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All Matter of Fantasies

A MOTHER ENDURES UNSPEAKABLE TRAGEDY WITH THE HELP OF FANTASY FOOTBALL AND THE NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

BY DONNA LYNN MARSH



I AM FROM NEW YORK CITY; born and raised, as they say. So I understand when people ask me why I love the New Orleans Saints. I always answer that it began with fantasy football—that my sister and first best friend on Earth made me play, twisted my arm to play, because that was the only way I would stop complaining about her obsession. I always say, “Robin made me,” but that’s only the earthly way to tell the story. There is another. »

Before I lost my daughter on Sept. 11, 2001, my life had always been controlled by fantasies. Through my fantasies I willed myself the perfect life—the careers I would have, the men I would love, the books I would write, the successes of my children and the places I would be. Oh, those places I would be. The fantasies were clear. The nightmares before 9/11 weren't.

I had nightmares of gray walls of water, following me, engulfing me, but by the time I noticed the dark clouds forming above, it was always too late. The water would crash from above. In some of these dreams I was alone, chased by the wall. In the more frightening iterations, I would be with Robin or, worse, one of my children. I would wake up in terror and let my daylight desires push them away. The nightmares stopped only after September 11th, after the real tragedy.


There is nothing so horrid as the loss of a child. Nothing was worse, for me, it turns out, than paying more attention to my fantasies than my nightmares. Before I lost Vanessa, before she was crushed by that gray wall of matter, I had said to her in another of our many quarrels, "Don't call me." And with one finger on my cellphone, I hit END.

The loneliness is the worst part, the days I long for one more touch from the only person who can never join me, unless it is in my dreams.

For a very long time after that day, I stopped fantasizing. No good could come of it. This life and the idea of a greater fruition were over. All I had left of her were mental images and the memory of the sounds of her voice and laughter; her high and low dimples; her piercing blue eyes; her bronze, beautiful body; her hair loose and long and wild or contained by her sports caps—only the Yankees or the New York Giants.

In my family, we were raised in the religion of Yankee baseball. Non-practicing Jews, the men (my Grandpa Hy and my father) spent much of their time in front of televisions or transistor

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radios (especially at funerals and unveilings), shouting out scores. Grandpa Hy was the first elder to convert from Judaism to Yankeeism. My father, too, rooted for the Yankees. I only saw him cry twice—when his father died, and when we lost Billy Martin.

Family allegiances are deep, and so I raised Vanessa, as I did her brothers, to be a Yankee fan. She and I, long before the boys were born and ticket prices shot above our financial comfort zone, went to games, always in Field Box seats. She loved Bucky Dent; I loved Lou Piniella. I once took her to meet Willie Randolph and another time to meet Dent. We cheered so loud at Yankee wins that once I almost lost consciousness. It was a glorious feeling, the one that takes us over when we are part of the crowd—when the emotions of so many people merge, and collective joy engulfs.

Vanessa grew up. She moved away from me. An adult, she was. For most of our lives, spinning away as fast as lives do, we were arguing, tussling, punishing each other for the ways in which we disappointed.

After September 11th, she left behind too much. Her goods amounted to more afterward than they ever could have meant before. It's been 13 years, and I still can't really look at all the pictures buried in my closet.

Most of the photos taken in the few years prior to that awful day died with her in the rubble. Vanessa was pregnant, and she took the pictures to work to create a website for the baby. In her car, later retrieved from the Washington Street garage, was a baseball bat, a positive pregnancy test kit and her New York Giants cap. I have few pictures of those football game days except for those I conjure of her cheering, beer in hand, teeth bared for her Giants, occupying that male stance that our love of football demands. I remember, though, how her face lit up when she said Tiki Barber's name. She left behind his jersey that she wore.

There is one picture of her with my sister Robin at a 49ers game, taken in the mid-'90s. Vanessa's boyfriend at the time was a fan, and she and Robin double-dated. They are facing the camera with no anger or tension, only joy. Robin is in her Jets jersey; Vanessa, a 49ers jersey. When I look at the picture too long, I am filled with longing and envy.

On Sept. 11, 2005, Robin and I were in Manhattan, where I had to speak about my 9/11 experiences. Robin held



Vanessa Langer, the author's daughter, died in the World Trade Center attack on Sept. 11, 2001.

her phone to her ear, congratulating her opponent that week on his fantasy football win. She wasn't really there; she was in the land of fantasy. When she clicked off, she said, "S@*t. I can't believe I lost!"

It was just after Hurricane Katrina. I didn't care about football, but I couldn't get the details of the people in New Orleans out of my head: people drowning in their own attics, the city submerged, the looting recorded on TV and we in New York knowing more than the residents did. The bodies held in makeshift morgues that families couldn't

reach. And me, driving past the piers on the West Side of New York, knowing bodies were there after September 11th but having no way to get in to be with her. I just needed to see her. Just one more time.

Finally, I gave in to Robin and joined fantasy football. On the first Sunday morning of the 2010 season, Robin and I woke up late, snuggled under covers in my guest room, laptops booted, and I began my own obsession with football. Philip Rivers was *my* quarterback, Arian Foster was *my* running back, and Dallas Clark was *my* tight end. It was a terrific year. I wore Rivers' jersey to a Jets-Chargers game at MetLife Stadium. I did not win the season title, but I made the playoffs.

The following year, I picked Drew Brees in the draft and Rivers as my backup. Jimmy Graham was my tight end, so I began watching Saints games. My brother-in-law, the chairman of our football board, made fun of me all season. He was going to write a book about how not to play based on everything I did. Each week I would study my lineup and my team. I ruthlessly dropped low-performing players. One bad week? Bang! Who's next? And I would pick up players through strange, instinctive feelings, which always turned out to be fruitful. And, boy, was it fun watching the games. I began, then, having

two football minds—thinking about my fantasy team and how to make it better, and my Saints and how to help them win. If fantasy football is all about *mine*, football teams are about *ours*.

I loved Brees and Graham more than I ever loved any Yankee, but I didn't know it then. I only knew how I felt with each Saints win—elated and complete. I loved Jonathan Vilma and Roman Harper and Marques Colston—an alum of Hofstra, where my son goes to school. I personally pushed Darren Sproles into the end zone against the 49ers, my feet dug into the floor of a bar. A young girl

in a 49ers jersey, enraged at my rooting, almost goaded me into my first bar fight. Me. A bar fight.

I began humming "When the Saints Go Marching In" before every game, sang it loud with my dog Lando (Lando during football season) and found myself humming during breaks in my workday or in the car. I draped myself in Saints swag. I won my fantasy league in 2010 and '11 but rooted more for the Saints. I watched every Saints game in 2012 after we invested in DirecTV NFL Sunday Ticket, and saw only the good in each game, even though it was the year of the penalties for Bountygate, and everyone I knew mentioned the cheating (Saints players were paid bounties for knocking players out of games). My stock answer: Saints are good people.

Each game I watched, each win and even through the losses, I felt Vanessa.

She was laughing with me when I kicked butt in my league, screaming through me at her Giants' Super Bowl win to end the 2011 season. And at the end of the '12 season, when I watched the highlights of each of the Super Bowls, I cried with her on my shoulder at the amazing '09 Saints win, Braylen Brees hoisted on his father's hip, confetti everywhere, the utter joy, feeling in a way I never felt about any home ever—like I belonged.

And every given Sunday, I am with her, screaming and loving and almost forgetting that she is gone. No female, suburban decorum. No "it's only a game." I am fully owned by my beloved Saints.

I can't wait to take my memory of my baby girl and her face all lit up with football fervor to my first Saints home game this season. To be in the stands with all of the people from New Orleans, people who know what it is like to wait for that one more look. Some of whom most certainly know that in these moments of collective sharing of emotion, grief and joy, we are no longer completely alone.

So come hell and high water, and we have seen both, I will see my Saints in the Superdome—the place that once housed so many in their grief, and together we will cheer. ✍

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The Saints quarterback, Drew Brees, drops back to pass in a game against the Minnesota Vikings at the Louisiana Superdome on Sept. 9, 2010, in New Orleans.