

A father's worst nightmare

A J Crisp

Two years ago my 12 year old son was killed in a car accident and my wife and 10 year old daughter suffered multiple fractures. The first year was a nightmare and the second year has been a bad dream. Perhaps my therapeutic catharsis may help other doctors who deal daily with disasters. I have always found the paranormal fascinating but had never experienced anything remotely paranormal. On the night of the accident I arrived home and found no one there. I immediately knew that something terrible had happened. I rushed from room to room looking for evidence of a burglary or even a struggle. I recall the

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cold sweat, the palpitations, and bowel writhing of sheer panic. I fought to think coolly. It was Tuesday, my son's scout evening. My wife must have broken down with the children and the dog. I ran to my car and drove fast. At the large roundabout half a mile away the road was blocked by a barrier and a policeman.

"There's a big accident up there, sir."

"I think my family are involved."

"That's statistically most unlikely, sir."

I drove furiously to Addenbrooke's. I asked in the accident and emergency department whether anyone by the name of Crisp had been admitted. The receptionist's features changed and my worst fears were confirmed. My wife was sitting on a trolley, pale, dyspnoeic with an oxygen mask, with fractured ribs, clavicle, and pelvis, and totally disoriented.

"Where are the children?"

"They are in the car."

My panic worsened. I began to stride throughout the department trying to find them until restrained and mildly reprimanded by a senior house officer. The timing of events over the next few hours is a complete blur but eventually my daughter was brought in on a stretcher conscious with multiple fractures.

"Hello daddy."

I felt immensely relieved but it was an interminable time before the consultant told me of my son's death. I already knew this must be so but I had previously calculated that if they had been driving home after my son had been dropped at scout headquarters he would now be waiting outside to be collected. I was leaving the hospital on this desperate mission when a nurse asked me gently to wait a little longer for the consultant.

Daily I walk along that hospital corridor which runs from the accident and emergency department to the pathology block and the mortuary and I can recall every step of that short journey with the hospital chaplain and a policeman for the identification procedure. Alasdair was lying with only his face and head exposed. I was surprised how cold he was already,

but it was January. His pupils were fixed and dilated; I can confirm this as I tested them myself.

There has never been an adequate explanation for the accident as the key participants have no memory of it. My next thoughts were of the next morning's clinic which I could not face. I telephoned my friend and colleague, Jumbo Jenner, to ask him to say I would not be there. He was with me in a flash and he plied me generously with whisky and brandy that night until I could sleep.

My wife and daughter spent the next two months in hospital and we were all surrounded by many supporters who warded off our insanity. Excessive visiting was a major problem. We often heard the next knock on the door with dread, usually when my wife and I were trying to grab a few minutes of mutual rationalisation and psychotherapy. More paranormal phenomena? Only one. I awoke at home two days after the accident and felt Alasdair's knees in my back, nestling up warm and solid, as he sometimes did on weekend mornings even at 12 years old. I turned to cuddle him but as I turned the knees disappeared. This was not a dream sequence. Dreams were traumatic: walking through a wood I saw Alasdair sitting under a tree.

"Daddy, I've been looking for you everywhere."

The dream unnerved me and still does. Could there be an after life and could he be searching for us, worried and confused? He had never had any sense of direction, which was a family standing joke. When we lived in the United States he had managed to lose himself at the top of the John Hancock Tower.

In another dream I was photographing the family including Alasdair on holiday. The scene then shifted rapidly to the eager scene when you inspect the photographs. Alasdair was not in the picture. There was only a gap where he had been standing.

I must also confront the anger of our loss. Why on earth was he being driven to a non-essential event on a dark, wet, windy night? How can two drivers lack the basic skill to avoid a collision? Another strong emotion jumps out from those early bleak days. Walking down

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the street I would see many examples of foul mouthed, ghastly, worthless jobboes and I would ask why they were spared and my son was dead. I remember mumbling in the street:

"There really should be better selection procedures for candidates for premature death."

Why should my family and I be condemned to a life sentence of despair interspersed by short periods of alcoholic bonhomie and long periods of public acting of which Laurence Olivier would have been proud?

Have there been any benefits? Our close friends are closer. I was overcome by the groundswell of genuine goodwill from colleagues whom I hardly knew. I have no fear of my own death whatsoever. If my son has experienced this what possible fear and horror can I have for this inevitable event?

The role of God? I do not know. Certainly I experienced periods of great tranquillity and certainty that we would eventually recover our sanity, even during the first few weeks. Were these God given?

I strongly recommend the therapeutic benefits of activity to the bereaved. Do not allow yourself to sit or lie and think. About one month after the accident I

bought my wife a new car although she was still languishing in hospital and this positive decision—against the background of exhausted, devastating inertia—made me feel high for 48 hours. We acquired a new dog as our last one had perished in the accident and she has been a strengthening focus of new life. We were also desperately keen to have another child inspired by the good fortune of my favourite actress, Patricia Hodge, at the age of 45. Then we could argue that some good would have come from bad but all to no avail so far. And never, never try to save money by buying a thin, elegant sort of car: bankrupt yourself and buy solid steel.

To children with love

Karen Trollope Kumar

Why is the birth rate so much higher in India than in Great Britain? Much has been written about variables such as female literacy, socio-economic status, and stages of demographic transition. Yet a deeply significant fact is overlooked in the debate on why Indians have so many children: it is because they actually like children. Bawling babies, terrible twos, fussy four year olds—they're all welcome in the warm lap of Mother India. Since Indians truly enjoy the patter of little feet, the more pattering the better.

As a Canadian who lives in rural India I have had an unusual opportunity to observe this phenomenon. India, through the eyes of my two small children, is a brilliant kaleidoscope of colour, a magic world where they occupy a very special place. One day last spring my 3 year old son and I were walking along the road near our home in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. A brightly painted bus came careering around the corner, its horn blaring. The bus was packed to capacity; passengers even perched on the roof. My son smiled and waved at the approaching vehicle. The response was immediate; people leaned out of windows and hung dangerously from the luggage racks, calling cheerful greetings to the little boy by the side of the road. The bus tilted alarmingly to one side. Then, with a terrific blast of its horn, it roared past us. My son looked up at me, beaming with joy. An image of a Canadian bus flashed before my mind: sleek, uniformly grey, with windows dark and shuttered against the world. No doubt highly efficient and safe—but from the point of view of a little boy by the side of the road, dreadfully dull.

Children interest every Indian. New mothers in India receive advice on baby care from all quarters. I have been lectured on medical care of my children by our washerwoman, advised on toilet training by our postman, and have had suggestions on infant feeding from the man who runs the corner shop. Young parents eager to test their theories of childraising face problems in this country, where the child is king. When our daughter was a few weeks old she used to stay awake till 3 am every morning, wanting to play, and then sleep during the day. Worn out by this routine, we decided to let her cry herself to sleep one night. This might break the pattern and get her to sleep at a reasonable hour, we thought. Alas for our plans—she had been wailing for only a few minutes when we heard an agitated knocking on our door. Our neighbour, an elderly grandmother, burst in and dashed to the bedroom. She whisked the baby out of her cradle and cuddled her, whispering, "There, there, little darling, little love! Your Ammaji has come... hush, now." Our daughter's yells stopped abruptly



SUE DARLOW/FORMAT

For the grandmothers of India, the child can never be seen as a tiny contributor to an alarming growth curve

and soon happy gurgles were issuing from the bundle in our neighbour's arms. Our lame attempts to explain our childraising theories were pooh-poohed by the indignant grandmother-next-door. "When a child cries, she should be comforted," she pronounced firmly. And that was that. In India you never contradict an elder, particularly concerning childraising.

One might assume that this indulgent approach to child behaviour would result in very naughty children. Yet it doesn't; Indian children are generally well behaved. My theory is that Indian children get so much attention from a host of loving relatives that they do not need to act out for attention.

I once told the grandmother-next-door that in the West children sleep separately from their parents right from birth. Ammaji threw up her hands in horror. "The poor little darlings! They must be so frightened, all by themselves. A child should sleep with his parents until he is at least five years old."

The practice of young children sharing the parents' bed is widespread in Eastern countries. Dr Spock would have been horrified. Dire consequences were predicted for children who sleep in the same bed with their parents. I've never observed any such consequences; in fact, Indian children are generally well adjusted and happy. Thumb sucking is rare, as are night terrors or sleepwalking. Indian toddlers never seem to need a favourite blanket or teddy bear to take to bed—why should they when they can cuddle up to their mothers at night? Perhaps the grandmother-next-door is right: children in Western countries are frightened of sleeping alone, and they try to tell us by thumb-sucking, teddy bears, and sleepwalking.

Indians have a loving and tolerant attitude towards children even under the most trying circumstances.

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