

To Bella

Read online with photographs and supporting records

My Bella,

There are days when I still expect to hear your voice. I think about the things you would say, the way you would laugh, and how quickly you would correct me when something made no sense to you.

I still hear you calling me Babe. I miss that more than I can explain.

I miss watching you make a complete mess of the kitchen sink, the kitchen table, and somehow the backyard too. I would look at it and wonder how one little girl could create so much chaos. You would probably tell me it was because I was old. And you were right. Sometimes I needed you to remind me what it felt like to be a kid.

Even slime brings me back to you. There is that video of us playing with slime. You looked at me and said, “He likes slime,” while I was insisting that slime was no fun.

You knew better. Maybe I didn’t like slime, Bella. But you could see that I was enjoying myself—not because of the slime, but because I was doing it with you.

That is one of the things I understand differently now. Sometimes happiness doesn’t announce itself while you are living it. Sometimes it looks like slime on a table, chocolate being passed back and forth, a basketball in the driveway, crayons scattered everywhere, or a little girl making too many classroom rules.

At the time, they were ordinary moments. Now I know they were my life with you.

I miss our chocolate. When you were little, I would bring you a chocolate bar and we would sit together, taking turns taking bites. As we got close to the end, you started protecting your share. If Babe took too big a bite, you made sure you got a couple of bites before handing me whatever was left.

Later, when I wasn’t always there, you would save chocolate for me because you knew I would come. It was such a small thing, Bella. It doesn’t feel small anymore.

I miss your drawings. I look at them differently now—the butterfly beneath the rainbow, the sunshine and stars, the picture of our family, the hearts, and the page where you wrote: Love. Peace. Joy. Calm. Happy. Safe.

Then there is the Valentine you made for me, the enormous colorful heart with “Happy Valentine’s Day Babe.” I didn’t know then that the things you made would become treasures. A drawing wasn’t just a drawing. Your handwriting wasn’t just handwriting. They were pieces of you.

I used to tease you about coloring inside the lines or making things look perfect. You taught me something without even realizing it: it didn't have to be perfect. It only needed to come from you. Even when your Titanic didn't look exactly like the Titanic, it was yours.

And yes, Bella, I know. The Titanic ship did not fly. You made sure Babe understood that. Eventually you discovered there was an actual Titanic movie and realized I had been making up my own version all along. Somehow you still wanted my stories. Sometimes you even helped me add to them.

There were nights when I was tired and tried to convince you to let someone else tell you the Big Bad Wolf. No. Babe had to tell it, because apparently nobody else could make it scary enough. I miss acting out the story and watching you laugh while pretending you were scared.

I miss our piano. I had wanted to learn when I was young but couldn't afford the opportunity. When I had you, I wanted you to have that chance. We would take turns playing songs for each other, and you would ask me to play you something nice.

I remember sitting there playing a song for you when you started reaching over and hitting the keys. I looked at you and said, "You're messing up the song, Bella."

At the time, it was another ordinary moment. I was trying to play my song, and my little girl was adding her own notes. I didn't know there would come a day when I would give anything to feel your little hands reaching for those keys again.

If I could go back, I would move over and make room for you. You could hit every wrong key and interrupt every song. I would just look at you, smile, and keep playing.

The beautiful part was that you were there beside me.

I miss Teacher Tuesday. During those last months, you, Fannie, Vicky and I had our little classroom in your room. Each week we took turns being the teacher, but nobody looked forward to her turn more than you. When Bella was the teacher, Bella made the rules, and the rest of us students had better follow them.

You prepared your agenda and made your classroom rules. And, Bella, you had a lot of rules. There were things we were allowed to do and a much longer list of things we absolutely were not allowed to do.

Looking at that board now makes me laugh. You weren't pretending halfway. When Bella was the teacher, Bella had a classroom to run, and Babe, Fannie, and Vicky were expected to behave.

You even managed to make time-outs fun. And, of course, there had to be candy.

You always told me you had the best Teacher Tuesday class. I would challenge you and say mine was better. We went back and forth about who was the better teacher, and I loved watching how seriously you took your little job.

Bella, there is something I never admitted to you. You were right. Your class was better. I was so proud of you. I thought there would be another Tuesday for me to finally admit you had won. Now I would give anything for one more class with my favorite teacher.

I miss speaking French with you. Sometimes we had so little time together that even ten minutes felt precious, but we still had our conversations. You wanted the whole family to go to Paris one day, and I promised we would. I am sorry we never got there together. That promise still hurts.

You wanted to go to Disneyland too. I still have the message you sent me with your drawing labeled “Disney Land.”

“I want to go there,” you wrote. When I told you it was a nice, fun place, you answered, “Yeah I really wanna go there.”

Bella, I wish I had taken you. You were ten years old. You weren’t supposed to have finished making plans. You were supposed to make new ones, change your mind a hundred times, and keep discovering the world.

I wasn’t supposed to be remembering the places you wanted to see. I was supposed to be taking you there. You wanted to try everything: softball, basketball, volleyball, piano.

Whatever interested you, you wanted to give it a chance. I loved your fearlessness. You once argued with another child because you insisted your dad was the best basketball player in the world. You gave Babe far too much credit, Bella, but I loved that you believed it.

When we played in the driveway or at the park, you always wanted to be on my team. Sometimes I would lift you up so you could make the shot. You thought we were unstoppable. Maybe in those moments, we were.

I can still hear myself telling you, “Don’t play to win. Play to have fun, and you can never lose.” At the time I was talking about sports. I wanted that for your life too: the chance to try, make mistakes, laugh, and keep going without worrying about being perfect.

Being Bella was enough.

You once told your brother, “No one is stronger than Babe except God.”

Oh, Bella. You were so sure of me.

You knew the Babe who could lift you toward the basketball hoop, carry you on his back, and hold you in the air while you sang, “I believe I can fly.” You trusted those arms. And when I put you down, you wanted me to do it all over again.

I wonder if you ever knew how much you lifted me too.

Sometimes all it took was hearing “Hi, Babe.” I could be tired or worried, and there you were—with something to tell me, something to show me, or something you wanted us to do together. Being your Babe gave me so much to look forward to.

You were stronger than Babe in more ways than you could have imagined. I think about your determination, your willingness to try again, and how laughter could find its way back before your tears had dried. You helped me find that laughter too. You did not have to understand everything that was troubling me to make a difficult day feel a little easier. You only had to be Bella.

And I suspect there are still a few kids in the neighborhood waiting to challenge me at basketball. You were always volunteering me for bets—basketball, backflips—as though you had already decided I would win.

You could have checked with me first, Bella. Babe might have needed to stretch.

I smile thinking about you making those promises on my behalf. I did not even have to be beside you for my little girl to be proud of me. Somewhere, while I was going about my day, you were telling someone what your Babe could do.

Now I would gladly play those games, take the sore muscles and all your teasing, just to look over and find you watching.

Or we could play catch. You loved playing catch with Babe, and you had so much energy. I was always amazed by how long you could keep going without dropping the ball. I would be getting tired, quietly waiting for you to miss a catch so I could finally take a little break.

But you kept catching it.

And when I was the one who dropped it, you would scream, “Yes!” I loved seeing the smile and excitement on your face. You would stop counting and just want to keep going. You didn’t care about the score. You wanted another throw, another catch, more time playing with Babe.

I miss having you wear me out, Bella.

What I would give to throw that ball to you again. To hear you scream when I missed, bend down to pick it up, and look up at your smiling face. To know that we still had another throw.

These are the memories that make writing this letter so hard.

I must have read it a hundred times, and every time, I cry. I know what the next sentence says. I know which memory is coming. I wrote the words myself, and still there are moments when I can barely see them through my tears.

Sometimes I tell myself I should not be crying, that I should be able to get through it by now. I tell myself that this time I will hold it together. Then I remember your face, your voice, something you said, and I cry again.

I do not feel strong, Bella. I feel broken.

One moment I am smiling because I can almost hear your excitement when I dropped the ball. The next, I am crying because remembering it is all I can do. I want to be there with you. I want the tired arms and you wanting to keep going. I want to hear about your day and wonder what you will say next.

I want my little girl.

I can tell our stories, but I cannot bring us back into them. I can remember holding you, but I cannot reach for you now. I can write your name again and again, and still what I want most is to hear you call me Babe.

I wish you were beside me as I wrote this letter. You could interrupt to tell your part, correct something I remembered differently, or laugh at how much I had written about something you thought was silly. I would put the whole letter aside to listen to you.

There is so much love in these pages that I wish I could give you in person.

You thought no one was stronger than Babe except God. I wish I felt as strong as you believed I was. Some days, I am simply trying to get through the day with how much I miss you. And perhaps I should stop asking myself to read a letter to my little girl without crying. Every memory matters because you mattered. Every ordinary moment holds someone I still love with all my heart.

These tears belong to your Babe too, Bella—the father who laughed with you, played with you, and sometimes needed a break long before you did.

Every time I look up from these pages, I still wish you would be there.

I miss Stuffuls. First there was the stuffed puppy, and then for years you wanted a real dog. When I asked what you would call your dog, you hesitated and said something like, “Stuffffff...uls.” Then you decided it probably wasn’t a good name. I told you it was the best name in the world.

When Stuffuls finally came home for your birthday, the happiness on your face told me everything. People would ask what his name meant. I told them my little girl picked it. It didn’t need a meaning.

You loved that dog. Even when he made you cry, you would complain about him, and five minutes later you would be playing with him again.

I miss the way children can insult you without even realizing they are insulting you. You told me I was hairy and reminded me I was old. Somehow I laughed instead of being offended. You had that gift.

I miss our stupid arguments about music. I would tell you “I’d Do Anything for Love” was one of the greatest songs ever made. You would tell me it was the worst song in the world. Sometimes you

wouldn't give me the last piece of chocolate until our argument was finished. Neither of us wanted to admit the other was right. That was part of the fun.

And then there was the song you made for us. The Bella-Babe song. Some memories belong so completely to two people that nobody else can quite understand them. That is one of ours.

I miss your questions, your confidence, and your stubbornness. I miss asking you, "What the problem is?" and finding a way to make you laugh when you were upset.

More than anything, I miss watching you grow. I was supposed to keep watching. There were supposed to be more birthdays, more school years, more games, and ordinary days when nothing special needed to happen because you were here.

I was supposed to embarrass you when you became a teenager. You were supposed to tell me I was old and didn't understand anything. I wanted to watch you graduate and see where your courage and imagination took you. I wanted to know the woman my fearless little girl would become.

There was supposed to be more time.

Sometimes I wonder what you would look like now. Would you be taller? Would your face already be changing? Would you still call me Babe in front of your friends, or would you pretend you were too grown for that and then say it when nobody else was listening?

Every photograph I have of you keeps you exactly where you were. The world keeps adding years to Babe. It doesn't add them to you.

There are photographs of every age you reached, and then there are no photographs of the ages that were supposed to come next.

I knew the little girl you were. I miss the person I never got the chance to meet. Because she would have been you too.

I wish I could have back the moments when I was distracted or didn't listen closely enough. I wish we had been given more time beyond the work and responsibilities of everyday life—more ordinary days together.

I thought there would be another visit, another bedtime story, another chance to sit beside you and listen. I wish we had more of those moments ahead of us. And I am grateful for the ones we had—the stories you insisted I tell, the chocolate we shared, and the games neither of us wanted to end.

You seemed to understand something I was still learning. You could turn an ordinary day into a classroom, a story, or a game. You drew things the way you wanted them drawn and named your dog whatever you wanted him named. You made room for joy in whatever was in front of you.

Sometimes grief makes me wonder whether I showed you enough of what you meant to me. I hope you never mistook the times I couldn't be beside you for a lack of love.

I wasn't a perfect father. But loving you was never something I had to question.

I hope you felt that love in the stories you insisted I tell, the chocolate we shared, the rides on my shoulders, and the way I lifted you toward the basketball hoop. Those were ordinary ways of loving you, and they meant everything to me.

Your Babe loved you. Completely.

Nothing that happened between the adults in your life ever changed that. Nothing ever could. And if there is one thing I wish I could tell you now, face to face, it would be this:

Bella, you were loved.

You were loved when you were laughing. You were loved when you were stubborn. You were loved when you were happy, when you were upset, when you were making a mess, when you were making rules, and when you were simply being Bella.

You never had to earn it.

You never had to be perfect. You never had to wonder.

You were my daughter.

You were loved simply because you were you.

If somehow you could read this, Bella, I would not want you to remember your life through the sadness that came after it.

I would want you to remember yourself laughing. Running. Playing. Learning. Arguing with Babe. Making your classroom rules. Saving chocolate. Loving Stuffuls.

Dreaming about Paris. I would want you to remember being happy. Because your life was not the day you died.

Your life was all the days you lived.

I remember you telling me that you prayed Babe would get fired from his job. I had told you I was working because I didn't know how to explain why I wasn't sleeping there every night anymore. Your words hurt then. When I remember them now, I wonder whether you thought losing my job would mean I could be home. What I hear in that memory is a little girl wanting more time with her father.

I wish I could go back, hold you, and tell you that Babe wanted to be there too.

There is something else I never want to forget: you loved Babe back. I felt it in the chocolate you saved, in the way you wanted me to tell your stories, and in your choice to be on my team. Those were some of the greatest gifts you ever gave me. I hope you knew how much they meant.

Even when I wasn't there, even when I was working, even when life kept us apart, I hope you knew that I wanted to be with you.

So much has happened since you left. There are things I wish had never happened and things I wish I could explain. Here, I want to stay with our memories. This letter belongs to you and me.

Babe and Bella.

I want people to know the little girl behind the name Isabella Pierre-Louis. And there is something about your name I want you to know.

Long before you were born, there was a little girl named Isabelle whom I loved very much. She was taken out of my life through separation, not death. I didn't get to keep watching her grow or continue being part of her life. But I never forgot her, or the happiness she brought into mine.

Years later, when I learned I was going to have a little girl of my own, I remembered that love and that joy. They became part of the reason I chose the name Isabella for you.

But I couldn't have known how completely you would make it your own.

Isabella became you.

It became the name of the little girl whose umbilical cord I cut and whom I held when she entered this world. The little girl I lifted into the air. The little girl who called me Babe, saved chocolate for me, made too many classroom rules, interrupted my piano songs, and named her puppy Stuffuls.

Whatever memories helped me choose your name, you gave it an entirely new meaning.

I had already known the sadness of being separated from a little girl I loved. I never imagined I would have to say goodbye to you. I am grateful I gave you that name. Every memory we made gave me another reason to love it.

When I hear Isabella, I think of your face. I hear your laugh. I hear "Babe."

I think of my daughter. My Isabella. My Bella.

I want people to know your humor and your stubbornness, how much you loved your puppy, how you ran your classroom, and how you believed you could do anything.

There was a whole life before that terrible day, and every part of it matters to me.

For so long, I thought I was supposed to be the one teaching you. I wanted to teach you how to play basketball, how to keep trying, and how to believe in yourself. Somewhere along the way, you became my teacher too.

You showed me that things don't have to be perfect to be beautiful. A drawing could be yours without looking like anyone else's. A song could have wrong notes and still be worth listening to. The best basketball team could simply be the one where we got to play together.

I cannot bring you back or finish the years we were supposed to have. I can tell your stories. I can laugh at the things you said and cry when I need to.

I can keep our BellaBabe memories alive.

I have been gathering our pictures and videos, Bella, putting them beside music that says some of what I struggle to say. I want people to see your smile, hear your voice, and know the little girl I knew. Making these tributes is another way for Babe to tell your stories.

Making your song brought me back to so many moments with you. As I worked on it, I kept thinking about what you would say if you could hear it. I wanted to put our love into the music—the chocolate, the stories, the laughter, and all those little things that belonged to Bella and Babe.

Now, when I listen, I wish you were sitting beside me. I want to watch your face as you recognize something about us in the words. I want to hear your opinion, even if you tell me that Babe needs to change something. There is happiness in remembering us, and then the ache of realizing I cannot turn to you and ask, "Did you like it, Bella?"

I think you would have loved it. And I think we would have made so many different songs together. Songs about Stuffuls. Silly songs that made no sense to anyone but us. Songs you would decide needed your own words, your own notes, and probably a few rules for Babe to follow. I can imagine us disagreeing about a line and laughing before we ever finished it.

You had already given us our Bella-Babe song. I wish we had been given the years to keep adding to it—to make new songs as you grew, with new stories to tell.

That is part of what hurts when I listen. I hear the memories we made, and I imagine all the music we never got to make. I am glad I made this song for you, Bella. I just wish we could be listening to it together, already talking about what our next one would be.

Sometimes it feels like the world has moved on so quickly, Bella. People return to their routines, and I wonder how often they still think of you. But Babe hasn't forgotten. I can't forget you, and I won't.

As long as I am here, there will be someone saying your name. Someone who remembers your little voice calling him Babe.

Sometimes, Bella, I let myself imagine being given just five more minutes with you. Forever is what I really want. Five minutes is simply the smallest impossible thing I can ask for.

I wouldn't spend them searching for answers. I would hold you and look at your face, trying to memorize every little detail all over again. I would listen to whatever you wanted to tell me, even if it was something silly. I know now how much I would give just to hear your voice.

Maybe I would ask you, "What the problem is?" one more time, just to hear your answer. Maybe we would share a piece of chocolate. One bite for Bella. One bite for Babe.

Or maybe you would play me the Bella-Babe song. I would sit beside you and listen, happy just to hear you sing it again. If it were my turn to play and you reached over to hit the keys, I would make room for you.

If you wanted to spend those minutes playing basketball, telling me my Titanic ship couldn't fly, or reminding me how old and hairy I was, that would be enough. Whatever you chose, I would be there with you.

Maybe the strangest thing is that if I really had those five minutes, I know exactly what I would try to do.

I would try to memorize you. And then I would realize I had already spent ten years doing exactly that without knowing it.

Every laugh I remember. Every silly argument. Every time you said Babe. Every ordinary moment that stayed somewhere inside me. Maybe a father starts memorizing his child from the moment he first holds her. He just never expects there will come a day when the memories are all he has left to hold.

And when those minutes were almost over, I would probably cry. You would probably look at me and wonder what the problem is, and Babe would try to smile.

This time, I would know exactly what the problem is. I wouldn't want to let you go.

I would hold you a little tighter and tell you how proud I am of you. I would tell you that you were right about Teacher Tuesday. And I would make sure you heard what I hope you always knew:

You were loved every moment I was there and every moment I wasn't. You were loved while I was working and when life kept us apart.

You are loved now. You will always be loved. You were my daughter, my little girl, and my teacher. You were Bella. And I was so lucky that, for the time we had, I got to be your Babe.

There is another ordinary thing I miss, Bella.

"Good night Babe."

Three ordinary words.

I must have heard them so many times without ever stopping to think that there could come a day when I would give anything to hear them again.

That is one of the cruel things about losing you. I didn't know which ordinary moment would be the last one. I didn't know which goodbye would become the goodbye.

I didn't know which time hearing your voice would become the last time I would hear it. If I had known, maybe I would have listened differently.

Maybe I would have stayed a little longer. Maybe I would have held you a little tighter. Maybe I would have answered, "Good night, Bella. I love you," and tried somehow to hold onto the sound of you saying Babe.

But that is the thing about ordinary moments. You don't know they are extraordinary while you are living them. You only know later. And now three ordinary words can bring back an entire world.

Good night Babe.

Your voice. Your face. Your room. Your laugh. For just a second, you are not a memory. You are my little girl saying good night to her father.

And I am still Babe. There are so many things I wish I could give you now. Another birthday. Another Christmas. Paris. Disneyland. Your teenage years. Your graduation. All the years that should have been yours. I cannot give you any of them. So I will give you what I still can.

I will give you my memories. I will give you your stories. I will keep saying your name. And for as long as I am here, you will still have a Babe who loves you.

What I want most is one more ordinary day with you. Not Paris. Not Disneyland. Not a birthday. No special occasion at all.

Just you and me, with a story to tell, a little chocolate to share, maybe some crayons scattered between us, and nowhere we have to hurry.

One more ordinary day of being your Babe. And maybe at the end of that ordinary day, when there was nothing left to do and nowhere else we needed to be, I would hear those three ordinary words one more time.

"Good night Babe."

And this time I would know. I would know that there was nothing ordinary about them at all.

I gave you the name Isabella.

You gave me the name Babe.

I will carry both for the rest of my life.

I love you, Bella.

Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. Always.

Babe