



A
PRAYER
FOR
ORION

KATHERINE
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A
*Son's
Addiction
and a
Mother's
Love*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *A Prayer for Orion: A Son's Addiction and a Mother's Love*
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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

SICK

THEY SAY that when you tie a rubber tube around an upper arm, you feel the love the way a river feels a rock—a swish up or over or around. The river tightens and narrows, the wake behind it shoots out water like the universe shoots out stars, but the gritty fog of sediment tells the whole story.

The needle goes in. Rubber tube. Pull it tight. Flatten the arm. Needle.

YO

THIS IS THE WAY it happened, or at least the way Rick told me it happened. Sweetboy was nowhere around. I was in the kitchen. Waylen and Rick were in the breezeway sitting in the white Adirondack chairs. They're not the traditional Adirondack chairs—they're more square than rounded. There are four of them. Rick was sitting across from Waylen, who wore aviator sunglasses so you couldn't see his eyes, only yourself, and his curly, blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail. His thin and large knuckled hands were clasped in front of him. Rick told him that God wanted to help him and then they prayed together, and even though he couldn't see Waylen's eyes because of the sunglasses, when he looked back up Rick saw a tear run down Waylen's cheek. That's what

he told me and that's what I remember, like I was sitting there with them—or to be more precise, I *was* Rick—looking at that tear, and behind Waylen was the yard and the different patterns of shade from the huge maple trees making their blue patches on the grass.

After that, every time I saw Waylen or talked to him I thought of the tear. As far as I was concerned it was on his face for good. Three years after that tear first appeared Waylen was dead of an overdose and his best friend, Stephan, was sitting next to his dead body in the hospital, never having seen anyone dead before, sitting there and praying because you never know, wasn't it about time for another Lazarus? And then Stephan was sitting there and watching Waylen's mother come through the door having just arrived and seeing her son and crumpling up, like her own body was finished with this life thing. Stephan took a picture of Waylen dead in the hospital and asked me if I wanted to see it. I said no. I wanted to remember the tear.

I know what it feels like to have your body crumple up like it's finished with this life thing. Like all of a sudden you realize that the only thing that had been keeping you alive was your son, and when you think he's gone your body tries so hard to die too, but it won't, so that's the most painful thing, that you can't get your own body to freaking die and you don't have any choice but to live. There's nothing you can do. He's dead and you want to be, but you're not.

* * *

Years ago I used to look at Orion's Belt through the enormous floor-to-ceiling bay window with individual glass panes in our living room and pray for our children: Sophie, Jules, and Sweetboy. The window leaks heat like breath through a cold fist, but I would stand there at night where I could see the stars and align Orion's Belt into one rectangular pane by shifting where I stood. I had a favorite pane that I liked to view

them through, the second row from the top—when I stood just right, the stars went from lower left to upper right: Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka. Those are their names. Mintaka, that last star. Like the bitter end of a tightened belt.

* * *

It was in our living room with the bay window that I thought we might lose Sweetboy and called the police. Sophie, our oldest, had been married the previous month and Sweetboy had helped to string the lights and fix up the backyard—he'd looked so handsome in his suit with his crisp white shirt and auburn hair cut short and other than carrying a red energy drink around with him that ended up in all the photos, he'd looked like the perfect groomsman. Jules had flown in from San Francisco and sang Wreckless Eric's "Whole Wide World" at the reception.

Seven months earlier Sweetboy had told us he'd started doing hard drugs and wanted to stop so we'd begun testing him. He'd consistently tested negative so eventually we stopped testing him altogether. We were like parents at a PTA meeting sitting in back of the high school auditorium, nodding our heads in agreement while the principal lectures on about how bad the drug problem is, nodding because our own kid had done them and we knew how serious the problem was. But the truth was, although we couldn't know it yet, that one word, *had*, would be incorrect.

While the memory of those days has faded, the accompanying sensations have not. I think I would call the overarching sensation compassion, although I'm not sure that's quite right. I don't think we feel compassion for our children. What we feel is a paler, yet far fiercer, sort of mercy. It's meant for ourselves of course—this mercy, that without it will mean suffering the implosion of every organ within us—and we

will go through any conceivable trouble, even giving our own lives, to achieve it. Even as I dialed, I didn't know where life would go because we might lose our son and then everything would change forever. I didn't feel angry, although it would have been appropriate—I lack in that department, which I've always assumed is at least one of the reasons I've lived most of my life with a dull, thumping bleakness that for some reason, in my visually inclined imagination, takes the form of a thick, fat hand pounding on an arterial door at the base of my neck. The door is probably made of horded muscle, formed over time from the mere act of staying shut.

I called the police because I found a text on Sweetboy's phone that stunned me. We assumed he wasn't doing drugs anymore. He couldn't be. It had been seven months since—at the encouragement of two of his friends—he had sat down with us and told us everything, told us we could test him. So we did. We assumed he was one of those kids who experiment with drugs, grow up a little bit, realize it's stupid, and quit. So many good things were happening. Kids' lives were changing. There was prayer. Our home was full of life. Although dread had accompanied many of my days over the last year, I was finally, hesitantly, beginning to relax. Initially, the last year had been full of the unique, solitary fear that only a parent of a child who's gotten involved with hard drugs can understand. Sweetboy had habitually come home at 4:00 a.m., sometimes not at all; he'd been smoking almost two packs of Marlboros a day. Once Rick found him snorting a pill, every phone call or trip out or text had been suspect. But the low, uneven sky had been slowly rising and Sweetboy, once again, was headed in the right direction. Things were good.

Our home had become a cross between a Billy Sunday revival tent and a carnny—half church, half zoo—and while early on arms raised toward a canvas roof could just as well be seeking a high as redemption, the love of God was prevailing. Our home had become a gathering

place for kids who wanted to hang out and talk. Rick had started two Bible studies. Tuesday evenings were for kids who were still using drugs, Wednesdays for kids who were clean and wanted to grow. Our living room was full of Sweetboy's friends, and friends of friends. Sometimes kids we'd never seen before. Our lights were on all night. The house was like a fishbowl, and with the cars bumper-to-bumper in our driveway and pulled up on the grass in front, and the bay window with the lit-up living room declaring all the people hanging out, I imagine there had to have been a bit of rubbernecking from the neighbors.

* * *

I saw the text around 11:00 in the morning. I had gone into his room to make sure he was awake, but I found him asleep on his back and covered by a blanket with one knee raised and his phone lying next to his pillow. He'd always tended to sleep that way, with one knee raised, which I could never understand because it implies some sort of tension while asleep, to keep your knee up like that. He was snoring. There was a slant of sun through the window that hit the wall as though it was about to ricochet and bounce quietly around the room, but it stayed in place, the golden light slicing the room in half. Sweetboy's skin is fair but he can still tan, and although when he was young it was a deep auburn, his hair is more of a brown now unless he's standing in the sun, where it looks almost red. Rick's grandparents were Irish and spoke in a thick brogue, and even though Sweetboy has the deep auburn hair and he doesn't always burn in the sun, there's still an Irishness about him, as though even though he doesn't have freckles, he should have them. His eyes are so dark you can't tell his pupils from his irises. I've never been able to tell them apart. Opiates cause the pupils to constrict into pin dots.

The language in the text was foreign; it wasn't the way Sweetboy talked, or texted. Or the way his friends talked, and at first I thought

that he'd accidentally ended up with someone else's phone. *Yo, u want me to get u some* (I don't remember what he called it). *Ima go into the city tonight if u want some cheap. Gotta go the Dad's comin.* All I could think was that some greasy haired kid was in his basement with the TV on, texting everyone he knew so he could sell some smack (or whatever he called it). Maybe he had a bunch of baggies on a coffee table in front of him that he would spend an hour that night filling with some kind of powder he'd gotten after passing a wad of dirty bills through the window of some kind of dilapidated Chevy Impala or maybe a slick new Mercedes with the windows blacked out as it slowed to a stop and a guy wearing some kind of sweatshirt with some kind of hood up and half over his face would unroll the window. He'd be all pimply and pale because he didn't have a clue how to wash his face since both of his parents were addicts and didn't pay any attention to him growing up and he'd been hanging out on the street since he was ten. He wouldn't bother to look up at the kid who texted Sweetboy to see if he wanted some smack, or whatever he called it, he'd just take his money and maybe flip through the bills with his dirty unwashed hands before handing off the smack, or whatever he called it, to make sure there were enough bills before the Mercedes or dilapidated Impala slowly pulled away and turned the corner onto a dark street with a waste of syringes, like abandoned tampon applicators, clogging the gutters. I imagined dozens of Ziploc sandwich bags full of whatever it was the kid was buying—which I know now would have been enough dope to feed every addict in Philly for a month. I imagined half inflated CVS bags pressed into the grills of drains—heavy rains having tried, and failed, to pull them into the sewers. I know a lot more now, but back then I didn't have a clue.



As I stood there with his phone, I felt a surge of both adrenaline and an antiserotonergic something take over. At that time I was trying to understand him at every angle; if I caught him in the midst of a turn or a glance, or with the light coming at him from behind, things would begin to make sense and fall into place; we could deal with whatever and tug him back into the earth's gravitational pull before some other space object grabbed his good senses and yanked him into oblivion. His iPhone was smudged and in a blue Otter case, which meant that it could survive getting tossed out a second-story window or thrown from a speeding car. My imagination had no end.

After seeing the *yo, ima, city* words on his phone, I brought it to Rick and silently handed it to him. He just stared at it. We both knew what it meant. I would say that the color drained from his face, although that isn't what really happened. I think his shoulders must have slumped a little, or his mouth opened a half-inch with no words; these are the sorts of things that make us say *the color drained from his face*. The phrase probably came about in an attempt to describe that visceral emptying that happens when you get bad news, news that changes the trajectory you were following before the bad news. I remember feeling like a little girl in the back seat of a moving car; the trees were going by, the fences, telephone wires doing their virtual jumps as we sped along. I could be all right as long as the landscape was on the other side of the window. The thick glass muffling everything—that's what it felt like, thick glass between me and The Bad News.

Rick handed me the phone and got up and went to the stairs and yelled for Sweetboy to come down. After fifteen minutes he still hadn't come so I went to the stairs and called again. "I'm *coming*," he yelled, slowly, like he was still pulling on his jeans.

He looked blanched and tired, a little confused, but also like he was beginning to respond to a terrified core somewhere within him. His eyes were sad, apologetic in their sadness. It was empathy I think, he

had hurt us by hurting himself. Our love for him was never in question and he and Rick, in many ways, up until recently had been best friends. There was a heaviness in the room. His gray-looking face and his eyes becoming worried (or relieved? I wasn't sure) as the realization that we knew what he was doing dawned on him. Sin-guilt-sorrow-repeat. He had stepped over the edge and didn't know how to get back. Rick gestured toward the phone.

"Want to tell us about this?"

He shrugged, "What?"

"The text," I said. "It's from some drug dealer. I can't believe this . . ." I ran a hand through my hair. "I can't believe this," I repeated.

"Mhmm, yeah." There wouldn't be any stories. He knew we knew and was too intelligent to try to cover it up.

"How long have you been doing it?" Rick said.

"I don't know, three weeks, a month. I'll figure it out, you can test me every day."

"You need to go to a program," I said. It seemed like Rick hadn't quite caught up yet. The reality. He looked distracted.

"You have nothing. We're taking it all," I said. "No phone, no car, no computer. You need to go to a program." All I knew was that if you were addicted to drugs you went to rehab.

He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. "I need my phone."

"Nothing. No computer either."

"Just let me make some calls first. People need to know I won't have it."

"Not a chance."

He got up and went to his room. Rick went to the kitchen and I sat with the phone, turning it around in my hands. I prayed in whispers, tears flowing, and thumbed through his past texts, hating all the abbreviations like they were narcotics themselves: yo, aight, proolly, hbu: Percs, Vicodin, Mollies, Xanies.

He came out of his room, walking fast, went through the kitchen where Rick was standing next to the sink, and out the back door. When he left, Rick turned to me and held up a set of keys, indicating he'd taken the keys to his car, but they were the wrong keys; they were to our car. We heard the engine start and Sweetboy's Subaru peel out of the driveway.

* * *

I was afraid. Around 3:30 in the afternoon, I finally called the police.

* * *

You can't explain anything to the police when they have a protocol. I'm not sure if this is because of regulations set in place; some thick wad of spiral-ringed paper bound together in the eighties because of some situation that proved exemplary. Or, perhaps more likely, because people who join the constabulary are people who find it soothing to imagine that there's a thick black line down the middle of life that separates evil from good and every word they say, type, or refuse to say or type lies on one side or the other. When you've called the police and are in utter straights, anything you say that doesn't fit onto the blanks on the form that I assume they have on the computer screen in front of them is ignored. There must be a place for your words to be typed in so that they can drag the form into the folder that goes into the file before the PC quietly shifts into its dormant state.

I wish I didn't know what a 302 is. Did my son say something that would lead me to believe he was a harm to himself or others? I don't know. I don't think so. Before he left, with his hand on the doorknob, do I remember him turning around and saying, *By the way, I might hurt myself. I might hurt someone else?*

I've always been the kind of mother who packs the lunches with natural gummies and sandwiches made with non-emulsified peanut butter and whole wheat Ezekiel Bread. When they were in school I wrote notes reminding them of how much I loved them and how much God loved them. I slid the notes in with the food.

When I die I will—if given a proper amount of time before the tunnel, the light, and the Lord Jesus—look up one last time and smile to my offspring and my husband, and without saying anything, the smile will be such a perfect representation of peace that I won't *need* to say anything. My face will say it all. My children and my husband will linger for a while and then go back to their homes and try to occupy their grief with thoughts of seeing me again one day when it's finally their turn. I hope I've done that much for them. I hope that I've modeled how to, as the Bible says, *put your mind on things above*. The great Eternal Perspective. It chases us down, but in the end it's where you go for the peaceful smile so that the relatives can go home and sip tea and eat chicken salad and talk fondly about the way you stuck the notes in the lunches and bought the non-emulsified peanut butter.

As I tried to explain the situation to the dispatcher, I knew everything that was happening was real. But still, I held it all in front of me like a strange movie—someone else's movie—humming along in the middle distance, only it was important that I respond to the narrative, somehow insert myself into the story, because if I said just the right things and made just the right choices, it was still possible that my son would be healthy and young and vibrant, that Sweetboy would be back at his desk sketching racecars and making boats out of duct tape. It was still possible for things to be just like they would be if he had never tried heroin.



I don't like to lie. That's why I didn't lie when I called in the 302 and the woman asked me if Sweetboy was a harm to himself or others. I knew that he was a harm to himself, and I told her so, but then I assume she paused with her fingers hovering over the keyboard, because then she asked me what he had *said* to make me *believe* that he was a harm to himself. He was not prone to outbursts or explosive emotion. I often wished that he would get angry or whine or slam the car door. I imagine there is some immediate drone of blood beneath his skin that's been fooling him into a state of languor for years, because I swear, if you were to take an icepick to the bottom of his feet, you wouldn't get more than a slight pulling away, like that unexpected jump the knee does when responding to the rubber mallet of a physician. The way I knew he was a harm to himself is because his full lips thinned the tiniest bit as he took the keys and went out the back door. He was pissed and scared as hell and I could practically smell the war inside of him. I tried to explain this.

"I know he's a harm to himself," I said with a shaky voice, and assumed the woman would acquiesce to my anxious state and quickly push the Big Red Button or the Large Emergency Lever that I imagined was within arm's reach of her office swivel chair. She would type in my son's name in bold caps, and this would immediately alert all officers in the area and neighboring states that Sweetboy was missing and in grave danger.

"What did he say to make you believe that he's a harm to himself?"

"I don't know, nothing. He didn't say anything. I just know he is."

"What did he *say* to make you believe this?"

"I don't know, he didn't say anything. *He just left.*" My voice trembled. I began to pace back and forth and kept looking out the window as though expecting every tax dollar we'd ever spent to show up on our lawn in the form of flashing lights, grief counselors, and helicopters.

There was a silence on the phone. “Look, for a 302 you need to have a reason to believe that he’s a harm to himself or others.”

To be fair, an officer did show up at the house, and he was very kind. When we opened the door he said, “There’s a domestic here?”

“Oh, no. No,” I said. “It’s our son. He took the car and went into the city. To buy heroin.” In my mind a “domestic” required me in a bad housecoat with a smoker’s cough, yelling at my husband to get the crap out of my yard, etcetera, etcetera. . . . There would be a gun perhaps, or at least bruises, for evidence.

Rick put his hand on my shoulder and guided me back to the couch. He stood next to the door and talked with the cop. I put my head in my hands. I loved my husband so much right then.

“So if we see him, we’ll stop him,” the officer said as he was leaving. “We can’t arrest him unless we find something in the car, but we’ll definitely stop him.” He shook Rick’s hand. “Good luck to you both,” he said, and Rick shut the door. Two hours later Sophie and Neil showed up. I hugged her and told her how much I loved her. I hugged her for a long time.

* * *

Sweetboy called later that night, around 1:00 a.m. I got a call from a number I didn’t recognize. His words were slurred. “Hey, jus want you to know I’m a’ ight.”

“Where are you? Just tell me where you are.”

“Nah, I jus’ don’t feel right about that . . .”

“Are you safe?”

“Yeah, I’m sssafe.”

I sobbed. “I love you. I love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

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