



ESCAPE ARTIST

I was 26 and never imagined a child could die.

Nikki Hardin

My son died on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, four days after Christmas, in a newsworthy snowstorm, on the back seat of our big red Ford Galaxie. We were making the long drive home from our parents' homes in Kentucky to our apartment on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. The wide back seat of the car had been turned into a temporary sickroom, all three children recovering from flu and curled up asleep in a nest of blankets, still clutching oversized plastic candy canes filled with M&Ms. Thirty-nine years later, I still have to turn my head in the drugstore when I pass holiday displays of those same candies.

Michael, the oldest, had just turned five. Born with Down Syndrome, he was attached to this earth so lightly that it was my mission, my job, to make sure he didn't let go. Middle of the night trips to the emergency room for shots of adrenaline to open his lungs, almost weekly doctor visits, special classes, every day spent hoping for progress and coaxing him to eat so he wouldn't have to make yet another trip to the hospital. That Christmas we had all been sick and spread out among relatives to convalesce, with Michael having the worst case and taking the longest time to recover. The day before we packed the car and headed for home, the local doctor had examined him and pronounced him okay to travel.

I was 26 and never imagined a child could die. Someday Michael would outgrow ear infections and bouts of bronchitis. His appetite would pick up, and he'd gain weight. He'd learn to talk—it was just a matter of time. And he wouldn't always be in diapers—it was just a matter of time. But time ran out on us and Michael let go, quietly except for a choking sound that I thought was a return of his cough. When I leaned over the seat to check his temperature periodically, he was cool and I was relieved because it seemed like such a good sign. Because I was 26 and I never knew children could die or that there was such a thing as a death rattle.

And when you're 26 and you pull up in the parking lot in the middle of the night and you carry the two little ones in and your husband stays behind to bring Michael in, you don't really understand when he runs in the front door screaming that he's dead. And then you're in a dream and you're banging on a stranger's door begging for help and firemen come and work on his body and an ambulance takes him away and your husband goes with them and you're left alone in the house with the other children. And what if you can't keep them safe ever again, because you've already failed once. So when you're 26 and you're used to running away from trouble, you begin to pack away the memories of Michael along with his clothes that very night.

I'd stumbled into motherhood in the same thoughtless way I'd made every big decision in my life. I left home like a horse out of the starting gate, bolting on a hot summer day when I was 17. I eloped to Memphis on a Greyhound bus with my high school boyfriend, a Steve McQueen look-alike I'd break up to make up with a dozen times, a record we'd be playing throughout our marriage. But I had started breaking away from home in my mind years before; my boyfriend just provided the ride. He had joined the Navy to get away from his home and left

for San Diego right after the honeymoon we spent with his parents. When I left to join him, another Greyhound took me west, farther from home than I'd ever been in my life. I was sure I was running toward a big life, but it really turned out to be a big lie. Our marriage turned all wrong right away and being an accomplished escape artist saved my life when that happened—I simply went to a happier place in my head where husbands didn't chase their wives with paring knives or get drunk and fall into the Christmas tree, still swinging and cursing on the way down. Sometimes I even packed up the kids and ran back home to my mother until we could patch up the cracks and move back into the marriage for a while longer.

By the time our son died, I was a hardened escape artist and I took a short cut around grief by throwing myself into funeral plans and funeral food and shopping for funeral clothes, because whoever heard of burying someone in old underwear.

Almost immediately afterwards I started packing for a move to a new duty station. I couldn't wait to leave that apartment full of death behind me. To get rid of the couch with the foam pillows that Michael had poured dish soap on and that continued to emit bubbles for weeks after. To pack away forever the Tijuana Brass records that he loved. To pull away from the corner where we waited for the bus to take him to his little school on the days he was well enough to go. To see the last of the neighbors who avoided us like we were radioactive. Maybe death was catching. Maybe they couldn't wait until our apartment was repainted and a new couple moved in who knew how to keep their kids alive and weren't going to race through the stairwell screaming in the middle of the night.

Sometimes when a child dies, the parents die too but they don't know it. We moved, we made friends, we had another baby, we went to parties. We also grew more bitter, more broken, more brutal with each other. Our marriage was dead, but we couldn't give it a decent burial. And we couldn't let Michael go either. Two years after his death, we finally divorced, but Michael still didn't have a stone on his grave.

In the years to come, I found it almost impossible to say his name, much less have it carved in stone. As long as we didn't mark his death with a stone, I thought it could remain buried. Gradually, I sealed that part of my life off. My ex husband and I never discussed it and when I did talk about it to other people, I heard myself being plucky and matter-of-fact. Because it was so long ago and life goes on and I was still running.

Life did go on, of course, and it was filled with all kinds of good things and all kinds of bad things and lots of so-so things, just like anyone else's, and I was just fine. But decades after Michael died, all the crazy glue that held my jury-rigged seams together started coming undone. My life was great, but I cried a lot and I couldn't figure out why. My life was great, but I thought about death all the time. My life was great, but I couldn't sleep. As so often happens, at just the right time, I found a guide to the underworld who would help me find my way backward so that I could go forward. I don't think it's a coincidence that he had the same name as my son.

And so 35 years after Michael died, I finally went back to Kentucky, the scene of so much of my sorrow, as befits a state known as "the dark and bloody ground," and I finally ordered a stone for Michael. A marker that says his short life is part of this planet's old rolling story. That he has a name. That I remember.