

Slidell Lifest

Knowing the right things to say as

It was bedtime. I was tucking in my 6-year-old daughter Juliet. The second born of four, she is my only girl.

It was an exciting night. The weather forecast mentioned the possibility of snow overnight, and the kids were giddy at the prospect. I tried explaining it wouldn't stick, there would be no snowmen, but they would have none of that. They were preparing for a winter wonderland come morning.

"Maybe the pond will freeze, and we can walk on it!" Juliet mused.

"Oh, no, it won't get that cold. But even if it did, we don't ever walk on a frozen pond, not without Mommy," I told her.

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous."

"Why?"

"You could fall

through the ice."

"And into the water?"

"Yes, into the water."

"Do you know anybody who that happened to?"

I paused for a while.

"Yes. I do."

"Was it a grown-up? Or a kid?"

"It was a kid. A boy."

"What happened to him?"

I considered my words carefully.

"He and his friend were playing near a frozen pond, and he went out onto the ice. He fell through," I said slowly, wondering if I was telling her too much.

"Did they save him?"

"No, baby. They couldn't."

She turned away, burying her face into her pillow. I heard her muffle a cry. She stayed that way for a while, and then she finally looked



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at me, her cheeks damp.

"That is a very sad story," she said.

"Yes," I said, blinking away tears of my own.

"It was very, very sad."

"What was his name?"

I told her about the boy who had been a classmate of mine at Clearwood Jr. High for many years. His name was Michael Shawn Morgan, referred to by many as "Mike," but I remember him as Shawn. He lived in my neighborhood.

"What did he look like?" she wanted to

know. "How old was he? How old were you?"

"He had dark hair," I closed my eyes, pulling up a picture from the recesses of my memory. "I remember he was tall. He had pale skin. I was 12, so he must have been 12 or 13."

"Was Shawn nice?" she asked.

"Yes," I smiled at her. "He was a nice boy."

"Why did he walk on the ice? Why did that have to happen to Shawn?"

"I don't know, baby. He and his friend were just playing. They didn't know that was going to happen."

A tear slipped down her cheek.

"It was a terrible thing, but you know that Shawn is in heaven now, and heaven is a beautiful, wonderful place, where everyone is happy," I said.

She nodded, but her eyes continued to question me.

"And even when that terrible thing happened, God was with

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a parent is tough

Shawn the whole time," I said. "He was never alone. God was always with him."

I searched for the right words and wondered--was she too young for this? Had I told her too much?

I finally continued, "Just like God is always with us, all the time. Whenever you're sad or scared, or you feel like you're alone, God is always with you. And when something terrible happens, God is still there. Because he loves us, and he never leaves us."

She seemed comforted.

"Maybe Shawn could pet Tad for me," she said, referring to our 15-year-old cat, who died last month.

"Maybe so," I answered.

I tucked the blankets around her and kissed the top of her head, told her I love her and wished her goodnight. There was a lump in my throat as I walked out of her room. I wondered if

I said the right things, or if I shared more than a 6-year-old can handle. It was unsettling, the confusion on my daughter's face; how she looked to me for comfort, to make sense of something I couldn't even make sense of myself. It's unnerving to be viewed as the one with the answers, especially when answers elude me.

And I thought about Shawn's mother, wherever she might be, and how I imagine she still carries a grief that can feel crushing at times, even nearly three decades later.

It's a hard business, this parenting thing. I hope I'm doing an OK job, saying the right things. I hope I'm raising decent, kind people. I hope Shawn's mother knows her boy is not forgotten. I remember him. He was decent and kind.

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