

SAY HIS NAME

When I meet somebody and they ask that innocent question, “Do you have children?” I never know what to say. How can I not mention Ben? But then if I do, I’m trapped in a long story of what happened and maybe that’s not where either of us wants the conversation to go.

But to not mention Ben, to say, “I have a daughter Jill who’s twenty-one and in college,” feels like more than a lie; it feels like I’m ignoring the biggest thing that ever happened to me... losing Ben. So, I take it case by case. Sometimes I say, “Yes, I have a boy and a girl” and change the subject; other times, depending, I say, “I have a daughter who’s twenty-one and a son who died when he was eighteen.”

There’s always the follow-up question hanging in the air, even if they don’t ask me: How did he die?

I say: “His heart stopped. We don’t know why.” I don’t have a great answer. “His heart went into arrhythmia and they couldn’t stop it.” Then there’s that silence. That hole where maybe we both feel the big emptiness, how fragile the whole thing is. Then, the hole closes up, although it never fully closed for me after Ben died.

That’s why I want to say his name, to honor him and the person who asked the question. I don’t want his name in that big hole.

I knew growing up that I would have a son named Ben, Benjamin. I knew in elementary school. I remember sitting at my kitchen table, my mother spreading peanut butter on toast for a peanut butter and bacon sandwich. I was in third grade and I said to her:

“When I grow up I’m going to have a son named Ben.”

“What if you have a girl?”

“No, no. I’m going to have a son named Ben.” I loved the name because it was so big and short at the same time. It’s such an honest name: Ben. That’s exactly what Ben was. No pretense.

When he was a little boy he loved to sing, do anything musical. When he talked, he was shy, but when he sang, he sang loud. At his first swimming lesson when the teacher had the kids sing the “Motor Boat Song” I could hear him belting it out clear across the pool.

Rosenberg

Sometimes, a friend will say: “I don’t want to remind you of sad things but I heard this new band and I thought of Ben. I knew he would have loved their music.” You’re not reminding me, I tell her. You’re helping me feel normal.

At Christmas at our house, Ben loved lights. From the time he could point at them, he wanted the house lit up. As he grew older, he decorated the whole outside of the house with little white lights—each year adding more. That last Christmas before he died, he was up on the roof for hours. I looked up at him from the driveway, my arms folded against myself. He had no hat, no gloves, that head of curly brown hair blowing every which way and he was smiling. I yelled: “It looks great. But it’s enough! Get down. Put on a hat.”

“When I’m done, Mom. Don’t worry. I’ve been rock climbing. I’ve done things a thousand times more dangerous than this.”

Like that was supposed to make me feel better.

That last Christmas, the house was ablaze, every window outlined. It was shockingly beautiful.

That first fall after he died, we went away for Thanksgiving. I couldn’t stand the thought of being home without him. I’ll never forget driving home that Sunday night. My husband Bruce, Jill and I had fallen into a silence perhaps bracing ourselves for the return home. We turned the corner onto our street and as we drove down our hill, I saw in the distance this glow like a house on fire. We edged closer and I realized it was our house so bright, then brighter and then, there it was: every window circled.

My best friend Marnie had come over with her husband Rick and strung the lights. Some people might think “how cruel.” But no, it was the biggest gift—to have the whole house lit up again. To be remembered. To have him be remembered.

Sometimes I think people don’t talk about Ben because they don’t want to hurt me. They don’t want to make me cry. I learned something about tears: they come, buckets of them, and then they stop. I carry tissues, I don’t wear mascara, I take the tears with me. They’re what I can keep. The missing him is what keeps me close to him.

Say his name. Ben. Sing his name. Ben. Light up the house with the letters B-E-N. That’s what I want. Ben, my Ben, Benjamin.