

After the show's dramatic conclusion, we were in the car driving Grandma back to her apartment when we were suddenly shaken by an enormous explosion. Our conversation halted as we nervously looked around.

"Look, look! Over there!" Daddy shouted as he pointed toward an enormous billow of smoke hanging in the sky just one short block to the right of us. We all snapped our heads in that direction. That is to say, all of us snapped our heads . . . except for Mom. She was sitting quietly in the back seat, in between my brother and me. Her eyes were half closed and a bit glazed over. She appeared to be lost in a state of mind that Daddy would later refer to as a "catatonic condition."

Daddy was too intrigued by the explosion to notice anything else around him. You could see the wheels turning round and round in his head as he tried to drive closer to the source of the blaze.

"Richard!" Grandma squealed nervously. "Richard, don't you dare drive me anywhere else but home—this instant!"

Daddy chuckled, holding his course, then replied with a sly smile, "Oh Ma, all you do is worry. Don't be such a scaredy cat. Let's go check out the action!"

"Oh, Vixadunavettle!" Grandma shot back in frustration, using her infamous German swearword that nobody else knew how to properly pronounce, let alone spell.

Daddy ignored Grandma's fury and addressed Mom, "You doing all right back there, Rainy?"

It took Mom a minute to realize that someone was speaking to her. "Yes, Rick. I'm fine," she responded apathetically, completely unaware of the surrounding excitement.

Daddy maneuvered the car to within half a block of the blast. "Richard! God have mercy!" Grandma dramatically shouted as she clung helplessly to the passenger's door in the front seat.

Daddy just chuckled again as if he were playing some kind of espionage game while staring at the scene that lay before us. A gigantic cloud of dusty, black smoke hovered ominously in the air above a Sinclair gas station. As it was making its slow ascent toward the heavens, it ignited without warning, mercilessly spewing its blistering breath below. People were sent screaming, and there was absolute chaos as everyone in the direct path of the fireball ran for their lives. Daddy had kept us at a safe distance, yet still close enough to scare my brother and me. As the two of us sat on the edge of our seats with our mouths agape, I had to stifle a scream. I had no idea how my brother was feeling, but I was in complete agreement with Grandma and wanted to get out of there . . . pronto!

Leaving the scene was the furthest thing from Daddy's mind. He was like one of those crazed storm chasers, hungering to catch a buzz off the excitement. It was only when he realized that Grandma's panic attack was getting worse that he finally eased the Buick around. As soon as Grandma sensed we were heading away from the fireball and toward the safety of her apartment, her shoulders slackened into a more relaxed position and she took a deep breath. "Please take me home, Richard," she quietly requested, clearly drained of all emotion.

Daddy reached over, reassuringly patted her thigh and teased, "Oh, Ma-a! You know I'd never let anything happen to you."

Grandma gave him a weary smile.

As we drove the remainder of the way back to Grandma's apartment in silence, Mikie and I instinctively sought protection from our mother, huddling as close to her as we could like two newborn puppies. She didn't seem to notice. "Momma?" I said. "Momma, are you okay?"

Neither the oddity of the explosion nor the sound of my young voice was an antidote for her catatonic state. She simply stared out the window at the blurred images fleeing past.



Mom continued seeping in and out of reality. On those days when she was faring well, she'd desperately try to fulfill the role of the wife and mother she'd long dreamt of becoming. She'd frequently join Mikie and me at the park, clean our house from top to bottom, and cook or bake anything her family requested, even if she didn't care much for it herself. Daddy enjoyed food almost as much as he enjoyed the water, and it wasn't unusual to hear him sweet-talk Mom into culinary pursuits. "Hey Rainy, maybe you could fix us that famous hot dish of yours tonight?" or "Honey, how 'bout whipping up a batch of homemade onion rings?" Mom was especially thoughtful whenever a birthday rolled around. She could always be found in the kitchen lovingly preparing our favorite cake. Mine was a German chocolate number with extra coconut frosting, no exceptions. Mikie chose white topped with chocolate fudge, and Daddy opted for angel food smothered in whipped cream and strawberries.

During the heart of each autumn, Mom would unfailingly bake us an all-American apple pie, and the tantalizing smell of cinnamon and sugar would fill our entire house. The instant it drifted past my nose, I'd stop whatever I was doing and race into the kitchen to beg for the leftover, sugarcoated crust I knew Mom had prepared especially for me. The radio was usually on, and if I happened to catch her when one of her favorite songs was playing she'd gently grab hold of both my hands and encourage, "C'mon, Baby, let's dancie dance." She'd lead me out into the center of the kitchen where the two of us would bop and groove together for a few blissful minutes. Mom would always giggle while enjoying my performance. "You are the cutest little thing, Baby Girl!" she'd say. "Just look at you. Why, you could be on *American Bandstand!*"

I so dearly cherished tender moments like those. They were rare exchanges of nothing but utter joy between just the two of us, mother and daughter. Mom's unconditional delight with that of her own creation bathed me in the purest kind of rapture, a treasure that would forever remain untarnished deep within my heart.



During the times when Mom's mind became paralyzed and unreachable, she would retreat to her bedroom and simply disappear. She would often be gone for only a few hours, but occasionally her absence lasted for days. If she were clearly in dire straits she'd end up back in the hospital, at which point Grandma would move back in with us until she returned. Her life's rhythm was unpredictable, even to herself.

As I look back on it all now, I realize just how hard Daddy tried to buffer my brother and me from the seriousness of Mom's illness. He spent countless hours taking us on canoe rides and patiently sitting on sandy, city beaches while we blissfully fluttered in the cool waters. He would often chaperone a tribe of our friends to enchanting places like the Conservatory, where limitless merry-go-round rides were enjoyed and scores of chocolate chip ice cream cones were avidly devoured. Daddy carefully colored the empty spaces of our world with so much laughter and fun that we never had time to grasp the true weight of our circumstance.

On a cool, crisp October evening in the fall of 1972, Mikie and I were sprawled out on our living room floor in the midst of creating homemade Halloween costumes. We'd rounded up a couple of large, beat-up cardboard boxes and were attempting to transform them into fake television sets with a little help from some tinfoil and black magic markers.

“Hey, Mikie, where’s the scissors?” I asked. “I need to cut out my TV screen.”

Mikie scanned the floor, thinking he’d already grabbed a pair. As soon as he realized his mistake, he got up and sifted through a nearby desk.

“That’s weird,” he said. “I thought they were right here.”

“I’ll go upstairs and check with Momma,” I said. “Be right back.”

I pushed myself away from the floor, passed through the dining room, then mounted the stairs and headed for Mom’s bedroom at the end of the second floor hallway. I noticed that her curtains had been drawn, and only the flicker from a small lamp on the dresser lit the dark room. I could hear an angry, muffled voice as I approached, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It sounded unfamiliar to me, and I wasn’t able to place it. I cautiously slowed my pace.

“You don’t know!” The angry voice shouted in a scratchy whisper. “You don’t know anything! Go straight to hell!”

I was scared now. As I moved forward, my lower lip began to tremble. “Momma? You there?” I asked as bravely as I could.

There was no answer.

The angry whispers continued.

Once I reached the threshold of Mom’s room, I could see her lying in bed underneath the covers, still fully dressed. Her pale, agonized face twisted and contorted as she carried on her delusional conversation with an unknown being.

“Momma?” I said in a soft, trembling voice.

She didn’t realize I was calling her name, so I stepped closer. As I passed her dresser something unusual caught my eye, and I glanced over at it. On the mirror was a message erratically scrawled in dark, red lipstick that read:

***Demons Be Gone! Leave Me in Peace!***

The blood rushed from my face. I couldn't comprehend what was happening and was so terrified that I began to cry.

"Momma!" I shouted as tears streamed down my face.

"Momma! Are you all right?"

My anguished cries jostled Mom from her trance, and she glared at me with bloated, resentful eyes.

"Get out!" She yelled at me.

"Momma, what's wrong with you?" I was sobbing now.

"Get out of my room . . . this instant!" She started to get out of bed, so I turned and ran back toward the stairs.

"Momma, please don't do this! You're scaring me, Momma!" I yelled over my shoulder. I ran down the stairs and back into the living room.

My brother looked concerned. "What's wrong?" he asked, clearly having heard all the commotion.

"Something's really weird with Momma this time!" I stuttered as I tried to get my explanation out in between sobs.

"Slow down, I can't hear what you're saying," Mikie instructed.

Just as I was trying to calm down and retell my story, Daddy walked in the front door. "Hi, Kids," he greeted as he began to take off his coat. It didn't take long for him to notice my distress.

"What is it, Twink? What's wrong?" he asked as he hung up his coat, then quickly strode toward me.

"It's Momma! Something really bad has happened!" I told him.

Daddy gently guided me over to the couch, sat down next to me and put his arm around my slender, heaving shoulders while Mikie plopped onto the floor next to his half-finished cardboard TV set.

As I unfolded my bizarre conversation with Mom, Daddy's face became completely expressionless. He kept on

