

To Sabrina Success

Read online with photographs and supporting records

Sabrina,

Shirley once wrote to me, “You’re so mean Dukens.” After the divorce, you echoed that description and also said I was a bad person. Hearing those words from you hurt because I remembered the years when you called me Uncle and the warmth we had shared. I wondered what had changed in how you saw me.

Your mother called me “bro,” and I called her “sis.” As recently as June 1, 2023, her birthday message to me still reflected that closeness. Those small exchanges mattered because I believed we were family. You were welcomed into my home. You stayed with us during summers, after high school, and while you were in college. We spent time together as a family. There were vacations, camping trips, cruises, visits to Florida, celebrations, shared meals, and ordinary moments that did not seem important enough to preserve at the time because we assumed there would always be more of them.

I remember you wanting to help me plan surprises for Shirley. On September 1, 2022, you reminded me that it was “Tati Shirley’s” birthday, asked what we were doing, and suggested a restaurant in the North End. It was an ordinary family conversation, and that is why it matters to me now.

In another exchange, you wrote, “I hope you’re doing well too! I miss you.” On March 11, 2023, I replied that I missed you all as well. On May 25, you told me your mother was in Boston and wanted to see me. I congratulated you on your accomplishment and told you I was proud of you. Those messages bring back the warmth I remember between us.

On May 27, 2023, you called me “Uncle” and asked whether you could see Stuffuls for her birthday on June 15. You said you and Grandma had remembered her birthday while talking about mine and hers. A few days later, you wished me a happy birthday too. Even the little dog Bella loved was part of those family connections.

Reading those messages now, I remember how natural it once felt to hear from you. A birthday suggestion, “I miss you,” a message beginning “Hi Uncle”—none of it seemed extraordinary then. It was simply part of being family. That is why the distance between us later hurt so much. I cannot know everything that changed for you, but I hope those years still have a place in how you remember me.

You were also part of Bella’s life.

You knew her as she was growing up. You loved her, and she loved you.

I remember you repeatedly telling me that Bella needed another sibling. You even wanted me to have another child with Shirley. At the time, those conversations were part of the closeness we all shared.

That is one of the things I have struggled to understand when looking back.

You were there when Shirley told me to leave. I remember seeing the sadness on your face as I was leaving. You were much younger then, and I don't pretend to know everything you understood about what was happening between Shirley and me.

But later, when you continued asking me to have another child with Shirley, I struggled to understand it. You had witnessed how painful things had become. Maybe you hoped somehow that everything could be repaired and that we could become a family again. I don't know. But for me, another child could never repair what first needed to be repaired between the adults.

There were other ways I tried to be there for you.

When you were in college and needed financial help, there were times I provided money through Shirley. I helped because I considered you family, not because I expected recognition or anything in return.

And that is why what happened afterward has been difficult for me to reconcile with the Sabrina I thought I knew.

As the divorce between Shirley and me unfolded, and especially after Bella's death, I experienced a change in your words and actions toward me. At times, what you said or did seemed so closely aligned with what Shirley wanted or believed that I reached a point where I could no longer tell what reflected your own experiences and conclusions and what may have come from what you had been told.

I cannot know everything you were told or how you reached your conclusions. You may also remember some of those years differently, and I am not asking you to replace your memories with mine. I am asking you to consider what you personally witnessed, what you were told, and what the records show—and to leave room for what you may not have known.

I understand that Shirley is your family. I would never ask you not to love or support her.

But you also knew me.

You can love and support Shirley and still acknowledge that Bella had a father who adored her, whom she called Babe, and who lost his little girl too. Those loyalties do not have to compete.

That brings me to something that still hurts.

At Bella's funeral, after all the years we had known each other and all the memories we shared, it felt as though we had become strangers.

There was no condolence. No handshake. No acknowledgment from you of me as Bella's grieving father.

I know you were grieving too. Bella loved you, and losing her hurt you. But whatever accusations were being made or conflicts existed between Shirley and me, I was still her father.

I was still Babe.

I was trying to comprehend a world in which my ten-year-old daughter was suddenly gone. I did not need you to take my side. I needed a simple acknowledgment that I had lost my child.

I know there may have been things you did not know how to say, just as there were things I did not know how to express in my grief.

I am writing because I don't want everything that happened after Bella's death to erase everything that came before it.

Perhaps someday, with time and distance from everything that happened, you will look back at all of this differently. Maybe you won't. That decision belongs to you.

Whatever you ultimately believe about me, I hope you will reach that understanding through your own judgment and conscience.

And despite everything, I don't want the last thing connecting us to be conflict.

You do not owe me a response. But if you ever want an honest conversation, or feel ready to share a memory of Bella—a story, something funny she said, or a photograph I have never seen—I would welcome it.

Those years of family meant something to me. So did the love you and Bella shared.

Whatever happens between us, you were someone my little girl loved. That will always matter to me.

Dukens Pierre-Louis
Bella's Babe