

CHAPTER 35: Taking Inventory

I just nudged Arnie because he was snoring so loud. As usual, he just grunted and squinted and rolled over and went back to sleep. He probably wonders why I'm up. Then again maybe he doesn't wonder at all. He knows me pretty well. Earlier tonight he and I sat here on the bed, ate potato chips and ketchup, and talked about what heaven must be like.

"I think heaven's like Little League this time of year," I said. "The sun's shining but it's not too hot yet and people sit on soft cushions and there are good tunes playing and there isn't much wind and everyone gets along and laughs and talks about baseball and old times and eats hot dogs and peanuts and drinks pop."

Arnie thought it over for a minute, then offered his version of heaven. "In heaven," he said, pausing with authority, "there are millions of gigantic heated swimming pools with mega-cute babes in bikinis and dark sunglasses and they're floating around on rafts and all the potato chips and ketchup and pop and junk food you want and you can play video games and ride super-fast WaveRunners all day and watch movies on big-screen LCD TVs and there's no school, ever!"

That made me laugh so hard it hurt my chapped lips, which already hurt from the salt from the potato chips. But I didn't care. Sometimes when Arnie's around you just have to laugh even if it hurts. He can cheer



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me up faster than anyone when I'm down. Anyone except for maybe my mom. Arnie knows that of all the people who helped me get over Grampa Jack dying, of all the people who helped me get over my depression and fear of people I know dying and getting sick, my mom is the one who's helped me the most.

In fact, my mom's the one who really helps me the most with everything in my life. She's the one who always listens to me even when I say some pretty weird things and she's the one who talks to me about things that really matter to me. It's always been that way. Dad gives me the discipline I need and I know he loves me and everything and he supports me and protects me, but Mom talks and listens. Arnie knows how much I love my mom and how hard this past year has been for me and how hard it is sometimes for me to talk about it. That's what friends and moms do best, they understand.

That cricket outside finally stopped singing. He must have gotten tired. I'm getting tired, too. I just looked out my window and the sun is just starting to come up. It's still dark, but you can see some light creeping up over the east horizon and it's coming into my room. Most of the streetlights are still on, but I just heard my dad's alarm clock going off down the hall. Now I can see a little light from the hallway sneaking through the crack under my door. I'd better get some sleep.

I have a baseball game tomorrow. I mean, today. I always get pumped the day of a game, especially when I'm pitching. We're playing the Tigers and it's a pretty important game. They've won their last three games and so have we. Neither team wants to lose. Playing for the Pirates this year is OK but I wish I could play for the Padres or the Cubs but they don't have Padres or Cubs in my Little League, even though the Cubs are probably the most popular team in Iowa. I just have to learn to like being a Pirate, I guess. Like Arthur says, making the best of it is part of life.

I can hear my dad's footsteps now. Lucky for me, we have wood floors in the upstairs hallway and a couple of the floorboards squeak so I usually get some advance warning. Dad checks up on me sometimes after he takes a shower and before he goes to work. He opens the door quietly. I think



he thinks I've never heard or seen him do it because I always pretend I'm asleep, but sometimes, like now, I'm awake.

There goes Arnie's snoring again. I have to close my eyes now and pretend I've been asleep for hours. Hopefully when I fall back to sleep for real I'll dream about baseball. I usually do the night before a game — even though it's morning now. I hope we win today. And maybe afterward I can cheer my mom up. She always smiles and shakes her head pretending to be mad when I come into her bedroom in my cleats and my dirty baseball uniform.

Sometimes if you are feeling depressed or sad or angry, as Dr. Mackey says, it helps to remind yourself of the good things in your life. As Grandma Paulson, who's a stubborn but smart old lady, says, "Sometimes you gotta take inventory." I do take inventory now. Sometimes I even make a list of the things I like in my life and another list of the things that suck and the list of things I like is usually longer than the list of things that suck. I usually throw away the list of things that suck and keep the list of things I like. Every time I do this, the list of things I like grows and the list of things that suck shrinks.

I've learned a lot this past year. The most important thing I think I've learned is that you can't go through life being scared all the time. That's probably the thing about me that's changed the most since my mom got cancer. I'm definitely not so scared of stuff now. I'm still afraid that my mom could die, and I'm still a little afraid of the dark but not as much, and I'm still a little scared of taking math quizzes sometimes and high inside fastballs pretty much all the time. But the thing I've done is face these fears. You have to look at them eye-to-eye. Nothing is as scary when you look at it eye-to-eye and stand your ground.

My mom knows all about being scared, and being brave. She has more courage than anyone I know. She doesn't complain about being sick, and if she is scared of dying, which I know she must be, she tries her best not to show it, at least in front of me. She puts on her game face, which for her is a warm smile. I hope and I believe that she will live a long, long time.



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But I know now and I guess I have accepted the fact that everyone and everything dies, eventually, it's a part of nature and there's nothing you can do about it. Nobody dies in exactly the same way and nobody knows when it's going to happen and nobody knows exactly what heaven looks like. But you shouldn't waste time worrying about it. Flowers and leaves and animals aren't afraid of it, so why should we? They must know something we don't.

Like Jordon Walcher, possibly and hopefully my future girlfriend, was saying, "When people die they're reunited in heaven with friends and loved ones they haven't seen in a long time." Jordon told me the same thing my mom told me: People don't really die if you don't forget them. Jordon said that a person is never really dead unless people forget that person was alive. When you look at it that way, Grampa Jack will never die and neither will my mom or anyone else I care about.

Yesterday when I was over at Arnie's I told his mom, while we were playing kings on the corners, a card game, that I was afraid my mom would die someday. "I understand your fear, Tyler. There's absolutely nothing more sacred than the bond between a mother and her son," she said, then sneaked a peek at Arnie, who was on the floor at the other end of the living room cleaning his skateboard wheels. She gave him a wink, and I think it embarrassed him because he dropped his skateboard, got up, and walked into the kitchen to make a sandwich.

