

You Want Me To Go *Where?*



“GET OUT OF MY ROOM!”

His mother glared at him. “Then take your face out of that computer, Ben, and be downstairs in two minutes!” She turned and went back down the stairs.

Ben banged the table with his fist, making his computer mouse jump. Why did his mother make him so mad? He knew it wasn’t her fault that his dad had died. But it wasn’t his either.

These days his mother moped around the house and never got dressed up, even though she’d started back to work. She kept serving the same old boring stuff for meals as though nothing mattered now that they weren’t a real

family. He was mad at that nine-year-old brat Lauren too. She was back telling dumb knock-knock jokes as though things could still be funny, even with their father dead.

Everything was different now. There was no Dad to crack jokes at the dinner table, no Dad to go with on bike rides out to the university. No Dad to take him to hockey games. He remembered how excited his dad would get when the Canucks scored a goal. He'd punch Ben on the arm and say, "How's that for a great shot, Beno!"

Just about the only thing that had kept his father from being perfect was that he smoked. Most of Ben's friends thought smoking was definitely lame. Life skills class drummed that into you in grade three. When his father coughed it sounded like the old dog next door barfing up his dinner. His father's lungs were probably as disgustingly black as the pictures the teacher showed in class. Ben used to hide the cigarette packages and beg his father not to smoke.

More than once his dad would announce, "Well, I've finally done it. This is the last of these little killers you'll see in my hand."

Of course they all believed him, and it worked for a while — then one day Ben would catch his father in the garage again sneaking a smoke. How could a kid look up to a father who did that?

One day his dad had said, "I started smoking when I was young, Ben, and I thought nothing could hurt me. Now it's too hard for me to quit." He'd ruffled Ben's hair. "Don't you

make the same mistake.” That same week his dad had cut down. But it was too late.

Then, after his father had died, the stupid hospice counsellors kept asking Ben if he’d like to talk. Ben had nothing to say. He’d been cheated out of having a dad around. End of story.

What was the point of it all if your father died when he was still in his forties? What was the point of anything? That was why Ben liked computer games. You never had to think about sad things when you were fighting an alien on *Battlefront*. Computer games were easy. You knew what you had to do.

Of course his mother spazzed because he spent so much time on the computer. But why not play on the computer? It was way more interesting than school.

School. Well, he’d got himself into a bit of trouble there too. His friend Mac had talked him into skipping the first time. It had been simple just to disappear after lunch and fun to hang out at the mall gawking at all the new computer stuff. He’d do it again if he got a chance.

As far as Ben could tell, things would be easier if his mum and dad had divorced. Kids with divorced parents still had their dads to do things with. Like Jimmy, whose dad had taken him salmon fishing up at Campbell River last summer. There was a picture of Jimmy with his father on his bedroom wall, both of them holding up twenty-pounders.

Ben came into the living room where his mother and his

grandmother were sitting together on the sofa. Gran was his dad's mother, and since his father died she was always at the house. Ben thumped himself down in a chair, crossed his arms and jammed his fists into his armpits.

Gran offered him some licorice, but he shook his head. Sweet things were his grandmother's weakness. She wasn't fat, but she was always moaning about gaining weight and needing more exercise, yet somehow she always had candy to pass around.

"We're worried about you, Ben," said his mother, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. Her blue eyes locked into his the way only a mother's eyes could.

Ben looked away. "Don't waste your time."

His mother pulled out the scrunchie in her ponytail, ran her fingers through her streaky brown hair and twisted it up again. "Ben, you've changed since your father died. You're rude and bad-tempered all the time. You pick fights with Lauren. You bury yourself in violent games and heaven knows what else on that computer. I never see you reading a book. Then last week you skipped school."

"So? Lauren bugs me and I told you the truth when I said I'd never skipped before. Besides, computer games aren't violent. *Battlefront* and games like that are good for improving your reaction time." Ben scowled across the room. "Why can't you just butt out of my life?"

"Sorry, we can't do that," his mother said. She looked as though she might start to cry, but then got herself together.

“I guess I haven’t been the greatest mother lately. In the months since Dad died, I’ve been a bit lost myself.”

Ben suddenly wanted to go over and give her a hug, but his shoes were Crazy-glued to the floor and he didn’t move.

Gran interrupted. “Ben, I’ve come up with an idea, and I need you to listen. Don’t say anything until I’ve finished.”

What was Gran’s brilliant idea now? Private school? A foster family? He was too young to be sent into the army.

Gran went on. “A long time ago when I was in grade school, my teacher gave me the address of a girl who lived in India. Her name was Shanti Mukherjee and she became my pen pal.”

“What’s a pen pal?”

“It’s someone you write back and forth to. We actually wrote letters in those days!” Gran laughed. “Shanti was my age and she went to an Indian girls’ school where she’d learned English.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Ben asked.

Gran took a deep breath. “I was an only child and I shared everything with Shanti. When I was sixteen my mother died, and Shanti wrote letters that made me feel she understood how sad I was.” Gran brushed her grey hair off her high forehead.

“So?” said Ben, swinging his leg over the chair. “You think I need a pen pal?”

His grandmother took a small black-and-white photograph from her wallet and handed it to Ben. It was a picture

of a dark-skinned girl in a school uniform, her hair in thick braids. On the back was written, *Shanti Mukherjee, aged 13.*

My age, thought Ben. “Why are you telling me all this?” He put the photo down on the coffee table.

His mother looked at him sharply. “Please let your grandmother finish!”

“Shanti and I hoped we’d meet one day, but then, after years of writing, we had a disagreement and I never heard from her again.”

Ben picked at his fingernail. “Can I go now?”

Gran handed Ben an airline ticket. She was smiling. “I want you to come to India with me to find her.”

Yikes. Ben stared at the ticket with his name on it.

Benjamin Leeson
Air India Flight 860
Vancouver, Canada, to Delhi, India
January 2 to 19

“Oh, man.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Lauren came bouncing into the room. “Does he know? Did you tell him?”

“Yes, and for once he’s speechless,” said their mother.

“Lauren knew about this?” asked Ben.

His sister flashed her lopsided grin at him. “Yeah, Mum’s worried you’re turning into a computer geek.”

Ben leaned over and gave Lauren a shove. He glanced again at the ticket. “I could go seventeen days without a