

# A Gift from Layla

The death at birth of Vanessa Gorman's longed-for baby, Layla, was played out in heartbreaking honesty on ABC-TV's *Australian Story*. Now, in a life-affirming postscript, Vanessa welcomes her newborn son, Raphael, writes **DAVID LESER**.

Raphael James Gorman was born on an historic, golden afternoon in June this year. To understand the miracle of his birth, to understand why you could almost hear a collective heave of relief and joy reverberate, not just around Australia, but beyond these shores as well, it is necessary first to understand the equal and opposite tragedy of the death of Raphael's half-sister, Layla, two-and-a-half years earlier.

Raphael Gorman would never have been conceived had Layla not died. And had Raphael not come into this world, had he not been presented to his mother, Vanessa Gorman, all pink and breathing and full of life on June 20 this year (1.32pm to be precise!), one wonders whether Vanessa would have survived herself.

Certainly a radiant light inside her had been extinguished, as those who know her or saw her award-winning documentary, *Losing Layla*, can testify to. What started as a film about a mother and father's differing responses to the impending birth of their child became, instead, one of the most

heartbreaking depictions of a mother's grief for her dead baby ever shown on television, both here and around the world.

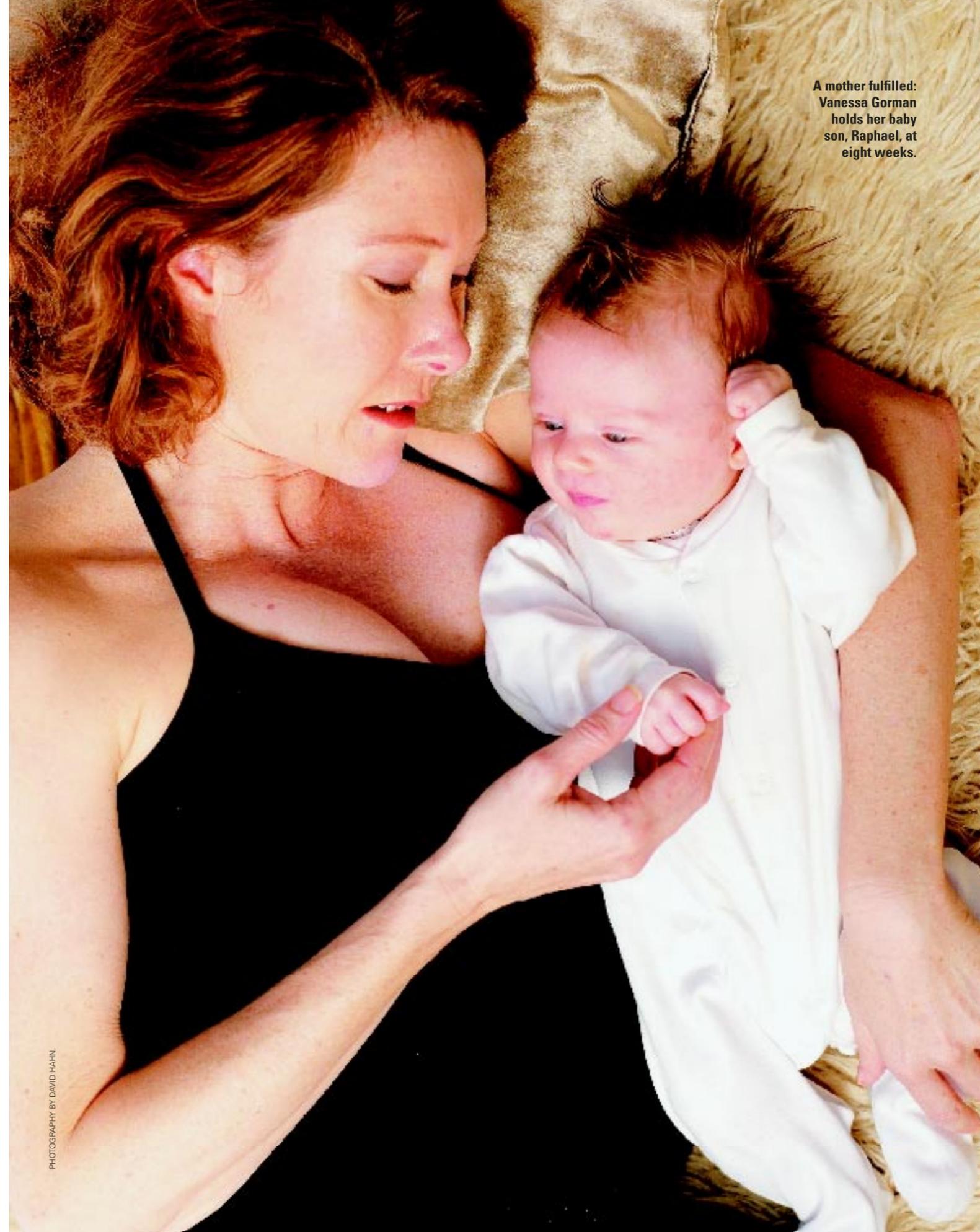
Through *Losing Layla* we saw not just the death of Layla but, perhaps, the death of every child, and not just the grief of Vanessa Gorman, but the universal grieving of all mothers for a lost child.

"I just want to take her home and be a mother," Vanessa wailed over the body of her child. "I just want her back."

Layla will never be forgotten, nor will her loss ever be fully reconciled, but now that Raphael is here, it is possible to tell a new story that speaks this time of the redemptive power of love and renewal.

In those seconds that Raphael Gorman entered the world, it was as if a new myth had been created. Demeter, the ancient goddess of agriculture, the protector of marriage, was no longer inconsolable in her grief for Persephone, her lost daughter. At last the seasons had turned, the sun had broken through and, in the grand cycle of life and death, life had once more asserted itself. ▶

A mother fulfilled: Vanessa Gorman holds her baby son, Raphael, at eight weeks.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID HAHN.

Vanessa Gorman had wanted a child since she was seven years old, growing up on her family's farm outside Wagga Wagga in NSW. It was an overwhelming desire that could not be assuaged by pets or dolls. "I remember standing in my bedroom feeling this fierce longing," she told *The Weekly*, "and making this pact with myself. I said, 'You can't do anything about it now. You will just have to wait until you're an adult.'"

In 1994, at the age of 33, she fell in love with Michael Shaw, owner of a Sydney sales agency and a man with a huge capacity for love. Only trouble was he'd recently left his marriage and was in no way ready for children.

"On our very first night together," says Vanessa, "we actually talked about what we wanted in our lives. He said, 'I want to play the field because I've just come out of a marriage.' I said, 'I want marriage and children.' Hmm. We both laughed."

In 1997, the couple moved into the rolling Dorset hills behind Byron Bay on the NSW North Coast. Prior to relocating, Vanessa had worked as an ABC producer on programs such as *Hot Chips* and *Review*. In 1998, she joined *Australian Story*, going on to produce memorable programs on tennis champion Pat Rafter and his family, actors Garry McDonald and Mel Gibson, and Queensland rugby league coach Wayne Bennett, to name but a few.

In the case of Bennett, Vanessa knew nothing about football before meeting the coach, but her intelligence,

curiosity and empathy for his life as a father of two disabled children resulted in a deeply moving piece of television.

"[PM] John Howard told me it was the best thing he'd seen on TV," says Amanda Keller, a Triple M broadcaster and close friend of Vanessa's. "That's because Vanessa's able to find the real heart of a person ... Here was a man [Bennett] who doesn't talk to the media and there she was, crying as he was talking. Her compassion helped open him up." (Vanessa later wrote the foreword to Bennett's memoir, *Don't Die With The Music In You*.)

In 1999, Vanessa fell pregnant. She'd warned Michael she was going off contraception, but failed to mention exactly when she was ovulating. Michael felt tricked, Vanessa felt elated. "I wanted a baby so much," she said, "I was prepared to ride roughshod over Michael's reluctance to have one."

Displaying the zeal of a true documentary-maker, Vanessa had already begun filming her relationship with Michael in an attempt to record the struggle between a man and a woman who love each other deeply, but are unable to agree on love's ultimate prize. She wanted to explore that collision point between male ambivalence and a woman's biological urges.

Once pregnant, the film began to capture Michael's painful resistance to commitment and fatherhood. "I think I felt like my life had slipped out of my control and I was signed up for something I hadn't really agreed to," he said. "I really wanted to be the expectant father that I hoped I would be ... I just wasn't." Michael began talking of leaving.

Vanessa found herself plunged into insecurity, but at the same time, overwhelmed by a "great wave of happiness, hormones and massive relief". Later, she would give voice to this joyful expectation in a diary written to Layla – after Layla's death.

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*"Buying buckets and borrowing cots and prams, being handed a wardrobe that surpassed my own – a gorgeous variety of soft tiny clothes and colourful dresses that I imagined slipping over your chubby body at one, three, six and 12 months.*

*Calendula tincture for your belly button, almond oil for the bath, a soft fluffy white towel, bunny rugs stacked under the change table lined up next to sheets and nappies, your teddy waiting in the cot ...*

*But mostly what I prepared was my heart – letting it open and soften as the months progressed until I was crying every day just at the beauty of life – a song, the butterfly we freed from the web, the dawn mist in the valley below.*

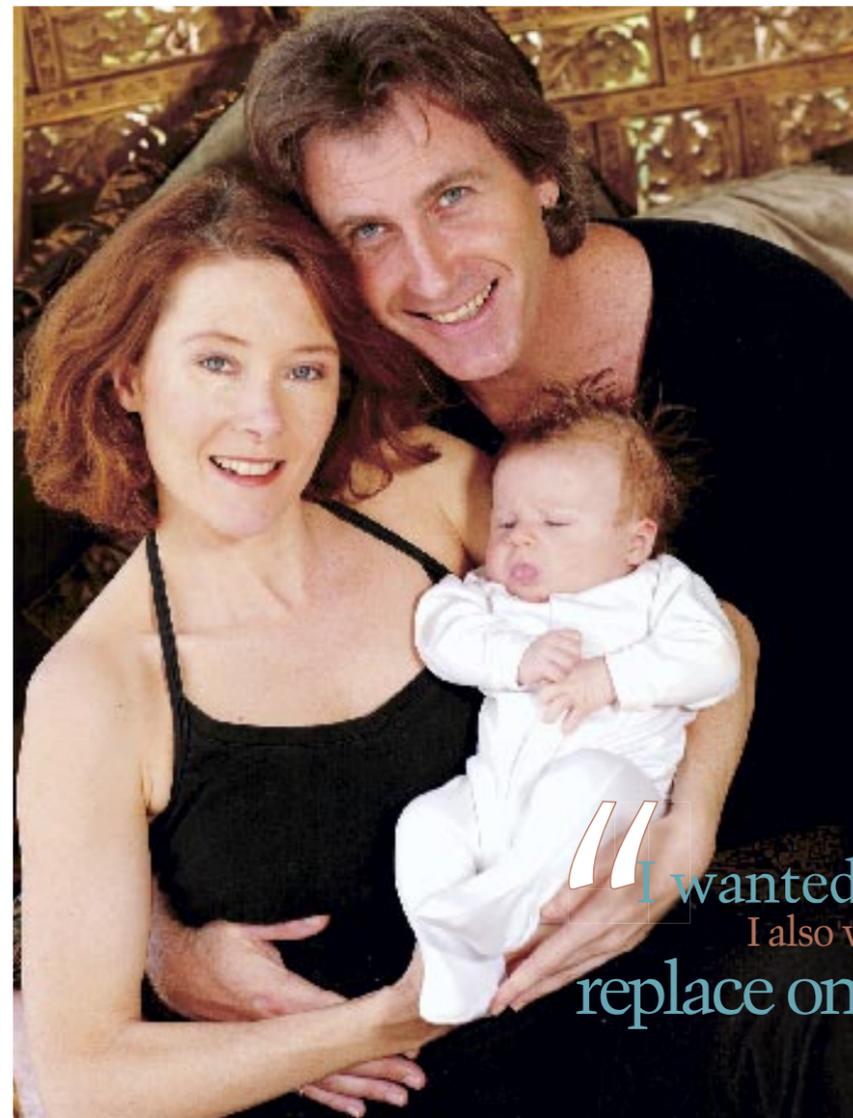
*Rubbing my rounded form in the bath and feeling you move a leg, an arm – I was in love with the shape you made and secretly stole glances at myself in the mirror, both alarmed and proud of this enormous swelling. Never a midriff girl, I became a midriff woman – flaunting my nine-month form ... wearing you with the pride of a woman in love.*

*Waiting for you. I knew you. Waiting for the last detail – what you looked like – to be revealed. Your face when I saw you at last, both familiar and a delightful surprise."*

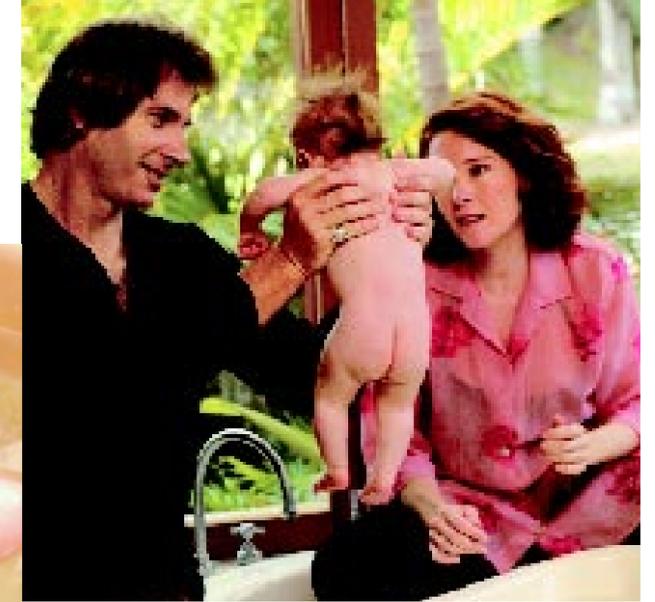
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It was not to be, of course. As we were to witness in her documentary screened on the ABC in March last year, an ►

Raphael and his parents, Vanessa and James Coates.



"I wanted this baby [Raphael], but I also wanted her ... because you can't replace one baby with another."



**At birth, Raphael weighed 3.4kg and came out "screaming and pink". Above, he enjoys a bath at home, under the watchful eyes of his parents, Vanessa and James.**

agonising 20-hour labour ended in an emergency caesarean at Lismore Base Hospital. Layla had inhaled meconium deep into her tiny lungs and needed to be flown immediately by helicopter to Brisbane.

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*"I know only one thing – that if you die I want to go, too. I don't want to live in a future without you there, don't want to have to face that level of grief ..."*

*Michael comes to my bedside weeping, traumatised by what they are putting you through downstairs. Traumatized that I might blame him for not wanting you passionately like I did. We weep together.*

*The retrieving paediatrician from Brisbane introduces himself and tells me you are sedated for the journey ... that they will take you to Brisbane where they will try one last machine, but that they don't hold out much hope for your survival.*

*I search his eyes for better news but he keeps the same sorry gaze fixed on me. I plead with him with my eyes because that is all I have at my disposal, but somewhere deep inside my brain I am screaming. I am screaming, 'you don't understand how precious this baby is, you don't understand how long I have been waiting to meet her, this is no throwaway baby, she will be a beautiful being and cherished by many, she will make some difference to society.' I want him to know all this so he will try as hard as he can to save you."*

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Michael Shaw's life was changing irrevocably, too, in that hospital emergency ward. Up until this point, Layla had been his nemesis, the symbol of his reluctance. Suddenly he was a man poleaxed by emotions he'd never expected.

"She [Layla] lay helpless and close to death, trying to breathe in a humidicrib," he wrote later in a book on losing children, *Always a Part of Me*. "And it wasn't until this point that I fully realised the seriousness of the situation.

"Everything I'd believed about my life started to fall apart. Part of me felt I'd made all this happen. I curled up in

tears but soon, very soon all I wanted to do was be with her. I was amazed at how much love there was in my body for her. Suddenly I was kneeling beside her trying to pour my love into her. I thought my love could keep her alive somehow ... as if this has been the missing part of the picture.

"Even though I'd been for the previous year in various states of frozenness, when I met the very thing I was dreading, my heart threw open its doors and willed her to live. She held my finger and I told her over and over that she was wanted. I knelt beside her ... and in an uncharacteristically unselfconscious way proclaimed my love."

Eight hours after Layla Shaw Gorman's birth, on February 16, 2000, a doctor came into the waiting room at the Brisbane hospital to inform Michael that his daughter was almost gone. "They asked me if I would like to hold her, which meant taking her off life support and effectively ending her life.

"I could see by looking at her that her struggle was almost done and I wanted so much to hold her once before she left. She hadn't been held at all in her life, not once in the traumatic, painful time she'd had to live. I finally got to hold my child ... and sometime in the following few seconds she died."

At around 5am that same morning, Michael returned to Lismore Hospital with Layla's body still warm against his chest. It was the first time Vanessa had ever seen him hold a baby.

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*"He brings you to me and I hold you for the first time. I do not know how to describe that confluence of love and despair. An hour passes. A nurse wheels in a bath and we undress and bathe you. Michael holds you tenderly, like he might a tiny angel with a broken wing.*

*The silence is sacred, just the splash of water as we anoint you, baptising you with bath water. Your body floats quietly on the surface. There is none of the startled thrashing of a newborn.*

*I lie there and watch your silent face and know that I am beyond even the place of tears."*

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For the next four days, while Vanessa was recovering from her caesarean, Layla's body was kept in a hospital cold room and brought to her parents periodically so that they could hold and bathe her.

As they did so, they allowed the camera to keep rolling, although later, when *Losing Layla* was screened, there ►

was criticism in some quarters that this behaviour was somehow macabre or in poor taste.

Vanessa Gorman never saw it that way, nor, one suspects, did the majority of viewers. Vanessa had been filming her relationship for four years and a friend had come to the hospital with a Digicam to record Layla's birth as part of this work-in-progress. No one ever expected a tragedy but, once it began to unfold, something in the chronicler's mind of Vanessa Gorman made her want a permanent record of her daughter.

Only months later did the idea of continuing with the film truly firm in her thinking. Vanessa had discovered what millions of mothers and fathers the world over knew already – that the death of a tiny baby is never a tiny death; that, in fact, it's a death as big as any other, maybe bigger. As a film-maker, Vanessa wanted to try to convey this message to the world.

After four days, she took Layla home with her – to the house she and Michael had renovated in anticipation of her arrival. That night, Layla lay between her parents in their bed while they wept and sang and fell into fitful sleep.

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*"I woke before dawn, lost in a dream I couldn't hold onto. She was still eerily silent, cradled against my chest. I began to stroke her hair and then moved down caressing her face. I loosened the bunny rug and tracked a path down to her neck and shoulders, my breath catching at the softness of the skin beneath her neck.*

*I began a long caress from the shoulders up to her cheek, around her eyes, over her nose, her mouth, down to her chest and back towards the shoulder. I stroked obsessively, a desperate braille reading. Her body was due to be burnt before lunch."*

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Eight months after Layla died, Vanessa Gorman and Michael Shaw separated. Although their love remained strong, a yawning chasm had opened between them. Vanessa still desperately wanted a child; Michael felt, for all his shame, still unable to yield. Two months short of her



40th birthday, Vanessa Gorman felt she had lost everything; that her desolation was now complete.

"I rage at the world," she wrote later. "I despair that maybe I have left further childbearing too late. I feel fear I will never love another like I have loved Michael. I wonder why my daughter had to die. I want the world to go away. I want them all to come close and offer their sympathy.

"I hate with ferocity and shock myself with dark thoughts, fantasising about disasters that may befall others. I dream each night of saving drowning and distressed children. I cry tears of pain and frustration. But underneath it all is just my grief. Underneath it all, again and again, rises that primal chant: *I want her back. I want her back.*"

Such is the power of film, however, that in a curious, almost metaphysical sense, Layla never entirely went away. She never stopped arousing our consciousness, stirring our hearts.

After the screening of her documentary, Vanessa was inundated with letters and emails from hundreds of people around Australia and overseas who felt that at last someone had articulated their pain.

Men and women, but particularly women, wrote of the loss of their own children – in utero, at birth, later in life.

They wrote of their abortions, their miscarriages, their post-natal depression, their failure to have children, their

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**Above:**  
Vanessa  
Gorman and  
Michael  
Shaw two  
months after  
the death  
of Layla  
in 1999.

## Why babies die at birth

In Australia today, one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage, one in 200 babies are stillborn and about 900 babies die in the first 28 days after birth. In total, this amounts to nearly 58,000 couples a year who lose a child in one of these ways.

**Miscarriage** This is generally defined as the loss of a pregnancy before 24 weeks gestation, when a foetus would not be sufficiently developed to survive outside the womb. The cause of miscarriage is very often frustratingly unknown. In some cases, it can be traced to medical conditions, such as chromosomal abnormalities, infection, hormone imbalance, cervical incompetence or genetic disorders.

**Stillbirth** Occurs when a baby who could reasonably be expected to survive outside the womb dies before or during

birth. Again, the causes are often unknown but can be similar to miscarriage and may also include placental abruption, where the placenta breaks away from the wall of the womb too early, or gestational diabetes.

**Neonatal death** (death soon after birth)

This can occur for many and varied reasons, including:

### **MECONIUM ASPIRATION SYNDROME**

One of the complicating factors of baby Layla's birth was that she suffered Meconium Aspiration Syndrome (MAS). This occurs when a newborn inhales a mixture of their first faeces, ordinarily passed after birth, and amniotic fluid, during labour and delivery. The meconium can cause a partial or complete blockage of the airways, making it difficult or impossible for the baby to breathe.

Although about 20 per cent of babies inhale meconium, whether it becomes critical or not depends on the amount inhaled and its consistency – the thicker and darker the meconium, the higher the likelihood of more serious problems. Risk factors for MAS include a difficult labour, and advanced gestational age (more than 40 weeks post conception). Other causes can include umbilical cord complications and poor growth inside the uterus. It is rare in babies born before 34 weeks.

For information about national support services contact: SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society) Australia. There are local SANDS offices in every state or you can visit them on the web at [www.sands.org.au](http://www.sands.org.au). Bonne Babes Foundation, phone (03) 9800 0322, or visit [www.bbf.org.au](http://www.bbf.org.au).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF DAWSON

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guilt about parenting and career choices, and the emotions surrounding all these cataclysmic events that had never been expressed, let alone sanctified.

Many more wrote of a new-found appreciation for the children they had, and how, after seeing this documentary, they had come to hold them more closely, cherish them more fully.

"*Losing Layla* was an amazing cathartic gift to the world," says Ruth Ostrow, a columnist for *The Australian*, who decided to write about her friend's loss and was then swamped herself by letters from readers.

"I think one of the last remaining taboos in life is grieving, and what Vanessa did with this film was enable people to grieve more openly. It enabled all these women to get in touch with their grief."

It also showed that in a society bereft of ceremony and ritual, you could find an unbearable kind of beauty and grace in being allowed to bring your dead child home to bathe and hold, before finally laying her to rest.

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For a year after Layla's death, Vanessa Gorman was buried under her landslide of sorrow. Although she resumed work with *Australian Story*, she rarely went out. Bills went unpaid and her living room was transformed into a virtual shrine to her daughter, replete with candles, photos and an urn filled with Layla's ashes.

One night, however, Ruth Ostrow managed to entice her to dinner. A man had been staying with Ruth and her husband, Maurice, and she wanted Vanessa to meet him. He was, she insisted, no ordinary man.

James Coates was an actor, poet and musician, a solitary, rather dashing figure who looked like a cross between the Marlboro Man and Jesus Christ.

To most women he was a romantic spectacle. Handsome, elusive and thoroughly compelling. To Vanessa Gorman he was the spark of light that would save her, although she had no way of knowing this at the time.

"James is like a gift from heaven," Vanessa says now. "A man with a beautiful, easy presence and gentle heart, who was courageous enough to say yes to love.

"He's always been one of those free-floating spirits who has never really been tied down. He's kind of on a spiritual path ... he's a musician with a Persian group ... and when I first met him, I thought, 'Oh, he's not the type to get tied down'.

"He'd sort of gone into voluntary simplicity and he really only owned a flute and a couple of sarongs, and a 20-year-old car. We started seeing each other, but I didn't think that he would be the type to want to have a child ... so I was very honest

with him. I said, 'I'm really longing to have another child, so maybe we need to split up, and you're going to have to help me do that because I'm not sure I'm strong enough to leave you.' I told him I didn't want to drag him on a journey he didn't want to go on. And he went away and came back and said, 'Look, I'd love to do this with you, I'd love to have a child with you.' "

Four months after trying to get pregnant and one week after a "house cleansing" – which involved removing Layla's shrine from the living room, and painting the house white – Vanessa fell pregnant.

As elated as she was, she spent the entire weekend crying. "It just seemed to bring it all back," she says, "and I thought, 'Oh, I just want Layla here'. It wasn't that I didn't want this baby. I wanted this baby, but I also wanted her ... because you can't replace one baby with another."

She also had to deal with James' initial reaction, one of fearful excitement. "When I first told James I was pregnant, he went quiet for a couple of days and then he came to me and said, 'Um, Nessy ... there's a trip that I've been thinking about taking, walking from temple to temple through Vietnam and Cambodia.'

"And I said, 'Oh, that sounds good, okay.' I sort of had visions – misplaced of course – of him years later still walking across Asia and me ringing up and saying, 'The baby's five, it's safe to come home'.

"We've joked about this since, but I think at the time he just needed to put that there as a little out ... otherwise he's been really excited about the pregnancy, full of trust, but with occasional bouts of trepidation as well."

His trepidation, though, was nothing compared to Vanessa's. For nine months she lived with the knowledge of what could – and did – happen in childbirth and, although to outsiders she seemed to wear her fecund beauty with a natural ease, deep down, in the very marrow of her being, she was scared witless.

That's why, when it finally came time to give birth, she chose to have a caesarean delivery at Sydney's Royal Hospital for Women, rather than, as before, at a regional hospital. She wanted specialists on call, neonatal services at the ready, state-of-the-art reproductive technology. She wanted no room for error.

As it turned out, she got exactly what she wanted and deserved – a swift and uncomplicated birth. Raphael Coates Gorman arrived weighing 3.4kg (7lbs 9oz), with a full head of hair and lungs full of oxygen. "He came out screaming and pink," said the paediatrician, Dr Stephen Gatt, "and I think he looked at the camera straight away."

That's right, the camera was there, too,

filming what will be – because of popular demand – a half-hour sequel to *Losing Layla*. (It is scheduled for screening later this year on the ABC as an *Australian Story*.) And what the camera captured was a caesarean birth much like any other, except that this one seemed a metaphor for the miracle of life itself. Vanessa Gorman finally had her child and this time he was screaming and pooing and feeding and doing all the normal things that babies do. An ordinary but extraordinary event if ever there was one.

As was the event the following evening between the fathers of Vanessa's two children. Michael Shaw and James Coates had met once before – but only briefly. This time, over a meal and a bottle of wine, they were able to relax into each other, sensing, it seemed, that they'd become part of something far bigger than themselves.

Michael acknowledged James for helping finally lift the weight of the world from his shoulders. He had come to the hospital that morning to congratulate Vanessa and meet his "adoptive nephew". It was the first time he'd been anywhere near a delivery room since Layla's birth and death. And now, although he would never forget Layla, he could at least imagine his life resuming afresh, knowing that the woman he'd loved – and would probably always love – had what she wanted most in the world. James, too, had opened his heart to Michael, telling him that were it not for Layla's death, he could never have fathered Raphael.

"I don't want to sound like Sir Galahad," he explained afterwards, "but it was never in my conscious programming to have a child, and if Ness hadn't lost Layla, I don't think I could have done it."

Except that Vanessa Gorman had shifted something deep inside him which he'd never quite anticipated. So beautiful, intelligent, funny, gracious, honest and courageous did he find her that he couldn't help but fall in love. And so deep was her grief that he couldn't help but want to try and salve it.

It was only now though – in the wake of all that had happened – that he was finally beginning to see that she'd given him every bit as much as he'd given her. They'd taken each other on this wild, uncertain, heart-filled journey, which had resulted in the birth of a child whose name meant, literally, God's Healer. And that is what Raphael had become – Layla's healing gift.

"I was so worried that he might not live," Vanessa said, finally, holding this new life force to her breast, the tears flowing like rivers of joy. "But then I thought, 'He's meant to walk this earth. He's meant to be here.' "

And so it would seem.

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