

Growth

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

A memoir

by Karen DeBonis



School was out for the summer. My mother had plans for the day, so she dropped me off with a family friend. I was happy to be there—I loved Mrs. M. and liked her children, at least within the familiar circle of family gatherings. Shortly after I arrived, a gang of outdoorsy, athletic-looking kids trickled into the house to prepare for a hike. I was neither outdoorsy nor athletic, and hiking included too many unsettling unknowns: people, terrain, expectations.

“I’ll just stay here with you,” I told Mrs. M.

“No, Karen. You have to go with the kids.”

Even at eleven, I got the distinct feeling she had observed a pattern of me choosing the safety of adult company over the rough and tumble play of my peers. I think she relished the opportunity to drag me

out of my comfort zone to the place she felt I belonged. Properly chastised, I didn't argue. I dared not make waves. I dared not disappoint a person I loved.

Reluctantly, I trotted along with the adventurers. At one point, a large outcropping of rock blocked our trail, which curved around to a hidden place beyond. The ground below the rock fell away to a deep precipice. One by one, the brave explorers side-stepped along a narrow ledge, grabbed hold of the rock face, and disappeared from view.

I was sure I would fall and sustain grave injuries, even death. Perhaps in reality it was not that dangerous, but to my impressionable, sensitive mind, it felt terrifying. Yet, I didn't want to ruin the day for the other kids or risk being called "chicken" or "baby." I took my turn, grasping the rock for dear life, trying not to look over my shoulder. I survived without injury—to my body, at least.

By the time we got back, I had a migraine—the first I remember. I went into the bathroom and cried. When I came out, red-faced, Mrs. M. looked surprised.

"Karen, what's wrong dear?"

"I have a really bad headache. Do you have some aspirin?"

My mother picked me up, and I sobbed the whole way home.

Years later, thinking about the incident made my heart race and my eyes smart. The helplessness felt familiar as a recurrent theme of my childhood.

I called my mom.

“Would you have described me as a sensitive child when I was a kid?”

“Absolutely,” she replied in that wise, loving tone that had buffered me through life.

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