

heartbroken,  
but not  
broken

jaimie clemmer

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# Chapter 1

## *The End*

THE WRITER KAREN BLIXEN (ISAK DINESON) SAID, “ALL SORROWS CAN BE borne if you put them into story or tell a story about them.” Is it too early in our relationship for you to hear me call this renowned author a liar? Liar is a strong word, I know, up there with “hate” and “ugly,” but as I sob writing almost every word of this book, I wonder if this sentiment is true. I guess I am going to put it to the test and start at the beginning—of the end.

It’s funny. Logically it seems like this would be the most difficult part of the story to write so I would put it off until the end. As a family, though, we have always preferred “bad news before good news.” I think that’s in part why this is the first part of the story. I wanted to get it out of my brain, out of my body. I needed to get it out. It’s almost like I am afraid it will disappear or I will forget it. Some days all I want to do is forget it, but then I panic. What have I already forgotten about it? Will I remember it? Will I remember Sawyer and our final moments together? Do I even want to remember? Ultimately, I do.

The end:

*“Sawyer Holden Clemmer McKinley, 10, a 6th grader at Amelia County Middle School, passed away peacefully on Friday, October 28, 2016. While at school on Wednesday, Sawyer experienced a catastrophic brain hemorrhage from a malformation of the vessels in his brain called Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM). It is a congenital, silent condition until it presents itself, at which time the presentation is usually grave. Sawyer’s condition was unknown until it presented itself and he was taken to the hospital where after three brain surgeries, he passed away.”*

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Sawyer and Jack arrived home in Amelia, Virginia, from their trip to San Diego, California, just before 2 a.m. It was a last-minute decision for Sawyer to go. The previous year Jack's sister Jenny had been diagnosed with an uncommon heart condition and was given a projection of possibly only five years to live. Jack is very close to his eight siblings and decided then he would make greater effort and spend the money and time necessary to visit Jenny as often as he could. As he was booking his ticket one night in early August 2016, on a whim I said, "Why don't you take Sawyer with you?" It just came out of my mouth. Grayson, age 13, and Finn, age 18, Sawyer's older brothers, had both done cross-country trips with their dad and it felt like the time was right for Sawyer to get some long-distance travel time alone with Dad. We booked the ticket and didn't think twice.

They snuck into the house early on the morning of October 26, 2016 without me waking up, which was odd because I am such a light sleeper. When I arose to my alarm to get everyone else ready for school, I let Sawyer sleep. "It's middle school, he has been gone for a week, I'll let the boy get some rest," I rationalized.

I dropped Grayson off at the high school (Sawyer and Grayson both attended middle school together but Grayson had French II first period at the high school). When I got home from the high school drop off, Jack had to leave for work so I got Sterling, our youngest who was three at the time, dressed and took her to preschool. *I will let Sawyer sleep a few extra minutes and will come back and wake him up for school. He will miss Art and Gym and be at school in time for Social Studies. Perfect,* I thought. I left Sawyer home alone at the house while I took Sterling to preschool.

Overwhelming panic arises in me when I think about the fact that not two hours before Sawyer landed in the hospital bed on a gurney he was home alone. *Alone!* What if the AVM had hemorrhaged and ruptured at home while no one was there? What if he had been alone? What if I had found him seizing, or worse, when I arrived home from dropping Sterling off at preschool? What if the only measure of joy (can we call it that?) we have gotten from this loss, our ability to donate his organs, was compromised because the event happened

at home and he was at the house too long before getting to surgery to be able to save his organs?

There are so many “what if” moments that could have played out so much more traumatically. I am forever grateful that if it *had* to happen, it happened the way it did. It was a tender mercy. In his talk “Tender Mercies of the Lord,” David Bednar says,

*The Lord's tender mercies are the very personal and individualized blessings, strength, protection, assurances, guidance, loving-kindnesses, consolation, support, and spiritual gifts which we receive from and because of and through the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Jack doesn't like the phrase “tender mercies.” He thinks it is cliché or overused or somehow lacks expressing the intimacy of God's personal love because it is such a generic term. But I don't know what else to call the experience of finding small joys in an overwhelming loss, so “tender mercies” wins. Sawyer's AVM rupturing at school and not in my home, as difficult as it made it for so many people, was a tender mercy for which I am grateful.

With everyone out of the house the morning it happened, I was able to awaken Sawyer and give my boy a kiss and hug before I told him to hop in the shower. He showered and came down, but his hair was dry. I gave him a hug and asked him if he had washed his hair. He is a ten-year-old boy, so he said “Um, yeah, sort of.” “Well, how come your hair is dry?” *Mumble, mumble, mumble.* I laughed, “Sawyer, I love you and I need you to go back and wash your hair please.” “Fine.” I sometimes replay this conversation over again in my mind. I'm glad I said, “I love you,” and I don't know why I did. I am glad I didn't yell at him or get mad at him. But why did I make him go back and wash his hair? Why couldn't I have just spent those last couple of minutes listening to him tell me about his trip to Legoland while he was with his dad in California, instead of telling him he could recount the events of his trip after school? There is a guilt that plagues me and probably will eternally. Nonetheless, he needed to know I was his mom and I was going to be there for him and I was also going to make him wash his hair. I didn't know what would transpire. We never know what is going to transpire. So do we never make our children wash their hair? I don't think we do. I think we make them take care of their bodies. We make them take pride in their appearance. While we don't

throw down the gauntlet every time they appear in an outfit comprised of plaid shorts and striped pants (which Sawyer did, often), we do have a responsibility to love and care for them, even if it is at the expense of other things sometimes. But oh, what I wouldn't give to have those minutes back.

After he was out of the shower for the second time, I went upstairs to check on him. I wanted to make sure he wasn't mad at me for our little hair scuffle and he wasn't. He was brimming with excitement. He could not be contained. He was just bubbling over with story after story about their trip. I was standing in his doorway and he was unpacking his book bag. He had purchased a Pikachu ceramic bank and it was wrapped in layers and layers of clothing. He said, "*Mom!* I have to show you this! I didn't realize I had wrapped it so tightly! Look at this awesome bank I bought in Mexico!" As he unwrapped layer after layer and I stood there in the doorway, I swear to you I heard a voice say in my mind, "Take a snapshot of this moment. These are the moments that define childhood. Take a picture of this moment in your mind so you can be present here in this moment and remember it forever." I swear to you, hand to Bible, I did just that and I thought, *Wow, turning 40 has changed you as a parent, Jaime. Kudos for living in this moment and not caring what the clock says.*

He showed me the piggy bank and a few Pokémon cards he had purchased for his brothers. He also showed me a Charizard toy he bought in Mexico and told me how excited he was to see Grayson and show him all the purchases he'd made. He was glowing. He showed me the T-shirt he had purchased at the beach in San Diego. It was a ridiculous T-shirt! It was gray and had a pug in a hoodie on it and said, "Pug Life." He loved it and was anxious to show his friends and tell them about his trip. I told him, "Come down and grab a bite to eat and I want to take a picture of your absurd shirt." He was all abuzz as he packed his book bag. He didn't want to eat breakfast, he rarely did, so I made him throw back a fig bar anyway. While he sat on the yellow bench tying his aquamarine sneakers, in his red cutoff shorts made from his skinny jeans, I chuckled to myself about his outfit. It was totally hilarious in a totally Sawyer way. It was perfectly him. Never an outfit I would choose for him, but perfectly him. He started to tell me about the details of Legoland and I told him his siblings would want to hear too, so wait and tell us after school. (As an aside, never wait. When someone you love wants to share their joy, let them.

He could have told me and he could have told them again later. I will never know what he had to say about so many things, but if I had taken a moment I could have at least heard more of his joy. Never wait.)

I told Sawyer to gather his things and head to the car so we could make it to Social Studies on time. I wrote him a note for being late to class and we got in the car. We were pulling out of our long driveway and I said, “Darn it! I forgot to take a picture of your crazy shirt.” He said, “You can get one when I get home from school”. I agreed and we proceeded. Then I had a strong impression and said, “No, I’m sorry but just unbuckle and hop out of the car. I really want a picture of you in the shirt now.” I put the car in park, he hopped out, and I snapped the shot. One shot. One photo. The lighting was terrible and the background nothing special. *I’ll get a better one later.* I took the photo because I wanted it for a Facebook post and thought, *how silly to stop the car and get us both out for a social media moment.* I listened to the promptings of the Spirit the first time and will be forever grateful for that tender mercy. While we were in the hospital, I kept looking at that photo and asking everyone who walked in, “What if this was the last picture I will ever take of my son?” No one had an answer. They all looked at me with the look that I would come to know often as the “we are so sorry but you are now a parent who has lost a child and we are so sad but we don’t know what to say so we will nod approvingly and try to not make the moment worse and we will say nothing” look. I still get it a lot.

October 26, 2016, 9:24 a.m. The last photo I ever took of *my* Sawyer.

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We pulled up to the front door of the school. I was in my gym clothes. Now to clarify, I am not the gym clothes wearing type. Some women sport the yoga-pants-athletic-shirt-look in confidence as their muscles glisten in the sunlight for all to see. Not this woman. I am more the “What’s the biggest thing I own that I can raise my hands in the air and *not* show my baby-belly that isn’t really a baby belly this many years later, but more of a ‘donut belly’” gym clothes wearing woman. I didn’t want to go into the middle school, but I also wanted it to be a learning moment for Sawyer.

He had just skipped the fifth grade and went straight from elementary school to middle school, so this was his first time being late to middle school. I told him that in elementary school I had to walk him in, but in middle school, children just took the note in and the secretary would give them a pass to go to class. He wasn't sure about it. He asked me to walk him in and I assured him they would let him proceed to class with the note. I even paused and thought about whether or not I should walk him in. I had the distinct thought, *He is learning the power of 'the note from a parent' right now. He is learning independence. But keep tabs on this newfound knowledge of his, he will be the one of all my children to employ this power in a possibly unauthorized way.* I told him that to make him feel comfortable, I would pull forward past the office and wait for him to walk through the office, get his note, and pass down the hall. The hall was mostly made of glass and I promised him I would roll my window down and give him the thumbs-up after I waited for his thumbs-up to indicate the transaction had gone smoothly. He agreed and the interaction went as planned. I can still see him through that smoky glass giving me the thumbs-up when I pull into the middle school parking lot every day now and I hate it. I think, *Why didn't I just walk him in? **Why didn't I just walk him in?*** It brings in to play another round of guilt. This guilt, of course, triggers the rabbit hole.

You know the rabbit hole. You go there yourself sometimes. I start the guilt soundtrack in my head: Why did you let him play video games instead of playing more educational games with him? Why did you ever let him spend time alone? Why did you promote independence from such an early age, he was only ten. Why did you let him play with children who were older, maybe it made him mature too quickly. Why didn't you spend more time reading aloud to him? Why did you ever let that child out of your sight for anything or for anyone? Why? The talking in my head gets louder and louder and the guilt gets heavier and heavier.

My new friend Amy—that's code for my therapist, because not everyone can understand the value of a therapist—said something in our second meeting that I am trying to embrace because I think there is truth to it. Amy asked if Sawyer had never been out of my sight, if he had not been allowed to grow in his independence and in his character, would he still be the same Sawyer that we knew and loved? If I never let him play video games with Lucas down the

street, would they have been able to form such a beautiful childlike friendship? Would he be my Sawyer if I had smothered him and never let him explore, let him try things on his own, or even let him be on his own? Probably not. The Sawyer we love is the Sawyer he is because of the way we raised him and because of the boundaries we set and the wings we gave him and there can be no room for regrets. There are too many other burdens to carry now. So, I try to take a measure of comfort in his final thumbs-up. To take comfort in the things I did instead of in the things I didn't do. Finding comfort is not an easy task. But since there are so many things in my new life now that I cannot control, I am trying harder to do better at the things I can control. I am trying to start by letting some of the guilt balloons go. (Cue the *Frozen* soundtrack, right parents? That phrase eternally belongs to Elsa. Thanks, Disney.)

I gave Sawyer the return thumbs-up after seeing his thumb go up through the long, tinted window and I drove away. Nothing is close to our home except more of nothing. That morning, the boys were at school and Sterling was in preschool and I had a long morning free, so I decided to go to the gym to work on that extra weight that I could no longer call a "baby belly." I had actually made my very first appointment with a personal trainer for that morning. I told my husband that "come hell or high water" I was going to find a way in the budget to meet with that trainer and get into shape. I sort of chuckle now because we got the hell and the high water, so I have since banished that saying from my vocabulary entirely.

But that morning, since I was already out dropping off Sawyer at school and had left early to get to my appointment, I figured I could drive a couple miles further out of the way to get the cheap gas for the van. The drive is about twenty minutes so I obviously hadn't checked my phone because I was driving. And then I hadn't checked it because I was pumping gas. But before heading to the gym from the gas station, I pulled my phone out and saw them. The texts. The messages. The missed calls. It was starting.

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