

IT JUST IS

BY BENJAMIN CARR

The first thing that I ever was, was Jo Anne's baby. When they thought I might not live the first few hours past birth, Jo Anne just marveled at how tiny I was. When the doctors told her and Don that I might have brain damage, she was just grateful that Atlanta had gotten a CAT Scan machine a few weeks before and that they wouldn't have to shoot dye into my brain to run tests. There's always something good to see, even in bad situations. Jo Anne always perseveres, so her thinking was that I might as well just persevere, too.

And the CAT scan results were good, nothing appeared wrong. So I just spent the first months of my life being Jo Anne's baby. I was darn good at it, too. She kept telling me so, that I was a cute baby and that I was a smart baby and that I was a special baby and that I was the best baby. She'd do stretches with me as she hovered over my crib, pulling my arms and my legs out straight and up and over my head. Most importantly, she kept singing me songs.

The first song she ever taught me was "Old MacDonald." At six months old, I would sing back—on pitch—"Ee I ee I oh" whenever she'd sing it while holding me. Apparently, it caused something of a stir at the Lithia Springs United Methodist Church that Jo Anne's baby could sing back to her. Jo Anne says that she'd pass me from person to person, that everybody liked holding me, and I'd sing for them at her prompt. I could sing before I could crawl.

It's significant that my first song involved farming because my mother grew up on a farm in Paulding, Ohio. Corn, wheat, and soybeans. She was the middle child of Merle and Glendine Jeffery's three girls. The Jeffery girls would sing all the time at Paulding Methodist. Even when Jo Anne got sick with the measles in the sixth grade and lost some of her hearing, she still sang beautifully and loved music. In high school her senior year, she was both in the choir, and she was drum majorette in her marching band. The girl could twirl a mean baton, and there's a photo of her in her yearbook doing just that. Like her two sisters, she went to Bowling Green State University. Like her two sisters, she studied to be a music teacher. Like her two sisters, she got married.

She was raised, she has said to me, with a very clear path on how to be a good person with clear goals and a fulfilling happiness. She told me this in a recording booth at StoryCorps. Her upbringing sounds very

regimented and a little strict. (Not completely strict, though. She did mention that she once chased a rooster around the house and killed it. Its name was Brownie. She did not elaborate.) She was given very clear guidance toward happiness and success by her mother. There was a plan. And everything was going according to plan in Jo Anne's life until her husband Don didn't much like being a history teacher, took a job in insurance that took them to Hartford, Connecticut, then Florida, and then Atlanta by 1973. Her mother was so upset when she left Ohio that she cried until her face bled.

I came along while Don and Jo Anne lived in Atlanta, and I do not fit a plan. I was Jo Anne's baby who could sing but couldn't crawl. When I did finally try to crawl, much later than the books said that I should, I dragged my left leg behind me a little bit. She took me to a pediatrician named Dr. Nicholson, who was very funny and very nice to me. He told her that I might have cerebral palsy.

I asked her during our StoryCorps talk how she reacted to that news, and my mom said something to me that she repeated all that day when we talked about obstacles we'd faced: "It just is."

She could tell it was minor. She knew that I was a smart baby because of the singing, because of the cute, because of the happy. It was brain damage, and it wasn't going to go away. But Jo Anne was not devastated. It just is. Sometimes God gives us something, and it leads us down a path different from our plans. Sometimes a challenge is just God giving us an opportunity to show off how strong we can be. We're not designed with subtlety. Jo Anne was a music teacher who could sing and direct church choirs with increasing hearing loss. I was a brain-damaged toddler who could read and sing before he could crawl. It just is. You do your absolute best with what you're given. There are no barriers. My mom taught me that.

I was in Egleston when I was three, having a surgery that required them to put me into a double-leg cast with a two-foot bar separating my legs for several weeks. I couldn't move on my own and looked like a giant letter A. Luckily, though, my mom had me watching a lot of PBS by then, *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company*, and *The Letter People*, so my double-leg cast was just another teaching opportunity. My parents hauled me around in a red wagon from appointment to appointment. Sometimes my dad carried me upside down like a suitcase. I said hello to everybody who stared, and doctors told her that I was the most socially well-adjusted CP kid they'd ever seen. I was friendly to everybody, I was sweet, I was LOUD, and I never stopped talking. And it hadn't worn on anyone's

nerves yet. That came later.

From years of how my mother reacts when people yell at her instead of speaking clearly or get annoyed at her increasing hearing loss that worsened in the 1980s when she worked in the stress of real estate, thinking that she's just being difficult or thinking that's how she should be able to hear, I know how to combat cruelty or idiots. You do it head on. You combat idiotic snarkiness with better, wittier snarkiness. You keep moving past all the jerks and don't let anyone stop you ever from getting what you want. I know what battles to choose. She has been my champion when I've faced adversity, and she taught me not to put up with crap from anybody. She made me into my own champion.

Jo Anne directed the children's choirs at church. She had me sing in the choir, like she had. Through that, she taught me that Jesus loves me, that Father Abraham had many sons (and many sons had Father Abraham), and that, if you're happy and you know it, you clap your hands. She believes that music is of the soul. She taught me that the right words sung the right way can mean something deep. She taught me to use my voice, that people should hear it. She taught me to love music. And music helped me understand words, rhyme, communication, meaning, poetry, and stories in all the ways that they can be told or shown or understood. She was a music teacher and a darn good one. She put me on a stage and taught me how to belong there: "Even Bambi had wobbly legs when he was on the ice. And everyone loves Bambi all the same."

I can take a stage because of her. Everything good that I am comes from her.

My mom just retired. She reads what I write and hears recordings of my stories, and she tells me that I should just be funny. People like it so much better when you're funny. So I'm funny even when it's serious. Tonight I wanted to write something happy, something true, and something funny and fun.

During our StoryCorps talk, my mom asked me a question that stumped me. She asked me what makes me happy, and I didn't have an answer. But I know what it is. My mother makes me happy. She taught me how just like she taught me songs.

And I'm happy. And I know it. So say amen.

THE UNSAID

BY CATHERINE DOUCETTE

When I was three, my parents told me my aunt had died in an accident. She was my dad's only sister. My mom says that I cried uncontrollably with my father that night while she worked a thousand-piece puzzle with my brother. I think I can almost remember this. It occupies the very fringes of memory, so that the threads I recall are of her funeral—the blue velvet drapes at the mortuary, the folds, the soft fabric against my fingers. Or one night when my Dad asked her to stay and visit, and she declined. And finally her red car parked in our driveway, awaiting sale, for weeks afterwards.

Suicide is a secret you can only keep for so long. When an entire family knows except for the children, it is a waiting game. I don't recall what words were used, or the outline of the story they told. But I imagine soft tones, diverted eyes, my parents keeping it short. In the atmosphere of absence, children create their own truths; pauses in adult conversation tell a story audible only to young ears.

One summer day, while playing in my grandmother's basement with my cousins, we staged a fake hanging. In the infinite perception of children at play, we pinpointed the undercurrents of tragedy; the unsaid has ways of manifesting. I can remember my grandmother coming to our call. She stood at the top of the stairs, blotting out the light from the kitchen. "Never, ever do that again," said the woman who'd found her daughter asphyxiated in her car. Then she turned away, and never mentioned it again.

My parents finally told me the truth when they thought I was old enough to understand. But the truth is that you are never old enough to understand. The secret exposed went screaming through my head. Running into my room I yelled, "Is there anyone else that killed themselves that you didn't tell me about?" I sobbed into a pillow with hot tears of anger. Tears that at the time I didn't know were cried for my father and his renewed loss. Ugly thoughts came in bursts: that Elaine had chosen to leave this life, my life, our lives. That my parents had lied, that an essential belief had been shattered.

The truth of Elaine's death is not a secret anymore, but it is also not discussed. The silence remains thick. In a picture on our stone mantel, she stands with her family. In a neat patterned skirt and blue blouse, she stares out of the glossy photo, frozen. Flanked by her two brothers, there