

First Funeral

by

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“No, No he’s not dead! Go back and try again!”

“I’m sorry he’s gone. We’ve done everything we could, and there’s nothing more we can do.”

I collapsed into my wife’s arms. We both stood as one with tears streaming down our faces. Our clothes soaking.

Keith, my first child, was born and died at Grossmont Hospital.

We were still living in El Centro. After working Saturday morning my family of four; my wife, almost three-year-old, Keith, his newborn younger brother and I made the two-hour drive to her parents’ home in El Cajon. It was Easter weekend, and we were planning to spend the night with them and celebrate Easter the following day.

They lived in a new upscale home my father-in-law built on the low eastern edge of Mt. Helix, one of San Diego’s most affluent communities, filled with gated mansions and large, expensive properties.

The plans for Sunday included getting up early, and after Keith found his hidden Easter basket, we would attend a sunrise service in an outdoor amphitheater atop Mt. Helix. The theater sits in the shadow of a huge white cross, visible throughout East County. It has a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of San Diego and the surrounding communities. This beautiful location hosted a yearly Easter sunrise service for as long as I can remember.

Following the services, we planned to go to a brunch buffet at the fashionable Tom Ham’s Lighthouse restaurant on Harbor Island overlooking the San Diego Bay.

In the afternoon, we would hide eggs for Keith’s Easter hunting followed by a backyard barbeque and then return to our home on Sunday evening.

The exciting Easter celebration never happened. Keith drowned Saturday afternoon.

After arriving, we were preparing for the next day’s activities. My wife and her mother were puttering around the kitchen, and her father took Keith with him to sweep and clean the back patio. They told me there was nothing I could help with. I decided to watch TV in the back room. I sat in a sizeable over-stuffed recliner. No shows caught my attention, and I was snoozing within minutes.

I snapped from a deep sleep at loud, hideous shrieking! Jumping to attention, I bolted to the dining area. Keith’s grandfather was standing in the open sliding glass patio doorframe holding my infant son. He looked terrified and distraught standing there with Keith’s pure white, limp body cradled in his arms.

“Call 911! Start CPR!” his grandmother was screaming. My father-in-law laid my boy on the floor and pounded his chest. I ran to the phone and dialed. I was trying to explain our location to the operator. I wasn’t sure if their new partially complete neighborhood was in El Cajon or La Mesa and it seemed to take an undogly amount of critical time for the operator to understand where we were.

I galloped the block to the corner as fast as I had ever run before. It was an eternity waiting to flag down the fire rescue vehicle and the following ambulance so I could guide them to my beautiful baby boy. Standing there, with tears streaming down my face, I could only think,

“Keith...Keith... my perfect baby Keith! What kind of father was I sleeping and not watching over your every move? I should have known better than that!”

Finally, I heard the blazing sirens coming over the top of the hill and started frantically waving, afraid they might miss me and drive by. They saw me. By the time, the two-vehicle caravan turned onto the street I was already halfway down the block distraughtly running back to where my baby’s lifeless body lay.

Immediately they went to work. Two black bag-carrying paramedics ran inside while two more unloaded a gurney. They worked on him only a couple of minutes before knowing they had to get him to a hospital as fast as they could.

They threw his wilted form onto the gurney and headed for the ambulance. As they rounded the corner leading to the front door, Keith’s small frame slipped off and fell to the floor. Immediately an emergency worker scooped him up and ran on while the others pushed the empty gurney behind.

The emergency team worked at lightning speed loading the gurney and leaping inside the vehicle. The man holding my son handed him up to one of the waiting men. They held Keith in place on the stretcher, slammed the doors shut and took off like a rocket, again with earsplitting sirens and flashing lights.

Not knowing where the ambulance was heading, my wife, and I sprinted to our car. I ran the stop sign at the end of the street desperately trying to catch them. I barely saw the top of the ambulance over the crest of the hill make the left hand turn and instantly knew they were going to Grossmont Hospital.

We arrived seconds after them and ran through the emergency room urgently searching for our son. A nurse led us to a small area just outside a private emergency treatment room. My in-laws showed up with our newborn minutes later.

I went into a small adjacent office and phoned my parents. I told them there had been an accident and Keith was dying. Also, we were at Grossmont, and the doctors were saving him.

Fifteen minutes later, they entered our waiting area. My mother, a career RN, came over and asked what was going on. I told her the doctors were still working on him. My mother looked me straight in the eye and emotionlessly stated, “You know he’s dead. It’s been too long.”

With tears welling in my eyes, I blurted out, “No he’s not, they’re saving him!” Minutes later a doctor emerged and told us he was gone.

Solemnly everybody walked to their vehicles and went back to their respective homes except my wife, baby Wayne and I. We went for a long, disheartening drive.

While we were driving aimlessly, I asked my wife what had happened. She explained it. When Keith's grandfather was pouring cement for the patio, he had heard about a new doggy duty system and cemented a stainless steel bucket into the corner of the courtyard. He would hose their dog's droppings into it. He never finished the installation; adding a secure lid.

He had been sweeping and not paying attention to his grandson son. When he went to look for Keith, he found him lying face down in the fetus-filled sludge at the bottom of the bucket.

We returned to my in-laws hours later and spent a tearful sleepless night.

On Easter Sunday, we had to go home to pick up an outfit to bury Keith in. I was too distraught to make the four-hour drive there and back. I phoned my father asked if he would fly me to El Centro. Of course, he agreed. He rented a four-seat Cesena so my wife could come along.

I called my boss and told him what had happened and asked him if he could pick us up at the local airport in Imperial and drive us to our mobile home ten miles away and then return us. He instantly agreed.

Al was waiting for us as we landed forty-five minutes later. He grabbed and hugged me hard for a long time.

After we flew back to El Cajon, my wife and I went to the Lakeside Funeral Home. I chose this mortuary because the caretakers were friends of my grandparents and I had been to their apartment above the first-floor mortuary.

We picked out a small white coffin and arranged for a Tuesday funeral.

My wife and I went back to my in-laws and made tearful-call after tearful-call notifying relatives and friends.

Monday morning we went to the El Cajon Cemetery and purchased a plot. We spent that afternoon with Keith at the funeral home. He looked so mature lying silently within his tiny coffin dressed in his best outfit. We also added some of his favorite toys and keepsakes beside him. I took off the cheap wedding band that I had purchased in Las Vegas and worn since my wedding day. I slipped it over Keith's thumb.

After another desperate sleepless night and I knew, we could never put this behind us.

When we arrived at the mortuary Tuesday, it was packed, and quite a few attendees stood throughout the service. After the mortuary, the procession went to the cemetery for a graveside service. At the close of this service, my wife and I laid a single red rose on top of his coffin and said goodbye to our son.

I was so out of my mind with grief I never heard a word of either service. It was the first funeral I had ever attended.

My mother and father invited everyone to their house for an after service gathering.

We stayed only as long as we emotionally could before our family of three drove the two hours home.