



CHAPTER 1

Learning to Live Without Ryken

Our Ryken is dead. The reality of our loss is still too difficult to comprehend some days. The year on the calendar is 2006, and I do not have a single New Year's resolution. I guess that is not the whole truth. Someday, I want a healthy baby for our family. I know that I have to get through my grief first.

The pain that I hold within my body makes it feel as though I am walking around in a full body cast. I am broken everywhere. Yet, if you were to look at me, I look fine... physically. I do not look broken. If you take a moment to look deep into my eyes, you will see darkness. The light has gone out, unless I am interacting with Kaden or around him. He is my flashlight in my dark and lonely world. Grief is my shadow. It is constantly at my side. It is my new alter ego, and no one can see it. But I feel it deeply on every level in every moment. There is no escape for me unless I sleep. Although, sometimes it even finds me in my dreams. There really is no escape for me right now.

Some of my friends are too uncomfortable to take the time to look into my eyes. They have abandoned me. I think my pain is too much for them to bear, or I can only assume they do not know what to say to me. Maybe they are concerned that infant loss is contagious and they don't want to "catch it." However, I should

not assume. That word, broken down, means to make an “ass” out of “u” and “me.” I learned this clever little phrase from one of my high school teachers and it has stuck with me all these years. This has left me a bit bitter about some friendships with certain people. I am not in the mood to care if I make an ass out of myself right now. Some people just really piss me off, if I am being honest with myself.

I try to shrug off the hurt feelings of being discarded and ignored by those people. I have many friends and family members who are there for me and try to help ease the pain that they can clearly see in my eyes when they take time out of their busy schedules to connect with me person-to-person. I should be grateful for this. I will focus on the friends and family that have stuck around and are there for me to lean on. That is the silver lining in this scenario.

I remind myself that Brett and I are walking together on a new path that is unfamiliar ground. We can now add “parents who have lost a child” to our resumes. We are walking in this new territory with Kaden in tow. There are just the three of us now. We are each stepping forward every day onto this new path. The old path we had been travelling on had four of us. It was called “the path of hopes and dreams.” Not anymore. Ryken has left our family, and now there are just the three of us once again. Just as it was before he was born. Yet there is a significant piece of our life that is missing from our family. That piece is called Ryken. This is our truth and sometimes the truth hurts. It not only hurts, but it can cause so much pain that it literally hurts to breathe. It can also take away the desire to live. So even though you are breathing, you are not really living because the pain is so unbearable.

Yet that is the reality here on Earth. Those that have perished, who have ascended to heaven to go back home to the other side, leave behind a trail of broken hearts that feel irreparable. At least that is how my heart feels.

Together the three of us are trying to make a new life, in our new home, in a new city as well. I am going to have to figure out how to live without Ryken for Kaden’s sake. I am starting anew, but I feel like I have moved to another planet. This is what my grief

is doing to me. It is a place where every single thought and plan involved our second baby boy being with us. *Baby made four, but there is baby no more.* I can't get this phrase out of my head. It is like a broken record player that is stuck.

It is a new life without Ryken. Honestly, even thinking those words in my head causes me such anxiety that I am on the verge of vomiting. I try to put that sentence out of my head and just focus on Kaden. This is hard to do. My thoughts continue to take me down memory lane. The past is where I live most days.

Ryken's bedroom at the end of the hall is quiet. The bassinet was wheeled into his room because it was too hard to continue to look at it every day in the living room. The phrase "out of sight out of mind" shoots across my mind like a fleeting star. This is not the case, as Ryken is always on my mind.

The dresser drawers have all of the clothing that Ryken will never wear. Some were new baby gifts but mostly Kaden's hand-me-downs. The vision of Ryken growing up and wearing some of my favourite clothes of Kaden's is but a distant dream. We have empty arms and broken hearts.

I am walking around in a state of shock and numbness still with a good dose of depression and anxiety mixed in for good measure. I don't know if my heart will ever be the same again and I don't care at times. It takes a lot of energy just to get up every day and get dressed. I reserve most of my energy to take care of Kaden.

It's a Sunday morning at the beginning of January. We have begun our day as usual, with our delightful toddler. The one thing that I take great comfort in daily is our oldest son. Kaden has been getting extra hugs and kisses that we would have given to Ryken if he were around. *If* he were physically here with us. I remind myself, or should I say my ego reminds me, that he is not.

Over breakfast and coffee, Kaden makes us smile and laugh with some crazy antic he is doing. He is good medicine for both Brett and me. With a whisper under my breath, I say, "Thank God for Kaden."

Brett has gone downstairs to exercise as we had purchased a punching bag the day before. Both of us thought it would be

Pamela Larocque

a great way to exercise and release some of our stress. My thought is that it will be a great way to deal with my grief. Brett tries it out and decides not to put on the gloves that have come with it. Unfortunately, he cuts his hand and it bleeds a bit. It is not a big deal though. Nothing is a big deal anymore after our loss. After losing Ryken the little things in our life get put into perspective quite quickly.

We head upstairs and our munchkin is hungry and requesting toast. I would usually tell Kaden no and offer a fruit instead. Today I am feeling more tired and less strict about Kaden's fruit and vegetable intake at the moment.

So the snack is made, and Kaden is busy eating toast and jam. He is sitting in his chair and dancing in his seat while he chews. After he has thoroughly enjoyed this yummy treat he shows us how sticky his hands are. He pats his hands together...back and forth and back and forth, he moves his hands together and apart. Of course his hands are sticky because Dad has made the toast and piled an inch of jam on it!! This may be an exaggeration... half an inch. Life is never boring with a toddler around... or a dad for that matter. His eyes light up and he throws his head back while his beautiful, boisterous laughter echoes in my ears because Kaden thinks this is so funny. That sound makes me smile and my heart feels a bit better. My sunshine, Kaden. Even on the cloudiest and darkest of days, he lifts my spirit like no other.

Our day slips away quietly, and before we know it, night has fallen. Kaden's bedtime routine helps me focus. I am able to move about doing the nightly tasks for him. There is so much comfort in routine for me. My brain goes on autopilot, and I just do what I need to do with no thinking involved. I could analyze this to death, but I don't. I am just happy that I can do this routine for Kaden. I am trying to be as normal as I can for him. Yet the truth is that I am unsure of what normal is anymore. At least what my normal is. The truth is, if I am being honest with myself, *I do not feel normal at all.*

The phone rings, and I hear Brett's mom's voice as I say hello. She shares with me that an aunt of Brett's would like to have

a Christmas ornament made for Ryken. It will be round, and she would like a picture of him for this gift. “That is very nice of her,” I hear myself say. My mind is racing and I feel a bit of anxiety because I am trying to figure out which picture to use. The one that comes to my mind instantly is the picture we chose for the funeral cards. Ryken was wearing his baby blue toque, as well as a baby blue outfit. I ask Brett if he thinks that is the picture we should use. He replies, “Sure.”

I am very excited for the night as it allows me to drift away from my life. The place I live where Ryken is nowhere to be found. There are still physical symbols around me though. It is as though they help me prove he was here and the past year of my life was not a dream. I once had a baby that I held in my arms and that I had carried inside my womb.

I glance in the kitchen and all of his medicine is still on the cupboard right beside the fridge. Exactly where I placed it the day that Ryken finally came home after graduating from the NICU at twenty days old. Strangely, these physical things give me comfort. I can't bring myself to move it yet. The thought of Ryken brings tears to my eyes. I will them away because Kaden needs me now.

I berate myself, as I know that he is with his angels on the other side. Yet the mother in me still wants him here... with me and with our family. The stages of grief are upon me. Let me tell you that it is a force to be reckoned with. I have no energy or desire to fight against it right now. The most overwhelming stage for me is depression. It is still so hard to understand what has happened. Maybe I am in the middle of bargaining. I really don't know, and I really don't care. I bargained with God when Ryken was in NICU, and I thought he would help me. He did not help me. I let it go for now. However, I still have a bone to pick with God.

Bedtime stories are read, and a thousand hugs and kisses are bestowed upon Kaden from both of us. I enter my bed and am full of gratitude that sleep has finally come to rescue me from the daily pain that I am living in. I welcome the reprieve the night gives me. As I think this thought, guilt settles in for the long haul, though. I am very vigilant that a mother's guilt is detrimental. I have no

Pamela Larocque

idea at this moment how to release my guilt or the foresight even to will it away.

Instead, I wear its shackles, and I am its prisoner. I fully admit to myself that I am wracked with guilt daily and many times in that day. I feel guilty that Kaden has a grief-stricken mother. I feel guilty that Brett has a sad and depressed wife. The list goes on for other family members and friends as well. The list is overwhelming. I am unable to be there for anyone. I try my best to be there for Kaden.

Then I even feel guilty that I am not happy, because Ryken has told me that he wants me to be happy. I have been given permission from my baby who lives on the other side *to be happy*. Yet this does not help alleviate the emotions within my body or the thoughts inside my head. He maybe does not understand the emotions of an adult because he did not hit that stage in this lifetime. He had no chance to become a parent. How can he say, "I want you to be happy." This is just too much for my mind right now. I let this go too, for now.