

An unconscious mother and her baby plunge upside down into the Heart River. Lucky for them it was in Tracie O'Donnell's backyard.

# A Splash in the Darkness

By NANETTE WATERSHOLL

**“B**ACK IN A FEW,” Laura Thorpe called to her husband as she nudged the front door shut, clutching their five-week-old infant close to her chest. She intended to indulge a post-pregnancy craving for ice cream and had decided to take the baby along. She would drive to the Dairy Barn in Dickinson, N.D., for her favorite—a hot fudge sundae with Spanish peanuts. Meanwhile, Kevin, a 40-year-old oil-

field operator, would tuck the couple's four-year-old daughter, Ashley, into bed.

It was just before nine on a cloudy July night as Laura strapped Chloe into her car seat and steered her well-worn '89 Oldsmobile Cutlass out the drive. She yawned. It had been a rough couple of weeks. Her pregnancy with Chloe had been uneventful, but since giving birth, her diabetes had taken a turn for the worse. Her blood-sugar levels were fluctuating wildly. Lately Laura, a 24-year-old bank teller, found it necessary to test her blood sugar every few hours. A diabetic since childhood, she knew that too-low levels could cause a blackout—or dangerous convulsions.

Laura glanced affectionately over at Chloe, whose wisps of hair glistened under the streetlights. "Mommy's blood sugar was fine at supertime," she whispered to the now-dozing infant, "so I can have a special treat while we spend this time together."

ACROSS TOWN, Tracie O'Donnell closed her eyes and took in the sounds of the Dakota outdoors—the buzzing

crickets, horses crunching hay in a nearby corral, the gentle whooshing of the Heart River, which had roared with floodwaters the day before.

Though she had to report to her job as a home health nurse at 7:30 in the morning and was feeling exhausted, Tracie, 32, was glad she'd relented when her kids pleaded to camp out in the backyard. For the past decade her job had taken her from one patient's home to the next along country roads surrounding tiny Dickinson, demanding as much as 60 hours a week. She loved her work, but it drained her—physically and emotionally. And she was nursing a shoulder that was still sore from surgery that she'd had several months before.

In the end, this evening of storytelling and cooking steaks on an open fire with her husband, Thadd, six-year-old Seth and eight-year-old Danielle was just what she needed.

LAURA DROVE PAST rolling pastures along the roads into town. What should have been a quick jaunt turned into two meandering hours. Though she would later have no memory of it, she had apparently driven aim-

**She drove aimlessly around town in the dark, unaware that she was teetering on the edge of consciousness.**

lessly around Dickinson, where she'd lived her entire life, unaware she was teetering on the edge of consciousness.

She later learned that her insulin injection before supper had kicked in, lowering her sugar, as was its job. But then hormones that were needed to produce breast milk for Chloe's next feeding pulled more sugar from her bloodstream—more than she could stand. Under the spell of hypoglycemia, Laura's central nervous system would have been impaired. She wouldn't have known how well she was maneuvering the curves and turns on the roads.

A FEW MILES SOUTH, in the dimly lit camper in her 20-acre backyard, Tracie listened to her children's soft, steady breathing, and then switched off the light. Her husband, Thadd, a 33-year-old health professor at Dickinson State University, had chosen to sleep in the house because of his allergies. Tracie settled into the camper's queen-size bed. Slumber parties, even in the summer heat, she decided, were better suited to kids and moms anyway.

An hour later Tracie awoke with a start to the sound of a splash. A car horn began to blare. Through the camper window, she could see two bright beams shining just below the river's swirling surface. Someone had driven into the Heart.

MISSING A CURVE, Laura's gray sedan tore through the barbed-wire fence on the edge of Tracie and Thadd's

property. Dragging wire fragments, it swerved to the other side of the road and flipped upside down off a low concrete bridge. Its nose lodged in the muck on the river's far bank. Murky water swirled in, filling the cavity of the car's ceiling.

Jarred conscious by the impact, Laura gulped for air, then panicked as cold water poured in around her. Shards of glass from the shattered windshield and side windows stung her hands.

She twisted in the seat belt to try to see Chloe. She was still in her car seat, hanging motionless upside down, just inches separating her from the rising water. But Laura couldn't move, couldn't make sense of what was happening. Then suddenly everything went dark and silent.

**T**RACIE LEAPT from her bed and dashed toward the house. "Thadd," she shouted. "Someone's driven off the bridge. Call 911!"

Bursting through the back door, she fetched towels and a flashlight, and slipped into a pair of tennis shoes. Without them, she knew, her bare feet would be sliced by broken glass littering the riverbank. Cars had gone for a swim there before.

It was 200 yards from her house to the river, and Tracie ran as fast as she could the whole way. She plunged into the chest-high water, slogging through thick weeds, branches and barbed wire. In the darkness she saw



PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL O'NEILL

swirling specters of steam rising off the still-running engine.

She wrestled with the front passenger door, opening it a half-foot before it wedged in the mud at the river bottom. Climbing on the exposed under-frame, Tracie peered into the auto below. She could see the driver thrashing against the seat belt, her face held below the waterline. As she reached through the door, the woman went limp. Tracie grabbed the woman's shoulder-length blond hair and lifted her head above the water.

Thadd splashed into the river and waded around the car, searching for other passengers. Reaching the front door, he spotted the hard plastic edge of the car seat and the tiny infant belted inside.

He groped for the belt that held the seat in place, and then pushed the release button. Unharnessed, the carrier and baby briefly dipped into the water. Thadd turned the seat upright, cringing as he dunked the baby again to get her through the partly opened door. Then he rushed to the riverbank and handed the drenched infant to a neighbor who'd raced to the scene.

Tracie watched as Thadd half-swam back toward her. It was as if everything was moving in slow motion. "I can't hold her up much longer," she screamed. Her arms ached, her shoulder throbbed.

Thadd positioned his compact frame against the driver, released her seat belt and caught the woman as she rolled forward. He placed her so her head was clear of the water.

"I don't think we should move her more!" he shouted to Tracie.

Tracie nodded. The woman might have head or spinal injuries. She waded to the riverbank to check on the baby. After confirming that the infant's heart rate and respiration were normal, she returned to help

**Twice Saved**— "If I had crashed anywhere else, I would have died," says Laura Thorpe, amazed that it was the O'Donnells who rescued her and Chloe.

Thadd. *If only an ambulance would come*, she thought.

LAURA COULDN'T PULL HERSELF out of the fog. Her head was filled with sensations and sounds—the cold water, the screeching horn. Over it, a woman was asking, "Are you on drugs? Have you been drinking?"

*No, no!* Laura thought groggily, her frustration building. Where's my baby? she wanted to scream. But her mouth wouldn't form the words.

Tracie pleaded, "What's your name? What's your phone number? Was there anyone besides you and your baby in the car?"

"I don't know." She forced the words out. "I'm Laura." Then, darkness.

TRACIE STUDIED the woman's face, brushing the muddy hair from her eyes. "Laura," she said to herself. "Laura."

*Wait a minute*, Tracie thought as the puzzle pieces flew into place. "I know her," she called as she waded to the riverbank, and then ran, dripping, across the pasture to her house. "We don't have much time."

*So many years*, she thought as she yanked open the refrigerator door. *Please don't let me be too late.*

The memories rushed back: a teenage girl, complications from diabetes, a badly infected foot. She'd treated her for weeks. Her blood sugar was always hard to control, Tracie remembered. She'd often wondered how Laura's life had gone after they'd saved her foot.

Pushing aside a half-empty jug of milk, Tracie snatched a carton of Sunny Delight. Pure sugar, she thought, tearing back out the door. "She's diabetic," she shouted to Thadd. "She's in shock. We have to get her blood sugar up fast." Tracie knew that each passing moment could lead to life-threatening consequences.

Thadd slipped his hand behind the woman's neck and pushed Laura's head back while Tracie trickled the sugary liquid down her throat. She willed her to swallow. "C'mon," she urged. "Drink!"

Suddenly Laura gulped. Seconds later her eyes flew open. "Where's my baby?" she cried.

Tracie sighed in relief. In the distance she heard the welcome wail of an ambulance approaching. She smiled at her former patient and said, "She's fine. And so are you."

**Tracie waded out of the river and ran, dripping, across the pasture to her house. "We don't have much time."**

Laura left the hospital later that night with just cuts on her feet and hands. Chloe was unscathed. Doctors confirmed that normal post-pregnancy hormone changes, exaggerated by breast-milk production, had led to a sudden dip in Laura's

blood sugar, causing her to black out from hypoglycemia.

The next day Laura's doctor urged her to begin weaning Chloe immediately. She did, right after delivering a guardian angel doll to Tracie's doorstep.

SOUNDS OF THE CITY



Having recently moved from Canada to New York City, my wife, Alice, and I were luxuriating in our apartment one rainy Saturday evening, when there was a loud knock at our door.

I went cautiously to our steel-sheathed door, which was reinforced by the heavy iron outer grille. The bell rang harshly. I opened the door a crack. "Who is it?"

"Checking the lights," was the rough reply.

"Our lights don't need checking," I replied, slamming and relocking the door. Even the most naive newcomers to a big city have heard of this one—some thief posing as an electrician cons his way into your apartment to rob you, or worse. Alice and I settled down and poured another glass of wine. The bell rang again.

"Checking the lights," came a desperate shout.

"Beat it," I said, "or I'll call the cops!"

A few minutes passed and the phone rang. It was our landlady upstairs. "Did anyone ring your doorbell down there?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I outfoxed him. He said he was checking the lights."

"That guy was delivering our dinner—he's from Chicken Delight!" she explained.

— JAMES HOUSTON, *Zigzag* (McClelland & Stewart)

SACHET CACHET

My creative mother enjoys doing crafts, such as making potpourri boxes decorated with ribbon and lace. Sometimes she gets so involved she disappears into her upstairs workroom for hours, forgetting about more mundane things—like making dinner.

One evening I arrived home to find the kitchen empty again. But this time I found a note: "Warning! Small craft advisory: Buy yourself a pizza."

—Contributed by JANICE DEGOSTE