

[142 (PAJ10) 3:55] CB: Is there anything you know you will remember about Ben?

PJ: [4.08] Yeah. His ability to identify car makes. He would see a Honda symbol and say Honda and he would see a Toyota symbol and say Toyota but then he saw the word "Ford" and he said, "What's that?"

[143] [light switches]

The way he ran on his toes. The way he ate spaghetti. It was just like...a disaster. [laughs] It was just funny. [quiet] And I'll never forget the night before he died. Were you sitting with me?

CB: That's my mom, Priscilla Jones. We're sitting on a bus to the March for our Lives in Washington, D.C. The night she's talking about is December 13, 2012.

That night, we went to see a performance of A Christmas Carol in our hometown. She was sitting next to her friend Francine's son, Ben. Ben was in first grade, the same age as Mom's students in another town. He died the next day in the Sandy Hook School Shooting.

PJ: And he was saying, "Don't be afraid, the scary part's coming." Not Scrooge but the ghosts. I'd forgotten that part actually, I'd forgotten that. And he was eating Skittles. I think he even offered to share them.

CB: I'm surprised she'd forgotten that moment, because I remember her repeating that story often in the days after Sandy Hook even more than I remember the play or walking home together that night, in the cold, under the stars.

Ben's older brother, Nate, was a fourth grader at Sandy Hook in 2012. He's a high school freshman now. The same age as some of the victims of the February shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. When I heard about Parkland, I immediately thought about that distance collapsing, about how a fourth grader from Sandy Hook was old enough to have been inside this other school, too.

Parkland survivors organized the March for Our Lives in D.C. to demand change in gun control legislation and research into all forms of gun violence. When I found out about it, I texted my mom. She already had bus tickets.

[bring in background noise]

That's where we're sitting now, on one of eight buses carrying Newtowners to D.C. for the March. The bus roars along the road. We left at five in the morning. Almost everyone around us is still asleep, but we're awake, talking about December, 2012.

Mom remembers watching my little brother, Patrick, and Ben's older brother, Nate, play at his house the day after the tragedy.

[138/6] PJ: They were giving Benny piggy back rides through the house, like they were pretending that he was on their backs. And they were prancing around. And they were cute. Yeah. [a lot of silence, noise of the bus]

CB: All the kids at Ben's house in the days after he died stayed mostly in the playroom. I was fourteen, caught somewhere between the playroom and the dining room, where the adults sat debating how and how much to tell them.

I mostly listened. I remember writing for hours one night, pulling every piece of nearby scrap paper into my orbit. I thought that writing down every detail, every conversation I'd overheard, would make them more meaningful somehow, or at least clearer.

At the same time, Mom was trying to figure out how to be a good friend. The only thing she could think to do was to keep showing up.

[PAJ1/133] PJ: There was a period when we were kind of omnipresent at Francine's. You remember, you were there. We were there for dinner and we were there on Sundays and we were bringing dinner over and we were cleaning her house, and I didn't want her to have to worry about the mundane things. And there were also a lot of other people that would come and go, but we were in the background just kind of helping things go.

CB: All this time at Francine's house was time Mom couldn't also be at home. She would walk into the kitchen, ponytail scrunched up in the back from driving forty five minutes home from work. She would drop her bag in the back hallway, give my dad, my brother, and I quick hugs, and walk out again.

I missed doing homework in the next room while she cooked dinner and listened to the radio. It was hard not to have her at home more.

Mom has thought about this, too. I ask if there's anything she would have done differently.

[142] PJ: I would have wrapped myself around you guys more. Because I think you felt pretty neglected. And you were grieving too.

You can barely hear it because of the bus, but I tell her that I forgive her.

At the time, I'd been angry at her. I used to think that anger came from the fact that she was gone so much. What I actually resented was the fact that she couldn't heal me. We had an intense relationship. I told her almost everything, and expected her to know exactly what to say to say to make me feel better about my problems.

Looking back, I expected different things from her than I did from my dad. That pressure was definitely gendered.

My mom was different after Sandy Hook. She watched Youtube videos of news coverage of the tragedy for hours. I'd seen her cry only once or twice before it happened. Afterwards, she cried all the time. But I still expected her to take care of us, to be a Mom with a capital M and not just my mom, the person, Priscilla.

I tell her I'm proud of her. For caring and giving so much. To us and her friend.

[bring back to conversation/the moment somehow]

The sun is rising over Baltimore out the window. People around us are stirring, rubbing their eyes, pulling their posters from the overhead bins.

We're sitting next to another family from our neighborhood. One of their daughters is sixteen. Her poster says, "There is blood on your hands." She says it's a message for Congress.

Mom's poster says, "Teachers' arms are for hugging." We've talked a lot about how terrified she is of teachers having guns, but not about what it felt like for her to go back to work with students Ben's age the week after he died.

[132/1/ 3:20] PJ: I remember the Monday after Ben's funeral, which was on a Thursday. We had a lockdown, and I was in a first grade classroom. And we were huddled under the table, and it seemed like it was about a forty five minute lockdown drill. But it seemed like it lasted forever. It was hard to be focused that year.

[1.14] There were couple of kids that were in first grade that year, and one of them in particular, he just looked like Ben. He acted like Ben. His academic record was the way I'm sure Ben's would have been. And that was hard. because I would think of that group at Sandy Hook. Last year until when they left. Because they're in sixth grade. That's where Ben would be.

CB: For the last five years, at school and at home, the tragedy has been present in her life every day.

CB: Do you think that this has made you stronger?

PJ: [long pause] No. I think I'm...what's the word? What's the word when you become...

CB: "Less strong?" It's weak.

[both laughing]

PJ: Not less strong. I could've pulled that one out....maybe injured. I almost feel like when Las Vegas happened, I almost was detached. Whether it was detachment for protection, I don't know, but when Parkland happened, I think I was able to emotionally engage again. But for a long time, no. So stronger, no, I don't think so. Sadder, yeah.

We shuffle off the bus into the crowd of hundreds of Newtowners. Most of them are wearing, green, the color of Sandy Hook Elementary School. Some are carrying pictures of the Sandy Hook victims. There's music in the distance, pulling us towards the main stage.

Every mass shooting since Sandy Hook, I've heard Mom and other people from Newtown say simply, "It happened again." Inside that "it" is not just an event but the grieving that follows. That plays out after so many instances of gun violence.

The Newtowners flow into a crowd of people from other cities and towns, wearing other colors, and it's like our posters are talking to each other. Gun violence affected people in Newtown so personally, but our posters represent such a small part of the problem people are here to fight. Someone holds a sign that says "Police Brutality is also Gun Violence." Another person's poster says, "More resources to urban schools."

Mom is already raising her poster-- "Teacher's arms are for hugging,"--as we walk towards the music, as the hundreds become thousands, then hundreds of thousands. As we flow down Pennsylvania Avenue with the crowd.

[tape from March]