind closed doors. On a floor that should be full of first gasps for air, she heard no newborn baby cries. The hallway was hushed like the quietness surrounding every grief she had ever known, imitating those few moments before loss becomes palpable and aching. Kate slowed her steps to delay the inevitable, thinking to herself that if she turned around now, she would never have to face the horrifying truth that waited for her when she entered the room.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Kate pushed the door open. She noticed the picture of a long-stemmed, white rose that hung in the center of it, and she winced. The room was like every maternity room she’d ever been in with a delivery bed, two uncomfortable-looking conversion recliners upholstered in a mauvy shade of plastic, and an empty newborn bassinette in the corner. It had everything Kate was used to seeing in this type of room except for the feeling of nervous anticipation and the rhythmic whooshes of a baby’s heartbeat coming through the fetal heartrate monitor. Only the heartbeat of Kate’s daughter, Tully, beeped through the heaviness of Kate’s sorrow.

Kate hesitated at the door, praying to herself as she had since she’d answered the phone earlier in the day, please give me strength and the right words to say. Kate stressed the pleases in her head so they sounded more like *please* hoping the politeness and urgency in her silent petitions would encourage God to answer them more quickly. Peeking around the curtain pulled across the entrance to the room, she whispered, “Hey, sweet girl. I’m here.”

Tully opened her eyes and grimaced as she struggled to sit up. Kate missed seeing Tully’s eyes shine and the corners of her mouth turn up in her familiar Tully smile, the smile that pulled up the tops of her cheeks to the bottom of her blue eyes until they squinted. Instead, Kate could see her fear masquerading as tiny, iridescent tears, squeezing from the corners of those blue eyes when she finally reached the side of Tully’s bed. She leaned in to give Tully a long, warm hug, hoping it would give Tully a feeling of warmth and the sense of comfort hugs sometimes did—safe and familiar like a favorite quilt or a worn teddy bear.

“Hey, Mom,” Tully said in a groggy, hoarse voice. “Thanks for coming. You guys got here fast. You just missed Dr. Hanson.”

“I’m so sorry, Tully,” Kate said, not knowing if she was apologizing for miss-

ing the doctor or for the loss of Tully's baby, only six weeks from his due date. "What did Dr. Hanson say?"

"She gave me some anti-anxiety medication for tonight and said they're going to induce me tomorrow morning. They don't know what happened to him, Mom. They can't tell us why."

The "why" questions would keep Kate, Tully, and Tully's husband, John, up that night. Why had Tully felt their baby in the morning only to discover there wasn't a heartbeat at her appointment that afternoon? Why did this happen at 34 weeks? Why couldn't Tully protect him? Why couldn't Kate shield Tully and John from this unthinkable sequence of events?

Kate reached back into her first-time mother memories and thought about the contrast between today and the day Tully was born. She remembered thinking how beautiful a sapphire birthstone would be in a mother's ring someday, but then Tully showed her independence and determination by coming in the last week of August. Now she and Tully could both wear peridot stones in honor of their oldest children. It was a comparison Kate wish she didn't have to make.

TULLY

"Hey, Mom," Ollie said. "Why do turtles remind you of Teddy?"

Ollie's question came as he was sitting at the kitchen island eating a PB and J for lunch, slowly chewing each bite and then licking the thick glob of peanut butter stuck to the roof of his mouth. Tully looked up from the sink where she was rinsing off the breakfast dishes before loading them into the dishwasher.

"Well, Ollie," she said, "when Teddy was still inside of me, he would always hide from the ultrasound technician, and we could never get a good look at his face. He liked to tuck it into his chin and curl up tight in a ball like a turtle going into his shell, so your dad and I nicknamed him, 'Teddy the Turtle.'"

"Do you think he still looks like a turtle?" Ollie asked as he spread a dropped lump of jelly around in circles on his paper plate with his index finger.

Tully didn't know how to answer Ollie's question. How could she explain to a 5-year-old that her memories of his older brother were beginning to fade, just like Teddy's images on the ultrasound paper hanging on the refrigerator, smudgy and out-of-focus?

"I think, Ollie," Tully said, "that Teddy probably still looks like a turtle because whenever I see a turtle, I think of him and, I think he still wants us to remember him."

"Yeah, I think so, too, Mom," Ollie replied. "I think he's still acting like a turtle so that when we see him someday, he can surprise us with what he really

looks like.”

Tully paused just a moment before responding to Ollie. “I think you’re absolutely right, Ollie. I can’t wait for the day when we finally get to see Teddy for real.”

After lunch, Tully set Ollie up with an eight-pack of finger paints, butcher paper, and a full roll of paper towels—just in case—then sat down in the adjoining family room and thought about her Teddy conversation with Ollie. Even though she’d told Ollie that Teddy probably still looked like a turtle, she knew differently. Teddy, in fact, had been born looking very much like a baby, fully formed with ten fingers, ten toes, and his father’s Irish, upturned nose and dimpled chin. Although his eyes never opened, Tully liked to imagine that Teddy had her blue eyes, a recessive trait that somehow ran strong on her side of the family passed down from her grandmother to her father and then to her.

Even after six years, Tully still felt Teddy’s loss in the deepest nooks of her heart and mind, the sadness tugging at her whenever she thought about the day they “lost” him. Tully hated the phrase “lost a baby” because it sounded so irresponsible, like she and John had somehow misplaced him and then had forgotten to go to Lost and Found to retrieve him. She also never knew how to answer the question, “How many children do you have?” Did she answer truthfully and then explain that her oldest was stillborn? Or did she lie and leave Teddy out of her count? Ignoring Theo’s being felt disrespectful to Tully, and she silently apologized to her firstborn when she took the easy way out and answered, “We have one little boy named Ollie.”

Tully looked away from their family picture on the opposite side of room and glanced into the kitchen to make sure Ollie was still painting on at least the marble countertop and not the walls. He was, gratefully, and he noticed her watching him.

“Look, Mom,” he said, holding up a picture filled with splotches of green, blue, and brown paint. “I painted a turtle sitting on a log in a river. Do you think it looks like Teddy?”

“I see your turtle on the log, and I do think it resembles Teddy a bit,” Tully answered. “Let me get a closer look.”

Tully walked back into the kitchen and stood behind Ollie and his painting, leaning down so her right cheek touched the top of Ollie’s head. She breathed in his little boy scent of peanut butter, vegetable-based finger paints, and a touch of baby shampoo before speaking.

“Why, yes, I really see it now,” Tully spoke into Ollie’s left ear. “The turtle’s head is tucked into its shell, isn’t it? And it’s sitting quietly and still on the log, hoping we can’t see it, right?”

Ollie nodded his head up and down and turned in his stool to face Tully. Holding up his still-wet picture, he asked her, “Can you please hang it up next to Teddy’s picture on the refrigerator when it dries, Mommy? Just like you have my preschool and kindergarten pictures next to each other?”

“Of course, Ollie,” Tully replied. “I’ll even make sure Daddy sees it when he gets home tonight, if that’s OK with you.”

“Yep,” said Ollie as he jumped from the stool and left the kitchen headed to the mudroom and the door to the backyard. “I’m going outside to swing now, Mommy. I’ll stay in our yard. Don’t worry.”

KATE

The next morning Kate woke up stiffly from a restless and uncomfortable night sleeping in one of the recliner-sleepers. For the one moment she existed in that dreamy state somewhere between sleep and awareness, she wondered why her husband wasn’t snoring beside her and where their cat, Izzy, was since she wasn’t curled up on the curve of Kate’s tucked-in knees. She then remembered her current reality. Taking a quick peek behind the gray plastic curtain pulled to keep out the early morning light, Kate saw a sun-filled, blue-skied August morning. The lingering orange, purple, and pink bands from the Indiana sunrise outside promised a perfect summer day, a feeling not echoed in the little room on the eighth floor. Kate knew today would be the hardest day she had ever faced, and she questioned how she could find peace and purpose in the upcoming tragic moments. Having been induced herself, she knew the process Tully would go through as part of her induction: the Pitocin drip, the cervix checks, and, finally, the call to push. But today, instead of a steady sound of whooshes and beeps, the three of them had just one heartbeat to listen to, a single human to watch electronically. A small cadre of nurses came into the room throughout the morning, checking-in with Tully, monitoring her vital signs and emotional state, but never staying long enough to make small talk or prepare the room for a standard delivery. They didn’t need to turn on the bassinette warmer or put the pediatrician on notice when it came time for Tully to push.

For 30 weeks, Kate had imagined the scene of helping Tully and John bring their baby boy into the world. She visualized how she would hold one of Tully’s hands while John held the other, and, as Tully’s support team, they would tell her to push, push, push. How they would watch for the baby’s head to crown and tell her he was almost there; just one more push Tully, and you’ll see your baby boy. Today, though, Kate whispered to Tully how brave she thought she was, how Tully was the strongest woman Kate had ever known, and how Tully was the best mama in the world to Teddy. Together, Kate, Tully, John, and Dr. Hanson brought baby Teddy into the world and into Tully’s waiting arms. From his head covered in wispy, black hair to his tiny, curled toes, Teddy was perfect in every way but one.

In the solemnness of the “after,” Kate thought she would find a sense of closure

that only comes with knowing the why. Instead, she found emotional support and physical strength in the people who endured the day with them. The compassionate doctor who carefully laid their precious Teddy on Tully's chest, hiding the true knot in his umbilical cord, gave Kate relief to know that Tully was supported. The discreet nurse who wiped away her own tears while swaddling Teddy and who took care not to touch his fragile skin any more than necessary, preserved more than just Teddy's complexion. She gave their family permission to hold him for as long as they needed to whisper, "I love you," and say their goodbyes. And it was the willingness of a hospital pastor to baptize a stillborn baby when another minister refused that showed Kate how faith is more than church doctrine; it is the act of honoring Christ's intent in horrific situations. In the aftermath of Teddy's birth, Kate sat in the near silence and absorbed the comfort that surrounded her family through these simple acts of human kindness.

TULLY

After Ollie left the kitchen to swing in the clearing of their wooded backyard, Tully picked up her cell phone from the counter where it had been charging, unlocked it, and tapped the phone icon. Near the top of her recent calls, she saw the name she was looking for and touched "Mom ICE 2." She made sure she still had a view from the large kitchen window of Ollie swinging on his playset as she waited for her mom to answer.

"Hey, Tully," her mom said after a few rings. "What's up?"

"Hi, Mom," she answered. "Not much really. Ollie just finished lunch and some finger painting, and now he's outside swinging. Guess what he painted?"

"Oh, that's a hard one, Tully," Kate said. She was trying to go down the current list of Ollie's favorite things in her mind before answering. "I'm going to guess either a car or a cat."

"Not even close, Mom," Tully said. "He told me he painted a turtle sitting on a log in a river because it reminded him of Teddy."

"Teddy," Kate said, lifting the end of his name with her voice so it became a question.

"Yes," said Tully. "Ollie asked about Teddy during lunch today. Just out of the blue, he asked me why turtles reminded me of Teddy, so I told him about Teddy hiding during his ultrasounds and how we gave him the nickname 'Teddy the Turtle.'"

"Oh, Tully! I wish I could be there to give you a hug right now, sweetie," said Kate. "I know that had to have hurt a little-maybe even a lot. How are you doing right now?"

"It did, but I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting that deep of a conversation with

a 5-year today,” said Tully. She hoped the small laugh at the end of her sentence didn’t give away that she wasn’t as fine as she said she was. She walked over to lean against the kitchen island to steady her shaking legs.

“I can come over if you need to talk, Tully,” Kate offered. “It won’t take me but a minute to put away what I’ve been working on and head your way. I’d love to see both of you anyway. It’s been a few days.”

“It has been a few days, and you’re more than welcome to come over, but please don’t think you have to take care of me, Mom,” said Tully. “I’m really OK. I’m just reminiscing about Teddy and all we went through those couple of days. I still don’t know how I survived.”

Tully heard Kate take a deep breath before she spoke again.

“Tully, you are the bravest woman I know,” Kate finally said. “I’ll be there in just a few minutes. Tell Ollie I’m on my way, and I can’t wait for him to show me his picture.”

KATE

She led Tully into the bathroom and helped her undress while the hot water in the shower created a fine mist around them. Tully’s long, blonde hair was matted from staying in bed for two days, so Kate gently brushed it to remove the largest knots before she washed Tully’s hair.

“OK, baby,” Kate said. Can you step into the shower without too much pain? You can sit on the shower stool we bought for you to use while you heal.”

“Yeah, I can get in there,” Tully replied, wincing as she lifted each foot and leg into the tub.

“I’ll do this as quickly as I can so you can get back to bed, OK? I just know that a warm shower always makes me feel better,” said Kate. “There’s just something about having clean hair and a clean body that relaxes me.”

“I don’t think I’ll feel relaxed for a long time, Mom, but the water feels good, and I really do appreciate you helping me get settled at home,” Tully replied, as she leaned her head back into the stream of warm water, letting it mix with the shampoo and tears running down her face.

After Kate got Tully dried off, dressed, and back in bed, she left her to nap alongside her husband, John. Kate closed the door to their bedroom as quietly as she could and glanced across the hall to the room where the nursery was ready for a new baby just two days ago.

During Tully’s stay in the hospital, Kate’s husband, and John’s parents had removed any trace of the baby that was supposed to arrive in a few weeks. They

had packed his unused clothes, books, and newborn diapers into tubs, and had taken them, along with the crib, rocker, and dresser, to a newly rented storage unit. Just the weekend before, family and friends had gathered to shower Tully, John, and Teddy with gifts at a turtle-themed baby shower, and they were still receiving gifts at their garage door multiple times a day. Kate looked outside every few hours for new boxes so she could then hide them under moving blankets in the garage until someone could be persuaded to take them to the storage unit.

Needing a few quiet minutes to herself, Kate headed to her room, which was next to the former nursery. Sitting on the bed, she melted into the mattress, feeling the enormity of Teddy's death settling like the weight of an immense boulder on her shoulders, back, and neck. Her emotional trauma turned into a physical pain that seized her body and wouldn't let go. All five feet, five inches of her ached as if her emotions had taken on life and were squeezing her until she couldn't breathe without gasping. She fell back with her arms over her head hoping that if she lengthened her core, she could get the air she needed. Deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth, Kate, she reminded herself. Feeling the tension starting to loosen in her shoulders, Kate sat up again and thought about what else needed to be done: notification phone calls to make and texts to send, plus Teddy's obituary to write for their hometown newspaper, and autopsy and burial details to manage. It all felt overwhelming in the moment, but Kate was not going to let those responsibilities fall to Tully or John. Let them sleep while they can, she thought, as she started down the stairs to her waiting to-do list on the kitchen table.

TULLY and KATE

"Hey, Ollie," said Tully as she walked out the back door. "Guess who's coming over in a few minutes? Gigi!"

"Gigi's coming over during the day! "Why is she coming?" asked Ollie. He stopped kicking his feet in the air, so he could slow down and talk to Tully.

"Well, I called and told her about your turtle painting, and she wants to see it," Tully responded. "I'm guessing that's OK with you, right, buddy?" She tried to stop Ollie's swing by putting her hand on the rope closest to her and holding on tightly. She didn't want him to be tempted to jump out and roll in the grass while they were talking. Ollie dragged the tips of his tennis shoes along the dirt path under the swing making a "shh-shu" sound every time they touched the ground until he came to a complete stop. He then spread the two lengths of rope apart with his hands before jumping and rolling in the grass anyway.

"Mom, I'm going to go sit on the front porch and wait for Gigi to get here," said Ollie as he ran past her on his way to the front yard. "Come with me, OK?"

Tully followed her son around the side of their house that bordered a small creek, taking care not to step on the scattering of purple and white violets blooming up-and-down the banks. She loved how the Midwestern springs came

in bursts of color in her yard—white crocuses, red tulips, yellow daffodils, blue muscari, and purple hyacinths. Pink blossoms dotted the red bud trees that grew along the creek bank, the entire scene creating a floral rainbow every March and April for Tully to enjoy.

“Are you coming, Mom?” asked Ollie, as he raced toward Tully from around the front of the house. “Gigi will be here any second.”

“Almost there,” said Tully. She ran toward Ollie, grabbing him around the waist and swinging him up in the air. His giggles filled the space between them, warm and bubbly like the best bubble bath Tully had ever taken. Tully gave Ollie a squeeze before setting him down feet first on the newly sprouted grass coming up in the yard.

“There’s Gigi!” Ollie cried when he noticed a car coming up the long drive to their house. He started running to where the driveway met the sidewalk in front of the garage doors.

“Careful, buddy,” Kate said. “Gigi will be here in just a second. Wait right here.” Tully came up behind Ollie and crossed her arms around him from behind to keep him from hopping into the driveway. She could feel Ollie’s excitement in his fast-beating heart and the near misses his feet made on hers while dancing up and down. When Tully heard her mother turn the car off, she released Ollie from her protective hug.

“Gigi!” exclaimed Ollie. “You’re here.”

Kate’s greeting mimicked her grandson’s enthusiasm as she met him in front of her car. “Ollie! Yes, I am. Give me a hug!” She picked him up and gave him a hug while swinging him from side-to-side.

“I’ve missed you, sweet boy,” she said as she gave him a kiss and put him down. “I hear you painted a picture that I have to see.”

“I did! It’s a turtle on a log. I’m going to go get it now. Be right back,” Ollie said as he turned his energy into a run up the porch steps and through the front door.

“I don’t know how you keep up with him, Tully,” Kate laughed as she and Tully sat down on the wide front porch steps. “That boy has more energy in him than a can of Red Bull!”

“Yes, he does,” Tully laughed along with her mom. “I swear if we could harness it, we might have the answer for our fossil fuel crisis.” Tully’s tone became quieter, though, when she said, “I sometimes wonder what it would be like if I had two little boys running around all day.”

Kate leaned into her daughter, giving her hug. “Two little boys would be a

blessing, Tully.”

At that moment, Ollie burst back onto the porch, his turtle picture waving in his right hand. Both women turned around and scooted over to make room for Ollie between them.

“Here you go, Gigi,” Ollie said as he handed her his picture. “The turtle is right there,” he said, leaning over and pointing to a green splash of paint near the bottom of the page. “And see, he’s sitting on the log I painted right here.” Ollie touched a piece of brown paint under the green blob. Kate turned the picture toward her so she could get a better look at Ollie’s piece of art.

“Ollie, I love your picture. Your mom told me that you painted it after talking about Teddy,” said Kate. “Is this him?”

“Gigi, you’re so silly! It’s just a picture of Teddy,” replied Ollie. “Teddy lives in heaven.”

“Of course, he does, Ols. You’re right,” said Kate. “You’ve done a good job painting a picture of him though. It makes me happy to see that he’s sitting on a log soaking in the sun.”

“Ollie, why don’t you put that back in the kitchen,” said Tully, joining their conversation. “I’ll hang it on the refrigerator after Gigi leaves. You can play outside until it’s time for dinner if you want.”

“OK, Mom. I’ll be out back,” said Ollie already halfway through the front door.

“I love that he thinks about Teddy,” Kate said to Tully. “It’s hard to believe it’s been six years since Teddy died.”

“On the day he was born, I promised Teddy that I would never forget him,” said Tully, “but sometimes a day or two goes by, and I realize I haven’t thought about him at all. Then I feel guilty. It’s this awful cycle I go through.”

“But you’ve passed your love for Teddy to Ollie. That’s obvious,” said Kate. “Even on the days he doesn’t come to your mind, I’m sure he comes to someone else’s. Between us all, he’s not forgotten. He just decides who he’s going to visit each day.”

“That’s a nice thought, Mom,” said Tully. “But you can’t imagine what it’s like to be the one in a million in the worst way possible. Now that John and I have been on that side of the percentages, I always think the worst.”

“I didn’t realize you still feel that way, Tull,” said Kate. “I guess I thought that after you had Ollie, that feeling went away. I’m really sorry I didn’t know or

didn't even think to ask." Kate slid over to Tully's side and put her arm around her.

"Ollie is such a blessing, but there's a reason we haven't had more children," Tully spoke quietly. "The anxiety I felt during Ollie's pregnancy was just too much to do more than once."

Tully and Kate sat in silence for a few minutes while Kate considered Tully's admission. She knew Tully and John had gone in for multiple ultrasounds while they were pregnant with Ollie, but she had no idea how much the stress of having a baby still affected Tully. She ached for her daughter and John who, at one time, wanted a house full of babies. For once, Kate had no positive words for Tully. She was at a loss on how to comfort her without sounding insensitive. Although she knew there would be no Ollie without Teddy, Ollie wasn't a tradeoff for the heartache they all endured when Teddy died. He wasn't a consolation prize. The grief lingered over their family like wisps of smoke swirling from person to person, sometimes leaving them alone, sometimes encircling them all with their tendrils. Like a campfire, the embers of their grief glowed and smoldered, waiting to be ignited at a moment's notice.

"No words feel right, Tully," Kate said after a few quiet moments. "I'm here for you in any way you need me. Please reach out when those days hit too hard, and I'll just sit with you."

"Mom! Gigi! Come here!" Ollie's shouts interrupted their conversation as he rounded the front of the house at a dead run. Stopping in front of them, Ollie kept up his excited chatter while reaching out a hand to Tully. "It's Teddy! Teddy's by the creek!"

"Ollie, honey, you know Teddy can't be here, right?" said Tully as she stood up, took Ollie's outreached hand, and followed him to the side yard.

"I know, Mom, but he's here. I promise! Gigi, are you coming, too?" asked Ollie, looking backward to where Kate was scrambling up from the steps.

"I'm right behind you guys," said Kate. She, like Tully, was curious about what Ollie could have seen in the yard that made him think he'd seen Teddy.

Ollie stopped by the creek bank bending down and pointing to a tree limb that had fallen across the running water. "Look, right there! Right there on the log," said Ollie. "Do you see Teddy? He's sitting on that log right by the bank. Just like my painting."

Tully and Kate looked down to where Ollie was pointing, the afternoon sun streaming through the spring foliage blooming in the trees above them leaving sparkles in the water and spots of sun on the limb Ollie was pointing to. Right where he pointed, a small painted turtle sat in a circular patch of sun nestled between a stand of cattails and a knot on the limb.

“See! I told you Teddy was here,” said Ollie. “He’s just taking an afternoon nap.”

Tully kneeled beside the bank and leaned over until she was just above the sunning turtle. “Hey, Teddy,” she said. “I’m so happy you decided to visit us today. She added quietly, “I’ve missed you.”

Kate stood behind her daughter and grandson and took in the surrounding scene-spring in glorious, full bloom along the creek, Tully talking to “Teddy,” and Ollie chattering to no one in particular about how awesome it was that Teddy was on the log “just like his painting.” Almost as if it had heard them, the small turtle stretched its long head out of its shell and looked around, its gaze resting upon the trio on the bank for moment before slipping into the creek and swimming away.