

THE NIGHT I FOUND MY SON

There's a special kind of fear,
known only to parents,
that one night the telephone
will ring and a voice
will say,
"Please come—quickly!"

■ When the telephone rang, I felt nothing more than a casual annoyance that it was interrupting one of my favorite television programs. But the voice at the other end of the line abruptly changed all that. It was the voice of Eric Fraser, a friend of my sixteen-year-old son Jim, and it had a peculiar, shaky quality. I listened, but it was as though a total stranger were standing in my shoes and hearing what Eric was saying.

"There's been an accident, Mr. Roderick. Jim is hurt, but I think the other kids are all right. Your car turned over."

"Turned over?" The stranger was speaking with my voice, trying to think with my mind. "Where?"

"On the road to the village. I—I think it's pretty bad."

"Where are you now? Where's Jim?"

My wife, Lois, had turned off the TV set when I answered the phone. Now she moved toward me, her expression one of shocked incredulity.

"We brought him to (Continued on page 193)"

by Harold Y. Roderick

MAX COPLAN

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The Night I Found My Son

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the drugstore," Eric said. Then he added, with a sort of desperate urgency, "Please hurry, Mr. Roderick."

"I'll be there as soon as I can make it." I dropped the phone into its cradle. This was a bad dream. It had to be. I turned to look at Lois, not really seeing her. "Jim's been hurt," I said. "Call Doctor Waite, and tell him they've taken him to the drugstore. I'll take the old car and go on in."

"What happened? Is he—badly hurt?"

"I don't know. The car turned over; that's all I know." I headed for the door, conscious only that I had to get to my son without delay.

"I'll get someone to stay with the baby," my wife said. "Helen or Arlene will drive me."

I had a crazy impulse to laugh. It sounded almost as though we were making plans to go out for an evening of bridge. Then Lois caught my arm. Her face was drawn, but her voice was steady. "Remember, Rod, the only thing that matters is Jimmy. Not the car. Not anything else."

I nodded and ran out. I didn't know what she meant then, but I did later.

IT WAS four miles to the village from our lakeside home—four agonizingly slow miles in the old car that was our second automobile. During that ride I tried hard to think coherently, to prepare myself for what I might find when I reached the village. But it wasn't easy. I kept having nightmarish visions of Jim lying hurt and bleeding in the wrecked car. As fast as I thrust these thoughts out of my mind, they were replaced by others almost as disturbing. All the heartaches and all the frustrations kept going around and around in my head. Somehow, this accident seemed to represent the total to which they all added up. . . .

Life had always been a struggle for me. I hardly ever saw my father after I was nine years old, and at sixteen I'd gone to work. Maybe that was why I always wanted things to be different for Jim. Maybe that was why I'd felt this growing sense of failure, this torment that seemed to be coming to a head that night.

My mouth was dry, and my hands trembled as they gripped the wheel of the old car. Pictures flashed into my mind with photographic clarity—views of things that had been buried in my subconscious for years. Jim was five years old, and I was sick in bed. He came tiptoeing into my room with a compassionate smile and an armful of battered toys—to keep me company so I wouldn't get lonesome. Then he was six, and it was his first day at school. He cried, clinging to my trousers, and I had to push him away. I knew how he felt, about school and about me. It was the first real tragedy of his life. I wished I could live that moment over.

It is hard to say when the trouble

actually began. What father—and there must be many who have found themselves in the same situation shared by my son and me—can point to a certain hour, day, or even year and say, "That was when I began to lose contact with my son"; what father has never looked at his teen-age son with a feeling akin to awe, uncertain just how to handle this bumptious, cocksure, unfamiliar resident of his home? One day Jim was a little fellow, shy, sensitive, eager; he ran to me with unquestioning faith when the wheel came off his bicycle. When one of the other children mistreated him. I could take care of anything, and I always did.

Then all at once—overnight, it seemed—he stepped across that mysterious border line into the complex and confusing world of the teen-ager, and somewhere along the way, he slipped away from me. I could repair a bicycle wheel, but the inner workings of a motor scooter were far beyond my meager talents. Jim got into a fight one day at school, and it was a major effort to pry even the basic details out of him. He made the high-school track team, making me inordinately proud; but when Lois and I wanted to go to the meets to see him perform, he became very reticent. It was almost as though the presence of his parents would embarrass him. In no time, he shattered most of my dreams of companionship, of happy father-and-son relations. The worst part was that I kept blaming myself, wondering how and when I had failed him.

Soon we were drifting farther and farther apart, and I was powerless to prevent it. I couldn't understand Jim's attitudes and manners, and he obviously couldn't understand mine. Little things loomed larger in my mind than they should have—such things as the clothing fads he went through, the work he avoided, his resentment of advice or guidance of any kind. Basically, I think a father sees a reflection of himself in his son, and he wants intensely to be proud of that image. He sees a fragment of himself that he hopes will contain none of his flaws and idiosyncrasies. It is so easy to forget that character is molded only through long immersion in the crucible of time, that a son has to go through the process for himself.

I see these things now, in retrospect, because of what happened. All I knew at the time was that we were seldom able to get together and that this hurt and bewildered me.

AT TIMES we fanned the embers into a real fire. I remember one occasion when we stood and shouted angry things at each other, and afterward, I couldn't even remember what had started it. Jim had been unbearably insolent, or perhaps I had been in an irritable frame of mind. Anyway, I walked away from that encounter shaken and ashamed, with deeper wounds than Jim knew he

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had inflicted. As I turned my back, I thought I glimpsed an anguished expression in Jim's eyes, too. But the wall that stood between us remained—and grew higher.

The moment Jim reached his sixteenth birthday, he thought he was ready to drive the car. I'd let him practice on back roads, with me beside him; but, to my mind, he was far from ready to go out and tangle with the rough-and-tumble traffic on main highways and in the city. Jim was equally sure he could drive expertly, that I was being an old fuddy-duddy about the whole thing.

We had many heated discussions. Finally, after a whirlwind brushup instruction session, he went to get his license—and passed the written and driving tests with a perfect score, despite my gloomy predictions. There was no holding him then. He'd shown me up. It should be perfectly evident that he'd been right all along and I'd been wrong. Now he had proved himself. Now he was really a man among men.

On Friday evenings, most of the youngsters in our neighborhood went to the movie at the local shopping center, about four miles from our home. On this never-to-be-forgotten Friday, Jim had permission to drive the station wagon. He set off about seven, with the usual warnings from his mother and me to drive carefully, having arranged to pick up two or three of the crowd. We watched him get into the car, jauntily confident in his blue zipper jacket.

Then we sat down to watch television.

NOW, as I crossed the highway and headed down the last stretch of road into the village, I was close to panic. I had no idea what I would find. I only knew I would have given ten years to take back the things I had said to my son in anger, to return just once to the old days when we understood and respected each other. Now it was too late. He was hurt, but it was too late for me to comfort him.

Ahead of me, off to one side of the road, I saw the probing headlights of several cars. This had to be where it had happened. This was where I would see my slim white station wagon—symbol of so many happier times.

The car was upside down. The roof was crushed, and the doors gaped open horribly. The fractured windows glistened like cobwebs in the gleam of the lights. This much I saw as I slowed in passing, and the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach intensified. My son had been in that wreck!

When I got to the drugstore, the clerk told me they'd taken Jim to the doctor's office next door. A highway-patrol car stood outside, and people were milling around—people with familiar faces, yet strangely unfamiliar now. I didn't know how—or why—they happened to be there, and I didn't care. They looked at me curiously, with twisted little smiles of sympathy, as I pushed my way through to the rear of Doctor Waite's office. Two other youngsters, the ones Jim had picked up, were

stretched out on tables in the examination room as I passed, and someone said, "The others are okay. Just bruises and shock. Jim's back there in the X-ray room."

I nodded gratefully and pushed on. I found him lying on a black-topped table. He was holding his right arm up with his left hand, and when I saw it, I had to grit my teeth. It had been snapped at the wrist, and the bone bulged out under the skin, bending his hand backward at a grotesque angle. A chilling thought flashed through my mind. Jim's event on the track team was pole vaulting, and he was good at it. It was one thing that he did wholeheartedly, that seemed to give him a sense of pride and accomplishment. I knew how much it meant to him and what it would mean to him to be deprived of it. From the look of that wrist, he might never balance a pole again.

His face was a sickly gray color. There were bits of leaves and twigs in his hair, and the jaunty blue jacket was torn and smeared with dirt. His legs, stretched out on the table, looked oddly thin and childish. One shoe hung partly off his foot. There was something terribly pathetic about that shoe.

Yet, miraculously, he appeared to be uninjured, except for the wrist. Physically, that is. The doctor was developing some X rays at that moment.

Jim saw me in the doorway and turned his head. His eyes were bleak with pain. "Dad!" There was a ragged catch in his voice. "What have I done? Oh, Dad—Dad!"

I felt foolishly awkward, groping for the right words. "How did it happen?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I—I think I got into the soft shoulder at the edge of the road. All of a sudden, I just couldn't hang onto the wheel. I tried my hardest to get the car back on the road, but it . . . went right . . . over . . ."

His voice cracked into a sob. I put my arms around him then, as I had done so often when he was a little fellow. Now he was a little fellow again—hurt and scared and stripped of all his cockiness. He needed me. He wanted to cry, but he was choking the sobs back.

THAT was when it happened—when I saw the window in the wall. I stared through it, fascinated by what I saw. On the other side of the wall was a picture of my son as he really was—a boy trying desperately to turn into a man, a boy full of conflicting emotions and loyalties, wanting so much to be a man, but still a boy inside. Suddenly I remembered how it had been when I was his age. Strange, how easily you forget those things—the growing resentment of authority that challenges manhood's independence, the deep-down striving for security, not from outside sources, as it had always been before, but from one's own self.

Because of this, the thing my son said next was not unexpected. "The car—it's a wreck, isn't it? I wrecked your car and hurt those other kids—"

and they'll hold you responsible, won't they?"

"Yes, they will," I said. "But we'll talk about that later."

He wouldn't be stopped. The words poured out as though he knew I'd seen through the window and he had to get them said before the blind was drawn again. "I did all this to you, and you've always worked so hard for everything we've got. I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry. . . ."

I smiled at him. "It's all right," I said gently. "I understand. We'll work it out when you're feeling better."

And it was all right, for the first time in many a long day. Jim had been through a living nightmare, and he was in severe pain; but he wasn't thinking of himself. He was thinking of me.

He turned his head away then and was silent for what seemed a long time. When he spoke, the sound of his voice had changed. Now it had a familiar tone. "I don't see how it could have been my fault," he said. "I wasn't doing over fifty. Do you think one of the tires might have blown?"

I could have anticipated that speech, almost word for word. But it didn't annoy me as it might have done earlier. On the contrary, I had to stifle a laugh. His guard was coming up again. I'd known it would.

I wish I could say the accident changed everything, that we lived happily ever after. But it isn't as simple as that. Nothing changes, really, except through the alchemy of time. There would be bad moments again, moments we both would regret. Yet I knew they would be easier to bear, more ably handled, because I had seen through the window in the wall. The trouble wasn't my fault or Jim's. It was part of the normal process of growing up.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Lois, and she was smiling past me at Jim. My wife has the most reassuring smile in the world. It told me that she had known about the window all the time, in her woman's way, and had been waiting for me to find it, too.

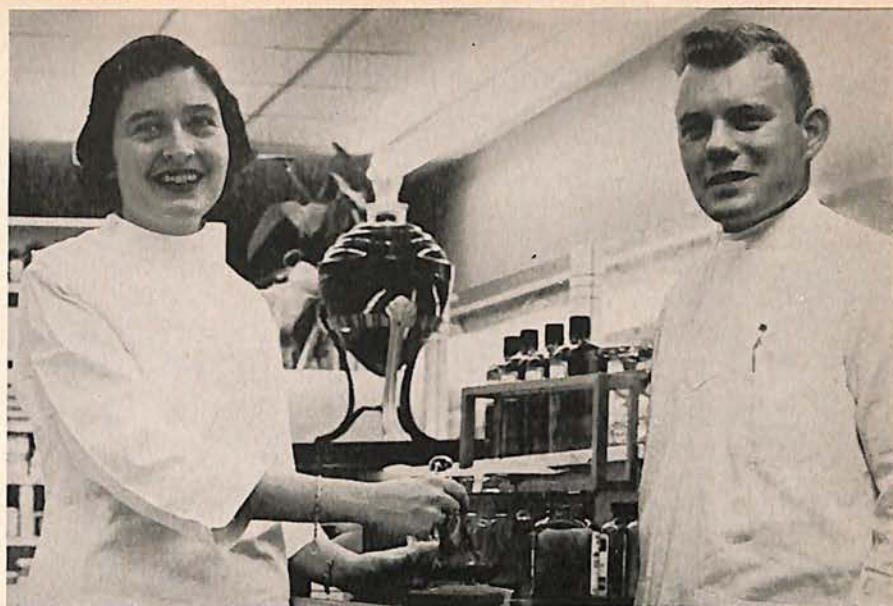
THE END

Summer Festivals

(Continued from page 28)

International Festival of the Arts, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Through July: elaborate new productions in English of Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Schiller's *Maria Stuart*; chamber music by the Hungarian Quartet; Spanish dancers; Japanese dancers; the Montreal Bach Choir; concerts conducted by Herbert von Karajan; songs by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Quite a lineup for a festival only two years old.

The Santa Fe Opera Festival, Santa Fe, New Mexico. July 12: Igor Stravinsky makes a rare appearance to conduct his massive new religious work, *Threni: Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah*; throughout the month: performances in English of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and of *Die Fledermaus*, *Regina*, *The Barber*



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