

Growth

A Mother, Her Son, and the
Brain Tumor They Survived

A memoir
by Karen DeBonis



Chapter 1: A Reckoning

I first noticed my son’s eye-rolling the summer he turned eight. It wasn’t the typical “Mom, quit bugging me” look. It was more like an ocular Ferris wheel, brown eyes circling around and around, taking in the view, enjoying the thrill. Up. Right. Down. Left. Up right down left. Uprightdownleft, several times, until it came to rest as if to take on new riders. Then the ride started up again.

Sprawled on the living room carpet, Matthew was oblivious to me watching from the kitchen. He hand-surfed through a pile of Legos, making a ruckus of *clickety-clicks*. The funny cowlick that defied hair gel and spit protruded from his crown, and his Goosebumps T-shirt had a soggy ring growing at the neckline where he chewed and sucked on it in concentration.

“There it is!” he proclaimed, holding aloft a tiny yellow helmet. That’s when I noticed his rolling, rolling, rolling eyes. I didn’t know it yet, but that moment was the beginning of the end of the old Matthew.

Bringing attention to a child’s troublesome behavior often exacerbates it, so I said nothing. But I registered eye-rolling in my brain where back-to-school paperwork, grocery lists, and work deadlines already overflowed. I could hardly imagine adding to my mother-load, but I filed Matthew’s unusual behavior under H for “Hmmm,” dated August 1994. Then I turned to the fridge to figure out what to fix for dinner.

At thirty-five, some days I thought I had my working mom act together—two kids, one husband, an old house, and a hyperactive border collie mutt. Other days, I looked at the calendar and thought, *I just have to get through this week, then I can breathe*. Sometimes I “just” had to get through the month until I could breathe, and I wondered if I’d remember how.

The evening after I noticed Matthew’s eye-rolling, he was playing in the backyard with Stephen, three, and Sparky, our adopted dog and incessant barker. I asked my husband to try to stop the barking when he went outside.

Mike sat on a kitchen chair in shorts and a ratty T-shirt, lacing up his work boots.

“Did you notice Matthew’s eye-rolling during dinner?” I asked.

“Yeah, I did.” He didn’t look up. At thirty-seven, his hair had not yet started to thin, and a tuft of it stuck out from the back of his New York Yankees hat.

"I think it's a tic," I said.

"What does that mean?" He glanced at me curiously.

"I don't know." I twisted my hair in a knot, then let it fall, unsure of what I wanted to say. "It's probably not a big deal, but I'll mention it when Matthew has his physical."

"Good idea."

Standing up, giving me a quick peck on the cheek, he added "I'd better get out in that garage before it gets dark."

Mike was able to put the conversation behind him easily. Not one to overthink or analyze things, he went back to what he knew—that our ramshackle garage was falling down, that it might be salvaged with cables and braces and his architect's ingenuity. A tic was an oddity he didn't understand and couldn't fix. It was easy to push into a corner of his mind, like our Christmas decorations in the attic, forgotten until I asked him to drag them out again.

At Matthew's annual well-child visit the following week, he sat on the padded table in his underwear, still too young to be bashful. Swinging his legs, he alternated butt cheeks in time to an invisible marching band. Giggling at his inventiveness, he crooked his arms and swung along.

"Silly goose," I said, unable to suppress a smile.

As soon as the doorknob clicked, Matthew stopped all but the leg-swinging. He always wanted to behave, especially in public.

“Third grade already, Matthew?” Dr. Peterson exclaimed, bursting through the door. “You’re getting to be so grown up!”

When Mike and I were expecting in 1986, we weren’t savvy enough to interview prospective pediatricians like parents often do today, and it probably wasn’t an option anyway. Our health plan had one pediatrician on staff, so that’s who we got. We got lucky. Around ten years my senior, Dr. Delores Peterson had a friendly face with a big smile full of big teeth. A mother of three older children, she had doctored hundreds of babies. More importantly, she never condescended to us due to our inexperience. Whatever the ailment or concern, she educated us in terms we understood without being patronizing.

Matthew politely answered her casual inquiries about his summer, his friends, and the upcoming school year. When she finished, Dr. Peterson gave him a canister of stickers to choose from.

“Any new concerns in the family?” she asked, turning to me.

“Did you notice his eyes?” I whispered from behind my hand, while Matthew dug in the jar.

She stared at Matthew for a minute.

“Matthew,” she said, “are your eyes bothering you?”

“Uh-uh,” he replied, shaking his head vigorously.

“Are they itchy?”

“No.”

“When I was a little girl,” she said, “I rolled my eyes when they felt itchy.”

I knew that wasn’t the problem.

“You can stop it, can’t you, Matthew?”

Don’t you know any child psychology? I thought. You can’t ask a kid a leading question and expect an honest answer.

For ten seconds, while Dr. Peterson counted, Matthew stopped eye-rolling. As soon as the time was done, his eyes made up for lost time.

Doesn’t that tell you something?

But my face revealed none of my annoyance, my smile remained plastered in place. When the doctor concluded that Matthew had a “habit tic”—a growing pain he’d outgrow—impotent words dribbled from my mouth. “Oh, good,” I said, and “That’s great,” two of my go-to responses for just about everything. And of course, “Thank you,” not only to be polite, but to stay in the good graces of a person I liked, in hopes she’d like me back, which was everything.

When I was six, my mother brought me to her hair salon for a trim of my long, thick hair. The petite hairdresser with a tall pile of bleached curls took an inch or two off my length,

then, brandishing her thinning shears, left billowing piles of blond fluff on the floor and a pencil-thin ponytail on my head. I felt as light as a butterfly. When we got home, I flitted around for my dad, showing off my skinny hair. My mom waited for me to flutter away before she said anything to my dad, but she didn't wait long enough.

“All Karen's beautiful hair,” Mommy whispered. “It's ruined.”

I didn't understand. Mommy sounded mad, but I saw her smile at the lady and tell her my haircut looked nice. I thought they were friends. Mommy said, “Thank you.” Mommy was so nice—she would never really be mad at someone.

At six years old, I had learned some important rules: 1) When you're mad, act like you're not, at least until you get home. 2) Be nice, even if you don't mean it. 3) Always be agreeable, even if your hair is ruined.

The rules would be reinforced over and over in the years ahead until they became part of me, until I became the so-nice mommy, until the only way I knew to be was a so-nice mommy who smiled to hide her anger. I became a woman who had never learned to stand up for herself and a mother who couldn't speak up for her child.

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