

Yes, You Could Forget Your Kid in the Car—I Did

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Another sad story of a child dying from being left in a hot car should remind us of one thing: it could happen to any parent

“Oh my God, what a horrible parent. I would NEVER let that happen!”

This is a common refrain shouted across the Internet when summer inevitably brings a smattering of tragic stories involving young children who die after a parent forgets they’re in the car. This time it was 33-year-old [Justin Ross Harris](#) of Georgia, who apparently forgot to drop his 22-month-old son off at daycare on Wednesday, leaving him in the searing backseat of his SUV for seven hours while his dad was at work. Harris has been [charged with murder](#). Perhaps it’s human nature to automatically assign blame, or the simple power of denial in convincing yourself *you* would never forget *your* child – which is understandable. But it’s also inaccurate. I can tell you in brutal, intimate honesty, because it happened to me.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says [25 kids every year die](#) from similar incidents; this year, that count is already at 13. There is of course no stat on the number of kids who get forgotten, but then remembered in enough time to survive. If you have the emotional fortitude to read [Gene Weingarten’s Pulitzer Prize-winning piece](#) on the subject, you’ll see it happens to moms, dads, parents young and old.

I won’t sit here and tell you I’m a great parent, but I’m not a bad one. I love my kids and they are my world. I take great pains to make sure they are kept safe and out of harm’s way, and yet... I’m human. That’s what we are. Our perpetual capacity to make mistakes is innate, and should be reason not to judge.

Six years ago, when my oldest was born, I was his primary caregiver. I worked full time but my schedule was flexible, and my wife made most of the money. That meant I had the privilege of making him breakfast, getting him ready, and doing all the drop off/pick up from daycare. And I had my routine that went like clockwork every day.

Every day except Wednesday.

I had Wednesdays off, and one of my relatives was nice enough to come down for a few hours and help me out by watching Will. I used this time to run errands, go to the gym, and decompress from the standard pressure of raising a 10-month-old.

But on this specific Wednesday, she couldn’t come. And since errands wait for no man, I had to take Will with me to all the stores on my list. I remember feeling very grateful he fell asleep just before we left, and even stayed asleep as I transitioned him into the car seat. Then, just like every other hump day, my mind wandered to the litany of things I had to do and places I needed to be.

It was winter in Massachusetts, and temperatures were in the single digits. As I parked the car I was more intent on bracing myself for the arctic blast of cold air than anything else. I took a deep breath, pushed the door open, and hustled out into the deep freeze. As I got to the door of the grocery store—roughly 50 feet from the car—I kicked myself. I had forgotten my shopping list on the passenger seat.

Oh, and one other thing.

When I realized what else I had forgotten, I learned the true meaning of “panic attack.” I just stood there, paralyzed by a deeper fear than I have ever known. I could try to sugarcoat it by saying I was sleep-deprived and out of my normal routine—factual statements—but there was no denying another fact: I simply forgot about my son. If not for remembering the grocery list, there is a very good chance my boy would’ve been frozen to death upon my return.

I’m a writer. More specifically, I’m a parent blogger. That means I’ve detailed some very personal and often humiliating stories. Yet it wasn’t until yesterday that I told my wife this happened, and it’s taken six years to get the courage to post it publicly. The shame was just too great.

There are times when parents leave kids to die in cars because they’re doing drugs. With cases of clear neglect I have little difficulty joining the masses in summoning righteous anger and outrage. (And in Harris’s case, the investigation has

not at this time been completed.) But when well-meaning parents have a tragic memory lapse that leads to a lifetime of guilt, shame, and blame, I can't help but muster up some sympathy and recall that day six years ago. The day a missing grocery list was the only thing that prevented me and my son from becoming a headline. And I'm willing to bet I'm not alone in the close-call department.

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