

Hannah Marino

Particles of wood dust swirled through the air, coating Pa and me. The sweet smell of freshly cut cherry wood filled the woodshop, and the buzz from the table saw muffled Pa's voice. I turned the switch off, and we discussed the finishes for the six infant coffins. These coffins were similar to the walnut one we made for my brother Brendan three years ago.

My mother delivered my fifth brother and tenth sibling, Brendan Francesco, on June 12, 2014, twenty weeks too early. A heart defect had led to his congestive heart failure and intrauterine death. When my mom placed him in my arms, I admired his small, beautiful face and noted his family resemblance. His pink lips were parted slightly as if he were sleeping. The half moons on his fingers and thumbs were tiny and perfect. I stared intensely, trying to memorize his every feature, all the while begging God for a miracle. *Please cry. Please just wake up and cry.* But minutes crept by and the reality sank in—my brother was dead. I cried.

Witnessing the raw grief of my parents was sobering. Meals, sympathy cards, somber floral displays, and adults speaking in quiet voices arrived at our home in the days that followed. I remember the people who acknowledged Brendan's death as well as the notable silence of those who did not, perhaps uncomfortable with our grief. The death of preterm babies can leave some unsure of how to best respond. But my family was committed to acknowledging this son and brother and burying him with the respect and dignity he deserved. After years of woodworking projects with my father, I worked

alongside Pa to fashion Brendan's coffin for his burial, feeling relieved to do something concrete.

A year later, Judy, a NICU nurse who heard Brendan's story, asked if we would consider fashioning caskets for the babies of other grieving parents. I immediately felt drawn to the task. The following weekend I put aside my other projects and selected new woods to start working with Pa. Intrauterine death, perinatal death, late miscarriages, and stillbirth all mean the same thing to grieving families—an empty crib and a broken heart. A baby's death is devastating to any family. When Brendan died, I started healing when people acknowledged his death with compassion. In turn, I console other families by honoring their child and the loss they feel.

Over the course of each year, Pa and I build twelve caskets of different sizes, shapes, and woods. After roughly cutting and planing the wood, we miter the corners, dado their bottoms, and insert a wood panel. Later, we glue and brad nail the corners, clamping them with flexible cloth clamps until they dry. Next, we belt and hand-sand the surfaces to prepare to route the top hinges in. After pre-drilling all the screws, we hand-screw them in place, and attach a chain on the inside of the lid. We finish each casket by hand sanding again, staining, and spraying three coats of lacquer. Inside, I place a handmade white cushion. Each detail of the process is a labor of love and an opportunity to heal. Anonymously gifting handmade caskets is a deeply personal way for me to help parents express their grief in funeral and burial rituals from their particular religious, ethnic, or cultural background.

Delivering the caskets to Judy at the hospital is always bittersweet. Each coffin represents a tragic loss. Building them, however, helps me give meaning to Brendan's life and to honor those of others. I still feel a pit in my stomach with each trip to the hospital, but I also feel tremendous peace knowing I can create something beautiful that may be part of another family's healing in the same way it is part of mine.