

Joe Russo

About 4, 800 words

21500 Park Row DR APT 407

Katy, TX 77449

941-716-4215

Joerusso8writer@aim.com

Sick

By Joe Russo

Little Jack must've been about three years old the night he walked into my bedroom. Sleepwalked into my bedroom. You see he's been having these dreams, real bad dreams, dreams that would make any child or adult run screaming for their parents. He's had them ever since he was born. At least that's what we thought. There was never really a time when Little Jack wouldn't sleepwalk into my bedroom and cuddle up next to me.

I was sound asleep and dreaming but I can't remember what I was dreaming about. Maybe it was the one where I was a bird flying high in the sky; maybe the one about the ocean and me being dropped right into the middle of it with no help to be found. I didn't hear Little Jack at first and he must've repeated my name at least three times. "Momma. Momma my tummy hurts."

"What's up baby? What's wrong?"

"My tummy hurts."

"Awh baby did you sit on the pot for a bit?"

"Yeah and nothing comes out. I can't sleep."

"Okay baby come here. I'll pat and rub it for you just like I did when you were a wittle wittle baby."

Little Jack jumped up onto my bed and cuddled up next to me just like he did last night and the night before. I rubbed his belly in short semi circles and watched as he fell asleep right there, right in my arms.

The next morning, it had to be July 9th, I was downstairs making breakfast. Hunter, my oldest boy, was already downstairs and playing on his phone reading whatever that was so important like a newspaper. Sarah, my middle child, had her Barbie's on the table, something that would've made her father scream but after the divorce I kind of let it slip. I let a lot of things slip.

I was making fritters, I'm telling you that because it might have a part in the rest of this story but I could be wrong. I'm not sure what caused it, what caused everything to happen.

"Hunter will you wake your brother please?"

My back was to him but I'm sure he rolled his eyes at me. Sarah moved in to pick up his phone and that I caught with my eyes. "You're playing with fire young girl."

I placed the fritters on the table. The classic concoction of flour, baking powder, sugar and salt an all time favorite in this household was a recipe I took from my ex-

husbands mother. Maybe something good did come out of this marriage I thought to myself.

"Sarah, start eating before the boys come back down. You know they always take the hot ones."

I sat at the head of the table, Sarah on my right, Hunter on my left and Little Jack at the other head. After the divorce we were pushed into this little two-bedroom apartment where Hunter had to sleep on a pull out couch in the living room. I know he hates it but its what we have to deal with for now, at least for the next couple of months.

"Ma he says he's too tired to come downstairs. And I'm almost positive he threw up in the toilet because it smells in there," Hunter says as he takes his seat back. He takes three fritters in his hand and puts two in his mouth.

I shake my head. "Poor thing. He was sick last night as well. Make sure you two eat. I'm gonna go check on him."

The staircase dissects the apartment in half and I take the stairs two at a time. I think back to what little Jack ate last night and the night before. I wondered if it was the divorce that finally got to him. Maybe, just maybe, he was doing it for attention. This wouldn't be the first time he's done something like this. We thought the bad dreams were a call for attention as well.

"Wumby? Baby? Are you okay?" I ask slowly stepping into my bedroom. I thought using his baby nickname would've put s smile on his face but, as I stepped inside, I found that he wasn't up for smiling.

He was slumped over the bed, the sheets wrapped around his little body. Pale, he was so pale. The smell, that putrid smell, was everywhere. It was on the floor; it seems that he didn't quite make it to the bathroom. It dripped onto the sheets.

"Oh baby what's going on with you? Baby? Baby answer me!" I ran over to him. His skin was cold to the touch. I pick him up. He's dead weight, the weight where he's sleeping but his eyes aren't quite closed. His breathing is slow and haggard. That low throat vibrating sound escapes his throat. Gagged and choked. He heaves.

"Wait baby wait till we get to the bathroom-"

Something cold runs down my back. I close my eyes as we stumble into the bathroom. I place him in the tub and run to the sink. I wet a towel, any towel, and place it on his forehead. He's so pale. When did he get like this?

"Hunter!" My little baby, my little Jack, with dried throw up on his chin. My sick, poor little baby.

"Hunter! Get up here!"

"Mom?"

"Call nine one one! Quick!"

Hunter stumbles into the bathroom phone in hand. "What's going on is he okay?"

"Just call please!"

"Okay. Okay!"

He walks out of the bathroom, phone to his ear. Jack looks up at me just before he makes that gagging sound again. Just before he throws up right there in the bathtub. Just before I glance down and see bits of red in it. Just before Hunter comes back into the bathroom and says the ambulance will be here soon.

"Is he okay?"

I look over at my oldest son, the splitting image of his father. Could I lie?

"I have no idea. Go and check on your sister please."

Hunter turns to leave. I cradle my sick son and wait for the familiar sounds of help.

They didn't let me go with him so I followed behind them wearing the same clothes I woke up in. I told Hunter to stay at home to watch his sister. He fought me a little saying he wanted to go to the hospital but I won. I told him to keep his phone around him as if today, this one day, would be any different.

The hospital was a twenty-minute drive shortened only by the fact that the ambulance's lights were on and the siren was blaring. I started crying, I'm not sure when, but I did. I remember stopping at a red light, the ambulance going ahead of me, and wiping away my tears. It was the first time I cried since the divorce.

The ambulance was parked and already unloading my son as I pulled up and parked. I ran after them wanting to be with them every step of the way.

"Ma'am you can't go in there. Ma'am-"

"That's my son."

"I understand. You still can't go in there," a nurse said, standing before the emergency room doors like a dragon guarding gold.

"That's my son that's my son that's my son."

And I fell into the nurse's arms.

I'm not sure what time it was when I awoke but I was still in the hospital in the waiting room. The sun was still up so I figured not long. The waiting room was full but not too full. The nurses paced back and forth and doctors, in their long white coats, came out every now and then. I was hungry, having not eaten that morning. The nurse that I fell into, she was looking at me and flipping through papers, look and flip. Look and flip. I stood up and walked over to her.

"Can I see my son now?" My voice was hoarse. I wanted something to drink as well.

"Ma'am-"

"I want to see my son."

"We were going to tell you sooner-"

"Tell me what?"

"We were going to tell you but you were passed out. Your son... He past away this morning. About two hours after you arrived."

No. No that's wrong. She has the wrong person. Not my son. Not my son. Not my baby boy. No.

"Here's the doctor now. He'll tell you more. I'm so so so sorry."

The room started to spin. I couldn't get a handle on where or why the room was spinning. The nurse called the doctor over. I watched as he strode over, his blond hair shiny and his teeth sparkling white. He watched as my son...

"How could you? You could've saved him! You could've!"

"We tried everything. We did. We couldn't pinpoint where his pain was. He

couldn't say. He said his stomach was aching but he passed before we could run tests."

"He..."

"He was dehydrated. Tired. It came as a surprise for all of us. You must know how terribly sorry we all are."

"My baby..."

"You can come see him now. We cleaned him up."

The doctor led me into the elevator and pushed the M button, a button no one ever uses, a button no one should ever use.

It was as cold as Little Jacks skin down here. The gurneys, all piled up as if they were in a marching parade and there, all the way in the back, a gurney with a small black bag. A small black bag like the ones doctors used to carry. It was labeled as if it were a prize instead of a loved one. Jack Morris, age 5, died June 9th, 2015, 1:33 P.M. The doctor started to unzip the bag the only sound in the otherwise quiet hallway.

"Don't its okay I don't want to see what he looks like."

And with these last words I turned back towards the elevator, still wiping the tears from my eyes.

The ride home was considerably longer than the ride there. My eyes didn't really focus on the road. I was in a sort of daze, running through the normal actions of driving and breathing. A kind of autopilot. I did notice one thing though; my tears stopped as I pulled into the apartment complex and watched the security gate open.

Hunter and Sarah were sitting on the couch when I walked inside. The apartment was quiet and for the first time in a long time Hunter didn't have his phone in his hand. We didn't say anything, we barely even looked at each other but I knew that they knew that little Jack won't be coming home. I'm not sure who called them to tell them but I figured it was the doctor. Or maybe it was me I couldn't remember.

I dropped my purse onto the dining room table, the only thing my ex husband gave me to keep, pulled out a chair and collapsed.

"Did you eat?"

"No Not yet."

"Mac and cheese. Mac and cheese, Mommy!" Sarah urged.

"You want some Mac and cheese baby girl?"

Sarah nods.

"Okay baby mama will make you some Mac and cheese."

I looked over at my two kids, my two other babies. I stood and walked over to them. I bent over, kissed the top of their heads and held them for what seems like ever.

"We'll get through this. Little Jack would want us to. I love you guys so so so much."

"Love you too mom."

"Go upstairs and play. I'll make dinner."

Hunter grabs his sister's hand and leads her to the stairs.

"Hunter? Call your father. He should know... what..." I couldn't finish.

Hunter nods his head.

That night I took a bath and thought up all the reasons as to why my marriage ended and plunged me into this world of darkness. Was it me? Was it something I did? If so, what did I do? We were happy once, that I knew, once upon a time but when did it end? We were teenagers stupid in love. We coasted the wave of romance that everyone, at least, once should ride but we didn't see the rocks in our way.

At nineteen we were married. At twenty-one we were married with a kid. At twenty-three we were married, with a kid, moving to a new city far away from the old life we always knew, and pregnant with our second child. We were tired. We were scared. We didn't touch each other for months – years even – and after Little Jack, named so because of his father and his father before him, we thought we were finished.

We weren't even close.

The bathroom is located right across from Little Jack's bedroom and as I was drying myself off his bedroom door remained wide opened. It was as if it were waiting for him to return from a friends house, to return to his toys laid out so in a manner dangerous to anyone but him.

I wrapped my hair up in a towel, taking extra care to throw away the towel I used to wipe up Little Jack's sweat and dried throw up, shut the light off in the bathroom and shut Little Jack's door.

We spent the next few days getting ready for Little Jack's funeral. The casket was mahogany with white satin inside. The flowers, though Jack could've cared less about them, were lilies and roses. Simple.

I guess Hunter called his father because each time I checked my phone there were little notes of his presence everywhere. Voicemails. Texts. A Facebook message where, unbeknownst to me, my relationship status claimed my marriage was still intact. They all went unanswered. I had no desire to talk to him, no desire to even see him but I knew, sooner or later, Little Jack's father would have to come face to face with the kids he abandoned.

June 11th, a day I was sure I could never forget, came and I found myself still in this autopilot mode. I awoke, got dressed, put on what makeup I had the strength for and walked downstairs. Hunter was already at the table his phone off and to the side of him.

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“I'm not hungry,” he answered.

“C'mon what do you want to eat?”

“I'm not hungry I said.”

“Hunter! I don't feel like fighting you today please!”

I knew we had a carton of eggs in the fridge and I decided eggs for breakfast would be a good idea. “Go wake your sister.”

“Mom.”

“Go and wake your sister for me please.”

“Mom last night my stomach started hurting. It felt like pins were being pushed into my stomach.”

“Hunter please stop joking.”

“I'm not joking. The pains they come and go.”

“Oh, God please not again. Please!”

“I called dad.”

“I know he keeps leaving me messages-”

“I’m thinking of staying with him for a while. Maybe after the funeral I would go back with him? He already said yes. He just wanted to clear it with you first.”

I’m stirring the eggs faster and faster. The heat turned up all the way.

“Mom?”

I don’t answer him. Instead I hear him climbing the stairs, that low, vibrating sound deep in his throat. I try to block out that sound, that sound of my oldest son vomiting into, what I hope is, the same toilet that his dead brother missed two days ago.

We pack into the car; Hunter and me in the front and Sarah, in her car seat, in the back. She brought two of her Barbie’s with her. I asked if she wanted to bring a toy for Little Jack but she didn’t seem to answer me. She looked the car window with this blank stare in her eyes. I noticed her skin was pale as pale as Little Jack’s and I told myself not to worry. I blamed it on the funeral.

We moved four states to the left to Illinois. We moved as far away from the city as possible. We moved in the middle of the night. We packed up whatever we could get our hands on and left the rest to the rats or to the new inhabitants of our old life. We left our cramped two-bedroom apartment in downtown Manhattan for a small cabin in the woods. Jack was going through his mid-life crisis you can say and who was I to stop

him? He made the money to keep the family afloat didn't he? I was just a normal housewife caring for her two kids.

We had enough money to keep us going for the first few months but I'm sure Jack never realized just how much it was to keep us going. I'm sure Jack never meant to get us pregnant with our third child the winter of that year. These things always seemed to escape Jack's mind.

I remember one night, I'm not sure of the date, but it was sometime during that winter when I asked Jack if he could look for a job somewhere. We were running low on funds; both he and I knew that. The new baby was due any month now and with no prenatal care we didn't know how it would turn out. I remember he laughed and said, "So what if its retarded? We can get rid of it."

I stared at him. This wasn't the Jack that I knew. He would never say something like this. He would never say something like this to his own child.

"Why would you say that? If you didn't want this child why didn't you say so?"

"I did! Its you who couldn't keep your hands off me."

"That's rich coming from you."

And then he slapped me, hard across my right cheek. My head twisted and my hands flew up to my face. I didn't cry, no, not that time or the other times my husband used my face as a punching bag. He didn't deserve to see me cry.

"I'll look in the morning for a job. Don't bother me about it."

And he went to bed. We never talked about him finding a job again. I think we were both scared to.

Moving back into a city from the country was a shock for all of us. We got so used to grocery shopping once a month, filling up the gas tank once a month and heading to a real playground that when we- the kids and I- found an apartment complex next to all three we felt like we were just coming out of a Disney movie.

For the first few weeks we loved in a state of bliss. Free from everything until the divorce finalized. And the weeks after that that state of bliss we so longed for blew up in our faces.

The cemetery was located behind this old white church that claims it was the first Baptist in the county. I chuckled at that; I was never one for organized religion. It was small and the few headstones that were already planted in the ground were growing old and faded. This is what life comes to I thought. Isn't it great?

There was no crowd gathered, no line of cars that lined the trees and hugged the black pavement road. There were only two other people atop that green grass, next to a pile of brown dirt; a priest and my ex-husband. I was already holding Sarah's hand and felt Hunter grasp my free hand, a thing he hasn't done in years.

"Is this all?" the priest coughed out. The tufts of white hair flew in the wind. Leaves danced across the green, danced on top of the people buried way below.

"This is it yes," my ex-husband said. He sounded the same.

I want to tell you what the priest said but I honestly blacked out. He talked about heaven's gates finally opening wide for another soul and something about the father

waiting for his lost son. He said something about peace and joy. He held out his hands and asked us to lower our heads in prayer. I didn't though, no, I looked over at my ex-husband. With his head lowered he looked good. He started losing his hair. He was a little chubby around the waist. He looked like the man I married just different.

“Amen.”

We all agreed and, as the priest dismissed us, Sarah dropped one of her Barbie's down the hole telling us that now Little Jack won't be lonely anymore. We headed back to the cars, Hunter and Sarah in front of Jack and I, like we were walking back from the park instead of the hole in the ground that would house our dead son.

“How are you?” Jack asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You seem pretty good. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I mean how else could I be?” I ask.

“Sad maybe... it's this feeling-”

“I know what it is.”

“Listen did Hunter tell you anything?”

“Yes we talked about it this morning.”

“What do you think? It'll be for a few days, a week at the most. I took off from work so I can hang with him. Sarah as well.”

“I think Sarah should stay with me. We can have a girls night-,” I say.

The whimsical drone of his cell phone ringing echoed throughout the quiet cemetery and we walked down by his car out of earshot. I stood by my own car and

waited for the phone call to end. It seemed like it took hours. Hunter, with his school backpack packed with clothes, stood next to me.

“I know honey and I can’t wait for you to meet him as well. Okay. Okay I love you too. See ya bye,” Jack hung up his phone and opened his car door. “Ready bud?”

Hunter gave me a quick hug. “I’ll call you tomorrow okay mom?”

I nodded, handed him a single silver key and watched as he opened the passenger side door to his father’s car. Jack stayed outside for a minute his eyes plastered on me.

“It was nice to see you even under these circumstances.”

“Nice to see you,” I said.

“You know Little Jack would’ve liked to see us like this again.”

“Like what? Happy?”

I didn’t hear his answer; instead I shut my door, started my car and drove away.

Our short-lived cabin life was ended about a week after our big fight. Jack got a job in the city and we left our cabin and moved back into a two-bedroom apartment about a mile away from Jack’s new office. The sound of car horns and yelling welcomed us back with open arms. Jack was as distant as ever those first few weeks back to civilization. Colder it seemed. He never hit me again but there was something in his eyes. Something... I couldn’t quite place.

Little Jack was born in the city hospital on September 14th at nine thirty-three P.M. The nurse brought him in to me and I smiled. My baby boy. The nurse, I think her name was Michelle, had brown hair and a fair complexion. I can remember the way she looked that day. The perfume she wore.

I spent the next few days in the hospital with the boy's visiting me when they could, Sarah either in her father's arms or held by Hunter. It was the first time I was truly happy. That ended that Friday, a full week after Little Jack was born. Ended when I found my husband with his arms around Michelle.

“What do you want to do tonight baby girl?” I asked.

“Oh I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

She shakes her head no.

“What about we watch that movie you've been wanting to watch? The one the boys would hate.”

“The Barbie Queen one!” Her eyes big and round.

“The Barbie Queen one. We can eat on the couch and have ice cream-”

“ICE CREAM!”

“Strawberry or vanilla?”

“Both!” She screams.

“Both?!”

I looked at my baby through the rearview mirror. She was so happy and so cute with her blonde hair in pigtails. Her “mermaid tails” as she called them. Her blue dress was wrinkled and right on the left hand side was a dirt smudge. She bounced up and down in her seat and for the first time I saw she was wearing mismatched shoes.

We were sitting in the living room, eating our ice cream when Sarah coughed. A dry cough like something was caught deep down her throat. She was on her fifth bowl of ice cream, alternating between strawberry and vanilla. I think she was eating strawberry when she started coughing.

“Mom this doesn’t taste good,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I take her bowl and smell it. “It smells good. What does it taste like?”

“Bad.”

“I think you need to stop eating ice cream.”

She coughed again, long and deep. Her skin was still pale. “My tummy hurts.” She doubled over just then and dropped her bowl of ice cream. She moaned and grabbed at her stomach. “Mommy. Mommy my tummy.”

I walked into the kitchen to grab a dishtowel. “I told you not to eat so much-”

She moaned louder this time. It sounded like a scream. I turned around to look at her, her skin deathly white now. She’s sweating now, her skin wet.

“Ice cream. Ready for bed?”

She didn’t answer me.

The apartment was quiet. Too quiet and I, in a sick way, enjoyed it.

I put the roach killer back under the kitchen sink, shut off the lights, locked the front door and laid down on the carpet in the living room with my daughter watching over me like a guardian angel.

I don't remember a lot of things but I do remember that I sat with Sarah, on the couch, for hours and hours. How long I can't quite tell you but I sat with her. I think I even held her hand. I'm not sure what I did after but I thought the apartment was too quiet, I thought this was God's way of punishing me for letting my marriage crumble. Which was another thing I'm not sure about. What day did it actually end? What time? I don't know. I watched as Jack took his stuff out of the apartment and into the little Volkswagen Michelle had. Said he would be back for the rest and I could only imagine he meant his kids.

His kids were the only things he loved. He could care less about me, the money, the job, or even, the place we called home. He never cared for his family, birthdays or anniversaries. He cared for his kids though; each and every last one of them.

I didn't want to fight. It was either him or me. The kids would've had to choose sooner or later. I chose for them.

Hunter came home that Tuesday morning and found Sarah on the couch and me in my bedroom. I haven't eaten anything since. Time after time I would walk down to the kitchen and grab the bottle of roach killer and open my mouth. Why did I deserve to live? A spray here. A spray there. It tastes metallic almost like swallowing a whole dime down your throat. It lingered in the mouth for about a minute, maybe two, and burned going down like it was a shot of whiskey.

Hunter, I guess, called the police. He and his father waited outside for them. I didn't put up a fight. I was handcuffed, led down the stairs, and into the back of a police cruiser. Hunter stayed outside the apartment. He didn't even look at me.

They say I'm sick. They say, well more like you say Dr. Hawkins, that I killed them out of anger. But you have to understand that I only wanted the best for my kids. You have to understand that and I guess, if you don't, then I have to understand that as well.

If you excuse me, Dr. Hawkins, but I'm not feeling well. My stomach's hurting. Isn't life funny like that?