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*Personal Essay***Waiting**

Marian Sorenson

We were lying in the shade of the John Deere baler, my youngest and I, the crumbs of our lunch scattered on our replete bellies, the quills of newly mown hay scratching through our shirts. The native hay lay in fragrant windrows in front of the baler and in huge eggs behind. Rolling over to his stomach, his chin resting on his palms, he asked, "So how did Grandpa know?" Fifteen-year-old Jared was only five when it happened, and although he remembered the incident, he had forgotten the particulars. I have not forgotten.

That summer afternoon the boys were milking the cows and riding the calves in the barn lot. Suddenly they were back, throwing down their bikes in the yard and racing for the kitchen.

"Tony's horse is dead. Some guys shot him and he's laying there, blood all over his neck and he's really dead!" Joey's face was red with exertion, the words exploding from his mouth in bullet bursts. Tony rubbed his eyes, gulping back sobs. Laurel and I dropped our supper preparations and swarmed them. "What happened? Say it slower. Joey, what is wrong?" Holly had heard enough and was already on the Suzuki four-wheeler, slamming the gears and streaking for the white house where Jim, the current hired man, lived.

"This truck drove by real slow." Joey was emphasizing each word now, willing us to get the picture. "Two guys were in it and they backed up and sat there, just staring at me and Tony. We were graining Ginger, and then one guy got out a gun. Yeah, a rifle, and just started shooting. We got out of there and they spun out and we saw Ginger sort of stagger and then he fell down." Joey spoke with his whole body, ducking, aiming, staggering. "Then we got for

home. Fast.” Tony cried quietly, his eyes fixed on Joey, his real brother, who had promised to take care of him, promised to never leave him.

“It’s true,” was all Holly said when the Suzuki spun gravel in the driveway, where we were waiting for her report. “You better call the sheriff. It’s real sick.” She would be a high-school senior in the fall and was Miss Take Charge.

Von and the older boys were not yet home, so Holly flagged down a neighbor who was passing. Tom knelt over the fallen horse. Then he closed the wooden gate and slowly wiped the inside of his hat with a bandanna. Shaking his head in disbelief, he asked, “Who in the heck would do such a thing? You ever see the truck before, Joey? Chevrolet you say? Blue, no stock rack? Don’t know nobody close drives such a rig.”

The story was repeated again and again most of the night. For Von when he returned from the sheep on the far range. For Dave, Dan, and Erin in from the hay fields. For Marianne after irrigating and later on the phone for Kirsten at her university summer session. And for the sheriff and the deputy and the local cops. Jared sat wide eyed, listening. The story was the same each time except for the new details added to answer the new questions. Idaho plates. 28 D something 4. One guy had a white shirt, and the other had some kind of red coat and a cowboy hat. Yeah, four-wheel drive. Didn’t talk—just looked and shot.

Two-way radios crackled, piercing the quiet of the valley air. When the officials left, we huddled together, comforting Tony, sensing Joey’s fear. The girls took their brothers to bed, sitting with them until sleep came. Von took the keys from the trucks and cars and locked up the shop and house. We had never locked anything before.

Saturday morning brought phone calls from our neighbors, alerted to danger in our peaceful community. Official uniforms again, the story again and again. Tony hung close to me, touching me, his bony body even more drawn in, somehow thinner. His eyes were dark circled, reminding me of my first glimpse of him, looking like a war waif as he and Joey stepped off the plane and into a new life and a new family. A horse of his own was his wish on the trip home, nearly two years earlier.

“You guys got horses?” Tony asked after miles of unnatural quiet. “You ever let kids ride? Wish I had a real horse.” Joey remained silent, not wanting food or conversation. Finally he asked his question: “You guys beat up kids when they’re bad?”

It took time to find the right horse for a city boy. Ginger, gentle but sprightly, was the answer. “I’m breaking him,” Tony would brag, coming back from a gentle ride on “my very own horse.” Now Ginger was gone.

Our house, filled with ten children, was seldom calm, but there was an uneasy tension that Saturday. Joey jumped every time the phone rang. He listened to the one-sided responses we gave and then hammered his questions, “Who was it? Did they get ’em? Do they know who did it?” He had attended his mother’s funeral a year before coming to us. He knew his mother died a brutal death. Perhaps that explained his anxiety, his hovering about Holly, his retelling the story to Dan, three years older and his hero.

We spent an uneasy Sunday. After church, we walked to our sacred grove in the quakies above the house, and to the birds’ accompaniment, we sang our silly family songs and talked of home and family and love. On the way back, we stopped at the hollow tree to check the robin’s nest. It was empty. The hatchlings had become nestlings and then fledglings, and now the mature couple had left to enjoy their brief retirement before returning to the cycle.

On Monday my Mom brought Dad from their home in Battle Mountain to the Elko Clinic for tests. I drove the sixty-five miles from the ranch to meet them. Dad was showing the first stages of Alzheimer’s disease, which would later take his life. He sat quietly, listening across the Red Lion table as I told of the bizarre events at our place.

“They haven’t figured out who did it,” I concluded to Mom’s clucking of “How awful.” Dad said something I didn’t catch. “What was that, Dad?”

“Joey did it.” He reached his trembling hand across the table to grasp mine, the hand still rough and callused from a lifetime of hefting a pick and shovel and sorting rocks.

“No, Dad. He couldn’t have. The police were there, and they are looking for two men in a blue truck. They are searching in Nevada and Idaho. They’ll find them.” My words were assured, but

my lips were quivering. I was sick. The taco salad had a strange taste. I took a forkful of lettuce and cheese and put it down again.

“Excuse me. I’ll be right back.” I dropped my napkin and stumbled over it, hitting my shin on the table leg. I rushed through the casino, between rows of slots, around the gaming tables to the phones, muttering denials, “It couldn’t be. No. No. No.”

“Holly, hi. This is crazy, I know, but, umm. Could Joey have done it? . . . You know what I mean! Could he have done it?”

Calm, reasonable responses. Un-Holly-like responses: “That’s crazy, Mom. There are too many details. Get real. He couldn’t have made all that up. No way.”

“Yeah, I’m being dumb. Thanks. Be home soon. Take care of them, Holly.”

I saw nothing on the trip home, heard nothing but the voice in my head. There had been warning when, just five days after calling Church Social Services saying we would take two children, any race, any age, any disability, the boys were in our home. “Don’t make it permanent too soon,” good friends advised. “Try them as foster children for a while.”

Sometimes we wondered if we had taken on the impossible. Would all our love, concern, and caring be enough to make up for the early years of neglect and abuse? One dark night after a bad dream, Joey remembered, “I just tried to wake Dad up ’cause a guy said I better or else, and Dad slammed me in the face with his fist. I woke up in the corner with blood all over me.”

All these thoughts swarmed in my head as I tried to concentrate on driving myself back to the ranch to deal with the situation. We love him, and he needs us so much, I reasoned. But our other children need a safe home, too. Are they safe? What will the years ahead bring? I breathed deep, sobbing breaths, trying to quiet the fears pounding in my chest. Somehow I got home.

I sat on Joey’s bed a long time that night. “Am I your best kid, Mom?” he asked as he always did. “Do you love me more than Danny?” I stroked his springy black hair and searched his hazel eyes. “Moms’ hearts love everybody best, remember?” I said.

“We’re stuck with each other, right?” he repeated the words I often said to him.

“Yeah, I’ve got you and you’ve got me and nothing will change that.” I said it to remind myself of the commitment that I had not expected to be so hard. Their IQ scores were so low. Too low for the sharp kids they seemed to be. But years of Head Start, kindergarten, and repeated grades had failed to help them read. So I sat at the table between them for days, weeks, years, and the miracle of learning began to happen. But they hated the everydayness of it, and sometimes so did I.

“I can’t do it. It’s too hard,” Joey would scream, kicking the table, breaking another pencil, tearing the paper. “You’re not my real mom, and you can’t make me do this. I hate your guts!”

“Okay, hate my guts. Hate my left foot if you want. But the only way you will ever be free from me is to read. Now, start again right here.”

“I’m gonna run away and never come back. Never!”

Catching him, holding his flailing body close to me, I would say again and again, “Wherever you go, I’ll come looking for you and bring you home. We’re a family, and I’ll never let you go. We’re stuck with each other.”

Now my own words echoed back at me. I watched him. He smiled a lot. He always smiled. Such a beautiful kid. He couldn’t do something so horrible, so sick, could he? Long after he was asleep, I lay beside him in the dark, feeling his breath on my cheek. Then I crawled back to Von’s comfortable warmth and his whispered assurances that all would be well.

In the predawn hours, I asked Von for a blessing of comfort. His hands, in the age-old ritual of healing, were warm on my head, protecting my sanity, allowing his strength, his faith to flow into me. His hands that have loved me, supported me, shared my pain in labor and illness, I knew would heal me now.

“I bless you with strength. With courage and wisdom. With vision to see the tender heart in the savage body.” His voice broke. “There is much pain and sorrow ahead for us.” I shivered at the sudden vision of all the nights ahead, waiting for our boy, searching for him, crying for him. And then I felt only peace and confidence. Von continued, “Trust our decision to bring them here; it was made prayerfully. It is pleasing to God. We are shepherds, Marian. We will feed His lambs.” He slipped to his knees beside me,

and the morning sun streamed through the east window, encircling us in a benediction of light.

That night I read to Jared and Tony, and Jared fell asleep as Tom Sawyer and Becky entered the cave. I tucked Tony in bed and turned as I was leaving the room. "Tony," I said quietly. "I know the truth. Do you want to tell me about it?"

His black eyes opened wide. Only his brown face showed above the log-cabin quilt. I sat beside him and put my face next to his as the sobs started deep inside him and his body shook. Then his skinny arms grabbed me, pulling me down with all his strength, and the words came out in spasms. "Joey shot Ginger. Ginger is dead, and Dad told me to take care of him." His body heaved in grief. "Now Dad won't let me have another horse." So softly I could hardly hear the smothered words, "And me and Joey will have to go."

At night it is cold in our valley in the Ruby Mountains, even in summer. The down-canyon winds sweep over the Rubies and flood the valley like ice water. The wind cooled my fever as I left the house to look to the hills, searching for strength. Walking the meadow trails is part of every day for me, and most days I pray aloud as the land renews my soul. "Thanks for this verdant valley of the desert where my children can grow deep roots." This night my prayer was a litany of need as I bowed to the earth, "Help me. Help us. Help him. Please."

Von and the older children came home, and we knelt in family prayer. I looked across the circle. Joey quickly closed his eyes, but not before he read my face.

Later, huddled together under a blanket on the back deck, my love and I looked again to the craggy peaks above the giant poplars that surround the house. Our pain rose from us to be swept by the wind to join the pain of all parents who love and grieve.

Joey did not come at the 6:00 call to breakfast the next morning. I found him sitting on his bed, head in hands, his clothes and treasures spread about.

"When do I leave?" the question muffled.

I formed my hands into cupping shape and held his hands within them. "Your wings are soft and tender now, and this home is a safe nest for you. But you will grow strong. When your wings are sure and steady, we will open the doors and let you fly away."

His eyes, dark and fear filled, searched my face. “Will I ever come back?”

“Remember the robin’s nest in the hollow tree? If this is truly your home, Joey, you will come back.”

He flew south one day, on wings too weak and too unsure. He is still flying. Each spring I climb the promontory and looking at the southern horizon keep my vigil. Waiting. Waiting for his return.

Marian Sorenson is a cowinner of the 1995 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.