

My Journal

I had long intended to begin keeping a journal, but somehow had never gotten around to it. Bill inspired me; I was desperate to divorce him and I decided that I would chronicle that process and my feelings relating to both him and the dissolution of our ridiculous marriage. I began my journal on June 28th, 1998. The first three pages were filled with the frustration and betrayal I felt at being tricked into a marriage with a man who refused to live with me (or even in the same state) and who was a pathological liar, even about inconsequential things.

On the night of June 30th, though, I received a call that changed not only the content of my journal, but of my life as well.

The call came at 1:15 am, waking me up. I remember wondering, as I stumbled from my bed, who could possibly be calling me at this hour. Probably a wrong number, I thought, but I was wrong.

The voice of my mother, in shock, was telling me that my sweet son, my Joey, was dead. I felt the blood drop to my feet as she told me that a truck had hit him as he was riding his bike across highway 395. My voice shook as much as my body and soul were shaking, as I tried to talk to my mother. She handed the officer who had come to the house to give her the news the phone. I moaned and cried as he told me the excruciating details; I couldn't stop repeating "my baby, my baby, my baby..." I could hardly ask the question, but I had to know. "Did he suffer?" "No, his injuries were extensive. He was dead at the scene. They tried to revive him, but couldn't. I'm so sorry."

I later learned that he had actually lived for a few minutes after being hit, but was probably not conscious. I don't remember much of the rest of the conversation, except to ask that my mother not be left alone. A neighbor was coming over to her, I was told. She got back on the line, insisting that I not be alone either, but alone was what I needed to be. I never would have been able to express the anguish I felt that night if anyone had been present. I needed to scream out his name, to wander from room to room to room and back again, moaning and crying at this: my greatest fear, my old premonition, my worst nightmare come true, after all these years, and just when I thought I was going to have him at home once again, where he belonged.

From the time he was small I worried that he would be killed on the road. When he was 19 months old and still not walking or talking, his pediatrician gave me the news that I knew he had suspected almost from the start: Joey was mildly to moderately retarded. I knew from the beginning that he was "different". He was the sweetest, funniest little huggy-bear cuddler, and most affectionate baby I'd ever known; always happy, and a joy to be around. And he *did* speak—it just wasn't in English. He spoke a sort of gibberish that only I could understand; he never called me Mama when he was a baby; he always called me Yah-dah. As he got a little older he began to walk, and to speak his own version of English. Transposing verbs with nouns and reversing phrasing,

he sounded like a little foreigner. Once he learned to say, "I love you" he said it to everyone, over and over. Looking back, I can't believe that there was ever a time when I got tired of hearing it and asked him to stop saying it so much...

Eventually he was as mobile as any other toddler, and that's when I became fearful that something would happen to him. I was fiercely protective of him and glad that he didn't have the coordination to ride even a tricycle, but he was as determined as I was protective, and he mastered it at the age of five. He was seven before he could ride a two-wheeler without training wheels, and nine before he could ride without crashing. His disabilities weren't immediately discernible to most people; it was only after talking to him for a while that you could tell that anything was wrong. My fears eased as he grew up, made friends, and brought joy into the lives of everyone who knew him. They didn't return until he was in high school and old enough to drive. I steadfastly refused to let him get his license until he was 18 and out of school, using every excuse I could think of to delay the inevitable. When he finally did get his license and a car, I was glad when he immediately blew up the engine and was no longer driving; for I had seen him drive, and it scared the bejusus out of me. When he was nineteen, he was no sooner back on road than he was off it again, the unhappy recipient of a DUI, and I was secretly relieved. It was obvious to me that he was not ready to be driving. Joey still was not driving at 21 when I moved to the Ozarks, and that was fine with me. He opted to stay in Nevada where his job and his friends were. When his roommate situation didn't work out, he moved in with my mother. There was talk from time to time of his getting his license. He got another car and I began to worry. I didn't want him driving; I didn't see the bike as a threat. He'd been riding for years and loved it. I actually *wanted* him to keep riding the bike.

I had to go back to Nevada and take care of things no mother should ever have to take care of. After what seemed like an endless journey but was really only the usual four hour drive to the airport, followed by the now normal waits, cancellations, an alternative flight to another airport, more waiting, and more delays, at last I was in the air and heading toward Reno, another hour and fifteen minutes away. My tired and teary-eyed sister Robin, and Mark, her boyfriend, met me at the airport; from there we had an hour drive to our mom's house in Gardnerville. I know we spoke on the way, but I can't remember what was said. It was 3:30 a.m., and more than seventeen hours since I had left my farm when we finally arrived at my mother's. Incredibly, she was up, and clung to me like she would never let go. I would be spending what was left of the night in Joey's room. Once alone in there I was drawn like a magnet to his closet, which I opened. His clothes hung in front of me, waiting for someone who would never wear them again. I put my arms around them all and embraced them, burying my face in them to inhale the smell of him, and I wept. I found the shirt I had helped him pick out just two months before when he had been the first of my family to come and visit me, and changed into it. I took his favorite clothes to bed with me to sleep in the bed he would never again dream in, and I cried myself to sleep.

In the morning I called the mortuary. They advised me against going there to see him, but nothing could have stopped me. I didn't care what he might look like; it didn't

matter. I had to say good-bye to him in person. But first, Robin, Mark and I decided to go to the place where he had been killed, and see if we could find out exactly what had happened. I wanted to try to imagine what he went through; I had to know, so that in the only way possible, I could be there for him and go through it all with him.

On the way, we stopped at the restaurant where Joe's older brother Max was working. I had spoken to him on the night of his Joey's death, and once or twice afterward, and he was in bits. When they were younger their relationship was sometimes tenuous; they were so different—Max, my firstborn, was near-genius; Joey was like Forrest Gump. They'd never had a lot in common. Growing up, there had been fierce fights between them, and even though they had long since resolved their differences and become good friends, Max was now killing himself with guilt and remorse. I wanted to make sure he was all right before I did anything else. I entered the restaurant's kitchen where Max was chef. When he came out of the walk-in and looked up to see me, he burst into tears and rushed into my arms. We held each other and cried together for a while, then released each other and made arrangements for him to come and have dinner at my mom's later on. From there we drove the short distance to the place where Joe had died.

We didn't find the spot at first; we were looking in the wrong place. I found it when I walked up the highway to the intersection. There, at the side of the road, was a stain from the blood that had drained from my son's head. On the road was the chalk outline of where his body had landed after he had flown off the hood of the truck when the lady who had hit him slammed on her brakes. I felt sorry for her, because I had been told that the crash was Joey's fault. It was dark, and he wasn't paying attention. He'd been playing pool with his friend Brian for hours, drinking beer and having a great time. When they left the bar, Joe took off while Brian was still putting on his gloves. He made it across four of the five lanes before being hit from behind. Brian heard the crash and ran out to where Joe was, scooped him up and held him as he was dying, saying "Hang on, Joe, you're ok, you're ok..." Joey's eyes were open for a second, but he couldn't breathe; he was coughing up blood. A highway patrolman happened to be coming in the other direction and saw the woman standing on the road, screaming hysterically, before he saw Joey. He turned around and returned to the scene, where he saw my son. He immediately got his kit and intubated Joe; moments later the paramedics took over, but it was no use. He died as they loaded him into the ambulance. I stared at the puddle of dried blood; Joey's blood. Not far from that spot I noticed a pair of discarded and bloody latex gloves. Joey's blood. I picked them up and put them in the pocket of my jeans. They had his blood on them, and I was desperate to have anything I could that was any part of him, so I took them.

I kept those bloody gloves until they dissolved into a small mass of indistinguishable goo, but in the first couple of years after his death I often felt the need to touch them and see them—the only physical remains of him aside from his ashes. I thought I could finally throw them away when I found them nearly disintegrated, but I changed my mind, retrieved them from the trash, and have them still.

Satisfied that we understood exactly what had happened, we left that place in silence. It was the 4th of July; one week before what would have been his twenty-third birthday. The next stop was the mortuary, where I would see my son dead on a table in front of me.

Mark drove, and Robin said that she would go in with me. On the way, we stopped again where Max was working, to pick up the note I had told him that he should write to his brother. I had told him to write whatever he felt he needed to say, put it in an envelope, and I'd have it cremated with him. He had it ready for me; I don't know what he wrote—it was only for the two of them to know.

Once at the mortuary we took care of business first; we had all agreed that it would be wrong to bury Joey in Nevada, he had hated Nevada and had wanted more than anything to move away from there. To my surprise and delight he had loved Missouri and my farm, and was planning on moving in with me as soon as he had saved enough money. I had been so happy to know that I would be getting him back—but now getting him back meant carrying his ashes in a cardboard box back with me.

Business finished, it was time to see him. Christy, the funeral director who had tried to persuade me not to see him, confided that she too had a twenty-two-year-old son, and she said she would have to see him too, if it had been her son that had died. She tried to prepare me for how he would look. It didn't matter to me what he would look like; I had to see him, to touch him, to talk to him, to kiss him good-bye. I had to be there till the end for him, no matter what. We got up from the table and I reached for Robin's hand. We both began to cry as we walked into the next room to where Joey lay waiting.

He was on a gurney, covered to his shoulders with a floral print sheet. His head, his poor head, rested on a pillow with a white pillowcase. His face was scraped and cut a little on his right side, and slightly swollen, but otherwise his sweet and beautiful face was not damaged. It was his head that was so shocking to see. It wasn't crushed or mangled from what I could tell, but the major injury was on the back of his head, and with his head resting on the pillow, I was spared seeing it.

It was what they had done during the autopsy that I could not have prepared myself for. They had cut the entire top of his head off and then reattached it with huge black sutures, placed every three or four inches apart, all the way around. The tissue in between the sutures gaped open, producing an effect that looked like he was wearing a bizarre crown of thorns. It was hideous and horrible, but the expression of such exquisite peace and serenity on his face took my breath away. My tears fell on his cheeks, and I gently wiped them away and caressed his face. I touched his lips and kissed his forehead and cheeks. I tried to speak, but at first all I could say was "Oh, Joey... Oh, my baby, my baby, my baby..." Then I found the words to tell him how much I loved him and would miss him. I said good-bye to him, then reached under the sheet to take his hand in mine. I didn't want to pull down the sheet to see if there were any other scrapes or injuries on his body, or to see the new tattoo of a sun with a smiley face that he was so proud of. I knew that he would be sliced open all the way down from the autopsy, and I didn't think

I could bear to see that. Seeing him, as hard as it was, helped me. It was that look of absolute peace. The rest didn't matter. Tomorrow we would have a day long informal memorial service, where anyone who wanted to could drop by and visit, and share their memories of my sweet boy.

Nothing could have prepared me for the outpouring of love and sorrow felt by so many for my son. It seemed that everyone who ever knew him was touched by him, in a way that no one else inspired. People who had met him years before contacted my mother and me to express their sympathy and to tell us how special he was and how sorely he would be missed. He taught us all more about unconditional love and generosity than anything we were ever able to teach him. He enchanted everyone who knew him. Some of his special education teachers from years before came to his service to tell us how much knowing him had meant to them. It was both touching and tragic to see how much he effected people; I'm sure he never had a clue about how highly he was regarded, but I have a feeling that he knows now.

To say that the first year following his death year was difficult would be a gross understatement, but through it all I faithfully kept a journal, filling it with expressions of a sorrow so deep and painful that at first I thought it would kill me. I didn't know that anyone could live with this shrieking pain inside. I feel that I now know about a sorrow that transcends all barriers, even species. I see footage of a mother harp seal scream as she watches the two-day-old baby she's carried for 11 months being beaten and skinned alive, and I know how she feels. I look at the drawing I did of a Somalian mother carrying the blanket-wrapped body of her dead child, and I know by heart what I only could imagine when I drew it.

I went to grief counseling and wrote in the workbook I was given my visual description of my grief. I wrote that it was a "sea of sorrow" that at times I am drowning in, and that at other times I am treading water in. At still other times I am floating on the surface, looking at the clear blue sky and the birds flying above, and I am at peace, happily recounting all the happy times and the joy that sweet boy brought into my life. My journal has witnessed these thoughts, and more. I wrote of how the gravity that holds us so firmly to this earth loses some of its density when something like this happens. I wrote of a movie I saw, where a father tells his son, after his mother has died, that "it's the living who have to resurrect themselves." I believe that this is true, and I know that keeping a journal has helped me in my own resurrection. I still have panic attacks from time to time, when the realization hits me, hard, that this is real; that I've lost the most precious thing that a mother can lose. At those times I feel like I've, jumped up to my neck into an ice-cold river. It sucks the breath from my lungs and the beat from my heart and leaves me gasping, frozen and paralyzed. When I catch my breath and feel my heart begin to beat again, I know I am alive and I know I'm alone; Joey's gone, and I'm never going to see his face, hear his voice telling me he loves me, or feel his arms around me, ever again, and I can't help crying, and it's okay to cry.

When I look back at entries in my journal I can see where I finally let the healing that I thought would never come, begin. My own resurrection is slowly and painfully

taking place. I no longer feel that it's a betrayal to go on. I now see that the true betrayal is not to, because I know that when I cried for that sweet, special, and precious boy, he cried too. His ashes are where he wanted to be; here on the farm with me, and all the animals he loved so much in life.

