

## Episode 49: Struck by lightning

I know. Right now you might be thinking, what's going on? Because today is Friday, but it's not a new podcast release Friday. There's a new episode of What Was That Like every OTHER Friday. So what am I doing in your podcast player today?

Well, I'm here to introduce you to another podcast. It's called This is Actually Happening. And when you hear that, you might be saying "Hey, I listen to that show! I love that show!" Or, you might be saying, "Hmm, never heard of it." Well, today you're going to hear of it, and you'll even hear one of the episodes from that show.

Here's what I find unique about This is Actually Happening. It's the only podcast I have listened to that is the most similar to What Was That Like. The host, Whit Missildine, finds people who have been through something, and he has them come on and tell their story. But it's in a different style, and that's what makes this show unique. I think you'll like it. Whit and I connected recently and we decided to introduce our listeners to each other's show.

For my show, when I first started, I made a list of some of the stories I wanted to hear people tell. One of those was, I wanted to hear from someone who has been struck by lightning. And I actually did come across a few stories, but the problem was, when someone gets struck by lightning, they are usually knocked out and they're unconscious for a while. Sometimes a long while. And then when they wake up, they might not even remember what happened. So it's not usually much of a story for them to tell.

But the story you're about to hear is indeed about someone being struck by lightning, and it's a very gripping story, and it comes from a different perspective. It's exactly the kind of story I do on this show, so I hope you enjoy it.

And let me know what you think about this off week episode. You can join the discussion in our private Facebook group, at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook). And I'll be back next week, with the next regularly scheduled episode of What Was That Like. See you then.

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This is the presentation of the audio podcast, This Is Actually Happening, Episode 94. What if the worst thing that could ever happen to you already had?

My son was born when I was - not quite - 17 years old. I had a relationship with an older man who I can't say took advantage of me. It was pretty mutual but my son was a result of that relationship. Once my son was born, he was completely out of the picture. I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. I lived in the same house until I was 20 years old and had a typical childhood. I had a single mom. My father passed away when I was - not quite - 3 years old. He was a coal miner. He had black lung as well as prostate cancer. When my son was born, I believe there were 6 girls in my high school who had babies that year. I was the only one who didn't quit school. I did take off the year of school when he was born, but then I went back to school the next fall and ended up graduating that year.

This was around 1980. It was expected that if you were a young girl who had a baby, your life was over. I confess, they never included me in those conversations about planning for college or a career. My mother was very cooperative in that. She watched my son while I went to

school. That all worked out pretty well. I was allowed to still have some social life, because I had the advantage of still living with my mother. She was right there and always willing to stay with my son if I needed her to.

I was a little girl that was raised on fairy tales and the goal was always to find Prince Charming, get married, and live happily ever after. My mother was pretty old school. She thought that it was very necessary for me to get out there and date so that I could find a husband. So, her plan for me to get myself married seemed pretty reasonable. I ended up marrying the first person who asked me when I was 20 years old because I thought that's what you were supposed to do. If someone asked, it was obviously the right path to take. I didn't even realize, at that point, that I had a lot of choice in the matter.

My first husband was somebody that I knew from high school, and we had dated off and on throughout high school. Right after high school, he joined the military but we continued to stay in touch. It was probably 2 years after I graduated that he proposed to me. He had continued to come home and visit me when he had some leave. Although I dated other people, this relationship kept coming back around. So, we got married fairly quickly, probably about 6 weeks after the proposal. I ended up moving in with him and my child to Maine in the dead of winter. That was the first time my son had not lived with his grandma since he was born. She was very close to him. He was the closest to her of all of her grandchildren. So, when we left, it was pretty devastating for her.

I ended up feeling very isolated there. I lost my support network. I was away from all my friends. I didn't have a car and things got pretty disastrous pretty quickly. We did end up staying legally married for about 10 years but were only really together for about 7. He was a good dad during the years we were together. I wanted to have a child with him. We were thrilled when we found out that we were going to have a baby and thrilled when my daughter was born. We never considered another one after that though.

I think my son was, maybe, 4 or 5 years old when my friend told him that my current husband was not his real father. I think it was just a casual comment but he was an extremely bright child - like a genius-level IQ. He did not take that as just an offhand comment. He picked right up on it and wanted to discuss it and needed to know the details. My son was an amazing child. He exhibited signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder at a very young age. He was a child who had to line up his toys. Everything had to be in perfectly straight lines. Everything had to be arranged and sorted.

It turned out that some years later - when he was around 9 years old - he started to turn his head very quickly and sniff his shoulder or flick his hand in a certain way. It was fairly apparent, soon after that, that he had Tourette syndrome. He didn't have any of those vocal tics that people really think about when they hear the term "Tourette Syndrome". He didn't swear. He didn't say offensive things. He just had some motor tics with his hands or with his head. He would also kind of nod his head very quickly. Sometimes when you're having a conversation with him, he would just repeat the last word you said. His Tourette syndrome was really not such a handicap. It was more something that just made him kind of interesting. Some other people in our family, myself included, have a neurologic disorder where we hear music in our heads all the time but none of us have it very seriously. There's no one in my family who has to do a ritual to go through a doorway, but my mother could always tell you exactly how many forks, knives, spoons, and plates she washed after dinner 3 weeks ago. She was a counter and a checker.

My son did, in fact, write a lot. He liked to write fantasy kinds of stories. He was a big video game player. When he was probably 12 years old, he was with a friend at our house 1 day, and they were having some kind of fantasy role-playing make-believe conversation game. He came up with this character that he called Kane McCloud. Kane was the hero. Kane always made the right choice. Kane always won the battle. Kane always saved the day. This was a character that stuck with him through the rest of his life. He liked to be called Kane. In fact, most of his friends started to call him that eventually. He made this interlocked K and M symbol - that was Kane's initials. He drew this symbol in different places and then, he started to write stories about Kane McCloud. Kane had this evil twin named Arkane, and they had to battle for good and evil, etc. He also had a lot of the poetry that he wrote in school and he'd recreationally feature this character, Kane McCloud - who was the hero that he felt he wasn't. He didn't always make great choices. He got in trouble. Sometimes, Kane was this alter ego for him - that could always be good. He was so into that Kane McCloud persona that he actually convinced his teachers in school to call him Kane instead of his real name. It just goes to show, not only how immersed he was in the story that he had created for himself, but also how charismatic he was in getting people to do what he wanted.

My son talked to me about feeling like an outsider, that nobody liked him, and that he didn't have friends, but every day when I would come home from work, there would be 4 or 5 boys up in the attic with him. His room was in the attic. We created the entire attic up there. It had video games and multiple bunk beds. It was kind of like a young teen boy paradise, so a lot of the kids liked to hang out there at our house. He had a ton of friends. We had this bonded relationship because I had him before I had anything else. I didn't have a significant other and then bring him into our family. He was the first. I had him. He was my first thing. He was my person before anyone else was my person.

I believe my husband and I got formally divorced when he was around 12 or 13 years old. We had been separated for a few years already. When I separated from my husband, it was pretty chaotic. He was still living locally. He liked to make a scene. He liked to show up at our house unannounced even though he didn't live there anymore. This also contributed to my son wanting to distance himself from the person with that behavior. We were still living in the same small town in Pennsylvania when my son was 14 years old. My daughter would have been 9 at that time. He had just completed his first year of high school. I was working. I had a boyfriend. Life was just chugging along day by day. We didn't have a lot of money but we made ends meet and tried to do a lot of fun things.

He was very interested in video games and often had people at the house playing games with him. He had a relationship with a video store that was in our town. When new games came out, they would hold them for him and let him have them first for as long as he wanted. It was his dream, at that time, to become a video game designer. He was doing some work on the computer. At that time, we were working on DOS on computers. Our very first computer had a 40-megabyte hard drive. He did some programming of text games where you would read text on the screen and it would give you a choice of what would happen next. So, he was shown a lot of promise as somebody who was on that cutting edge of game design, even at his young age.

One evening my son asked me if he could spend the night at his best friend's house, and he asked me if he could have \$5 so that he could go to the public pool in our town the next day, and I said, "Sure". I gave him the \$5. A little while later, he left the house to go to his friend's. It was within walking distance.

A few hours later, after dark, it was about 10 o'clock at night. A huge storm moved through town. It was this incredible, huge window rattling storm. My daughter had already gone to bed, but the storm woke her up and she came downstairs. She got in bed with me and she was frightened. She had a crush on a boy in her class at that time and she said, "Mom, I'm really worried about that really big lightning. What if it hits that boy's house? What if his house is on fire? What if he got hurt?" I said to her, "Don't be silly. It didn't hit his house. That kind of thing doesn't really happen".

As we were curled up in bed there, there was a knock on the door. I couldn't even define what was different about it but there was something about this knock - it was insistent. So, I told her to sit tight. I got up, went to the front door, and opened it. Outside the door were these 2 teenage boys that were complete strangers to me. I've never seen them. One of the boys said to me, "Are you Mrs. 'My name'?" at the time, and I said, "Yes". Then he said, "Something had happened. It was very important and they needed me to come with them". I had no idea what they could possibly mean by that. I said, "Well, hang on a second. I can't leave my daughter here alone." I walked to the telephone, picked it up, and I dialed my sister. She just lived a few blocks away. I was going to ask her to have someone in her family come in and take care of my daughter while I went to find out whatever this mystery was. As I was on the phone, one of the boys said to me, "Ma'am, you don't have time for that!" So, I tossed the phone to my daughter. I walked out the door into the rain and I got into this boy's car. He took me from there, to my son's best friend's house.

Right across the street from his best friend's house was our town park. I could see that there was something going on at the park. There was an ambulance. There was a police car. There were a lot of people milling around. I saw the police sergeant that I know there at the edge of the park. I went to her and asked, "What's going on? These boys told me that something happened to my son". She said, "Don't be silly. This has nothing to do with your son. Now, let me do my job. Just go over there across the street with everyone else". The neighbors were all trying to figure out what was the situation. There were probably 20-25 people standing around the street. There were a lot of people I knew.

Then, my sister arrived. She came to find out what on earth might be happening. Just after she arrived, the police sergeant came back across the street to me. She was kind of looking at her shoes and not really looking me in the eye. She said to me, "Okay. What was he wearing?" I told her and she said, "We're not really sure what happened over there but witnesses were telling us that lightning struck the big tree there in the park". They believed it came out of the tree and hit my son. She said that the ambulance was leaving for the hospital with him right now and that we should go. It was a 20-minute trip to the local hospital. Once we got there, I knew that my son was in a room a few feet down the hall. I couldn't know what was happening but I believed, at that time, that my son was dead because I couldn't feel him in the world anymore. My sister said to me that I kept repeating that to her, "I can't feel him anymore."

Finally, somebody came and spoke to me. They said they confirmed that he had been struck by lightning. They had no vital signs, but they kept detecting electrical activity and they weren't very experienced in handling lightning strikes. They didn't know if that meant that he had some sign of life or just what that meant. Eventually, the doctor made a decision that it was just residual electricity from the lightning and that he was indeed, probably deceased from the moment that it hit him. Finally, this man came into the room. He announced that he was the deputy coroner and that he had pronounced my son deceased by lightning.

Then, he started to have the most inappropriate conversation with me. He said to me, "So I wanted to ask you about that shirt your son was wearing". I said, "What about it?" He said, "What exactly does that mean? 'No more faith' - Is that concept kind of a religious statement?" I thought, "Is this man trying to insinuate that my son got struck by lightning because the choice of T-shirt he was wearing made a religious statement?" I said, "No, idiot. It's a band. It's called Faith No More". It is not a religious statement. Then he said to me, "I was just wondering if you might like to have an autopsy done." I said, "Why would I want to do that?". He said, "Well, in case you wanted to sue someone." I said to him, "Who exactly is it that you think I'd like to sue for lightning striking my son?" He said, "Well, I guess you're right. That's kind of silly. I thought maybe you'd want to sue the town because it happened in the park." I said to him, "I think you need to go away now."

I got pretty hysterical and wanted to see him. A nurse took pity on me and she said, "We have not cleaned him up yet but I'm going to take you in there. I just want you to know that it's not going to be pretty, and there was my son lying there, not alive anymore. The first thing that I noticed about him was that all over his body - going in a direction from his right shoulder and moving downward - were these tiny little purplish lines on his skin that looked exactly like lightning. This is called arborization and it doesn't happen always to lightning victims. Often, they get this pattern burned onto their skin by the remaining electricity moving through their body. It was horribly beautiful. It was obvious, from the pattern, what path the lightning took through his body. They lifted up the sheath and showed me where that pattern continued down his opposite leg and clear down to his foot where the lightning exited. She showed me a tiny exit wound on the foot too.

We ended up being at the hospital until about 3 o'clock in the morning and I went home. It was probably 4 o'clock in the morning when I got home. I laid down across my bed in my clothes, and I fell instantly asleep. I woke up a few hours later - I think it was around 7 AM - and I thought, "What am I supposed to do now? What are you supposed to do after your son was struck by lightning?" So, I went to his room and I found the clothes that I thought he would want to wear and I did laundry because I couldn't think of anything else to do and make use of my hands. I didn't want to talk to anyone yet. I didn't want to face anyone yet. So, I found his black shorts, his black silk shirt, and his black tie. I did a lot of laundry.

Not long after that, my sister who had been at the hospital with me came back to my house. She picked me up and took me to her house where my daughter had spent the night. We sat in a nice lawn chair on the porch. My daughter came out, sat on my lap, and said, "Well, what's going on? Where were you all night?" I said to her, "Remember that big lightning that you thought hit your friend's house?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, it didn't. It hit your brother and he died". She looked at me with that disbelief of a 9-year-old, like, "How could that be possible?" I understood that because I was feeling my own disbelief. To this day when I say, "My son was struck by lightning", it's disbelief.

Then, we started thinking about what else needed to happen. My brother didn't live far away but he didn't have a phone. So, we went to his house and knocked on the door. When he answered it, he could tell immediately that something was very wrong and I had to say that thing again. I had to say to him, "My son is dead. He was struck by lightning". The more I said it, the more unbelievable it sounded. One of the first things I thought of when I found out what happened to my son was, "I cannot imagine any person on this earth more likely to attract a bolt of lightning than him". He was just this electric person. He was so unique. He had a genius IQ and was in

gifted programs. From the time he was in second grade, he had Tourette Syndrome. He walked around town wearing a long black raincoat and carrying a metal pole that he referred to as his staff. It could have been ridiculous but he rocked it - he made it a fashion statement.

One day I got home from seeing the people in my family that I needed to see. I got this brilliant idea that - this being the early 90s, this was pre-digital music - I would make a mixtape because I just imagined how offended my son would be by recorded hymns played on an organ at his funeral home event. So, I started to gather some CDs together. I put together a tape, which they actually played on a repeat loop the entire time we were in the funeral home. It had things on it like Cypress Hill, Faith No More, Talking Heads, Beck, Metallica, and a lot of the music he loved at the time. In between each song, I put these little parts of the theme song from the video game Mortal Kombat because that was his absolute favorite game. What everybody says in a time of crisis is, "Is there anything I can do for you?" and I remember saying to this boy, "Yes. In fact, there is. Do you have a Cypress Hill CD because I can't find his." It made these kids feel good to just come and be with me for a little while. When they asked if there was something I needed, I could actually think of something to ask them for. They could say yes and do it. It made everyone feel like the world was not completely out of control. I think that was what I was looking for - something that I could do that would make me feel not completely out of control.

The next few days that followed were 1 long period of disorientation. How do you even know what to do next? I am a person who likes to be in control and I felt so completely out of control. I needed somebody to tell me what to do next and it was a good thing that my 1 older sister was there by my side. She's the one who said, "Okay. The next thing that we need to do is go to the funeral home". It never occurred to me that that was my next move. The most horrible thing a parent could ever do is be asked to choose their child's casket. What would they like? Would he look good in this? How will this look with his outfit? Well, how do you even make that choice? I picked this beautiful, horrible casket. Everything that I was asked to do felt absolutely absurd. It was surreal. It was like a movie. It was like it wasn't even happening to you. It was happening to someone else. I just wanted to go back into my house, curl up in a little ball, not speak to anyone, and not make any decisions to figure out how on earth I was having this ridiculous dream.

There were so many things required of me over the next few days, and so many people who felt the need to be near me - for the most part, in a very positive way. One of the hiccups was when I was with a funeral director - he was walking me through gathering information for the newspaper obituary. He was asking me about family members, where he went to school and these different kinds of questions. Then, he asked, "What about his father?" I said that his biological father was irrelevant. He asked, "Does he have a stepfather?" I said, "We're divorced. We've not been together for some years." He said, "Oh. Well, then that's something that we wouldn't put in the paper listed as part of the family." That ended up really blowing up at me.

Later, at the funeral home, when we were there for the first viewing, I was asked to step into a conference room, and there was my ex-husband, his mother, and his siblings. They were furious with me because I had not listed their names in his obituary in the newspaper. I wasn't even sure how to respond to that. I think I said something like, "Are you suggesting that I left you out of the newspaper because I wanted to use my son's death to do something mean to you?" Then, I refused to have the conversation and left the room. They wanted to have this big confrontation and make my son's funeral about them, and not him.

There were hundreds and hundreds of people there - family, friends, people from the town that I didn't even know. People said just the most beautiful things. People had these wonderful loving feelings for my son. I don't think they were just fake feelings that came out because he was gone. They were so raw and emotional from his peer group. It was so touching that these kids struggled. These 10, 11, and 15-year-old kids struggled to put their feelings into words and did such a beautiful job. There were probably 100 kids that I didn't recognize. These kids said to me, "He was in my English class", "I had a crush on him". So many girls told me they had a crush on him. It was unbelievable for my son who thought that no girls liked him - that nobody liked him. So many girls confessed their little secrets to me.

My daughter was at the funeral home the whole time because she needed to be there with the rest of the family. I don't think she understood that her brother was dead. She didn't understand what that meant to her until after all of the people went home, when everything quieted down and it was just the 2 of us in the house instead of the 3 of us in the house.

Once things quieted down, I had no idea what to do with myself. So much of my time and my life revolved around my children, not 1 child but children. All of a sudden, I had all this time on my hands and this emptiness. I didn't know how to fill that time and emptiness because the duties that used to fill them didn't exist anymore. I spent a lot of time in my son's room. I found a lot of pictures that he had drawn, little cartoony things. I found stories he had written that I had never seen and I've kept a lot of that stuff. I found a picture of a naked woman with a boa constrictor. I found some things like that, some things that showed me that he was moving into adulthood in ways that he wasn't comfortable sharing with his mommy and I had to be okay with that.

I went back to work after about a week. My work folks were very kind to me and generous with time off, and just allowed me to ease back into things. So it was helpful that I had work to go back to and focus on. I started to get to know my daughter a little more. It seemed like she was more of a daddy's girl and my son was more of my close friend. So, I really build up my relationship with my daughter in a way that I hadn't been before. I realized that I didn't know her nearly as well as I knew him like his best friend.

I think her life took a very different path because she lost her brother. Now, she was that girl whose brother got struck by lightning and that became an identity not just to herself, but to others. I was the mom of that boy who got struck by lightning. I can't even just say my son died because that doesn't tell the story. My son was struck by lightning. Lightning came out of the sky, chose him, and took him. What does that mean? Does that mean I was a bad mother? There were times when I convinced myself that it happened because I was a bad parent. There were times that I comforted myself by thinking that he was taken because he was needed elsewhere. I don't know where, how he got to this elsewhere, or what his function would be there, but some other universe needed Kane McCloud, the hero, so lightning came and took him because he was needed there. We tell ourselves stories to try to make sense of our world that makes no sense.

For a long, long time after my son died, every day, I heard the word "Lightning" somewhere - like, I would wait for it. When I got up in the morning, I would start listening for the word lightning. Every day, I would hear it somewhere. Someone would say it. I would hear it on a weather report. I would hear it in a song. Someone would say the word lightning every day. Was that word in my life before and I just didn't notice it? Was I just more sensitive to it now? Where did that word suddenly find me?

I am very sensitive to people using a reference to being struck by lightning as some sort of unlikely circumstance. I have, in fact, complained sometimes to advertisers. There was a local florist who had some ad that said, "Oh. Did you forget your significant other's birthday anniversary? Well, you might as well just get struck by lightning." I just was appalled by that and I wrote them a letter. I said, "Would you say in an ad, 'you might as well just get breast cancer'? Would you say, 'You might as well just be in a horrible car accident and die?' Then why is it okay to say you might as well be struck by lightning?" They were so apologetic because people just don't think of that. After his death, I received an invitation in the mail to attend a support group for parents who had lost children - parents whose child children died in automobile accidents, suicides, murders, or horrible illnesses, where the parent had to watch their children suffer for months or years before they finally passed away.

My child died very suddenly and felt no pain. If he did, it was only for an instant. He didn't suffer. I didn't have to watch him suffer. I didn't have to make choices about his care that might prolong his suffering or his life sooner. I had a friend in that group whose child was killed in a head-on collision and the other car was driven by his sister's boyfriend. When your child is murdered, you have someone to blame. When your child was hit by a drunk driver, you have someone to blame. In my case, I thought and thought over it. I let my son spend the night at his best friend's house, which was not the wrong thing to do. He asked me for \$5 and I gave it to him. The last thing I said to him was, "I love you". I can't find any way to blame myself or anyone else for this. So, that's one silver lining, that if that was the moment that my child's life had to end, I don't have to blame.

I feel like I'm a completely different person than I was before. This is something that I feel identifies me more than anything else - the fact that I am the mother of this incredible boy who was taken by lightning. It's strange to me that the thing that I feel identifies me the most is something that most people - who know me - don't even know about. The thing that I consider the biggest part of my identity is a secret from most of the people who work with me. These are people who I see in day-to-day life except for the people closest to me.

I love my husband. I have two grandchildren now. My daughter named her first child after her brother. There are some friends that I really care about. Though honestly, most of the people I know, if I never saw them again, it wouldn't break my heart. I don't want to get close to too many people because I don't want to lose them. I understand that no loss of anyone else can touch this loss that I have. I just don't want to care about people like I used to. I know that the worst thing that is ever going to happen in my life already has.

When I'm having angst over something, when I'm upset about something at work, when I'm angry with someone, after that anger boils for a little while, I remember to say to myself, "Why are you so upset? The worst thing that is ever going to happen in your life already has in the scope of the universe of terrible things that can happen? Where is this little disagreement on that spectrum?" So, it allows me to just release things.

When I think about why did this happen to me, why did this happen to my family, why did this happen to my son-- I have come to grips with the fact that it was his day, it was his turn. I have no idea why he was taken so spectacularly, but it was my turn that day. It was my family's turn. It was my son's turn to die. Does this make me want to believe that there was some force involved that made this happen? Do I want to believe that if there is somebody in charge, if there's God or whatever in charge, that they would do something like this? I just can't wrap my head around that. I remain as I was before, a person disinterested in religion.

Yesterday was the anniversary of this happening. I was awakened at 1:30 in the morning by a horrific thunder and lightning storm, and it woke my husband too. He was so kind. He said, "Oh honey. I'm sorry. On this of all days, you had to be wakened by lightning" and he held my hand. Eventually, we went back to sleep. Sometimes I catch myself saying out loud over and over, "My son was struck by lightning."

After all these years, I still can't believe that that happened. Then, I say to myself, "How is that possible? Are you sure?" and I questioned myself for a minute. I wondered if it was possible that I hallucinated all this, that I was mentally ill, that I made it up, and that I dreamt it. Then, I go look under the bed and I see the box that has all the sympathy cards, drawings, poems, and the death certificate that says, "Cause of death: Electrocutation". I can't get away with fooling myself that it's not real. It was our turn that day. That's the only way I can think of it. I can't make sense of it any other way.

I'd like to read you a poem that he wrote. This poem is part of a packet that he did when he was in high school. This one's called, "What's Kane do?". It's my favorite.

Kane crushes the castle's courts and knocks down walls of all sizes and sorts. His knights fire arrows from the ports as Kane crushes the castle's quartz. Kane topples the terrible towers that haven't been built for more than an hour. He stomps down the grass and all of the flowers as Kane topples the terrible towers. Kane wins the waging war. His wounds are deep and very sore. Now, he feels he's even the score because he's won the waging war.

### **Witness Ally**

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