

# Keeping Kyrie

A true story of faith, family, and foster care

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with Nathan Christensen



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It's a long drive, the forty-five minutes that turn into eons when you have a baby that can't breathe. She sounded like a vacuum cleaner caught on the cord of the drapes, and her lips were blue and her hands purple. I watched her tiny form, face down in her prescription car seat bed, in the rear view mirror as I drove. The miles stretched before me like one of those dreams where you are running but can't get anywhere. I nearly cried when I could finally see the hospital, and then again as I got frustrated in the maze of access roads and parking lots. My hands tangled in the seat belts, trying to get her out quickly, and I was scared to death we would lose her before we made it inside.

We were rushed back to a small room in a far corner. A tiny bundle on the adult size hospital bed, she was suddenly covered in cords and face masks and stickers all plugging her back into the matrix of life. Nurses peppered me with questions while doctors hovered over the baby. I was grateful when the baby's caseworker burst into the room, confirming my answers and signing paperwork. A tech brought in some formula, and the caseworker and I both shouted at the same time that she would choke without thickener, without special bottles, and without careful pacing.

Just two months old. She'd come to us from the hospital just three weeks before, fighting for air. Now she had new problems: her little heart was trying to quit.

In less than thirty minutes from squealing into the parking lot, they had a plan for us and a Life Flight was on the way. Her birth mother was notified we were at the emergency room and that the baby could die, but she did not come. When the transport team arrived, the caseworker turned to me and whispered, *You're going. This is your baby, and you're going.* Before I could respond, they strapped the baby to my chest, and then strapped me to an ambulance stretcher, along with her oxygen and monitors, and wheeled us out. An ambulance drove us to an airport, where the stretcher was pushed onto an airplane.

The nurses on the flight were kind, and I was grateful. The four-hour ride was smooth, but very uncomfortable. I could not move because the baby and I were immobilized. My legs were straight out in front of me and soon fell asleep with burning tingles and pricks. The baby also slept. She stopped breathing twice, and all kinds of alarms went off. They moved so fast on that tiny plane, and worked on her while she was still strapped to me. I felt helpless, in the way, and in the dark. I could not move and there was nothing I could do.

Trapped there, lifted farther and farther away from Nathan, the children, and our little home, I felt sucked out of my life like a spirit leaving a body.

*This is just like what happened to my mom.*

My mother was killed on the weekend after my brother and I had gone to the temple to honor the first anniversary of our father's death.

It started with a text message, from a woman who said she was an ambulance, which was very confusing. Her next message said that she knew I couldn't hear to talk on the phone. Her third message, which I now realized was coming from my mother's phone, asked me to have Nathan call her immediately.

Nathan was already talking on his own phone in our nursery-without-babies, working with his writing partner to get ready for an upcoming performance of their musical *Broadcast*. The second it took me to leap from my chair in the study and fly into the nursery across the hall felt like hours. I burst into the room, unable to speak in complete sentences, signing frantically. Nathan jumped up, hanging up on his composer, somehow understanding enough to call my mom's phone. I could not hear what the woman-who-was-an-ambulance told him, but I saw his face. I saw his face, and I knew that day was going to be a bad day.

He tried signing to me as he listened, interpreting what the ambulance EMT woman said to him. *Accident. Broken arms. Broken legs. Cardiac arrest. Heart stopped. Intubated.*

The words made me cold, each phrase punching the air out of my body and pouring ice into my veins. I could not stand up, my legs collapsing under me. Nathan grabbed me, slowing down my fall, sinking us to our knees where he wrapped me up in his arms and began to pray. I did not understand why we were on the floor, or how I got there, or why Nathan was slowing me down with a prayer when I couldn't move anyway. That's when the phone rang again.

*You have ten minutes to get here.*

By then, I couldn't even think in complete sentences. They said they would call us back, but we needed to get to the hospital in Pryor, Oklahoma, which was an hour's drive. We flew into action, some part of my body remembering the four months of my dad dying of cancer, so that my arms automatically reached for toothbrushes, snacks, and a change of clothes as I packed a bag to go to the hospital.

My mind was racing, thinking about how difficult and long her recovery would be, how I would work more to pay for it, how I would not leave her side until she was okay. I kept packing things, reaching for something to hold on to, until Nathan grabbed me and held me and somehow gently shouted, "*This is not cancer! We have to go now!*" He was saying something about no time to pack, that this wasn't about her being in recovery for months, that this was about getting to her before she died. I was so confused. I was angry that people were talking about my mom, who wasn't dead, because I just saw her last night.

While we drove, we called my brother, telling him the pieces we knew. Then the phone rang again, redirecting us to a regional hospital in Tulsa. Nothing was making sense. We turned the car around, heading back in the opposite direction. The hail started then, and the drive to Tulsa seemed to take days. Time stood still, stretching out into one gasp for breath, with tears and prayers and impossible waiting. It made me cold, my own not-breathing.

My mother was notorious for sending misspelled text messages full of words other than what she intended. The irony was that her degree was in English, and her professorial command of grammar came to rule our entire lives, in all its ceaseless demand for perfection. But ever since her ovarian cancer and chemo ten years before, she had pampered herself with manicures that gave her long and fancy nails, which meant she could no longer type well on a touchscreen. She chose to just send random four word messages, rather than keeping shorter nails, so that any text we got from her was a game of decoding. It was even more confusing when auto-correct was thrown into the mix, and I think it amused her.

The last text message I got from my mom was around lunch time, and it said "aprons poolside". I finally figured out that meant that April, her favorite poodle, was still inside her house and my mom wanted me to let her out. I went in the afternoon to do that, and to deliver some treats that my mom loved. After I let the dogs out, I set up a pile of cookies and candies, making just enough of a mess to annoy her, but knowing she would be surprised and delighted. I turned around to see what else I could do in her house, and a sudden stillness fell on me like a mantle of cold snow. It was a deep and heavy eeriness. I did not like the feeling, so instead of doing anything more at the house, I went home to Nathan.

Later, Nathan's phone gave a hail warning for the evening, so he went over to her house to bring the dogs back in. Three little poodles went right to their crates ("castles", my mom would say), but April, the spoiled favorite princess, ran straight to mom's room and hid under the bed. Nathan gave up trying to get her out and started to leave, but right as he got to the door, he heard a sound like a sad cry. He turned around, and saw April crawling out of mom's room on her belly. She made it all the way to Nathan, and then rolled over on her back. Not an affectionate animal to anyone but my mom, this was weird. He rubbed her belly, picked her up, and put her to bed. We didn't know that mom's car had just collided with a Jeep and a semi, but somehow, April did.

Mom was very proud that she had gotten a job of her own so that she could move out of my house when Nathan and I got married. She had retired from her library work years ago, but she was a career woman and did not like *not* working. She wanted to be independent in every way, and thought of her new rental house one block over as a kind of wedding present to us. She had worked so hard finding a job, and so many had (illegally) treated her unfairly because of her age. She was so proud of her work, and had been so courageous in facing those challenges.

Her reward for so many years of survival were her grandchildren, whom she loved more than anything, even more than the poodles. She wanted nothing more than to be a grandmother, and wanted any and all of them staying with her as often as possible for as long as she could get away with before my brother and his wife noticed. When they grew into teenagers and got busy, she went to their events and activities, driving for hours just to get to watch them play or perform, and putting on a brave face as if she were content with quick smiles and drive-by hugs. She was so proud of them!

That's what she was doing that day: driving back from Missouri, where she had watched one granddaughter in a swim meet and another win the debate tournament. It was unusual that I was not driving her, but these were daytime events, and she had done a good job of leaving in the

afternoon so she would be home before dark. I was enduring morning sickness, and felt strongly that I should not go that day.

Later, when I said so many times that the accident was my fault because I was not driving her that day, Nathan would remind me this was false guilt, even survivor guilt. He said that when the driver of that Jeep hydroplaned and clipped the front of that semi, coming to a stop right in front of mom's car, there was no time for her to even hit the brakes. He said if I had been driving her, I would have died, too. We could be real about how much we missed her, but also consider for what purpose God kept us alive — because we did survive, though I didn't feel very alive without any air.

Nathan was amazing during his first emergency with me. He got the after-hours number for sign language interpreters, and called the hospital on the way, giving them the number and explaining that mom was being flown in, and I was her Deaf daughter with cochlear implants, and that we needed an interpreter to be sure nothing was missed and everything understood.

Nathan held me up those days, and often held me tight. I think he helped me not run away. When information was too hard to face, and scenes too gruesome to see, he kept me steady and strong in a way I have never known. He comforted me when I cried in my sleep. When I jolted awake in panic and screams, he wrapped his arms around me. When I laid there unable to sleep, still and quiet but with tears pouring down my cheeks, he rubbed my hands and just let me be.

He kept working hard at his job as a writer through all the chaos, knowing that I needed time off from my full-time work as a counselor for Daybreak Family Services. Trying to support us alone, he served me while I was in a daze, going with me to the funeral home, and stopping me randomly to look in my eyes and remind me to breathe. He brought me bits of food from the piles carried in by friends, and took me for little walks so there would be air in my lungs.

He gently reminded me there were only two weeks left in the month, and that we must move quickly to get mom's things out of her rental home. He moved all her costume jewelry over to our house so I could give pieces to my nieces, and he helped me go through her clothes. She had so many that it would take me three years to get them sorted, but he never complained or rushed me. He fed her dogs. He did the dishes, swept the floors, and took care of my garden. He held my hand, always quietly in the background or slipping gently forward to make me laugh until I was breathing again. I loved him, and was glad he was the husband I had chosen.

It seemed like hours before we made it to the hospital that Saturday night in the cold sleet. I broke out into hives as we rushed into the ER. Nathan went ahead of me, to find the interpreter and figure out where to go. I had to go to the bathroom. Again. And throw up. Again.

Finally making it to the waiting room, I saw Nathan's face, and I knew. When I looked into his eyes, melted with love and grief, I knew. He took my hands and pulled me close, looked me in the eyes with all the courage a brand new husband of only three months could muster, and told me, "She's gone." That was the second time I fell to my knees, screaming and crying. I pulled at my hair and hid my face and sat where he moved me and cried and could not breathe and could

not breathe and could not breathe. The doctor came in then, to make the official announcement, saying she had expired.

I was aghast. I was angry. *Expired? Like milk?* I was so bewildered, and so cold.

We learned that my mother had never been brought to Tulsa. The helicopter couldn't lift off in the weather, and she had never stabilized enough for transport. She had been taken by ambulance to a small rural hospital instead, and we were in the wrong place. We had gotten the wrong information that second time, receiving the call meant for the family of the driver of the Jeep that killed her just five miles from the interstate exit that would have delivered her safely home. This is not where my mother's body was waiting for me to say goodbye; this was where the doctors were treating the man who killed my mom.

The doctor said that if we hurried, and if we beat the medical examiner to the correct hospital, we could still see her before her body was taken away. I went into panic, saying over and over that we had to go. My friend René, who had appeared like magic to help interpret and to help grieve, knew how slick the roads were becoming. She grabbed me, and looked me in the face and said sternly, "Go. But do not hurry."

We left the conference room, with me wondering how to make my legs move, and came out into the hospital lobby. Nathan's parents were there waiting for us, and I cried out to them that she was already gone. I needed them in that moment, but also felt my body heave away from them, these in-laws I had only just met and now were the only parents I had, but not *my* parents. My parents, both of them, were suddenly gone, and I was an orphan, and there was no air in the room.

Nathan drove us those forty miles on that cold and icy night. A million thoughts were flying through my head while I was thinking nothing at all. I was frozen like sleet building up on the windshield wipers, tears streaming down my face. Nathan dropped me off at the emergency room entrance of the Pryor hospital, and then tried to follow me in so quickly that he forgot to put the car in park and had to go chasing after it. I ran in to the front desk to ask where to go, and they said trauma room five. My brother and his family were already there when we arrived, their little girls sleeping in an alcove with the oldest brother watching over them.

I blindly ran through the curtain straight into my brother's arms, flashing back to the day my grandmother had died and he ran to me in a similar way. Something about the fear on his face reminded me of his little four-year-old self, while somehow making me feel ancient. The mantle of big sister fell on me the way stillness fell at mom's house earlier.

We did beat the medical examiner, and I was able to see my mother. She was still guarded by the police who had brought her and we could not touch her body, or embrace her, or move the sheet that covered her body. She was the wrong shape, not all together, not herself at all, except it *was* her, and I needed her. I needed to touch her, and to hold her, and to weep over her. I needed to speak to her, to cry out for her to wake up, to scream at her not to leave me. I needed to make sure she knew I was sorry for everything, that I was grateful for everything, that I really did love her more than anything.

The doctor came in with my interpreter to tell us about her injuries and their severity. He talked about damage to her internal organs, and he told how long her heart had stopped, and that it had stopped so many times they ran out of medicine to get it started again. He said that when the accident happened, her nerves were cut so she was not in pain, and we got to talk to the EMT who stayed with her. She said mom was just chatting away, telling her all about her daughter in Owasso and the day she had spent with her Springfield son and his children at their high school competitions in Joplin.

It was when the firemen cut her out that all the pressure was taken off her body, they explained. She had been pinned down under the crushed dashboard, her legs crumpled in front of her. She was helpless and trapped there, unable to move, and there was nothing she could do. The metal pushing her down had been blocking her injuries, so that her heart had enough pressure to keep beating. But when they removed her from the wreckage, there was nowhere for all the blood to go, and it all just left her. She lost consciousness immediately.

She died then, he said. He said even if they had been able to revive her, she would not have ever been herself again – nothing more than a vegetative state – with her brain missing oxygen for that long, not even taking into account her other injuries.

My interpreter, Don, was good and brave and did his job well. His heart is real, and his spirit authentic, and his eyes were wet as his hands flew. I am glad it was him on call that day. They amaze me, those interpreters and the gift they are to the world. I will never forget his hands from that day, or the shapes they made in the air, those shapes in the air I could not breathe.

When the doctor finished, the policeman told us about the accident. He said all the eye witnesses told the same story, and that mom was not at fault. He said there was nothing she could have done. He told us about the Jeep and the semi, and that she hit them directly right after they came to a halt in her lane. He said anyone in the car with her would have died, too. “I should have been driving her,” I said. *I should have been driving.*

They let me have a final moment alone with my mother, then. The information of what had happened to her had been poured into the air around me but wasn’t processing in my mind. My brother went to deliver the news to his children. Nathan went to tell his parents and bring them to the room where our family would be gathering.

My mom was all covered with blankets, except for her face. Her belly was swollen three times its normal size, which would not have impressed her, but I knew from my work in the ER that this was where her blood had pooled when it could not be pumped through her body. Her face was the only thing that was mostly okay, and to me she was beautiful. She was not herself, and my mind was fighting to put this picture together, that it was my mom there on that stretcher. I knew it was. It was her hair, and her skin, and her closed eyes. *Wake up, Mama! Wake up! Please.* Even as I whispered these cries, I knew I didn’t really want her to wake up, not to what she would be facing. *How can I ask you to wake up only to endure so much?* My little girl heart needed magic right then, magic to make her okay, and magic to make none of this happen, and magic to make me never to have been naughty, so that I would be worthy enough to work some magic.

When there was no magic, and I was suddenly no longer a daughter but a grown woman with no parents, I kissed her forehead and brushed my hand through her hair. I held her hand and I cried in whispered prayer tears. Then the medical examiner showed up and took her away.

We gathered ourselves in an empty room, because gathering is what Mormons do. Our local bishop and his wife came, and Nathan's parents, and my brother's family, and Nathan and me. Nathan, together with the other men, laid hands on our heads and gave us each a blessing. A stillness came, with words of strength and comfort that were specific to each of us. This was the power of the priesthood, the peace from our Heavenly Father, even the understanding that hard things are a part of His plan.

Nathan and I drove home silent and exhausted, his hand holding tightly onto mine. I didn't want him to pull away, but I had nothing left in me to squeeze back. When we got home, it was nearly two in the morning. We were starving, and I spun myself in circles trying to function enough to make some food. Nathan vacuumed, because it was the only chore we hadn't finished before the accident, and I was obsessing about it, knowing my family would be sleeping on the floor. He didn't argue or reason with me; he just did it so I wouldn't have to worry about it.

I found leftover surprise in the freezer, and threw it in the microwave. When it was thawed and I pulled it out to see if it was warm, I realized it was leftovers from the roast we had with my mom at Family Home Evening the week before. That was my first time to cry since leaving the hospital, and my first time to hit one of those endless, random triggers that would continue to pop up like ghosts and throw her absence at me like a knife in the gut.

Around three in the morning, with my brother's family sleeping in every available corner of the house, the organ donation people called for the long interview required for them to do whatever they do. My brother and I bumbled our way through answering their questions about when she had ovarian cancer and who else had cancer and what kind of treatments did she have. We were exhausted enough that we got silly, trying for anything besides more crying. When they asked if mom had ever had rabies, he said, "Yes, and her name was Emily." When they asked when mom's high blood pressure started, I told them it was the year my brother was born. We finished by four in the morning, but before we could sleep, they called back to apologize and tell us there was not enough left of mom for them to be able to harvest anything, and so her body would just go directly to the funeral home for cremation. Nothing was funny after that, not for a long time.

My last visit with my mother had been something special. Nathan and I had gone to the doctor to get our medical clearance for fostering. He examined Nathan and talked to him, and gave him a shot, and then signed his papers. Then he saw me, examined me, and told us he would sign my papers, but that we needed to know that I was pregnant again. When I told mom, she said she already knew. Moms are like that. She talked with me about my high risk for miscarriage, and talked to me for the first time about her struggles to carry a child, and her experiences when she was pregnant with me. It was sacred beyond just being our final conversation.

That's why I wasn't driving her that day, when she had asked for a ride to Joplin. She wanted to go see my nieces compete in their events, but I had morning sickness and couldn't go. She didn't want to miss it because nothing made her happier than a whole day with all the grandchildren. In full role reversal, I made her promise to be back before dark. *Why didn't you come home? You promised, Mama! You promised!*

I lost that baby three weeks after my mother's funeral. I didn't really lose it, but that's how people talk about death, as if the person was misplaced or might turn up later. The idea might be intended to distract or ease the pain, but it wasn't truthful. What was true is that my baby had moved from one world to another, had transformed from a mortal being into someone eternal.

I thought of my mother every time I "lost" one of my babies. I felt like a pioneer girl from children's novels that I had read long ago, left on my own in a new and unfamiliar world with strangers, albeit kind ones. I knew she would have been with me had she still been alive, and wondered if she had now gained some sacred access to my children that I did not have. Perhaps her lifelong promise to come back and haunt me was more than just an idle threat.