

Suzanne

It was 1972. The Vietnam War still raged on. Sarah and I, Laura, and baby Suzanne had driven across the country from Los Angeles to Ann Arbor so that I could enter a Ph.D. program. I worked at the local mental health center. We worked very hard at our various jobs. I did data analysis with a very early computer system. My friends were doctors, nurses, social workers, and a mélange of administrative types from finance, accounting, and human resources. Every Friday someone would yell out: "We'll have happy hour at Jimmy's!"

This was not news. They always went out for drinks on Fridays. Nonetheless whoever announced this non-news got an enthusiastic: "I'm in," "I'm in," "Do you need a ride?" "Meet you there!"

At thirty, I was older than many of my co-workers. I was a married man with two daughters. I rarely joined these mini events on Fridays. But today, I did.

About twenty of us sat at the long table in the dim light of the bar. The room was smoky. It was a loud scene. I stamped my feet to shake off the snow as I walked in and took off my giant fur-hooded blue Air Force parka. I wedged in between two pretty women.

I don't know quite how it happened.

I've replayed this scene many times. In the rhythm of such things, I ordered 1 drink after another. As a parent, I felt a constant pressure to go home to my family, but this was so much fun. We laughed. We argued and gossiped. We flirted.

After some time passed, I was, by my own standards, drunk. It was about 5:00 PM. I knew Sarah was home waiting for me.

No, I didn't responsibly wait around to become less drunk. I went to my car.

Once outside, I thought the blast of the cold winter air would help me. Snow had begun to fall, giving everything that special sunset white glow. I stood at the edge of my car and scooped up some icy slush and rubbed my face.

"Ahhh that's good" I shook my beard like a wet dog.

When I started the car, the radio blasted a cassette tape I had in the car. It was The Dark Side of the Moon.

I rolled down the windows. The evening commute was beginning.

“Ah good”

“A wet face and the blast of air will work,” I mumbled to myself.

I edged out and slowly drove home on newly plowed streets. Streams of cars crawled along. Headlights glared through the frosty windows. The road revealed itself only by the black tire tracks on the white newly fallen snow.

I made it home safely because everyone was driving so slowly.

The Golden Street house



It turned off Packard Boulevard and drove to our home on Golden Street. I expected to find Sarah with our three-year-old daughter, Suzanne.

I didn't see the note waiting for me until parked in our driveway and opened the ice-covered glass storm door.

The note hung on a nail. It flipped frantically in the wind.

The note said:

“Call Emma! Sarah has taken Suzanne to the hospital.”

I didn't go inside the house. I climbed down the icy stairs and jumped back in my car. I was now pumped with adrenaline. I tried to slow my breathing. I

tried to focus on the note. "*What did it mean?*" Emma lived a block away, and she came to her door quickly.

She said only: "Suzanne fell down your stairs. Go to the ER."

As I headed to the hospital, my headlights showed the black drifts of snow and the partially blocked residential streets. I kept the windows down and could hear the crunching of car tires around me. My own car had studded snow tires. They made their own loud sound. It was early evening and folks were driving home. Everyone drove slowly in the new snow and dim evening light. I turned off the radio.

I talked to myself.

"OK, you have to calm down."

"You have been drinking and you have to get to the hospital."

The icy wind burned my face and numbed my hands.

"Calm down. Calm down."

"Get there. Get there."

"I should be with them."

"I should have been home."

What had happened?"

I knew nothing.

I arrived at the University of Michigan hospital. I parked poorly, cutting across two parking places near the emergency room entrance. I worried about my parking as I went through the automatic doors.

"Your daughter is in intensive care on the 8th floor." "Take the blue elevator, then follow the red line."

Still in my parka, I began to sweat. I seized the counter of the 8th floor nursing station and asked for Suzanne. I could see her name on the big whiteboard behind the nurse.

My wife Sarah came to my side, and we went to a small waiting area.

People crowded the room with pain and grief. The room had an odd smell. It was fear. All of us in the room were waiting for word about our very ill or injured children. Over several days, I would hear each story. Some children would die.

Sarah and I sat on a vinyl couch together. It sagged, and it tumbled us into the middle. We could whisper. Sarah began the retelling:

Sarah was reading in the living room while Suzanne played on the floor. She noticed Suzanne was not within sight and called out.

“Suzanne, where are you?”

“Suzanne, come here!”

“Suzanne? Suzanne?”

The house was silent except for the thumping of the dryer in the basement.

Sarah went upstairs, calling:

“Suzanne, Suzanne”

Sarah paused her narration and sobbed quietly. Everyone in the room was listening to her every word.

She continued,

“Finally, I went to the basement stairs. I didn’t see her from the top of the stairs.” I yelled, “Suzanna Banana, you come here. Don’t hide from me.!”

“I went down the stairs steadying myself on the stair-well wall. When I was about halfway down the stairs, I looked over the edge and could see Suzanne curled up on the cement floor.”

“I picked her up and could feel something soft and wet on the side of her head. She was unconscious.”

“She was limp and like a doll.”

Sarah ran barefooted as she carried Suzanne along the icy streets to the home of our friend Emma. Her husband, Ernesto was a physician. By good fortune, Ernesto was at home at 4 in the afternoon. He barely looked at Suzanne before he told Emma to get the car and drive Sarah and Suzanne to the hospital.

Sarah spoke with that strange politeness we all have drilled into our heads: "Oh, I can drive myself over." "I hate to bother you"

"NO!" Ernesto said loudly. Sarah understood. Quickly, Emma agreed to pick up our other daughter Laura and to put the note on our front door. It was fluttering white note that would await me.

This was the 70s. No cell phones, texts, emails. I was somewhere, but no one knew where I was.

In the ICU, Sarah explained to me that she had not been there long before I arrived. Now, we waited to hear from the Suzanne's physician.

A nurse appeared with the doctor. They had some paperwork. The doctor told us that Suzanne had a fractured skull and that they might need to do surgery. We had to sign authorizations, and we did.

I said to Sarah: "We just have to sign it." "We have to trust them."

I later learned from friends that this physician was in the last week of a 3 year neurosurgery residency. He had learned a lot.

The doctor told us Suzanne had had a major seizure and that the trauma caused her brain to swell. He explained that surgery might be needed, but he wanted to wait to see if they could reduce the swelling with only medications.

Over the next few days, Sarah and I stood vigil in the hospital.

In a few days, as the swelling in her brain subsided, we tried to talk with Suzanne. Whenever we approached her, she would scream and have what we might call a fit.

In any other setting, a three-year-old having fit meant very little.

"I want the yellow cup."

"I want a hot dog, not grilled cheese"

"I want candy."

But Suzanne screamed at the sight of us, Sarah and Mike, her parents.

We stood in the hallway.

"Do you think this is what brain damage looks like."

"Oh god, don't say that."

"I'm sorry. But I'm scared."

"I'm afraid too"

"We should get out of here in the hall. Let's go downstairs away from everyone."

"Let's go out in the snow. We have to get control of ourselves."

When we came back on the ward, a nurse approached us:

"You may want to just let us care for Suzanne for a few days."

"Do you see that she is calm until you come near her?"

She continued to explain:

"Remember, she was home and happy and then suddenly woke up in this scary place. She has pain. In her world, you two handle everything. She is angry at you! This will pass. We see it all the time. It will be ok."

Indeed, we saw that the nursing staff could pick up Suzanne and care for her without incident. For the moment, we were triggering the "fits." We were reassured by the nurse. Yet we both felt tremendous guilt that our baby could be so hurt.

While the hospital stay continued. Sarah stayed at the hospital. I went home to look at the scene of the accident.

We had just moved into this home. The basement was full of unopened boxes. The stairs to the basement were dark and there was no handrail. Worse still, lacking a railing, anyone on the stairs could fall over the side. This is exactly what Suzanne had done. She fell about 10 feet down to an uncarpeted cement floor.

The stairs well was dark. I felt waves of guilt since I had known these stairs were dangerous.

I knew the stairs needed slip proof stairs

I knew the stairs needed a handrail.

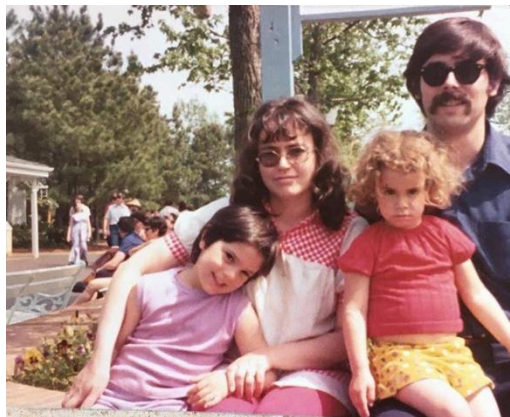
I knew the stairs needed a new rail to protect anyone, no less a toddler, from falling over the side.

I knew the stairs needed bright light.

I stood at the top of the stairs. It was early in the afternoon. I had to move beyond feeling that I had failed my family. I had to fix things.

I was not a skilled builder, but I bought timber, wallboard, stair treads, a railing system, and lights, and began working late into the night. In 12 hours of continuous work, I finished. Although I was forever afraid of those stairs, they were now safer.

Suzanne came home after 10 days. She is well.



Left to right: Laura, Sarah, Suzanne, and Michael (1972)