

The Footbridge

by Gretchen Tremoulet

When I was twelve years old, my mother went into labor with Melodie. I was beside myself with excitement. In my mind, I'd made Melodie my baby. It suddenly didn't matter any more that I was short and had mousy brown hair. My mom let me decorate the nursery. It had been my nursery once, then Ben's, then Eric's. It'd been a long time since there'd been a baby in the family.

Every time another kid came along, my dad built another bedroom for the kid that was getting kicked out of the nursery. Actually, by the time Mom was pregnant with Melodie, Eric had been campaigning to get out of the nursery for years. He put all the nursery stuff in the barn and put up a bajillion posters of the Wildcats basketball team. Since he was a shorty, he was only dreaming, but most of the boys in our county had the same dream. Hoops hung from nails on trees all over the county. Ours hung on an oak tree. The ground around it was muddy and sloped, but they didn't care.

Anyway, Dad built a room for Eric, then Eric moved in, then I dragged all of the nursery stuff out of the barn into the yard, washed it good, let it dry in the sun, then put it in the nursery. The room smelled like sunshine. Of course it helped that I'd painted the walls yellow. I chose yellow rather than pink, even though we knew the baby was a girl and her name was Melodie, because I liked yellow and I hated pink. Mom didn't care.

I made long garlands of tissue paper flowers—all colors except pink—and hung them around the walls. On a trip in to Wal-mart, I spent the money I'd saved on a yellow crib quilt covered with hobby horses and butterflies. I cut pictures out of catalogs, taped them on construction paper, and hung them on the walls. That was the most beautiful nursery on earth, and it was for my baby.

I don't want you to get the wrong idea about our house. It had lots of rooms, but they were all homemade. Well, not all of them. The living room and dining room and kitchen had been built by a regular builder or something. And my parent's bedroom, and mine. But my dad built the rest. He did a good job, too.

Our truck stayed on the other side of the creek. It didn't seem strange to me, as it had always been that way. The truck was parked in a pullover along the road. The creek ran between the road and our house. There was a footbridge older than me that was what we used to get between the house and the road. The barn and tobacco were on the opposite side of the road, so it made sense to keep the truck there. You *could* get to our house with the truck—at least to the back edge of our farm behind the house—but it was a seventeen mile drive out of your way, so we never did. It would have been a job and a half to get from the road through the woods to the house.

Dad took Mom to the hospital when she went into labor. I was ecstatic. I dashed around cleaning invisible dust off everything in the nursery, even though I knew it would be a day or two before Melodie would come home. Home. Just the thought made me feel like I was floating.

The next thing that happened broke everything. The phone rang and I answered it, expecting Dad to say that Melodie was born and how much she weighed and if she had a lot of hair and all of that. It was Dad, all right, but I couldn't tell at first, he was sobbing so hard. I'd never heard Dad cry, even when my Grandma died. He couldn't talk, and I kept asking him what was wrong, what was wrong, what was wrong, until I thought I was going to shrink. That's what that fear felt like—like I was shrinking.

Finally he said, "Mom's okay. She's gonna be fine. But Melodie was stillborn. They don't know why."

I knew what stillborn meant, because it happened occasionally back here in the mountains. But that was only if the mothers hadn't been to the doctor when they realized they were pregnant. My mom had done all of that. She'd done everything right. We all had.

I talked some more to Dad, but I don't remember what he said or what I said. He talked to Ben and Eric. Eric ran outside because he didn't want us to see him cry. Ben didn't say anything after he hung up. His face looked like the salt maps we'd made in geography in the fourth grade. He went to his room, came back with his basketball, and left, slamming the back door so hard it sounded like a rifle. I guess he went up to the basketball tree and shot baskets. I don't think he tried to find Eric. He realized Eric wanted to be alone. I'm guessing at all this.

I sat at the kitchen table and cried a flood. It didn't help at all. I wondered why people cry when it doesn't help.

We'd read *The Catcher in the Rye* in school. I felt closer to Holden, closer to the book, than I ever had when Mrs. Bloom had made us read it in English. I'd hated it then—but I hated everything someone made me read. Holden seemed now to be a sort of a friend, but even so, I recognized that I wasn't like him. Or maybe just not as brave. I didn't want to break stuff—any windows or anything. I stared at my hands like the book was in them and I was trying to understand it.

Then this mood came over me that drove me to action. I didn't plan it, it just came to me out of the thin air. It owned me.

I took all of the big stuff, the stuff that had been mine, then Ben's, then Eric's, back out to the barn. The bassinet, the crib, the chest of drawers with bunnies on it, the change table, the pine rocker. Then I put all of the stuff that had been only Melodie's—the new clothes, the quilt, the pictures on the wall—in a box. I stood in the room seeing how bare it looked, feeling how bare it felt.

I got the shovel and took it and the box down to the grass near the bridge. The sun shone big time, I remember that, but it wasn't hot. A breeze rustled through the trees, and the crickets and birds set up quite a chorus. All those things are as clear in my mind as if they were etched there. They probably are.

I buried everything except the garlands of flowers. I marked the burial place with a rock from the creek, but it didn't need marking. It was a mound of dirt, and I doubted anything would dare grow on it. I realize now that didn't make sense, but I was quite sure at the time.

After I'd finished that, I held the garlands in my hands. In my mind, they were real flowers. Every color but pink. There were a lot of them. They could have stretched into forever. I knew what I wanted to do with them, and I didn't care what anyone said. Melodie was coming home—her spirit was, anyway, but it was still coming

home. I wound the garlands around the railings of the footbridge. They covered the railings on both sides of the bridge from one bank to the other. They *did* stretch into forever—or maybe into eternity.

I was awfully young then, and I was positive there was an eternity and a heaven and all that. I'm not sure anymore. But that feeling I had standing there at the end of the bridge, looking at the garlands of tissue paper flowers reaching to the other bank and back—that feeling comes back to me now and then. It's mixed with happiness and sadness and, oddly, a lot of strength. It doesn't make me believe, even though I want to, but it does give me hope.