



## GRACE IN *impossible places*

Monica Kidd MD

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2017 April 24;189: E622. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.170352

*Coda: the concluding passage to a piece or movement, typically forming an addition to the basic structure. It's a fitting title for our new back-page column, which will highlight voices from Canadian physicians on myriad topics, clinical to meta-physical. Our opening columns will be written by Dr. Monica Kidd, a poet, seabird biologist, radio journalist, mother and, now, family doctor and associate professor of medical humanities at the University of Calgary. If you're curious about her unusual career, you can read a profile about her in the Jan. 9, 2017, issue. We hope you enjoy this new feature and, as always, we welcome your feedback.*

**O**n a Tuesday not so long ago, I was driving to work and heard a piece of radio that made me park the car and continue to listen until I risked becoming unfashionably late for clinic. It was an interview on CBC's *The Current* (Mar. 14, 2017) with a woman whose father was murdered in 1978 and *the man who pulled the trigger*.

Margot Van Sluytman was 16 when two police officers knocked on her family's door in Scarborough, Ontario, and told her that her father had been killed during

a robbery at the store where he worked. Glen Flett had taken aim and fired when his attempt at emptying a Brinks truck went wrong. He hadn't meant to kill Theodore Van Sluytman, and only learned he had when he read about it later in the newspaper.

Fast-forward many years later. Margot has become a poet and holds an online fundraiser for a project she's involved in. She receives a donation from a woman with the last name of Flett. Margot writes back, asking if she is any relation to

Glen. Turns out she is his wife. Margot tells Glen's wife she wants an apology from him. In turn, she tells Margot he's been waiting most of his adult life for an opportunity to do just that. Glen and Margot meet. They talk for hours. Eventually they become friends. Now they do work together in prisons. They speak not about forgiveness, but about finding humanity behind the crime. Margot's final words of the interview were, "Murder, rape and brutality are horrible things. But life is

not horrible. The acts are horrible. But not our humanity." Glen and Margot talk about hope.

Back up 24 hours. I had been called to triage in the obstetrics unit. "There's a multip here in labour," the nurse said, looking oddly stricken. "This is her second pregnancy, but her first son died. He was three years old. And," she continued, looking at the woman's prenatal record, "he was born in 2013. That means it wasn't that long ago. Brain cancer." We looked at each other, our grimaces mirrored.

I tried for a moment to imagine what they must be feeling. I'm a mother of three small children, and I can't even look the possibility of a sick child in the eye. I took a deep breath, and went in the room. The couple wore the same anxious smiles I've seen so many times from any two people about to have a baby. Should I bring it up?

As the woman began to breathe through a contraction, the man reached up with both hands and held hers. On the inside of one of his wrists was a tattoo that read *Henry* (not his son's real name). On his other wrist was a rubber yellow bracelet with the words, *Henry is getting better and better*. Henry, the child who had died

nearly a year ago to the day.

Of course I brought it up. It's relevant to her medical care, and they wear their story on their wrists. I said I knew about Henry,

that I was sorry for their loss, and that I was really happy they were here.

Not too long after that, I had the privilege of handing them a perfect baby girl. I think about her dad cradling her in the crook of his arm while he traces the letters of her brother's name on his wrist. Margot said it: horrible things happen to us, and yet life is not horrible. There is hope. I think about that newborn girl crying on her mother's belly, and I am staggered by the possibility of grace.

*Horrible things  
happen to us,  
and yet life  
is not horrible.*