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THOUGH HE DIE EARLY, HE SHALL BE AT REST



*You became a believer because you saw me.
Blest are they who have not seen and have
believed.*

—Jesus to Thomas, John 20:29

In 1988, several years after the Salvesons lost their son Ken at the Harrods bombing, we were to fully understand the pain and grief they went through. We lost our oldest son, Nicky.

He had suffered from schizophrenia since he was fourteen years old. One characteristic of the disease is that all schizophrenics have suicidal tendencies. They tend to lose touch with the real world. And always, the paranoia—the deep-rooted belief that people are plotting against them. According to one psychiatric study, nearly 25 percent did in fact commit suicide in 1988. Leading up to his suicide he struggled to live some semblance of a normal life, but couldn't. By this time he had cut himself off from

everyone—no exceptions. He experimented with drugs. He had serious self-esteem issues. He was rebellious in a way that was beyond what many teenagers experience and outgrow. His medications caused such severe side effects that he devised ways to avoid taking them without us knowing it. So severe were they that he would wander off and stay away for days at a time. It caused us to get very concerned about his physical well-being. In one instance he checked into a sleazy hotel in Newark, New Jersey, where two guys stole his motor bike at knifepoint. The next day a tenant went berserk and indiscriminately knifed a guy to death in the room above Nicky's. The guy then set the hotel on fire, killing several of the tenants who were asleep. Nicky was one of the lucky ones and made it out safely; we got the whole story from the police, who called us to take him home. When we got there he looked like something out of Michael Jackson's music video, "Thriller." Thereafter, his behavior had to be closely monitored, but his desire to be independent led him to go off again, this time to live on his own for a while, thereby cutting himself off from the treatment and family support he so desperately needed. On one occasion when we went to visit him, we had to virtually force ourselves on him before he would spend some time with us. While there I saw something that made me break down. He bought an old wreck of a red Mercedes-Benz sedan. The symbolic message was clear—Dad had a red Mercedes, so he had to have one, too. That is what made his death even more painful for me; he was a ship off the old block, sharing with me even my passion for all things nautical. He was more like me than any of my children, warts and all.

Alone, on a bitterly cold December night just before Christmas in his cramped two-room apartment, with no

heat, no companionship, and only a few sticks of furniture, his world came to an end. At the blossoming age of twenty-six, no longer able to cope with his tormented life, Nicky broke our hearts—he committed suicide by putting a handgun to his head. The police report concluded that he did not die immediately from the gunshot wound. Instead, he bled to death over what must have been a torturous and agonizingly long period of time. Adding to the trauma was the fact that we received the news via a callous phone call. Ronnie and I embraced as never before, holding on for dear life, sobbing in complete shock. His life, not ours, flashed before our eyes. Twenty-six years of loving, of caring, of nursing, of worrying, gone in a heartbreaking instant. Gone too were all the dreams we had for him and his future. Where had it all gone, and *why*?

When it came time to identify his body at the coroner's office, we could not bear the thought of looking at his wounded and ghostly body. Instead, we opted to rely on dental records for positive identification. Nor could we bear the thought of looking at or receiving the gun he used to take his life. Instead, we instructed the police to destroy it.

And so my boy's tormented life was over. How fitting that his headstone should read, *THOUGH HE DIE EARLY, HE SHALL BE AT REST*. The thought of not ever seeing him again would eat away at me every day of my life. Now, age offers some comfort in the knowledge that each day brings me a day closer to seeing him again. Losing Nicky gave me an inner awareness of things I hadn't thought much about before. First among these was the need to be grateful for every day of life. It is something many of us take for granted, but I soon realized it is something to appreciate and cherish because it is so very fragile. Then too I became more cognizant of the need to be a more giving person. The

need stemmed from a thought that plagues me to this day. Would his outcome have been different if I had given him more love and more of my time? Should I have been more tolerant and showed more patience? Would it have been any different if I had shared with him more of the things going on in my life? Did I take him to enough “Brooklyn Dodgers games,” as my father did with me? Should we have done more things together, like playing catch? I put myself on a guilt trip, and vainly wished for another chance.

After we lost Nicky I was convinced his loss was the one thing that would finally cement our troubled marriage. Surely such a loss would be enough to crystallize any marriage. Not so. Just one and half years after Nicky died, Ronnie and I filed for divorce, counseling notwithstanding. In 1991 we were divorced, thus dissolving a thirty-four-year marriage. I looked for answers and found some by attending meetings of a child-loss support group called The Compassionate Friends. I discovered that an incredible 90 percent of all couples that lose a child end up divorced or separated. The many reasons are well beyond the scope of this discussion. However, a primary reason stems from the blame each parent puts on the other for the loss of the child. We didn’t experience that one, though, because Nicky’s schizophrenia was beyond our making and control. I attended eight to ten meetings of the support group before quitting. Problem was that I came away from most meetings more depressed than I was going in. Sitting with a group of strangers for a couple of hours, sharing the most intimate details of cause and effect, was no comfort.



In the meantime, Dorine was experiencing her own share of misery. In 1990 she was involved in a near-fatal car accident while pursuing a PhD in biophysics at Syracuse University. She was also working at becoming a proficient skier. As a passenger in the rear seat of a friend's car on the way to a local ski slope, they were broadsided from the left, where she was sitting. The car had been idling at a stoplight, and began to pull forward after the light turned green. The guy who hit them had jumped the red light, and plowed into them, spinning their car around twice.

As described by a passenger in a car behind them, the force of the impact was so severe that Dorine came flying out the rear driver's side window "like a rag doll." Her body was thrown clear of the car and came to a crushing stop against the curb. However, God was on our side that day, because in one of the cars behind them was a cardiologist who witnessed the accident. Dorine had stopped breathing, and he immediately administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, saving her life.

In Syracuse University Hospital, Dorine underwent several surgeries to remove her spleen and repair broken facial bones. The broken ribs had to pretty much heal on their own. To further complicate matters, she suffered a concussion. Although her healing was slow, and she lost her spleen, she made a full and courageous recovery.

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The decade after 1988 would become the most agonizing of my life. I had always considered myself the classical Capricorn: that sure-footed mountain goat who stubbornly keeps climbing the mountain to overcome whatever obstacles may appear, and no matter what catastrophes

may occur. But more illnesses and tragedy would leave the family questioning what else fate had in store for us.

The quadruple whammy came in 1997 when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. It was up to me to select what kind of treatment I wanted. I could have the prostate gland surgically removed (prostatectomy), or have radiation therapy, or radioactive seed implants. Another option, hormonal therapy, was not recommended because the cancer had not spread beyond the prostate. Following my urologist's recommendation, I read *The ABCs of Prostate Cancer*, by Doctors J.E. Oesterling and M.A. Moyad. It became my bible. I read as much as I could on the subject, getting second and third opinions, and talking with other men similarly afflicted. I consulted with my niece (my brother's daughter) Patricia M. Camuto, MD, an Attending Physician, board certified in Anatomic and Clinical Pathology. Her assistance in confirming the urologist's diagnosis and proposed treatment plan was invaluable, as it gave me that extra measure of confidence I needed to make a tough decision. God bless her for it. Finally, I opted for the prostatectomy. For someone my age that seemed to afford the best prospect for longevity.

All of this came on the verge of my retirement. I was diagnosed with cancer the month before my retirement, and had the surgery two months after retirement. I thought to myself, *What a hell of a way to start my golden years*. It was as if I was being told to "Go Directly to Jail—Do Not Pass Go," or even worse, check out. But after successful surgery I had the newly earned distinction of "cancer survivor."

I was now living alone and went through a difficult period of convalescence after the surgery. With so much time on my hands, I found myself reflecting on the past.

As a young man, my capacity for handling disappointment and catastrophe was limited. I can remember how disappointed I felt when I dropped what would have been the winning touchdown pass during a high school championship football game. I was depressed for months thereafter. Then there was the failure to get into Kings Point on my initial attempt. That drove me to utter despair. These events were hugely important to me at the time. And I also believed that through disappointment and catastrophe, hope and even wisdom can emerge. In time, the thing that evolved in my character was a steely determination to work even harder to achieve my goals. No, I didn't become a better football player; I was as lousy a football player at Kings Point as I was in high school. But that determination, that stick-to-itiveness, made it possible for me to gain admittance to Kings Point on the second try. With that success came an added bonus. My confidence got a much-needed boost.

As I matured, life experiences strengthened my capacity to cope with real catastrophes. There is no better example of that than the rigorous mental and physical training at Kings Point. Next came the navy, and being faced with life-or-death situations. Even traveling and living overseas had an impact on my capacity to deal with crises. There was the terror of Pan Am Flight 830, and shipboard fire in Kaohsiung that claimed sixteen lives. I'm not what you would call a fun guy, but I do have a sense of humor that helped me through the tight spots.

I knew everybody's life is full of hard knocks. You look at life, and know it's not a cakewalk. But you must be able to bounce back and get on with your life because there is still much to live for. But as I lay healing, questions nagged me: Why do cruel and inexplicable things happen? Why

is a young life taken? My gut told me that the pains and ills suffered in this life are predicated on our actions in the previous life, just as our destiny in the next life will be predicated on how we conduct ourselves in this life. How else can injustice be explained, other than to say it is beyond our comprehension?

Throughout my convalescence, I was reassured by the knowledge that statistically, the survival rate for prostate cancer was high. The challenge, however, was to get through the convalescence, and this is where Dorine saved the day. By this time Dr. Dorine M. Starace had earned her PhD and took a job at UCLA as a research scientist specializing in neuroscience. Much of her work focused on the use of biophysics in determining how the human nervous system functions. She wrote papers with titles such as “Voltage-Dependent Proton Transport by the Voltage Sensor of the Shaker K⁺ Channel,” and, “Activation of Transducin by a *Xenopus* Short Wavelength Visual Pigment.” Notwithstanding my technical background, I’m embarrassed to say that I could understand only about every third word, and even then, only the grammatical articles.

In spite of her busy schedule, she managed to slip away for two weeks to nurse me back to health. That so typifies Dorine’s finest quality—generosity that springs from a heart of gold. She would later play a similar role for me after three more surgical procedures. For that kind of devotion I am eternally grateful. Her tender love and care made full recovery not only possible, but bearable. I began going to the fitness center again two or three times a week and maintaining a healthy diet, and as much as I was able, feeling that things were getting

better. Clearly, my bout with cancer gave me new respect for the sanctity of life.



The next tragedy came in 2005. This time it hit my daughter-in-law Suzanne. She was married to my son Michael, and died October 14, 2005 at age forty-one after a two-year bout with cancer, chemotherapy, and all of the rest that goes with trying to survive the dreaded disease. She gave all of us a lesson in strength and courage that would remain an inspiration to her family and ours, and especially to her sons Benjamin and Brian.

Loss of life at any age is tragic. But in Suzanne's case it was especially so because her life was flourishing. Her new executive position at a major publishing company showed ever-increasing promise. Yet, she never lost touch with the demanding needs of her family. We recall her multifaceted talents as mother, wife, professional, friend, and homemaker who did it all so exceptionally well. Artistic too, she helped instill in her sons a deep appreciation for the arts. Brian's achievements in playing the piano and saxophone are examples of artistic endeavors in which he and his brother Benjamin consistently excel.

Michael and the boys picked up the pieces of their lives and moved on, relying very heavily on each other, and on Suzanne's legacy. However, we all shared some dark ruminations. Our fortunes seemed to be in decline for no apparent reason. Were we witnessing events going on in the family that seemed a microcosm of what was going on in our great nation, which was also suffering misfortunes at home and abroad? There are indeed parallels. Perhaps we were overextending our commitments and our finances. Were

we in spiritual decline? Were we too focused on material prosperity? Were we committed to the same values that had been a cornerstone of our success to date? More specifically, had old-fashioned values such as discipline, loyalty, obedience, and being responsible been irretrievably lost? Had we forgotten about the power of prayer? Did we care enough about those less fortunate than ourselves? Lastly, had we forgotten our roots; the roots that gave us moral courage and strength that became the foundation on which everything else was based? I grappled with these issues on a national and personal level. Since Nicky's suicide and the ensuing tragedies, I had become sharply cognizant of these questions, and made efforts where I could to do something about them, however humble. I was doing my best to focus on the importance of giving to the people around me—giving time, skill, money, and talent. From it came a new credo, "Life's greatest gift is to give." That will be my epitaph. I began volunteering at the local VA hospital, and also felt that I had become a more compassionate person.

I developed a bond with Gerry Salveson, brought about by sharing what I believe to be life's greatest pain, the loss of a child—mine to suicide, his, to the Harrods bombing. An even stronger bond developed between my sister Anne and I, who had lost her daughter, Ellen. Only a person who has lost a child can truly relate to the never-ending anguish, and Anne had given me love and support at a time when I needed it most. She understood that when you lose a child you never stop grieving, nor do you ever know real joy again.

There are simply too many painful reminders. Nicky's favorite song was Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba." As a toddler, he would laugh and dance around like a jumping bean every time he heard it. Difficult, too, is listening to

Eric Clapton's poignant song "Tears in Heaven," which he wrote after his four-year-old son fell from the fifty-third-story window of an apartment. Every time I hear the lyric wherein he asks his son, "Would you hold my hand if I saw you in heaven?" it brings a lump to my throat. However, the most touching tune was Nicky's own composition, "My Dad." The lyric consisted of just two words—"my dad." Every morning as I walked out the door he would sing it to me over and over again to his own melody. It still rings in my ears. Even writing about it now is painful. With the passage of time the grieving is no less acute; the only difference is I'm now able to at least talk about it. Still, there is this terrible ache every time I see a child who bears the slightest resemblance. The final joy for me is to know there is one more crying hug waiting for me upon entering the Pearly Gates, as I hear the good Lord whisper in my ear, "Your boy is waiting for you."

Oh, but how life sometimes plays out in mysterious ways. In December 2003 my daughter Dorine was blessed with a son whom she named Nicholas IV, after her brother and me. I somehow feel he is a reincarnation of the son we lost. So maybe God doesn't work in such mysterious ways after all—he gave my son back to me. With his birth I am thankful every day for the joy he brings me, joy I thought I could never feel again. "Joy" is the warm feeling I got from something he said to me recently. Curious to know what happens to people when they get old and need to be *fixed*, I told him that sometimes they have to go to the doctor and maybe even go to the hospital. He mused for a bit and then asked what happens if they can't be fixed? "Unfortunately," I said, "They will eventually die." He then said, with the sweetness that only a five-year-old can exhibit, "Granddad, I want to die when you die."

Every night after he goes to bed, I go to his room, and just before he falls asleep I gently kiss his blond head and whisper in his ear, “Goodnight sweetheart, I love you.” In the comfort of his warm bed, with a belly full of his favorite pasta, a slight nod of his head tells me he heard me. It is impossible to explain how much I regret not having done that every night with my Nicky. It is what every parent should do every day of their lives in one form or another—let their children know they are loved.



If I consider how I handled the quadruple whammy, I will say I did pretty well. I wasn’t “depressed for months” after these events, nor did I experience “utter despair.” There was distress and tension, yes. But there was still much to live for. I had to get on with my life and face up to the responsibilities around me.

In my lifetime I’ve probably had more than my share of close calls. As I look back on those incidents I rejoice and am thankful that my guardian angel works overtime. There’s a marvelous witticism in an Annie Lennox lyric that so aptly captures the downright frustration many of us feel in dealing with life’s challenges. The great Scottish singer-songwriter in her ballad, “Cold,” tells us, “Dying is easy. It’s living that scares me.” Sometimes I think my life reads like a soap opera—son’s suicide, divorce, cancer survivor, two children involved in near-death car accidents, loss of my daughter-in-law, several near-death experiences, earthquake survivor, numerous surgeries, military death in the family, survivor of terrorism and of hurricanes in the North Atlantic and typhoons in the Pacific Ocean—but I’m certainly not ready to abandon the ship of life. I continue

to be an optimist, a sentimental fool, the dreamer who wallows in the prospects of a utopian world void of evil and tyranny.

Sometimes I wake up believing that to “make love, not war” is impossible in the face of human frailties and weaknesses. The world can never be a perfect place, because people are not perfect. We are victims of a vast complex of human prejudices that are difficult to understand, let alone combat. Religious strife continues unabated as a cornerstone of international conflict, as it has for centuries. The human race continuously proves it is capable of heinous crimes. However, when I get too down on myself and the world around me, and need inspiration, I reflect on Mother Teresa, an ethnic Albanian whom I consider to be the greatest person of the twentieth century. Her legendary charitable work was the embodiment of integrity and humility. She dedicated her life to serving “the poorest of the poor,” from her base in Calcutta, India. When she died in 1997, her Missionaries of Charity had nearly four thousand nuns and ran nearly six hundred orphanages, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and clinics around the world. And when critics questioned her Nobel Peace Prize, she replied with the noblest and most divine words that I have ever heard, and which still ring in my ears: “The fruit of service is love, and the fruit of love is peace.”