

THIS MOMENT

This moment is safe. It is the only time in my day that feels truly safe. When I wake up and slide into my husband's arms, I experience a respite from fears that otherwise permanently torment me. It's like being saved from drowning, but at the same time knowing I will be thrown back in. I cannot escape. This moment of peace can never last. We have to untangle. Life goes on. I get out of bed only to feel tormented again.

I feel her untangle from my embrace. Hear her sigh, the same sigh I have heard every day for longer than I care to remember, and for a brief moment I feel a sudden flash of anger. I know, just as I have always known, this moment of anger must not be allowed to last.

I know he's angry, he never says anything but I can feel it. Well, I am angry too. I am angry with him because he has to take more than his fair share of responsibility. If he had been different – I don't know, a more involved father, a more observant one, a more interested one – then maybe our son would not have gone. I can't let my anger last. I am scared it will destroy us both.

I know she blames me for our son going. She thinks I am emotionally bankrupt, a distant father and husband, and I think she may be right. I love my wife, she is beautiful and passionate, and in many ways I wish I could be like her. But when she is disappointed in me, she is so cruel. It is all I can do to protect myself from her damning words that rain down on me like physical blows. I take it because I believe I deserve her abuse, and anyway, all the fight has gone out of me since our son disappeared. I am scared that with her pain and anger she will destroy us both.

First thing in the morning, when I rest in my husband's arms, I have the courage and strength to feel the love I have for my son. Only in those moments when I borrow my husband's breath can I do this. I am so grateful for these precious moments. During the rest of my day, if just one shred of that love broke through I know my heart would stop. I miss him so much.

My wife is trapped and I can't help her. In fact, we don't talk about our missing son or our feelings anymore. We have survived as a couple. We had to. We simply had nowhere else to take our pain. We don't hate each other. I don't know if we love each other, but I know we need each other. Maybe the love will come back if our son does.

Our son is a drug addict.

Ryan disappeared more than two years ago. He had just turned 18. He cleaned out his bank account, took his passport and disappeared. No explanation and no contact since. No birthday cards, Mother's Day or Father's Day cards and no Christmas cards. There is just this terrible silence that echoes around our home, almost mockingly, on every day we should be celebrating. He left behind a shattered family.

Pointlessly, his two brothers are prone to blame themselves, as if they could have stopped him. When they are not blaming themselves they blame him for his extreme callousness and all the grief he has caused. Either way, they are bound in pain too. At 24 and 26, they are getting on with their lives. They are doing well, but I see deadness in their eyes where true happiness used to live.

My husband and I are still in shock; we are not used to his absence. Maybe it would have been easier if he had died and we had closure. Now we face each day hoping he is alive somewhere but knowing he hates us so much, or hated his life so much he chose to vanish. On balance, I would rather have some hope than the certainty that death brings.

It was a late-night phone call from the mother of one of his concerned friends that alerted us to the fact he had gone. I had never met this mother before, but she felt we needed to know Ryan had booked himself into an airport hotel and had played host to a group of his friends, her daughter included. She said he had been spending large amounts of money on food and drinks, and was now on a flight to Sydney with a one-way ticket. Her daughter, she said, had persuaded her to call us out of a deep concern for his safety once he got to Australia. They knew a lot more about his drug habits than we did. Maybe one day I would thank her.

Spending up large meant he had to have money. The only money, to our knowledge, he had was the inheritance from his grandfather and that was in one of our accounts, supposedly safe until he was 25. A quick check showed us he had managed to hack into our account and transfer the \$30,000. Was this theft? Can you steal your own money?

We were so shocked and concerned for his welfare that against a ticking clock we raced to the local police station and begged them to interfere. Could they, would they, get the Sydney police to arrest him on arrival? If they couldn't, then I was terrified he would be lost in a loveless city where his youth, his money and his addiction would cost him his life.

It was a hard sell. Of course, they wouldn't get involved. He was 18, had taken his own money and, as they pointed out, it is not a crime to break your family's heart. They did say, however, that he would likely get himself arrested and sent back if customs found drugs on him, which seemed like the best outcome. That didn't happen.

The days and weeks that followed were pure torture. Waiting for him to contact us, waiting for news. The sense of urgency to find him was overwhelming. His friends hadn't heard from him. His social media activity had stopped. His mobile phone was turned off. He hadn't used any credit cards or an ATM. He didn't contact his

brothers. They tried everyone they knew, every contact who knew anyone in Sydney, but to no avail. He had disappeared. If he was alive, he didn't want to be found.

The facts were, we were told, that every year around 30,000 people went missing in Australia. Most of them were found within the first few weeks, but the 1600 or so who weren't were likely to never be found. Our son, our beautiful Ryan, became one of these.

The police can only do so much. They asked a lot of questions about his state of mind and his life, and you answer them realising that the

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boy you love, the boy you've known all of his life, is a boy you simply don't really know. We didn't even really know what kind of a drug addict he was and that made us feel pathetic. We knew he had been using drugs since he was 16. I found pills in his room.

"It's ecstasy, Mum. Everyone takes it when they go to a rave. It's harmless – we all take it. Please don't tell Dad, he wouldn't understand."

Stupid, stupid me. I actually felt a tinge of pleasure about being recognised as the understanding parent; the cool one, in on the secret so to speak. So no, I wouldn't tell his father if he promised to stop. And he promised. But he didn't stop. But I didn't keep my promise either because I told his dad. I made my husband agree not to say anything because it would break the trust I had with Ryan. He promised and he kept to it. I wish he hadn't.

Months later, when the police came to arrest him for breaking into a chemist shop looking for drugs, the blinkers were well and truly ripped off. There was no tinge of pleasure then, just abject horror that I had been so naive in dealing with Ryan. The police, it would seem, had Ryan on their radar for quite some time. He was a suspected drug dealer as well as a user. The chemist shop had been unoccupied at the time. In law and when considering sentencing, this matters. It was his first offence and because of his youth and the extremely expensive lawyer we hired, we were able to get our son diversion thus avoiding a criminal conviction.

Around our kitchen table we tried to talk to him, we railed at him, we begged him to explain himself and we threatened to chuck him out. There was anger, there were tears but the only answer we got from Ryan was: "I am sorry I have let you both down, but it's my life and I like drugs. I know what I am doing."

We told him we couldn't and wouldn't condone his drug taking to which he said, "You won't have to. I have a friend I am going to live with." That day he left.

By comparison with what was to come, this was such a mini death because, although he left home, we still saw him occasionally. Over the following year, he would pitch up for the odd meal and the odd birthday. He wouldn't say much, but he would eat with us and then sit in his old room, which was exactly how he had left it. I had to force myself not to crowd him because if I did he would be off. Each time we

saw him he was more and more evasive about how he spent his time or how he made money. We learnt not to ask questions. He seemed so fragile and gaunt, yet he had defiance burning in his eyes and he still had a smile that lit up a room on the rarest of occasions he bestowed it.

His brothers, Tom and Sam, didn't think he was an addict. They thought he was a heavy user for sure, even a dealer, but they felt he had more control and more self-interest than an addict would normally have. After he went missing their opinion would become my lifeline.

In our efforts to find him we went to Sydney twice. Our first time there, Tom and Sam came and we all put up posters in Kings Cross. We walked around both day and night looking for our Ryan. We did this for two days. It was so soul destroying. Each young homeless person I saw or talked to made me feel completely helpless. I felt so much pain. I wanted to save them all, as if saving one of them would bring Ryan back.

The police got us to fill out a missing person report and we were grateful to be taken seriously because there was a concern for his safety and wellbeing. We did all the things one does, like involve the Salvation Army and the Australian Red Cross, but in the end our efforts had to end. We didn't even know if he was in Sydney anymore.

My husband and my sons told me I had to let him go. I have tried, but I have never succeed. He is always there. I still have two beautiful boys who I love just as much, but I know I shortchange them. It's hard to be all I can be when I have a broken heart.

This morning when I lay in my husband's arms borrowing his breath, I realised next week is Ryan's 21st birthday. He will have been gone for two and a half years. I am not prepared for that thought. I feel my heart lurch, my breathing stop and a searing pain rip through my stomach. I untangle myself at speed. I am going to be sick.

Just in time I make it to our ensuite and vomit in the toilet. As I wipe my face, I hear the phone ring. My husband answers it. I can't hear who he is talking to but when I walk back into the bedroom his face is alight, the phone still in his hand and without a word said I know.

In this moment I am finally safe because my son is. 



AUTHOR GAYE BILLINGS

First and foremost, I am a wife and mother of two sons, and a stepmother of two daughters.

Secondly, I am a sales coach and business therapist.

And, thirdly, I am an aspiring writer who dreams of having her own column that's valued for its wit and pithy opinions. Originally from the UK, we immigrated to New Zealand in 1988. The "we" comprises my husband, two-step daughters and our baby son of three weeks, plus four dogs ... our very own British Invasion.

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