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DON'T TAKE ME FOR GRANTED

BY JANICE PAI

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The air was chilly and stale as we walked into the chapel. My parents and I arrived just after my sister and her husband. A friend of theirs offered to baby sit their other children. My sister walked over to the tiny opalescent casket that stood on an acrylic zigzag stand. Tears streamed from her eyes as they looked down at Jesse in the clothes she picked out for him. She told me she was unsure about his outfit. He wore a baby suit with a caricature bug (the car) with the words "On the Go" embroidered by clouds of puff next to the car and a matching beanie. I do not think she could have chosen a more perfect outfit.

Eleven and a half weeks ago, Jesse was born with a hole in his heart. The doctors found the hole when my sister was about 5 months pregnant, but they assumed it would heal itself like they had seen in so many previous cases, but it never healed. The doctors said Jesse would have to undergo two surgeries and would not be sure if both could be done at one time until they opened him up. Once born, he was immediately transferred to ICU at the Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC). I did not visit him or my sister during their stays at the hospital.

The thought of pregnancy never appealed to me: the overgrowth of the stomach, the popping out belly button, the "Alien"-like points poking through the skin marking where the hands, elbows, feet, or knees are, being sick for at least a couple months and the invasion of my body by something that grows then exits the body through an enormously stretched out orifice – no, not appealing at all. I have never been very fond of babies or children: babies and their fixed gaze upon nothingness, endless crying and neediness, their unisex appearance, their discolored skin – it's a wonder how anyone could think they're so cute and this is all before they begin speaking or walking.

I have always said I could only take my niece and nephew in small doses. People are surprised when I tell them I do not want to have kids then as if it mattered, they ask what my parents say about that. I tell them the truth – my sister has made them grandparents enough times for the both of us.

I took for granted thinking Jesse would be okay although the first three to four weeks of his life were very difficult. He had open heart surgery just a few days after leaving the comfort of his mother's womb and practically thrust into a life of endless tubes in a see-through plastic cage that kept him warm. I only knew this because of the pictures I had seen. My sister's friend was kind enough to keep up a web page dedicated to Jesse's health through a hospital-sponsored site, Carepages.com. She documented every significant event Jesse overcame. It was something someone very close to my sister was able to do. Something I should have done.

The doctors were only able to do the first part of the surgery. The second part would have been done if he had reached six months. The doctors told my sister "Jesse woke with a vengeance" after sleeping for about ten hours after his surgery. He cried, kicked and screamed with such anger and rage that he reopened his stitches and bled, but the bleeding did not cease as it should have after some hours. He had an unplanned surgery within twenty-four hours of his first to find that his chest

tube had scratched his heart. His heart needed to be stitched.

I helplessly watched my sister gazing into Jesse's casket and whispering words to him. Then she frantically paced from one side of his casket to the other, trying to find a way to pick him up and hold him. I knew she could not, although at one point, I believe she had her fingers under him. How much I wanted her to be able to pick him up; just one last time to help ease her pain. Yet I only watched until I felt it was safe to see him myself.

He did not feel his mother's arms until he was about 3 weeks old. Once he felt her, it seemed he knew she would do anything for him and hold him until his pain stopped or at least subsided as any mother would do for her baby. I saw from Carepage that my sister cried the day she finally got to hold him. She completely bawled. The one picture I specifically remember was her sitting in a rocking chair cradling him in her arms with his tubes still connected to him. She had a sad smile, of relief and despair. She complained about the rocking chairs because there were only two in the ICU and space for ten or so babies. All the mothers had to share the rocking chairs.

The only time I held Jesse was at the hospital the day he was pronounced, "Safe in the arms of Jesus." I did not hold my first nephew until he was completely passed the very fragile stage of his life - the stage that may have done damage if dropped - the age of one and a half years old. My niece I held when she was about a year old. I calculated that I would hold Jesse when he was six months. I wish I held him sooner.

My sister walked over to her bag and got out a My Little Pony and a Hot Wheels car. She put the My Little Pony down in Jesse's casket.

"This is from your big sister. She wanted me to give this to you and tell you she tested it out for you," she said with that same sad smile.

She took the Hot Wheels and put it on the other side of Jesse.

"And here's a Hot Wheels from your big brother."

My brother-in-law took out his guitar. He picked at the strings and turned the tuning knobs before he started singing songs.

When Jesse came home, he cried a lot and usually only stopped when my sister would hold him or when my brother-in-law played his guitar. Jesse would have loved music and good music at that. My sister once told me about a time Jesse would not stop crying and even holding him would not ease him, but only my sister and the children were home. She grabbed her husband's guitar not knowing at all how to play and began picking and strumming the strings. Jesse stopped for a moment as if listening and realized it was not good music, he began crying again even worse.

The doors opened to the guests. Inspirational music played softly in the background as people came in. Everyone walked to my sister and her husband to give their condolences. Some walked to Jesse. A few who recognized me came to me as well.

My eyes were swollen and stinging. My nose was sensitive from all the tissue I rubbed against it. I was sure it was red. I went to see Jesse before the service started. I ran my fingertips against his cold, chubby cheeks. I then kissed my fingertips and pressed them onto his lips. I kissed my fingertips again and pressed them onto his forehead. I tasted my falling tears and wiped them from my chin so they would not fall on him and taint his picture perfect sleep.

I only saw Jesse three times when he was with us. Two of the times he was sleeping. He did not look any different in the casket than in his stroller or bassinet. I thought I would have had all the time in the world to bond with him when he was older as I planned with my other niece and nephew. I even gave my sister quality time with Jesse. When he came home, my mother and I took the kids to Disneyland for a couple nights so my sister and her husband could be alone with Jesse. I was extremely relieved when our trip was over and my sister came to pick up the kids.

"Take them!" I said.

We laughed.

"So I probably won't ever do that again unless you come along."

"Was it really that bad?" My sister asked.

"Uh...yeah!"

My sister appreciated it. She told me quite a few times how much she appreciated me taking the kids so she could focus her attention on Jesse for those days.

When the service started, my mind traveled through all the times I could have done more for Jesse. I could have taken at least one visit to the hospital while he was there or more trips to my sister's place. Did he even know me? Would he remember me? Why didn't I take more pictures? I only have 3 pictures of him and he is sleeping in all of them. I always think how morbid that is. In one of them, he is even wearing the same outfit he was buried in.

The day he left us, I was at work. It was early in the morning. Only my manager and I were at work as of yet. I was filing when I heard my desk phone ring. I figured whoever it was could leave a message if it was not important. Then my cell phone rang. It was my sister. An eerie feeling arose in me.

"Hey," she said. Her voice was different. Instantly I thought something happened to Jesse, but I was afraid to ask.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Um... where's Mom and Dad?"

They had a routine. She should have realized my mom was at work and my dad was probably on the way home from dropping her off.

"Mom's at work today. I don't know where Dad is. On the way home maybe? Why? What's up?"

"Oh." She paused.

I waited.

"I'm on the way to the hospital. Jesse stopped breathing," she broke down into sobs.

My legs felt weak. I dropped to my knees and put my arm up against the cold file cabinet and my forehead on my warm arm. I fought back the tears. *Just until I get off the phone with her.*

"Is he breathing now?" I asked not knowing what to ask.

"Barely."

Shit...

"I'll call Dad," I said, trying to keep my voice from trembling.

"Okay. I'll try calling mom. Start praying."

"I will."

Would God really be so cruel to have Jesse endure so much just take him away from us, from my sister? I could not fathom any possible reason that would condone such an abrupt action, but I felt

as though God was telling me, "Yes."

I called my father.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?" He answered.

"I just talked to Julie. She's on the way to the hospital. Jesse stopped breathing." I began to cry.

"What?" He asked in disbelief.

"Jesse stopped breathing, so they're on the way to the hospital."

All I heard was static until he spoke again.

"That poor little boy. He's been through so much."

My dad was on his way home, but decided to meet my sister at the hospital, but he was delayed after I received another call from my sister's phone.

"Is this Janice?" An unfamiliar voice asked and gave shivers down my spine. I knew Jesse was gone.

"Yes," I answered. She introduced herself as the hospital's chaplain, but I do not recall her name. "Your sister lost the baby. Do you think you could come to be with her?"

I broke down in tears. I knew I was not stable enough to drive, but I had to get to her. My sister needed me. I called my father. He picked me up.

The pastor opened the mic for those who wanted to say a few words. I did not recognize many of the people who spoke and felt these people knew Jesse more than I did. I knew they had probably seen him more. Words played through my mind, but I was too shy. I hated speaking in front of crowds. I only imagined what I would have said – my name, how I'm related to Jesse, then talk about the time I took Jesse's older brother and sister to Disneyland for a few days and how they drove me absolutely crazy every moment we were there just so my sister could spend quality time with Jesse, and then I would end by saying "What I would give to have the chance to do it all over again with Jesse there." These words never left my mind.

Once the guests finished their stories, my sister and her husband said a few words of their own and thanked everyone for their support.

My brother-in-law was first.

"Whoever said no one should have to bury their child was right..." He began. It seemed he was the only one who was truly angry with God for taking Jesse. We hosted a luncheon after the funeral and went to my sister's house after. We all left the restaurant together, but in our own cars. By the time my parents and I arrived, my brother-in-law had already taken Jesse's crib out of their room and moved it into the garage.

It took a moment for my sister to gather herself, but when she did, I felt she touched all the guests in the chapel.

"I prayed everyday since Jesse passed that the Lord would perform some kind of miracle with Jesse," my sister said, using the podium to hold herself up. "That as He raised Lazarus from the dead, he would raise Jesse and use him as a lesson for all those who would see him and hear about his miracle. That they would know God exists and all those unsaved will become saved. Every day that passed without this miracle happening, I knew God had a greater purpose for Jesse..."

A flood of tears fell from my eyes as I drowned in my guilt and sorrow. I knew I could have been a

better aunt and a better sister. I had the ability, but never the motivation.

The service ended. We – my sister, her husband, his parents, my parents and I – stood by Jesse's casket to greet everyone who wanted to see him. When everyone was done, we took one last look at him before his casket was closed.

As we walked to Jesse's burial, I noticed he was lucky to live as long as he did. He was being buried in the cemetery's infant section. Many of his neighbors' stones were marked with one date. Jesse would have two.

We took our seats on the cold folding chairs under a green tent. I sat behind my sister. The sun hid behind the clouds that day. The sun never peaked even once. The gloominess of nature matched the gloom in all our hearts. The pastor's words were spoken unnoticed. Instead, I reflected upon all the things I did not do while Jesse was alive, all the things I could have done. From the most simple things like asking how he was doing to things that took the most time and compassion such as his Carepage. I simply needed to care more.

I placed a white rose on Jesse's casket.

My sister's friends passed out a dozen or two white balloons. I took one and once everyone was finished placing roses on Jesse's casket, we surrounded him. The ridges of the ribbon slid between my fingers as I let go slightly, but not enough to be released yet. It was not time. I wanted to speak to Jesse, but I had nothing to say. Would he even be listening?

The tears stopped falling as everyone placed their rose on his casket. A prayer was said after the last person.

I let go of my balloon. I watched it float into the sky as it drifted higher and higher along with the others, but I kept a steady eye on mine until it blended with the clouds. Maybe Jesse caught it as it left my sight.

The weight was not lifted off my shoulders as I foolishly had hoped. The guilt of not knowing my nephew engulfed me. There was no sense in dwelling on what could no longer be changed. I had my chance and I took Jesse for granted. Time was something I thought I would always have and so never questioned the thought of *doing something later*, but it was too late. There was no later. My time with Jesse was cut short and there was nothing I could do to make up for what I did not do. I could only let go of my guilt or at least attempt to.

My sister told me on the way to Jesse's funeral, she heard Social Distortion's "Don't Take Me for Granted." She imagined a grown Jesse in Heaven rocking out with an electric guitar wearing torn jeans and a white t-shirt. I enjoy that vision of him.

Jesse did serve another purpose for God's work. Instead of flower arrangements or gifts, my sister and brother-in-law requested donations to the Rocking Chair Foundation at CHOC. Jesse raised enough money for five rocking chairs. An emblem on the back of each reads: Celebrating Jesse David Chang "The joy of the Lord is our strength" Nehemiah 8:10. All but one has been painted. I plan to help my sister's family paint it when they are ready.

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Janice Pai was born in Los Angeles, CA. She has been attending California State University, Long Beach and will be graduating in December 2007 with a Bachelor's in English with emphasis in Creative Writing. This is her first publication, but looks forward to further accomplishments. Janice is exploring different categories

and genres eagerly seeking her niche and passion.

