

THE NEWS

I always thought if something happened to one of my children, I would somehow know. I would feel it inside. If I were asleep, I would jolt awake with a horrible, heavy hearted, knowing feeling. I would pace the floor until the call came, confirming my fear. It would only be a matter of how it happened and then, the fear confirmed, I would fall onto the floor, screaming until everything went black and I died myself or the world ended.

But it didn't work that way. I slept. I slept all night, even though a horrible accident had happened at three a.m.. I didn't find out about the accident until after ten o'clock the next morning. And when I did find out, I didn't die. The world didn't end. The sun just kept on unmercifully rising day after day.

I had remarried after being divorced for ten years and the address Stephen and I had shared had changed, but his driver's license hadn't been updated. I suppose the police went to an empty apartment to notify us of the horrible accident. Stephen had a list of phone numbers in his wallet, numbers only, names weren't present. Since he knew to whom the numbers belonged, he apparently didn't feel that it was important to write the names. He was eighteen. Go figure.

I had told him to always have the home phone and my pager number with him. He said of course he did. And he did – toward the bottom of the list. Behind the girlfriend and the guys and the girls who were just friends. The police apparently grew tired of talking to kids in the middle of the night and quit long before they got to my pager number or the home phone.

The kids that the policemen called asking for next of kin were freaking out and calling the house at a frantic rate – but they were calling downstairs, to Stephen's private line – a phone we couldn't even hear ringing upstairs.

The call we received at ten the next morning was from the co-ordinator of the foreign exchange student board. Stephen had met a wonderful girl, Isabelle, who was an exchange student from Paris. Isabelle had stayed with this co-ordinator before being placed with a host *family*, which is why Stephen had the co-ordinator's number near the top of his list. Isabelle's host *family's* number was also near the top of the list, but they couldn't be reached that Sunday morning.

Everyone seemed to give up except this lady that I had never met. She didn't quit until she had Isabelle on the other end of the line. Isabelle gave her the upstairs phone number and the phone call was made, telling us that the police were looking for next of kin for Stephen Beam.

Ron, the wonderful man I had just married, took the phone call. The color drained from his face in front of my eyes. I asked what was wrong and he didn't answer. He took off downstairs to his office, next to Stephen's bedroom. I followed. He was dialing from the office phone. Urgent business on a Sunday morning? No. Business could

never have put a look like that on his face. Not even if he had just lost his entire business.

With a pleading look on his face, he pushed the door shut behind him and began to talk quietly. I saw the message light blinking frantically on Stephen's extension at the computer just outside his bedroom and I walked to it. I flipped through caller ID and saw many familiar names, having called at very early hours. I couldn't get the messages, as Stephen had his own password.

"What is going on?" I demanded hysterically, walking back toward Ron's office.

He laid his head against the now partially opened door of his office, his green eyes full of tears. "Isabelle's co-ordinator says the police called her before daylight looking for next of kin for Stephen," he said in a voice that choked on the words. "I called the police and they say they don't have anything. I'm trying to find out what's going on."

"Find out now!" I heard myself scream, but he was already dialing again.

I was shaking. It was April 13th and very warm in the house, but I was cold. Horribly cold. Stephen was supposed to be spending the night with a friend. I walked back to his caller ID unit to confirm that the friend's name was among those having called before daylight. I shuddered as the number appeared. This wasn't a good sign. If Stephen would have called from the friend's house, he would have called on the upstairs line. I walked back to Ron's office and looked at him helplessly.

“I’ve left our number with the police and asked them to please look into it,” Ron said in answer to my look as he frantically dialed yet another number.

It had to be a cruel hoax if the police didn’t have anything, didn’t it? Please let it be a cruel hoax.

I dialed the friend’s number from Stephen’s phone and didn’t get an answer. I called my twenty five year old daughter, Stephanie, and begged her to tell me she had heard from Stephen. She hadn’t seen him since ten thirty the night before.

The phone in Ron’s office, idle for a second, rang. Ron grabbed it and took off upstairs, not seeming to believe what he was hearing. I followed. He went out onto the deck and closed the sliding glass door behind him. At this point, I knew I didn’t want to know what they were saying, so I stayed in the kitchen.

The phone call was from the morgue. Stephen’s body was there, an autopsy just completed. As the medical examiner gave a stammering Ron the exact cause of death, she realized that we hadn’t even been notified of the accident. She apologized profusely, saying she had called the police station and asked for our number and it was given to her. Call me stupid, but this could not be standard procedure.

Maybe there is no ideal way to find out, but this was seriously lacking something. When Ron called the police station back, asking why no one knew what was going on, the policeman said there had been a shift change since the accident. Well, leave a sticky note.

Under the circumstances, I feel that every number on the list Stephen had should have been called until I was

found. Ron has his own business at home, but also is a policeman second shift and if a child were to die on his shift, I know without him telling me, he wouldn't come home until he had up close and personally told those parents. I would expect no less of him.

Stephen had died at three a.m. in a single car accident. He couldn't sleep at his friend's house. Sleeping away from home had never been easy for him. When he was a child, I missed many episodes of *Dallas* because the phone call to pick him up usually came about that time on Friday night. I didn't mind. But now he could drive and he had left on his own.

He lost control of his little truck in a very bad curve, hitting a tree. The first witness on the scene was on foot, asking someone in a car to call 911. The wheels of the truck were still spinning as the people in the car called for help, then ran to the truck. The pedestrian disappeared. I will always feel that Stephen swerved to miss this pedestrian and lost control of his truck. Of course, I will never know.

Stephen had his seat belt on, the truck caved in on him. The steering wheel hit him just above the heart, severing his pulmonary artery and almost severing the aorta. He had died in less than a minute. An autopsy had been performed because Georgia law requires an autopsy on anyone under twenty one who dies suddenly.

When I went to bed on Saturday night, I had a healthy, beautiful eighteen year old son, whose most used line was, "Aw, Mama, you worry too much." When I awoke, that beautiful little boy was gone from me, his body battered by windshields, steering wheels and an autopsy.

It wasn't just the undecided, slightly reckless teenager I had to begin to try to give up. It was the infant who had lived in the world of Winnie the Pooh, who lay in my arms, taking his bottle, and when he saw me smiling at him, stopped taking the bottle and smiled back at me, the milk running out the corners of his mouth. It was the little boy who brought me flowers with a wonderful smile on his face when he was four, the arm with the flowers outstretched toward me, a cat named Charlie Bobby Sox tucked under his other arm.

It was the little league football player, smiling at me from under his helmet and giving me thumbs up, the twelve year old who cracked me up trying to bodysurf in Hawaii, the thirteen year old who had toured Europe with me, playing in the snow in the Alps. And yes, the eighteen year old, who outweighed me and towered over me, who had hugged me and comforted me just one short month earlier when he had served as pallbearer at my Dad's funeral.

I lost the baby, the little boy and the almost man - in one swift and fatal blow. I walked numbly back downstairs. I stood against the washing machine, trying to figure out how life could go on. I didn't want to call anybody because repeating it would make it more real. I sunk to the floor, the washing machine grazing my spine painfully as I went into a sitting position. I saw a pair of his dirty blue jeans in the laundry basket beside me. I embraced my knees, laid my head down, and rocked myself. "My baby," I sobbed. "My baby."

I seemed to rise from my broken body, much as Stephen must have risen from his broken body on his way to Heaven. I called my daughter because I knew I had to. Her husband answered and I heard him say over and over, “Oh, no. Oh, no, man.” He was like a brother to Stephen.

Stephanie’s voice was one of devastation, then, just as I did, she rose from her wrecked body and took it upon herself to drive to her dad’s house in North Georgia to deliver the news.

Our TV had been playing before that horrible phone call came through, but no one was watching it. On my slow and painful ascent upstairs, I heard a news brief speaking of a horrible accident. When I reached the top of the stairs, I saw Stephen’s little truck plastered on the TV screen, slices through the roof support posts of the cab a tell tale sign of the way his body had been retrieved. The name was being withheld pending notification of next of kin, the voice said, but I knew the other phone calls had to be made before all the other people who loved him saw the truck on TV. The news brief had been running every hour, if anyone would have been paying attention to the TV, we would have found out in yet another horrible way.

I called a friend. She was at church and her recorder picked up. I repeated the news to see how it sounded. It sounded horrible. I called my sister. She started crying and I stood like a zombie. I envied her having the ability to feel. I thought for a moment of my poor wrecked body down by the washing machine. But there was no time to think about that now. There were things I had to do.

Ron and my sister made the other phone calls and people started to come to the house. Some were surprised to see me cleaning a mirror or wiping off a counter. They would tell me to sit down. They didn't know that wiping the counter or cleaning the mirror gave me something to do with my life for the next five minutes and I couldn't think any further ahead than that.

Ron called the same funeral home that had handled my dad's funeral and arrangements were made for them to pick up Stephen's body at the morgue. We were to meet with them at four to make the arrangements for Stephen. All I could think about was my little boy's body in a cold morgue. "I want to go there. I need to be with him."

"No, you don't," people would say kindly. "He's in Heaven. That's just his body. You don't need to go there. You don't need to see him that way."

This wasn't happening.

I asked Ron to go by the tree Stephen had hit on the way to the funeral home. I had to make myself believe, so I stared at the scene. Stephen had hit the tree with the left front corner of the truck, the driver's side, the steering column becoming a battering ram to his heart. The left tire, wheel and all, was still lying against the tree. Why it hadn't been taken with the truck, I didn't know. The front grill was there, as well, and the inside console that had obviously been removed when the top was lifted off the truck. A yellow piece of plastic with some blood on it that his body had been placed on had also been discarded carelessly on the spot.

Cassette tapes were scattered, the brown tape spilling out of some of them. The strewn tape reminded me of when Stephen was a toddler and had gotten his hands on Stephanie's Madonna tapes, destroying them. I picked a tape up numbly. Confederate Railroad. *Jesus and Mama*. *Jesus and Mama always loved me*, the words came into my head. Guns N' Roses lay beside it. Metallica lay a step or two away.

A cracked plastic cassette case with names of songs recorded from Isabelle's CDs lay a little further down. The song titles were written in French in beautiful female penmanship. I picked up another tape with an assortment of songs that had been recorded from the radio. I had recorded them. Sam Cooke, Three Dog Night, Sammy Johns' *Chevy Van*, *Snoopy's Christmas* by the Royal Guardsman. Stephen had always laughed at Snoopy's Christmas battle with the Red Baron. All were songs that had been introduced to him by me. I remembered the fun we had had.

Fighting tears, I clutched the tapes in my hand and looked at the tree. A small pine tree. It didn't look big enough to do the damage that had been done. The bark was gone in the spot where the truck had hit and the tree was leaning. Beyond the tree, in the woods, lay his blue and white basketball. University of Kentucky. He had won it at Six Flags shooting baskets. He won one almost every time he played. The basketball had been catapulted from the back of the truck. I walked to it and picked it up, and clutching it close to me, along with the tapes, told my husband I was ready to go.

At the funeral home, I was told his body wouldn't be ready for viewing until the next morning. I remembered all the people who had assured me I didn't want to see him before the undertakers had their time with him. How bad was he? We made the funeral arrangements and went home and I went to my body beside the washer and cried.