

Sandpiper

She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sand castle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea.

"Hello," she said.

I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child.

"I'm building," she said.

"I see that. What is it?" I asked, not really caring.

"Oh, I don't know, I just like the feel of sand."

That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes.

A sandpiper glided by.

"That's a joy," the child said.

"It's a what?"

"It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy."

The bird went gliding down the beach. Good-bye joy, I muttered to myself, Hello pain, and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

"What's your name?" She wouldn't give up.

"Robert," I answered. "I'm Robert Peterson."

"Mine's Wendy... I'm six."

"Hi Wendy."

She giggled. "You're funny," she said.

In spite of my gloom, I laughed too and walked on.

Her musical giggle followed me.

"Come again, Mr. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

The next few days consisted of a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, and an ailing mother. The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwasher. I need a sandpiper, I said to myself, gathering up my coat. The ever-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed.

"Hello, Mr. P," she said. "Do you want to play?"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance.

"I don't know. You say."

"How about charades?" I asked sarcastically.

The tickling laughter burst forth again.

"I don't know what that is."

"Then let's just walk."

Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages.

Strange, I thought, in winter.

"Where do you go to school?"

"I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation."

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She chattered little girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed.

Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood to even greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home.

"Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today." She seemed unusually pale and out of breath.

"Why?" she asked.

I turned to her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" and thought, My God, why was I saying this to a little child?

"Oh," she said quietly, "then this is a bad day."

"Yes," I said, "and yesterday and the day before and -- oh, go away!"

"Did it hurt?" she inquired.

"Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself.

"When she died?"

"Of course it hurt! I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off.

A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed, and admitting to myself I missed her; I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door.

"Hello," I said, "I'm Robert Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was."

"Oh yes, Mr. Peterson, please come in. Wendy spoke of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please, accept my apologies."

"Not at all -- she's a delightful child." I said, suddenly realizing that I meant what I had just said.

"Wendy died last week, Mr. Peterson. She had leukemia.

Maybe she didn't tell you."

Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. I had to catch my breath.

"She loved this beach, so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no.

She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days.

But the last few weeks, she declined rapidly"

Her voice faltered, "She left something for you, if only I can find it.

Could you wait a moment while I look?"

I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope with "MR. P" printed in bold childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues -- a yellow beach, a blue sea, and a brown bird.

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Underneath was carefully printed:

A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and a heart that had almost forgotten to love, opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," I uttered over and over, and we wept together. The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words -- one for each year of her life -- that speak to me of harmony, courage, and undemanding love.

A gift from a child with sea blue eyes and hair the color of sand -- who taught me the gift of love. This is a true story sent out by Robert Peterson. It happened over 20 years ago and the incident changed his life forever. It serves as a call to all of us that we need to take time to enjoy living and life and each other. The price of hating other human beings is- loving oneself less.

Life is so complicated; the hustle and bustle of everyday traumas can make us lose focus about what is truly important or what is only a momentary setback or crisis. This week, be sure to give your loved ones an extra hug, and by all means, take a moment... even if it is only ten seconds, to stop and smell the roses. This comes from someone's heart, and is read by many and now I share it with you... May God Bless everyone who receives this! There are NO coincidences!

Everything that happens to us happens for a reason. Never brush aside anyone as insignificant. Who knows what they can teach us?

I wish for you, a SANDPIPER!