

Parenthood

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Six years old and he had misspelled the word “blue” in front of the entire class. They all laughed and teased him. It wasn’t his fault! How was he supposed to know that it was spelled B-L-U-E and not B-L-O-O? His mother picked him up early that day, and Rowan was sure that she would be upset with him for being so stupid. But she wasn’t. His mother smiled at him, held him in her arms as best she could, and didn’t stop until his eyes were dry.

“I’m so proud of you, Rowan. I know it’s not easy being wrong.” Her son breathed a sigh of release into her shoulder. He smiled up at his mother, and although Rowan had been certain the world would end that day, he now knew everything would be okay, from the comfort of his mother’s arms.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Seven years old and he fell off of the tire swing after convincing the fourth graders to push him. He bumped his head on the metal support beam and his ankle got caught in the chain as he fell. “I can’t believe you guys thought it was a good idea to push such a little kid,” remarked the knowitall teacher’s pet. Rowan sobbed into the playground wood chips.

“You’re such a crybaby,” added the coolest boy in the fourth grade. Rowan tried to stop the tears, but his head *hurt* so *badly*. How was he supposed to stop crying if he was in pain? Rowan’s mom had always said that tears were natural and that it was a *good* thing to cry. Had she been wrong? Rowan didn’t think that was possible, his mother, wrong?

“Come on, dude! Man up a little,” sneered the kid who had pushed him on the tire swing in the first place. “You’re acting like a girl.”

The adult in charge helped Rowan up, and while the crying softened, it didn’t completely stop until they reached the nurse’s office. The nurse put a bandaid on his chin and ice on his knee. Rowan sat in the nurse’s chair and sniffled as he ate the lollipop she had given him.

Rowan went back to class and sat dejectedly at his desk. He scribbled frowny faces on his math assignment. Subtraction could wait! Rowan wanted to go home, away from everyone who knew that he had cried. He was tired of his friends staring at him and asking if he was okay. Of course, he was okay! He had just fallen and scraped his chin, and his knee, and his elbows, and his cheek. Maybe he wasn't okay. But boys didn't cry, that was such a *girl* thing to do, the fourth grader had said so! All Rowan wanted to do was go home and sit with his mom. He knew that if anyone had answers it would be her. The day was finally over and Rowan thought that he couldn't run to his mother's car faster. Rowan told his mom all about his awful day and his mom didn't falter at all. "Don't listen to those older boys. They don't know what they're talking about," she reasoned with her son.

"But *mom* they said that boys don't cry. That means I shouldn't be crying!" Rowan complained as his mother buckled him into his carseat.

"Didn't you cry today?" Rowan's mother asked him. Her son assured her that he did, although he was confused as to why she was asking such a ridiculous question. "Well then, problem solved," she paused for a moment. "As far as I know, you are, in fact, my baby boy, and if you were crying..." she trailed off, hoping that Rowan would put two and two together on his own, but his expression looked just as confused and forlorn as before, so she completed the thought on her own. "That means that boys *can* and *will* cry." Rowan smiled for what felt like the first time in hours. His mother was right. He did cry, which meant that he could cry. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as his mother reassured him, Rowan knew everything would be all right.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Eight years old and he was the last person picked for the teams in dodgeball, all because the last time they played he was the first one out. It wasn't fair! Rowan loved to play dodgeball, and even though he was still on the team with his friends, his feelings were still hurt from being the odd one out. And to top it all off, he

was so distracted from the embarrassment that he got hit in the stomach with the rubber ball. He was the first one out. Again.

Rowan pouted as he walked off of the dodgeball court and sat on the bleachers. Why couldn't he do anything right? The gym teacher was definitely going to say something to his mom now! His mother would be so disappointed that Rowan hadn't been able to play like the other kids. He'd been trying so hard, but it felt as if it wasn't enough. Boys were supposed to be *good* at sports. So why wasn't he? The gym teacher blew the whistle. Jailbreak! This was his chance! Rowan could show everyone that he *was* good at dodgeball and that he *could* play just as well as the rest of them. He got one, two, *three* people out before he got hit again. This time by a *girl*. What gives? He couldn't even beat a *girl* at dodgeball? Rowan frowned, he tried to convince the gym teacher that it wasn't fair! He wasn't out! He couldn't be! Rowan walked off of the dodgeball court and sat on the bleachers, *again*. He could hear the whispers of the mean kids in his class. *Idiot. Wuss. Baby.* His class was dismissed, but those words kept bouncing around his mind.

After what felt like an eternity, Rowan saw his mother. She asked him how his day was, and because Rowan didn't want to disappoint her, he lied. Rowan told his mom all about how *fun* gym was today, and as he spoke, Rowan could see how relieved she was. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he made his mother smile, he knew everything would turn out well.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Nine years old and his teacher called on him to answer a question in class. His hand wasn't even raised! Rowan tried not to overthink it, he really did. It was an easy question. Who was the first President? Rowan knew this, it was George Washington, obviously. So why? Why did he say Jefferson Davis? His teacher chuckled a little bit, but before he could gently correct Rowan all of the other kids had started to laugh too. Rowan bowed his head in shame. It was such an easy question, even a second-grader would know it! Rowan felt stupid, and embarrassed, and alone. His tears fell slowly, no more than one

at a time. He couldn't let anyone know he was crying. His tears smudged the writing on his history worksheet, and Rowan hoped that his teacher wouldn't notice. He had to man up before anyone noticed he was acting like a toddler. Rowan's mom could tell something was wrong when she saw her son, and while he assured her it was just a long day, and that he couldn't wait to go to bed. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but when his mother tucked him in that night, he knew everything would turn out okay.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Ten years old and it was his first day in middle school. Rowan was nervous. There were so many new, older kids here. Rowan didn't know where his locker was, or where his first class was, or even who his teachers were! By some miracle, he managed to get to class on time, but no one looked familiar. The teacher was taking attendance, and none of the names sounded familiar either. Then, the teacher finished taking attendance, but Rowan's name wasn't called. Rowan asked the teacher where his name was, and the teacher checked, but his name was nowhere to be found. Rowan's face flushed a dark red. He was in the wrong class. Not *just* the wrong class, an *eighth-grade* class. All of the older kids laughed at him. The teacher helped him find the right class, but she was irritated, she had to work around some little kid's mistake. Rowan was anxious and guilty now.

By the time the end of the day came around, everyone knew about his fluke, and everyone was teasing him about it. He did his best not to cry, but when he saw his mom, the tears began to flow. She hugged him as she asked "What's wrong, Rowan?" but Rowan just shook his head. Why was he such a *crybaby*? He knew boys didn't cry and that the other boys were just teasing because that's what they do, but it still hurt. Rowan didn't stop crying until he was far away from the middle school, with the scary eighth-graders and cranky teachers. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he sat in the back of his mother's car, far from the people who had upset him, and safe in his mother's presence, he knew he'd be okay.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Eleven years old and he was the only one in his homeroom who didn't get a Valentines' Day candy gram. All of his friends received

the classic candy hearts with sweet messages attached to the box. He was the only one in his group of friends without one. Rowan didn't know how to feel, he was upset, sure, but he was also happy for the rest of his friends. Then, his teacher pulled out a box of gourmet chocolates that were for him! *Thank you for being the best Valentine, Rowan! I love you more!* Rowan was certain the world would end that day but as he ate the chocolates his mother brought him, he knew he'd survive.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Twelve years old and in his rush to get to class, he dropped all of his papers in the hallway. Everyone else was in a rush, and no one stopped to help him. Once he finally picked up all of his notes and assignments, he made his way to his locker. Right as the metal door swung open, the bell rang. He was late! Could anything else go wrong today? He finally got to class, and of course of all of the classes to have to arrive late, it was his strictest teacher. Rowan cringed as the door squeaked on his way in. He made a joke like he had intended to be late to make the rest of the class laugh. That way they were laughing *with* him and not *at* him. He left class that day with a lunch detention slip. What was his mother going to think? Getting into his mom's car at the end of the day Rowan did his best to hide his day's work, but his mom knew better than that. "Are you okay, Bub?"

"I'm okay, I had a bit of trouble with my locker today and was a bit late to class," Rowan told her. He started talking, and it was like the dam had overflowed. He told her about the strict teacher and his lunch detention, but that it wasn't a big deal. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he reassured his mother, he knew that the world would continue on.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Thirteen years old and he didn't make the cut for the football team. He'd tried so hard, but he wasn't even picked to be a *waterboy*. How could he still not be good at sports? Sports were a boy thing. Rowan was a boy. So why couldn't he run, throw, and hit as hard as the other boys? Rowan didn't want to be teased, so he made jokes about it. He and his friends laughed about how stupid the coach was, even though Rowan knew that it wasn't true. When Rowan got home his mom asked him how tryouts went,

Rowan lied and said that it didn't matter, that there's always next year. His mom knew that while there was next year, it didn't change how disappointing it was this year. She surprised him with his favorite candies and a movie night. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he watched the film with his mother, he knew everything would be all right.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Fourteen years old and he failed a test. Chemistry was a hard class for Rowan, and he definitely didn't feel confident in the results at all. Let alone when the teacher let the class know that only one person failed. His friend had gotten a ninety eight percent, but Rowan put the paper in his binder as quickly as possible. His friend asked what he got and Rowan told him that it didn't matter. Rowan's friend dropped the topic, even though he knew that Rowan was the one who failed the test. Rowan felt like he could hear the thoughts going through his friend's head. *Idiot, chemistry isn't even that hard? How could you fail a test that badly? I can't believe that you had to go and mess up the curve for everyone else.*

When Rowan got home that day, he went straight to his room to start studying because he didn't want his mother to be upset with him about his grades. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he studied to make his mother proud, he hoped everything would be okay.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Fifteen years old and he was in love. She sat next to him in algebra, and Rowan was certain she was the smartest person he knew. In fact, Rowan was so distracted by her presence, that when she spoke to him he wasn't sure if he was imagining it. "Hey, what did you get for three?"

"Sorry, what?"

"Number three? On the assignment? What did you get?" Her voice sounded like an angel on earth, Rowan decided.

"Oh! Uh, I got seven." Rowan smiled, she was talking to him!

“Seven? Yikes, I got ninety-two, I totally did it wrong.” The cherub turned back to focus on her assignment and Rowan felt his heart swell. He *really* liked her! Once he got home from school that day, he asked his mom for advice. Rowan’s mother felt her heart fill with a bittersweet joy. Her little boy wasn’t so little anymore. She smiled as he panicked while asking her whether she thought he should tell her, or wait, or keep his feelings to himself. His mother smiled at the thought of her child in love, she was so proud of what Rowan had become.

“Mom? Mom! Are you listening?” Rowan’s mother snapped out of her thoughts.

“Of course I am, Baby,” she smiled at her son. “Do what you think feels right.” Rowan was certain the world would end that day, but as he confided in his mother, he hoped that love would overcome his fears.

Rowan was certain the world would end that day. Sixteen years old and his heart was broken. The angel turned out to be a false prophet. She didn’t even know Rowan’s name. He had gained the courage to try and talk to her once out of school, and Rowan still hadn’t forgotten the way she said, “Sorry, do I know you?” in such a condescending tone. He didn’t know what to do. They’d never even been together, he had nothing to mourn over. But still, Rowan couldn’t help but to be upset by the entire situation. Rowan sat in his room and cried. Where had he gone wrong? He didn’t want to talk to anyone about anything, especially his mom! It was *her* advice that had gotten him into this mess. Rowan was certain the world would end that day, and as he cried in his room, it felt like the apocalypse couldn’t come fast enough.

Rowan was certain the world would end. Seventeen years old and he felt completely alone. All Rowan wanted to do was to be honest. He was tired of lying. To his friends, to his teachers, to his mom. He was tired of being jealous of his friends. Their athleticism, their girlfriends, their grades, their looks. That their father actually stayed around and was there for them. That they had a mom who just was there, because mom was all that she had to be. He could feel his silent sobs turning into an ugly, melancholy, green monster. Rowan heard a knock on his door. “Rowan?”

“I’m fine, Mom.” He felt his voice crack. The door creaked open as his mother got a good look at him. “I said, I’m fine, Mom.” Rowan tried to stop the tears. His mother sat down next to him on his bed. “Mom?” Rowan’s mother’s heart broke at the heartache in her child’s voice. She wrapped her arms around him for what felt like the first time in years, and held back tears of her own as her son fell apart within her embrace. Where was the bright eyed boy she knew? Where had she lost him along the way? Had she been too absent in his life? Was she so compassionate towards her son that it drove him away? Or was it the world, with its pointed claws, and sharp tongue that pierced her little boy’s ears with lies on what did or did not make him good enough for society. That awful monster that ripped families apart and drove wedges in between the heart and the mind. The beast that had stolen her son from the day he was born and the doctors smiled and told her that she had a beautiful baby boy. The shadow that lurked behind insult and were planted in his brain from the moment he began to understand speech. The devil that had tempted her son with promises of acceptance and acclaim: Masculinity.