



# Bryson Wouldn't, Avensbeck

I did something wicked yesterday. Bryson wouldn't have done it. Bryson always did the right thing, but he wasn't here anymore. That's why I did it. When Bryson died last week I didn't want to be good anymore. I wanted to punch somebody the way Popeye always did to Bluto. Of course I couldn't punch anybody 'cause I'm only five and everybody else is practically fifty. I just wanted them all to leave me alone, but Momma made me put on my church clothes and a black bowtie and marched me down to the car where Poppa sat stern and stiff behind the steering wheel.

"I don't want to go," I pleaded, "I can stay home by myself!"

Momma sniffed and turned from the front seat to brush my hair. "I know honey, but your brother would want you to be there."

*But he's dead!*

"Really? Did he say so?"

She gave a funny sort of laugh and turned back to face forward. "Of course dear."

"Momma?" I had to clear something up that had been bothering me.

"Yes sweetie?"

"I don't think Bryson is dead. I peeked at him after the doctor said that he was gone and he was still there, and he didn't fall apart so he can't be dead."

I could see Momma's shoulders stiffen; she didn't usually do that when I asked a question.



She turned back to face me as a tear crawled down her cheek. “Bryson’s body is like a shell, Jesse. The real Bryson was inside, and now he’s gone, but he left his shell behind. Do you understand?”

I nodded slowly, and then scowled. “Why didn’t he ask me first?”

Momma made a funny sound and Poppa spoke; he sounded angry. “Bryson’s gone, Jesse, and he isn’t coming back. That’s all you need to know right now. No more questions.”

*Bryson is gone.*

*He isn’t coming back.*

I stared out the window at the telephone posts flicking by. Bryson had carried me on his shoulders like a horse once and we had ridden at the telephone posts in our front yard pretending they were giants come to attack us. That was when I was only four. We wouldn’t conquer telephone posts anymore. He wouldn’t tell me stories about the good thief who snuck into people’s houses at night and cleaned up the kitchens of nice people and broke bad people’s dishes. He wouldn’t play checkers with me. I almost always beat him at that game.

Knowing we wouldn’t play checkers anymore made my stomach feel like the time I ate too many peanuts and had to run to the bathroom.

We finally got to church and had to sit staring at the box where they’d put Bryson’s shell. After the pastor said some things about Bryson being happier where he was now, men picked up the box and carried it out to the yard with all the graves. Why should I care that Bryson was happier? Why hadn’t he taken me with him? They lowered the box into the ground and the pastor said “dust to dust and ashes to ashes,” which didn’t make sense since Bryson’s shell hadn’t turned to dust and ashes.

Of course! That was it. Why hadn’t I thought of it before?



I tugged at Poppa's hand. "Do you think maybe if we tell Bryson that we don't want him to go, he'll come back since his shell is still here?" Poppa pressed his lips together very hard like he did when Aunt Jenny told him she was leaving Uncle Austin. Momma started crying.

"No, Jesse," Poppa replied quietly, "Bryson *can't* come back. Do you understand? It's all over."

Bryson *couldn't* come back. Tears welled in my eyes. What if he didn't want to go? I looked up at my parents, standing so sad and silent, watching the men in suits shovel dirt over Bryson's box.

"Momma, Poppa? Will Bryson be happy?"

Momma looked down at me, her cheeks glistened with tears. Why was she still sad? Bryson always made her smile.

But Bryson was gone now. Of course she was sad. She smiled at me but it wasn't a happy smile. It was what she smiled when my kittens knocked over her pretty vase and smashed it to bits or when I sprayed salad dressing on her pink sweater.

"Yes, darling." Her voice was soft. "He'll be very happy."

Then why wasn't she happy? I looked into her furrowed up face. Maybe it was because there was nobody to make her happy, and I was making her cry asking so many questions.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and frowned the way Grandpa was doing right next to Poppa. I only wished I had a cigar to chomp like he always did. I didn't say a word until we got home. Actually, I didn't talk at all until last night. That was when I did it.

Momma was worried about me. I knew because she came up and sat down on the side of my bed after she tucked me in.

"Darling. It pains me to see you so quiet. Bryson is in a better place now." She paused, trying not to cry, "Jesse, right now I need to know that you're going to be okay. Can you promise me that?"



I thought for a bit. What I was going to do was dreadful. The dear God might not forgive me, but Momma looked so sad. Bryson would cheer her up, so I just had to.

I smiled at her, “Yes, Momma, I’m just fine.”

It’s a terribly wicked thing to tell a lie.