

Ms. Tillman, the secretary in the big office at the front of the school, called Ben over the intercom. “Benjamin Kent, please grab your things and come to the principal’s office.”

It was always trouble when you got called to the principal’s office. In kindergarten, he’d gotten into a fight with Eddy Webber by the swings. The two of them spent the rest of that day getting lectures. Apparently, little boys who fought on the playground never got jobs when they became men.

He couldn’t remember having done anything wrong. The teacher gave Ben a stern look that said it was his fault for interrupting class. He didn’t care for her.

He walked out of the classroom and made his way down the hallways toward the office. The place seemed so big, almost certainly the biggest building in the world. Years later, when he came back for his mother’s funeral, he walked the hallways again with Eddy and realized just how small it really was. For now though, all the other students were in their classrooms, and the halls were empty. The only kid in the biggest building in the world.

As he got closer to the office, he noticed there were more adults around than usual. The librarian, Mrs. Warfle, and the janitor, Mr. Thomas, were both standing outside the library by the office. Mrs. Warfle looked like she was crying. He’d never seen an adult at the school cry before.

Ben stopped in front of them. “Are you all right, Mrs. Warfle?”

When she saw him, tears welled in her eyes. “I’m fine, Benjamin. You need to go to the office.”

There was sudden dread in his gut. If he’d been just a few years older, he would have understood the expression Mrs. Warfle was giving him, or he might have realized that Mr.

Thomas couldn't make eye contact.

Ben walked a little faster. He must have done something really bad if Mrs. Warfle was crying. She was nice, but she was tough. If she saw you dog-ear a book in her library, she was likely to slap you with a ruler. Nobody messed up her books.

He turned the corner into the office. Ms. Tillman and the gym teacher, Mr. Dons, were whispering to each other. Both stopped when Ben walked in. Mr. Dons was the meanest teacher in the school. Eddy had told Ben in confidence that people who failed his gym class got locked under the school until the fourth grade. Ben doubted the claim, but he wasn't going to fail gym class and find out. Mr. Dons didn't look so mean today. He gave Ben the same sort of expression Mr. Thomas had given him just a moment before.

"How're you doing today, sport?" Mr. Dons asked.

"Good, sir." Ben shifted on his feet.

"That's good. I'm glad to hear it." He let out a long sigh and looked like he had to pee.

"Well, you have a good day, Ben." The look on his face changed, as if he'd said a bad word. He walked by Ben and out of the office.

Ben was at a loss, but he didn't like whatever was going on. "Am I in trouble, Ms. Tillman?"

"No, sweetheart. No. You need to talk to Mr. Porsche."

"Yes, ma'am." He walked up to the big door with P-R-I-N-C-I-P-A-L spelled on it. Principal. He'd learned to read that word in kindergarten when he and Eddy sat in the office for hours waiting to get a talking-to.

Ben knocked on the door. Mr. Porsche's big voice called, "Come in."

He had the biggest office in the school. Apparently, Mr. Porsche was a doctor. Ben's dad

told him that meant he was supposed to call him Dr. Porsche and not Mr. Porsche. That struck Ben as odd, because none of the things from a doctor's office were anywhere in his school that he knew of. He did it once in front of Eddy, and now whenever Eddy said the principal's name in front of Ben, he always called him Mr. Dr. Porsche.

"Close the door and take a seat, son," Mr. Dr. Porsche said. Ben did as he was told. Mr. Porsche slid a candy jar on his desk toward Ben. "Go ahead and take one."

Ben took one and slid it into his pocket. It was rude to suck on candy when you were talking. "Did I do something wrong, sir?"

"It's 'have I done something wrong, sir', and no, Ben, you aren't in trouble." Mr. Porsche was the only one at the school who called him Ben. "There's been an accident, son."

The dread in Ben's stomach grew, but he didn't know why. In the back of his mind, he had a feeling it wasn't about him, but he had to ask anyway. "What did I do, sir?"

Mr. Porsche took a deep breath and blew it out. "You haven't done anything wrong. Your father's truck was hit on the highway this morning. Your mother is coming to pick you up to see him in the hospital."

Ben's fingers and toes went numb. Mr. Porsche explained to him that his father had been driving as he was supposed to, when a man who was drunk hit his truck.

"Is my dad okay?" Ben was trying to be a man. His father would have told him that men don't cry.

Mr. Porsche pursed his lips. "I don't know."

He said a lot of other things while Ben sat in the chair. It was going to be all right. His mother would explain everything to him. The hospital was a fine hospital, and his dad would be taken care of. But nothing registered.

He knew about death, but he'd never experienced it. All of his grandparents died before he was born, and his dog was still alive and healthy when Ben was in the second grade. He knew a girl who's grandpa had passed away in the first grade, but they weren't close, and you weren't supposed to ask about that kind of thing. Still, something in his head wouldn't stop nagging at him. It was the feeling you had when you knew things had changed forever.

"Is my dad dead?"

Mr. Porsche was in the middle of telling Ben about how he'd never seen a bad accident on that highway before. Ben as an adult, as a doctor, would have known Mr. Porsche was trying to fill the silence.

Mr. Porsche took another deep breath before he answered. "I don't know, son."

Tears welled up in Ben's eyes, and his lower lip quivered. Mr. Porsche didn't have a lot to say after that. Ben cried and did his best not to look him in the eye. It wasn't manly. When your dad was a coal miner, it was important to act like a man.

Ben's mother walked into the office five minutes later. When he heard her voice, he got up without asking to be excused. She was putting on a brave face, but when she saw Ben, she lost her composure. Her eyes teared up, and she started to cry. Ben ran to her and threw his arms around her waist.

She spoke with Mr. Porsche and Ms. Tillman for a moment before they left. Ben didn't catch any of it. From the look on his mother's face, he knew something really bad had happened.

His dad was dead. He'd dreamed about it the day before. Not a regular dream, but a *serious* dream. The kind that touched something deep inside even as a kid. In the dream, his dad was driving with a man dressed up all in black. Ben thought it was a friend of his dad's, but as they pulled onto the big highway that lead to the coalmine, the man told his dad it was time to go

home. The truck kept going, but his dad and the man were gone, and then the truck was nothing but a pile of twisted metal. Ben hadn't understood it then, but he did after his visit to the office. He never told his mom about it. By the time he was an adult, he'd forgotten it himself.

They sat in the back seat together, her hand grasping his as his mother's friend Susan drove them to the hospital. His school was in a separate county, and the drive to the hospital took thirty minutes. Neither of them spoke. Halfway there, he reached into his pocket and closed his hand around the piece of candy Mr. Porsche had given him. *So when your father has a bad accident and dies, you get candy?* That wasn't fair, and Ben started to sob. His mother held him close for the remainder of the drive.

When they got to the hospital, Susan parked the car and the three of them walked into a room that his mom told him was for emergencies. Susan and Ben sat down in some chairs near a big desk with two women standing behind it. His mother walked up to the desk. The way she looked back at him. The way she walked— her arms wrapped around herself, her steps shuffling— he'd never seen her scared before.

She spoke to the nurses quietly. One of them said something to her, and the entire room went still. She turned around and looked at him, her eyes full of tears. He closed his fingers around the candy in his pocket again.

It wasn't fair at all.

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The new few days passed in a blur. An endless stream of sorry adults came and left his house.

“He was so young.”

“Everything to look forward to.”

“You’ll be all right.”

Ben wouldn’t be all right. Nothing was ever going to be all right again. He didn’t know how the grownups could look at him with a straight face and tell him anything was okay. His dad had died. He was gone, and he wasn’t ever coming back.

The funeral was worse. They held the ceremony at a small chapel, in a small room with wood paneled walls on the grounds of the place where his father was going to be buried. Ben always hated wood panel; it reminded him of an old man’s house. The suit he wore was black and ugly. The tie was too tight, the pants too high, and the shoes too big. He didn’t understand all the stupid games.

*Why dress up? He doesn’t care anymore.* Ben had never once seen his dad in a suit anyway.

He hadn’t eaten the candy Mr. Dr. Porsche had given him. To eat that candy would be to accept everything. He refused. As long as that candy stayed in his pocket, everything was just a bad dream, a nightmare he’d wake up from and tell his dad about. He closed his hand around it, finding comfort in the sticky sweet.

Susan sat next to him the whole time. She understood, at least. She never said a word, just sat quietly, holding his hand when he reached for hers. He waited like that for an hour, one hand in his pocket holding on to the last piece of his father he had, the other holding Susan’s hand. His mother stood outside the door, greeting people as they came in. An older Ben would have noticed she was avoiding looking at her husband’s corpse, but young Ben thought she was too busy to sit with him. If he’d known she was avoiding the body, he would have understood. He couldn’t actually see it through the closed casket. Open or closed made little difference. Ben was looking at anything but at his father.

The priest walked in and everyone took a seat. He talked about the freedom God gave to souls no longer trapped in their human form. He went on and on about the love God had for all of his children, and the precious gift of life he bestowed upon them. It all smelled like bullshit.

*If God loved me, my dad wouldn't be dead.*

Ben's eyes welled with tears. He didn't want to cry anymore. He'd cried so much over the last few days he thought he must be out of water. His mother cried a lot, too. He wanted to be a man for her. His dad wasn't there to do it anymore, and someone had to take care of her. She was a strong woman, but they had raised Ben with old-fashioned ideas. He didn't know how, but he was going to take care of her until she could be with Dad again.

When the priest finished trying to bullshit Ben, everyone made a long line to go past the casket. Ben didn't want to go.

"Momma? Can I just wait here?"

She knelt down next to Ben in the same black dress she would be buried in next to her dead husband years later. "Why, Benji?"

He shuffled his feet. Normally she would have told him not to fidget, but those were special circumstances. "I just... don't want to." His eyes misted over, but he blinked back the tears.

"Okay, sweetheart. You don't have to." She stood up and whispered something to Susan. Susan held Ben's hand while everyone else filed past the casket.

The funeral ended, and they took his father's casket out to the back of the building where a hearse waited. He helped carry the casket, though all of his dad's friends were bigger and stronger. His mother finally lost her composure watching him carry her husband to the hearse. The long, black car scared Ben. It had a voice that said, "Give me your dead." He didn't have

much choice, and he did as it told him. He half-expected to see the man in black from his dreams driving it.

When they reached the grave, they took the body out and set it on straps that would let them lower it into the ground. Everyone backed away and watched as the priest said a few more words about peace and rest. Four big men in suits lowered his father into the ground. Ben and his mother stood closest to the hole as the casket lowered. None of it was fair.

*Dad's gone. He left Momma and me all alone.* It was too much, and Ben turned to cry into his mother's waist. As he pulled his hand from his pocket, the piece of candy fell out and into the hole with his father. It made a dull clunk as it hit the lid of his casket.

Ben cried harder.

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Ben's dad brought in most of the money, and without his income, his mom had to sell the house they were paying off. They moved into a trailer on the other side of town. The only good thing about it was being closer to Eddy, who lived just across the road. Most of the kids at school had been quiet around Ben after his father's death. One loud jerk, Tommy Cunningham, told Ben he was trailer trash now. Ben knocked him into the dirt and gave him a black eye. When Ben told Mr. Dr. Porsche what happened, he still got into trouble, but the principal didn't call his momma. Ben always liked Mr. Dr. Porsche after that.

Ben and his mother grew closer once they moved into the trailer park. They'd always been close, but now that Ben had to take care of her for his dad, he saw himself as the man of the house. He did all his chores and made sure everything was taken care of when she got home from work. Most importantly, he took his schooling seriously. That trend stayed with him all the way through school, right up to the point where he received a letter in the mail saying he'd



gotten a full ride to U of M in Ann Arbor.

He'd been hoping his entire life for a chance like that. Ben wasn't much for praying after his father died, but if he had been, he would have prayed for that. He finally had a chance to give something back to his momma, who had worked so hard to make sure he had everything he needed after his father died. If he could graduate college and get a good job, he could take care of her as she'd always taken care of him. He could break free from poverty, and if he ever had kids, they wouldn't grow up as he did. He could afford to move her out of Rapid Hills, away from the grocery store and its asshole manager.

All of that was somewhere in the back of Ben's mind the day he kissed his momma goodbye and boarded the bus bound for Michigan. She was getting older, and hard lines had set on her face, but the day he left, she was still lucid. Years later, he wondered if she'd held onto her mind long enough to make sure Ben was taken care of. He only came home during summer breaks for his first three years of college. That last summer she'd been slipping, and Ben thought something might be wrong with her.

On that day in July, though, there were no thoughts other than bittersweet goodbyes.

"You write me at least every month, Benjamin Kent. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Momma." Ben closed the luggage compartment after packing in his two suitcases. Everything he owned in two small bags. "I'm going to write you every day."

"Don't write your mother every day, Ben, or you'll never find a girlfriend," she said with a smile.

He rolled his eyes. She grabbed his face with both of her hands.

"I'm gonna miss you so much, baby." Her lower lip quivered.

"Don't cry, Momma. This is hard enough."

“I’ll cry whenever I please.” But the tears stopped, and the smile became warmer.

The bus driver poked his head out the door. “’Bout time to head out, folks.”

Ben was the only one getting on. The bus station was a county over, near where he’d gone to high school. It was getting late, and his momma had a long drive back home. Long and lonely.

The thought might have made Ben cry too, but he was going to be strong for her. Besides, he was a man now. It wouldn’t do for him to be crying when he said goodbye to his mom. Ben kissed her on the cheek and slung his old, ratty backpack over his shoulder.

“You be good, Ben,” she said as he walked toward the bus.

“I will, Momma.”

“And you be nice to people, even if they aren’t nice to you.”

“I will, Momma.”

“And Ben?”

He turned to look at her as he climbed onto the bus.

“I’m proud of you. Your dad would be, too.”

“I love you, Momma.”

“I love you too, son.”