

Central Queensland University

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Sing no sad songs

Biographical note:

Sandra Arnold has a MLitt and PhD in Creative Writing (CQUniversity). With poet David Howard she co-founded the New Zealand literary magazine, *Takahe*, in 1989 and was its fiction editor until 1995. She writes fiction and non-fiction and her work has been published and broadcast in New Zealand and published internationally. She teaches Academic Writing at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology in Christchurch, New Zealand. Email: ArnoldS@CPIT.ac.nz

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A fantail sat in the ivy on the barn and watched as we packed the wheelchair and commode into the car. Chris drove into town to return them to the hospital. And came home with Rebecca's ashes. Before he had time to move them to his study I walked into the laundry and saw a small, green cardboard box on the washing machine. I looked from the box to the sink where, two years ago, Rebecca had stood washing her pet ferret, Stinky. Bare-footed, in shorts and crop top, eyes sparkling, grinning at the camera, with the soapy ferret draped over her hands like a piece of stretchy rubber. Now she no longer had a body. Her beautiful smile, her talents, her hopes and dreams all fitted into this small green box. This was beyond tears. This was beyond my ability to stay in my skin.

Over the following week I launched into a maniacal cleaning frenzy. The house shone within an inch of its life. Next we started on the garden, pruning trees, letting the light in. We worked in the paddocks from morning till night, clearing the trimmings from the gorse hedge and loading them onto the bonfire and burning them. A contractor came to cut back two huge macrocarpa trees. Chris sawed up the logs into firewood for the winter and I heaved them into the wheelbarrow and trundled them to the woodshed. It was hard physical work, but we needed to have a reason to stay out of the house all day so we could be exhausted enough to fall asleep at night. Even so, sleep was fitful and racked with terrifying dreams. Waking in the morning was worse. Always the split second of forgetfulness followed by an awareness of something that needed to be remembered. Then full consciousness that left me breathless, hollowed out, scraped raw.

Friends visited with flowers and food and company. They invited us out, but we couldn't face re-joining the world. We talked about selling the house and leaving the area, but had no energy to begin such a process. People phoned and asked how we were, but I had no words to express how we were. We avoided sitting at the table to eat because the empty place was more intensely redolent of Rebecca than her physical presence had ever been, though she'd rarely sat at the table with us in those last few weeks. Soon the soup and casseroles ran out so I cooked a meal and set the table. When we sat down I saw I'd set it for three.

It exhausted me to answer the phone or receive visitors. However, I recognised that other people loved Rebecca and had a need to come to our home and grieve too. Sometimes I was surprised by the intensity of their grief. Sometimes I had to be the one who gave comfort.

A week after Rebecca died we left the house to go to our son-in-law, Mark's, graduation ceremony at the Christchurch Town Hall. He asked Chris to go on stage with the other academics. Chris compromised by bringing his gown to the graduation so he and Mark could have photographs taken together. However, as we took our seats in the auditorium Chris said he regretted his decision not to go on stage. He looked for the organiser and asked for an extra chair to be put there so he could take part. Afterwards we went with Susannah, Mark and his family to the Curator's House

in the Botanic Gardens for lunch. It was meant to be a day of celebration. But it didn't feel real.

Two of Rebecca's friends from Art School, Jo and Christine, cleared out her locker and brought over her unfinished projects, and a book that the staff and students had made in which they'd written their thoughts about her. A couple of lecturers had written that she was one of the school's most promising, talented and successful students. A classmate had written, "I hope she's happy, drawing and riding horses somewhere." They brought us flowers and a white rose bush to plant in the garden. The mood in their class was sombre, Christine said. No one could believe it. Everyone had been on holiday when it happened, so they hadn't heard the news until they returned for the next term, expecting that Rebecca would be picking up from where she'd left off last September. "Everyone used to call her Warrior Princess and Celtic Woman because she was so strong-minded and adventurous," Jo said. When they went out onto the Port Hills to draw, Rebecca leapt from rock to rock until she fell into a gorse bush, tearing her skin. "The blood was pouring out, but she said it didn't hurt and she carried on drawing. That's when we started the Warrior Princess thing." As she talked I thought of Rebecca setting out for Art School dressed in a miniskirt, riding chaps, her grandmother's green pentagram necklace, a jewel stuck between her eyebrows and studded leather bands on her wrists.

"Omigod! You're surely not going out like that?"

"I'm an art student. I can dress how I like."

"Hmmm ... well I suppose that's true."

Two weeks after Rebecca died I saw in the TV guide that *Xena: Warrior Princess* was on that evening. It had been one of Rebecca's favourite programmes and though I normally didn't watch it, I felt impelled to see this episode. It concluded with Xena's death and her reappearance to her friend, Gabrielle. She assured Gabrielle that she would always be there for her in spirit. I wept, "I didn't know it was the final episode. I thought Xena was indestructible."

Peter, our GP came to see us the day he got back from Europe. He was of the generation of doctors who considered home visits normal. He was in tears as I described Rebecca's last days and her funeral in our garden and the visits of the fantail. For many years after Rebecca's birth, he'd laughingly ascribed her childhood ailments to the fact she'd 'been born in a cave', referring to the Leboyer birthing method I'd insisted on having. Just before she died he told Chris he wanted to be the one who certified her death. But just as he'd missed her entrance into the world so too had he missed her exit.

The District Nurses, Mary and Prue, called in to see me. At the same time Kate, the palliative care doctor, rang. When I told them about the fantail's visits they said Rebecca's spirit was so strong she'd have found a way to send us some comfort after her death and that because of her affinity with nature, sending the fantail was the way she'd do it. They also said she was able to die in the way she had, without fear or

pain, because of all the love around her. A few days later, the stoma care nurse, who'd been so abrupt about Rebecca's minding the ileostomy bag, rang and said the same thing. She sounded kind. I wished she'd been kinder to Rebecca.

Three of Rebecca's closest friends, Natasha, Bart and Grant, came out and spent the whole day with us. They wanted to talk and talk about her. Bart was in tears. He said he couldn't believe she was gone and couldn't accept it, "Even when I saw Becks in that coffin." Someone he knew had attempted suicide. This made him angry because Rebecca had wanted so much to live. They spoke about the crazy things they'd done at high school; the parties they'd gone to; the old car they'd kept on our property and painted with rainbow colours and raced around the river beds in. Their stories fell like rain in a desert. Before they left they searched through the photograph albums and selected the photos they wanted copies of.

Fabiano wrote from Brazil about his distress that he wasn't there when Rebecca died. I told him she couldn't leave while he and all her friends and her brother and sister were with her. That they all needed to leave before she could.

Our neighbour, Sue, Rebecca's riding buddy, said she couldn't stop crying one day. That night she dreamt Rebecca was standing at the foot of the bed in her riding clothes, smiling and happy. The next day Sue rode Rebecca's horse, Red, down to the river and decided to ride him every day.

I went out into the paddock to groom the horses and set out jumping poles. I sat on the barrels Rebecca had placed under the trees. With my eyes closed I tried to hear the sounds of cantering hooves and pictured Rebecca, long, blonde hair flying out behind her as she took the horse towards the jump. "Did ya see that Mum?" But I opened my eyes to empty spaces and silence.

Chris wandered out to find me and I asked him whether he thought it was best to die quickly with no time to say goodbye, or die by inches, as Rebecca had, even though we did have time to say all the things we wanted to. He didn't know. Then John and Sue came over and Chris brought cups of tea into the paddock. As we stood talking, Chris jumped onto my horse, Jade's, back. It was something Rebecca had done many times. However, it was an error of judgement on Chris's part because Jade hadn't been ridden bareback for months. Not only that, Chris had never learned to ride. I was about to tell him to get off and Sue was about to go for a bridle, when Jade trotted off, gathering speed. Chris tried to jump off, but fell to the ground, landing on his head. We ran over to him. He was white, his pupils had dilated and his pulse was weak. He didn't know where he was or what had happened. John called the ambulance while I sat by Chris, wailing. Just before Chris was lifted into the ambulance his memory returned briefly and with it, the memory of Rebecca's death, as if he'd heard it for the first time. In the ambulance he drifted off, woke up to ask what had happened and again and again cried, "She's *dead*, isn't she?"

The ambulance stopped at the local surgery for the paperwork before continuing on to the hospital in town. The same locum was there who'd certified Rebecca's death.

When he'd examined her he'd strolled out of her room and started chatting cheerily to Chris about his sister who was doing an engineering course at Canterbury University and asked Chris if he knew her. I stared at him in disbelief. And now, here he was again, asking me to go into the surgery to sign forms. My grey face? My tears? The semi-conscious man on the stretcher? FORMS? I told him the forms could wait. We. Needed. To. Get. Chris. To. Hospital. NOW.

As I look back on this and similar situations during Rebecca's illness and after her death, I'm incredulous that I stayed silent in the face of such crass behaviour. But the territory was so foreign I had no language with which to negotiate it. Instead I questioned whether I'd heard correctly. I told myself I must have misunderstood the paramedic who asked me "how long has she got?" on one of our trips back from hospital; that I couldn't possibly have heard the registrar tell Rebecca that if her intestinal blockage didn't clear "that'll be it"; and when I heard "You're lucky you've got two other children," and "God needed her more than you did," I told myself everyone else was as unfamiliar with this territory as I was, or they surely wouldn't say something so stupid.

Sue came with us in the ambulance, her calm, reassuring presence preventing me from lapsing into hysteria. The trip to hospital. The Emergency Department. The same doctors and nurses. A nightmarish replay of recent months. Fortunately, the x-rays showed Chris wasn't seriously injured and after four hours he was discharged. We arrived home to a crackling fire and a meal in the oven, cooked by John.

The world no longer felt safe or predictable. Our elder daughter, Susannah, was devastated by Rebecca's death and had started thinking of having a baby to ensure the continuity of life. Benjamin left the Church. He said he no longer wanted to sing about the grace of God when there was no grace to be found in his sister dying at the age of twenty- three.

Several months before Rebecca was diagnosed with cancer she told me she longed to travel, but that ultimately she would want to buy land near us. "I just can't imagine myself living far away from you and Dad," she said, and I'd laughed, remembering the teacher prising her white-knuckled little fingers off my hand the day she started school. But this was no normal nest-emptying. There were Rebecca-shaped spaces everywhere we looked. Her paintings hung on the walls and filled her room. Her clothes hung in her cupboard. Her dog and cats and horses and goat still needed to be taken care of and fed. We heard the same sounds she'd loved, the stags roaring at night, the wind in the trees, the horses whinnying in the paddocks. But within these objects and animals and within these sounds there were no gales of laughter. No wood cuttings littered the floor, no paint-stained cloths on the table, no half-eaten sandwiches on the bench. I could smell her scent on her hairbrush and her clothes – like summer grass, saturated with sun. I could hear her voice in my head. But oh, the silence. Oh, the stillness.

We sat down to have dinner, but I couldn't sit still. I jumped up to go and groom the horses.

"What ... *now*?" said Chris.

"Yes, now." I said.

Their smell. Their warm breath on my head as I picked out their hooves and brushed their manes. This was the best form of therapy that existed, in Rebecca's opinion. And she was right. I stopped crying and hugged the horses. And thought of Rebecca jumping over the gate at the end of a ride, washing their tack, brushing them, putting their rugs on. It was during our rides on the river bed that she opened up and told me things I'd never known about her, all her hopes and dreams. She wanted to go to Texas to work on a horse ranch for a while, and to Ireland because she loved Celtic history. She'd also like to go to Brazil again and help David with his riding school. Most of all she wanted to buy her own land in the future and breed horses and have lots of animals. She thought she might like to marry some day and have two children. "They'd have to be born in the saddle though," she laughed.

Since her childhood, when she'd clung to me like a limpet, she had astonished me with her beauty, her humour, her daring, her energy, and now her ideas for the future. These tumbled over each other with such rapidity I lost track of them. I was amazed by this girl of ours, and worried constantly that her risk-taking would result in an accident. There was good reason for this. She told me cheerily one day that she'd driven through the level crossing just before the train came through.

"It was pouring with rain and my wipers weren't working that well," she laughed. "I saw these red flashing lights, but they didn't register until I drove over the crossing. Then I saw the train. *Whoops!*"

She tossed off my lecture with, "Don't worry. I have nine lives."

"No, you *don't*! You're a *girl*, not a *cat*!"

Walking over the paddocks to the trench Rebecca had dug so she could train Jade to get over his fear of jumping ditches, I thought of stories people had told me of sensing their dead relatives near them: an unexpected whiff of perfume, the radio unaccountably turning on, a light touch on the side of the head. My father had told me that when he was dozing in a chair a few days after my mother died, he felt a soft pressure on his foot and woke to see her sitting opposite him smiling. "It only lasted a few seconds," he said, "and then she was gone. But I know she was there. I wasn't dreaming." Well, if it gives him comfort to think that, we'd said. My brother told me that our mother's favourite flower had bloomed at her front door.

"Coincidence," we said.

"Probably," he agreed. "But in winter?"

My longing to have Rebecca with me again, to see her and touch her, filled me with a despair far beyond tears. Far beyond my ability to express in any way whatsoever. My grief was physical and my whole body ached with it. In the middle of the paddock, where no one could hear me, I called my daughter's name. A sheep from

the neighbouring paddock bleated loudly in response. It sounded distressed. I hurried over to investigate.

When Rebecca was six, she gave me a crayoned picture of a wiggly oval shape covered in coloured spikes.

“What is it?”

“It’s a sheep.”

“And what are these spikes?”

“They’re his sparkles.”

“Sparkles?”

“Yes, he’s so happy he’s sparkling!”

The sheep complaining at the fence wasn’t sparkling; in fact he was trapped with his head stuck in the wires. I pulled at them, but I couldn’t free him.

Oh, stupid sheep.

Wire-cutters! Go on!

Where?

In the shed!

What do wire-cutters look like?

These ones here! In the toolbox!

Back at the fence with the cutters I sliced through the wire and the sheep pulled his head free. He stopped and looked at me and gave a grunt before running off.

“You’re welcome,” I called after him.

What had I expected? That Rebecca would waft by me playing a harp?

Get *real* Mum!

Research statement

Research background

Sing no sad songs is an extract from my PhD thesis which comprises a theoretically informed exegesis and a creative nonfiction memoir on grieving the death of my young adult daughter from cancer. Clinical studies on grieving young adult child death from cancer (Grinyer 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) indicate that death from cancer in young adults is very rare. These studies also highlight the need for extended discourse on the effects of such a death on parents.

Research contribution

Two memoirs (Addison 2001) and Grant (2005) deal with the topic of grieving the death from cancer of a young adult son, but a gap existed in creative literature on grieving the death from cancer of a young adult daughter. My creative work draws on a body of knowledge about grief by such writers as Addison (2001), Allende (1995, 2008), Didion (2006), Grant (2005), Holcroft (1989), Lewis (1961), and Noel (2005) and extends it by elucidating parental grief for the death of a young adult daughter from cancer.

Research significance

In entering the space of a narrative on parental grief, readers may take the story beyond the confines of the page and use it to articulate their own stories. The academic significance of this work is recognised by the publication of a chapter from my thesis in *Research into 21st Century Communities* (2007), a paper in *TEXT* (October 2009) and a presentation at the Australian Association of Writing Programs annual Conference (November 2009).

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