

My Treasured Relation

Jodi Latremouille

I have always wanted to write about my cousin Shelby, but whenever I try, the words just don't seem to do justice to my cousin who never grew up. I want to make him live again in this story. But mostly, I would just really like to not cry today.

Shelby was born to my aunt, with too much life ahead of her, and so he was raised by my silent-stoic, gentle grandfather, Dave and Leona, the asthmatic, arthritic heart-young grandmother, with more love in her than those sick lungs could handle.

This little boy was never formally diagnosed, as he never got the opportunity to spend much time in school, but looking back now, I know that he did indeed have certain cognitive delays, which I did not, and still cannot, name. Nor do I want to. Socially-constructed deficiencies are not lovable. To me, he was just Shelby, even though on that level beyond the one that we talk about, we all knew that he didn't function in quite the same way we all did.

Shelby was diagnosed with something, though. He was diagnosed with leukemia at the age of five. His childhood years were a blur for all of us.

Waiting and hoping,
trips to Vancouver through the Fraser Canyon- and later, over the Coquihalla,
stays at the Ronald McDonald house,
fundraising projects,
months in isolation units,
missed school,
missed life,

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hours and hours stalking and thrashing in the shallow end of the backyard pool:
daring us to venture near him.

A wheelchair-bound, abbreviated trip to Disneyland,
Make-A-Wish dream visits with Hulk Hogan and Trevor Linden,
Birthday pizzas delivered by none other than
Raphael the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle,
and a failed autologous bone marrow transplant.

We were told that Shelby was going to receive a “miracle cure,” a treatment that my 11-year-old brain understood in the following terms: the doctors would take a massive needle that would suck the bone marrow from his spine, purge it of cancer cells with radiation, and return it back to his body with another massive needle, with the expectation that the healthy bone marrow would regenerate and grow, filling his spine with healthy bone marrow. My sister and I have always wondered if our matching needle phobias were inspired by bearing witness to our cousin’s medical treatments.

I learned the language of platelets and prednisone
and blood counts and spinal taps and we-still-have-hope
and in/remission/out and chemo and things-are-not-looking good
and be-nicer-he’s-sick and making time count.

No, wait a minute
Time counted us
by appointments
and remissions
and birthdays
and good days
bad days
and
one
more
day.

We counted everything
Except time.

I now understand this “miracle cure” autologous bone marrow transplant the way the doctors and all the adults in the room did, as what it was in those days, as more of a “last ditch experimental treatment.” Shelby spent three months in complete isolation while the bone marrow was being purged of cancer cells. In order to visit him, we had to wash our hands to the elbow with stinging, sharp-smelling disinfectant soap, walk through the sliding door into the closet-sized “isolation chamber,” wash our hands again for several minutes, don plastic shoe coverings, plastic clothing, and face masks, then enter through a second sliding door, careful, fearful, not to get too close. We could touch his hand, but hugs were out of the question. We just couldn’t risk it. He was my alien-cousin, a lovable monster descended from another planet, participating in an experimental study, peering out from behind his oxygen mask. Then I would hear his muffled, cheerful gravelly voice, saying “Hi, Jode!” as if he were just my good old, familiar little earth-cousin. At

age ten, he was much more subdued, resigned to the treatments, than he had been in the early years.

Six-year-old tornado.

“I am a DINOSAUR and I am going to SMASH YOU!”

Pierced.

“I am a LION and I am going to EAT YOU!”

Swearing.

“SHIT! I HATE YOU!”

Despising his cruel saviours.

“I am JAKE THE SNAKE and I am going to do a D.D.T. right on your HEAD!”

Restrained.

“I am going to ride my snowmobile all the way back to Merritt
and you will never find me again!”

My sister and I spent many hours with Shelby through the years, his contracted playmates, and I think our company probably was one of the reasons my grandmother was able to maintain some semblance of sanity. He was a challenging kid to begin with, prone to temper tantrums and boiling-over fits of anger. And having to be stuck with needles, of varying diameters, on a daily basis, was, and still is, unfathomable to me. Anyone who had to go through all of that would, understandably, be just a little “on edge.” My mother would send us over to Grandma’s house every day after school until we became too busy with our extracurricular lives; in the later years we would squeeze in weekend sleepovers and pool parties when we could. The two girls would play Duck Hunter and Super Mario Brothers for hours and hours on end, while Shelby wrestled in the background with his stuffed animals and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figurines, shouting out the play-by-play, occasionally jumping off the couch and squashing us flat-out under his roly-poly body, making us gasp under his weight, begging to be freed, to breathe again.

On the day of my 8th birthday party, all of my friends had come over to celebrate. Of course, Shelby was invited. It was a glorious spring day at the “Fox Farm,” our 5-acre mountainside hobby farm, perfect for badminton on the lawn and hikes up the mountain to the magical forest. My father had installed a rope swing in the woods about 200 metres above the house. All of the kids were taking turns. One of the less experienced “city slickers” lost his grip and launched himself into space, then landed softly, unbelievably, gracefully, like a ski-jumper on the steep landing slope, sliding down the leaf-strewn mountainside straight into an anthill. One girl forgot the only safety rule (to launch yourself *away* from the tree in a circular trajectory), and flew straight out from the tree, then straight back in, smashing into the tree trunk. We watched her float in slow-motion horror, and then cringed in sympathy, shielding our eyes and turning away, wincing at the inevitable “thud.” We turned back and peeled our hands from our eyes to watch her loosen her grip and slither listlessly off the rope into a weeping heap at the base of the tree. Only two casualties this time. Not bad.

Shelby was down at the house, as it was too difficult for him to hump all the way up the sidehill to the rope swing. I am pretty sure that what we did that day was my idea. One of us ran down to the house to grab a bottle of ketchup. We chose a “victim,” smeared the ketchup on her, and started hollering. “Shelby, help! Tracy fell off the rope swing and she’s bleeding!” I heard him,

out of sight near the house, yelling, “What? Oh no! I’m coming, Jode!” And we were all snickering and jeering, until we saw him emerge over the hill, panting and crying, wheezing, tripping over sticks, stumbling up, knees dirty, nose running.

Distraught.

Our laughter froze instantly to silence. He had brought a tea towel. I didn’t know what he thought he was going to do with that. I guess... I suppose... that was the funny part. It was just a joke.

For his 10th birthday, our family bought him a funny little voice-activated yellow plastic sunflower in a funny little plastic green pot that danced a herky-jerky hula, its funny little happy sunglassed face bobbing along to the Mini Pops singing their funny little-kid version of “Karma Chameleon.”

That flower was cool, man. Totally rocked that song.

In order to get it into the room we had to unwrap and open up the package, then wipe down every single surface with the disinfectant, including the batteries. The nurses brought it in for him, as that day he was having a “bad immune system day.” We smiled through the window as he tried it out, grinning from cheek to soft, chubby cheek. We could see him laughing through the glass, and in my head I could hear his hoarse, breathless chortle. My mom picked out that flower for him. I am sure she thought it would cheer him up. It did; she nailed it out of the park. He loved that flower. All the days of his life. Because you should never grow out of silly little things.

Shelby finally did make his escape.

We were called in to visit him in the hometown Merritt hospital.

I knew it was bad,
because any self-respecting version of Hope would have bundled him up in her arms and
magically swooped him all the way back up and over
the winter-blizzard highway
to Vancouver Children’s Hospital.

Bloated, drained, cushioned by crisp white pillows
and our false cheerfulness.
Distracted by niceties and pain.
We, the kids, protected, excluded.
Unaware but still knowing.

Just a short visit.
Tired. Ready. Calm. Barely eleven years old.
Selfless. Raspy.
“Have fun skiing tomorrow, Jode.”
Big, soft, squishy, forever hug.

We knew things were bad when we were allowed to hug him.

Wait, hold it, hold on, for him.
Cry in the backseat on the way home.
Look out the foggy window at the hazy, unending night.

Shelby died on a blowing-snow January night, at the age of 11. I was 12 years old.

I got my first menstrual period the day of the funeral. What a day for firsts. I wasn't particularly afraid or ashamed, as some young girls were back in the days before moms were supposed to be a girl's best friend and talk about, oh, about just absolutely everything! I had read about it in a book somewhere, and had some "samples" stashed in my bathroom cupboard. I was just, oh, just annoyed, awkward and lonely. I just wasn't ready to grow up, not just yet.

Shelby's neighbour
and best friend in the whole entire world,
a mature young woman-ish,
kind, gentle 12-year old
Robyn,
who didn't have to be his friend,
with two perfect, large fake front teeth
that got knocked out years ago in a biking accident
riding down "Suicide Hill" by our neighbourhood school,
who felt-penned a massive "Hulkamania!" poster for Shelby's best-day-ever
and who probably got her period (light-years) months before me,
and who I imagined would know
exactly how
to handle her newfound womanhood
gracefully,
(She didn't. She told me so years later.)
was beside herself after she returned from viewing his body.

His Vancouver Canucks jerseyed,
google-eyeballed Disneyland-Goofy capped,
painless body.

"That's the first time in his life that he has ever been alone."

She wanted to wait with him in that room until the service began.

Our great-aunt was asked to perform the eulogy, and my narrow little 12-year old self was disappointed in the choice, expecting that she just way too stuffy and stodgy to do my hilarious, ridiculous, lovely little cousin justice. My mom had written the eulogy- oh, it was just so perfect- and I didn't want it spoiled by someone who didn't know him just the way we did. I think back now and realize that my pin-curled aunt was probably the only one in the entire jam-packed room of 300 people who was tightly wound enough to hold it together for the entire speech.

And she re-called him to a “T”.

A “D.D.T.,” that is:

“I know that Shelby is up there in heaven,
riding his snowmobile
and doing D.D.T.’S on all the angels.”

Shelby was the exception. To everything. He was the beautiful little monster who reflected back to us who we really were. We were rude, wild, loud, unfiltered, imaginative, hungry, hurting, scared-cruel dreamers.

That is what love does.
It makes us want to do justice.
Without justice we are merely co-existing.
Waiting for the reward.
Labelling.
Judging- and moving on.
I will never move on.
I want to make him live again.
My treasured teacher.
My relation.
Alien-cousin.
Brother.

Heart-swelling baby dinosaur.
Lion.
Hulk.

Bio

Jodi Latremouille is a graduate student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. She is an entrepreneur and a social studies and literacy teacher.