

Searching for Stella

Author : mishi

Well, here I am sitting on the itchy, crumb-covered carpet at Great Wolf Lodge while the kids colour Power Rangers pictures next to me and Aimee watches CNN—hanging on to every detail of the upcoming US election (sigh). It's a slightly different scene every year, but the cast of characters never changes. Me, Aimee, Gracie, Sam, Hugo, Auntie Angie (and, until this year, Juju— but she had to work) show up at the doors of Great Wolf Lodge to both celebrate and grieve the death of our beloved Stella. As soon as the big glass doors swing open and we are greeted by the animatronic howls of wolves, we all feel a sense of deep sadness, as well as comfort. Even though the outside world continues to change and move, Great Wolf Lodge stays the same. We have been coming here for 7 years now and they serve the same bread pudding in the restaurant, tell the same jokes at the end of kids story time, sell the same t-shirts in the giftshop and have the same wallpaper on all the bathrooms in the entire lodge. It's incredibly comforting. When you come here it doesn't matter what time it is, what day, or what season, because inside it always smells, looks and feels the same. Because Sam's birthday is two days before Stella's death anniversary, we are always here for his birthday. He thinks that's why we come. We definitely celebrate his birthday while we are here, but it is also our escape from the sadness of "that" day— October 22, 2012. We immerse ourselves in the chaos of noise, sugar and temper tantrums and wait for the day to pass. All the while spending insane amounts of money on sparkly temporary tattoos, oversized cookies and cheap souvenirs.

As soon as Aimee and I start to feel the first hint of autumn in the air, we steel ourselves for that feeling of intense sadness that comes as Stella's death anniversary approaches. It's almost a relief when it's over because the build up is so painful. As each date passes, we are forced to relive those horrible last days which, although they were peaceful and full of love, were excruciating to endure. October 1 was the last day we took Stella out for ice cream. October 9th was the last day Stella opened her eyes and really responded to us. October 11 was the day we *thought* she was going to die as she gasped for air and shuddered in our arms. October 20th was Sam's first birthday, and October 21st was Xavier's. Stella lay dying in our bed, her bony chest slowly rising and falling and we sang "Happy Birthday" to the little kids and held lit cupcakes in front of her motionless body. The tears, which don't come as often anymore, come easily around these dates. I remember we went to the Funeral Home on Hallowe'en Eve to prepare for her funeral, and then the actual funeral was on November 1. The following week we had her Stellabration at Riverdale Park. The details of all those days play in my brain like an old movie. No matter how I try to distract myself, the memories flood to the surface. I have her little face flash in my mind when I'm unloading the dishwasher. The last outfit Aimee and I dressed her in floats in front of my face as I wait at a traffic light on the way to work. The feel of her soft skin on my chest as she slept next to me wakes me up at night, and it sometimes takes me a second to realize it's Sam or Hugo that's crawled into my bed, and not her. Sometimes when I make toast in the morning, I make two pieces of white bread and put honey on one, and jam on the other then cut them into 4's because that's how my dad served me breakfast every morning for a year while Stella sat on my lap. When I wake up at night after uneasy dreams, I can't remember if Stella's DIPG was a nightmare, or really happened. Then

my eyes adjust to the dark and I see the paintings at the end of our bed with her footprints on it, and I remember that she really is gone.

It hurts every single time.

Now she's been gone 4 years, which means she's been dead longer than she was alive. Yet the three and a half years she lived I can recall with great detail, whereas the 4 years that have passed since come to me in small chunks. I can remember lots of things, but there are huge chunks of the last four years that are missing. For example, I barely remember Hugo's first year of life. I don't know what I did with him all day, I don't remember when he first spoke, or walked, or got his first tooth. I just know that he was 10 weeks old when Stella died, then suddenly he was 2 and I started remembering again. I know I learned to drive and got my license, but I don't remember any of my driving lessons. I have forgotten how to cook my Nana's scalloped potatoes. But I can tell you exactly what I was wearing the day Stella got diagnosed.

I usually reflect as her death anniversary approaches what has changed in the way we live. And as the years pass, the changes become more permanent and pronounced.

I recently realized that one difference in the time that has passed since her death is how I find her. When Stella first died, Aimee and I felt as though we really needed to hang on to her things. Each toy, every piece of clothing, each physical space that she had been in was a memory. We couldn't stand the thought of getting rid of anything that Stella had touched.

Recently, I've been trying to convince Aimee that we should move out of our home. I want to save money and get out of the city. I feel happiest up at the cottage surrounded by trees and water and where the boys can run and not have to worry about cars. I like the pace of life out of there. There is always time to stop and look closely at a turtle crossing the dirt road. The people who live there ask at the grocery store checkout how so and so's mother is feeling and we spend time as a family reading books and doing crafts instead of being stuck in traffic. But when I talk to Aimee about moving, she always says, "I am never leaving this house. This is Stella's house...how could you ever want to leave here?". I have come to realize that Aimee still finds Stella in the walls of that physical space. She can't stand the thought of leaving the space that Stella was born into, lived in and died in. And when she comes to Great Wolf Lodge, Aimee looks for Stella in the Cub Club and the Warm Pool, and she remembers her little yellow bathing suit and finds her in the shadows under the fake trees in the lobby. But I don't see Stella on the living room couch, or the splash pad at Great Wolf Lodge. I don't find Stella in her bedroom at home, or in her little pink teapot that still hangs around the house getting played with once in a blue moon by the boys. Aimee loves wearing the t-shirts or sweatshirts we've had made over the years that have Stella's name and picture on them. But I have to be reminded to wear them because although I like them, I don't find Stella there either.

So I started to ask myself...where do I find Stella? If not in her room, or her toys, or her clothes, or the house...where is she?

I came to the conclusion that because so much of me...my identity, my way of looking at life, my

hopes and dreams...have changed since Stella's diagnosis and death, I find Stella in the way I live my life. I find her when I don't get frustrated waiting in line at the grocery store because my cashier is "in training". I find her when I don't have enough money to pay my phone bill, but I take the kids to Toys'R'Us and spend \$40.00 on Lego. I find her at work when a family I've helped hugs me after their Funeral and thanks me for making a difference for them. I find her when I give the kids a second cookie after dinner, or let Sam wear pyjama pants to school. I find her when I go for walks and take time to feel the sun on my face and watch an ant crossing in front of me. I find her within me. I have tried to take all the best parts of her and make them a part of me. I don't need to look for her in a physical sense anymore, because she is in every breath I take.

A few weeks ago, I ran into a very difficult situation at work. After being told I was to be transferred to a new location, I had a concern regarding my new schedule and how it would affect my life at home. "We don't make business decisions based on personal lives," I was told. Any questions I asked were either ignored or answered with "that will be decided once you are at the new location". I was frustrated beyond belief, and that's when I found Stella. Because as I was sitting in that room, listening to someone tell me that my family took second place to my duty as an employee, I got a moment of intense clarity. There is *nothing* more important to me than time with my family. I'd rather sell the house and live in an apartment than work a job that keeps me away from birthday parties, thanksgiving dinner, the Christmas Eve church pageant and my kids weekend soccer games. Becoming a Funeral Director has made it abundantly clear to me that tomorrow isn't guaranteed for anyone. If we are lucky, we get to live to a ripe old age, but even then it is someone's parent, sister, friend, aunt who dies. And out of all the eulogies I've listened to, they all boil down to the same theme—the good times the deceased spent with the important people in their life. What is the purpose of living a life where we forget the things that truly matter? So even though it would make more sense for me to find Stella at the playground she used to love, the Dairy Queen I walked her to, or the yellow monkey shirt of hers Sam sometimes wears, I actually found her in a sterile funeral home office during an intense and difficult conversation. It reminded me of a saying I read a long time ago on a card that said, "She will never be there when you want her, but she will always be there when you *need* her".

Sometimes Aimee and I talk about how even though the time after Stella's diagnosis was the worst time of our lives, it was also the best. Because we had no purpose in life other than to be surrounded by the friends and family who meant the most to us. And even though it is not possible to live a life like that every single day— obviously we need to work and clean and cook—I never want to forget that the most important thing in the world is spending time with the people you love.

So even though I could say that I find Stella on this itchy green carpet at Great Wolf Lodge, I think I really find her in my conviction that the one thing you can never get back, is time. Whenever I want to find her, I just look for the part of myself that is braver now, surer now, and is letting her kids stay up past their bedtime right now because, hey, we're at Great Wolf Lodge and Stella would have wanted it that way. And yes, Stella, we will be having ice cream for breakfast tomorrow.

XOXOXOX

We stopped at Stella's tree on our way to Great Wolf Lodge to bring some flowers and Timbits (Hugo, Mishi, Gracie, Andge & Sam):



Violet brought Sam his birthday cake at Great Wolf Lodge:



The first day of school...Issac, Mishi, Sam, Hugo & Xavier:



Stella's little brothers... 4 and 5 already!



We wish we could see Stella in person, instead of visiting her grave at Necropolis Cemetery, but Sam always finds her plaque and gives it a little kiss:



Missing you sweet girl

