

Morning

by: Becky Thomas

*Beep, beep beep.*

I reach over and hit the snooze button. I wish I had turned it off earlier since I had been awake since four, but that would have involved effort and there just wasn't enough of that these days to waste. The great heaviness is on me again, pressing me down into the mattress. It presses my chest so hard I don't know if the next breath will come or not. I am astonished each time it does, amazed my heart is still beating, my lungs still expanding, my blood still pumping. The heaviness comes and goes. I never know when to expect it. Just when I think it is defeated, it reappears, a reminder that life will never be normal again. As if I could forget.

I turn my head enough to see the rumpled bedcovers that my husband left behind when he got up. . .or has he ever come to bed? It's hard to say these days. The heaviness affects us both, just differently. His is more like a caffeine shot than a weight. He can't stop moving, can't stop thinking, can't stop working, can never be at peace. While I had to will my limbs to move, he can't get his to still. He has probably passed out in the recliner downstairs while watching videos of Ben. At least I hope he has - sleep was a precious commodity in our house and whatever you needed to do to get it was not only allowed but encouraged.

*Beep, beep, beep.*

I slam my hand on the snooze button again. 6:10. I have to get up. I'd promised both kids a real breakfast this morning, not just the pop tarts and granola bars I usually threw at them. There was a Girl Scout vest to find, lunches to make, money needed for a field trip. I must check the weather too, to remind them to dress appropriately. These fall days had been crazy, going from hot to cold back to hot, none of us were ever sure how to dress. I smiled remembering how Ben loved this weather, he loved the unpredictability of it. He was always good with unpredictability. I guess he had to be.

The heaviness presses harder and my smile disappears. My lungs are working overtime to pump air in and out, to keep my heart beating, to keep my blood moving. I can't help but wonder why. Why? What was the point when part of me had been ripped away and buried in the ground, never to come back? What was the point of getting out of bed, cooking meal after meal, washing and folding clothes, talking to people and pretending like everything was ok? It is all so exhausting, so futile, so pointless. All that food would rot, all those clothes would end up in a trash heap, and all those people would end up in the ground. All of them. And everyone they loved too. Life was just a series of activities designed to keep us from thinking about death.

How many times while driving have I imagined mashing the gas pedal to the floor, ramming straight into a wall? How many times have I held a bottle of pills in my hand just a minute too long? Or lain in the bath, watching red blooms curling away from my wrists until I blinked and they were gone. The heaviness doesn't come nearly as often and I am thankful for that. Therapy must be helping - or was it just time? I don't know. I do know that it will show up again and, when it does, I am battling for my life.

I am overcome with guilt. I have never really had to battle for my life, not like Ben. I turn onto my side and hug Ben's pillow to my chest. It was ratty and stained, blue with moons and stars scattered over it. It hadn't left his bed in all of his 16 years and now it never left mine. He had taken it with him to every hospital visit, every surgery, every check-up since he was a baby. It was his good luck charm, he had said. Until it wasn't.

I punch the pillow in anger. He fought so hard, his whole life, I really thought he would beat it somehow. He would be the miracle. If big-heartedness could heal a heart defect, I know it would have happened. After he died, we were overwhelmed with the phone calls, notes and stories about Ben's kindnesses. He had touched the lives of just about everyone in our small town in one way or another. You'd think it would have helped to hear that, and it did in a way. But it mostly made me angry at the unfairness of it all. Why is it that those who are a force of good in the world are the ones taken from it too soon?

Then I felt it - a shift in the weight - a loosening of the breath - I could almost hear him saying to me "you can be the goodness for me." He was right, as always. My children need a mother. My husband needs a wife. Ben needs me not to waste any of the precious days I have been given and will be given, days that he didn't have. His were short but never wasted, ever. He crammed more courage, more love, more joy into his brief life than many 80 year olds I know. What right do I have to give up fighting? He never did.

*Beep, beep, beep.*

I sit up, throw the covers back, put my feet on the floor and turn off the alarm.