

The lost son

by [Martha W Hickman](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

For years it was the image of the cat that haunted his dreams, so that each time he woke up he would experience the same chill, his body on the edge of trembling, until he remembered what the dream was about, but even then he had to play it through, listen to the story again.

He had been in the army, in the early days of the Vietnam War. The incident which kept threading through his dreams had nothing to do with fighting, or the terrible climate, or impossible peasant conditions, or the harsh barkings of an unknown language, or the traces of blood they walked carefully past lest they trip off a landmine.

It had been a pleasant afternoon, away from any fighting, and he and some buddies were relaxing along the shore of a stream, just sitting back and letting the sun shine on them. A plank of wood lay not far from him—next to his best buddy, Walter, a black man from Alabama. As they watched, resting against the tall fronds of grass, a stray cat wandered out onto the plank, one end of which hung suspended over the stream. The plank—he told himself this every time he remembered the story—was undeniably closer to Walter than to him. The cat seemed in kind of a daze. It walked out onto the end of the plank, then back again toward the shore, then out onto the plank, where it stopped, peering over the edge, looking down at the marsh below.

“Come on back here,” Walter called. The cat started, and turned to slowly retrace its steps, as though frightened at what might happen.

Languorous in the sunlight, Richard watched the apparently growing apprehension of the cat. Then, maybe because the slight weight of the cat’s turning toppled the balance, the end of the board fell precipitously downward, and now the cat was scrabbling anxiously, trying to scratch its way to the top and to safety again. Walter, seeing what had happened, eased forward on his belly, tried unsuccessfully to bring the board up to level and, when that didn’t work, tried to stretch his arm far enough to grab the cat and bring it to safety. He failed, and after several frantic minutes, the cat fell from the board and disappeared beneath the pond scum. Walter looked

toward Richard—shrugged, as though to say, “Too bad,” and returned to tying some vines together, or rolling a cigarette, or whatever he’d been doing. And that was that.

Except that it wasn’t, for Richard. Because he knew—and he supposed Walter knew, though they never spoke of it—that where he had lain back against the tall grasses of the stream bank, he was so close to the end of that fallen board that with a swoop of his arm he could have reached down and rescued the struggling cat, and he hadn’t.

When he was 42 years old, his son, Lee, the older of his two children, committed suicide. He found the lock to the gun case, took a gun and shot himself in the head in the small outbuilding behind the house, where they kept the lawn mower, the weed-trimmer, the electric clippers, a pair of lawn chairs they never remembered to get out until the summer was almost over. Nobody else was home when it happened. His daughter, Ellen, saw traces of blood easing out from under the shed door when she and Richard got home from work. He had picked her up from her job at McDonald’s. His wife, Cyd, was already home but hadn’t noticed the blood—or maybe it hadn’t yet leaked out from under the door when she got home.

“Dad, isn’t that blood?” Ellen opened the shed door before he got there, and screamed.

The days after that Richard could scarcely remember—the confusion, the disbelief, the barrage of looks between himself and Cyd—at one moment, sobbing together in wordless grief, at another looking at one another with accusing eyes—Who had failed him? What had they not seen? Both of them had their private guilts, which they did not share with one another. For each of them the question was, “It wasn’t my fault, was it?”

They went along like that for months, and one day they realized the marriage was over. Ellen would soon be old enough to be on her own, but for now she went to live with her mother.

In due course each of them married again. With tears, and broken words, Richard spoke to his new wife about Lee. She put her arms around him, held him close. “Those things happen,” she said. “You never know what was playing through his mind. It probably had nothing to do with you.”

Gratefully, he hugged her, but he did not believe her.

A few years later, his church put out an appeal for men to visit prisoners on death row—"Some of them don't have any family near here—or anybody to visit them," the priest explained. Richard volunteered.

He had to get various kinds of clearance—a voucher from the priest, a check of his own record to be sure he had no history of criminal offense, an interview with the prison chaplain, since this was a church-sponsored invitation.

He genuinely liked the man he visited, who had been convicted of murdering a young man in some kind of aborted drug deal. Of course, according to Karl, he had been set up, he wasn't really the one who pulled the trigger. His court-appointed lawyers were running through a course of appeals. They'd about reached the last and, unless the governor—or the Supreme Court—could be persuaded to stay the execution, he was scheduled to die within the month. "How old are you, son?" Richard asked one day, not thinking.

"Twenty-eight," Karl said.

"Figures," he said.

Karl gave him a strange look. "Figures?"

Richard shrugged it off. "I just guessed," he said. He could have told him about his son, Lee, who would have been 28 next month, but why?

A demonstration against the death penalty was being planned for the courthouse steps. The governor of Illinois had just called a halt to all executions because of the possibility that an innocent person might be killed. It seemed the moment for concerned citizens to act.

Richard planned to go. He might get pulled in, jailed, ordered to pay a fine. He didn't care. "I'll be there, Karl," he told him. "I'll be rooting for you."

A troubled look came to Karl's face. "If you get arrested," he said. "If they take your name, you know you can't come visit me."

"But I got to protest. I got to show up," he said.

"Yeah, but then I can't see you."

The demurral startled Richard. “Which would you rather—that I not go?” Richard asked.

There was a look close to panic in Karl’s eyes. “I rather you come here. There’s other folks protesting—but nobody to visit me.”

So when the list to sign up for the protest was posted at church, he didn’t put his name down, though it gave him a kind of empty feeling not to do so, like he was wrecking Karl’s chances of getting off death row. He loitered around the parish hall for a while, still uncertain about what to do, and then on his way out he stepped into the now empty sanctuary to sit for a few minutes.

Something stirred within him. It took a while for it come to the surface. It was something about signing up, and, strangely enough, it had to do with his son, Lee. Signing up. That was it. His pulse quickened though he did not move. Lee had wanted him to sign him up for soccer. For weeks they had talked about it—you had to have a parent sign you up. Saturday came, and they all forgot.

The cat had got sick and they had to take her to the vet. She had convulsions. She was discovered to have an inoperable growth on her head, and they had to have her put down. It wasn’t until two days later, when Lee came home crying, that they remembered the soccer. They tried to explain to the coach, but the teams were filled. “Try next year,” he said. But by the next year Lee had gotten in with a gang of boys whose interests did not include soccer—or any sports, for that matter. It was the group who, by high school, had gotten into trouble for trying to raise marijuana in someone’s backyard.

If he had signed him up for soccer, Richard wondered, his eyes playing over the blue and red robes of the Virgin Mary at one side of the altar, would that have made the difference? If the cat had not got sick? And why hadn’t he reached for that cat that hot afternoon in Vietnam? Why had he just let it slip off the board and drop into the water? And he hadn’t signed up for the death penalty protest, either.

The weight of it all settled on his shoulders, like that heavy lap robe—it was really a rug—they used to wrap themselves in on those sleigh rides they took on his grandfather’s farm. He felt his eyes sting. His right arm twitched. He reached inside his coat and felt for it—the small pad he always carried with him in case he needed to jot something down. He took a pencil from the pew rack in front of him, flipped open the pad and laid it on his knee. Slowly, he began to write: “For soccer: Lee

Anderson.” And then he wrote it again: “For soccer: Lee Anderson.”

His vision was blurry now and, carefully, he folded the paper, then folded it again. Then, on a rueful impulse, he bent back the corners of the paper the way they used to do to make paper airplanes. He creased it hard along the central line with his thumb and forefinger and, his heart suddenly light, he lifted it into the air and let it fly so it made a direct arc and fell nose down in the lap of the smiling Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus. While he continued to lean forward, his eyes intent on that folded paper, a cleaning woman came in and, seeing his gaze on the paper, picked it up and asked, “Is this something you want?”

He was between laughing and crying now and he shook his head lightly and said to her, “I did, but I don’t need it any more,” and he watched her slip it into her apron pocket and walk on out of the room.