

The night was dark and rainy. It was midnight. A whip-crack of lightning, the union of millions of electrons, blazed through the ebony sky, searing through the humid steam of August-born heat. As the light emblazoned night with its blinding, temporary brand, a child was born into the world. That child was me...

Daddy sat patiently in the waiting room at the hospital in Cleveland, Ohio that August night. He had brought Mom in earlier that day, and the doctors had tried to induce labor. They had been unsuccessful. I was not yet ready to face the world. I had not been ready for the past two weeks since my mother's due date. She must have been feeling a bit antsy.

He had returned that evening as the doctors had instructed. The rain began to fall as he watched the other fathers-to-be leave to meet their new children and to comfort their wives. As the hours passed, the raindrops grew heavier, swollen from their long stay within the comforting confines of the gray clouds above.

Midnight came and went. Dad had been waiting for hours. He was starting to get tired; his eyes were drooping from exhaustion. Just as he was about to fall into Sleep's waiting arms, thunder struck loudly and boldly, jerking Dad from the peaceful world behind his closed eyelids. He sat up, nervously checking his watch. It read 12:13. Then it dawned on him. At that moment, when the lightning and thunder had crashed, Dad knew, he just *knew*, that I had been born.

I was born on August 8, 1969. The most exciting thing that happened on that day was that Charles Manson and his followers committed a horrible murder that lives on in history. Not

such a great day to remember! I was the first of two children. My mom and dad had been married two years before I came along. My sister was born in 1971.

I don't remember much about being a toddler, but one memory does stand out in my mind. I remember my sister rolling around in her walker. I don't think I liked her very much. She was two years younger than me. She came up to me in that walker and pulled my hair. I got so mad at her that I pushed her over. She lay on the green carpet of the apartment we lived in, crying her brains out. My mom was pretty mad at me for that!

Another memory I have is of blaming my sister Hallie for writing my name in crayon all over the wall in our hallway. My mother came up to me and said, "Did you write your name on the wall?"

"No," I replied innocently, "Hallie did it."

"That's funny," my mom said. "Hallie is only two years old and doesn't know how to write!"

Hallie and I had a lot of fun as kids, even though we didn't always get along. She was sort of a cry baby. She couldn't stand to be away from my mom for one minute. I can remember her screaming, staring out the window after my mom would go to work. She was very "clingy" to say the least!

When I was seven years old, Hallie and I went across the street to our friend Robin's house. We were playing in Robin's mom's room when I felt something on my knee. I looked down. There was a string on it. I tried to wipe it off, but the string was stuck. I started feeling some pain. Hallie knew there was something wrong, so she ran across the street, yelling for my dad. Dad couldn't figure out what the problem was, but he put us in the car and drove to the emergency room.

X-rays revealed a needle embedded in my knee. I had knelt down on a needle at Robin's house, and the string was still hanging out of it! An operation followed to get the needle out, and I got to miss a week of school. That was the scariestt think that happened to me as a kid.

When I was ten years old, my dad's job was moved from Cleveland to a little townin Georgia called Toccoa. Hallie and I were really sad about leaving our Cleveland home. Georgia was so different from Ohio. The people talked funny and thought we were weird. I was in fifth grade.

It took a couple of years for my family to feel really comfortable in Georgia. Now that I've lived here for over 20 years, I can't imagine growing up back in Cleveland. We like to visit friends and family there every once in a while, but now Georgia is our home.

In 1984, my parents bought a sandwich shop in Toccoa called Brother John's Subs. My mom managed the shop, and Hallie and I worked for her after school and on the weekends. I was a freshman in high school at the time.

High school was very different from middle school. I was pretty weird to begin with. I loved high school be casue there were other weird people just like me there. I made lots of friends my first year, many of whom I still communicate regularly.

My best friend in high school was Kelly. She and I were in band together. She was a year older than me. We did all sorts of fun things together, and now that we are all grown up, we still enjoy each other's company, though not as often as we would like.

I graduated from Stephens County High School in 1987 and began college at the end of that year at the University of Georgia. I started off as a journalism major, but I quickly changed

my mind and became an education major. I decided on middle school education because I remembered being in middle school. It had so many ups and downs. I thought that maybe because I could relate to the middle school mentality, I would be a good middle school teacher.

I finished my last quarter by student teaching at Clarke Middle. I got my undergraduate degree in 1990 and finished working in the office at CMS as a secretary that year. I became a full-fledged teacher in 1991-92. I taught sixth grade science my first year.

1991 was also the year that I met my husband, Greg. We met through a mutual acquaintance and were friends before we started dating. Greg was an intelligent, sweet, generous, and caring person, and still is today. We decided to get married in 1995 and bought our first house on the east side of Athens. We got three babies – Puck, Pan, and Joy. They were ferrets, but we thought of them as our babies.

We lived in Athens for a couple of years until Greg got a job in Atlanta. We had to decide whether we wanted to stay in Athens, move to Atlanta, or find some place in between. I put out job applications to Gwinnett County schools, but in the end I decided that I loved Athens and Clarke Middle too much to leave. Greg and I settled on a house between Athens and Atlanta, so we both commuted to work every day.

In 1996, I decided to become a vegetarian. I had wavered back and forth between eating meat and not eating meat all my life, even since I was a little kid. Now I finally decided to be an herbivore. The change wasn't that difficult for me since I ate very little meat to begin with. It was an important choice in my life, and I am still a vegetarian today.

Also in 1996, during the summer Olympics in Atlanta, my niece Kailin was born to Hallie. Kailin was such a little cutie! She was just like Hallie in that she hated being away from

her mother. They always say, “What comes around goes around.” I think this is especially true for Hallie!

A few years later in 1999, a number of interesting things happened. First of all, I was voted by my fellow teachers as Clarke Middle School’s Teacher of the Year. This was a very important and exciting honor for me. I had been at CMS for 7 years, and it made me so happy and proud to know that my colleagues felt that I was a good teacher. It was one of my proudest moments.

Also in 1999, I turned 30. For my birthday, Greg bought me a brand new Corvette. My Corvette is blue with a hard top that comes off. It is really beautiful, and I love to speed down the highway in it. Driving a Corvette is like flying. It sort of takes your breath away!

2001 was one of the best and worst years of my life. In April, Greg and I found out we were going to have a baby. We were excited, scared, happy, unsure, and nervous all at the same time. We had no idea what raising a child would be like. We decided to wait and tell our mothers for Mother’s Day as a special surprise.

In the meantime, my mother had been feeling very badly. She was tired and could hardly find any energy. She went to the doctor to have tests run. The night before she would hear about her test results, I talked to her on the phone. She was very sad and scared about the tests. After I hung up with her, I asked Greg if I could go ahead and tell her our news about the baby, hoping it would cheer her up. He said yes, so I called my mom back.

“Mom,” I said, “I have some news that is going to make you really, really happy.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“You’re going to be a grandma again,” I replied.

And then all I heard was laughter. It was the sweetest sound to my ears. Mom just laughed and laughed. She laughed for a minute straight until finally, I could hear my dad and sister in the background asking what happened. Mom told them, and they laughed too. They were all very happy because I had said for years that I would never have any children. I guess I was wrong.

The next day, we found out that my mom had cancer.

My mother went into the hospital in Athens. Scores of tests were ordered so that the doctors could figure out what kind of cancer it was. They finally diagnosed Mom with mantle cell lymphoma. This type of cancer is particularly virulent and almost always deadly.

Chemotherapy was ordered as a treatment option for my mother. She was moved to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. My mother was so strong throughout her treatment. She always tried to have a positive attitude and to see the good in everything. She vowed that she was going to beat cancer. She was going to be a grandmother to my baby.

In the summer of 2001, Greg and I decided to take a trip to Greece because we figured it would be the last time we'd get to go anywhere interesting for a long time. We knew that with a baby, we wouldn't be able to do much traveling, and my mom was doing well at the time, so we went. Greece was one of the most interesting and beautiful places I have ever seen. Greg and I visited many islands on a cruise ship. Our ports of call included Mykonos, Crete, Santorini, Ephesus in Turkey, and Rhodes. It was the best trip I've ever taken.

My mother's health varied from week to week. She made it through chemotherapy, but she lost her hair in the process. She wore this cute hat to cover up her bald head, but we kidded around with her about it all the time. I thought she looked good bald. My mom was

able to feel my baby kicking, and that gave her great joy. I'd lie down on the bed with her, put her hand on my big belly, and she'd laugh when the baby kicked everywhere.

By November, 2001, my mom's health had declined. She had lost too much weight, she wouldn't eat, and her mind was starting to deteriorate. The cancer had invaded her spinal cord and entered her brain. She succumbed to mantle cell lymphoma on November 16 at 9:13 in the morning. I was there when she died, and it broke my heart that she never had a chance to meet my baby.

As my family picked up the pieces left in the wake of my mother's death, I had to start preparing to have a baby. I was huge, and even my big maternity clothes weren't fitting any more. My due date came and went. I got bigger. It was getting dangerously close to Christmas, and still no baby.

Finally, my doctor suggested I have a cesarean section because the baby was too big to deliver normally. And so, my son, Cassidy Rain Bell, was born exactly five weeks to the minute after I lost my mom on December 21, 2001 at 9:13 a.m. He weighed ten pounds, and fifteen ounces. That's one big boy!

And that's where my life has taken me so far. I have just started my 12th year of teaching sixth graders at Clarke Middle School. I work half time now so I can spend more time with Rain. I am also finishing my Masters degree in Instructional Technology at UGA this semester. After that, I hope to relax and enjoy being a half time teacher for the rest of the year.

I'm not sure where my future is headed. I have learned many things in life. One of the most important lessons I learned was one that my mom taught me after she died. My mother's sister told me that Mom once said to her, "I love my life!" That pure, simple statement is the

way that everyone should feel all the time, even when it gets tough. When it's good, or when it's bad, life is really all that we have. We might as well enjoy it while we can.

I love my life!