

# When you have a friend in Heaven

We're in the checkout line at the grocery store—my little boy and I—and we're placing items on the conveyor belt.

"Do you want these left out of the bag?" the cashier says, holding up two bottles of water.

"That would be great," I say. "We need those for the flowers. We're stopping at the cemetery."

"Oh my," she says. And she visibly recoils. She is suddenly uncomfortable, immediately more interested in checking the price of mushrooms than in engaging with me and my 8-year-old son.

For a moment I'm caught off guard. What did I say?

Then I realize. I referenced death—the most natural thing in the world and yet a topic people don't know how to talk about.

Because I've opened the door, I feel I need to continue the conversation.

"We were so happy to think of it today," I say, chattering on so she doesn't think that the grief is raw. "We used to stop at that store by the cemetery to get flowers, but it closed."

"Mm-hmm," she says, and now I am fairly sure that she just wants me and my bouquet of daisies to disappear.

As we head for the exit, I feel a little guilty. I didn't mean to pull the cashier into an awkward exchange. I was just answering honestly and practically. I didn't realize that saying the word "cemetery" would change the whole conversation.

Why is death something we can't talk about? Why is it so frightening? I don't want to die, and I don't want anyone I love to die. I grieve the people in my life who have passed away, and I wish each of them were still here. But I also believe that death is a natural part of life, another chapter in this amazing story God created us for.

And, if my children learn nothing else from me, I hope they will come to see that death may be an end, but it's also a continuation of life on earth. I don't want them to fear death or back away when it comes up in conversation. I want them to see all members of our human family as interconnected, the body of Christ, all of us on our way to Heaven or already there.

My son seems not to have picked up on the exchange at all. We head off to the cemetery, talking as we go about our baby nephew and cousin whose grave we're going to visit.

"You know, I stopped by Georgie's grave the other day, but I didn't have flowers," I say.

"You went without me?"

"Yes, I was on my way somewhere else, and I realized I was going right past the cemetery," I tell him. "I knew it would make me a few minutes late, but I figured I could stop and say hello. I told Georgie how much he would love playing with his sisters and baby brothers."

"I can't wait to teach the twins how to play baseball," says a voice from the backseat.

We drive up to our usual spot and stop. I take the flowers, and my son carries the water. Then we realize there are already flowers at the grave.

"Who could have beat us to it?" I joke. "How dare they?"

"Maybe Grandma or Grandpa," he says. "Or Uncle George and Aunt Treasa?"

We give their flowers a drink and make room to squeeze ours into the vase, too. The pastels of the hydrangeas don't match the red, white, and blue daisies we've brought, but I love the combination. It seems to me that it says to any passersby that Georgie is loved by multiple people, loved differently, loved proudly, loved fully.

Then we pause to say a few words to Georgie. We talk about earth and Heaven and our family and how we miss him even though we've never met him. Then we pray a

Hail Mary, make the Sign of the Cross, take a picture to send to Georgie's mom and dad, and we're on our way. It's not a long visit, especially on a steamy summer day, but it's an important one.

As we drive away, we talk about how we wish Georgie were here with us, and how special it is to have a friend in Heaven. He is an amazing gift to us in ways I could never have imagined when we said goodbye almost five years ago.

Because, you know, it wasn't goodbye. It never really is.

And I'm so very grateful for that.