

Why do we wear black to funerals?

I couldn't ever piece it together. Even now, standing in the rain in my new black coat, I asked myself, why? Why couldn't we wear yellow? Was it not sad enough of a color? Or was it just too bright to wear while grieving? Who decided that yellow was not a funeral color?

'I'm sorry Jack sweetie.' Are you? Do you even know what you're sorry for?

'He was a good boy,' You didn't know him. He's never even spoken of you before.

'He loved you,' I'm not so sure.

I lifted my arm, an arm that didn't feel like my own. It weighed more now than it ever did as I tucked wet strings of hair out of my eyes. An umbrella had been given up on a solid hour ago now and everyone had gone. But I was still there.

I think it was because I didn't trust my legs enough to walk to my mom's car. She said she would come back for me when the weather got too bad... But I don't think I'll be able to make it even then. My head spun, one part from the rain pounding down on my skull and ninety-nine parts from the fact Ben was gone.

"Hey, what're you doing out here?" Lola, a girl in my physics class shouted over the sound of rain beating down on everything around us. I didn't have to turn to look her in the face, her voice was the type that you knew, for no matter how long you lived, you'd never hear anything quite like it. So I didn't show her my bloodshot eyes or the bags that circled them, I just stared at Ben's name on that little piece of paper that let people know someone was buried there.

"I'm grieving," I responded. That's what my mom had told me anyway.

"Me too," she held the umbrella over both of us. When the rain stopped hammering down on me, I felt relief, but began to shiver as I realized how cold I was. "I was in three of Ben's classes. He was nice, I really liked him. Bit annoying in English, though."

"Just English?" I asked and turned to her for the first time. Her red straight hair was wet and began to puff out in certain places. Black mascara smeared in areas under her eyes. She nodded, "Why just English?"

"He always writes about the same thing," she paused. "Wrote,"

"What does he write about?"

"You."

"What?"

"Always about you. He wrote a bunch of stuff and then give me his book and let me read it all. Every single poem, short story, drawing or sketch, it was all about you," she told me and I looked back at the little piece of paper. *Ben Hearing*.

It rained the next day too. I relaxed in the recliner, eating bowls upon bowls of cereal and watching too many episodes of *Bones*. By the time two o'clock rolled around, I figured I could be a forensic anthropologist or a professional cereal taster.

At three, my mom asked me to go to bingo with her and I promised her that I would rather run a marathon than do that (I hate exercise). So she left me alone in the house for the first time in four days and went to bingo with Hilary Clarke from down the street.

When Netflix asked me if I was still watching *Bones* for the fifth time that day, I decided that it was time to turn it off. I walked out into my kitchen and sat down at the table, staring at the mess it was in. I didn't like messes, but lately, I haven't liked much. I didn't like science and reading didn't appeal to me anymore. I didn't even miss English class. The only two things that I had left for me in this world were Netflix and Honey Nut Cheerios.

Mom's been awaiting my mental breakdown, because it's bound to happen at some point. She's been waiting for me to crack like she's been waiting for dad to come home. I see her jump sometimes if a car rolls up the driveway... A hope still there that it might be him.

Then, the doorbell rang and I debated on whether to answer or not. When it rang again, I sighed heavily, deciding to see who it was. I got up and on my way to the front door, it went off again. I took a second to swallow my fear as I opened it to Lola, hood up as she shielded herself from the rain. I was surprised to say the least.

"Hey!"

"Hi," I said, unsure of what exactly she was doing standing on my porch. I don't think she really knew either because she took a second before unzipping her jacket and shoving her hand inside. She pulled out a notebook.

"It was Ben's," she told me. It took a moment for me to gather enough courage to take the book out of her hand. When I felt the fabric cover my heart sank. This really is Ben's notebook.

"Thanks Lola," I said and stared at the cover of it before looking back up to her. "Wanna come in for some coffee?"

"Bit late for coffee," she said. I nodded, a little upset because I knew once I closed the front door, I would be alone again. "But I'll take a cup of tea if you have any."

"Yeah, of course."

She left an hour later. I walked her to the door, said goodbye and then watched her get into her parents' minivan and drive away, rain still coming down as hard as the days before. When the phone rang, I didn't get up out of the dining room chair. I waited for it to stop and when it finally did, I got up to see who it was. *Unknown Number*.

I jumped when it began to ring in my hand, again, it was *Unknown Number*. I stared it down before finally I caved in and answered.

“Jack speaking,” I mumbled. The other line was nearly silent. In the background, I could hear the ever-so-faint sound of *21 Guns* by *Green Day*, but nobody spoke. “Jack speaking,” I repeated myself before the line went dead.

I pulled the phone away and laid it face down on the counter. 21 Guns made me think of Ben, it's his favorite song. Of course, thinking of Ben brought on waves of pain. I felt a familiar lump in my throat, the very same one that I felt almost a week ago now.

I'm sure that there are at least three different lumps that present themselves under different circumstances. When you're nervous, a small one will press against your Adam's Apple and won't leave until you swallow it with your doubts. A slightly larger lump will appear once you hit a moment of regret and that one never goes away. It just becomes less noticeable and more bearable. The worst of them all is the biggest lump that associates itself with sorrow, grief, pain, loss. It hangs at the back of your tongue and tastes like a rotten apple. It's like the phlegm that you just can't seem to swallow.

I felt that with the feelings of pain, grief and sorrow. I thought of him, of us, lying on my trampoline. We shared a set of headphones and listened to his favorite *Green Day* songs. The sun lit his pale skin, dark hair and blue eyes. I absorbed every detail. Every moment. Every breath.

After the rain came the snow, and the snow came hard. My phone disrupted my slumber that next morning and I opened my heavy eyes to the bright white landscape. I looked at my phone screen. Lola.

Hey, your homeroom teacher dropped a stack of notes by my Science class today. Want me to swing by after school?

I didn't reply. Instead, I pulled my covers over my head and tried to go back to sleep. There was no victory in this battle. It was 12 p.m when I hauled my body out of bed and made it down over the stairs. Mom was on the phone, chatting in a serious tone to someone in the dining room. I ignored it, not finding much interest in her private conversations and poured myself what was left of the Honey Nut Cheerios.

Mom went to work the next day, but only for a few hours. She claimed that they were going to cut back on her shifts for a while. We both knew that would only last as long as I could run. I failed Phys ed.

I was sitting at my desk, looking out the snowy window before I stared at Ben's book. I almost picked it up to read it, but instead decided to go back to sleep. I was carried away in tidal waves of sweat and nightmares.

"You can be anything you want to be Jack," Ben whispered, "The world is at your fingertips." I stared at his snow white face, piercing orbs stared back at me. I didn't take my eyes off him as I shook my head, my brown hair, rocking with the movement until it settled to the left side of my face.

"No, I can't. I want to be yours, Ben. What happened to us? I want us to be okay again," I said and he began to bite his lip, staring at the few feet between us. "I just don't understand, since that thing last week, you've been so distant." I rubbed my cheek, waiting for a response that seemed as though it wouldn't come.

"It's that," he finally managed. I sighed heavily, my shoulders dropped in frustration.

"Why?"

"I died."

I blinked a few times and Bens complexion was a sickly green, eyes so bloodshot the whites were unnoticeable beneath the red. His blue iris' were coal black and his clothes were ripped and torn. I almost gagged, I could smell the rotting flesh.

I shot upright, sweat was pouring off me and in my room, I could make out Lola. I sighed, exasperated, rubbing my cheek as if I had just been punched.

"What're you doing here?" I asked. She licked her lips and motioned towards the door.

"Your mom let me in," she responded.

"Shit. What time is it?" I muttered.

"6 o'clock," Lola told me and I heard her place herself on my desk chair. I swung my hand up, covering my face. I have been asleep since yesterday.

We sat and talked for a while after that and she told me that, while I was sleeping, she and my mom sat down and talked. I was a little weirded out, I won't lie, but Lola is the type of friend where you don't worry about what she'll say to your mom all because she doesn't know enough about you. She just knows enough to be considered a *friend* and that was fine for me. I needed a friend.

"Pizza delivery," mom sang from my doorway nearly an hour later. "They took so long we got it for free." She seemed too happy about that, but it didn't matter to me what she's smiling about. As long as she was smiling again.

The day I was to go back to school came around quicker than I hoped. My stomach churned as I stared out the passenger side window, the drive making me queasy. I held on to everything, my seatbelt locked around me. I watched everything, every car and person around us. I thought I was going to throw up everywhere as I licked my dry lips. When mom stopped in the parking lot, I didn't know whether to be relieved or more anxious. I took a moment to mentally prepare myself. *Just lift the handle, Jack.*

“It’s okay honey, we can try again on Monday.” My mom whispered and began to drive away. Finally, I worked up the courage to swing open the door. She slammed on the brakes as I jumped out, taking my bag and hauling it over my shoulder.

“Bye, I love you,” I promised her before closing the door and walking towards the school. On the way in, nobody batted an eye. Nobody noticed me. It was easy, but then I walked inside.

People. Everywhere. Clumped in posies and cliques, staring me down in silence. It wasn’t a normal high school hallway. Everyone stopped living to take me in. I had been out for almost two weeks now and it felt like my first time stepping foot in here. I walked by everyone, pretending not to notice their stares and whispers. I *tried* not to notice, but it was hard. I finally reached my locker after the painful walk there when I realized I had forgotten my combination. I laid my bag down and picked up the padlock, staring at it, mesmerized.

“Shit,” I mumbled when I heard someone clear their throat. I pretended not to hear.

“Jack,” that voice. I cringed. It was Bailey. I could already hear the gay slurs pouring off his tongue. My blood began to boil; I couldn’t take this.

“Not today,” I muttered, staring at my combination and trying to keep my attention there. “maybe next week, but not today.”

“Hey, just let me talk to you-” I cut him off, unable to control my feelings, hormones, all of it had gone haywire. I spun and swung my fist, letting it hit his cheek bone. His head snapped to the left and he held it for a moment before turning back to look at me. I was so shocked and mad at the same time, I didn’t even notice the pain in my hand.

I’ve never been in a fight. That was the first time I even acted out in a violent way against anybody... That’s when I found out it didn’t solve anything. It just left your hand in a mess and your mind scrambled.

“Feels better doesn’t it? Getting that out?”

“Not really,” I replied honestly. “Why haven’t you hit me yet?”

“I’m not here to fight with you. I want that to stop. I just want to tell you I’m sorry about Ben,” he said and it seemed genuine. *Of course it’s not Jack, look at him. He’s made your life miserable. He made Ben’s life miserable. Why would he be sorry?*

“You’re sorry?” I choke up. He nodded and looked as though he were mentally preparing himself to say a huge secret. One that would change his life forever once he admitted it. I watched him impatiently.

“People like me,” he stopped. “this isn’t about me. I’ve done a lot of bad to a lot of people... I didn’t think about what it would be like if they died or something. I’m sorry, I’ve been feeling guilty as hell about Ben, Jack.” Bailey looked sick. “I don’t want to make the same mistake with you. This doesn’t make up for half the crap I put you through, but I want you to know I’m sorry and I’m here for you.”

I almost started to cry. Bailey, the big and bad, had a change of heart all because Ben was dead. Bailey, the big and bad, would stop victimizing me because I liked boys. I swallowed the third lump in my throat. I was in so much pain and he saw that. I couldn't say anything and he didn't expect me to. Instead, he patted me once on the shoulder and walked away. The bell rang, but I stayed put. I didn't want to move.

I didn't even want to be alive anymore.

I left school without a word. I didn't really have a place in mind, I just started walking.

The Treehouse stood before me. I looked up at the old decaying wood covered in a thin sheet of white and felt butterflies fluttering in and out of my ribcage. Ben and I had spent years in that tree house, reading old comics, listening to music, talking, crying. Anything and everything. My lowest points and my best memories, all in that tree house. I pulled the rope that released the ladder.

I could barely stand inside, I was too tall. I hunched over and stared at it all, pulling my coat around myself a little tighter. I sat down on one of the milk cartons we used to use as stools, but not the blue one. Ben always liked the blue one so I sat on the white one. I looked around, taking in all the old memories, some destroyed by weather, but I know that not one other human had been up here but us. We found a place that no one knew about. We found a place that was ours. The only other people who knew was my mom and Ben's dad who helped with the construction.

I looked at the picture we had taped to the side: 11 year old Ben and Jack. I laughed to myself and then my chin began to quiver. *Here's a good place.* I told myself. *You're allowed to cry here.* I did. I cried as hard as I had the moment I found out. I cried for the first time since then and I cried like my whole world was breaking even though it wasn't. It wasn't breaking because there was nothing left of it to break.

I drop my book and look to Ben, hunching over his homework. I bite my lip, the question I had asked myself for years now, circling about in my mind. I shook my head, looking down at my book again. I don't need to bring it up, but as I gave him another glance, the words spill out like vomit.

"You think my dad would be proud?" I ask. Ben looks up to me, putting his pencil down. "Of me, that is."

"Of course, why?" he replied immediately.

"He was a Marine, Ben." I say and stare at him. He shrugs.

"So?" he wonders. Shouldn't it be obvious?

"So, he fought and protected our country. He was a manly man."

"Your point?"

"I'm not a manly man. I'm a girly man, not even a man," I began to stammer across words. How could I explain this to him?

"Jack." That did it. I can tell by the look on his face and the tone he uses that he caught on.

"No, seriously: I mean, he left before I came out to my mom and... Isn't that every dad's worst fear? Their son being gay?" I ask Ben and he shakes his head, heaving a sigh and grabbing my hands.

"It could be worse. You could have been a serial killer," he tells me and I roll my eyes as he laughs, pulling my hands away.

"Great. Thanks." I tell him sarcastically, picking my book back up. Sometimes he's useless to talk to.

"You're amazing, Jack," he whispers. I turn slightly and see him staring at me, a smile painted across his lips. I shrug insecure as I bury myself back into my book.

"Shut up," I try to conceal my grin, lips twitching into a straight line.

"It's true, you are the most amazing human I've ever met. I say that, Jack, and mean every word." There was a certain twinkle in his blue eyes that made my heart leap. "Even if you were a serial killer, you'd be a damn good one. He'd be really proud." I laugh.

"Thanks, Ben."

I woke up and found the tears had frozen onto the side of my face. I had fallen asleep on the cold wood. I haven't slept that well in weeks. It was almost, relieving. It was until I heard the light hearted buzz of my phone anyway.

"Jack speaking,"

"Jack?! Oh, thank God!" Lola squealed into the phone, the background was messy, the line was breaking up. I was ready to question her, but I looked around and saw the darkness that overlapped the Treehouse.

"Lola, I'm sorry I'm-"

"Where are you? Jack we're all so worried!" Lola shouted at me and I took a breath.

"I'm at the Treehouse." I said. "Tell my mom to wait at the entrance, she'll know where to go. I'm sorry, I panicked. I left school and walked and fell asleep-"

"We're on our way!" Lola assured me.

"Okay," I replied and stood up, pressing end on my phone and nearly hitting my head off the roof as I began to climb down the ladder. When I got to the bottom, I began to tie the ladder back up and I started in the other direction, back to the path so I could get to the entrance.

I stepped up onto the log we used for years that ran across the frozen over pond. I put one foot in

front of the other before I saw someone on the other side... A figure of a familiar shape, and then I realized who it was. Ben. He was standing there. He was alive, in a blue T-shirt and khakis.

"Ben," I started towards him. My heart raced. I could feel his warmth. His breath. His hair. His hands. Him. And then I lost my footing. I was so focused on getting to the other side and to Ben I wasn't paying much attention to the log. My foot slipped on black ice and I fell, right through the frozen pond.

I drifted in the water, below zero. It felt like thousands of knives stabbing me all over. My breath was lost, I was lost. I tried to get to the top, but the ice had already frozen over... I couldn't break through. I began to sink.

"I'm sick of this back and forth fighting between us," he said and took a sharp left. I bit my lip, staring out the window, watching the town pass me by. "What I did was stupid and I admit that, but you can't hold it against me forever, Jack."

"Would you if I cheated on you with Brandy?"

"That's different," he insisted as he stopped at the red light.

"No, it's not." I turned to him and his eyes were on the road ahead. "It's not any different. We fought and so to get back at me you ran off with Henry-"

"I told you it was a one time thing," Ben snapped and his foot slammed on the gas, the car jerking ahead and down the road, fast. I took hold of the seat and shook my head. Why was he like this? So stubborn. His anger was toxic, but I kept pushing. I wasn't letting him get away with this.

"How do I know that? What if we fight again and you decide you'd rather be with Henry-"

"Jack!" I shook as his cry echoed through the car. "Stop this." his tone was dangerous and all I wanted to do was ball up and hide. "Just stop." I stared at him. "You know that I would never hurt you intentionally," he said, looking over every inch of my face. He was looking for something, I don't know what, but the way he stared me down made it obvious he expected something from me. "I'm sorry."

I didn't even know what hit us, but the car flipped eight, maybe nine times. I woke up upside down. Rescuers shouting. Hands grabbing at me. I jumped. Gaspd for air. Cried out in pain. I was scared. I had never felt this way before.

"Can you tell me your name?" the man outside my door shouted. I gathered the strength to ignore the ripples of pain throughout my body.

"Jack."

"Jack, we're going to get you out of here, okay?" he sounded sincere. I wanted to believe him. I was going to believe him... Then I realized that Ben wasn't in the driver seat.

"Did you get Ben out?" I asked like he knew who Ben was.

"We're going to focus on you right now," he responded. Despite the constant shocks of pain, I looked around for him, but couldn't catch sight of him anywhere... All I could see was blood. A lot of it. Was it mine? Or his?

"No," I protested. "No, I need to see Ben. Where is he?"

The red that covered the inside of the car made me anxious. Things began to go black. Nobody was in focus anymore, just a lot of blur and panic. Beside me, I felt a hand take mine. I followed the arm and saw him outside the vehicle, reaching in and rubbing my palm, soothingly. He smiled warmly, but my body felt cold. He looked fine, his black hair hung perfectly, framing his face. Blue orbs stared back at me.

"I'm right here. I'll always be right here," he promised me. I nodded.

"Okay." That was all I needed. That was enough reassurance to get me through the two and a half hours of prying me out of the bent in, crumpled piece of metal. I was so cold. I felt like I was inside a crushed coke can, but his hand didn't leave mine. It made me feel a little warmer... A little safer. A little more alive.

I sputtered out the water and it tracked down my chin, my eyes opened and I felt new. I felt like I had just been born into the world. No, I felt like I knew the world. I knew every secret it held and I knew every truth. And for the last time, I saw his face smiling above me. For the last time, I saw his blue oceans, staring me down. *Goodbye Ben.*

"Oh, Jack." Warm hands cupped my face and my mom was a wreck. She stared down at me with eyes that pleaded for enlightenment. "Oh, thank God."

"I saw Ben," I blurted out. "and I know Ben's dead." Lola had a hold of my hand and my chin began to quiver. I had finally pieced things together. "That was the second time I've seen him, the first time was at the accident. I thought he was holding my hand, but really, he was 20 feet down the road, surrounded by people trying to resuscitate him," I paused. "Since the accident, I've wanted to avoid saying it, because as soon as you say it out loud, it makes things real. Once they become real, you have to deal with them, but Ben's dead."

"You don't have to bear this on your own," my mom told me. "I have always been here for you. Lola is here for you. We want to carry some of that load Jack. We want the old Jack back, the one that made us laugh and smile and told cheesy jokes."

"I survived. I made it out with whiplash, that's all." I said bitterly. "I'm not this person because he's dead. I'm this person because I'm alive."

"You're alive for a reason, Jack," Lola interrupted me, harshly. "Maybe you don't know what that reason is yet and maybe you'll never know, but don't take it for granted. I don't want that for you. Ben wouldn't want that for you. We want everything great in this world for you, but we all have to face hardships. We all have to get through them." I didn't say anything. She was wise, Lola. I hadn't realized it before now.

“Mrs. Smith?” a voice shouted through the black of night and my mom responded.

“Yes! Over here!” she called out and I heard a group draw near.

“How long was I out?” I asked Lola, wanting to change the subject.

“You were under the ice for at least a half an hour, It’s a miracle you’re alive,” she told me. "A blessing." I watched the paramedics come into view. Lola and my mom were instantly moved away as a brace was put around my neck. I heard her continue from a few feet away. “I’m warning you Jack Smith, don’t take that for granted.”

They lifted my body onto the stretcher and began to strap me down while blankets and other sorts of things were wrapped around me. I was chilled right to the bone.

They walked me out of the woods and my heart beat was the only sound I was paying attention to. I needed to pour my focus into something so I wouldn’t pass out, because I knew as soon as I fall asleep, there’s a chance they’ll lose me. A few hours ago, that wouldn’t have been such a bad thing. A week ago, I would have preferred to have been left under the ice, I was struggling with the pain of survival. I still am. It has tattooed itself into my heart and it’s going to be there for a long time. But tonight, when I was trapped under that ice, I remembered something. He’s here. Right here, and he’s always going to be.

The End.