

AMAZING GRACE

The strange phone call came the night before my son's wake.

"Miz Perry," a feeble voice, obviously an elderly man. "You don't know me, but I read about your son, Paul, in the paper. I just want you to know how sorry I am."

"Well, that's nice of you to call," I replied, not really surprised. My 11-year-old son had been featured in the local paper numerous times during his treatment for a rare childhood cancer, neuroblastoma. The last article, just two days before, had told of his dying in my arms.

"Miz Perry," the elderly man continued, "I want to come by the funeral home tomorrow to sing a song for you."

"Sing a song?" I asked, a little puzzled by his request.

"Yes ma'am, that's what I do. I go to funeral homes and sing songs. It makes people feel better."

"Well, um, how wonderful," I stammered.

"So what time should I be there," he persisted.

What the heck, he sounded harmless enough. I told him the hours of the wake and managed to end the call. So much to do before tomorrow...

The weather was obscenely violent the next day as we drove to the funeral home. Lightening slashed across the sky in angry strokes. Thunder cracked and boomed in chorus.

I was secretly exhilarated by the violent weather—so much like my passionate son, who never sidestepped an obstacle he could climb over instead. I wanted to stand out in the rain and let the water soak through me, laughing hysterically until my voice was hoarse.

I imagined my son whipping up this storm in heaven, his long skateboarder's hair flying, his arms waving, directing the wild weather like Zeus with his lightening bolt. And I smiled, just as lightening zigzagged down the sky in front of me and sparked like a firecracker on the tail end.

"Did you see that?" I asked my best friend sitting next to me in the car. I knew without a doubt that my son was with me today.

Inside the funeral home, I tiptoed into the viewing room, anxious to be alone with my son's body, yet apprehensive about approaching his casket for the first time. There he was, as beautiful as I knew he would be, decked out in his skateboarding t-shirt and khaki pants. I was so desperately glad to see him again. I had missed his little body so much over the past three days.

I wondered if it would be morbid to take his picture, and if I did, would I ever have the courage to look at it?

His beloved and battle-scarred skateboard leaned up against the casket. I touched his cold cheek, stroked his hair and laid his one-eared stuffed doggie next to his shoulder. How was I ever going to let him go?

To my right, I felt my first visitor approach the casket.

"Miz Perry, I'm here to sing." There stood my elderly caller, a short, stooped man, clutching a battered hymnal. He asked me to pick out a song. I fumbled around in my mind and came up with *Amazing Grace*.

And then he started to sing the most "amazing" version of *Amazing Grace* —singing the first few words of each verse, all jumbled together...

*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound...
Twas grace that taught my heart to fear...
When we've been here ten thousand years...*

I felt hysterical laughter bubbling up in my throat again, and I searched the room for someone to rescue me. Surely it wouldn't be fitting to laugh in front of my son's casket like a crazy woman?

No need. Soon enough he finished his butchered version of *Amazing Grace* and smacked his lips. "Do you have any refreshments," he asked, scanning the room.

I tamped down my hysteria once again and directed him to the break room as my other visitors started to stream in.

My distinguished minister, hair plastered to his head, rain drops still running down his nose, shoes squishing on the carpeting. This time I let the laughter go.

He patted my arm in sympathy. Poor girl, he probably thought, she's really having a hard time.

Friends, coworkers, my son's classmates and teachers, his doctor, neighbors, the local firemen who had befriended him, even the mayor came by to pay respects.

My ex-husband and his wife approached, both of whom had nipped a little vodka in the parking lot. His wife hugged me, sobbing uncontrollably, face pressed into my shoulder, hugging me tighter and tighter, refusing to let go. I awkwardly, but firmly pulled away and she grabbed me again, sobbing for the little boy she'd never met.

I waited for my ex-husband to retrieve her, but he had already settled into a lounge chair amongst relatives, eager to catch up on old times. I remembered now why I had divorced him.

A while later my best friend walked over. "Did you know there's a little old man singing Johnny Mathis songs to your mother in the break room," she said. "He's taking requests."

My mother dearly loved Johnny Mathis. I wondered how long it would take them to start on Tony Bennett.

And then much later, my brother: "There's a little old man here who says he needs a ride home." The funeral director hurried over, apologetic, his voice hushed and worried. He promised to see the funeral singer home.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see my ex-husband's wife making a beeline toward me again. She'd obviously been out to the parking lot for another nip of vodka and was teetering, arms outstretched to grab me.

Horried, I ducked behind my brother and shoved him toward her, hissing that he had to get rid of her.

But I couldn't help smiling again at the insanity of the day. My son would have loved these moments of craziness. I turned back to his casket and stroked his beautiful face and hair. A lifetime of touches ... a body I had bathed, diapered, loved and nursed.

How was I ever going to leave him at the cemetery?

Outside the thunder cracked, and I knew he was with me again. I turned around to greet my next visitor.