

It was half past midnight, Valentine's Day, 1977, when the 44-year-old mother of four boys in Hollandsburg, Indiana, did what the voice told her to do. She stood up and looked down at her normally pristine living room, at her sons, now covered in blood. Her own blood stained her pink sweater.

The pain in Betty Jane Spencer's shoulder and back was excruciating, yet somehow distant. She couldn't give in to it—not yet. In her mind, she could still hear the concussion of the 11 shots fired. She could still see the terror on her son Greg's face before he was hit, as he lay next to her on the floor. She could feel the weight of his shoulder nestled against her side.

The first two bullets fired at her had hurt the most--one in her back, then another bullet in her shoulder. She had played dead but one of the killers kicked her and she flinched.

"Shoot that one again," said a male voice that had been laughing only moments before.

"Which one?" another voice answered. "The woman!"

Spencer prayed silently. "Oh no, God, not again." She thought of her husband and the look on his face if he opened the door hours from now, returning home from his night shift job as a television engineer. Everyone he loved-- Reeve, Raymond, Ralph, Greg and Betty Jane—lined up on the floor, shot execution style.

"God, please don't let Keith be the one to find this," she prayed. "Thy will be done." The killer cocked the gun and fired. The bullet whizzed toward her head and blew off her wig, scalping a swatch of thin skin above her ear.

The killers thought the hair blown from her head was evidence they'd hit their target. Convinced she too was dead, they picked up the shell casings and cleaned the room of evidence. Spencer didn't move until the killers left.

Then, it was quiet--deathly quiet.

The voice seemed to come from the right side, behind her. It was a voice she felt more than heard. It was kind, calm, and direct. It told her to stand up and look at her four sons—that it would be the last time she would see them. It told her to get her heavy winter coat on. "Walk," the voice commanded. "Get help."

Spencer stepped out the door of her modular home and into the snow. It covered her shoes and illuminated the rural acres of Parke County surrounding her home. It was a beautiful night. Spencer left a stream of blood on the snow as she walked toward the house of the nearest neighbor, a quarter of a mile away. 'One step at a time,' she told herself. 'Just keep walking.'

Her elderly neighbor had been in a deep sleep. He heard the incessant knocking, and wondered who was outside at that hour. Irritated, he got out of bed to go to the door.

Spencer walked calmly into his house, and stunned him with her words.

"I've been shot. I think my boys are dead. Please help me. Talk to me."

"If you don't keep talking to me, I'm going to pass out."

Still standing, she picked up his phone herself, and called Parke county deputies to one of the most heinous murder scenes in Indiana history.

For Betty Jane Spencer, there was the life before, the life after, and the instant it changed from one to the other. The clock in her bedroom marked the moment: 12:13 am.

The clock stopped when the killers ransacked the room, flinging the clock

with the butt of a shotgun.

Prior to that morning, Betty Jane Spencer had considered her life normal—even happy.

She'd married her second husband, Keith, a year before, and they'd blended families. Her son Greg, at 22, was the eldest of the boys. She immediately bonded with her stepsons, and they with her.

The youngest, Ralph, at 14, was loving and kind-- the athlete in the family. His older brother, Reeve, at 16, was the jokester. "He had two speeds," Betty says with a smile, "Stop and go." He had just earned his driver's license 10 days before his life ended.

Raymond was two days away from his 18th birthday, a serious boy who—like his father—was methodical about every project he tackled.

Betty's son, Greg, was intelligent and good-looking. She called him her miracle child, born after she'd suffered five miscarriages.

They were all looking forward to Valentine's Day. Keith left just before midnight for his job at the TV station transmitter. Ralph and Reeve had gone to bed. Greg was watching a movie in the living room. Betty was in the kitchen making a list.

Suddenly, the unlocked front door burst open and two men with sawed-off shotguns walked in. Two more men came in the back door. They wore gloves and wild looks on their faces.

They told Betty and Greg to lie down on the living room floor, and went to get Ralph and Reeve. "Take anything you want," Betty Jane said. "Just don't hurt my boys."

Daniel Stonebreaker, Michael Wright, David Smith and the ringleader, Roger Drollinger, were all from the area and adjacent counties. Each had run-ins with the law before, but nothing approximating the crime they would commit at the Spencer home.

Inspired by the movie "Helter Skelter," about the murder spree of Charles Manson and his followers, the four young men had gone on their own "thrill kill." They picked the Spencer home at random.

When they rounded up the family, they ordered them to lie face down on the floor, with their hands behind their backs. The men asked if everyone in the family was there, and said they'd shoot anyone who pulled into the driveway. Greg offered that Raymond was due home any minute from his job in town. "We'll wait for him," one of the men said.

Betty Jane remembers the excitement in their voices as they ransacked her house. She also remembers the sound of their laughter.

Raymond arrived home and walked right into the trap.

The killers took turns shooting, firing at the heads of each boy, then at Betty Jane. Bleeding profusely but still alive, she describes a sense of peace that came over her. She thought she was dying, and that God had wrapped and her boys in His arms. "I was actually angry when I discovered I wasn't dead," she says.

When the killers left, Betty Jane says the voice that commanded her to get up was as real to her as if someone were in the room. "I truly believe it was God, telling me what to do. I wouldn't have been capable of doing those things on my own."

None of the three shots fired at Betty Jane had hit vital organs, but she had significant wounds. She was hospitalized, leaving only to attend the funeral service honoring her sons.

From her hospital bed, she helped an artist put together composite sketches so accurate that they led police to capture the killers within a month.

The trials were public events. People gathered on the courthouse grounds to catch a glimpse of the gunmen. There were sharpshooters stationed on the courthouse roof amid talk of vigilante justice. Indiana had no death penalty at that time. Each of the killers received multiple life sentences.

Betty Jane Spencer felt as if she'd been sent to prison as well. She was trapped by her own anger and grief.

"I woke up angry. I heard people laugh and I'd think to myself, 'It must be nice to have something to laugh about.' I felt so guilty I was alive. I felt I had to make every moment count, but I couldn't."

She'd often drive to the country where she'd pound on the seat of the car, screaming. She'd pick up a stick and hit it against trees.

The anger and loss took a toll on her marriage, which broke up in 1987. It also tested her faith in God.

A breakthrough came several years later, in the office of her therapist.

"I said without even thinking, 'I hate God,' and my therapist said, 'Don't you think God understands, and loves you anyway?' And, suddenly, for the first time I felt a little bit of peace."

She built upon that peace and began an unexpected new role in life, as a crusader for victim's rights. "I said to God, 'You open the doors, and I'll walk through,' "

She lobbied the Indiana legislature, testified before Congress, and formed a group called "Protect the Innocent." President Reagan called her to the White House for his signing of an instrumental victim's rights bill.

Friends started calling her Betty "Job," after the long-suffering but ever-faithful biblical character. Betty Jane helped change and strengthen 56 victim's right's laws.

When two of the killers requested clemency, Spencer testified to keep them in prison. "I'm not bitter but I'm resolute. It is a shame that eight lives were ruined that night. Four through death and four more through prison," she said.

Forgiveness would be a life-long struggle for Spencer.

"What happened that night is not OK. I've put forgiveness over there in a drawer. God will handle it."

Nature took care of the murder scene. A heavy storm destroyed the home years later. Spencer settled in Rockville, Indiana, in a home less than 10 miles from the murder scene.

On the 27th anniversary of her son's murders, she put flowers on their graves, and wondered out loud what they'd look like in their 40's.

"I know when my time comes, they're going to be at the gates with their hands in their pockets saying, 'Hey Mom, what took you so long?'"

"I want people to remember what happened that night. My boys didn't get a second chance."

Looking back at age 70, she feels she made the most of her life, growing in strength and faith.

"I learned two things that horrible night. I learned I'm not afraid to die. But in time, I learned I'm not afraid to live either."

(Betty Jane Spencer died on October 26, 2004, 27 years after the murders and eight months after this article was published. She is buried next to her sons.)