



How I Coped When Mommy Died

*A documentary tale of love, loss and life anew
by Brett Hardy Blake*

Viewers' Guide

This Viewers' Guide was created for use with the 30-minute documentary film *How I Coped When Mommy Died*.

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Barbara Bogard
Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, D.H.L., D.D.
Wendy Wank

How I Coped When Mommy Died was written by 13-year-old Brett Hardy Blake, and co-produced and directed by his Emmy-winning adoptive mother, Lori Hope. The film was edited by Eleanor Tydings Gollob. Animation was created by Siri Margerin and Carter Tomassi. Original music was written by Nasús Aransu. The film was produced in association with KQED, Inc.

My Heart Will Go On (Love Theme from *TITANIC*) written by James Horner and Wil Jennings. Copyright 1997 Famous Music Corporation, Ensign Music Corporation, Fox Film Music Corp., TCF Music Publishing, Inc. and Blue Sky Rider Songs.

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How I Coped When Mommy Died premiered on KQED-TV, Channel 9, San Francisco on April 16, 2000. The Theatrical Benefit Premiere was held on June 8, 2000 at Grand Lake Theater, Oakland, California, to benefit East Bay Agency for Children.

How I Coped When Mommy Died is available for purchase and for screenings from:

Fanlight Productions
4196 Washington Street, Boston MA 02131
(800) 937-4113, fax: (617) 469-3379
Outside the U.S. Call (617) 469-4999
e-mail: fanlight@fanlight.com
Web Site: www.fanlight.com

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“The day the parent dies. Whether it’s preceded by a prolonged illness or comes unexpectedly, the ground shakes and nothing remains the same.”

Leslie Simon and Jan Johnson Drantell, in
A Music I No Longer Heard: The Early Death of a Parent

BRETT HARDY BLAKE WAS 10 YEARS OLD WHEN breast cancer claimed his mother’s life, shaking the ground beneath his world, changing his life forever. He had seen it coming when his mother’s cancer recurred three years earlier, shortly after his parents’ divorce. An only child, Brett had grown even closer to his mother during her illness, which deepened the pain of her death at age 42.

Although no one could ever take the place of his mother, Brett knew he would not be alone. Several months before his mother died, he learned that Lori Hope and David Blake wanted to make him part of their family. That meant moving—an all too common experience of children after the death of a parent. Brett moved from his all-white world in suburban Denver to the diverse city of Oakland, California. New family, new home, new city, new school, new friends, new life—a lot to deal with when you’re only 10. Brett saw the move as a chance for a new start but, for some children, moving means simply another loss to cope with.

When he was 13, Brett wrote and co-produced *How I Coped When Mommy Died* to help other children faced with the death of a parent. He shares his personal journey, talking openly about his feelings, from the fear during his mother’s seven-year struggle with breast cancer to his numbness after her death. With mature insight and engaging humor, he tells how he survived his mother’s death with the support of family, friends and professionals, such as counselors, health care providers, and hospice workers.

“This film is not just about my mother dying,” Brett explains. “It’s about a life, a love, and just going on and being helped.” It shows how, with the right support at the time of the loss and afterward, individuals can survive

Some Helpful Concepts About Grief

and grow through the most tragic of circumstances. Ongoing support, not just for weeks or months but sometimes for years, may be needed, especially at anniversaries and holidays.

Many people find strength in personal counseling. But for Brett, the right support was not individual therapy but a support group called *PediatriCare* at the East Bay Agency for Children. There, children experiencing loss met to help each other. Working with adult facilitators, they talked about their fears and other feelings. "It helps normalize the loss," he explains. Today Brett continues to work with children experiencing the loss of a parent, not only through the film but also through writing and speaking about his experience.

Although Brett's story is a unique incident, variations of the story happen each year to thousands of children who experience the death of a parent from breast cancer or other diseases. Each child's grief is unique, depending on his or her developmental age, culture, family relationships and circumstances. *How I Coped When Mommy Died* is particularly helpful to older children and teens. However, the documentary is important for anyone who has had to deal with a loss, or who has had to support someone grieving a death, divorce, or other personal tragedy.

Experts working in the field of loss and grief recommend that adults discuss these topics with adolescents before they see this film because it can evoke powerful, sometimes frightening emotions. Adolescents may have questions about the possibility of their own parents' death or about who would take care of them if one of their parents were to die. Education about death and grief as part of life should begin before crisis strikes.

Many experts on children's grief and loss, including Rabbi Earl Grollman, author of more than 25 books about death and grief, have told us that children especially need guidance and support after seeing *How I Coped When Mommy Died*. They also need to know about other resources for support, including books, web sites, videos and national support organizations. This *Viewers' Guide* brings those resources together with common questions that arise after seeing the film and appropriate ways to answer them, and a discussion of common feelings and coping mechanisms in bereaved children.

The Guide is intended to help families, friends, teachers and health care professionals as they support and counsel children grieving the loss of a parent. "Ideally, I would be there whenever the film is shown to talk with people afterward," Brett says. "Since that isn't possible, the *Viewers' Guide* is the next best thing." Brett has agreed to respond to e-mails, however. His address is: aleatoire7@mindspring.com

- Grief is natural. It is also complex. There is no way to avoid the pain. Grief is the price you pay for love.
- Grief is individual. Like fingerprints or snowflakes, each person's grief is different. Different people grieve in different ways, and children and adolescents may grieve differently from adults.
- Grief has no timetable. Just as there is no "normal" way to grieve, there is no "normal" timetable for grief. Resolution may take longer than people expect.
- Grieving can include every possible emotion: anger, depression, joy, loneliness, guilt, fear, sadness, happiness, unfairness, relief, despair, denial, freedom, and anxiety. It's possible to have several, even contradictory emotions all at once. For example, you can feel love for someone who has died and yet feel anger at the person for leaving you. Feelings can change from day to day, even from hour to hour.
 - ALL EMOTIONS ARE OK. They aren't "good" or "bad," although what people do with feelings can be a bad idea. Adolescents need to feel permission from themselves and others to experience ALL their feelings.
 - The grieving person needs to identify and honestly communicate emotions and find safe, unharmed ways to express them.
 - Support groups as well as individual therapy for people experiencing grief and loss can be helpful.
 - Adolescents need help in identifying people, both peers and adults, with whom they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.
- Grieving children and adolescents need to learn to ask for and accept help. They need to see that others consider it a privilege to help, just as they would if the roles were reversed. Asking for and accepting help gives people an important opportunity to serve. Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness but rather of the courage to take charge of what's happening.
- Grief can have both physical and psychological effects. It's important to eat well, exercise, and avoid the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs offer a tempting escape from feelings but can interfere with the natural grieving process and cause long-term physical and psychological problems.
- Seeing others grieve helps children and adolescents feel OK about expressing their feelings.

10 Guidelines for Parents Helping Children Who Have Experienced the Death of a Loved One

1. Do take the word “death” off the taboo list. Allow it to be discussed openly in the home, the school, the church, and the synagogue.
2. Do understand that mourning and sadness are appropriate for people of all ages. *Children are people.*
3. Do allow children to release their emotions. Let them name their feelings: “I am *angry*. I am *sad*. I am *hurt*.” *Expressing* these emotions is not harmful. *Suppressing* them is.
4. Do tell your children’s school about the loss in the family. This will help teachers understand possible sudden changes in behavior.
5. Do seek help if you feel unable to deal with your children during this crisis. Even the best-informed and well-intentioned parent or other adult may be unable to counsel a bereaved child, especially if the adult is also grieving.
6. Do not tell a child that he or she is now the man or woman of the house. It is difficult enough for a child to lose a loved one. Do not deprive them of their childhood.
7. Do not use stories and fairy tales as an explanation for the mystery of death. For example, do not say “Your mother has gone away on a long journey.” This gives the impression that she may someday return. A child’s greatest need is for trust and truth.
8. Do not let children believe that you have all the final answers. Leave room for their doubts, questioning, and differences of opinion. Eventually they must find their own answers to the problems of life and death.
9. Do not be afraid to express your own grief. Repressing your feelings suggests that children should do the same. Children receive permission to mourn from adults. Showing grief openly and mourning without fear or embarrassment helps both children and parents to accept that death is natural but painful.
10. Do not forget to continue to give assurance of love and support. The greatest gift that parents can give a child is *themselves*. Be willing to *listen* for minutes, hours, days. Children need to talk, not just be talked to.

Help children recall happy times together with the person who has died, not just the sadness of death. Remind children that the loss of one important relationship does not necessarily mean the loss of others, including the one with you.

When words fail, touch! Physical demonstrations of love and support can be more important than words.

Excerpted and adapted with permission from *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*, by Earl A. Grollman (1990, Beacon Press)

Common Questions from Viewers of *How I Coped When Mommy Died*

When responding to a child’s question, keep in mind:

- What does the child need to know?
- What does the child want to know?
- What can a child understand?

Remember, it’s okay to admit that you don’t have all the answers: no one does. Even as you share with your children, you will gain fresh insights for yourself. In other words, before you can explain death to children, you have to begin to explain it to yourself.

1. *Why do people die?*
Dying is part of life. Every living thing in the world—trees, flowers, animals, and people—dies at the end of life. As it says in the Bible, “To everything there is a season...a time to be born, a time to die.”
2. *When do people die?*
People die when their bodies no longer work right. Sometimes people die when they are very old. Other people die because they are very sick. Sometimes accidents such as a car crash cause people to die, even young children and babies.
3. *When will I die?*
No one can know when you will die. We hope you will live a long, healthy, happy life and die only when you are very old.
4. *Could you die at any time? Could I die at any time?*
It’s possible that an accident could cause you or me to die suddenly but because we are well and healthy, we can expect to live for a long, long, long time. We can help avoid accidents by being careful when crossing streets, for example, and by fastening our seatbelts when riding in a car.

Common Questions cont'd.

5. What do dead people do all the time?

Be factual in answering this question: We don't know what dead people do. We do know that when someone dies, their body is put in a casket and buried in the earth (or burned in a place called a crematory and the ashes are scattered—or however the remains were handled). Many people believe that the dead person's spirit goes to heaven but no one knows for sure what happens.

6. Can someone die because you wished they were dead?

No. Wishing someone would die cannot make it happen. Nothing you can do or say or think can cause someone to die. Even if you feel you did or said something bad, you were not the cause of your someone's death.

7. I feel bad. Why don't I cry?

You can feel sad without crying. Sometimes the death of someone you love is so hard to believe that you don't cry at first. Some children don't cry because they're afraid their tears will upset their family members. Others don't cry because they don't want their friends or schoolmates to know how sad they are. But it's okay to cry grownups cry too. It's also okay not to cry if you don't feel like it. Grieving is different for each person.

8. Will I ever come back to life again?

No. Once you die, you don't come back again. No one does. People say that a loved one who has died "lives on" when they remember the loved one but that doesn't mean the person has come back to life. Many people believe that their spirit or soul lives on after death.

Common Questions cont'd.

9. Who will take care of me if my parent(s) die?

If father dies, for example, you and your mother will still be a family so you will have someone to take care of you. Many parents make sure that someone in the family who loves you will take care of you in the unlikely event that both your parents die. They do this by making a will, a legal document that says who is to be your guardian if they both die. Before he died, Brett's mother arranged with Lori and David that they would have him come and live with them in Oakland. That way he still has a family, although a different family than when his mother was alive.

10. Brett's mother died after her cancer came back.

Does cancer always come back?

No, cancer doesn't always come back. Some people live for many years after they have been treated for cancer and eventually die from another cause. Millions of people are alive today who were once diagnosed with cancer. If cancer does come back, it is more serious but new methods of treatment helped people live many years. Often the disease may not return, allowing the person to live a full, complete life

Children may pose many other questions as well. Listen carefully to their concerns and always respond in a compassionate, caring and age-appropriate way.

Resources

Books for Parents

- Christ, Grace Hyslop, *Healing children's grief: Surviving a parent's death from cancer.* (Oxford, 2000).
- Colorosa, Barbara. *Parenting through crisis: Helping kids in times of loss, grief and change.* (Harper Resource, 2000)
- Doka, Kenneth, ed., *Children mourning, Mourning children.* (Hospice Foundation of America, 1995)
- Edelman, Hope. *Motherless daughters: The legacy of loss.* (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1994)
- Emswiler, Mary Ann and James P. Emswiler. *Guiding your child through grief.* (Bantam Doubleday, 2000)
- Fitzgerald, Helen. *The grieving child: A parent's guide.* (Simon & Schuster, 1992)
- Gaffney, Donna. *The seasons of grief: Helping your children grow through their loss.* (New American Library, 1988)
- Goldman, Linda. *Life & loss: A guide to helping grieving children, 2nd edition.* (Hemisphere, 2000)
- Grollman, Earl A. (ed.), *Bereaved children and teens: A support guide for parents and professionals.* (Beacon Press, 1995).
- Gullo, Steven. *Death and children.* (Dobbs Ferry, 1985)
- Harris, Maxine, *The loss that is forever: The lifelong impact of the early death of a mother or father.* (Dutton, 1995).
- Huntley, Theresa, *Helping children grieve: When someone they love dies* (Augsburg, 1991).
- Johnson, Joy. *Keys to helping children deal with death and grief.* (Centering Corporation, 1999)
- Johnson, Joy, and Marvin Johnson. *Children grieve, too: A book for families who have experienced a death.* (Centering Corporation, 1998).
- Kroen, William C. and Pamela Espeland, ed. *Helping children cope with the loss of a loved one.* (Free Spirit Publishing, 1996)
- Rubel, Barbara. *But I didn't say goodbye: For parents and professionals helping childhood suicide survivors.* (Griefwork Center Inc., 2000)
- Schaefer, Dan and Christine Lyons, *How do we tell the children? A step-by-step guide for helping children two to teen cope when someone dies.* (Newmarket Press, 2000)
- Silverman, Phyllis Rolfe, *Never too young to know: Death in children's lives.* (Oxford, 1999)
- Simon, Leslie and Johnson Drantell, Jan, *A music I no longer heard: The early death of a parent.* (Simon & Schuster, 1998).
- Wass, Hannelore, and Charles Corr, eds. *Helping children cope with death: Guidelines and resources, 2nd edition.* (Hemisphere, 1984)

Resources cont'd.

Books for pre-school children

- Brown, Margaret Wise, *The dead bird* (Addison-Wesley, 1958)
- Clifton, Lucille, *Everett Anderson's goodbye.* (Henry Holt, 1983)
- Grollman, Earl A., *Talking about death: A dialogue between parent and child, 3rd edition.* (Beacon Press, 1990).
- Joslin, Mary. *The goodbye boat.* (W.B. Erdsman Publishing, 1999)
- Mellonie, Byron, and Roberg Ingpen. *Lifetimes.* (Bantam Books, 1987)
- Mundy, Michaelene, *Sad isn't bad.* (Abbey Press, 1998)
- Varley, Susan, *Badger's parting gifts.* (Mulberry books, 1992)
- Wilhelm, Hans, *I'll always love you.* (Crown, 1989)

Books for young readers

- Cleaver, Vera, and Bill Cleaver. *Grover.* (J.B. Lippincott, 1970)
- Cohen, Cindy Klein. *Daddy's Promise.* (Promise Publications, 1997)
- Corley, Clizabeth A. *Tell me about death, Tell me about funerals.* (Grammatical Sciences, 1973)
- Gerstein, Mordecai, *The mountains of Tibet: A child's journey through living and dying.* (Barefoot Books, Ltd., 1987)
- Kohlenberg, Sherry. *Sammy's mommy has cancer.* (Magination, 1993)
- Linn, Erin. *Children are not paperdolls.* (Harvest Printing, 1982)
- Little, Jean. *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird.* (Viking Kestrel, 1984)
- Mills, Joyce. *Gentle willow: A story for children about dying.* (Magination, 1993)
- Powell, E. Sandy. *Geranium morning.* (CarolRhoda Books, 1990)
- Silverman, Jan. *Help me say goodbye: Activities for helping kids cope when a special person dies.* (Fairview Press, 1999)
- Spelman, Cornelia. *After Charlotte's mom died.* (Albert Whitman & Co., 1996)
- White, E.B. *Charlotte's web.* (Harper, 1952)
- Winsch, Jane L. *After the funeral.* (Paulist Press, 1995)

Books for older children and adolescents

- Adler, C.S. *Daddy's climbing tree.* (Clarion Books, 1993)
- Blume, Judy. *Tiger eyes.* (Laurel Leaf , 1982)
- Bode, Janet. *Death is hard to live with: Teenagers talk about how they cope with loss.* (Laurel Leaf Press, 1995)
- Cleaver, Vera and Bill Cleaver. *Where the Lilies Bloom.* (Harper Trophy, 1989)
- Draper, Sharon. *Forged by Fire.* (S & S Children's Books, 1997)
- Fitzgerald, Helen. *The grieving teen: A guide for teenagers and their friends.* (Simon & Schuster, 2000)
- Fry, Virginia Lynn, *Part of me died too: Stories of creative survival among bereaved children and teenagers.* (Dutton Children's Books, 1995)
- Grollman, Earl A. *Straight talk about death for teenagers: How to cope with losing someone you love.* (Beacon Press, 1993)

Resources cont'd.

Kremetz, Jill. *How it feels when a parent dies.* (Knopf, 1981)
Kuklin, Susan. *After a suicide: Young people speak up.* (G. P. Putnam, 1994)
Palmer, Pat. *I wish I could hold your hand.* (Impact Publishers, 1994)
Richter, Elizabeth. *Losing someone you love.* (Putnam, 1986)
Talbert, Marc. *Dead birds singing.* (Little, Brown, 2000)
Traisman, Enid S. *Fire in my heart, Ice in my veins: A journal for teenagers experiencing a loss.* (Centering Corporation, 1992)

Books for Professionals

Adams, David W., and Eleanor J. Deveau. *Beyond the innocence of childhood: Helping children and adolescents cope with death and bereavement (Beyond the innocence of childhood, Volume 3)* (1995)
Baxter, Grant and Wendy Stuart. *Death and the adolescent: A resource handbook for bereavement support groups in schools.* (University of Toronto Press, 1999)
Bertman, Sandra L. *Facing death: Images, insights and interventions* (Hemisphere, 1991)
Bode, J. *Death is hard to live with: Teenagers and how they cope with death.* (Delacorte, 1993)
Corr, Charles A. *Death and dying, life and living, 3rd edition.* (Wadsworth, 1994)
Cunningham, L. *Teenage grief: A training manual for initiating and facilitating grief support groups for teens.* (1990)
Linzer, Norman, ed. *Understanding bereavement and grief* (Yeshiva University Press, 1977)
Luchterhand, Charlene, and Nancy E. Murphy. *Helping adults with mental retardation grieve a death loss.* (Accelerated Development, 1998)
Margolin, Sylvia. *Complete group counseling program for children.* (Center for Applied Research in Education, 1996)
O'Toole, Donna. *Growing through grief: A curriculum.* (Mountain Rainbow Publications, 1989)
Perschy, Mary Kelly. *Helping teens work through grief.* (Taylor & Frances, 1997)
Sutherland, Sandra. *Good grief: Helping groups of children when a friend dies.* (2000)
Wass, Hannelore and Charles Corr, *Helping children cope with death: Guidelines and resources, end edition.* (Hemisphere, 1984)
Webb, Nancy Boyd, Ed. *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners.* (Guildford Publications, 1993)
Wofelt, Alan D. *Healing the bereaved child.* (Center for Loss and Life Transition, 1996)
Worden, J. William. *Children and Grief: When a parent dies.* (Guilford Press, 1996)

Resources cont'd.

Films/Videos

After the tears: A gentle guide to help children understand death. Directed by Diane Crandall. 23 minutes. \$19.95 from amazon.com.
Grief: How to help children feel, deal, and heal. By Dr. David Crenshaw and Phyllis Rubin. 85 minutes. \$29.95 from www.griefsupportvideo.com
A Place Prepared: Helping Children Understand Death and Heaven. Paraclete Video Productions. Directed by Charity Spatzek-Olson. 40 minutes. \$34.95 from Paraclete Press, P.O. Box 1568, Orleans, MA 02653. www.paracletepress.com
The Yearling (MGM/UA Home Video, 1985)

Organizations/Websites/Newsletters

Amanda the Panda
www.AmandaThePanda.org
1000 73rd Street, Suite 12, Des Moines IA 50311
515-223-4847; 515-223-4782 fax
Support groups and camps for grieving children, college students and adults.

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org
3615 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington DC 20016-3007
202-966-7300; 202-966-2891 (fax)
Professional organization assists parents and families in their most important roles.

Association for Death Education and Counseling
www.adec.org
342 North Main Street, West Hartford CT 06117-2507
860-586-7503; 860-586-7550 (fax)
Multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to death education, bereavement counseling, and care of the dying. Publishes Forum newsletter.

Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center
www.barrharris.org
Institute for Psychoanalysis
122 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1300, Chicago IL 60603
312-726-6300, extension 308
Help for children facing death, divorce, separation, or abandonment.

Bereavement: A Magazine of Hope and Healing
www.bereavementmag.com
5125 North Union Blvd., Colorado Springs CO 80918
888-604-HOPE (4673)

Resources cont'd.

Center for Loss & Life Transition
3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins CO 80526
970-226-6050

Center for Personal Recovery
P.O. Box 125, Berea KY 40403
606-986-7878
Publishes a quarterly newsletter, "Renew," covering grief and bereavement.

Centering Corporation
www.centering.org
mail@centering.org
7230 Maple Street, Omaha NE 68134
402-552-1200
A publisher of books, tapes and videos about death for children and adults.

Centre for Living with Dying
554 Mansion Park Drive, Santa Clara CA 95054
408-980-9801
An educational program for students, teachers, staff and parents.

Compassionbooks.com
A clearinghouse for books and other resources on serious illness, death, loss, grief and bereavement.

The Dougy Center
www.dougy.org
P.O. Box 86852, Portland OR 97286
503-775-5683
The first grieving children's center established in the U.S. Publishes a newsletter, guidebooks, and other resources for grieving children and the parents and professionals who care for them.

Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children
2303 Indian Mound Avenue, Cincinnati OH 45212
513-841-1012
Peer group support for children and families in mourning.

Good Grief Groups
www.goodgriefgroups.com
info@goodgriefgroups.com
Fike Enterprises, Inc.
226, 3605 Sandy Plains Road, Suite 240, Marietta GA 30066-3066
770-977-6377; 770-926-3743
Provides training for teachers, administrators, group leaders, parents, and publishes a workbook to help those who are grieving.

Resources cont'd.

Good Grief Program
Boston Medical Center
1 Boston Medical Center Place, Boston MA 02118
617-414-4005
Provides crisis intervention to schools and community groups, consultation to teachers, administrators, group leaders, and parents. Maintains a resource library of films, books and other materials.

Grief Support Services
2400 86th Street, Unit 13A, Des Moines IA 50311
515-276-5056; 800-843-3496
Offers a quarterly newsletter plus information sheets on a family's loss and personalized correspondence.

The Griefwork Center, Inc.
P.O. Box 5104, Kendall Park NJ 08824
732-422-0400; 732-422-4609 fax
Offers educational and professional training programs on loss and grief.

Growth House, Inc.
www.growthhouse.org
The leading on-line community for end-of-life care.

Loss, Grief and Care: A Journal of Professional Practice
The Haworth Press, 12 West 32nd Street, New York NY 10001

National Hospice Organization Hotline
800-658-8898
A nonprofit organization with more than 2200 member programs.

Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying
Baywood Publishing Company, 26 Austin Avenue, Amityville NY 11701

PediatricCare
303 Van Buren Avenue, Oakland CA 94610
510-208-3535
Support groups, information and referral for children and families coping with bereavement or life-threatening illness.

T.I.G.E.R. (Teens in Grief: Educate, Rebuild, Support)
521 Garden Court, Quincy IL 62301
Support and grief education for young people who are grieving.

The End

*My skin is white and so am I
With fears of death and loss.
Cancer cells and long black caskets
Fill my mind with thoughts
So bleak and cold that I will one day fall to this as prey.
I suck in my tears just long enough to say
That I won't be caught in this big mousetrap without a fight
And I will climb these fortress walls with all my might.
Although I feel a part of me
Has been taken rather fast
I know this memory and all its pain
Will soon become the past.
Although this dolphin is wounded
It will soon swim again
And I will come to realize that
The end is not the End.*

Brett Hardy Blake, age 11