



Ryan

Ryan Tan Jia Wei
27 February 2000 – 1 July 2004

Ryan had been enjoying himself at a poolside party minutes before he was found unconscious in the pool. He died 12 days later from drowning. Shattered by this tragic accident, his parents Jeanne and Nick, and his older brother Russell struggle to carry on and make sense of life without the baby in their family.

Written by Sonya Szpojnarowicz, from an interview with Ryan's parents Jeanne and Nick

On Saturday, 19th June 2004, four-year-old Ryan excitedly accompanied his parents and his big brother Russell to a party at his father's friend's place. They had been there before, and as they knew the party was to be around the condo pool they had talked about taking swimming things with them. The boys said they weren't interested in going to swim as they wanted to chat to their friends and enjoy the party, so they didn't take anything.

Everyone enjoyed the party. It was a beautiful setting and the place was brightly lit as evening fell. People were standing around in different groups chatting and enjoying the atmosphere. As some children were swimming, friends offered to lend the boys their spare swimming clothes if they wanted to join in—but again the boys said they didn't want to as they were quite happy playing outside.

Ryan's mother Jeanne was sitting near to the side of the pool, chatting with some friends. Ryan decided it was a great game to run loops around the pool, coming back to report to Mummy each time. He would dart off laughing, and run back calling, "Hello Mummy!", very pleased with himself.

But this time he had been longer away than before. Jeanne was beginning to look around for him, wondering where he was, assuming he had been distracted by someone else—but not imagining that anything was wrong. Ryan's father Nicholas was chatting to some friends at the other end of the pool when he heard a child scream out, "Hey look! Someone's drowned in the pool!" Never for a second imagining that this could be his own son, he rushed to look, and could indeed see a small shape underwater. "Maybe it's just a towel," he said, trying to calm the child. But another friend had realised that this small shape was a child, and dived in to grab him out.

In a split second Jeanne and Nick's world was turned upside down. Their beloved son, who moments before had been running around laughing, having a great time at a family party, was lying unconscious before them, not breathing and not moving—nobody could believe that this could really be happening.

Nick is a trained first aider through his work as a cabin steward with SIA, but he had never thought he would have to use his skills on his own son. With the help of a friend he tried to resuscitate Ryan, and an ambulance arrived in minutes. Both Nick and Jeanne wanted to accompany their little boy to the hospital and were shocked to hear the staff say that only one parent was allowed...but how could it be possible for any parent not to be with their child at such a moment? In their desperation they both got in anyway, but their hearts sank as they realised the two paramedics were only inexperienced NSmen, and they were putting the oxygen mask on Ryan's face upside down... The ambulance journey felt like a nightmare that seemed to take forever—Nick and Jeanne both felt paralysed with panic, shock and terror. They could hardly register the young paramedic trying to get them to fill in their IC details on the forms as they tried to focus on their beautiful young son's face, to hold his hands, hoping desperately that everything would be all right.

At the hospital Ryan was resuscitated but remained unconscious, and was taken to PICU where he was put on a ventilator. The doctors warned Nick that the prognosis was not good, but they would have to wait and see and hope. Nick and Jeanne stayed at the hospital, while Jeanne's sister looked after Russell, sleeping in a room on the ward, spending every waking moment with their beloved son. Friends came to visit and to give support, and many of their friends from Church came to pray. Russell was allowed to come in to see his brother, but it was a very difficult experience for him to see Ryan not moving, attached to so many tubes and machines. It was all so hard to take in—Ryan looked so normal, so peaceful.

For 12 days the family lived a scarcely bearable nightmare of desperate hopes and terrifying fears, waiting for something to happen. They had sickening conversations with doctors about the possibility of taking Ryan off life support, or of Ryan surviving but being severely handicapped. What kept them going was that Ryan really seemed to be responding to them—tears would flow from his closed eyes when they spoke to him and stroked his hand, or a dangerously low brain activity reading would normalise when they kissed him and told him they loved him. They had to take each day as it came, never knowing what was going to be the outcome, but scarcely daring to hope. One terrible day Ryan suddenly swelled up, full of fluid, which the doctors said was normal in such a drowning case—but then the swelling subsided and Ryan looked beautifully “normal” again.

But very early in the morning of 1st July, Nick and Jeanne had to watch helplessly as Ryan gently but surely slipped away. He died as they sat with him, crying, telling him they loved him forever.

Nick and Jeanne were thrown into a new and frightening world, trying to deal with their own agonising pain and grief at the same time as keeping life going as “normally” as possible for their eight-year-old son Russell. This story is being written less than a year after Ryan’s death—his family have had to endure their first Christmas and New Year without their younger son, and their first Chinese Lunar New Year. Before this book is printed they will have faced what should be Ryan’s 5th birthday. They struggle on, gaining strength from their Christian faith which reassures them not only that Ryan is in a happy place but also that they will see him again. Jeanne reads as many books on grief as she can, and writes her thoughts and sorrows into letters and poems for her beloved lost child. Nick is strong, open and honest, talking eloquently and sincerely about his grief, willing to share his feelings with compassionate friends. They are doing everything they can to face their grief and to try to keep living as a family, to keep hoping that in time they will begin to be able to enjoy life again. But it is a long hard struggle that is only just beginning.

Three months after Ryan’s death, his mother Jeanne wrote this poem for him:

I Remember

I remember—your first butterfly kick in my womb,
I remember—my tears of joy when your naked slimy
 little body was placed on my chest,
I remember—your first angelic smile that brought
 so much joy to our lives,
I remember—the first brave step that you took,
I remember—the first time you called me “Mummy”,
I remember—the time you had your first little tooth,
I remember—loving and caressing your tiny body sleeping beside me
I remember—my high anxiety when you fell ill
I remember—the sound of your little feet that greeted me every morning
I remember—our bedtime “chit-chat”
I remember—the adorable angelic look on your face,
I remember—whispering sweet nothings to you in your sleep,
I remember—loving your sweet sweaty smell,
I remember—your cheerful greetings of “good morning”, “good night”, “I love
you”,
 “take care”, “drive carefully, have a nice day” and many
 more of your loving care.
I remember—the hugs and kisses, the warm smooching,
I remember—my wonderful companion when Daddy was at work
 and kor kor was at school,
I remember—the precious time we shared when we were alone,
I remember—you singing Robbie Williams (“Better Man” and “We Will
 Rock You”),
I remember—you watching “Jamie’s Kitchen” with delight,
I remember—you imitating “Sponge Bob” with excitement,
I remember—how you enjoyed shopping and outings,
I remember—how your “Mummy you look so pretty and you
 smell so good” made my day,
I remember—you jumping into my arms and giving me a bonus hug and kisses
I remember—my little kitchen helper busy beating eggs for me,
I remember—how obedient and patient you were with me,
I remember—the excitement in your voice when you welcomed Daddy
 and kor kor home,
I remember—our daily tea breaks—milo and your favourite ah ma’s biscuits,

I remember—you holding ah ma's hand lovingly wherever we went,
I remember—your sweet hello's to all the strangers you met,
I remember—the joy you brought to everyone who came in contact with you,
I remember—the fear in your eyes on your first day in school,
I remember—you sharing with me the fear of going to school,
I remember—the tears you shed when you were angry,
I remember—the shouting match you had with kor kor,
I remember—how you and kor kor filled our house with so much life, love and joy,
I remember—thanking God for having you, kor kor and Daddy,
I remember—the bubbly and cheerful boy who lit up my life,
I remember—both of us cuddling and lazing around on a hot afternoon,
I remember—worshipping every word you said,
I remember—with you, I started to love all over again,
I remember—how colourfully you painted my life
I remember—every second, every minute, every hour of the four years and four months we shared together.

And how can I ever forget the shock,
The anger, the fear; and the
Overwhelming pain when we said our first and last goodbye.
My precious possession and part of my life has been snatched from me,
I am acquainted with bitterest grief.
I am crumbled, my wound is permanent,
My soul has been badly tormented,
My eyes blurred with tears.

Now, my life has changed forever.

AND I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER...