

AGE PROGRESSION

Family connections.

BY SUSANA MARTINEZ-CONDE

THEN: Julia thought at first that the baby had slept through the night. She wanted to go back to sleep, but her breasts felt uncomfortable and milk-heavy, so she got up instead.

Inside the nursery, the familiar smells were soothing. The sweet buttery scent that was most intense over the soft spot on Rose's head; the vanilla fragrance from her bedtime lotion.

The room was too quiet.

She listened hard for the baby's breathing, willing her own lungs not to exhale, but only the ringing in her ears shattered the silence. She pawed at the light switch. Then she was standing over the crib, not knowing how she got there, tearing the blanket off her daughter's face.

NOW: Rose's wedding is next month, and Julia is helping with the flower arrangements. People say that she spends too much time obsessing about Rose, but she doesn't care to listen. Not a single one of her well-meaning advisers has walked in her shoes.

She regrets that Rose's father will not attend the simple but charming ceremony, but it can't be helped. He's been out of the picture since Rose was a little baby.

THEN: Julia watched the baby's head flop back and forth. She knew not to shake an infant but could not think of stopping; even less imagine the rest of her life after stopping. She kept shaking Rose until her husband, awoken by her screams, ripped the baby from her arms to attempt CPR. He kept at it, too, until the medics arrived and took Rose from him.

NOW: Julia never tires of looking at Rose's pictures. Her scrunched-up face minutes after she was born. The first toothless smile. The first shaky steps on chubby legs. Julia has documented every Halloween costume, every school graduation. The photos and home videos span more than two decades. She is amazed to think of how far she and Rose have come.

THEN: The grief counsellor at the hospital had arranged for the portrait artist, and Julia had been too numb to object. Now the girl lifted her eyes from her tablet and studied Rose. Julia tried seeing her baby, finally free from tubes and probes, through the



stranger's eyes, and failed. The little body on her lap was growing foreign to her, even as her shirt became damp with unsuckled milk. Her eyes brimmed over and she thought it odd that her tears would still fall after she was no longer sobbing. She felt hollowed out and filled with liquid grief, spilling from her in every way.

NOW: The first portrait had been a miracle, a conduit that bridged the broken landscape of Julia's universe. Smiling at the memory, she opens the file in her computer and watches Rose's chest move up and down in her sleep, her eyelids fluttering as if about to wake.

THEN: Julia had resisted looking at the finished picture on the artist's tablet, but eventually relented, her mind seeking diversion from the horror on her lap. Then she couldn't stop watching. The baby's cheeks were flushed, and the slackness of her posture suggested sleep from which she might awake at any moment. "She looks alive," Julia said, acknowledging the young woman for the first time. Understanding the imploration in the mother's words, the artist took back the tablet and resumed her work.

Where Julia's husband had failed, and then the medics and doctors had failed, the artist succeeded. The newly animated portrait showed Rose's body moving in synch with her respiration, her rosebud mouth working as if dreaming about nursing.

NOW: When a baby dies, parents mourn not only the sweet infant that was, but also the spirited schoolgirl, the awkward teenager, the assured young woman that might have been, that *should* have been. They grieve

for their lost grandchildren. Julia no longer sorrows. She's not haunted by what ifs. The answers have unfolded in front of her for more than 20 years.

THEN: The hospital portrait, and the age-progressed reconstructions that followed, opened an irremediable schism in Julia's marriage. Her husband refused to partake in the immersive scenarios that later technological refinements allowed. His desire for another 'real life' child felt like a betrayal of Rose.

NOW: Julia's ex-husband has been happily married for most of Rose's life. He doesn't speak to his first wife or first-born child. Rose's half-siblings have never met her.

THEN: After her husband left, Julia consulted with the best virtual developers and age-progression biographers. She decided that Rose should have an ordinary life, not a fairy-tale one. Her daughter would experience the ups and downs, the minor disappointments and small joys that a regular child would. And she, her mother, would not run Rose's life as it evolved — she gave creative control to the company that she hired to age-progress Rose.

NOW: Julia is not a fool. She knows — how could she ever forget — that her baby died half a lifetime ago. *And yet.*

She remembers a college lecture about multiple worlds. The professor said that our universe splits every time we make a decision. When we park our car in the left spot rather than the right one, when we fail to set the alarm clock and sleep in instead of waking up early, when we stay in bed and don't check on the baby in the middle of the night, the universe breaks in half. There are as many universes as choices.

Who's to say that the virtual life Julia has created for Rose is not a window into the life that another Rose is living elsewhere, in a more benign reality? Julia likes to think it is.

She goes back to the flower arrangements. Roses, of course. Her daughter is marrying young, but she may not wait too long to make Julia a grandmother.

She can't wait to meet her grandkids. ■

Susana Martinez-Conde is a scientist who writes for fun. In a parallel universe, she's a writer who dreams about doing science.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY