## after olivia

(continued)

front of us. "Isn't that dumb?" I pointed out every ray of light poking through the cracks. "Look how close the outside is!"

We trundled out into the afternoon. Nobody had cried, for which I congratulated myself. But now it was time to go. In the crowd, I was separated from Leslie. I walked with Dorothy toward the car, then stopped. Leslie knew we were leaving, but did she know we were leaving now? I stood on a little rise above the crowd, shading my eyes against the bright heat as I searched for Leslie and Olivia, and when I finally saw them I waved and yelled, "I-AM-GOING." Leslie nodded. We turned and left.

#### A FRIEND'S PROMISE

If this story were fiction, you might complain it is all too obvious: the fearful mothers, the haunted house, the long, careful wave good-bye. You are hoping, perhaps, that it isn't one of those little girls, who never fought, who patted the baby animals and ate snow cones. But it was one of those little girls. It was Olivia.

She died three weeks later, and not from a rare disease, or a drunk driver, or an evil monster who snatches children. She died from a stone bench. dering around stunned and grieving. The intensity of the pain was visceral. I did not know how she and I would be able to remain friends. I couldn't believe she would ever want to see me again, because if it had been Dorothy under that bench, I wouldn't have wanted to see her. Why should I have to watch her child thrive when mine wasn't going to? "Give me a call only if your child happens to die!" I would probably have screamed at her. But Leslie was stronger than that.

I heard people asking her, "Is there anything I can do?" and thought, Aren't we stupid to ask that? What can we do? But when my turn came, I asked anyway, because I was supposed to.

She wanted me to call her, she said, and ask her to go for a walk. She was worried about what would happen when the distracting parts—the funeral, the visitors, the phone calls—were over. She was worried about what would happen next week, next month, the rest of her life.

"Of course," I said. But the truth was, I wanted to run as far from her as I could. I wanted to be in a different hemisphere from the pain in that house. We made a date to go for a walk the following week, but I had no confidence that I could help her. I didn't know the right things to say, and I feared my native sarcasm would be misread as flippancy. Our friendship, based on the united front of our fear-

friendship had been one of convenience, now we were spending time together for our own sakes. My worries about not knowing the right things to say were groundless, for two reasons: First, there were no right things, and second, my job was not to talk, but to listen. And though it was terribly hard to dwell in the deep sadness of our conversations, I also began to sense the true privilege of being permitted to share this time in Leslie's life.

We'd already known that being mindful of danger was not enough. You can buckle your children in their car seats and run checks on their babysitters, and some horrible thing can still drop out of the clear blue sky and take them away before you have time to say good-bye.

Articulating our fears had not worked, either; our little toehold of control turned out to be as useless as the denial we scorned in others. (In fact, when you got right down to it, that denial seemed more valuable than all our worrying, since it offered a sweet anesthesia, that very "Hey mon, no problem" we had always shunned.) But if we are helpless to protect our children from the kind of random, senseless thing that took Olivia's life, then how are we to behave as parents?

### **PUTTING OUR FAITH IN LOVE**

I think often of a television interview with the late Elizabeth Glaser, founder of the

Pediatric AIDS Foundation. She had been in the middle of her perfectly ordinary life when she learned that a transfusion had given her and her two children the HIV virus. After her daughter's death, she devoted herself to eradicating the disease that was killing her and threatening her son. At the end of the interview she

was asked the question we all wanted answered, the one I—safely seated on my couch, with my healthy child asleep upstairs—had been brooding over. How do you live your life? How do you go on?

Glaser was nonchalant. To her, the question was a no-brainer. How do you live your life? You love your kid, she said. Every single day.

And now, two years after the inexplicable death of a blossoming 5-year-old girl, I believe this is the only lesson worth taking away. On the morning of the day the accident occurred, Leslie happened to tell her daughter, "I am so proud to be your mommy." Now I say the same to Dorothy as often as I can. I'm under no illusions. I know telling her I love her won't protect her, but she seems to appreciate it even so.

# Though it was hard to dwell in the sadness, I began to sense the true privilege of sharing this time in her life.

"A stone bench?" I can hear you ask. "A stone bench?"

It happened at a gathering of friends over Labor Day weekend 1997. Earlier that day, across the ocean, Princess Diana had died in a car crash. The whole world, it seemed, was distracted. In upstate New York that afternoon, a tennis game was ending and a gang of kids was playing around an old stone bench when somebody innocently leaned against the slab that was the backrest. It might have been there for a hundred years, but at that moment, it fell apart. Three children were sitting behind the bench when it fell. Two got out of the way. Olivia died instantly.

"Do you remember how we tried to keep them safe?" Leslie said when I saw her two days later. Her house was full of flowers and casseroles and people wanfulness, would fall apart in the face of one bald fact: My daughter was alive.

#### A FRIENDSHIP BLOOMS

Leslie and I took many walks in the woods that year. The energy we once spent on other people's horrors we now turned to the horror at hand. Leslie understood the necessity of finding the right words for what she was experiencing—the subtle but critical difference between "getting over" and "getting through" Olivia's death and the inadequacies of those overused terms "healing process" and "closure." It seems to me this willingness to experience the loss intellectually, even as it devastated her emotionally, is what ultimately allowed her to survive.

Despite my misgivings, I found we were becoming much closer. Whereas our