



Excerpts From A Diary

by Ann S. Knighton

12/5/72. Today Erica went to Gracewood. I wish I were dead; then I would not have to think about it.

12/8/72. I don't know if I want to talk about Erica. I do know that I haven't felt relieved with her gone. It's like hoping someone who is terminally ill will soon die, but then not feeling relieved after the death.

12/11/72. I am grateful that my job as a Biology and Chemistry teacher at Richmond Academy demands much of my time. My whole day went well; as a matter of fact, it was salvation for me. The thought of coming home and not having Erica here is cause for me to worry. Anxiety makes my stomach quiver and I think, "What is next?"

12/13/72. I wonder what is going to happen today? It is Wednesday and I still will not get to see Erica today as I have an evening meeting I must attend.

I still remember the happy look on Erica's face when she came out to see her sister, Stephanie and me last night. Dear Stephanie; how hard this is for her. She tried to take Erica home by refusing to let go her hand last night.

I still have so many questions going through my mind. Why did this happen to me? Why does Erica have to be retarded? And if retarded, why a chromosome anomaly which is the most severe kind? Why are my ideas so different from those of my family? Emotionally, I know that they do care. Why must I have the extra burden of divorce? Why must I be two people at once, both stay home and work. Why, why, why?

Same Day 10:30 P.M. Every time I attend these meetings on mental retardation, I always want to cry. The meetings are very well organized and everyone is so kind and understanding. Does anyone else feel as weepy as I do or am I all alone in my feelings? Please tell me, someone! Why do these meetings make me so emotional even though I enjoy them? Are they good for me?

Same Day 1:00 A.M. I cried. I finally cried! For five years I have wanted to really bawl, and yell, and yell. I cry for Erica, for me, for my divorce, for the attitude of my family towards Erica. Crying is some relief. I must sleep now.

12/14/72. I keep thinking, "If I'm not careful, I will wake Erica." Then I remember that Erica is not here to be awakened.

I find myself doing things to protect Erica: putting the scissors up immediately after using them; putting up all medicine; putting a hot iron in a safe place; turning handles of pots inward on the stove.

Later Same Day. My attitude about Erica and my family's attitude are totally different. I find this hard to handle. It is painful.

12/15/72 12:30 A.M. While scooping up some very brittle magnesium oxide from its container for one of my chemistry classes, the thought passed through my mind, "Erica is retarded; she will never be normal. Erica is at Gracewood." An emptiness seemed to engulf me, my stomach quivered and my chest became tight. But I quickly turned to my class and continued issuing chemicals for their experiment.

Today Stephanie spent some time with my mother and father. It is right that Stephanie be with her grandparents. She must not be deprived of a normal childhood. My parents probably feel that I need some time to myself

since Erica is not at home temporarily. I must not allow myself to become dependent over Stephanie. I love both my children very much, but still I am haunted by the indecision about Erica. Is Gracewood truly the best place for her? I must remind myself of *Jeremiah 32:17*. "Ah! Lord God Thou didst build the Heavens and the earth by Thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for Thee."

I cannot afford to mope. I have work to do. I am going into the kitchen to wash my dishes, remove the papers from my table and think about getting and decorating a tree for the girls.

12/16/72. Another Day, Another Time, Another Place. Stephanie went to spend the day with Grandy and Grandma. I went with a friend to Gracewood to see Erica. I pinned some orange barettes in her hair. We stayed until supper. We ate at Shoney's on the way home; the fudge cake was delicious. It was a good day.

12/19/72. Today it was sixteen degrees Fahrenheit. I had to be at school at 7:15 A.M. My VW would not start so Stephanie and I walked to school. I was glad for once that Erica was at Gracewood. It usually takes us about fifteen minutes to walk but it was so cold that it was hard to walk fast!

12/21/72. This is a rainy day. I have not done very much except sleep. Mrs. B----- called from Gracewood to see if I were going to pick up Erica tomorrow. I assured her that I was.

I have had sixteen days to be free, to be relieved of the burden of all the responsibilities of Erica: sixteen days to do my Christmas shopping, to think, to clean my house, to try to organize my life. But I have done only the most necessary chores. All I have been able to do is think, think, think. Perhaps with Erica home for Christmas and my family together for a happy day, the picture of my life and the future will come into focus.

Epilogue

It has been eight years since Erica's first temporary visit to Gracewood. There have been many sleepless nights and many heartbreaking decisions. I did not send her to Gracewood; I let her go. I have learned that I have Erica in my heart and mind; she is part of me wherever she may be. It is fortunate for her that she has been accepted at Gracewood because this is best for all involved. She is severely retarded, not only mentally, but physically as well. This is painful; it hurts; it always has and it always will. The fact that Erica is older does not make things any easier. However, I have learned to deal with the total matter. At Gracewood I am free to see Erica

when I want. She can and does come home several times during the year.

The reality of my life is Stephanie and our relationship together. We have a real bond. We talk a lot; we do much together. We joke, we laugh, we sing, we dance. We take trips together. Stephanie is now sixteen years old and a typical happy teenager.

Once more the Christmas Holidays approach and the time before Christmas when so much has to be done. Stephanie comes home all excited about some school affair. "Mama, are you listening to me?" "No, Stephanie," I reply honestly, "I have been thinking about Erica." Her expression changes quickly. She comes over to me and puts her arm around my shoulders.

"Will Erica be home for Christmas again this year?" I nod and shortly we are sitting at the kitchen table eating our dinner and planning what we shall do for Erica for Christmas.

"Mother, can we try some new toys again this year? There probably are some that make a noise that she will like?" I look at Stephanie and see the eager expression on her face and nod my head. Each year, it seems, we try something different hoping she will respond, but it always ends up with her old favorites, the Mattel "the Farmer Says" and the Fisher Price Telephone. Still, maybe this year will be different. Stephanie smiles, "I'm sure they have lots of new things at the Malls. I'll look; I know what she'll like." She gets up and starts to leave the room then turns back, "Mama, can we have more lights on the tree this year, and maybe a bigger tree?" She looks at me; again I nod. Is this for Erica or for Stephanie? She comes back and gives me a quick kiss. We both know Erica's reaction to the tree. But as always we look forward to seeing her smile at the Christmas Tree lights after we have turned them on at least five times to get her attention.

I listen as Stephanie closes the door to her room and know that I truly look forward to having Erica home to play with her same noisy toys. I look forward to seeing her step all over the unwrapped packages to take a seat in the midst of them and chew on her favorite towel. I look forward to holding her and having both girls together for Christmas. Outside the early winter evening reminds me I must finish my lists and start the many necessary chores to have things in order, because it is Christmas once again. □

Ann Knighton is a native of Augusta, Georgia. She graduated from Paine College with a BA in Natural Science with emphasis in Chemistry. She has done further work at Atlanta University, University of Georgia, and Augusta College. She presently teaches chemistry at the Academy of Richmond County. She is immediate past president of the Augusta Association For Retarded Citizens. She is a member of the Augusta Area Mental Health Advisory Council.