



THE DEATH OF A SON

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There was not even a 48-hour warning between the first x-rays of Kelden's knee and the surgery which amputated his leg. When his physician-father took him for x-rays Sunday afternoon instead of waiting until Monday, I should have suspected something was very wrong. But I didn't. Kelden had suffered a sharp pain in his knee when he moved quickly, but that didn't seem anything to cause concern. I remember standing in the warm California sun that afternoon watering some ivy grown scrawny from lack of attention and thinking how peaceful was the hour—vowing not to fret so over the small, irritating inconveniences that accompany a new move with four small children. The year in California promised to be a peaceful interlude between the completion of my husband's medical training and his beginning a private practice. But the peace was flown minutes later when father and son returned home.

A strange growth had appeared on the x-rays, and the doctors felt a biopsy should be done immediately to determine if the growth was what it appeared to be—an osteogenic sarcoma (cancer of the bone)—a condition rarely found in children. The survival rate, even with a high amputation of the leg to prevent spreading, was not more than five percent.

I never considered that he might die. The thought that our beautiful five-year-old boy might lose his leg before his life had really begun held a terror my mind could not go beyond. We reacted that evening as our parents, themselves reared in Mormon homes, had reacted in times of illness and trouble. We first called in the elders of our church holding the authority to administer to the sick. We ourselves fearfully knelt in prayer—and we called our parents and family to ask for their prayers and support. Because the community was new to us, we were not acquainted with the church members, but the bishop and his counselor came in response to our plea. How can I express, as we knelt while the elders prayed, our desperate hope for an assurance from our Father that the doctors were wrong, that their fears were unfounded, and that our son would be found without disease after all. As we rose to our feet, the bishop extended his hand to us with the words we so longed to hear.

"I have never had a stronger feeling that all is well. I feel certain that when this child is examined tomorrow, everything will be right with him."

Kelden was admitted to the hospital the next afternoon for surgery the following morning. In the months that followed I learned to accept and even treasure many things—among them were "last moments"—moments precious because they would never be again, moments filled with words and actions that had to be recorded within the heart clearly enough to last for a lifetime of remembering. But on that August afternoon as Kelden and I shopped for a new book to read in the hospital, I still rejected the thought that never again would my son and I walk hand in hand. Nor could I treasure the moment when I tucked him in his hospital bed for the night and gave a final caress to the strong little leg.

I had not yet learned.

Both my father and father-in-law are spiritual men. My husband and I lean heavily upon their judgment. That evening after we returned home from the hospital, my father called. During his prayers that afternoon, he had received a profound feeling of reassurance that all would be well with his grandson. Later that evening my husband's father called, again expressing his feelings of peace regarding our son.

But still we feared, my husband and I.

Kelden's father knew, better than anyone else close to the little boy, that the chances of a benign growth were practically non-existent. And so he, too, placed his hopes in a power greater than medical science. He fasted and prayed throughout the day and night for wisdom to make a decision—and for a miracle. When he returned to bed in the hour before dawn after walking over and over again the streets of our neighborhood, I whispered, "What if the growth is malignant? Are we going to let them amputate? Wouldn't it be a lack of faith in the healing power of the Lord to amputate his leg?"

My husband lay a reassuring hand over mine. "Don't worry about that. As I walked home after my prayers tonight, I felt suddenly at peace and certain that all will be well."

The next morning we watched while someone rushed by on his way to the lab with tissue from Kelden's knee. "Now—please, please don't let it be true!" Our combined energy was spent in this silent plea with God. I remembered Kelden's excitement at watching a "mixed-up television show" the doctor had promised the anesthesia would bring, and how irresistible he had been during his final examination before surgery. He had joked with the doctor, and hopped gaily from one foot to the other when he was pronounced a very healthy young man.

Then, suddenly, the waiting was over, and I knew that what I had feared in my heart was real—the bone was infected with cancer, and the leg had to come off at once if the disease were to be stopped.

"Five minutes," the surgeon said. "I'll give you five minutes to decide. It must be done now."

"No," I insisted. "We still believe in miracles."

Why had everyone been so certain this would not be? Had we deceived ourselves? Now there was no time to think—to prepare.

"Of course, amputate." This from the father who was also a doctor. "We have no choice but to try." And so the leg came off.

The cry "If I had only known" must have been uttered millions of times by as many lips. All the unrelenting uncertainty of mind about the decision to amputate that little leg was in truth irrelevant. If I had only known the ending of this story from its beginning, what suffering I could have saved myself and those about me. Because as it happened, that decision had no influence on the destiny of the child.

Eventually he awakened, and his questions had to be answered. His first words were, "Mommy, why don't you give me a drink of water?" Those unexpected but familiar, petulant words sounded with joy in my heart. My child had lost a leg, yet he was still my Kelly; as incredible as it seemed to me then, he was still the same impatient, determined, immeasurably dear little boy as ever he had been. At that moment I understood that we had not been deceived. All was going to be right with our son. What was the loss of a leg when he was alive and the world still before him to conquer. With his own special gifts of nature, it would be easier for him than most.

"Mommy, my leg hurts."

Oh, how fervently I prayed for the words to explain and comfort.

"I know, Kelly. The leg was sick, and because we didn't want it to make the rest of you sick, the doctor had to take it off. But it's all right, son, because in a few weeks we'll get you another one—one that can walk and run and even jump. And until then, I will be your legs. We'll go together wherever you want to go."

"Mommy, did you want them to cut it off?"

"Oh, yes, son. You're not going to be sick now. It's all right!"

He didn't cry, but he wasn't fooled. A single tear rolled down his cheek. "Can I still drive an airplane?"

And then—"Where did they put it? They didn't use a hatchet, did they?"

His recovery from the amputation was immediate. In three days he was home and climbing to the top of the terraced lawn in back of our house, swinging with his brothers and flying his new airplane. There were times when he seemed almost gay, and times when he was silent and reflective. Although he learned to use crutches, he preferred to hop, climb, and scoot with his own remaining limbs. Hours were spent in the fitting of an artificial leg. He knew the frustration and excitement of learning to walk again, and the heartbreaking realization that the new leg would never be really the same as the old one. He insisted upon reality, and refused to even make-believe about anything he knew required two real legs. At first he was hurt and cried when his neighborhood chums tired of swinging in our yard beside him and ran into the neighboring yards to play, leaving him behind to call tearfully after them. But he learned very soon to be independent.

It was late one afternoon just four weeks after the surgery that his father came home looking bewildered and peculiarly over-tired. He seemed discouraged, I thought, but it was far more than encouragement he needed. The very pillars of his life—his belief in a God and his own ability to communicate and receive direction from such a God—had been toppled. He had just come from

a consultation with the radiologists, where I had taken Kelden earlier in the day for a check-up. Routine x-rays had unbelievably shown an identical tumor in the remaining leg! Our child was going to die unless some miracle intervened, and how could we expect a miracle from a God who had deceived us—who had sent a feeling of well-being and peace to all who had prayed in the child's behalf. My husband was consumed with self-accusation—with a feeling that he had hypnotized himself into believing what he wanted to believe. It seems naive, especially for persons knowledgeable about the medical significance of this disease, but neither my husband nor I had ever considered that Kelden might die, not since that first strong feeling of reassurance we had received in answer to our prayers.

And now he was definitely not all right. We considered for a few, endless hours a high amputation of the remaining leg which would leave our son a cripple and give only a slight chance for his life. May we never know again the despair and loneliness of those hours when we believed we lived upon this earth without a supreme, interested Father to give purpose and plan to existence. It was not until we knew a little boy's trust in death and its awakening, his dignity while facing pain, that we understood the truth of the promise given us by our Father: All is well with your son. He lives forever.

There was no need to amputate the other leg—further tests showed it was too late. And so we knew, barring a miracle, that he must die. The weeks remaining would surely be few. And somehow, he knew, too. We drew the courage to face them from our son.

The pale, misshapen little figure lying against the white sheets, and the unused artificial leg standing in one corner of the room, spoke his story to all who entered. His flesh had withered quickly away, and the huge tumors which had crushed the bones in his shoulders rendered his arms and hands useless. Two-thirds of his abdomen was filled with bone tumor, and the skin was drawn so tightly over his face that the eyelids would no longer close. Only his eyes and lips moved. The slightest movement of the bed caused him intense pain. It had been only four months since that day he had hopped so gaily from one foot to the other. But though his beautiful body was being devoured, his mind and spirit seemed to soar. In the beginning he was very possessive of the gifts which came continually to the house for him, and was irritable because of the pain. He had been particularly so with the x-ray staff at the hospital where he received daily super-voltage therapy for pain in the remaining knee, and so his father and I were surprised when he asked, as we carried him into the hospital for his last treatment, "Do you think I make George sad? He loves me, and I'm not very nice to him. I haven't much longer to make him happy, have I?"

During a card-playing session the evening before, Kelly had looked up pleadingly at his father and asked, "What happens when you die, Daddy?," and his father had answered, "Why, you go back to live with your Heavenly Father, Son." But this wasn't enough. The child knew that he would soon have to leave us, and he needed to know what would become of him. The usual childhood answers would not do. This was the first of many sessions between father and son. I don't know exactly what was said during those hours, but I know that both father and son grew in courage and peace of mind. I know that

Kelden was concerned with Christ's crucifixion and atonement. "How much was the hurt?" he asked. "Who helped him be so brave? Do you know if He cried?"

"If Christ still had the nail holes, will I have just one leg?"

At first he had been restless with the long prayers that were offered over him, but later on when the bishop came to see him, he asked, "Would you like to say a prayer for me, Bishop?" And when we were alone, he confided, "The bishop likes to say prayers, you know. It makes him happy."

Due to the devotion of his doctor who called on him daily, we were able to keep Kelden at home with us. In spite of his illness and the continuous doses of medication, he remained lucid and eager to learn. And he prayed—always before each injection of pain medication. He eventually needed as many as twelve a day. "Daddy," he asked, "Don't give the shot until I pray. Please hold my hands tight, Mother." And then—

"Father in Heaven:
Please help me to be brave.
Help me to stand the hurt,
And help Daddy to give a good shot.
In Jesus' name,
Amen."

Then, with little clenched fists and gritted teeth, he would call, "Okay, Dad."

Although he was not afraid of death, he clung stubbornly to his life. He said to his older brother, "Maybe I'll die, and maybe I won't!" He hated terribly to leave us, more than he minded the pain, it seemed. "Mommy," he would plead, "When I go to heaven, can't you come too?"

It was a few days before Christmas that Kelly suggested a ride in the car to see the lights and pick out a Christmas tree. His doctors had insisted several times that he could not last more than a few hours, but time and again he rallied, each time to increased pain, leaving his doctors at a loss to discover the source of his strength. He had received a dollar bill in the mail that morning and was delighted at the prospect of treating the family to hamburgers. We slid him gently onto a small mattress and carried it to the back of the station wagon. He winced with every movement but never cried out. "Five hamburgers," he called out in a clear voice at the hamburger stand, "And one french fry. We'll have to share it." He wanted everything as usual on this day. I helped him take a bite from the hamburger he had saved for himself. "No more today, Mother," he whispered, "Let's save it. Maybe I'll finish it tomorrow in heaven."

The next morning, Kelden's pain had become intense. "I'll try to be brave while you're putting that under me," he promised as I tried to change the sheet. But the pain was too great, and his father was not home. "I guess you'll have to give me the shot, Mom." And I began with trembling fingers, but because there was no flesh left in which to inject the needle, I tried again and again, actually bending the needle, but without success. "Oh, Kelly," I cried, "I can't do it! I can't!" Then my five-year-old son whispered to me, "Mommy, look at me. You can do it. If I say you can do it, you can do it." And I did.

Late that afternoon, after the tree had been trimmed at the foot of his bed, he died. His spirit struggled to free itself from that wasted body, and he was gone.

Oh, how empty was that room. I wrapped what was left of his little body tenderly in a blanket and held it close in my rocking chair as I had yearned so long to do. He could feel the pain no longer. And when at last I gave him up to the mortician, he received the body with tears on his cheeks.

That body had grown in four months from a child to a wasted old man. And his spirit had grown large enough to fill all of our hearts and lives with faith and expectation until we meet again.

