

GIFT FROM A SON WHO DIED

by
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It's not the way I thought it would be. I thought the sun and the moon would go out. I thought joy itself would die when Eric died. He had given so much to all of us — his family, his friends. And yet his death is not the end of joy after all. It's somehow another beginning. . . .

Eric died at twenty-two, after a four-and-a-half-year struggle with leukemia.¹ While he left us with the deep bruises of grief, he left us so much more. So much to celebrate! There's a victory here that I'm still trying to understand. Why do I, even in loss, feel stronger? Why does life on this untidy, dangerous planet seem more wonderfully precious? I am

conscious now of the value of each good moment, the importance of wasting nothing.

These things are Eric's gifts to me. They weren't easily bought or quickly accepted. And not all came tied with ribbons; many were delivered with blows. In addition to leukemia, Eric was suffering from adolescence. And there were times when this condition took more out of us than his other one. A seventeen-year-old boy who may not live to become a man is suddenly in a great hurry. Like a militant new nation, he wants instant independence and no compromises. After the first few weeks, Eric quickly took charge of his illness. I was no longer to talk to the doctors. In

1. leukemia (lū ké'mé ə), usually incurable blood disease.

fact—the message came through clearly—I was no longer to talk at all unless I could avoid sounding like a worried mother.

Perhaps it would have been different if we'd had a chance to prepare for what was coming, but it was a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky.

We live in a small Connecticut town, just a block from the beach. This had been a summer like many others. The front hall was, as usual, full of sand and kicked-off sneakers, mysterious towels that didn't belong to us, an assortment of swimming fins, and soccer balls. By September, I, like many mothers, was half-longing for school to start and half-dreading it. Our twenty-year-old daughter had married, and now Eric was packed and ready to go off for his freshman year at the University of Connecticut. But ten-year-old Lisa and fourteen-year-old Mark would still be at home. I kept telling myself how lucky I'd be to have less laundry and fewer cookie crumbs to contend with. But I didn't exactly believe it.

One afternoon Eric and I both wanted the car at the same moment. "I've got to run at the track, Mom." He was wearing his soccer shorts and running shoes. "I've only got two more days before school starts, and I'm not in shape."

I knew how much he wanted to make the freshman soccer team when he

got to college, but I had work to do. "I have to go to the printer," I said. "But I'll drop you off at the field and pick you up later."

"Okay." He scowled a bit at the compromise. As we drove off together, I noticed something on his leg—an ugly red sore, big and round as a silver dollar. There was another farther down. And another on his other leg.

"Eric. What have you got on your legs?"

"Dunno. Little infection maybe."

"It doesn't look little to me," I protested. "Impetigo is what it looks like. We'd better go right over to the doctor's office."

"Mom!" He was furious.

"Eric," I said. "Impetigo spreads like mad. If that's what it is, they aren't even going to let you into the locker room. We've got two days before you go. Let's get the doctor to clear it up now."

"All right," he said dully.

The sores did not look like impetigo to our doctor. He told his secretary to call the hospital and arrange to have Eric admitted next morning for tests. "Be there at eight, Eric," he said.

"What tests?" I turned to the doctor. Eric had had a complete physical required for all freshmen, only twelve days before. Blood tests, too. He'd passed with flying colors.

"I want them to rerun some of the

blood tests," said the doctor. "I've also ordered a bone marrow——"

I blanked out the words "bone marrow" as if I'd never heard them. After all, I thought as we drove home, he'd just had that perfect physical. . . .

Yet the next afternoon when the phone rang and the doctor was saying, "I'd like to talk to you and your husband together——" I knew at once. "You don't have to tell me," I said. "I know. Eric has leukemia."

I was once in a house struck by lightning. The sensation, the scene, even the strange electrical smell returned at that moment. A powerful bolt seemed to enter the top of my skull as I got the message. . . . Eric had leukemia.

He'd always been a fine athlete, a competitor, a runner. Now fate had tripped him; he stumbled and fell. Yet how quickly he tried to get up and join the race again! Left at home that fall, very ill, with his friends scattering to schools and jobs, he still was determined to go to college later, study hard, make the soccer team, eventually make all-American. To these goals he soon added one more—to stay alive.

We both knew that tremendous ordeals lay ahead. Leukemia, cancer of the blood, had always been a swift killer. When Eric developed the disease in 1968, doctors had just found ways to slow it down by using powerful drugs to

suppress symptoms and produce periods of remission. They did not know how to cure it.

There was hope, though, in the fact that Eric had a type of childhood leukemia that was especially responsive to drug therapy. (By now, a few youngsters are actually being cured of it.) But Eric, at seventeen, was beyond the age of most effective treatment. Soon we discovered that his body overreacted to many of the best drugs, and that the recommended high dosage, needed to destroy diseased cells, tended too quickly to wipe out healthy ones.

There were times during those first months when I saw him shaken, fighting for control. After all, it hadn't been too long since he was a small boy who could throw himself in my arms for comfort. Part of him must have been crying, "Please save me! Don't let me die!" I couldn't save him, but I could show him my own best courage. I learned to hide my concern, my tenderness, and I saw he was strengthened by my calm. He had to run free to be a man. I wanted that. If there were to be no other alternative, eventually I would help him die like a man.

We learned to be casual with danger, to live with death just around the corner. Whenever Eric was discharged from the hospital after transfusions (first they would give him two, then five, then seven), he would fly down the steps

swinging a duffel bag, as if he were just back from a great weekend. I'd hand him the keys to the car, slide over, and he would pick up his life as if nothing had happened. But there were always drugs, always bouts of nausea.

I remember once starting up the stairs to bring him a cup of weak tea. He passed me on the way down wearing his swim trunks and carrying a spear gun. Ignoring the tea, he said, "Maybe I'll get you a fish for supper." He played pick-up soccer, weekend football, and basketball with a hemoglobin so low it left him short of breath, occasionally faint. On the basketball court, his teammates, galloping for a goal at the other end of the gym, would shout, "Just stay there, Eric—we'll be right back."

It was always more than a game he played. His life was on the line.

"Exercise, Attitude, Desire" were the chalked words on his blackboard. These three words would bring him through. "You don't die of leuk, you know," he said once to me. "Something else goes. Your heart. Or your kidneys. I'm going to be ready for it when it comes for me. I'm going to win."

But he was not confused about the nature of his enemy—at least not by the time he'd spent some weeks on the eighth floor of Memorial Hospital's Ewing Pavillion in New York.

Ewing patients talk a lot about remissions, of course. "Remission"—that

seductive word! Hope, with the end-to-hope implied. Eric's remissions encouraged us. Once he got an eleven-month stay of execution with the drug Methotrexate. I remember looking at him that summer as he ran the beach with friends. All of them tan, glowing, happy, all with the same powerful shoulders, the same strong, brown legs. What could there be in the bones of one that differed from the others? The next day Memorial phoned. Eric's most recent tests had shown that his remission was at an end. Even as I watched him, wild cells had been springing up in his marrow like dragon's teeth. More and then more. Always more than could be slain.

Eric endured and survived many crises. He learned to live on the edge of the ledge and not look down. Whenever he had to be in the hospital, Memorial's doctors gave him passes to escape the horror. He'd slip off his hospital bracelet (which was forbidden) and rush out to plunge into the life of the city. Crowds, shop windows, cut-rate records.

Restaurants in Chinatown. Concerts in the park. Summer parties on rooftops. He listened a lot but never told his own story. "Where you from?" His answer was always, "I've got my own pad on First Avenue, between 67th and 68th. Nice neighborhood—handy to everything." (Some way to describe your bed on Ewing Eight!)

Even more than exploring the city,

he loved working out, trying to get back his strength on these brief passes. Once he went out waving good-bye to less fortunate inmates on the floor, only to return an hour later waving from the ambulance stretcher. There was no living without risks and so he took them. (This is one of his special gifts to me. Dare! Take life, dangers and all.)

The disease gained on him. To prevent infection he was finally put in a windowless, isolated chamber, the laminar air-flow room. Sterile air, sterile everything, sterile masks, caps, gowns, gloves for anyone entering his room. He joked, played to the eager audience peering through his glass-windowed door. And then sudden severe hemorrhages. Six days of unconsciousness, soaring fevers. His white count was dangerously low. Platelet count zero! Hemoglobin hardly worth mentioning. Sure, I thought, this is the end. But friends came, literally by busloads, to give blood for transfusions. During that crisis, it took more than thirty-two blood donors a day just to keep him alive.

I watched the doctors and nurses jabbing for veins, taping both needled arms to boards, packing the hemorrhages, shaking him to rouse him from stupor, and I thought: Enough! Let him die in peace! Why bring him back for more? He's proved himself—and beyond. He's had two good years of

college. He made the soccer team and even made the dean's list. No more! Let him go!

But I had more to learn about my son's strength and resources. There was still much good life to be lived at the edge of the dark place. Eric came back. He had to remain in the laminar air-flow room, off and on, for nearly four months. Yet within weeks he was running from twelve to fifteen miles a day. That spring, he didn't get back to college, but in his absence they named him captain of the soccer team; he received the award for The Most Improved Player, and finally was listed among the All-New England All-Stars. Proud honors, justly won. And there were others. We have a bookcase full of plaques and medals.

But I treasure even more the things they don't give medals for: his irreverent humor; the warmth and love and consideration he gave his friends, especially his comrades in the War on the Eighth Floor. For these last he was a jaunty hero, survivor of epic battles. Yet he was always one of them; hopefully, the Golden Warrior who would lead them all to victory—or at least escape.

He and a fellow inmate almost managed it once. Hiding themselves in laundry carts under dirty linen, they rode down nine floors on the service elevator and out to the sidewalk. Just short of being loaded with the laundry on a truck, they decided to give themselves up and

go back to bone marrow, intravenous bottles, and the rest of it. There was, after all, no real way out.

As a variation on the theme of escape, Eric invented Ralph the Camel, a melancholy dromedary who, although hospitalized for "humpomeia," somehow managed to survive all the witless treatments his doctors could devise, including daily injections of pineapple juice. Ralph starred in a series of underground comic books known as *The Adventures of Ewing 8*, which featured Memorial's top doctors, nurses, technicians, and other notables, all drawn by Eric in merciless caricature. As Dr. Bayard Clarkson put it, "Eric spared no one, but we could hardly wait for the next *Adventure*." When they asked for more, his price was simple: "Get me in remission."

One of his exploits became a legend. Ten important doctors made Grand Rounds together every week. This particular Monday they stopped by the bed of their liveliest patient, to find him huddled under blankets looking unusually bleak.

"Eric! How do you feel?" asked Dr. Dowling, concerned.

"Scaly," was the mumbled reply.

Only then was the doctor's eye caught by the live goldfish swimming around in Eric's intravenous bottle. The plastic tube running down under the covers wasn't, of course, hooked up, but

it looked convincing. The doctors broke up. The ward cheered! For the moment, humor had death on the run.

The eighth floor was a bad place to make friends. As one crusty old patient put it, "Make 'em and you'll lose 'em." But for Eric, there was no way to stay uninvolved. In the beginning he looked for the secrets of survival in the most spirited people around him. "That Eileen is so great," he told me. "She's beaten this thing for five years!" Or, "Look at that old guy, Mr. Miller. They just took out his spleen, but he's hanging in there!"

Then, as the months of his treatments lengthened into years, he began to see them go. The good, the brave, the beautiful, the weak, the whining, the passive. They were all going the same way . . . Eileen, Mr. Miller, and so many more. When he was at home during one of his last remissions, he chalked up new words on his blackboard. "We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty" (G. K. Chesterton). Eric would not desert or fault his companions. He would play his heart out while the game might still be won, but he was beginning to think of the unthinkable. The casualty lists on the eighth floor were long. . . .

At the end, Eric finally accepted his own death. This acceptance was his last, most precious gift to me—what made my

own acceptance possible. There was no bitterness. He said, simply, "There comes a time when you say: 'Well, that's it. We gave it a try.'"

I remember one afternoon in Memorial a few days before he died. He wanted to talk of all the good things: the way he felt about his sisters . . . the wild, wonderful times he'd had with his brother, Mark. Suddenly he closed his eyes and said, "Running. That was so great—running on a beach for miles and miles!" He smiled; eyes still closed. "And snow! Snow was fun——" He was summing it up, living it, feeling it all again while there was still time.

He talked on quietly, gently, in the past tense, telling me, without telling me, to be ready, to be strong.

Once, thinking the light was hurting

his eyes, I started to lower the window blind. "No, no!" he stopped me. "I want all the sky." He couldn't move (too many tubes), but he looked at that bright blue square with such love. . . . "The sun," he said. "It was so good——"

It grew dark. He grew tired. Then he whispered, "Do something for me?"

Leave a little early tonight. Don't run for the bus. Walk a few blocks and look at the sky. Walk in the world for me. . . ."

And so I do, and so I will. Loving life that much, Eric gave it to me—new, strong, beautiful—even as he was dying. That was his victory. In a way it is also mine. And I think perhaps it is a victory for all of us everywhere when human beings succeed in giving such gifts to each other.

Comment

1. a. How old was Eric when he became ill?
b. What were his plans for the future?
2. a. What does the author mean by writing "'Remission'—that seductive word"?
- b. How did Eric use his remissions?
3. To his friends in the hospital, Eric was "a jaunty hero." Explain why they regarded him in this way.
4. What did both Eric and his mother do that showed they were courageous people?
5. What was the gift that the mother received from her son?