

Tragedy Breeds

By Renee Wentz

Hurricane Isabel had passed, but not without leaving her calling card in Hampton Roads. Trees were uprooted and laying in many people's houses, debris was spread across yards up and down every city street, and everyone was asking the same question: "When will my power be restored?"

Our power had been out for two days, and my kids desperately were missing the television. I decided to take my 8-year-old son, Garrett, for a drive. The drive went well, and we just were returning when Garrett spotted his friend, Bradley, and wanted to play. I agreed to let him and stopped our minivan in the street.

Before he ran off to play with his friend, I cautioned Garrett to be alert. I reminded him that, with the cleanup effort underway, branches and trees would be piled everywhere. "Be extra careful, and watch for cars if you cross the street," I said.

"OK, Mom," he answered, with a "Mom always worries too much" attitude. I knew he was excited about getting to play with his friend. Shutting the van's sliding door, he headed toward Bradley.

I still was looking at the mounds of debris and trying to see if any danger was close by when I accelerated forward. I immediately heard something that sounded like a large branch hit the front of the car. Pressing the accelerator a little harder, I felt a distinct bump. "The hurricane has left so many large branches to clean up," I thought at that moment. "The situation really is dangerous."

Suddenly, I decided to check on Garrett again. He wasn't in the neighbor's yard—in fact, I couldn't see him any-

where. Then, a sharp jolt of panic hit me. "Could I have hit Garrett with the van?" I wondered.

Remembering not to back up, I put the car in park and got out the driver's door while calling his name. Only silence followed. "Surely he's in the yard, or maybe he's going to come around from the other side of the car," I tried to convince myself. Slowly but surely, though, I came to realize I had done the unthinkable: I had been careless and run over my own son.

I started screaming, "Garrett! Garrett!" Then the most beautiful and, yet, the most horrible thing ever happened in one surreal moment. My son came crawling out from under the car, calling, "Mommy!"

I bent down and picked him up—with his face bloody and swollen—with the same ease as if he weighed only a pound or two. He clutched me amid screaming, and I held him close while carrying him to a grassy area nearby, where I gently lay him. He cried in my arms as I assured him that he would be fine. "Mommy is here," I said, noticing that, despite the situation, those words seemed to calm him.

Some say this photo is a composite, or "fake." I can't attest to its authenticity.—Ed.

Hurricane Isabel still was making her approach on the Hampton Roads area when this photo was taken.



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Within seconds, a nurse who lived in the neighborhood appeared, followed quickly by another neighbor who is a paramedic and another who is a policeman. Using his police radio, the latter called for an ambulance, since we had no telephone service. These neighbors examined Garrett as best they could. By the time the ambulance arrived, my husband had appeared, and he accompanied our son to the hospital. It was a short trip, and the hospital staff was ready to give Garrett immediate attention.

A thorough examination and X-rays revealed that Garrett's only injuries were a cut on his chin that required three stitches and some severe scrapes and bruises [see accompanying photos]. By the grace of God, he had escaped any internal injuries

or broken bones. He didn't lose consciousness and was allowed to go home with us from the emergency room. The next several days were full of discomfort for Garrett as he endured the road rash and sore muscles from his experience.

Meanwhile, I was trying to find a way to live with myself for what I had done. It seemed like all my friends and neighbors were more worried about me than they were Garrett—all I could do for several days was cry every few minutes. My confidence was shattered, and the feelings of failure were overwhelming at times.

Amazingly, it was Garrett who helped me start healing. One day after I had had another crying episode, he said to me, "I'm going to be OK, Mom, and you really are starting to bother me." At that moment, I realized I had to quit letting my guilt get in the way of helping him have a complete physical

and emotional recovery.

Garrett made a full recovery, and the only lasting effect he has is a healthy respect for moving vehicles. I still struggle sometimes with the thought of what could have happened but find solace in my belief that God is in control of everything.

As a result of this experience, we have established rules regarding safe car practices. Garrett always crosses in front of the car—never behind it. If he is outside when I'm in the car, we must make eye contact and wave to each other. Accidents are going to happen, but we must do our best to avoid them. It takes rules that both the children and the adults must understand and follow. ■

The author is a Coast Guard wife.