



Ning

Lee Shan Ning Eryn
8 August 1998 – 31 December 1999

At a time when most people were eagerly awaiting the new millennium, Valerie and Gerard were abruptly silenced by the death of their darling daughter, Ning. What appeared as a simple flu turned fatal almost overnight. But with deep faith and family support, they slowly found strength to appreciate life again.

Written by Vanessa Baxter, from an interview with Valerie Lim, Ning's mother

Valerie Lim was a typical first time mother. Elated to discover she was pregnant Valerie opted for a natural birth that was much easier than she expected. “Eryn Lee Shan Ning” was born on 8th August 1998, weighing a petite 2.8 kg and measuring 48 cm. Arriving with extraordinary ease, Ning exuded gentleness with her soft features and sparkling eyes. She grew to be a happy child who enjoyed the company of her family and friends and was cherished by all in her extended family. As familiar with her maternal Grandmother as she was with her parents she grew in her first year surrounded by faith and love. Ning’s first spoken word was “Papa” and a favourite spot for play was a tent pitched in the living room! Val and Gerard treasured their family moments and felt blessed to be her parents. Whilst Val loved her job at The Esplanade, she resigned on 15th December 1999 so that she could spend more time with Ning.

A week later on Christmas Eve, Ning showed signs of a fever, which her parents treated with the usual medication. The fever under control, the family spent a quiet

Christmas at home while Ning happily played with her new toys. On 29th December, Ning's fever rose to 39.5°C and at midnight her concerned parents hastily drove her to Gleneagles Hospital. Within a couple of hours her fever had escalated and she lost consciousness. An ambulance rushed her to NUH for specialised care. Tragically the virus that resulted in the fever had attacked her brain stem and her body organs shut down. By midday on 30th December 1999, Ning was on life support and medication which could not be sustained. At 7.10 pm on 31st December, Ning passed away peacefully having never regained consciousness.

The cause of Ning's death was certified by the coroner to be viral encephalitis. How she contracted it remains unknown.

The bond of strength amongst family and friends was evident in the days following Ning's death. People spontaneously assembled and assisted with arrangements for the funeral. Bouquets of white flowers and baby balloons were ordered for the wake and music was selected for the Mass. Aunty Pam sang Ning's favourite lullaby "Circle Game" and her best-loved uncles and Papa carried her to rest.

As others celebrated the turn of the century, Val and her family faced an enormity of loss that was indescribable. Overwhelmed, stunned, and numb, Val questioned over and over, "Why is this happening to me?" She could not accept that the timing of Ning's death was a coincidence and felt a powerful message was hidden in this tragedy. Her private feelings of guilt consumed her and she questioned whether she had in some way failed Ning as a mother. Waking daily to her own tears, Val felt the reality of her empty home and her lack of purpose. With no external, independent support mechanism available at this time Val turned to her faith, her family and her friends for stability and support. Through prayer and in asking God's guidance Val was learning to accept her daughter's death but without a concrete answer to her questions.

Meanwhile, her family was gaining a strength and closeness grown out of mutual prayers and a search for peace. Gerard took time away from work and along with their own parents, he and Val travelled overseas. Together they visited holy sites and historic locations to appreciate the majesty of life and God's creation. Each had moments to reflect on their lives and the life that had been so quickly taken from them. This was a turning point for Val who realised she needed to stop searching for answers and to relish the peace imbued in sacred places like Churches and to harness this peace for herself and Gerard. The trip was a moving and bonding experience for a family who came to be whole again. Together, the family now commemorates special occasions such as Ning's birthday and the anniversary of her death. These rituals of coming together to celebrate Ning's memory provide a way of incorporating the deeper meaning of her loss into their own life experience.

Val's friends surrounded and supported her when she desired company but allowed her to grieve in private on request. Their children gave Val the hope that she would be a mother again. She would "steal" hugs from children Ning's age to imagine her little

daughter at her side. Slowly Val gained strength to divert her energy to meaningful activities. Children's Voice, an annual fund-raising project set up with friends in the midst of these dark days, is one of many children's charity projects that Val is now involved in. She feels blessed to have learned the joy of putting others before herself, a lesson Ning helped her to grasp.

Gerard was one of Val's greatest sources of strength. Whilst grappling with his own grief Gerard was always able to attend to Val's needs and in doing so he too gained an inner strength for healing. They would discuss each other's feelings and fears and found an openness and mutual understanding that brought them even closer together.

The year 2000 was humbling. God took and God gave. Ning's funeral engulfed the beginning of the year and then Val discovered she was pregnant. Thrilled and thankful Val also worried for the baby she was carrying through such an intense time of grief. Weeping and dreaming about another girl, Val tossed between sorrow and joy. On 1st December 2000, she was elated to give birth to a stunning little boy, Lee Ze Ning, known as Noah, a "gift" from his sister with her eyes and a wealth of worldly wisdom in his boyish looks. Two years later, Lee He Ning (Toby) was born and Val considers herself a Mother blessed with three extraordinary children, one who watches over them all.

Val talks to her boys about Ning, an important part of her own healing process. She creates stories for them about Ning's adventures, shares videos of Ning with them and displays her photographs prominently around the home. The boys share in the memory of the sister who came before them and they know that she is not with them today because God asked her to go home to Him early and she obeyed. Praying together, laughing at Ning's antics, sharing her special moments and simply remembering her is a crucial part of this family's ability to move on.

It has been five years since Ning left to be an angel. Never a day passes without Ning being remembered and loved. Whilst we should not wallow in the past or submit to our memories, we should always search for a way to value them. Treated as a treasure these memories can give lasting pleasure, comfort and inspiration.

An angel has passed.
In the rippling of her wings
She touches our lives.

Heavenward.
Go little one, fly.
We will never forget.

– Joanne Cacciatore
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