

Where do the Sparrows Go When They Die?

by Casey Kokoska

A question I often asked myself as a child was, "where do the sparrows go when they die?" I didn't know the answer then and I still wonder about it. Now I see a dead bird silenced by some evil force, and I know he didn't die. Something killed him: the elements took him away, a lost soul in the night.

When I was six, my best friend was a boy on my street. We used to play in my sandbox, talking of things long forgotten by grown-ups -- like never growing up, or the monsters under our beds and in dark closets. His name was Tommy, but I called him Sparrow because he was small for his age. Its ironic to think of that now because he died too.

I remember the day I found out Tommy was dying. I waited in the sandbox for him, half-heartedly building the castle we began the day before. Without Tommy I was only half, so I waited for him for what seemed like forever, and it began to rain. Then I heard a distant ring from the house. About 10 min later my mother came out, sheltered by her umbrella, but her face was wet just same. We walked together to the house. Just before we entered, I turned and watched the rain beat down the sandcastle Tommy and I built.

Once I was inside and had a cup of hot chocolate in my belly, my mother called me to the table. She put her hands on mine. They were shaking. I immediately felt it: something had happened to Tommy. She said doctors had performed some tests a while back, and something showed up wrong. That something was leukemia. I didn't know what it was and I looked at my mother with confused eyes, but with knowing and heavy heart. She said that people who had what Tommy got -- no: what got Tommy -- had to go away. I didn't want him to go away. I wanted him to stay, stay with me.

The next day I had to see Tommy. I had to see if it was all true, so I had the bus driver drop me off at his house instead of mine. When I reached the door, Tommy's mom said he didn't want to see me. She had no idea how easily she could hurt a little girl. She broke my heart like a piece of cheap glass. I ran home in tears. After I returned home, Tommy called. He said to meet him at the sandbox after our parents went to bed, so I did.

He didn't look any different, maybe a little paler, but it was Tommy. He did want to see me. We talked to those subjects incomprehensible to adults, and all the while we rebuilt our sandcastle. Tommy said we could live in one just like it and never grow up. I believed him whole heartedly. There we feel asleep, engulfed in true friendship, surrounded by warm sand and watched by our sandcastle.

I woke up just before dawn. Our sandbox was like a desolate island surrounded by a sea of grass, interrupted only by the back patio and the street. A child's imagination is never-ending. The dew gave the imaginary sea a reflective shimmer, and I remember reaching out to touch the dew to see if it would make the make-believe water ripple, but it didn't. I turned around, and Tommy jolted me into reality. He was already awake, staring at the sand castle. I joined him, and there we sat, locked in the awesome magic the sand castle held for two small children.

Tommy broke the silence. "I'm going to the castle now."

We moved like robots, as if we knew what we were doing. I guess in some small way we did. "I'm going to the castle now. Come visit, I'll be lonely." I promised him him with all my heart that I would. Then he closed his eyes, and then my Sparrow flew away to where I knew at that moment all the other sparrows went when they died. And there he left me, holding a soulless, crippled bird in my arms.

I went back to Tommy's grave 20 years later and placed a small toy castle on it. On the castle I had engrave, "To Tommy, my Sparrow. I'll come to our castle someday, forever."

When I'm ready, I'll go back to the place where our sandbox was and imagine our sandcastle. Then my soul, like Tommy's, will turn into a sparrow and will fly back to the castle, and to Tommy, and to all the other little lost sparrows. A six-year- old again, who will never grow up.

<http://www.ntu.edu.sg/home/hblim/passages/sparrows.htm>