

## A Cut Penny

He was my friend. That's the only real thought going through my head as I stand there with his mother as I help her clean out his room. The room seemed darker now that he's gone. His belongings don't look the same now that he's gone, but then again nothing will be the same now with him gone.

I picked up a photo from his desk of the two of us. His name was Benjamin or well Ben. He had light brown hair that almost looked blond in the summer sun and dark blue eyes that looked like a raging ocean that was magnified by his thick glasses. We were 7 years old in this photo which feels like yesterday and not 10 years ago. My eyes shifted over to the younger me in the photo, my long dark brown hair next to his light brown made his hair look blonder. My brown eyes looked dull next to his. This photo is who we used to be. Pam and Ben.

Ben's mother put a hand on my shoulder which brought me back to reality. "Pam, are you ok sweetie?"

His mother was the sweetest woman in my life and like my second mom. "Yes, sorry I was lost in thought."

She looked at me with concern, knowing I wasn't alright. "I'll make you some lunch and give you a moment alone."

"Thank you Mrs. Miller." I replied quietly.

She left the room and I listened to her heels clack down the stairs. I turned back to Ben's desk and pulled out his old chair. I sat there looking at all the photos of us through the years. Slowly growing up through the photos. Yet my eyes drifted back to the photo in my hand. The youngest photo of us together. That's when I remember the day we met.

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It was the first day of first grade and it was recess. I was on a swing alone when I saw Ben on the ground in the back corner of the playground. He was surrounded by three bigger boys from our class. The teachers couldn't see what they were doing in that corner and I couldn't just swing there and watch this poor kid get beaten up by bigger kids. That's when I jumped off the swing and marched right up to the group of bullies. I had no fear of these boys.

As I approached the group of boys I squeezed between two of them so that I stood between the bullies and the boy on the ground. I looked up at the bullies standing my ground saying, "Leave him alone."

The biggest of the three boys who was the obvious leader stepped towards me, "You're a girl. You can't do anything."

I smiled at them. Of course I knew I couldn't beat them in a fight but my mom taught me how to get teacher's attention. "Yes, I am but if you don't back off you'll regret it."

The boys just laughed at me and didn't back off so I screamed at the top of my lungs. The boys in front of me looked confused at what I was doing but then it worked as teachers walked around to see the corner we were in. They ran over to help with the situation at hand. The boys noticed that the teachers were coming so they ran off in the other direction. The teachers came up

asking what was going on. I helped the boy off the ground and answered, “I saw those boys beating on him, and then I told them to stop and when they didn’t I screamed.”

The teachers walked off to go get the boys that ran off. I turned to the boy and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes I am. Thank you for helping me back there. I’m Ben, what’s your name?”

I smiled at him, “I’m Pam.”

Then from that moment on we were inseparable.

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I set the photo down back onto its place on his desk. Another photo on his desk caught my eye. It was the photo of Ben and me at Ben’s first round of chemo. He had found out he had cancer at the age of 10. It wasn’t a huge deal when we found out about it because the doctors said that they had caught it early so they could treat it. Yet over the years it kept getting worse and worse. Towards the end though the doctors thought that they had gotten it under control, but they were very wrong. Ben struggled with cancer for about 7 years and right when things started to look up that’s where it ended.

Mrs. Miller then came back up the stairs with a sandwich in hand. “Here you go Pam. It’s peanut butter and jelly just how you like it.”

I sat there and slowly nibbled on the sandwich in front of me. Mrs. Miller sat on Ben’s bed silently just looking at the floor in front of her. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling, her only son taken from her after watching him suffer for years. This woman took him to all of his chemo sessions for years. She listened to doctors after doctors telling her the amount of treatments that Ben has to endure for a chance to live a few more years. The heartache of watching her son slowly dying for years. As I looked at this woman who looked like a part of her died.

“Mrs. Miller, how are you doing?”

She looked up at me and even her eyes looked dead, yet she smiled at me, “I’m not doing great obviously and I don’t know what to do now without him.”

I moved from the desk chair to sit next to her on the bed. I took her hand, “I know it’s hard and you are suffering in ways that I can never understand what you are going through as a mother. Just know that I will be here for you, for anything you need. You are my second mom and I will come over to help with anything that you need.”

She put an arm around me and held me close as she cried quietly. “Thank you Pam for helping me with everything. I don’t know how I will be able to clean his room.”

“Mrs. Miller don’t worry I will clean his room by myself just so you don’t have to go through that pain. Is it okay if I stay in here tonight? I don’t want to go home plus I want look around his room a little longer.”

“Of course honey, I’ll go call your parents.”

“Thank you Mrs. Miller.”

She gave me one last hug before she went down stairs to call my parents. I stood up and straightened up his bed. For some reason I still have the need to keep his room clean even though I have to pack up his things. I turned to look around his room, I don't even know where to start with all of the packing. There's too many things to pack up, with so many memories buried in the room. His clothes, his books, and the photos he has all over his room. Most of the photos in his room are of course of the two of us. For years Ben had a crush on me and I knew he did, mostly because he told me when we were in the second grade and continued to tell me for years.

I remember the first time he told me that he liked me in the second grade.

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We were in a park spending the afternoon helping Ben with the monkey bars. After Ben had made it through half of the monkey bars without falling we went and sat on a park bench. I could tell he was holding something in. So I asked, "What's wrong Ben?"

He looked at me with fear in his eyes, "I like you Pam."

"What? Ben we are friends."

He looked away shaking his head, "I know we are friends and friends get married all the time, and I want to marry you."

I didn't know how to respond to this statement so I laughed. It wasn't the right response, I could tell by his face so I stopped laughing, "Hold on." I reached into my pocket and pulled out a penny. "Ben, you're a great guy so if you can cut this penny in half I will marry you when we are older."

He took the penny in hand and stared at it. "Are you serious?"

"Yes I am, but I'm not going to marry a guy who can't do the monkey bars." We both started laughing.

"I promise you that I will cut this penny for you." He beamed at me holding up the penny.

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Mrs. Miller came back upstairs with boxes and tape. "Here you go Pam. I realized I didn't give you any boxes for you to pack with."

"Thank you I was just wondering about that."

I took the boxes from her and sat on the floor with them. Mrs. Miller left me alone again with all of Ben's things. I started to build boxes. After three boxes I decided it was best to start with his clothes. Thankfully he never had too many clothes, so this was probably going to be the fastest thing to pack. I start with the bottom drawer so I can work my way up. The bottom drawer was just jeans which was surprisingly more than I thought he owned, but they also seemed to be the exact same pair.

The next drawer was all of his flannels. His flannels. He always offered me one when it was cold out, and carried an extra one with him just for me. That's when I found his dark blue flannel, the one he wore on his first date with Jean from school. His only first date.

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“Ben you can’t wear just a plain white t-shirt, especially if you are going to the park in late September. You need a flannel.” I said from his bed.

He bent over his drawer filled with flannels. “Which flannel though? I want Jean to like it, and you know she cares about looks.”

“Yeah, which is why I’m confused she agreed to go out with you.” I laughed at him.

He threw a rolled up pair of socks at me as his response. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know I’m not the most stylish guy in school but he I got humor for days.”

“Is that what you have? I thought it was an inhaler.”

He picked his inhaler off of his desk and held it up. “This is just my microphone so my jokes are fresh.”

I laughed at him. “Why don’t you wear her favorite color? Do you have a pink flannel?”

“No I don’t. What about my dark blue flannel to kind of match her eyes.”

“Aw are you starring into each other’s eyes already? So cute.”

He picked up the flannel and put it on. “No she just keeps going on about her eyes and how special they are because they are a dark blue.”

“Can’t believe you want to go out with a girl who is that obsessed with her looks. She’s going to be too high maintenance for you.”

“It’s one date. Not like we are getting married.”

“I’ll remember that for my toast at your wedding when you two get married.”

“Ha ha very funny. I gotta get going my date is in 20 minutes which means you have to go to your own house for once.”

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With those three boxes packed I got up to sit back down in Ben’s desk chair. I started with the photos of us by setting them in carefully in the box. I’m packing up his life into these boxes. It’s crazy that he’s not in my life anymore. Life isn’t fair. I opened up the center desk drawer and there was a lot of different little objects, and that’s when I saw it.

A single penny in the drawer surrounded by knives and two lighters. I picked up the penny and laid it flat in my hand. I looked hard at the penny and I could see the surface was covered in different little dents and scratches. I fell to the ground on my knees. Ben had been actually trying to cut the penny so he could marry me. He took that seriously even though I told him that in the second grade. We were kids and over the years he never gave up on me. I never gave him the chance to be with me. I kept him in the friend zone for years when he always loved me.

When I fell I must have made a thud sound because Mrs. Miller ran up the stairs to check on me. “Sweetie what’s wrong?”

My face was covered in tears, “In the second grade I told Ben that if he could cut this penny in half I would marry him. He actually tried to cut it for me.”

She knelt down next to me, “I always wondered why he was messing around with that penny at night.”

“How often did he mess with it?”

“Almost every night. One night he cut one of his fingers with a knife trying to cut it.” I began to cry harder. He spent nights trying to cut a penny for me for years. “Pam, I knew my son loved you. I’ve known for years. I even tried to help him cut it sometimes. Pennies are resilient coins.”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew. Everyone knew that he loved you. Something about how you stood up for him the first day you guys met made him fall for you.”

I just stared down at the penny entranced by the many different cuts and scratches. They went in different directions. Ben tried for years just for the chance to marry me. Ben truly loved me and I was blind to it this entire time. How could I not see it? He was always there for me no matter what. He came and helped me with homework every time I had to cram for a test, and he was there when I had broken my leg and needed help with stairs. Ben loved me and it took me finding this penny to realize I loved him. Now it’s too late.