

The Middle Ages: In the yard, a new tree. Like our late son did, it wiggles when the wind blows

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MARCH 23, 2018

Our daughter Rapunzel is in the bathroom teasing her little brother about his “Johnny Bravo hair,” like high surf, a perfect wave.

It’s a small thing, sure, but I welcome this tiny vignette of normalcy, one of daily life’s lovable little skits.

People talk, in the wake of our older son’s fatal accident, of the “new normal.” I think no one ever wants a new normal. Any new normal is inherently flawed, absent some touchstone that brought us emotional comfort.

In this case, their beloved big brother. Their Johnny Bravo

Hell of a week, softened by the outpouring of messages from so many of you, offering prayers, condolences, stories of perseverance in the wake of similar untimely deaths.

I just want to tell you that I’m deeply disappointed. As a certified wise guy, I had no idea there could be this degree of kindness and compassion.

You have been so nice to us it makes me kind of cry.

“I hope that if you can ... you will drop little snippets about Christopher into your columns,” one reader wrote. “Then, in some peculiar way, we will all be memorializing him.”

Done.

Three weeks after the accident, sharp pain has given way to numbness. How's that for progress? A son or daughter's death is a bile that lasts forever...a gut punch that hurts only when you breathe.

We're discovering that great grief is a boulder you cannot move alone.

The other night, I managed to laugh a little in the bleachers during our younger son's baseball game. To see this, you might think I'm all right. I'm so *not* all right.

I bask though, in the old normal, to be surrounded by moms and dads I've known since tee-ball, with whom I can joke about the snack bar food or the way we dress in five layers of clothes on a night in the mid-50s.

My niece was at the game, the one from Chicago, and she could not hide her amusement over our kvetching at the cold. Someone had brought a space heater, and everyone was chugging hot chocolate and coffee.

"It's too cold to snow," I joked as storm clouds gathered over the mountains.

It's when we get home that the great grief kicks in again, in the house that's half as loud as it used to be. Absent the boy yelling at the beagle. Absent his too-loud TV. The dreaded new normal.

We'll cry until we laugh.

We see glimmers of this. The other night, there were four millennials sitting around the dining table trying to explain to each other who Bette Midler was.

"Wasn't she in 'Beaches'?" one asked.

"What's 'Beaches'?"



The swear jar has been a huge success. It may contain more money than our 401(k).

(Chris Erskine / Los Angeles Times)

And I accidentally started drinking decaf again, thought I'd contracted anemia, or malaria or (worse) old age.

"Dr. Steve?" I said in a call to my internist. "I need a blood test."

"You know, you're drinking my decaf again!" Posh yelled from the next room.

We have also instituted a "swear jar," which we feed with dollar bills when our tongues betray us. I'm about 40 bucks in, but Rapunzel leads the pack. The swear jar may contain more money than our 401(k).

Call it the new-old normal. Call it the eighth stage of grief.

Your personal notes sustain and kill me all at once. There are so many stories like ours, of parents who lost children or siblings who lost a brother or sister. It's a bigger club than you'd ever imagine. Some parents lost a child, and then unbelievably, lost another one.

How do you ever get past that?

Such stories invite agonizing questions. No one should ever have to bury a child.

Much of the survivors' advice is to talk about the loved one, to share joy and sorrow, sustain him, bless his memory, reach out, talk, curse, laugh, bellow, cry.

We welcome your suggestions, your confusion, even the awkward encounters at the supermarket, which are probably harder on you than they are on us. No one said this would be easy.

The cards, the candles, the casseroles, the pies... they all help, including soulful little notes from total strangers who watched our son grow up in the pages of the newspaper.

"We loved him with you," one said.

"You can find me where music meets the ocean," reads a line from a poem someone sent.

And in the yard one day, a light green sapling planted in Christopher's honor, by some of my buddies in the Happy Hour Hiking Club.

The tree is all elbows. Tall and gangly, it wiggles a little when the March wind blows, just like he did.

The tree is a beautiful reminder of him. And of you.

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