

# Jennie's Example

## The Origin Scene

Mr. Anderson was the first person I ever knew who died, and the thing I didn't know about death was how quiet it was going to be. There was this weird hush in the Andersons' house--no one running around, or arguing or throwing balls against the walls. It was as if Beth and all her brothers had been unplugged. Their house now felt like mine did after my sister Nora left for college--a place where it wasn't acceptable to move too fast or speak too loudly or say what you really thought. It was terrifying.

What I couldn't say--what I really thought--was that Mr. Anderson had let me down by dying. We'd made a deal about a month before he died. It happened at their massive farmhouse dinner table on Sunday night, which was spaghetti night. The boys were throwing sourdough rolls at one end of the table, which Mrs. Anderson was trying to referee. At the other, Beth turned to her dad and said, "Ruby's writing a play." I almost spit out my milk. It had been a secret, for one thing. But for another, at my family's dinner table, anyone who heard that news would just smile and nod, sure I'd never really do it, sure it was just a childish whim, and that would have mortified me. I curled my toes inside my shoes to brace myself, but Mr. Anderson's eyes lit up. "A play?" he said, and he asked me what it was about, and if he could read it when I finished it. I relaxed, and took a breath. He had no doubt that I would finish it. He had no doubt that it would be worth reading. And for the first time, I felt that confidence, too.

I finished my play a few weeks later. Two days after that, he died. When I found out, I couldn't stop crying--not for Beth and her brothers and her mom, but for me. I was

shattered by his death. That's what I couldn't say in their house, because how could I? How could I say how much I was hurt when my friend couldn't even seem to breathe? How could I sit on the couch and cry when Beth and Mrs. Anderson were barely saying a word? I was just the twelve year old best friend of the daughter of the guy who had died. My job was just to sit there, eating the cookies the church ladies had put out, pretending that I didn't feel let down.

The church during the funeral was also quiet. I mean, there was organ music and someone sang a sad song about a sparrow, and lots of people spoke, but it still had this strange quiet in the air, as if three hundred people had silently agreed to act as if nothing had changed and the only way we could do that was to make as little noise as possible. The Andersons all sat together in the front pew, and I kept thinking what it would be like to be Beth and have no father, but all I could think of was that I already kind of felt like I didn't have a father. My dad didn't read to me like Beth's dad had, and he didn't come to watch my soccer games, and even though he was a teacher like Mr. Anderson, he wasn't interested in the stories I wrote or the poems or the plays. Even when he was home he was distant, and I got the feeling he really didn't even like me. I closed my eyes and imagined my father dead, and I didn't feel anything different. A tiny part of me was relieved, because I wouldn't have to pretend to miss him if he died--and that was when I started to cry.

A week after the funeral, our team had a game against the Hornets, and I started begging Beth to play, because I thought that would get her to breathe again and laugh again and be my best friend again. No one loved to kick a soccer ball as much as Beth. "Come play," I said. "It'll feel good."

For the first time since her dad died, she looked me square in the eyes. There was something so dark and sad in her eyes that she looked a little bit dead herself. I swallowed, as if I'd been caught seeing something I wasn't supposed to see. "He came to every game I ever played," she said. "How can you even say that? How can I play without him?"

I understood how much Beth hurt, but she wasn't making any sense. My dad never came to see me play, and I could play just fine. Playing had nothing to do with who was watching. It was something you just did, just you and your teammates. But I wondered if I was missing something. *Was* playing soccer better if your dad came to watch?

"It's worth a try," I said, desperate to save my friend from whatever had taken hold of her.

She shook her head no and looked away again.

Game day arrived, and while we were warming up, I looked across the field and there were Beth and her mom, making their way across the field like they had down the aisle of the church--slow and unsteady, as if each step cost them more than they had to give. I shouted and waved--so excited she was there, she had listened, this would all end--but they didn't look up. Her mom was wearing dark sunglasses and they were all loaded down with stuff--chairs and a cooler. Beth's two younger brothers trailed behind dragging a blanket and a picnic basket. You could picture Mr. Anderson trotting up, swooping in, and helping them all out, but he wasn't there. He was never going to be there again.

Everyone was watching them, but pretending like they weren't watching them, and now that even included me. I hated myself for that.

They came right up to the sidelines where they usually sat. I saw that Beth had on her uniform, but she didn't run out to us. She helped her mom set up one chair and then another right next to it. It was Mr. Anderson's chair, a silent empty memorial. Her mom quickly sat down without speaking a word to anyone. The brothers sat quietly on a blanket without grabbing for the ball, cracking open the cooler, or wrestling on the grass. Then Beth pulled up her shin guards, turned, and ran out to us, and I thought things would be okay.

The coach called us all into a huddle. We put our arms around each other the way we always did, and suddenly I felt Beth's shoulders shaking. She was crying. Not just quiet tears dripping down her face--she was gasping, howling, and her face looked like it might crack. My heart began to pound because this was my fault, I'd begged her to come, and now everyone was frozen in place watching Beth's guts spill out, and no one else seemed to know what to do to fix it, not even her mom, who still sat, gripping the armrests of her chair as if they might save her from drowning. Beth covered her face with her hands and walked as if in slow motion to the sidelines. She fell on her knees in front of the empty chair, put her forehead on the ground and wailed. "Please, please, please." She never said please *what*, but she didn't have to. It was please everything.

I had always felt jealous of Beth, but suddenly I felt sorry for her. Suddenly I could see that this was the worst possible thing that could happen to a person, and it had happened to her, and she was only twelve. I could see that she might never recover from this.

*Thank goodness, I thought, I won't ever have to suffer like that.*