

A Gift of Peace

It was a warm August morning when I saw the bird nesting in the willow tree. His gray, velvety wings clung to his fragile body while his head was held tall and proud. Slowly, I approached the branch where he sat, fearing he would free himself from my grasp as many other birds had done before. The willow tree, hanging over the rotting porch, had welcomed robins, sparrows and any other bird willing to accept its invitation. Without hesitation, the bird hopped into my open arms, full of life and fearless of any danger it may encounter. As I stared at this peaceful, defenseless bird, I thought about life and death. At the age of fourteen I rarely considered either of these until a few months earlier when death suddenly became a reality.

As I stood holding the bird in my arms, my thoughts turned back to my brother, Lawry. I could see his cheerful and pleasant smile as I ran down the stairs to greet him at the door. He'd yell, "Hello Sugarplum" and lift me upon his sturdy shoulders to carry me back up the stairs. I felt proud to be with him as we walked hand-in-hand down our lengthy driveway which, then, always seem too short. Now I felt helpless, though, as I stood holding the bird in my arms not wanting it to be set free, as Lawry had been; too soon.

Several days passed and the bird stayed with us. He'd sit upon my father's shoulder whenever we spoke of Lawry. One afternoon, while everyone was out doing his chores, the bird stayed with my mother and me as we sat talking in the kitchen. The bird almost seemed human as my mother spoke to it. I couldn't help but laugh at both of them as the bird hopped about my mother's shoulders. Gradually my laughter faded away, though, as my mind drifted back to the day when Lawry and my mom had been talking in the kitchen. Sitting in that same chair, listening to their conversation, I heard them say:

"I'm down to twelve pills a day now, Mom."

"Really? That's wonderful. How do you feel?"

"Alright I guess."

"Why are you taking pills?" I asked.

Suddenly the room became silent, our eyes met and the beat of my heart grew rapid. Quick glances were shared between my brother and mom. I sensed something was terribly wrong. "I have Leukemia," Lawry answered.

I sunk my head into my opened hands, and, for a moment, began to cry. Then I looked up at Lawry's face and saw an expression on it I had never seen before. His eyes were sunken and sad, seeming glassier the longer I stared at them. His tanned face was now pale, and I noticed how thin his hair had become. Why hadn't I noticed it before. I thought he had the flu, but Leukemia, no!

My mother look puzzled as she watched me sitting in the chair. I wondered how long I sat there with my mind, once again, on Lawry.

“It’s a dove”, she said.

“What? I asked, startled by the break of silence.

“The bird. It’s a dove. Where do you suppose it came from?”

I shrugged, not knowing what to say, but I knew. Again, my mind wandered back to those first few weeks Lawry was in the hospital. I had never been anywhere like it before. There were several people there speaking foreign languages and others with unfamiliar accents. I recognized Lawry’s wife, Lori, in a room nearby and headed in her direction. Inside the room I could see Lawry through a plastic wall. My vision was slightly distorted, though, by the wrinkles in the plastic. I wished I could see him clearly and hold his hand the way I used to. Instead, I saw his bones protruding from his skin and his frail fingers shaking as he tried to drink his sterilized water. His hair had fallen out from radiation treatment, leaving him with a hairless head even lighter than his pale face. I longed to see Lawry healthy again, playing games and dancing like he had always done before. Wasn’t there anything I could do?

Finally, I was able to help. Within the following months I visited the hospital often to donate platelets. Slowly, I would approach the vinyl-topped bed and lie down. My palms were sticky on its surface as I moved my body back against the pillow. My eyes wandered from the cotton balls, rubbing alcohol and the needle connected to a thin rubber tube, to my arm. The nurse strapped my upper arm with a thicker tube while I squeezed a long, round mass of paper tightly in my hand. Thick, scarlet blood flowed from my arm to a large bag on the machine beside me. Gradually, each muscle in my body relaxed and, for a moment, I closed my eyes and smiled.

Downstairs the doctors were examining Lawry. “I think he’s going to make it,” one of the doctors whispered. Lawry’s wife overheard what the doctor said and immediately told Lawry. We thought Lawry’s cheerful smile and tremendous appetite had disappeared until that moment. Soon chocolate covered Bon-Bons, shrimp and lemon-meringue pie were sent to Lawry’s room. Within minutes the plate returned---empty. Lawry was soon roaming about the halls in a wheelchair with my mother close behind. When I looked their way again, my mother was being pushed in the wheelchair by Lawry!

Those memories were vivid to me as I wandered outside with the dove, reluctant to set it free. My family gathered on the lawn with me to bid the dove farewell. I pretended my tears were from the glaring rays of sunlight, but I knew each one was for the dove.

As I watched the dove resting on my palm, my thoughts returned to Lawry’s last days in the hospital. Once again, I laid on the vinyl-top bed giving platelets. Looking up from the bed, I saw my parents staring down at me. The corners of my father’s mouth moved slowly upward in a faint smile. Tears fell from my mother’s eyes as she caught them with the drenched Kleenex she held in her unsteady hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s Lawry” my father replied, “he has pneumonia.”

Nobody saw much of Lawry that night except his wife who stayed with him throughout the operation. When I did see Lawry again he couldn't speak. From his neck hung a tube secured by gauze pads and tape. At the end of that tube hung another larger tube, like that of a vacuum cleaner. Holding everything together, including Lawry, was a respirator. I sat beside him alone that night. It had been nearly five months since we had been together without being separated by a plastic wall. Now there were no hugs, kisses, sugarplums or paths to walk down hand-in-hand. Only Lawry's cries of pain and my silent prayers filled the room. I laid my head back against the chair, looked upward and folded my hands tightly upon my chest. "Please God," I began, "don't let Lawry suffer like this. Put an end to this useless pain, somehow."

My brothers Paul, Greg, Jack and I spoke few words on our way to the hospital the following week. I could feel my heart beating faster and faster the closer we came to Lawry's room. Before walking in, I held my breath deeply and let it go. Surrounding Lawry were family and friends watching him as he lay unconscious. All but the raspy suction of the respirator remained silent. At each of Lawry's sides sat his wife, Lori and my brother Greg; Lori resting her head upon his heart, Greg holding his hand. Suddenly both Lori and Greg looked up, frightful but knowing. The doctor checked Lawry's heartbeat, turned the respirator off and told us Lawry had passed away.

Lawry died only three days before his twenty-sixth birthday. For five years he battled with Leukemia, knowing he had less than a 20 percent chance to live. I will never forget those months we spent with him in the end, nor will I forget how much he suffered with so little complaint. Thought at times I miss him terribly, I know he is looking down upon us, knowing some day we will be together again.

Five months after Lawry passed away, we were visited by the mourning dove in the willow tree. Today we would set it free. As I lay on my stomach, basking in the sun, I could see the dove shifting from branch to branch, holding its wings out, preparing for flight and folding them back down again. Suddenly the bird stopped, held out its wings and flew directly toward my back. From my head to my toes, it flapped its wings as if it were waving good-bye, then flew away. Below I stood waving it good-bye as I was left with the most wonderful gift one could give---the gift of peace.

Heidi Kammer, age 17