

How I learned what to pray for

by Jo Deurbrouck

"Mommy," the voice was thin as a fledgling's.

"I'm here, baby," I said. An arm rose from the pavement and small fingers wound themselves into my ponytail. Her mother must have long hair too, I thought. And perhaps a voice like mine. Lucky her. Lucky me.

"It hurts, Mommy."

"It won't hurt much longer, baby," I said. I was pretty sure that was true.

I ached to cradle her but the angle of her neck when I'd first jumped from the car, the pink fluid now beginning to seep from one ear, and the bizarre new knee in her left thigh all said no. I crouched closer so my breath caressed her face. With both hands I held the delicate egg of her skull steady and straight. Old first aid training. Fat lot of good.

What had a young child been doing out here anyway, a half-mile from the nearest house, on what should have been empty highway?

Wrong question, asshole. The right question was this: How had an inconsequential choice - mine, to fumble with my iPod on a familiar, empty stretch of highway - imploded on us both?

The numbers 9, 1, 1, chanted themselves in my head. I knew how they'd sound, how they'd *feel* if my finger could tap them into my cell. As usual its battery was dead. I had neglected to put it on the charger last night. Another inconsequential choice gone critical.

My engine ticked as it cooled. Like a clock. Like a bomb. A meadowlark called, apparently the only penitent who deserved an answer today because a moment later came a distant, identical set of falling tones. Then another. Then one more.

Must be nice.

Suddenly her eyes flew wide. She knows, I thought. She knows I'm not her mother. Oh god, she knows she's alone, sprawled across the dashed yellow line, her pink daypack under the right front tire of a Honda Civic, an ant crawling up one small, bare leg and I can't even brush it away because I have to hold her head, a flower on a broken stem, I, the woman who has killed her.

"I can't remember, Mommy. I can't remember why I ran away."

My relief made me dizzy. The child spoke again. "Can we go home now?"

