



Flying Around Mountains

*Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age
The child is grown, and puts away childish things.
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies. – Edna St. Vincent Millay*

Yesterday morning as I was brushing my teeth, I heard a thump. I recognized the sound immediately. Another bird had hit one of our windows. I held my breath as I walked outside to investigate. Sure enough, a red-breasted robin lay on the red carpet beneath the window just outside our living room. As I watched, one of the robin's legs twitched then relaxed and rested limp upon the earth. I believe I saw the light go out of its eyes.

I've placed a dollhouse and a chair inside our living room against the glass; the chair is tall but not tall enough to stop the birds from trying to fly through those windows. We could place decals on the windows that would alert the birds, but we've never purchased them, hoping the birds would simply know to avoid the glass. "It's a matter of aesthetics," my husband says. "I don't want to stick anything on the windows." And so we live as the casualties die. Only two weeks ago, I found two small, multicolored birds on the red carpet. They were such beautiful, delicate creatures; the whole family felt the loss. My husband and our six year-old, Lily Rose, equipped with rubber gloves, carried the birds to the ivy in our backyard and gently placed them down. She said goodbye sadly but without tears.

As I studied this robin I thought, this was not a ritual I wanted to see become routine. Was he truly dead or merely stunned, as occasionally happens. I kept hoping that the next time I returned to check, it would be gone. It would stand up on unsteady legs, flap its wings for good measure, and eventually take off to join its pals in the nest. No such luck. Around dinnertime, the bird was still there.

That night I decided to read Lily one of The Little House On The Prairie books, and wouldn't you know, in the first chapter Laura Ingalls' dog died. Laura fluffed the dog's bed, he licked her hand and looked up at her with sad, loving eyes, then arthritically circled the bed three times, lay down, went to sleep and never woke up. I choked up.

"That's sad, isn't it Lily?"

"What Mommy?"

"That the dog died."

"Oh, I thought he just wasn't feeling well."

"No sweetie. He died. He was old." A moment's pause in the conversation followed.

I could hear Lily thinking,

"Candy almost died didn't she, Mom?" Candy is our nine year-old dog.

"Yes, she did, and someday she will die -- but not for a long time," I hastily added.

Damn! Why had I said that? Lily's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't want Candy to die," she said as she began to cry. "If she goes to the mountains, I'll never see her again!" My daughter decided at age three that the mountains are where we go when we die. She made that decision when she asked me where her two great-grandparents, Bobby Movitz and Zadie Goodman, had gone when they passed away. I took her pre-school teacher's advice and asked Lily where she thought they had gone, and when she said she thought they were flying around the tops of mountains, I nodded and said that sounded like a good place to be.

But four months had passed, and she was feeling potential loss more profoundly.

"I won't see Candy if she's flying around the mountains, will I Mommy?" Lily sobbed as the realization hit her.

I inhaled deeply. The mountains weren't enough anymore. I sat immobile, witnessing the concept of death taking hold in my little girl, remembering that I had been around her age when I began to understand the ultimate separation death brings. Many nights I cried myself to sleep visualizing my own parents growing old -- their hair turning white, their skin wrinkling, then withering away, leaving me all by myself when one day they just didn't wake up.

It's a scary notion for a young child -- scary as an adult as well. I worry about someday leaving my daughter alone in the world to fend for herself. I worry that she may die sooner than her time -- some freak accident, a disease. On the deepest level, I fear that heart break would kill me if that ever happened. How different is that fear from my six-year olds?

I rocked my child, letting her cry the sadness out. "Don't worry honey, everything will be all right," I whispered, but she didn't hear me, and in a strange way I felt relieved. I had made the statement out of habit, but in truth life can be sad. Dogs and people die. I was grateful to be physically there with my arms wrapped around her. Someday I wouldn't be.

I let her fall asleep in our bed with Candy lying on the floor besides us. She snuggled between her daddy and me, finally feeling safe enough and loved enough to succumb to sleep.

I forgot to check on the bird before retiring that night. The next morning, with Lily's tears fresh in my mind, I approached the window. The bird was still there -- dead. I was thankful Lily hadn't seen it. Holding two paper towels, I knelt down beside the lifeless body, and gently picked it up whispering apologies and goodbyes. In tears I walked to the hillside and tossed the creature into the ivy.

As I returned to the house I decided that in spite of aesthetics I would buy those "Do Not Fly Into Me, I'm A Window" markers. I would calmly explain to my husband that they were the only possible warning those birds around our house would ever have, and for their sake we would learn to live with the decals. As I drove to the hardware store I thought about how I would protect a few birds even as I knew I could never protect my daughter from the realities of life and death all around her.