

After the show's dramatic conclusion, we were in the car driving Grandma back to her apartment when we were suddenly shaken by an enormous explosion. Our conversation halted as we nervously looked around.

"Look, look! Over there!" Daddy shouted as he pointed toward an enormous billow of smoke hanging in the sky just one short block to the right of us. We all snapped our heads in that direction. That is to say, all of us snapped our heads . . . except for Mom. She was sitting quietly in the back seat, in between my brother and me. Her eyes were half closed and a bit glazed over. She appeared to be lost in a state of mind that Daddy would later refer to as a "catatonic condition."

Daddy was too intrigued by the explosion to notice anything else around him. You could see the wheels turning round and round in his head as he tried to drive closer to the source of the blaze.

"Richard!" Grandma squealed nervously. "Richard, don't you dare drive me anywhere else but home—this instant!"

Daddy chuckled, holding his course, then replied with a sly smile, "Oh Ma, all you do is worry. Don't be such a scaredy cat. Let's go check out the action!"

"Oh, Vixadunavettle!" Grandma shot back in frustration, using her infamous German swearword that nobody else knew how to properly pronounce, let alone spell.

Daddy ignored Grandma's fury and addressed Mom, "You doing all right back there, Rainy?"

It took Mom a minute to realize that someone was speaking to her. "Yes, Rick. I'm fine," she responded apathetically, completely unaware of the surrounding excitement.

Daddy maneuvered the car to within half a block of the blast. "Richard! God have mercy!" Grandma dramatically shouted as she clung helplessly to the passenger's door in the front seat.

Daddy just chuckled again as if he were playing some kind of espionage game while staring at the scene that lay before us. A gigantic cloud of dusty, black smoke hovered ominously in the air above a Sinclair gas station. As it was making its slow ascent toward the heavens, it ignited without warning, mercilessly spewing its blistering breath below. People were sent screaming, and there was absolute chaos as everyone in the direct path of the fireball ran for their lives. Daddy had kept us at a safe distance, yet still close enough to scare my brother and me. As the two of us sat on the edge of our seats with our mouths agape, I had to stifle a scream. I had no idea how my brother was feeling, but I was in complete agreement with Grandma and wanted to get out of there . . . pronto!

Leaving the scene was the furthest thing from Daddy's mind. He was like one of those crazed storm chasers, hungering to catch a buzz off the excitement. It was only when he realized that Grandma's panic attack was getting worse that he finally eased the Buick around. As soon as Grandma sensed we were heading away from the fireball and toward the safety of her apartment, her shoulders slackened into a more relaxed position and she took a deep breath. "Please take me home, Richard," she quietly requested, clearly drained of all emotion.

Daddy reached over, reassuringly patted her thigh and teased, "Oh, Ma-a! You know I'd never let anything happen to you."

Grandma gave him a weary smile.

As we drove the remainder of the way back to Grandma's apartment in silence, Mikie and I instinctively sought protection from our mother, huddling as close to her as we could like two newborn puppies. She didn't seem to notice. "Momma?" I said. "Momma, are you okay?"

Neither the oddity of the explosion nor the sound of my young voice was an antidote for her catatonic state. She simply stared out the window at the blurred images fleeing past.



Mom continued seeping in and out of reality. On those days when she was faring well, she'd desperately try to fulfill the role of the wife and mother she'd long dreamt of becoming. She'd frequently join Mikie and me at the park, clean our house from top to bottom, and cook or bake anything her family requested, even if she didn't care much for it herself. Daddy enjoyed food almost as much as he enjoyed the water, and it wasn't unusual to hear him sweet-talk Mom into culinary pursuits. "Hey Rainy, maybe you could fix us that famous hot dish of yours tonight?" or "Honey, how 'bout whipping up a batch of homemade onion rings?" Mom was especially thoughtful whenever a birthday rolled around. She could always be found in the kitchen lovingly preparing our favorite cake. Mine was a German chocolate number with extra coconut frosting, no exceptions. Mikie chose white topped with chocolate fudge, and Daddy opted for angel food smothered in whipped cream and strawberries.

During the heart of each autumn, Mom would unfailingly bake us an all-American apple pie, and the tantalizing smell of cinnamon and sugar would fill our entire house. The instant it drifted past my nose, I'd stop whatever I was doing and race into the kitchen to beg for the leftover, sugarcoated crust I knew Mom had prepared especially for me. The radio was usually on, and if I happened to catch her when one of her favorite songs was playing she'd gently grab hold of both my hands and encourage, "C'mon, Baby, let's dancie dance." She'd lead me out into the center of the kitchen where the two of us would bop and groove together for a few blissful minutes. Mom would always giggle while enjoying my performance. "You are the cutest little thing, Baby Girl!" she'd say. "Just look at you. Why, you could be on *American Bandstand!*"

I so dearly cherished tender moments like those. They were rare exchanges of nothing but utter joy between just the two of us, mother and daughter. Mom's unconditional delight with that of her own creation bathed me in the purest kind of rapture, a treasure that would forever remain untarnished deep within my heart.



During the times when Mom's mind became paralyzed and unreachable, she would retreat to her bedroom and simply disappear. She would often be gone for only a few hours, but occasionally her absence lasted for days. If she were clearly in dire straits she'd end up back in the hospital, at which point Grandma would move back in with us until she returned. Her life's rhythm was unpredictable, even to herself.

As I look back on it all now, I realize just how hard Daddy tried to buffer my brother and me from the seriousness of Mom's illness. He spent countless hours taking us on canoe rides and patiently sitting on sandy, city beaches while we blissfully fluttered in the cool waters. He would often chaperone a tribe of our friends to enchanting places like the Conservatory, where limitless merry-go-round rides were enjoyed and scores of chocolate chip ice cream cones were avidly devoured. Daddy carefully colored the empty spaces of our world with so much laughter and fun that we never had time to grasp the true weight of our circumstance.

On a cool, crisp October evening in the fall of 1972, Mikie and I were sprawled out on our living room floor in the midst of creating homemade Halloween costumes. We'd rounded up a couple of large, beat-up cardboard boxes and were attempting to transform them into fake television sets with a little help from some tinfoil and black magic markers.

“Hey, Mikie, where’s the scissors?” I asked. “I need to cut out my TV screen.”

Mikie scanned the floor, thinking he’d already grabbed a pair. As soon as he realized his mistake, he got up and sifted through a nearby desk.

“That’s weird,” he said. “I thought they were right here.”

“I’ll go upstairs and check with Momma,” I said. “Be right back.”

I pushed myself away from the floor, passed through the dining room, then mounted the stairs and headed for Mom’s bedroom at the end of the second floor hallway. I noticed that her curtains had been drawn, and only the flicker from a small lamp on the dresser lit the dark room. I could hear an angry, muffled voice as I approached, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It sounded unfamiliar to me, and I wasn’t able to place it. I cautiously slowed my pace.

“You don’t know!” The angry voice shouted in a scratchy whisper. “You don’t know anything! Go straight to hell!”

I was scared now. As I moved forward, my lower lip began to tremble. “Momma? You there?” I asked as bravely as I could.

There was no answer.

The angry whispers continued.

Once I reached the threshold of Mom’s room, I could see her lying in bed underneath the covers, still fully dressed. Her pale, agonized face twisted and contorted as she carried on her delusional conversation with an unknown being.

“Momma?” I said in a soft, trembling voice.

She didn’t realize I was calling her name, so I stepped closer. As I passed her dresser something unusual caught my eye, and I glanced over at it. On the mirror was a message erratically scrawled in dark, red lipstick that read:

Demons Be Gone! Leave Me in Peace!

The blood rushed from my face. I couldn't comprehend what was happening and was so terrified that I began to cry.

"Momma!" I shouted as tears streamed down my face.

"Momma! Are you all right?"

My anguished cries jostled Mom from her trance, and she glared at me with bloated, resentful eyes.

"Get out!" She yelled at me.

"Momma, what's wrong with you?" I was sobbing now.

"Get out of my room . . . this instant!" She started to get out of bed, so I turned and ran back toward the stairs.

"Momma, please don't do this! You're scaring me, Momma!" I yelled over my shoulder. I ran down the stairs and back into the living room.

My brother looked concerned. "What's wrong?" he asked, clearly having heard all the commotion.

"Something's really weird with Momma this time!" I stuttered as I tried to get my explanation out in between sobs.

"Slow down, I can't hear what you're saying," Mikie instructed.

Just as I was trying to calm down and retell my story, Daddy walked in the front door. "Hi, Kids," he greeted as he began to take off his coat. It didn't take long for him to notice my distress.

"What is it, Twink? What's wrong?" he asked as he hung up his coat, then quickly strode toward me.

"It's Momma! Something really bad has happened!" I told him.

Daddy gently guided me over to the couch, sat down next to me and put his arm around my slender, heaving shoulders while Mikie plopped onto the floor next to his half-finished cardboard TV set.

As I unfolded my bizarre conversation with Mom, Daddy's face became completely expressionless. He kept on

sighing and shaking his head from side to side. Mikie looked as scared and confused as I was.

Daddy tried to reassure my brother and me, just as he always did, and then became uncomfortably silent for what seemed like a long time, his breath deepening as the minutes took their toll.

“Now, you kids stay right here,” he uneasily instructed. “I need to go make a call to Grandma.” Mikie and I exchanged wary glances. We both knew exactly what that meant.

The next morning, Mom was gone and Grandma had moved back in.



Up until this point, neither Mikie nor I had ever visited Mom while she was away. Daddy finally decided that it was time for the four of us to reunite, despite the supernatural forces that poisoned the well of our existence.

The drive from our house out to the County Hospital was well beyond the city limits. A forested landscape and several family farms dotting the route were our only relief from boredom, except for an occasional herd of heifers. Each time my brother and I spied one of those large, gentle creatures, we exuberantly greeted it in our own, special moo-language until Daddy couldn't take it anymore and made us roll our windows back up.

As we neared the hospital, Daddy tried to prepare us for what lay ahead as he described the facility where Mom was staying. “And Kids,” he cautioned, “don't expect Mom to be the mother you're used to. She may be very tired or in a catatonic condition or overmedicated. It's hard to say at this point.”

I took my eyes off the scenery and momentarily stared at the back of Daddy's seat. I suddenly felt overwhelmed at the loss of my mother and wanted someone—anyone—to put her

back together again . . . just like it was before when she used to hold me tightly in her arms on our red rocker and tickle my toes.

As we pulled into the hospital grounds, we drove past a lone woman who walked feebly down the street in our direction. The enduring lines of agony that were etched across her face were a constant reminder to all of the battle within, and a clear indication that her demons had been victorious. Her haunting gaze followed us until we were well beyond its reach, leaving me uneasy about the condition of my mother.

I can still vividly recall the place where Mom was staying. Several lovely, turn-of-the-century, brown brick cottages collectively speckled a circular street that wound its way around a little park as serene creek waters flowed nearby; the deceptive charm of it all masking its painful reality.

As Daddy maneuvered the Buick over to cottage number 8, it felt as though we were pulling up to a mansion in the rich part of town rather than a home for the ailing. Inside the cottage, however, was a much different story. It was divided into several small rooms, providing each occupant the security of their own private space.

Mom's room was located up one flight of stairs and to the left. As the three of us ascended, we passed a nurse who gave Daddy a tired greeting, dark shadows encircling her eyes. Mikie and I started to chatter until Daddy glanced back at us, quickly drew a forefinger to his mouth and whispered, "Shhhhh . . . we don't want to disturb anybody." My brother and I immediately came to attention and fell in line behind him, now sheepish and silent.

Mom's austere, spotless room was dimly lit. She was lying in bed with her eyes closed, propped up against a few pillows. The three of us approached her side, then Daddy lovingly touched her arm and whispered, "Rainy, it's Rick. How ya doing today, Kiddo?"

Mom became aware of someone beside her and groggily replied, "Oh, Rick. Is that you?"

Daddy said, "I've brought the kids this time, Honey."

Mom struggled to open her eyes. They fluttered several times in an attempt to squint at us. "My dear little ones," she whispered before closing them again. Her effort to connect with us seemed to sap her strength.

"Daddy? Is Momma having another catama-tonic condition again?" I asked fretfully.

"Not this time, Twink. Momma's just very, very tired. She's been through a lot these past few weeks."

"Dad?" Mikie asked. "Is Mom going to be able to come back home soon?"

Daddy didn't answer at first, solemnly staring at his young wife's drained face. She was only thirty-four yet looked decades older. "I'm not sure, Son," he said after a while.

We lingered in the room for a few more minutes before Daddy felt it was time to head back home. He took my hand in his, and the three of us slowly exited cottage number 8, each heart as heavy as a boat anchor.

After we piled back into the Buick, I stared up at Mom's window in earnest, hoping she would show us a sign of life and wave goodbye, but her pretty, delicate face was not destined to appear.

It would be several more weeks before I would see that face again.



Mikie and I were restless when we arrived home later that afternoon. We didn't feel like being with our friends or going outside, so we just sat around my brother's bedroom and played Parcheesi while listening to the local bee-bop radio station.

I was winning and excitedly teased, "Bet you wish you were me, Loser!" Mikie gave me a dirty look. "Shhhhh. Listen," he said as he cocked his head, trying to concentrate and silently pointed at the radio.

Initially, I took this as an attempt to outmaneuver me, but as he became more insistent I stopped teasing him and paid attention to the chipper voice of the radio announcer.

KS97 was having a contest with a Payday of \$10,000 big ones! All my brother and I had to do was keep listening to their station and identify whichever song accompanied the chime of a cash register. Mikie and I got really excited about our big break. Mom constantly had the radio on, and the two of us could recognize just about every current hit there was.

"Mikie! Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I gleefully asked.

"Ahhh..." stammered my brother. "Well . . . that's a ton of money. We could buy lots with it. Get some primo hockey gear, a super cool stereo . . ."

"We could get a kitty!" I interrupted, and then began to imagine shopping for all the toys I'd dreamt about, and the possibility of a new pink banana bike. After several minutes, my thoughts steered me back to Mom. I looked over at my brother and asked, "Wait a minute. What is the-e-e one thing we've wanted more than anything else?"

Mikie thought about it for a while and then astutely responded, "We've always wanted Mom to never get sick again."

"Exactly! And if we won the 10,000 bucks, we could send Momma to that one place she's always talking about." I crinkled my nose as I tried to remember the name of it. I asked my brother, "What's it called again? Loads? No, wait... Louds!"

"Lourdes, Dum Dum."

Whenever Mom told us the story of the tiny French town where a young, peasant girl named Bernadette had several

recurring visions of the Virgin Mary, she would get a faraway look in her eyes. Since that miraculous event, just a century before, tens of thousands of pilgrims have fervently flocked to the surrounding baptismal waters. As soon as they immersed their burdened flesh into the soothing, aquatic arms of salvation, something powerful happened, something rather miraculous. Their earthly wounds, both physical and metaphysical, vanished, and they became whole souls once more. No more tears to be shed. No more agony of mind and spirit. Just a gloriously radiant being who was free once more to give love and to receive it. Mom was certain that the waters at Lourdes were the conduit between heaven and earth.

My brother and I were true believers. We were so convinced that if Mom could get enough money to make the quest, all her troubles would be gone, and . . . all our troubles would be gone.

We were now on a mission. When we weren't in school, we burrowed ourselves in Mikie's room, flipped on the radio, and played board games until we got the signal that it was time to call in and win the \$10,000 prize.

We were shocked when we didn't win on the first try. We didn't even win on the second. We dialed our little hearts out, but someone else beat us to the punch every single time. Saturday sped by, then Sunday. We tried again all night Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. No luck. The weekend rolled back around and we were plumb sick of playing games and waiting by the radio. We finally realized that there were just too many other people in the city who were also trying to get their paws on the prize. It was time to give up. Any hope of being able to reclaim our mother from her murky, catatonic state was gone. We were crestfallen.

We slumped up to Daddy's bedroom on the third floor, and told him we had decided to abandon our scheme. He gave us a comforting look, then kidded, "Is that why you two have been holed up in Mikie's room all week?" He leaned forward

to lovingly tweak my nose and pat Mikie's shoulder. "You're good kids, you know. Never forget that. Your mom would be real proud of what you tried to do for her. She'd be real proud."



Mom came home from the mental hospital a few weeks after Halloween, just as the leaves were beginning to change from deep, earthy greens to burnt reds and cornhusk yellows. She'd never gotten to see the cool TV sets that Mikie and I had concocted out of the cardboard boxes we'd scavenged from the corner grocer, so Daddy found a Polaroid he'd taken of us on Halloween night and stuck it on the fridge.

"What's this, Honey?" Mom asked of me one morning as I was sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

"Don't you remember, Momma? Those are the costumes Mikie and I made."

Mom stood in front of the fridge and stared at the picture for a long time. "Why, I'm sorry, Dear . . ." she began before briefly pausing, ". . . that I wasn't able to be here with you."

I stopped crunching my cereal and reflected on our visit at the mental hospital, then somberly replied, "Me too, Momma."

As the days passed, I could sense Mom's relief to be back home. In the evenings, she could usually be found in her room quietly reading the Bible in bed. I longed for her company and often sought her out before going to sleep. On one particular evening she smiled at me when I entered her bedroom and patted the side of the bed, silently beckoning me to sit beside her. She set her book down and lovingly caressed the side of my face.

"You are a beautiful, little girl, Baby. So beautiful," she said tenderly.