

# *Death Of A Grandchild*

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*“Granny!”* she would shriek as she leaped with abandon into what she trustingly assumed would be my waiting embrace. Her eyes would shine with joy as she anticipated playtime, Granny-style. We would collapse on the floor, surrounded by dolls and other such girlish accoutrements. Sometimes I got to be the Mommy and she would be the Daddy, and when she grew tired of parenthood, she would dump her ‘children’ in a box, and we’d dance to the rhythm of Old McDonald, joined by her two brothers (one of whom was her twin). Sibling rivalry would fade into the background as story time began.

*Could there be any greater joy?*



My beloved granddaughter, Tal Doron (affectionately called Tali) was just four years old when she died on August 26th 2007. A stunningly beautiful child, she exuded both childlike joy and astounding maturity throughout the ten months of her suffering. Diagnosed at age three with a rare form of brain cancer, her chances of survival were slim. Nevertheless — as she endured the unspeakable horrors of chemotherapy and stem cell transplantation — we convinced ourselves that she would beat the odds.

*There was simply no other way to think.*

Dazed and terrified, we sprang into action, aided by our wonderful community of friends. The family needed to eat. The parents needed clean clothes. And there were two bewildered little boys whose world had turned upside down and inside out. My heart broke as I dropped my 3-year-old grandson at playschool (without his twin for the first time in his life) and had to leave him screaming because I was needed at the hospital.

*How could this possibly be happening in my family?*

With heartwarming compassion, the oncologists devised an aggressive treatment regime, which would require my granddaughter to be hospitalized for the better part of six months. Each day, after work, I would alternate between helping out at the hospital, and spending time with the two little boys at home — until my body demanded an end to this frenetic pace as I found myself crying non-stop — and realized that it was time to take a leave of absence from work.

Tali's hospital room was a veritable "Dora the Explorer" exhibit — Dora being her all-time favourite character. She had Dora books, videos, posters, stuffed animals, stickers ... name it; she had it! She even played Dora games on the computer, which inspired her parents to set up Skype for her, so that she could interact with her brothers — and other family members — when they were unable to visit. I remember one of her uncles launching a two-way tooth-brushing session over the Internet! And for me, it meant extra time with her, reading stories or singing together — activities which she loved.

The second phase of treatment — stem cell transplantation — carried with it a significant risk of infection due to the immune system being severely compromised by the treatment. Only Tali's parents were allowed in — one at a time. But if one parent wasn't well, I became the overnight alternate.

After sanitizing everything and anything in my possession, I would peek in — only to be greeted with an excited "*Granny!*" — sending my heart soaring to the moon. When she displayed typical three-year-old silliness my heart would dance

with happiness, and when she was ready for sleep my heart would melt as she lay quietly, her huge dark eyes locked with mine as I sang to her.

*From this child – not yet four – I learned about the capacity of the human psyche to experience joy – and yes! to laugh – even amid unimaginable circumstances.*



Discharged home after the last cycle of treatment, she flourished, quickly gaining weight and looking healthy and robust. We dared to be cautiously optimistic, but soon after her fourth birthday came the catastrophic news of a relapse from which she would not recover.

It was unfathomable to imagine a world without this remarkable child. Words couldn't possibly capture the depth and breadth of our grief.

Her devastated and devoted parents cared for her at home, where I too stayed day and night, terrified to leave. I remember singing "You Are My Sunshine" to her ... until I reached "Please don't take my sunshine away". I could not go on.



She died two days later.

As I tried to articulate my sorrow, I found myself trying to brush aside my grief, since it was a mere drop in the vast ocean of suffocating agony into which her parents had been plunged. Of what importance could my grief be when the parents were facing a future forever darkened by this inconceivable loss?

Yet I could not ignore the screaming voice inside of me, and I had to keep reminding myself that loss cannot be measured ... that my pain – although markedly different than that of Tali's parents – was real.

Hoping to somehow quiet my sorrow, I began creating a collection of tangible and touchable remembrances. I put together photo albums and videos, surrounded myself with framed photographs, wrote in my journal and listened to "our" songs.

Gradually I began to notice that time was softening the edges of my grief, allowing me to remember moments my granddaughter and I had shared - how she would give me Dora stickers for "good behaviour," make up nonsense syllables or declare her love for me, arms outstretched to show me just how much. She loved "chicken muggets" and "pupcakes" and needed "mapkins" to clean her face. She offered adult-like encouragement when I exaggerated my struggle to master a task ("Good job, Granny!" or "I know you can do it Granny!"). And she was so proud of her long string of bravery beads, one for each painful procedure she endured.

Tali's surviving twin is now ten years old. His parents, who never stop grieving for their little girl, must make his birthdays special for him, while simultaneously taking time to remember Tali. And so, each year the family gets together to carry out a ritual: We write messages to Tali, paste them onto helium balloons and release the balloons to drift towards the sky.

Tali's twin never lets us see what he has written.

*I am thankful for each precious moment I had with this remarkable little girl, whose courage, wisdom and capacity for joy touched the very deepest part of my soul, where it will remain always.*

