

# Girl of Light & Shadow

A Memoir of My Daughter  
Who Killed Herself



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Light, Cloud & Darkness Books  
Longmont, CO

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## CHAPTER 4

### *Free Fall*

SOMETIME IN THE eight months following John's birth—before, alas, I lost my job in a massive wave of industry layoffs (so, it wasn't personal)—I asked my boss if my infant son qualified as a “Native Texan,” just because he had been born, you know, in *Texas*.

Without missing a beat, he popped off the most convincing disclaimer I had ever heard. Almost as if he'd been sitting around waiting for me to ask the same dumb question that, obviously, other damn Yankees stranded in the South had asked before, at existential moments like this.

“If a cat crawls into the oven to have kittens,” he replied, in his finest Native Texas drawl, “do you call ‘em *muffins*?”

I cocked my head, thinking. He smiled serenely. Waited for me to get it.

“Uhh . . . *ab!*” I cried, after missing a few beats. “My kid's a Native Kitten!”

With regard to my son's (Yankee) pedigree, my boss and I were on the same page.

Speaking of metaphorical ovens—not literal ones, like Texas—when my children were old enough to understand that they were definitely *not* Native Texans (and I would tolerate no *y'alls* in my house, thank you very much), sometimes I joked that John had been half-baked while Beth had been slightly overdone.

By that I meant that my lovely little girl, as we all knew, had been born ten days beyond her due date. Unlike her brother, who couldn't wait to get here, she refused to come out of her room (neatly foreshadowing the surly teen she would become).

Beth was a breech baby—her head jammed up under her mom's ribcage as if she were trying to crawl as far away as possible from that infernal entry to a world of eternal woe (“Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here!”). As if she had already heard the sounds of the tormented souls who awaited her arrival on the other side.

Which, perhaps, she had.

She wouldn't turn around, wouldn't put her head down and get with the program, no matter how many nurses tried to manipulate her in the final weeks before the oven timer dinged.

We had to stage an intervention.

At 8:26 a.m. on April 12, 1990, at Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center in northwest Houston, a bunch of masked intruders broke in and dragged Elizabeth Anne Valusek out against her will. By cesarean section, not by her feet. Just to be perfectly clear.

And, yeah, she was pissed.



From the standpoint of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Franklin's classic three-fold story structure, the long arc of Beth's life story kicked off that morning with her first whopping "complication"—a situation that causes the (hopefully) sympathetic character some sort of problem, which generates tension. In this case, those damned home invaders and kidnappers handed her over to *me and Cathy*, of all people, for safe keeping.



The first time I held my baby girl—snuggled in a cozy blanket, her head smooth and round as a softball (having successfully avoided the narrow passage through which she'd been so loath to squeeze)—I barely understood what I was feeling.

Awe, relief, and love, of course.

But a dark undercurrent of ambivalence flowed just beneath the surface. I did *not* experience the explosion of inarticulate joy that had warmed my entire being when John arrived, four years and four days before. I felt, instead, the cold fingers of an old, familiar dread.

*This will destroy us*, something in me whispered. An ancient echo from 1979, the year we had dangerously overdrawn our joint relational bank account.

Gazing at Beth's sweet little face, my brow furrowed at a sudden, strong intuition: *Our marriage is nothing but an empty shell—and this child is the hammer that will surely smash it open and expose the lie we have been living all these years . . .*

*And then what?*

Before long, I began to feel an irrational knot of *resentment* toward this tiny, innocent, demanding new intrusion into our marital delusion. I was deeply conflicted. I "loved" my daughter, yet her mere presence in our hollow home apparently brought out the worst in me, at times, those first few months.

In a venomous letter Cathy dashed off days before I left her forever, when Beth was in preschool, she made sure to skewer me over the difficulty I had bonding with my daughter in those early days.

"You didn't 'handle' her infancy very well," she wrote, indicting me for unraveling our ridiculous relationship. "Why did you seem so *angry* at her? You left me alone so often, it was exhausting and all-consuming. Ultimately, you and I became even more estranged."

Notice the words: *even more*. She did not dispute our pathological, pre-existing condition.

And it's true—I didn't volunteer to get up regularly in the wee, weary hours of the night to share the load, as I had with John. I didn't spend nearly as much time with Beth, in general. Otherwise, I took good care of her. Fed her, burped her, rocked her on my shoulder. Changed her diapers.

I played with her and John, after work. I tag-teamed with Cathy on weekends. I was, by no means, an absent father.

But, yes, something essential was missing at first. It wasn't Beth's fault. It's as if part of me had died. I felt robotic. Back then, no one talked about fathers suffering from postnatal depression. I had no conceptual bucket to throw myself into, to make sense of it.

Attachment theorists, developmental psychologists, and social neuroscientists could rightfully wag their fingers at me for whatever I did or failed to do during that particularly formative period. Beth's marvelously malleable nervous system was quickly becoming "entangled" with those of her caregivers, for good or ill.

We were literally pouring the foundation on which she would build the rest of her life. It wouldn't do to leave cracks.

But I was blissfully ignorant of sound construction practice. All I knew was that I was not my usual perky self. I tried not to give myself a hernia for not feeling things I simply could not feel—yet. I foresaw that, in due time, I would bounce back. I would naturally grow into more fatherly affection.

And I did.

After roughly five months of floundering emotionally, feeling detached and confused and vaguely negligent, while doing no explicit harm, indeed, I fell in love with my daughter, as predicted. I never blinked again.

Unfortunately, it took a stupefying medical shitshow to shock me out of my parental coma.



One Friday afternoon, while I was still at work—a professional writer, now, for a geoscience software company in the energy industry—Cathy laid Beth down for a nap after feeding, started to leave . . . and *thought* she saw her stop breathing for a few seconds.

Despite the fact that Beth was absolutely peachy the moment Cathy snatched her up, and nothing remotely similar had ever occurred before, she phoned our pediatrician in high panic.

Based on nothing more than Cathy's hysterical ravings, the pediatrician diagnosed our daughter, over the phone, with infant sleep apnea. She told Cathy to call 911. This knee-jerk reaction set in motion a massive, unstoppable medical machine that flattened everything in sight for the next five days—during which Beth came within a heartbeat of being killed.

Paramedics arrived from a local fire station within minutes, lights flashing, examined Beth on the spot, and found nothing amiss. She wasn't blue from insufficient oxygen, but she *was* turning a scary shade of scarlet from screaming in terror at the crowd of huge, loud objects that suddenly surrounded her and began knocking her about. With the best of intentions.

It should have stopped there. Even the paramedics thought so.

Days later, after I conducted my first, hasty forensic investigation into what-the-hell-just-happened-to-my-daughter, I concurred. To no avail. The pediatrician ran the show, driven, as I soon came to understand by the sacred Oath of Hippocrates, modified slightly to align better with the modern American Medical-Industrial Complex: *First, cover your ass.*

She knew her diagnosis had been unethical, if not illegal, but she persisted. Began "treating" Beth for her deadly medical condition. Threw everything she had at my child, leaving us sitting uselessly on the sidelines, gasping for air, grasping for understanding.

Electrodes were stuck to Beth's head and chest. She lay, isolated, in a pediatric chamber of horror bloated with extra oxygen; immobilized by Velcro restraints so she couldn't pull loose any of the wires and tubes, flat on her back, legs spread like a frog for dissection in high school biology; startled sporadically by noise and lights and invasive procedures—sticking her heels to draw blood, waking her, shaking her, making her cry in pain and fear.

We couldn't even hold her without dislodging some piece of pediatric paraphernalia.

All of my daughter's prenatal premonitions had come true. It *was* Hell out here. Her so-called treatment was a perfect simulacrum of medieval torture. Intended, like the Inquisition, to "save" her. Without a *shred* of medical evidence that she was, in fact, afflicted with apnea.

Five days and nights this went on. Then, I pulled the plug. Literally.

Wednesday afternoon, while Cathy was off to the cafeteria for coffee, I quickly packed up all of our belongings and set them on the bed. I opened Beth's iron maiden, carefully removed her restraints, unplugged all the wires and devices, slipped her into a onesie, and nestled her softly on my shoulder. I felt her whole body melt. She fell into a profound slumber. Breathing deeply. Oxytocin permeated my brain. Fatherly warmth suffused my soul.

The nurse on duty walked in and froze. "*What are you doing?*" she practically shouted, rushing toward me. Beth jerked.

I glared at her. "Taking my daughter home," I said, hackles raised. "I've had *enough.*"

"You can't do that!" she cried, huffing with exasperation.

"Just *try* to stop me," I barked.

Cathy entered the room and froze. We all stared at each other for a moment. I told Cathy to get the bag. We were leaving. She just blinked, too stunned to move.

The nurse said, "I'm getting the doctor!" and sprinted down the hallway.

Cathy wouldn't budge, stalling my carefully planned escape. We argued in muted voices, trying not to awaken Beth.

The nurse returned swiftly with the pediatrician, her face already red, radiating with her most authoritarian disdain. She paused halfway across the room, sizing up the situation. Then everybody started jabbering at once.

The pediatrician accused me of putting my daughter's life in danger, refused to authorize her release from the hospital. I threatened to sue her for medical malpractice—and *child abuse*—if she didn't get the hell out of my way. *Right now.* Cathy flapped her hands, helplessly, and begged me to stop. The nurse, standing three or four feet away, bounced from foot to foot, ready to tackle me if necessary.

That's when it happened.

Beth was still sleeping, a little sack of potatoes on my shoulder. I was holding her in place with one arm under her bottom, across her lower legs; my other hand resting firmly on her back. During a heated outburst, unthinking, I briefly removed my hand from her back, gesticulating to make a point.

Just then, Beth reared backward with surprising force, frightened out of her slumber, no doubt, by our raised voices . . . and flipped right off my shoulder. Head-first. Into the air.

*Free fall.*

My heart stopped.

Time stopped.

Everyone lunged at once.

I missed.

Cathy stumbled.

The pediatrician was too far away.

The nurse, however, on her toes already, snagged one of Beth's ankles, mid-air—her body dangling upside down—a microsecond before her skull would have slammed into the hard linoleum floor, killing her on impact.

Our faces went white. No one spoke. Beth howled. The nurse handed her to Cathy, in slow motion. Tremors rippled through every muscle in my body. I blew out a lungful of carbon dioxide.

Picked up our bag. Flicked a look at Cathy. We left.

No one tried to stop us.

Twenty-eight years later, four months after the long arc of my daughter's life story had reached its ruinous resolution, one overcast November day—well past tourist season, so I had the place largely to myself—I stood on the thick wood planks of the highest suspension bridge in America, swaying uneasily in the breeze, gazing over the short metal railing at the vertiginous drop below.

Out of nowhere, I remembered Beth's original free fall. Struck by a sickening symmetry between the two traumatic events.

In this, her final moment of existential crisis, I had lost my tenuous hold on my baby girl—again. She had slipped right through my fingers and plunged head-first into space. This time, however, no one was there to catch her.

She died, alone, on the hard floor of the Royal Gorge.

And closed some sort of cosmic loop.

And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

—T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”



It is well-known now that the amygdala, the hub of the brain’s complex threat detection and response circuitry is fully mature by the eighth month of gestation. We can feel genuine fear, therefore, while still floating in the womb (just ask Beth). Like all mammals, fear may be our most primal emotional experience.

Sensibly, it triggers a cascade of nifty neurotransmitters and handy hormones that surge through the body’s channels from stem to stern, “hydrating” us for either combat or retreat—in other words, *survival*. Sadly, uncontrolled flooding can breach our levees and inflict lasting damage.

Especially in a child.

Without the soothing, top-down volume control of our evolutionarily more advanced frontal cortices—which, in humans, don’t finish cooking until, egad, we’re in our *mid-twenties*—terror, like Beth experienced repeatedly those five days while she was just an infant, can register as an overwhelming, whole-body trauma.

And, as *New York Times* bestselling author, Bessel van der Kolk, founder and medical director of the Trauma Research Foundation, puts it: *The Body Keeps the Score*.

Even in small doses prior to the consolidation of conscious memory, around three or four years of age, these sorts of “adverse childhood experiences” tend to accumulate, drip by drip, over time, sensitizing the developing nervous system to whatever threats, cues, or “stresses,” seem to have set off the body’s strategic defense system in the first place. Whether we remember them or not.

Until we learn to regulate our own reactions, consistent and persistent intervention on the part of mature, emotionally grounded caregivers can act as external brakes on runaway amygdalae. Otherwise, incidental accidents and adversities continue, in effect, to turn up the volume on our vigilance for danger, keeping our troops on standby 24/7, making our systems incrementally more “nervous”—literally shaping our personalities—as we grow.

Nowadays, these are called “developmental” traumas, to distinguish them from, say, the single sledgehammer blow of Cathy’s abduction at gunpoint. Instead of smashing us to smithereens, they slowly, insidiously erode our well-being.

Like endless lies and infidelities.

At the entrance to the mini tourist attraction of Boulder Falls, an adorable cascade from a crack in the Precambrian granite eight miles west of the city, along Colorado Highway 119, someone mounted a massive stone with a hole right



through its heart, penetrated over untold centuries by bazillions of drops of dihydrogen monoxide in its liquid phase—that’s right: *water*.

That holey rock stands as a sacred icon of my beloved daughter’s own heart, eroded by tens of thousands of miniscule, seemingly inconsequential yet neurologically significant interactions with the world, starting with emotionally volatile Mom ‘n Pop, until, at something like fourteen years of age—her prefrontal cortex still half-baked—they punched a hole right through her.

She never found a way to repair the damage.



I tell you this, at this point in the developmental stage of my journey through the wastelands, to explain why, despite all the *delightful* things that actually happened to Beth throughout her childhood, I keep jumping like some perverse practitioner of parkour from one damned thing to another.

There’s a method to my madness.

I’m retracing a very specific path—the “twisted path” through the multiverse—which leads from Beth’s arrival on planet Earth to her annihilation on impact with that same planet. And, except for the last mile, so to speak, *she did not walk that path alone*. The last step she took may have been her *choice*. But it wasn’t entirely her *doing*.

Suicide is largely a social phenomenon.

In a passage scratched in a spiral notebook a few months before she took her own life, Beth speculated about how self-destructively her mother had lived and how, ultimately, she had died:

In my mind, Mom killed herself. Whether intentionally or not, I don’t know, she did it to herself. But, also, the world did it to her. Her life could have unfolded in no other way, given the circumstances she was born into.

“The world did it to her.” Drip by drip. This applies to Beth, too, of course.

I’m trying, for now, to document this second part of my daughter’s seemingly fatalistic hypothesis, focusing on what the *world* did to *her*—initially, what *we* did to her—“the circumstances she was born into”—before I get into what, it seems, she did to herself.

Intentionally or not.



Three months after the shitshow, now unreservedly dedicated to loving and caring for my precious daughter, yes, even in the middle of the night—exhaustion be damned—I found myself entangled in a conversation with Cathy that took an unexpected turn.