the slayer of innocents
judi davis

The ice edged slate blue waters of the magnificent Columbia River raced and swirled below the bank where I stood in brittle bent yellow grasses on that frigid December day. The bleak and desolate day was an accurate reflection of my innards. I felt as empty and devoid of life as the winter dried corn husks that slithered and chattered with every gust of the wind. Wind, like seeking capricious smoke from a campfire, whipped my waist length brown hair into tangles about my head, into my eyes and mouth, or sent it streaming behind me. Only the cold penetrating wind blowing through my lightweight cotton housedress, pressing and molding it against every curve and bump of my body, or whipping and snapping the full skirt like a flag in a gale kept me connected to this earthly plane. I felt so insubstantial. I should have blown away. I should not have continued to exist. I did not want to continue to exist. It is expected and accepted that nature’s bounties must die back in fall and winter; nature needs to store up the energy to surge upward with renewed vigor when each New Year turns from its first quarter into the glorious days of spring. It was not expected and not accepted as natural that my tiny son, Wade, never even saw a quarter-of-a-year of life; he would not push up from the ground in renewal in the coming spring—no, not in any spring.

There is a killer loose in the world, a killer who doesn’t recognize any boundaries: social, economic, national or international. This killer has been on mankind’s most wanted list for centuries. He eludes capture; he is beyond understanding. Through the ages his victims have always remained the same. He preys on tiny helpless babies and their families. There is a quick, silent strike leaving death and devastation behind—sorrow, confusion, and often guilt. He most often strikes in the quiet peaceful night between the hours of midnight and 8:00 a.m., but he has been known to slay with impunity at any time of day or night. Through the years this killer has had various names, some of the best known today are: “Crib Death,” “Cot Death,” and most recently, “Sudden Infant
Death Syndrome”—SIDS—an acronym that strikes terror in the heart of any new parent.

Over the centuries, many reasons have been given for these otherwise inexplicable deaths: “... and this woman’s child died in the night because she overlaid it” (I Kings 3:19). Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of innocent mothers and fathers have gone to their graves believing they had, in some mysterious way, killed their own beloved tiny baby. In the past two centuries, pneumonia and the onset of an unknown sudden virus have taken their share of the blame for these incomprehensible deaths.

I became personally acquainted with this SIDS—The Slayer of Innocents—on December 11, 1974, when I awoke to find my tiny baby boy, Wade, dead in his crib. The age old slayer of innocents had crept into my home on practiced stealthy feet in the middle of the night and stole my baby’s life; he ripped my heart apart and left me breathing. As I stood above the Columbia River three days later, being whipped by the freezing wind and gazing with sightless eyes into the swirling water, I wanted to wail my anguish. I wanted to rail at God. I wanted the wind to take me with it, scatter me to the four corners of the earth to merge with my baby’s ashes. I needed to be able to release a primal scream to ease my pain, but too many years of iron hard refusal to exhibit my pains destined this too to remain sealed within my breast.

I stood there in the biting cold only dimly aware of the goose bumps on my flesh. I had fled from my warm, insecure home, in my lightweight housedress to find healing solitude; the healing solitude of God’s natural world. I had impatiently endured an absolute lack of privacy for three long long days. I could no longer endure the well meaning, thoughtless, constant chatter about other dead babies and dead children in my overcrowded home. This devastation was far too deep to share; I could not, would not, wave a flag of my agony for others to feast upon. I had to come to terms with my grief in my own quiet way. I disliked crowds at the best of times; they did not allow you time or room to think, to be yourself. I would usually wonder, “What are they so afraid of? Why are they so uncomfortable within their own skins? Why do they have the need to be a part of a herd?” Now, I had to dig deep within myself and find the reserves to get
me through a gaping never-to-heal wound like no other I had ever experienced. I had to endure. I had responsibilities—God had left me three beautiful living children. As I retraced my steps to my overrun home, I consciously resolved that my children would never feel the guilt of living, the guilt that I and my brothers had lived with after our youngest brother died; guilt fostered by our mother’s excessive overwhelmingly visible grief over one dead child without regard for the continuing needs of the living.

After Wade’s death I learned more about SIDS than any parent ever wants to know. Despite all of our modern technology the death of these infants continues at the rate of more than one in every 1,000 live births. Deaths due to SIDS are unpredicted and unpredictable. Beyond the historical fact that most SIDS deaths occur between the ages of two and four months, the other “facts” are muddled and contradictory: A SIDS victim is known to be premature, weak and under five pounds birth weight; SIDS babies are usually big, strong, healthy babies. One frightening “fact” that I learned was that had my twins been identical I would have found Wendi dead at the same time as Wade, or within twenty-four hours. Many of the “facts” seem to me more like myth than fact as the medical profession twists itself into a pretzel seeking answers to the unanswerable.

I remember the chills that ran up and down my spine in November as my husband and Mother lingered at the after breakfast table chatting about “cot death.” I wanted nothing more than to tell them, “Please change the subject.” My Mother discussed the fact that she believed her baby sister had died of cot death even though the doctor had put “starvation” on the death certificate. Can you imagine the heartache this “cause of death” gave my Grandmother who breast fed her babies? Even today, medical science seems to have a need to slap on a label rather than admit they do not know something. I believe this conversation was God’s way of preparing me for what was to come. Although I probably should have, I had not heard of “cot death” before.

In his own way, God had remained true to me. He could have let the Slayer of Innocents tear my ten year old son, Sean, out of my life instead of my tiny two month old baby; He could have left my empty aching arms with ten years of memories, of mornings, days, and nights, instead of two all too brief months.
Ten years of joy, of loving, nurturing, storytelling, hugging, cub scouts, kissing, little league, playing, cuddling, homework—all of the minutiae of watching my once tiny baby boy become a tall, sturdy, responsible, and delightful youngster. Ten years of assuring my son that, “It’s alright; Mommy is here.” The Slayer of Innocents insured that I would never have the joy of watching Wade become a child, a teen, a man—he turned those dreams and my words, “It’s alright; Mommy is here,” to ashes in my soul.

Health care companies are trying to find ways to prevent SIDS. They have developed a monitor, an electronic device to monitor a baby’s breathing. This unit sits in the baby’s room and will sound an alarm in a unit kept close to the parents if the baby quits breathing. There have been claims that these devices have prevented death from SIDS. But it has not been proven! (It has been proven that these devices are expensive. And marketing practices insure that no responsible parent will forgo having one.) All babies stop breathing for short periods of time, as though they forget to take a breath. Why do some babies never remember to take the next breath? There is widespread belief in the medical profession that even if there were a team of experts, in all fields of medicine, around the crib of an infant about to die of SIDS they could not prevent it—because they do not know what causes SIDS.

SIDS is a traumatic way to lose an infant; it has a profound psychological effect on the parents who not only suffer devastating grief and anger at their helplessness, but also, feelings of guilt and responsibility. Why did the “Slayer of Innocents” choose their home? Why did he seize Wade and leave Wendi whose crib was less than six feet away? My personal theory is: We are not meant to know why these babies die, nor are we meant to be able to prevent these deaths. All of our scurrying around, trying to find a way to thwart this “Slayer of Innocents” from striking with impunity, will ultimately prove to be just chasing around and around in endless circles, exactly as we have been doing for centuries. Some things are meant to remain a mystery and I believe this is one of them.

My tiny baby boy, Wade, would have celebrated his thirtieth birthday with his twin sister, Wendi, on October 9, 2004; yet, I can still, after all these years, feel the weight of his small, warm, sweet smelling body in my empty empty arms.