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THE MONUMENT

by

Dillon Flake

When I was in high school, an eighteen-month-old girl wandered away from home and drowned in the river. The tragedy became a defining moment in my hometown, Horseshoe Bend. Everyone in the community felt it; many kids skipped school because of grief, and teachers were told to excuse children who requested a visit with the counselor. We were asked not to spread rumors about the death. There was a well-attended funeral in the community center. Afterwards, they released a cloud of balloons. Finally, they erected a big white cross on a hill near town in memoriam.

I, of course, was an ignorant, selfish teenager. Every time I saw that cross, I thought to myself how melodramatic it was. It was the only monument in town, erected in memory of a baby. I remember commenting to my mom that I didn't know why everybody was making such a big deal out of it. "She's a baby," I said. "Of course it's sad when babies die, but when somebody's that young, you don't even really have a relationship with them yet. It's not like losing an old friend."

My mother didn't attempt to make me understand. She simply said, "You've obviously never had children." I was offended by my

mother's comment. Like many teenagers, I was arrogant and felt like adults took me for granted because of my age. I'd been around plenty of babies and was sure I was right. But I wasn't right. I wasn't right about how serious the tragedy was, I wasn't right about a parent's bond with an infant, and—though I didn't know it at the time—I still had a lot to learn about love.

My daughter, Ruby RaeAnn Flake, was born ten days early on February 27th, just over a year after I married my wife, Emily. Ruby was the thirty-fourth grandchild born into my family and only the second born into Emily's family. She got the best of both of us: Emily's almond-shaped eyes and dimples, my complexion and cleft chin. Her size definitely came from Emily's side; Ruby was five pounds at birth but still deemed a healthy child. We were proud of our newborn.

I had always been under the impression that babies were homogenous—all of them were pretty much the same. Personality was something that didn't develop until someone was four or five. And true, Ruby did spend the bulk of her time as a newborn sleeping and eating, but her individuality became apparent almost immediately. She preferred sucking her fingers to taking a pacifier; she preferred being outside to inside (even when it was cold); and, once she graduated from an all-dairy diet, she preferred condiments to any other food we offered her. It had never occurred to me that someone so small could have opinions.

That wasn't the end of it. Though our daughter wasn't a fast grower (even now, at a year-and-a-half old, she still fits into clothes meant for six-month-olds), she was a fast learner. Half a year past her first birthday, she could walk, talk, dance, throw, climb,

high five, give kisses, and take her dirty diapers to the garbage. Sometimes I'd find her in her room, flipping through a book, reading to herself in gibberish. I was shocked by how complex she was—not to say that Ruby is some sort of prodigy, but I'd taken for granted that babies developed on schedule with some sort of unwritten curriculum programmed by God. I thought their interests were 100 percent dictated by what their parents conditioned them to like.

This was not the case. Even when we were trying to teach Ruby her first words, she still blazed her own trail. In the months we spent endeavoring to coerce a "Mama" or "Dada" out of her, Ruby started saying, "duck," "poop," and "Jesus," often interchangeably. Sometimes she would even use words that we were sure we'd never said to her, like "temple" or "platypus." She made it clear that she had no interest in television unless we were watching it together; she thought it rude of us to eat anything we weren't willing to share; and she begged me not to play my mandolin unless she was asleep or at the park.

Ruby invented many of the words we use and many of the games we play. She loves to fake us out by tempting us to come get kisses and then telling us to go take a nap right before we get any. She refers to all of her peers as either "friend" or "Sally" and believes the two most meaningful ways to interact with them are to give them hugs or follow them around. And all this from a girl who's barely over eighteen months.

Ruby is the same age that the baby from Horseshoe Bend was when she drowned. Was that child inventing words and games, discovering the world, forming opinions? Was she learning to

speaking, laughing, and love? How could I have known how wrong I was? Ruby isn't just my daughter—she's one of my very best friends. Because of Emily's demanding nursing job, Ruby and I spend a lot of time together. We have expectations of one another, we have inside jokes, we miss each other when we're apart, and we have a lot of memories together. If I ever lost my daughter, there is nothing that could ever replace her. Would I put up a cross for her? Maybe.

And so now, as I reflect, I express the remorse I should have felt for that poor family that lost their child. It doesn't take a lifetime to truly love someone—it doesn't even take eighteen months.