



WHEN I WAKE UP

By Rebecca Andersen

It is Wednesday night. I am sitting on the edge of my bathtub and dangling one toe in the tepid water. No, I am not about to bathe. There is a towel the yellow color of aspen leaves in autumn on the floor, crumpled in the way that only damp towels can crumple, looking almost like it could be a nest. My pink-skinned children got out of the bathtub probably an hour ago, and I have stayed in the bathroom, just watching the water shift under forces unfelt by me. The children are in the hallway discussing the best way to get the little crumbly pieces dropped by the banana bread off of their plates. My baby says she likes to use her tongue, like a kitten. She'll be three years old on Friday. It has been seven months since Benjamin died last October. The income from the nut company he sold nine months ago has held up well so far, and it probably seems to everyone in the neighborhood that we are moving on and doing just fine. We sent out thank-you cards for everyone who sent flowers or food for the funeral.

It was cancer that killed him. Cancer caused by cigarette smoke caused by his father caused by his mother's young decision. But I have stopped blaming her. My knee slips and I grip the edge of the tub so I don't get my jeans wet. And then I lift the plug and watch as the water swirls down the drain. I used to try to see if I could put my finger inside that hole made by the swirling water, and I thought that maybe it was like what the Children of Israel saw when Moses parted the seas; walls of water on every side. The Red Sea was probably a lot deeper.

The children have abandoned their plastic Barney plates and left crusts in the hallway. Even banana bread has an undesirable crust to my children. I step over the mess they've left, knowing that my oldest girl will pick it up for me. For a nine

year old, she is good at taking care of things. I hear her in the girls' bedroom, giggling with her little sister. It sounds like I'm listening through a wall of Vaseline.

Nothing has been clear since seven months ago. My breath escapes in a deep, slow, exhale that sounds like a sigh but isn't really anything other than a certain emotion I can't quite put my finger on. So I put my finger on some abandoned banana bread crumbs instead. Crumbs my kitten-daughter forgot. The sweetness is so small inside my mouth. Benjamin loved banana bread, and it reminds me of him. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. It's too soon to be afraid of forgetting him, I know, but maybe too far to still be sad about banana bread. I can't decide. I don't want to decide. I never have been good at making decisions like Ben was. He was good in general. I think about him for a while, not crying, standing in the hallway with crumbs on my finger.

He had deep brown eyes, with eyelashes I always envied. He was tall, and I could tuck my head right under his chin. That was my favorite place to be, because he smelled irresistibly good when he'd put on his Polo Sport cologne. I've tried spraying it on his pillow, but it's not the same scent. There must have been something about Ben himself that smelled so good.

My eldest gets the baby ready for bed and brings her to me for a goodnight hug. I'd probably feel like a stone against the little body. I don't like hugs anymore. So instead, I follow them back into their bedroom and stand next to the bed as they climb in. I wrap my arms around me and look at my sun-freckled hand. A childhood of sun-worshipping reveals itself in my white-blond hair and in my skin. I could probably get cancer, but I'm not afraid

of it anymore, I think. Would it be romantic to succumb to the same thing as Benjamin? Would that secure me a spot next to him in heaven? I finger the lavender lace canopy of my daughter's bed thoughtfully as she crawls into bed, watching how it drapes and creates a false wall between my girl and the world around her when she sleeps. When they are in bed, I leave their room, but forget to turn on the night light.

"Mommy?" the baby calls out.

"Laura, can you turn on the light for your little sister?"

She sighs heavily, but I hear her bed creak as she climbs out. "Okay, mom."

I continue down the hallway. I can't stop thinking about the lace wall. I wonder how heaven is partitioned, if at all. If it is, it is probably partitioned with lace, I decide. I don't try to figure out why it is partitioned. Instead, I focus on figuring out how it looks there, what kinds of things there are for a person to do. I wonder if Benjamin is happy in heaven.

Because I do believe in heaven now. I never used to, and when Ben's smoking father passed away four years ago, we cried. A lot. And then I moved on and, truthfully, I forgot about him. At least, I forgot about him in the way that people do when they don't ever expect to see someone again. I knew I'd known him, but he was gone, and I was still here. I never stopped to think whether Benjamin's mom ever missed her husband. When Benjamin got sick, I needed a heaven to escape to but couldn't find it. I thought I could find it in every breath Benjamin had left, in the moments we tried to pretend like he wasn't sick and we would curl up on the couch and talk about the kids or drink our coffee together in the morning before he'd go to the walnut-packing company we owned. But then he stopped going to work. He sold the company, because he knew he was going to die. He made us a hefty bank account, enough to last comfortably for at least five years. His eyes sunk in, and every time he breathed it took forever for him to exhale, until sometimes I would wonder if he was just going to fall down dead right

then, unfinished, leaving me begging for the release of air just as I always felt cheated when the radio was turned off in the middle of a song. I couldn't find heaven in living when every breath felt so incomplete.

But Ben's last breath was a full one, in and out, and his last look was towards the sky, outside the double-paned window of his hospital room. I stared numbly out the window for an hour after he was gone, but I couldn't see anything up there. So I knew it had to be heaven he was looking at. He could see heaven then, and I trusted him, so I believed.

I turn off the lights as I walk heavily through each room of the house, being sure to check that the doors are locked. And I'm glad I closed all the blinds before the darkness came. I never feel safe at night anymore.

My room is only one door away now. I can see into my five year old boy's room as I pass. My arm brushes his door open a crack and he turns over, shielding his face from the sliver of light that pierces the darkness and illuminates his toy-littered floor. My boy doesn't clean his room. I think I used to be more diligent about picking up after him. But truthfully, I can't remember. I can't even remember where I was even earlier today when they got home from school. It's frightening to me how much I've forgotten about being the mother I once was.

And finally, I climb into my unmade bed, leaving the light on in the master bathroom, as I've done every night now since he left. Sleep is hard to grasp. But that's normal now. I twist my fingers into the flannel sheets.

I dream about Benjamin, and I wake up shaking. My baby girl is crying in the other room. Her soft sobs echo in the darkness and break my heart. But . . . I can't get up to help her. It's too hard. Too much. If Benjamin were still here. . . He was a better parent than I am, and I miss him. The silent cries of my heart mingle with my baby's in the darkness. And soon my eldest wakes and I can hear her nine-year-old adult voice soothing her little sister back to sleep. It soothes me a little, also.

When I wake up, two of my children are ready to leave for school. My nine year old girl comes into my room to tell me goodbye.

“Mommy,” she says to me as she is leaving my room, “Emmie was crying during the night, but I fixed it so you didn’t have to bother.”

She pauses in the doorway. “Do you want me to get her a Pop Tart for breakfast?”

“Yeah,” I mumble sleepily, and I add a soft “thanks,” but she is already out the door and down the hall. She’s a good girl. I wonder what I would do without her.

I hear the school bus come and go. The television is turned on downstairs and the faint jingling of Teletubbies music reaches me through my bedroom door. I realize I can’t remember how or when my baby learned to turn on the television herself. What kind of mother am I anymore?

The week that Benjamin died, his mother came. My family came too. They flew in from Virginia for the funeral, but none stayed long. Virginia is a long way from my house. Ben’s mom was going to stay and help out. When the flowers were wilted we threw them away. She offered to help me write the thank-you cards, but I told her I could do it myself. A week passed. We both hurt too much to talk to each other.

Three weeks later, she came down with her bags packed. She called a cab.

“Where are you going?” I had asked her.

“I just don’t know what to do,” she answered. “You are fine on your own. You are really strong, Terri. You don’t need my help. And. . .” I remember how she fingered the tips of the tall maroon candles on the hall table while she talked without looking at me, “and my boy is dead. So I don’t know what to do anymore. I’m going to go home.”

She called twice after that. My son answered the phone both times and told her I was busy. She must have believed him. It has now been five months since anyone has asked to help, probably because I don’t cry much in public anymore. It must

seem to them that we are doing just fine. They say I am a strong woman.

I dream of Benjamin again on Thursday night. He asks me if I’ll come to visit him. He’s sitting calmly on the edge of a cliff. I recognize the place. It’s in the canyon, not even an hour away from our house. We used to go hiking there before the kids came, and always in the winter when it wasn’t too hot. But we haven’t been there for almost ten years. Maybe because a teenager fell off the edge and died. But Benjamin, he was always brave, and athletic. Heights never scared him, and so he sits calmly on the edge, smiling at me in my dream. He’s so real, I can even see his soft, curly hair shift a little in the breeze. His deep brown eyes call me to him. He tells me how lovely the weather is, and how much he wants me to be there with him. I reach out to him, and he stands up, walking towards me, as if he was never gone. I can even smell him.

I sit up straight in bed, and I know I can find him if I leave right then. It wasn’t a dream—it was a vision, and it is true! He is there. If I get to him, I can bring him back home with me. We can sit together on the couch, drinking our coffee in the early morning light and talk about our future together. I throw off my covers and stand up quickly. Nothing is more important to me than getting Benjamin back. I get dressed in the soft light that spills into my room from the bathroom, trying to pull my hair into a ponytail with one hand as I tug on my jeans. The clock on the nightstand says 5:43 a.m. If I hurry, I can get there before the sun comes up. That seems important for some reason. But I take five more minutes to brush my teeth and put mascara on. I haven’t worn makeup since he died, and it takes me a few tries to make it look good. I’m about to see Benjamin again, and I want to look beautiful for him. Just the thought of wrapping my arms around him makes me tingle inside. I run through the house, slip on my shoes, and climb into the car.

The drive is short. Main Street is empty, and travel is easy. I'm too excited to pay attention to the speed limit, and I am probably driving too fast, but I don't care. I do notice, though, that all the lights I need are green this early in the morning. This makes me smile, and the happiness spreads across me, bringing warmth I haven't felt since the last time I was in Benjamin's arms. I grin wider. I listen to some music on the radio. Our small town radio station plays Delilah reruns this early in the morning. The song that comes on next is dedicated to a man named Paul, who helped his fiancée, Shelia, to see the world from a new perspective. Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." It's beautiful, and I tap my fingers on the steering wheel as I drive, I sing along, and I wipe a tear of joy. And then I'm there. I park the Volvo in the lot next to the picnic tables and listen to the gravel crunch and grind under my tennis shoes as I quickly walk in the dim light to the spot where Benjamin is waiting for me. The early morning air is crisp and I shiver and tug my black sweater a little tighter around me, but I do not stop smiling.

But he's not there. Not where he's supposed to be. I'm still smiling, though, because I'm sure I can find him. He probably just stepped off the edge for a minute to get a better view. I take a few more steps, and I turn around a few times, wondering if he's just trying to sneak up on me. But I can't see him around, so I know he must just be over the edge a few steps. If I get out there, I'll find him. I just know it. I have to find him. Nothing else matters. I think about sitting on the couch together, and wish I had turned on the coffee maker before I left.

"What a wonderful world . . . mm . . . mmm," I sing and hum as I walk to the sand-colored rock at the edge. I stand on the edge of that cliff, still singing, my voice gaining volume. "I see skies of blue, red roses too . . . I think to myself, what a wonderful world . . . mm . . . I hear babies cry and I watch them grow, and I think to myself . . ." I stop. In a swift moment, I realize what I'm about to do. My voice echoes sharply against the rocks around the river below. Babies, I think. I have babies. Ben

gave me three children, and he loved them all so dearly.

I carried each one of those babies inside of me for nine months. I felt so special, being the only one who got to hold them, the only one who really got to know them, while they grew in my womb. And I gave my body, my comfort, and even risked my life bringing each one of them into this world. Louis's wonderful world. How could I come so close to taking myself away from them? I shake my head quickly, and my ponytail comes loose. I wasn't trying to do anything but get to Benjamin. But he's dead. And my children are still alive. I'm still alive.

Frightened, I step back and collapse on the ground. How could I have forgotten my children like that? I sit in the thin wild grass and cry for what seems like hours. I think about my children. I realize how much Laura took over for me, doing all the 'mom' things. I think about Peter, a good boy now, but with no parental attention, how long could he stay that way? And little Emmie—she is growing so fast, with no one to notice her. Benjamin always was a good father. Now that he is gone, I'm afraid I can't do it without him.

I sit on the edge of that cliff and until the sun begins rising. Crimson is the first color, followed so swiftly by orange and pink, and then suddenly, it's morning. The sun is up, and I am sitting near the edge of this cliff. No, I am not about to jump. My tears are dry on my cheeks. It is Friday morning, my kitten-baby's third birthday. The children must be awake by now, and they probably don't even know I'm gone yet. Just one hour ago, they were almost orphans.

They need me. I love them. I need to go home and bake a birthday cake. With pink frosting. I have always loved pink frosting. I think about Benjamin, how much he loved his little girls, how proud he was of his son. I can't have Benjamin back again. He's in heaven now, with the lavender lace walls, and I think he's watching his children. I love Ben, and I love our babies. I drive home with the radio off, and I'm not smiling yet, but that is okay.