

Hannah

by Rev. Dr. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale

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“Sarah.” Daniel’s voice was gentle, solicitous ... and tired. “Honey, we have to go to the gate.

“Sarah,” he tried again. Somewhere from the depths of her womb, where she’d withdrawn to cradle her baby, her Hannah — Hannah, Hannah, Hannah — to cradle Hannah and hide Hannah — oh, Hannah — and herself from the howling rage and screaming abyss of pain, somewhere from the depths, she noted the ragged edge of Daniel’s voice.

“Sarah, we have to go. Our plane is about to board. Please, b... [see how he stops himself from using the “b” word]. Please, Sarah.” He braced to pull her unwieldy body from the overstuffed chair into which she had sunk. Some small part of Sarah’s consciousness fought its way out of her womb, leaving the rest curled protectively around Hannah. With Daniel’s help she would rise; she would leave this secluded corner of the club, soda and nuts untouched, view unseen; she would put one foot in front of the other and walk to the gate; she would board the airplane; she would get off the plane; she would go to the clinic — one foot in front of the other; she would return to the airport, board another plane, return home; and then.... And then? Oh, God...and then? Her knees threatened to buckle, but Daniel had her. Right foot, left foot....

Don’t look up. Don’t meet their cheery gazes. Don’t give them even a sliver of her attention, for they’d seize it, wedge their way in, and ask the question. “When is it due?” Bright, chirpy, “When is it due?”

Not it! Hannah! — Hannah, Hannah, Hannah — Hannah is due tomorrow. Five years yearned for; 30 weeks held in my not-barren-after-all womb; 24 (who would have guessed I would be pregnant?) 24 weeks beloved and awaited. And she (not it, she — Hannah, Hannah, Hannah) is due tomorrow.

It had occurred to her in the middle of an argument about in vitro fertilization. Not an argument, really. A debate. They took different sides to try to tease out all the angles in their search for an answer they could endure. The Church said no. It frowned on the Assisted Insemination they had tried when the doctor first suggested that the problem was with Daniel’s sperm. Low motility — they just weren’t strong enough swimmers to make it all the way up to her eggs. So they’d let the doctor collect and preserve several ejaculates of Daniel’s semen (more swimmers, better odds) and insert the fluids deep inside Sarah (less distance, better odds) at just the right moment in her cycle (timing is everything).

Now the doctor said they should try in vitro. Dr. Grace would take Sarah’s eggs and Daniel’s sperm and introduce them in a petri dish (spare the little guys the swim altogether) and then, a few days later, implant a fertilized egg, a little blastocyst of joy, into her uterus. (All in all, much easier on Daniel than her. But then wasn’t that true of pretty much every bit of reproduction?)

But the Church didn't just frown on this procedure. It said a definitive No. The Pope was quite unambiguous on the subject. He said it is, "beneath the dignity of the human person." But what did the Pope know of the emptiness of a house and yard bought with children in mind? What did the Pope know of the way her womb and breasts ached to feed new life? When she stood at the kitchen sink, her mind's eye filled the back yard with children who carried her athlete's grace and Daniel's ready laugh. Did the Church know how it felt not to be able to leave the sink, go to the door, and call those apparitions in to be bathed, pajama-ed, tickled, tucked in, read to, and kissed good-night?

Was it really so wrong to yearn to share their lives and blessings with new life? Were they selfish to want to create life that held within it the essence of each of them — the fruit of their partnering? Again and again they argued in circles around these questions and their options; hoping, praying, that they had missed something during their last 987 orbits around the problem, that on trip 988 they'd notice some slice of light, some chink in the arguments that had thus far eluded them. Hoping that God would re-order reality.

And then, on trip 989, Sarah saw a hint of light — from behind her. Not a resolution to their questions, but an improbable answer to their prayers. A way out of that fruitless orbit.

"Daniel?" She laughed, her eyes scrunching in the corners in that way that always made him stop and catch his breath. "Daniel, this is going to sound crazy. But... I haven't had my period this month. I'm overdue." Daniel laughed, too. God, she loved that about him — the way he could see the ridiculous even in the most horrible situations, the way he could always laugh.

"No, wait. Honey, I'm serious.... I think I'm serious." She was beginning to get a silly grin. "Dan, remember a few weeks ago when I had that little bug?" I was queasy every morning for a week. Every morning, Daniel."

"You don't really think that... "

"Well, no.... Of course not.... But still...."

"Waiter!"

He paid the bill and they raced each other to the car. They slid into the garage before the door had finished rising, spilled out of the car, and bolted for the house, giggling and jostling one another. Daniel made it to the bathroom first, rummaged under the sink, and reemerged with their last home-pregnancy test kit. They'd thrown it there to get it out of sight. He wheeled to present it to her.

"Here. Pee."

Caught up short, her giggling stopped and her eyes widened. "I don't have to pee."

"Pee anyway."

"I don't know if I can!"

"I can tickle it out of you." He stepped forward menacingly. "No!" She squealed like a girl. "No. That did it. I can pee. Give me that. Now go away. No! Stay! Just ... Oh, God. Daniel, is this possible?"

Twenty minutes later they toasted their success with orange juice spiked with water (in honor of the swimmers.)

The next months were filled with arranging extended maternity leave, buying more clothes than the baby could wear if she remained infant-sized for three years, and

readying the nursery. Sarah had never been one to care about decorating. They didn't have furniture suites, or color schemes, or fancy window treatments. But suddenly everything mattered. She found herself stenciling bunny borders on the nursery walls and loving every minute of it.

She sang and talked to Hannah while she worked — describing the world that was waiting to welcome her, introducing her to friends and family. She was making just such an introduction to the ultrasound technician when she realized that the technician had gone silent.

“What’s wrong? You’re quiet. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Shhh, Sarah. Stay still. I’m just looking.”

“You’re not. You’re worried. I can see it. Why? What is wrong?” — Not Hannah. Tell me it’s not Hannah. Daniel! Daniel, don’t let it be Hannah.—

“Let me get Dr. Grace. I’ll be right back.” She gave Sarah’s shoulder a squeeze, nodded at Daniel. Daniel, whose grip on Sarah’s hand had hardly changed at all, an imperceptible tightening, but Sarah felt it. Sarah knew Daniel in her marrow. She held Daniel in her womb — Hannah— Daniel, who accompanied her to every checkup, unwilling to miss an instant of the creation of their first child. Daniel, Sarah knew, was as frightened as she.

The doctor was gentle. She had tears in her eyes as she said the words. “Fetal anomalies incompatible with life.”

The doctor was firm. “No, Sarah, Daniel, I’m sorry but I’m not wrong about this, though we’ll do the tests to confirm it.”

She was very sure. She could see that there was no cerebral development beyond the brain stem. The heart and liver were growing outside the body. It was likely that the lungs and intestines were also compromised. No, fetal surgery was not an option. There was virtually no chance all these problems could be adequately repaired. And it would put Sarah at extreme risk.

“I’ll take the risk. Anything to save Hannah. — Oh, God, Hannah.

“I understand, Sarah. But she can’t be saved. There’s too much wrong. Too many essential functions we can’t repair. I can’t put you at risk, Sarah, when I know this baby cannot be saved, will not live. I am so sorry, Sarah, but it can’t be done.”

Daniel got a number to call for a second opinion. Then a third. Sarah stopped him. “Dan, we have to face this. We have to, Dan. We have to make a decision — for Hannah. We’re her parents, Daniel. We have to decide how to take care of her.” She made another appointment with Dr. Grace. She asked the question — what now? She wept for them both, herself and Daniel — Daniel, her rock turned to stone — as they listened.

They had options, though none that could save Hannah. Sarah could attempt to carry the pregnancy to full term. Hannah might be able to survive in the womb, though she’d die immediately upon birth — once Sarah’s system was no longer sustaining her. There were dangers to Sarah. To try to deliver a full-sized fetus with such profound malformations would surely damage Sarah’s birth canal. It would almost certainly impair her ability to bear any other children. It could kill her. A Caesarian delivery involved surgery — a pointless risk and trauma, the doctor clearly thought, when no live child would result. And if the baby died in the womb, before reaching full term, as well she might, Sarah would be at risk for sepsis. Sepsis, too, could render Sarah sterile — or it could kill her.

Even if all went well physically, how could Sarah, or Daniel for that matter, endure two more months of carrying, and caring for, a child they loved but knew was doomed? The least dangerous option was to terminate the pregnancy and do an extraction. The nearest place to have this procedure done was, Dr. Grace informed them, in the mid-west. She would make the referral, would call and secure an appointment for them. Sarah was stunned. “You can’t do it here?”

Jaw clenched, not meeting their eyes, Dr. Grace shook her head as she rose to her feet. “You’ll like Dr. Melborne. He’s very good and very compassionate.” Jaw still clenched and eyes hooded, she excused herself to make the call, to arrange the end of their pregnancy.

As Sarah and Daniel stared after their doctor in stunned silence the ultrasound tech, who had not spoken since bringing Dr. Grace in, opened a desk drawer, extracted an oversized sheet of paper and handed it to them, saying, “This is why she can’t do it.”

The paper resembled a Wanted Poster from the Old West. Rather than “Wanted: Dead or Alive” it said “Wanted: Dead or Disabled” in big bold print. Under that banner was a picture of Dr. Grace. Beneath her photograph it said “Abortionist Carol Ann Grace.” Beneath that were her home and work addresses. And then more information — a description of her car complete with plate number and her husband’s name, work address, car, and plate number. Sarah gasped as she reached the end of the poster and read, “Children: Elizabeth Ann Grace, age 8 and Mark Andrew Grace, age 6, followed by the names of their schools, their teachers, the location of their classrooms.

The technician took the poster and stashed it back in the desk drawer. “She moved out here four years ago when she started receiving photos of her kids in the mail. There were snapshots of them at school, playing with friends, playing in their own back yard. I wouldn’t be surprised if she started providing abortion services again once the kids are grown and out of the house. But she won’t do it until then.”

Dr. Grace slipped back into the room. “He can see you Wednesday. Can you go out Tuesday?”

Daniel shook his head back and forth, blinking, as he said, “Next week? No This is too fast. We need time to think, time to adjust. No, not so soon.”

“Daniel.” Dr. Grace paused until Daniel looked at her, focussed his gaze on her. “Daniel, sooner is better. The earlier we do this the easier and safer it will be for Sarah. It’s also possible...” She paused and took a breath. “It’s also possible that Congress will outlaw this procedure.”

“What?” Daniel was incredulous. He’d followed the news reports about the ban on the procedure called partial-birth abortion. He and Sarah had filled out postcards in church urging their congressmen to support the ban. But this wasn’t an abortion. This was not about killing an unwanted child. This was their Hannah. Hannah, who could not live. And it was Sarah. Sarah, who was at risk — more with each day that passed.

Again, Dr. Grace was gentle but firm. They had to decide, and act, soon - before the option was taken from them, before the law took effect and required them, required Sarah, to carry their child-who-was-not-to-be to term.

“Wait.” Daniel struggled to come to terms with it all. “Wait. There’s an exception for the life or health of the mother.” This couldn’t be true. They couldn’t be rushed into this. The door could not really be closing on his best chance to protect Sarah.

“No, Daniel. I’m sorry. The exemption is only for the life of the mother, not her

health.”

“But you said her life could be endangered.”

“That’s not good enough under this law. There must be a specific and immediate threat.”

“She has to actually be dying?” This was surreal. He had asked his legislators to pass this law.

“Pretty much, yes. And by then it may be too late to preserve her ability to bear another child.”

Sarah had stopped her silent weeping. She reached out to Daniel, rested her hand on his forearm, grounding him, interrupting the escalation of hopelessness, frustration, and rage before it climaxed in an explosion that neither of them had the emotional reserves to bear.

“Then we’d better act quickly,” she said softly. “We can leave on Tuesday.”

The plane touched down. Daniel, once again her rock as he resolutely protected his wife and child, led Sarah off the plane, into a cab, and to the Quiet Nights Inn. On the public sidewalk in front of the Inn a half dozen people stood holding signs. One proclaimed, “Abortion is Murder” others showed grossly enlarged photos of bloody, dismembered bodies. Daniel pulled Sarah’s face tight against his shoulder as the taxi moved past the demonstrators.

Inside, the receptionist greeted them with a professional cheerfulness that was transformed to tender sincerity as soon as Daniel gave their name and she caught sight of Sarah. She called the manager, Betsy, whose gentle warmth threatened to dissolve Daniel’s granite resolve. Betsy explained the procedure for the morning.

There were several of Dr. Melborne’s patients staying at the Inn. A van would come for them in the morning. Daniel and Sarah would get a call from the front desk at ten ‘til eight in the morning telling them where to await the van. It pulled up to a different door each day to throw off the protestors. The patients and their companions would be gathered by the appropriate door and hustled into the van as soon as it arrived, before the protestors could rally around it. The Inn’s security guard and the two extra guards provided by the doctor would stay until the loading was complete.

“I think we’d rather take a cab — just the two of us.” Daniel found his voice.

“You’re welcome to try, sir, but I don’t think you’ll find a cab that will be willing to take you to the clinic. In the past some of them have been followed and harassed after being seen there. Now they pretty much refuse to go.”

Daniel had no time to protest. At that moment Betsy glanced out the window and Daniel saw her green eyes widen. “John!” she shouted as she raced for the door. Betsy ran full-tilt, with an armed guard — John, presumably — right behind her, across the parking lot toward the sidewalk demonstrators who now stood between the hotel and a yellow school-bus. Stopped in the road, door open, red lights flashing, the school bus idled as the driver propelled a girl of about ten down the steps, off the bus, and into the midst of the small crowd.

The group quickly circled the child, hemming her in. In seconds John was there, Betsy just steps behind. Without pausing he reached into the scrum and lifted the child out pivoting to hand her to her mother and then turning back to the crowd to keep them at bay until Betsy got her daughter safely off the sidewalk. A look from John reminded the

group that they were barred from hotel property but the shouts followed the trio across the parking lot and into the lobby. “Your mother helps kill babies! Maybe if you become inconvenient she’ll have you killed, too!”

“What happened?!” Betsy quivered like a bowstring. “That wasn’t Mrs. Marks.”

“No, Mom. We had a substitute driver today.” The little girl looked pale but her voice was steady and she showed no hint of tears.

“Didn’t you tell her that you’re to be let off right here at the door?”

“I told her. She said school busses stop on public roads not on private property and she wasn’t doing any special favors for me or my mother. Then she pulled right up to where all the people with the signs were. I tried to stall so someone in here would see and come get me, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me off.”

Betsy was nodding tightly, in time to the tic that had developed below her left eye. She took a deep breath, visibly relaxed, and pulled her daughter in close for a hug. “I’ll take care of it. You, my love, did a great job. I’m proud of you. You okay?”

“Pretty much. Nothing a pizza and some cable wouldn’t cure.”

Betsy laughed and tossed the girl an apple. “Apple and homework now and we’ll see about pizza and cable for dinner.”

“Awwwright!” the girl crowed as she left the lobby. Turning at the door she added, through a mouthful of apple, “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m okay. And I’m proud of you, too.”

Sarah watched the exchange and willed herself not to wonder what Hannah would have been like at ten. Daniel agreed to the van.

Betsy put them in a room with a microwave and a small refrigerator. These were not standard in Quiet Nights rooms but Betsy provided them to all the patients, in case they didn’t want to leave the Inn. She gave them a key to a storage closet full of microwaveable food. There was no charge for the food. It was donated by the Inn’s staff who knew that many of Dr. Melborne’s patients could ill afford the trip out there in the first place and many had insurance policies that would not cover abortion no matter the reason for it.

As the van neared the clinic they saw the protestors. Dozens of them lined the approach. A police barricade forced the van to stop before turning onto the side street that led to the safety of the high-fenced parking lot. As the van stopped it was surrounded by the shouting crowd. Pictures were pressed against the tinted back windows. A trim young officer approached the driver who waited to lower the window until the officer’s body was squarely positioned to deny any of the crowd access to the opening. The driver passed the officer a passenger list and the IDs, collected earlier, of every passenger. The officer leaned in the window to get a look at all the seats. He was thorough but blessedly quick. He thanked them, apologized for delaying them, and stepped away, allowing the driver to raise the window and mute the cacophony outside.

Before the van could pull away the officer knocked on the window and gestured for the driver to open it again. From a squad car parked at the curb with its engine running and windows rolled tightly up emerged a police sergeant. His pants hung low beneath his oversized belly leaving the cuffs bunched over his shoes. His shirt pulled at the buttons. His tie, which may have been the proper length when it had only a vertical drop, was not long enough to handle the horizontal detour and ended several inches shy of his belt.

“Wait just a minute,” he shouted, pounding the van’s hood as he crossed in front of it. “You gotta do a better job of checking than that, son.”

He demanded the passenger list and IDs, standing back to the side so that there was

room for the protestors behind him to see and be seen. Then he moved to the side of the van and opened the door. “Look up. Look here,” he snapped as he slowly read off each name on the passenger list and peered into the back to match photos with faces. The volume of the shouting increased as behind and beside him cameras clicked, video-cameras whirred, and pens scratched notes as each name was read aloud.

In the van Daniel gathered Sarah close, pulled her head to his chest, eyes and one ear shielded by his shoulder, the other ear covered with his hand. She surrendered to his protection. This was new to them. The easy camaraderie of their love, their well-matched partnership, Sarah’s athletic self-possession had never inclined them to the charade of chivalry. But now, as Hannah’s parents, a different kind of team was forged, a different teamwork required. It was up to Sarah to see Hannah through this, which she could do only by trusting Daniel to cover her back. Sarah was living in her own womb, with Hannah — Hannah, Hannah, Hannah — while Daniel shepherded them along the path and through the perils. Daniel’s warmth engulfed her, blocking any sight or sound designed to distract her from Hannah.

Past the blockade now, the van stopped, the door opened. Daniel helped her out and led her to the clinic door. Left foot. Right foot. Shrieking voices assailed her.

“Why are you killing your babies? Don’t do it! Listen to your baby— Mommy, Mommy, don’t kill me!”

Daniel was trembling. But still he led her — left foot, right foot. The clinic door closed behind them. Blessed quiet. The walls had been soundproofed when the clinic was rebuilt after a bombing ten years ago. Now only the soft voices of staff and patients remained. The sudden quiet and cool of the clinic, after the cacophony outside in what was, at 9 am, already 90 degree heat, served as a salve for raw nerves and abraded spirits.

The reception area was full though not crowded. In addition to Sarah and Daniel — and Hannah — there were, from their van, a young woman (not yet showing) who had had to travel 7 hours, by bus, alone, to get to this, the nearest abortion provider to her home, and a mother and her pregnant 15 year old daughter who had traveled from a state that required consent of both parents for a minor’s abortion; the mother’s slightly crooked nose, reminiscent of a badly healed break, confirmed Daniel’s suspicion of why they weren’t willing to involve the father. Another van had brought four local women — two for first trimester abortions, one for a pregnancy test, and one for a regular prenatal check. The clinic discouraged patients from arriving in their own cars. Too often they were followed home, or their license plates traced, and they awakened the next morning to picketers at their homes. The clinic arranged a different pickup point each day.

As the two van-loads were being checked in the phone rang. Moments later a woman wearing shorts, sneakers, and a black clergy shirt and collar guided a 19 year old through the front door. The young woman had an appointment. Her boyfriend had been driving her in when he saw the protestors and panicked. He had stopped three blocks away, put her out of the car, and sped away. Bewildered, she had seen the clergywoman and approached her to ask directions to the clinic door. Fortunately, the priest she found was one who had come to support the clinic — to try to keep the protestors from succeeding in their efforts to close it down. The priest had phoned the clinic to assure that the girl did have an appointment; the clinic had notified the police that the two of them should be allowed to pass the barricades; and the priest had gathered the girl close to lead her past

the shouting crowd, through the pinching and elbows and hair-pulling, and into the calm of the clinic. Moments later it was time for Sarah and Daniel and Hannah.

An aide leads Daniel, who leads Sarah — right foot, left foot — into the procedure room. It's windowless, thank God, but painted a soft yellow — light, but not too cheery. In addition to the table with stirrups, rolling stainless steel instrument tray, adjustable work light, there are two rocking chairs each draped with a crocheted afghan. The nurse gives Sarah an injection and leaves Daniel to help her undress, don the light cotton gown, and sink into one of the rocking chairs. Daniel starts for the door but Sarah stops him.

“Dan, wait! Oh, God, Dan.”

He takes her hand in his, brushes the hair back from her forehead, kisses her gently on the lips. Their eyes meet and hold. Simultaneously, almost imperceptibly, they nod. It's time. Daniel purposefully crosses the room and opens the door a crack to signal their readiness, then returns to Sarah's side.

The aide, a nurse, and a doctor enter quietly. The doctor tells them how sorry he is for their loss, promises to take good care of Sarah, asks if they have any questions. They don't. He and the nurse scrub and glove while the aide settles Sarah on the table, puts her feet in the stirrups, adjusts sheets and drape and gown. The drugs have done their job. Sarah's cervix is dilated; not as much as it would be for a full-term birth, that's more than her body can handle at this stage of the pregnancy, but enough for tiny Hannah's malformed body to pass through. Except the head.

They'd been told to expect that. As the nurse gently supports Hannah's body, the doctor makes a small puncture and suctions out enough cerebral fluid to allow the soft bones of the skull to collapse just a bit — just enough to allow the head to slip out. Hannah, delivered whole.

They clean both Sarah and Hannah, wrap the baby in a soft blanket, and ask Sarah and Daniel if they still want to hold her. Yes. Oh, Jesus, yes. Oh, my Hannah. Daniel and the aide help Sarah back to her rocker. Daniel takes the other chair as the nurse hands Sarah their daughter, their first, their longed-for Hannah. Above the folds of the blanket only her perfect face is visible. Together they explore it, placing gentle fingers on Daniel's chin, Sarah's eyes, Hannah's own perfect miniature ears. Neither notice as the others slip out, leaving their family alone to its grief. Time stands still as they talk and sing to their little girl; rock her, cuddle her, pray for her.

Eventually, Daniel rose and made his way to the reception desk. He asked for the priest. She was easy enough to track down. The staff had insisted that whenever she was not in the building she be accompanied by at least one bodyguard with a two-way radio in case the bodyguard needed to call for help. (Some of the Christians had been harassing and threatening her.) Within minutes she had joined Daniel at the desk. “I want you to baptize my baby. Can you do that?”

There were several theological reasons she shouldn't, couldn't, do it — couldn't baptize an already dead fetus. But they all paled in the face of the naked need in front of her. She simply nodded, put a hand on Daniel's shoulder, and walked with him back to the room where Sarah and Hannah waited.

“May I?” the priest asked Sarah gently, nodding at the yellow swaddling blanket across which frolicked pink and blue bunnies. She lifted the little bundle gently, gazed for

a moment at Hannah's face, placed a soft kiss on her forehead, and turned to her parents.

"What's her name?"

"Hannah."

"Does she have a middle name?"

Sarah looked alarmed as she shook her head.

"That's okay," the priest assured her. "Hannah is a beautiful name and it will do just fine."

"Wait." Daniel spoke, looking at his wife. "Grace?" Sarah smiled and, as one, they turned their gaze to the priest.

"Name this child." The priest softly intoned the ancient command.

"Hannah Grace," her parents replied, as parents had done for centuries.

"Hannah Grace," said the priest, "we come now to welcome you into the community of the baptized. We do this not to save your soul, for we know that your soul is, as it has always been, safe in the hands of God who loves you.

"Rather, we come as an act of outrageous faith. We come to affirm that your life matters, that the world has been changed because of the time you were in it, and that nothing, not even death itself, can undo that."

Lifting Hannah above her head, she thanked God, even in the midst of grief, for Hannah and for all she had meant and would mean in the lives of her parents. Bringing the child down to her breast she cradled her in her left arm, placed her right hand on Hannah's head, and continued.

"And now, God, even in the midst of our pain and confusion, we bring this child to you to be baptized by water and the Holy Spirit, to acknowledge her as Your own forever.

Reaching out, she cupped Sarah's jaw, rubbing a thumb softly across her cheek. She repeated the motion, now mingling Daniel's tears with Sarah's. Then, slowly and firmly, with her tear-soaked thumb she traced the sign of the cross on the infant brow.

"Hannah Grace, I baptize you, in the name of God...."