

~ First Place NMW 25 Nonfiction Prize (tie) ~

Mil Norman-Risch
The Day My Son Died

The cough syrup was in a bottle on a shelf in the kitchen. He would need something to make him feel better if we were to bundle him up and take him out in this weather.

I wrapped my sweater around me and walked downstairs to the kitchen, where the dishes reprimanded me in the silence of the counter's blue gray light. I opened the cupboard, found the bottle, read the label: last year's Triaminic, a prescription cough suppressant and antihistamine for children under two. It had expired a week ago. Still, it shouldn't matter, and what else could I do? Not only was it the day after Christmas, but it was Sunday, and the doctor's office was an hour's drive to town.

If going for this walk was something we must manage, *as a family*, this was something I could do now. Measure out the half-teaspoon in its plastic dropper.

None of that was difficult. Nor was insisting his sister wear the scarf and mittens, packing up the diaper bag with the bottle of carrot juice, Melanie's sippy cup and cheerios, the Pampers and the extra change of clothes and shoes, just in case, and remembering to grab the cassette tape of Raffi sing-alongs for the car.

After I wiped his nose once more, I zipped him into his hooded coat of gray and white fabric patterned with clouds. *Blond Boy with Curls in Hooded Coat. Or Portrait of Zippered Cherub, Framed By Clouds.* I forgave myself for these titles, my need to name things in order to see. He wouldn't mind, if he grew up to learn that his mother had put him to bed saying to herself, "look at this angel face and these golden perfect curls," a sentence that really meant, "Thank you for being a baby who goes to sleep at night. I'm just so tired of everything." He won't mind, I told myself, to learn some day that although I was not grateful for the surprise of the pregnancy so soon after the first, I was indeed grateful for the surprise of his spirit, the easy sleeping blond-curl baby that he was.

The walk was not my idea, I was married to a German. Germans own sturdy boots or walking shoes they spray with water repellent. They walk for hours in drizzling rain, through mud bogs, I learned firsthand when we lived in Sehestedt and then here in Virginia. They traipse across miles of gray-brown barren stubble fields in dim winter light, tossing jokes to each other, gaining tempo, inspired by the fog, the damp, and the destination, nowhere.

The people we were meeting two miles away, at a spot where a new road had been carved into the Goochland County woods to create a rural subdivision that ended with cul de sacs, were Germans.

*

I don't know exactly what I was doing when it happened. We had left our cars at the main two-lane, yellow-striped road, at the appointed meeting spot. We had walked far enough down this rude-sliced road, now new with gravel and exposed to light, that we had settled into separate

conversational groupings. Far ahead of me down the road, walking with Mark and his children, was Volkmar, with Melanie riding on his shoulders. Against the gray backdrop of empty winter branches I see their tiny distant figures in my mind now as blots of color—the green of his pants, and above that, the red of his jacket, the yellow of Melanie’s coat, the purple dot of her hat. Father and daughter, colors in a vastness.

Susanne, the German woman, was with me, close enough for us to drift in and out of conversation. I was pacing myself with Christopher, holding his hand. *Christopher, a bulge in his cloud coat, the corduroy sausage legs tipping along in his rubber-edged shoes.* These words and images come to me whenever I tell the story, but I didn’t think that sentence at the time. I just remember walking and then losing the rhythm. But this happens all the time. Toddlers stumble. And then they walk.

But he didn’t.

I pulled on his hand, and nothing happened.

When one tries to retrieve—in all its exactness—a startling moment of awareness, part of the story is really the point before the awareness, the unremarkable vagueness. But what was that? I will say I was looking at bare tree branches without seeing them, I was walking along a gravel road without feeling the gravel, I had Volkmar in my sight but I was not looking at how his figure moved against distant shadows. I was two feet away from Susanne but I was not seeing her hands in her pockets. I will say I was thinking. I was thinking the usual whys, hows, and ifs.

And at that instant when I looked down to find what broke the rhythm of our walk, I was thinking rather than looking.

But there he was, and I saw him: he lay on the gravel, limp, his mouth open, and his eyes rolled back to the whites of his eyes. He looked (but I did not think the word) dead.

The ensuing moments swirl by in memory as images of my impotence: Do I bend down to examine him? Do I take him in my arms? Perhaps, but what I see in memory is my standing there, refusing to move forward in the ghastriness of time, while Susanne kneels down over his body, lifting, fingering, thumping, listening.

Is he breathing? I ask her. She is holding him in her arms. Is he breathing? She looks up, but she does not answer.

And so I know.

I need Volkmar. He needs to know. I see his figure down at a curve in the road in that ghostly forest of bare branched trees, and I startle myself with the volume I summon to yell. Come here. Volkmar, come here! The figure turns. Melanie is on his shoulders. They are far away. Come here NOW. The wave of shame and resignation I feel at that moment is familiar. He might not come. I sense his instinctive reluctance.

But he comes.

They are with the body, turning him upside down like a chicken, holding him by the feet, thumping and clapping. Then I am running. Running up the steep grade of the hill, running for the clearing and the yellow stripe of road. *The mother runs to save her son. The mother’s adrenalin accounts for miraculous rescue. Or The mother cannot make it to the road in time and so this is the day her son dies.* How long can a brain be deprived of oxygen? How long before saving him means saving him only from death but not from those other bad things? *The day my son began life in a vegetative state.* Even though I am a runner, my stride feels weak, hesitant. I imagine myself stopping to get my breath. *You would do that,* I say, still running. I see Dustin Hoffman, his hair flying backwards as he jerks his head to look behind him, running through alleyways and parking lots, over roadways and bridges, the very image of the power of desire. *You would actually stop. In the movies the person running for his life does not lose faith or speed.*

Everything is blurred and gray. They are far behind me, running now too. I am running for the car, running for Christopher, running for mercy, all of which I know are lost, and at the same

time I am running only for the road itself, where in the movie version, someone will be there to save us. But there is only us.

When I reach the main road where our cars are parked, I am not even aware of breathing. I flag down the one approaching car and say it, conscious of the words themselves as words:

“Excuse me, can you help us, I think my son is.... (do I say *dead?*)... is dying.” No cell phone. Not from here. Sorry. And they drive away, astonishingly.

Surely too much time has passed now. It’s too late now. I know this. But we get into our car, leaving Melanie behind with the others to care for her, and I try not to look at the figure in my lap, this weight in my arms. He is still a little body in a coat. Dense. His lips are the color of his face. His eyes are rolled back in his head. The white between those open eyelids, between those eyelashes, is too terrible. I do not check for breathing. Volkmar is speeding, slinging us hard from curve to curve. At a one-lane bridge over a creek I say, softly, *Great. Now we can all die together. As a family.* I remind myself that couples supposedly pull together in a crisis. The Husband and Wife. Father and Mother with Child. And then we argue. No, not the Goochland Clinic, drive to the gas station! It’s not like in Germany! But he bangs over the curb into the parking lot of the health clinic, and we don’t even get out of the car to check the entrance doors and signs. The parking lot is one flat stretch of asphalt emptiness. He jerks the car into a backward spin and the gray tracings of tree branches blur cloudy as we pick up speed on the way to the gas station.

Christopher is still a weight on my lap. And now, a minute more is lost, I think. I try not to blame Volkmar, to measure his faults, but I do. Even now. Especially now. And I feel the strange liminality of the moment. Here we are in the space between two things. This is the day my son dies, but because no one has told me yet in words, this is still the part before I know for sure he’s dead. This is the waiting part, the gray blue formless foggy part, the part without titles, just the movements and static before the final crystallization. No one can *do* anything.

The car feels like an absurd space for a final awareness, the dashboard as the curved horizon. I tell myself to try something now, here in the car. *Try to save him now*, I say to myself, shamed. I am his mother, after all, and here I am not touching him, not stroking his golden hair, whispering over his body, singing over him, wailing over him. Clouds frame the dead face of my golden boy. I am his mother and I am lost.

What strikes me now as I tell this story, is that my thoughts were these: I did not seek the cause. I did not, strangely, check off names of possible illnesses and syndromes—epilepsy, meningitis, rheumatic fever—nor did I rewind my memory to look for missed signals of his impending collapse. I did not say *maybe it’s the cough medicine that expired; maybe the acid changed and it poisoned him.* Or even plainer: I did not say *if only we hadn’t come out for this walk in the cold.* With my son on my lap, my son in a cloud coat, I just said, (because I am a person who will not suffer fools or easy fictions,) *this is the day, this is the day, this is the day my son dies.*

There at the grease-smearred desk of the Exxon Station on Route 6 where I dialed 9-1-1, I was conscious again of our total isolation and the absurdity of those moments of drama as they must happen in actual human lives: ours. Here I am, one of those people who call 9-1-1.

I saw the television show in my mind: how every Tuesday night for years Volkmar and I sat in the living room, dinner plates on our laps, listening as the show played tapes of actual emergency calls, and actors then dramatized the story of what was once someone’s real happening moment. Surely for us the ambulance will not come as fast. And besides, it’s too late. But the people in the show, they believed. A little girl got behind a driver’s seat and saved a school bus full of children when the driver fainted. An old man lifted a mangled Mercedes off his wife. Some woman whose brother was trapped in an almost airless cave kept him awake and alive by making him sing along with her for seven hours straight.

The rescue squad arrived just minutes later in answer to my call. They want you to ride in the ambulance, someone said. I got in the back, and sat on a fold-down seat beside the stretcher, where they had tightened wide black straps over Christopher in his unzipped coat. Volkmar rode next to the driver.

The rescue squad volunteer was a tall skinny red-haired boy no older than the students I teach, but because he wore a white jacket, and because he had strapped in my boy, and because he was crouched there with me in the ambulance, looking at red lights on a monitor, and in spite of the words in my head saying, *He's only a boy doing rescue squad work*, I asked him, "Can you just tell me, is he alive?"

"We'll get you to the hospital, ma'am, and they'll be able to help you out." A euphemism, I decided. He knows.

I cannot see much of myself in the scene. But I know I got up, finally, from my seat, to look at my baby, to act like a mother in the movies, a mother who saves children. Or a mother who is able to look at death. You are my little Buddy Man, You are My Boo, You are the Baby One, You are so good. I sang it as a whisper. His eyelids were closed now.

When you live with lost faith, when you shrug off stories with happy endings, when you know too much or see too much, or think too much, or wish too much, is it difficult to sing? But I made myself sing.

*

And now I come to the end of the story.

We were standing in the hospital emergency room. Christopher lay on the table. His eyes were open. His eyes were blue.

So it was nothing. It had been nothing at all. My son who had died was alive again, a boy with blond hair and blue blinking eyes and with arms that reached and a voice that said "Mommy" and a chin smeared with streaks from a runny nose.

A febrile seizure, caused by sudden spikes in the body temperature of infants and young children, is a rare non-life-threatening occurrence that can have all the signs of death. Sometimes, the doctor was saying, without equipment, even a physician cannot determine whether the child is breathing. That's it.

We had to call our friends to pick us up at the hospital and drive us the thirty-two miles back to that road where we had left our car. In the backseat of one car, and then of the other, on my lap, in the dark, Christopher slept the whole way home.

I have told this story many times. Christopher knows it well. Just two years ago, for her eighth grade English assignment, in the spring when Volkmar found out he had stage four gastric cancer, Melanie wrote a poem titled "The Day My Brother Died." In her poem's version of the story, the brother dies. I guess she felt the poem, being a poem, must end without the miracle.

In my English classroom, most every year, I tell stories, always with the titles first: "The Day We Lost the Gerbils," "The Day I Ran Over My Dog."

"I'm going to tell the story called 'The Day My Son Died,'" I say, knowing they will listen in unbreathing dread. And when I get ready to tell the ending, I wince. I've misled them. It isn't a proper ending. But still there is always a boy in the back of the room, maybe a skinny boy with long legs, or a red-haired boy wearing a zip-up ski jacket, or, this year, a boy named Ben, blond, blue-eyed, with a round face, who wrestles on a team with my own fourteen-year-old son, who wipes his face with the back of his hand, not sorry I see him: full knowing the truth of the title, not sorry for its fiction.