

After Olivia

My friend Leslie and I used to sit in her kitchen or mine, exchanging stories of disaster as our 5-year-old-daughters, best friends since nursery school, played upstairs. Car accidents, leukemia, pedophiles, E. coli—we had consistently, some might say compulsively, indulged in these horrifying conversations since we'd first met beside a sandbox where our daughters, Dorothy (mine) and Olivia (hers), were christening their new friendship with buckets of sand. The girls were easy companions who never fought, never ran out of things to dance about, and only gave in to bad behavior when it was time to go home.

As for Leslie and me, we first approached each other with the tentative interest of women whose daughters had already bonded and found, to our mutual relief, that we liked each other, too. Besides, we had something important in common: our terror.

Between us, we were afraid of everything: planes crashing, rare disease, crime in its myriad, terrible guises. Parents who seemed not to share our fears were exotic creatures to us, and we disapproved of them even as we secretly envied their imperviousness. Sitting at the kitchen table,

shaking our heads over the tragedies in the newspaper, we spoke harshly of parents who didn't fasten seat belts or require bicycle helmets, who left their sleeping kids in the backseat while they ran inside a store (just for a second!).

It's not that we thought we were immune. But we had a never-quite-admitted notion that by articulating each specific dread, we could somehow strike that thing from the realm of the possible.

We rose from these conversations drained but uneasily reassured. Also grateful, for who else could we share such guilty things with? Once we slipped and started talking childhood cancer

Their friendship had been one of convenience, but when tragedy struck, it became one of constancy.

BY JEAN HANFF KORELITZ



A freak accident ended one girl's life (Olivia, above right) and another's innocence.

in front of Leslie's husband, Chris, and he stared at us in shock. "Don't worry," I said. "We do this all the time."

AN ALMOST PERFECT DAY

Two summers ago, by happy coincidence, our families were visiting Vermont at the same time, and Leslie and I decided to meet with our children at a big county fair. We petted baby chickens and ate snow cones and watched cows get milked, then made our inevitable way over to the rides. The girls took turns choosing: Olivia wanted to ride in the little planes that swung into the air, and I took a picture of her with her arms

up against the sharp blue sky. Dorothy chose something that looked like a Rastafarian fun house, adorned with a portrait of Bob Marley and the legend, "Hey mon, no problem!" Though, as it turned out, there was a problem.

I climbed into the car with them and held on as it jerked into the darkness. Almost immediately, I saw that it wasn't a fun house but a haunted house—a ride filled with sudden jolts, loud noises, and faintly ridiculous metal spooks jumping into the light. Dorothy was unsettled, but Olivia was terrified. "Oh, look," I found myself saying heartily as some white-painted ghoul dropped in (continued)