

A Passage Back

Becky Fogg

WHILE WE WAITED FOR THE SCHOOL BUS, my little brother grabbed my arm and said, "Becky, those kids are calling me 'Monkey Head' again." I had to admit to myself he did look . . . well . . . different. Because of the chemotherapy his hair was thinning and his cheeks were getting chubby. His ears stuck out and, of course, the school kids thought it was funny. But I didn't understand how they could be so mean to someone with leukemia.

I turned to the group of kids who were laughing and jeering. "Stop it," I said. "You guys are not being nice." I could feel Greg clinging on to my back pack. It wasn't fair. No one understood. Although I was just in the second grade—two years older than my brother Greg—he looked to me for protection, and I stood firm. "Don't!" I said again, this time louder.

"You look like a monkey!" the red head said.

I hated her.

Greg and I were buddies. Being at the tail end of a large family of seven, we were often left alone to play with each other while everyone else was busy being grown up. We had our secret hiding places and our private passwords—"Kermit" and "Miss Piggy"—to get into the fort. At times we would trespass over to the neighbor's yard and throw mud at passing cars. When the cars screeched to a stop, we would run back into the trees and find our secret passage back to safety. We watched out for each other and kept each other's secrets, and sometimes I wondered if we could communicate without even talking. I could just look at him and know his feelings. I loved all my brothers and sisters, but with Greg it was different: I was proud of him; he was my little brother; he was a part of me; it was us, together, inseparable.

The kids at the bus stop wouldn't quit. "Monkey, Monkey," they said. They were jumping around scratching their armpits and yelling as though they were in a jungle. I looked at Greg and saw tears welling up in his eyes. I could feel my face getting hot and my body bigger and bigger. Finally, I snapped. I ran over and landed my fist into the face of

the biggest boy. Then all the noise stopped. Greg was startled, and once I noticed what I had done, I panicked and ran back next to him. He started laughing through his tears.

"Sssh!" I said. "Greg, don't laugh!" I waited for the big boy to do something, but he didn't. He just picked up his back pack and got in line and we all waited for the bus quietly. By lunch time everyone knew: Don't mess with Becky's little brother.

"Come on kids," Mom called down the hallway. "Get in the car. Greg has an appointment with Dr. Medrano in ten minutes."

"I don't want to go," Greg said to me softly.

"Why?" I asked. I knew Dr. Medrano was his favorite doctor. Such a nice man. He always did Greg's finger pricks fast so they wouldn't hurt, and then we would all get a treat afterwards.

"I just don't," Greg said. He traced the carpet patterns with his Hot Wheels racer. Mom called again. "Kids . . ."

"No," he yelled back. "I'm not going!" He threw his car and ran to the toy closet, shutting himself in. Mom came into the playroom confused. I shrugged and pointed to the closet. She sighed, went over to the closet, and spoke softly to Greg.

"Come on," Mom said. "Dr. Medrano is expecting us today. Honey, we can't be late. Please come out, dear." She waited but we didn't hear a thing. Mom spoke through the crack in the door: "How about if we stop by the toy store on the way home?" After a few seconds the closet door opened, and Greg headed for the garage; Mom followed, and I was close behind.

Sometimes I resented Greg for his manipulative powers. I didn't know why after every doctor's appointment we had to go to the toy store so he could pick out another Transformer or Hot Wheels. Big deal. Sometimes I even wished I was sick.

Because of Greg's illness, I soon learned all the vocabulary that goes along with leukemia: chemotherapy, prednisone, remission, relapse, red blood count, platelets, transplant, bone marrow, spinal tap, finger prick—and hell. After Greg was first diagnosed at the age of three, he was taken to Long Beach hospital for his first few treatments. Mom and Dad went with him, and some of the older kids visited on the weekend. But I was stuck home—two weeks without my buddy Greg. Everyone at school wanted to know where he was. I really didn't even know.

After a year of spinal taps and finger pricks at Dr. Medrano's, Greg went into remission. "It's as good as cured," Mom explained to the family. "There aren't any bad blood cells in Greg's body now. Although the bad cells could come back, we have a really good chance that they

won't." I thought I understood: Greg was okay, but we still had to pray for him, just in case.

At Christmas time Mom was in charge of the ward Christmas show. She prided herself on the musical ability of our family. She had taught us all how to sing—even harmonize—as early as the age of three. A typical family night began with Mom at the grand piano, all seven children seated around her with Dad at her shoulder. My favorite song was, "Hey Everybody, It's Family Night!" We would sing every verse and Greg and I even put actions to the words. The table in the middle of the room turned into a stage, and Greg and I would perform. The highlight of the upcoming Christmas program was sure to be Greg's number. Everyone in the ward adored him. He was only four but was more charming than a prince himself.

On the day of the big program Greg was dressed in a black tuxedo with a red vest and a green bow tie. His four-year-old voice started off softly, and his hands were clasped behind his back.

"I'm gettin' nuttin' 'for Christmas, Mommy and Daddy are mad. I'm gettin' nuttin' 'for Christmas. Cuz I ain't been nuttin', but bad."

"Come on Greg!" I called out. I stood off the side of the stage behind the curtains. "You can do it!"

The crowd laughed and it seemed to energize his performance. Greg realized that everyone loved him; he was the star and he began belting out the words.

"I put a tack on teacher's chair, somebody snitched on me. Spilled some ink on Mommy's rug, I made Becky eat a bug."

He looked over to me, emphasized my name, and chuckled as he finished.

"Bought some gum with a penny slug, somebody snitched on me. Oh, I'm gettin' nuttin' 'for Christmas . . ."

The music ended and Greg took a bow. Everyone applauded while he kept bowing—and bowing and bowing. My turn was next. Mom looked to me from the piano and motioned me to come on stage for my solo. I pointed to Greg who was still bowing and throwing kisses.

"Greg!" I whispered sharply. "It's my turn." He kept bowing. My mother stood up and went to offer her hand to help him down off the stage. He saw her and ran to the other side of the stage, the audience now exploding with laughter.

I could hear my mother, "Greg, get off the stage now." She was stern and—I could tell by her voice—frustrated with her four-year-old show-off. As he moved closer toward my end of the stage, I grabbed his arm and pulled him off.

I didn't want to perform in the Christmas program anymore. Greg

had already stolen the show.

Our family tried to live normally through months of chemotherapy; sometimes it seemed as if the whole family had the disease. Greg was sometimes moody and other times happy. The joys of medication. We were just glad he was in remission. Then, at the age of seven, I contracted chicken pox. This posed a major problem. Greg's immune system was still not functioning to its full strength. If he contracted chicken pox, it wouldn't be just a normal case; it could become so severe it would take his life. I had to move out for five weeks, roaming from friends to family to friends, finding a bed to sleep in every night—but it was never my own. After the worst part of my illness had subsided, I pleaded with my mom to let me come home. She said that I had to have fewer than ten chicken pox scabs. I waited and watched each little sore turn into scab and heal, anticipating the day I would reach the goal of "fewer than ten."

Twelve.

Eleven.

Ten.

Nine!

It finally came.

Mom answered the door and caught me by the arm as I ran past her. "Becky," she said, "don't go too close to Greg. It still might be dangerous." Mom's tone was firm. I nodded. I understood but was disappointed. I walked around the corner and saw Greg watching TV.

"Becky!" Greg called out jumping up from the couch and running to me. He opened his arms to give me a hug.

"No! Don't!" I said backing away. I was afraid of killing him. "Mom told me I can't touch you." I put my hands up and stepped behind a chair. Greg stopped and looked at me. His face turned to the floor and he fell on the rocking chair crying. "I'm really sorry," I said, as I ran down the hall to my room. I didn't want him to see my tears; I had to be strong.

It was Halloween morning and Greg was going to be Dracula. Kind of ironic for a kid with blood cancer. Mom made our costumes: a long black cape for Greg, a bunny suit for me, and a princess gown for my sister. Everyone else in the family was too old to trick or treat.

"Greg," Mom said, "we have an appointment with Dr. Medrano this morning." He still needed monthly check-ups. They left for his appointment, and I finished ironing Dracula's cape.

That night Mom put make-up on Greg—scary dark eyes and blood dripping from his mouth. I had fake bunny teeth, and my sister got to wear blue eye shadow.

"Cheryl," Dad said to Mom as he stepped into the room. "You need

to get on the phone." His voice sounded tense, and I looked at my mother anxiously. She picked up the phone by her bed. "No, dear," Dad said, "the phone in the study." Mom left the room and I looked at Greg. He shrugged and turned to the mirror to admire his face.

With our parents gone, Dracula and the fuzzy white bunny lit candles and put out bowls of goodies for any trick or treaters coming our way. As we grew bored of our costumes, we went and watched the Halloween specials on TV, waiting for Mom and Dad to come out of the study. I saw Mom walk out of the study with Dad's arms encircled around her. They went straight to their bedroom; no one noticed but me. I got up and walked down the hallway, where I could hear Mom sobbing. I knocked.

Dad answered the door.

"Where is Mom?" I said.

"Come in, honey," Mom said, inviting me to sit on her lap. I was worried, and I stared at her hands as she explained what had happened. "Gregory has relapsed," She said. "This means he has leukemia again. But this time, it has come back worse." She hugged me tighter, and I didn't know what to do. Dad had gathered the rest of the family, everyone except Greg; he was still watching cartoons. "We are not going to tell Greg tonight," my mother continued. "I don't want to wreck his Halloween. I want him to have one last night of being a normal child."

The chemotherapy started up again; Greg's cheeks regained their chubbiness; his hair started falling out—all the familiar symptoms that I had forgotten about. The relapse didn't seem to affect Greg the way it affected us. We were watching him die; he was going on with life. I worried that he wouldn't see Christmas; he talked about fishing in the summer. Greg even found a silver lining in his relapse: he thought it was pretty neat that his hair could come out in the handfuls just by giving his locks a slight tug. "Merry Christmas!" he would say as he pulled out a handful of hair and threw it on the shocked girls on the playground. I saw Greg's blonde hair turn into convenient confetti.

Later that day, walking home from the bus stop, I tried to teach him: "Greg, you can't do that."

"Why not?"

"It's just not . . . not cool," I replied, searching for words. But he didn't seem to care; he pulled out a lock of hair and threw it on me.

"Merry Christmas!" he laughed as he ran home.

The last thing I wanted for my tenth birthday was to spend it in the UCLA hospital. Greg had gone to L.A. for a bone marrow transplant. "It's Greg's only choice," Mom had explained. Although the doctors

hadn't perfected the treatment, Dr. Medrano had recommended it very highly. So, like it or not, I was there with Greg. As usual, my sister, my dad, and I had driven down for the weekend. Mom had been there for a month and was glad to welcome us back on our weekly commute. The whole scene was frightening: we went through a sanitation room before entering Greg's room, washed our hands, and changed our clothes. Bright yellow tape that said "Intensive Care" formed an X across his door. No germs allowed. The room was decorated with his Transformers, G.I. Joes, a stuffed guard dog, a computer, games, and flowers. Two colorful signs broke the monotony of the white walls: "Good luck, Greg!" and "Get well soon!" Every weekend many new cards or flower bouquets appeared.

Each time I returned to school, kids in his second grade class would ask if he was okay and when he would be back. I would say, "He's doing fine, and he'll be home this summer." But I wasn't sure about anything anymore.

Another month gone and the transplant went fine. His body had accepted the marrow, for now. In preparation for the transplant, the doctors had tested each of us to be marrow donors. I wished I would be the match, but I wasn't. I had O+; Greg had B-. My oldest sister was his perfect match.

Greg had now spent eleven weeks in the hospital. Fifth floor, east wing. He had a new poster that said, "We love you, Greg. 9th Ward." He knew all of the nurses and called them by name.

"Lisa," Greg said as she changed his IV. "Do you know that I love you?" He winked at her.

"You're an angel!" she smiled, rubbing his bald head. He was famous for winking at the nurses. They would always tease me, "Your brother sure knows how to flirt for an eight-year-old. Did you teach him that?"

"Of course," I'd say with a swish of my hair.

But I was scared: Greg didn't look healthy. I was uncomfortable around him, and I knew he could sense it. Some weekends he didn't even want to see me. "It's his medication, Becky," my mother would console me.

At this point in his declining health, Greg's eyes couldn't stand bright light because of the radiation treatments and medication. Mom bought him some cheap red sunglasses with mirror lenses. They covered his brown eyes, which were the biggest and darkest in the family.

But Greg made the best of it. "I'm Joe Cool," he'd say, holding up his thumbs like the "Fonz." The only time his tubes and IV seemed to disappear was when he would laugh; he was his old self. But when we went outside to the playground, Charlie (he had named his IV and monitor) would have to come along, still attached to his body.

Greg came home after the transplant had been classified as “successful,” and our family felt privileged to have a “miracle” in the household. His room was ready and waiting. I was sure that even our dogs missed him too. On arriving, Greg stepped out of the Chevy Suburban and looked over the whole house as if he had forgotten what it had looked like. He smiled. I stood close by holding his favorite pillow. He was home. What a relief. I’d been so afraid that I would never see that day.

Our delight lasted less than seventy-two hours. Mom and Dad had to drive him back to UCLA. His eyes were yellow, a sign that his liver was not functioning as it should. If needed, the rest of the family would come up later that week. It was the beginning of July, and school was out.

Word came back from UCLA: Greg wasn’t well; he had declined fast. The rest of us left for L.A. the next day. When we arrived, I volunteered to stay with Greg while the others went out to eat in Westwood.

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. “Just go and bring me back something to eat.” I sat in the rocking chair next to Greg’s bed. The television was on, and I pretended to watch *The Cosby Show*. I couldn’t help but wonder if this would be the end. Greg was taped with round sensors. Wires connected him to machines. I could watch his heart beat. “Just keep on beating,” I thought. Being in the hospital had been hard on him. One of the new nurses had ripped tape off his body yesterday to change the sensors, tearing his skin like paper. Greg had tubes running from his nose, and his lips were dry and chapped. His body was not working like it was supposed to. His stomach was full of fluids that his liver couldn’t handle, and it made his belly look like an expectant mother’s. I didn’t like how he looked. He was motionless. He just lay there. He watched TV. Or he pretended to.

I didn’t say much to him that night. But I wish I had.

The next morning Dad came down to meet us in the lobby. “You need to come upstairs,” he said, “Greg is getting worse fast.” He could hardly say the words. My heart beat wildly, and I dreaded what my mind had ignored for the last couple of months—that he might die.

I hurried to his room and looked in through the window. I couldn’t see him. Doctors and nurses surrounded him. Big machines, ones that I didn’t recognize, stood next to his bed. The main doctor came out and I shuffled aside.

He spoke to my dad quickly. “Greg has had a seizure, and it doesn’t look as if he will last long. His lungs are filling up with fluid faster than we can extract it.” The doctor was holding a needle, the size of a twelve-inch ruler. Dad motioned the whole family into the empty room across the hall.

“Greg isn’t going to last long.” He gathered us into a circle. “Mom

and I have decided that we don't want to put him on a respirator. We don't want to make him suffer any longer." Dad looked to us for support of this decision. I stared at the floor. This was all happening too quickly. We bowed our heads for prayer. I heard my father say, "Thy will be done, Father. We are letting him go."

I was numb.

The main doctor peeked in. "Gary?" he said. He motioned for us to come. Quickly.

I followed my parents. People rushing around. I heard noises and beeps. The voices of doctors and nurses grew louder. We stood in the hallway, waiting. I looked to my brothers' and sisters' faces for reinforcement that things were going to be okay. I only saw confusion and pain.

My mother grabbed onto my dad. "Gary!" she cried. The rest of her sentence was mumbled into his collar. She had spent the last three months by the bedside of her youngest son and here she stood in the hallway as he lay inside without her. "He's calling me," Mom said, hugging Dad tighter.

The door opened. The doctors and nurses filed out of the room, their faces fraught with frustration and failure. The head doctor nodded at my parents, and we entered Greg's room. The machines were gone and things were quiet. Sensors gone. Tubes gone.

Greg lay on the white bed, arms neatly folded over the sheets. His bald head cradled by his pillow. Eyes shut. My brother's bare chest was red, and markings of needles were left behind. One nurse on the left side of his bed quickly wiped away blood that had escaped Greg's mouth, probably hoping that none of us had noticed.

I had. I grabbed my mother and buried my screaming face in her stomach. I could barely feel her hand caress my head as her body shook. She latched on to Dad, and I stood between them.

I could barely stand to peek out on the scene. Greg's Transformers still stood in the window sill. His stuffed dog, "Bruno," stood guard, as Greg always had said, by the window. The signs were still hanging, almost mocking the hope we'd once had. "Get well soon!" But it was over. We had lost the battle. I never thought this would happen. I expected Greg to grow up by my side. We still had so much to do. Soccer games. Junior high. Seminary. Girls. High school. Driving. Dating. We would be there for each other. But now things had changed. No one knew what to do until we instinctively knelt around his bed, holding hands, and Dad offered a prayer once again. I opened my eyes and looked around the room wondering if my brother were still here. I knew he was.

After the prayer I touched his hand; it was still warm. We were then allowed a little more time to say good-bye before his body was taken downstairs to be prepared to fly home. I didn't want to go home; he

wouldn't be there. I wanted to pretend that I would find Greg in front of the TV with his thumb in his mouth. I wanted to crawl into bed with him. I wanted to yell out his name and hear him respond. I wanted to jump on the trampoline with him. I wanted to meet him in our fort, to follow him through our secret passages, to give him my password. Pretending was no use.

Two years ago Mom was in charge of the Easter fireside for the whole stake. And, of course—thanks to Mom—I sang a solo. After the program Sister Wills, a dear old lady with marshmallow-white hair, came up to me in tears.

"You are beautiful," she told me, hugging me close.

"Thank you, Sister Wills," I said, "so are you."

"I have to tell you something, my dear," she said. She brought her wadded tissue up to her eyes, lifted her glasses, and caught the tears from her right eye. "While you were singing that beautiful solo . . ." she paused, "I saw your brother standing on your left side. He was there, with you . . . a beautiful angel." She smiled at me and held my hand tightly.

Tears came to my eyes as I registered what she had said. Had my brother been there? I wanted to see him. For a moment I was angry that I had not seen him. Why had Sister Wills? If I had looked over my shoulder, would I have seen him?

Maybe.

I went to my father in tears, trying not to make a scene. "Dad," I said. He was waiting for my mother to stop talking so we could go home. "I have something to tell you," I said pulling him over to a corner. "Greg was here tonight. Sister Wills told me."

Tears came to my father's eyes as I explained and he sat down. "That is really special, Becky." He looked at me. "Does Mother know?"

On the day my brother would have turned sixteen, my mom called to remind me. "Yes, Mom, I know," I said. I was disappointed and a bit angry. I'd had a hard day, and the last thing I needed was for my mother to think I'd forgotten my younger brother, as though he was unimportant to me. Maybe she thought that I didn't remember him enough. Like visiting his grave. Mom insists on it every time we are in Utah. But that plot of grass doesn't mean anything to me. I don't remember him best by looking at a piece of stone.

Sometimes I deal with my brother's death by tricking myself into believing it never even happened. But then I see his picture. It all rushes back. The loneliness never goes away. At times I can feel him near. I know

he is concerned about me and watches over the things I do. He is a part of me.

Through the years Greg has lived on in my mind. Last year I was playing a “get-to-know-you” game with my Family Home Evening group at BYU. We took turns answering questions that were printed on cards. I was asked the question, “Would you trade all your memories if you could have all the money in the world?” I stopped. My mind flashed back to Greg—his bald head, his smile, his laugh, our hiding places, our secret passages, his toys, the doctor’s office, his three-wheeler, his eyes.

“No,” I said. “Never.”