

JOANN

A MOTHER JOURNALING THROUGH GRIEF

Despite Denise's reassurances, I took the water wings out of the shed and laid them on the porch in full view so she wouldn't forget to use them when you and Danny went swimming. The upstairs windows could be opened no more than a crack to prevent a fall from the second story, I warned her, while actually showing her the distance with the tips of my fingers. I reminded her to leave the baby monitor on while you were asleep and she was outside. While explaining your dosage of medicine, I wrote down lengthy instructions and a phone contact on the tablet lying on the dining room table. Feeling more apprehensive than usual, I searched my imagination for worst-case scenarios and directions to prevent them...continually asking myself, "What am I forgetting?"

The bright props of the lake scene camouflaged the future events of that day. As our boat slowly cruised at what your father and I would call "cocktail cruising" speed, Willie Nelson's "You Were Always on my Mind" mingled with the hum of the engines. Willie's music was our personal favorite during our dating years. You see, Dick Deveny wasn't a perfect boyfriend, so you could say it was his theme song. Though he had become a wonderful husband and father, and at that moment, I was feeling so in love with the person he had become.

I gazed absently at the shoreline as it moved by. My thoughts were devoid of pain and worry but, at the same time, they weren't filled with happiness as they should have been. I should have been ecstatic, merely in knowing that my two boys were at home waiting for me. But life's habitual routine distracted me, made me preoccupied and heedless. Although I would thank God for the blessing of you and Danny in my prayers, I assumed the entitlement. So while watching the pretentious mansions pass by, I was looking into the future and wanting more, unaware that in that future, I would look back and long for what I had.

The words of the water patrol and my next thoughts still echo through my mind. Please, don't let it be my babies!

While my heart raced, our boat moved torturously and slowly behind a line of boats. We seemed to merely bob up and down through the turbulent waves of the channel. My uncontrollable sobs alerted the anglers on shore, because they stopped baiting their hooks and casting their lines to gawk at me as we moved by them. The teasing green eye continued to taunt me as my fingers stumbled over the black buttons of the phone and we crawled toward the open water of the next bay. I wanted to scream at them, pleading for their help. But I couldn't say the words, so my inner voice remained silent.

Brrrinnng...Brrringgg....brrringgg. The consecutive rings resonated in my head as I dialed our home phone. The click of a recorder finally broke its sequence, and my own voice answered. While impatiently waiting for the conclusion of my own cheery message, I knew that person had already become a stranger to me.

"Denise! Denise! Please, pick up the phone!" I heard my own trembling voice speak into the uncaring machine. Where are you, Denise? Are my babies all right? I wanted to let go of my contrived composure and release all my anxiety into a deafening scream. But the fear of not coming back from hysteria was greater.

In the darkness of the V-berth cabin, I attempted to cover my peach swimsuit with a tank top and shorts. Then while being tossed about the cramped galley, I grasped the counter top for stability and mechanically poured my untouched Bloody Mary down the sink. More than ever, a clear mind was needed—at that moment, my head felt like a hive full of riled bees. My eyes transfixed on the thick liquid slowly flowing down the drain, leaving a red stain in its place.

Denise...What had I forgotten, what did I leave out? We talked about your meals and about keeping you away from the screen door. Did I ever tell her you were able to slide that door open, Billy?

"Lock the screen door, Denise!" I now yell, while jumping up from my seat in that theater. The nearby observers in the audience avert their eyes and shake their heads because they know. They know that no matter how loud I cry out, the movie will proceed as filmed.

DENISE
THE SITTER

Your disposition that day was tranquil, a very odd term to describe any behavior displayed by Billy Deveny.

After your nap, you calmly played with your toys by yourself in the corner of the living room as your brother watched television nearby. I took notice when you silently walked over to the couch and placed your diapered bottom next to Danny on the cushion. I remember thinking you were acting quite unusual. You would normally divert his attention from the television by striking him over the head with the wooden spoon from the kitchen or any other convenient solid object. But you weren't yourself that day; your demeanor was serene.

You gazed up at your older brother with admiration while sitting leg to leg on the couch. Your feet dangled in the air while you intently gazed at Danny's profile. He stared at the television screen, oblivious to your presence—or was he aware and merely comforted by your closeness?

With the image of Danny and you still in my mind, I turned to grab two fruit snacks from the kitchen. The memory of what came next is still there, despite the efforts I've made to forget.

The distance from the living room to that cabinet was only three feet. But in the seconds it took for this small task, your smiling face next to Danny vanished—gone forever.