D-Day 1985
By Christina Grant

Trying to get comfortable, I wriggle deeper into the brown velveteen slider rocker—to which I’ve been pinned all morning. My nose is red and sore from the cold virus that has descended on our family, and my back aches from a night spent patting, burping, and singing to my restless three-month-old baby. I gaze out the window through falling snow at the poplar trees hugging our hand-built house in the middle of our 160-acre farmstead. I can’t see our two draft horses, but I know they’re out there, their dun-coloured backs sugar-coated and their hooves scraping for bits of green.

“Come on,” I murmur into Damian’s face, “have a little milk—it’ll make it better.” I stroke his cheek with my forefinger to arouse the rooting instinct, and as his rose mouth opens a crack, I press his face onto my nipple, compelling him to accept comfort. But something isn’t working; he’s not sucking right.

“Hey,” I say, too loud. “What’s the matter?” I slacken my arm, and his head, which would normally strain to stay attached, falls back. Milk dribbles, unsucked, down his left cheek and onto his yellow and white terrycloth sleeper, his lips still parted. I stare into his eyes, two brown orbs with lids softening and closing—but not, I suddenly realize, out of the familiar sweet breast bliss.

I thrust myself forward and stand up, rejected breast protruding from my half-unbuttoned cotton nightgown, and involuntarily give him a little shake. “Damian! Look at me!” His eyelids shudder; his eyes are glazed, unfocussed. My heart bangs in my chest. Something is wrong.

* 

Peter is doing a perfect storm dance on the gas and break pedals of our candy-apple red Ford pickup, trying dissolve the thirty-two miles between our home—where my bewildered mom now watches over our two-year-old, Brennan—and the little white hospital in Hythe. 

The tires jerk in and out of the long, frozen ruts in the dirt road. It’s minus twenty-two degrees and snow is falling thickly onto the windshield. Peter’s face is tight with concentration. Mine is hanging over the bucket car seat, willing my baby to suddenly gurgle, look up, and smile, like it’s all been a silly mistake. Instead, his little head—covered in fine, dark gold hair—lolls against the cushions of his car seat, bobbing with each rut we hit. The normally 40-minute drive takes almost twice that long. 

* 

“I’m not certain, but it looks like meningitis,” intones Dr. Chai, our tiny and unflappable doctor as he clutches a glass slide and sweeps back into the treatment cubicle. “The white blood cell count is high, his fontanel is swollen…”

His what? Peter and I stare. Dr. Chai owns all the words in this moment; we’ve never seen him so animated.
“You need to get to the Grande Prairie hospital,” he says. “I’ve phoned ahead; the pediatrician will be waiting for you.” We nod in dumb unison, rising out of our chairs, impelled by the urgency that has flooded the room. I take Damian, limp, from the doctor’s arms, place him back into the car seat, and we bundle out of the room. Dr. Chai trails us out into the deserted hospital lobby and peers through the glass entry door at the thickly falling, wind-whipped snow.

“My four-by-four is in the back,” he says. “You can take it.”

Take his truck? This shocks me—Peter too. “It’s ok,” Peter says in knee-jerk fashion. “We have ours.” We can’t take the doctor’s truck! He must be over-reacting. We press our way out into the blizzard towards our pickup, which is standing alone in the lot. We clamber in, and as we pull away, Dr. Chai lingers at the hospital door, his white coat and black hair almost obscured as the thick, wet snow slants down. He looks like a figure on a static-y, black and white TV screen, and the surrounding noise is about the same.

* 

Peter drives, neither of us talks. The windshield wipers slice at the snow, scratching out 20 metres of vision each time: thwup, thwup, thwup. I hardly take my eyes off Damian; I want to believe this isn’t getting worse. The highway is deserted; the blizzard is getting angrier. Finally, an agonizing thirty-five minutes later, we make out the red glow of the first traffic lights of Grande Prairie, and we slide to a stop. The engine noise subsides and another sound, tiny but monstrous, fills the cab. Damian is whimpering, a strange, robotic whimper unlike any human sound I’ve ever heard. It comes and goes with his breath or his heartbeat, I can’t tell which. Now I’m full blown scared. He could die, It could happen right here in this truck, at this red light. We should have taken Dr. Chai’s 4x4; it might have bought us minutes, we might have hit the green light, it might have saved our son.

The light bursts green and the truck lurches forward, careening past the big “H” for hospital. We turn in under “Emergency” and Peter jams on the brakes. He leaps out, runs around, yanks open the passenger door, and seizes the car seat. We erupt as a unit through the sliding glass doors. Two nurses are standing there, waiting. “Dr. Chai called,” one says. “We’ll take him now.” I pull Damian out of the seat and thrust him into the first nurse’s arms. “Help us, please! He hasn’t nursed since 8:30 this morning…” I’m still stammering as they whisk him into a blindingly bright treatment room. In grateful horror I watch as they peel off his sleeper and diaper and lay his tiny naked body on an ocean of hospital bed. White coats swarm in. The platter-sized clock above the bed reads 12:16 pm.

Suddenly a tall, brown-skinned man in a pressed white coat is standing before us. “Hello,” he says quietly, briskly, kindly. “I’m Dr. Libseksal, the pediatrician. I’ve spoken with Dr. Chai. I’m going to do a spinal tap to confirm meningitis. You can wait in the parent’s room. I will come talk to you when we know more.” He doesn’t wait for our response, but nods and disappears. I hug my now painfully swollen breasts and crane my neck to glimpse Damian lying very still, arms and legs splayed, chest festooned with sensors attached to wires that coil into machines. A plastic tube protrudes from his scalp and snakes up to a bag of liquid impaled on a chrome hook over his motionless head.

I feel the tears rising up inside my flushed cheeks. Peter takes my arm and tows me to the parents’ room down the hallway. We careen towards an avocado-green vinyl couch, and my
hand reaches out to pluck a tissue from the thoughtfully placed Kleenex box on an end table. How many parents have wept here, I wonder. I join them. If Peter is crying, I don’t register the fact.

*

Eighty minutes later, Dr. Libsekal raps lightly on the door and slips into the dimly lit room. I claw through the haze in my brain and force myself to rise mechanically from the couch; Peter does also. The doctor pulls a hard chair from a corner and sits. Like robots, we follow suit, sinking back into the warm vinyl dents.

His skin gleams with a thin coat of sweat. We look at him hungrily, willing him to say that it’s okay, that our son will be fine, that it’s not as bad as it looks.

“It’s serious,” he says in a low voice. “We will get the results of the spinal tap in the morning, but the fluid from the meninges—the membrane around the spine—is full of pus. I believe it is meningitis.”

I grow smaller on the couch as if a syringe had been inserted into my own back and the plunger pulled slowly back.

“Viral meningitis,” the doctor continues, “is not treatable; it simply runs its course. But we are lucky. This is bacterial meningitis. It can be treated.”

We are lucky. Hope pokes at me. I stiffen and lean towards him, willing him to say other beautiful things.

“I have begun strong intravenous antibiotics,” he continues. “We may be able to stop this.”

He reaches out a hand to touch me lightly on the arm, then withdraws it and looks us both in the eye. “I must tell you that your son is very sick. It is possible he could die. If he recovers, there could be blindness, deafness, mental and physical disabilities. Tonight is critical. Let’s focus on tonight.”

Focus? What can we do? Pray? But I’m not religious. In this moment, I want to be.

Guilt, thick as tar, forces a question from me: “Could we have caught this sooner?” My mind runs on: Was this something I did or missed? Was I a bad mother?

“No,” the doctor responds, instantly. “Meningitis is a fast-moving disease. You did the right thing. Dr. Chai did the right thing. We’re doing everything we can, treating it aggressively.” Aggressively. I love the sound of it on his lips.

Before the heavy door sighs shut, I glimpse the bottom part of Dr. Libsekal’s green cloth legs disappearing down the fiercely lit hallway. A few minutes later a nurse enters and deposits an electric breast pump and several glass bottles on the table. My breasts are rock hard; it must be done. Peter moves towards me and quietly helps, fumbling with the strange contraption. Finally we get it working; the mechanical sucking is a bizarre, blessed relief. I fill three and half bottles. I’ve never seen my milk like this before, encased in glass. I stare.
“We can go see him now,” Peter says in a thin, soft, pummelled voice. He gathers the bottles with one hand and puts his free palm in the small of my back, shoving open the door with his elbow. We grimace like miners brought too quickly to the light at the surface. Peter steers me to the nurses’ station. “Our son?” he asks the faceless people behind the counter, handing them the bottles. “The baby with meningitis?”

“Oh,” says one of them. “The ICU.” She gives a room number, explains the way, and we wobble down the hall and into an elevator. The ding expels us into the children’s wing. Purple dinosaurs and polka-dotted mushrooms pop crazily out from the walls. We turn left, right, and swing into Damian’s room, two abreast like a team of horses; we need all the power we can muster.

Damian, inert, heavily wired, and exposed except for a diaper, lies in the middle of a hard, white mattress in a stainless steel crib. What’s left of my heart cracks. Lights, beeps, clicks, and whirs surround us. I think, how can he sleep? Won’t he get cold? Then I remember: he’s slipping into a coma. His body is a war zone, this deliberately overheated room and these machines, his allies.

I lean over the crib and touch a free place on his shoulder. I am his mother again. “Hey my little sweetheart,” I whisper. “Mommy’s here.”

“And Daddy’s here,” says Peter from the other side of the crib.

“And we’re staying,” I say, louder. “Me, you, and Daddy.”

A nurse enters, checks the machines, and points to a reclining armchair. “There’s only room for one,” she apologizes. Peter agrees to head back to the parents’ room.

Under the blazing lights, I push the chair tightly against the crib and climb into it, stretching out as best I can. I reach my right arm through the crib bars to arrange the tubes so I can lay my index finger in my baby’s upturned palm. I curl his four tiny, flaccid fingers around my one and hold them there with my thumb. I edge my face next to the cool steel rods, my hot breath condensing on them like mist on leaves. I close my eyes, breathe, and start to hum a halting rendition of Johannes Brahms’ Lullaby – Opus Forty-nine, number four, our favourite.

I fall crashingly to sleep.

*  

West Edmonton Mall, the biggest in North America. I usually avoid it. However, I’m in the city with my two healthy sons, and I feel like celebrating. I push the blue, canopied stroller holding sleeping Damian, one, while Brennan, three, zigzags alongside. We trundle past acres of shops towards the two-storey PlayPlace in FantasyLand.

The sounds of screaming teenagers and the rumble of the Mindbender roller coaster assault us, and Brennan looks up, his eyes like moons. We stop at the elf-like entry door to the maze of climbing tubes that beckon children up, up, and further up, so they can slide down into a pit of plastic balls. The noise of wildly screaming girls and boys is overwhelming; I impulsively cover my ears. Brennan mimics me and we stand there, two country folks struggling to adjust our senses to this alien land.
“Go on,” I urge him. “Give it a try.” Brennan, always cautious, gulps in a breath and ventures forward. I smile encouragingly and think again how lucky I am. Brennan strong and active and Damian, mine again, snatched from the jaws of death. I glance down and see my baby boy still fast asleep, his mouth making little sucking movements.

A heavily pregnant woman pushes an empty stroller towards us, pauses, and looks briefly at Damian. “Gee,” she shouts above the din, “He’s sure a good baby.” She rolls her eyes in the direction of the rumbling rollercoaster and shrieking kids.

“Yeah,” I agree. “He’ll sleep through anything.” The woman peers quizzically at me, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head, then walks on. Her look stops me cold. I stare hard at Damian’s serene, sleeping face, then sweep the raucous room with my eyes as well as with my now piercingly acute ears. Nobody could sleep through this. Black fear drains the blood to my feet.

In a bleak office in the bowels of the Glenrose School Hospital, I sit alone in a thinly padded chair and struggle to support my wriggling 13-month old baby long enough to breastfeed him to sleep. Finally he becomes languid in my arms. Mother’s milk drunk, his mouth lets go and I tuck myself back together, draw him close, stand up and walk down the hall.

I stand in the doorway and gape, my grip tightening around my slumbering son. A stainless steel crib crowned with a Dr. Seuss mobile stands adrift in a sea of gleaming grey tile that ends at a dark wall of humming, floor-to-ceiling brain stem hearing test computer equipment.

I see Peter, smiling unconvincingly, seated on a chair near the crib. Nobody speaks so as not to wake the baby. He needs to be sound asleep for this test. The technician is a thin, twenty-something girl with streaked blonde hair pulled severely into a ponytail. Expressionless, she motions me towards the crib.

I move obediently forward, battling back the sense that I’m making an offering. I heave Damian’s dead-weight pudgy body over the smooth metal edge onto the mattress. I keep one hand resting on his arm, reluctant to withdraw completely. Leaning against the crib, I watch the technician’s slender fingers press little round paper tabs attached to thin wires onto his scalp, then trail the wires over the rails and affix them to one of the black electronic devices. Since his recovery we’d done several regular hearing tests, all delivering results “in the normal range,” but this test would be definitive. The electrodes would directly pick up brain activity from sound.

 Silence. Only the brushing of the technician’s white sleeve against the body of her coat—and the thudding of my heart. I breathe deeply. Peter and the outer world disappear; I see only my son and this woman who cradles a small, black, clam-like plastic speaker hooked to a computer. She squints at an L.E.D. display panel and, grasping a round dial, turns it all the way to the left. Then she reaches over the crib rail and hovers the speaker a hairsbreadth from my son’s left ear. Glancing back and forth from Damian to the dial, she slowly twists the knob to the right. A tiny light tube in an adjacent display window bubbles orangely to life. Sound, in carefully regulated tones and frequencies, begins passing through the wire into the speaker.

I suddenly remember to swallow. The dial is now one quarter of the way around, and the technician shifts her attention to a second display window where a pencil-line of green light lay unmoving across its horizon. I stare. Okay then, I think, inhaling sharply—some hearing loss.
Unexpected, but we’d adjust. I fight against an image of my perfect son sprouting an ugly, brown, chest-mounted receiver hooked to two rubber snails in his ears—I’d just seen several such children in the halls. Deaf children. Handicapped. Well, I’d get over it. We’d make it work. At least he’d hear and talk.

The tiny etched marker line of the dial is now at the top. Still no brain activity. What decibel level had we reached? I want to ask. My voice evaporates. I gaze at the technician, mining her face for clues; there are none. She stares at the lighted windows and twists on. Three-quarters of the way around, I become aware of a strangled sound. My own, internal screaming? No, it’s from the speaker. The tones are now so loud I can hear them from three feet away. Damian sleeps on, smiling. The soft skin of his eyelids twitches—REM sleep, no less. The speaker rattles in the technician’s hand as she works to keep it an even distance from Damian’s ear. The dial line on the knob comes to a stop, hitting bottom on the right hand side. She pauses, withdraws the clam, scratches out a few notes on a clipboard, resets the dials, and starts over on Damian’s right ear.

Interminable minutes pass. This time I don’t watch the machines. I watch my son. I’m trying to keep seeing him as the same baby we brought here. The test ends with the soft clatter of wires being detached and switches being clicked off. I look up. Scrupulously avoiding my eyes, the technician intones what she has found, and I hear only the loudest bombs: “No hearing to the level of the equipment: 98 decibels worth of loss. Bilateral. Profound.” I’ve read enough to know this means he won’t hear a chain saw fired up behind his back. Speech unlikely.

Back in the light and air of the consulting room, they try to talk to us. I can’t imagine why.

We expel ourselves from the building, gutted and reeling. We thread our way through the parking lot, me clutching Damian, now awake and gleefully swiping at the tassel on my red wool toque, and Peter gripping a white plastic hospital bag containing an extra diaper, the remains of an Arrowroot cookie, and a large, blue book on something called S.E.E.—Signed Exact English. They had told us to learn about ten signs to keep him from getting frustrated and said it would be easier for us to learn than American Sign Language. Peter fumbles with the lock on the passenger door of our orange Volkswagen van and I clamber inside, heaving Damian into his car seat. I start to talk to him—and stop. My God.

He grins at me, flashing his recently-erupted tooth, and vocalizes, a sound just like, I realize, those I heard issuing from the hearing-aid-sprouting children inside. Deaf sounds. How could I not have noticed how odd they were before? The world is upside down. My cheeks are slick. Peter puts the VW into reverse, then forward, and eases out of the parking lot. My forehead tips towards the icy glass of the window; its cold slices through me, penetrating the numbness. The van stops for a red light, and Damian gurgles in the back as another car with several flailing, screeching children rendered mute by the two panes of glass and the space between us rolls up alongside. The kids see my face pressed up against the glass and grin and wave, making it a game. They call out, though I cannot hear. Nobody can hear. I watch their mouths open and close, open and close. We are all, us car-locked families, frozen in time and on the street, momentarily, exquisitely, and deceptively, exactly the same. The light turns green. I feel the surge of Peter’s foot on the gas, and we move forward. Damian squeals his deaf sounds. We are forever different.
Postscript: Damian Karl, 28 (BA psychology, BEd Secondary Education, University of Alberta), is bilingual in American Sign Language (ASL) and written and signed English, without speech; he volunteers at local and provincial levels within the deaf community and is pursuing a career in deaf education and literacy.