

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Rathrae, and for the story Unremembered Loss.

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Compassion

When I see something that is hurt, compassion is not my first response. Ten thousand years of genetics cause my mouth to start watering. My society taught me to see another's misfortune as my opportunity.

And on that day, when I broke a wing and saw that boy walking towards me, I knew my life was over. It was my time to be the victim – that's just how the world works. He stopped. He bent down. I held my breath, waiting for the blow. Instead of hitting me, he slipped his hands under my broken body and picked me up.

"You poor thing," he said to me.

"I'm not poor," I replied.

He didn't say anything else to me, he just whistled, and I was in too much pain to want to push the matter. I don't know how long he carried me, I passed out a few times. Each time I woke the world had changed and the boy seemed to be walking a little faster.

All but the last time I woke. We stood in a white room. I could feel the sturdiness of a table under the boy's hands.

A man spoke. "Its just a dumb bird."

"He's not dumb and he's not just a bird. He's hurt and he need my

help. Are you going to help me or is my money not good enough for you either."

It was a while before the man replied. "Fine, bring him into the back room."

The boy carried me back. There was tenderness in the way her carried me, concern in the way he laid me down, reluctance in having to leave.

When I woke again I was in a box, laying on a soft towel, a gentle vibration pulling me back to sleep.

"Why?" I asked.

"Quiet boy. You go back to sleep." Then I felt him stroking the back of my neck softly.

The next time I woke we were in another room. This one was blue. A woman was speaking.

"Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy. Why don't you think?"

"I was thinking, Mom. He was hurt. He was in pain. He though he was going to die – I could see it in his eyes. I thought. I knew what I had to do and I did it."

Jimmy's mother sighed.

"It was my birthday money to spend. You said so."

That seemed to end the argument. Jimmy's mom left, leaving Jimmy and me alone.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that. She really does care, too. How's the wing doing?" He reached down and scratched between the feathers on the back on my neck.

"I'm fine. I should be dead." I squawked at him.

"Oh! You can talk." Jimmy's voice was much higher.

"Of course I can talk. I was talking to you earlier."

"Sorry, I only heard squawks before. It was probably the pain you where in. I'm so glad you're doing better now."

That's how Jimmy was. I was rude, he said he was sorry. I complained and he tried to make things better. I wasn't in any mood to learn about where I was that day. I was confused and I guess mad that I wasn't dead. That evening I learned more about Jimmy.

As the sunlight faded and the room filled with shadow, it also filled with sounds. The meows of a hungry kitten, the whimpering of a frightened puppy, the croaks of a toad replaced the silence of the afternoon. Soon though, Jimmy returned. The meows turned to a purr with a few scratches. The whine

to a playful barks when Jimmy tossed a ball across the room. And the croaks, well they stayed croaks, that just what toads do. Me, I just watched.

The next morning, after feeding each of us, Jimmy asked me, “Are you feeling better?”

“Not great,” I replied, “but better than I was.”

“That’s great. I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

Here it is, I thought.

“I’ve got to go to school. If Max starts to get upset, can you just talk to him a little and tell him that everything is going to be okay? He gets a little panicky sometimes.”

That, of course, was not what I was expecting. I didn’t know what to say so I just said, “Sure. Who’s Max?”

Jimmy said, “The cat,” over his shoulder as he ran out the door.

I spent the morning thinking about the sorry state I was in. I know what you’re thinking, I’m pretty selfish, I only think about myself. That’s exactly what I was when Max started crying. Oh, just shoot me and put me out of my misery. I was like that for ten minutes. I tried burying my head under the towel. I tried focusing on the clouds I could see out the window. I even tried squawking louder than Max was whimpering.

Ten minutes of that torture, that agony, but then I started hearing something else – fear. Max was not

just annoying, he was crying out for help. My shoulders weren’t just tense from the high pitched whaling, my heart was feeling heavy. Then I remembered what Jimmy asked me to do.

“Hey, Max. What are you worried about? Everything is going to be fine.” There I was, a respectable hawk talking to a cat. The cat, of course, answered with the most gut wrenching cry yet, and that’s when it hit me – it was a gut wrenching cry. I felt something for this cat.

I stood up, lowered myself down off the table and dropped to the floor. A shot of pain ran through my back and my wing’s tip rested on the floor – held there by the weight of its brace. I hopped over to the cage that held the cat – or kitten. It stopped for a second, its head tilted, its left leg encased in white.

“What’s wrong Max?” I asked. “Do you need to scratch and can’t move you leg?”

Max let out a tentative meow and lifted his other paw to the cage’s bars.

“You want out?”

“Meow.”

“Will you be good?”

Max took down his paw and meowed very softly. I was thinking about opening the cage. What was I thinking? What good could come from letting a kitten out into the same room I was in, especially since I was probably stuck on the floor and not in much shape to fight?

“Meow.” Low and long.

Part of me was yelling *no*, as I lifted the latch with my beak, but it didn’t matter, I needed to do this. The kitten bounded out of the cage. He sprinted around the room – jumping from chair to desk to bed. He disappeared into the closet only to return with a piece of clothing in one paw, which he proceeded to hold onto with all three paws while rolling over and over, the other sticking out straight.

I talked with Max all that day. It felt kind of strange talking to a kitten that didn’t talk back, but it also felt good knowing that Max was having a good time instead of being miserable.

Over the next three weeks, as my wing healed, I became more and more aware of pain of others as a steady stream of rescued animals pass through Jimmy’s room, but I really didn’t understand compassion until I met Mary.

It was a rainy afternoon. I had been taking care of the other animals while Jimmy was at school. When he came home he brought Mary with him. She was a quiet girl. When Jimmy introduced her to me, I said, “It’s good to meet you, my name is Silent-Upon-the-Air,” and Jimmy said, “I just call him Air.”

Mary looked at me for several seconds then in a voice that sounded like a gentle breeze in an oak tree she said, “Hi.” Then she quickly looked away.

I felt it. More than with any of the animals the Jimmy had brought home. I could feel deep inside of me that this girl was in pain.

I watched as Jimmy put a rabbit into her arms. I saw fear in her eyes, but then it changed. The rabbit's nose was twitching and Mary started to pet it softly. It buried its face into her arm and I saw the muscles in her neck relax and she sat down on the chair by the desk.

Jimmy left to get them something to drink. I just watched. A few minutes passed and then I saw a tear roll down her cheek. It felt like I was going to die. I wanted to help her, but I had no idea what I could do.

Mary quickly wiped her cheek dry when she heard Jimmy returning. The pain was gone from her face – she looked like a different person.

“Do you like the bunny love?” Jimmy asked.

Mary nodded.

The two of them sat there, talking about school, and bunnies, and all the different kinds of animals Jimmy had brought home. When I say talk, I mean that Jimmy talked and Mary mostly nodded and petted the rabbit.

I could tell Mary needed something, but what? I also felt like I needed to do something, but again, what? Then it occurred to me that Mary had been different with Jimmy had left the room. I decided that I needed to be alone with Mary.

“Hey, Jimmy. I bet Mary would like a snack.”

“Would you?” Jimmy asked.

Mary nodded. As Jimmy turned to leave. I could already see a

change in Mary, and in me. The door closed and she held the rabbit closer to her face.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked in my softest voice.

She turned her head and looked at me; then she nodded.

“Why are you so sad?”

She turned away and pulled the rabbit even closer to her face. Another tear escaped her eye.

“I don't know why, but I really want to know.”

She looked back at me. “No one wants to know. No one sees me.”

“I do. I see that you're in pain. I can feel that you're in pain.”

Mary's face seemed to tighten and then relax. She put the rabbit down in its box and then started walking towards the door.

“Please,” I said. “I don't know what I can do, but please let me try to help.”

She stopped and turned around. Her eyes had changed. They looked like the eyes of a predator. She spoke with a voice still quiet, but hard as stone. “Did Jimmy put you up to this?”

I tilted my head. Confused, I didn't know what to say. “Put me up?”

“Did he tell you to be nice to me, or are you getting secrets that he can tell his friends?”

I felt crushed, like the day I hit my wing on the wire and fell to the

ground. I sat down and put my head on the towel.

The room was silent. I think every animal in the room held their breath. I don't know how long it was – it felt like forever – then she changed. Gone was the look of anger.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “It's just that no one... I mean, everyone is so busy. There are more important things to do.”

“More important than you?”

The question just hung there. Mary didn't seem willing to answer it and I didn't know what else to say.

Jimmy came back a few minutes later carrying a plate with pieces of apple and cheese on it.

“Hey, Jimmy.” I said. “Mary and I are having a private talk, can you give us a few minutes?”

Jimmy froze. “Um. Sure I guess. I'll ... a ... I'll go watch a show. Let me know when you're done.” He left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

“Mary, I haven't known you very long. In fact, I don't really know you at all, but I want to. And you might not believe it, but to me you are important, and if I get to know you more you'll probably be even more important.”

Mary walked back and sat on the bed, right besides me. “Really?” she said. “That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“That's sad.”

Mary reached over, picked up a piece of apple and then offered it me.

“Thanks, but I don’t eat fruit.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“I bet the rabbit would love it.”

Mary smiled and gave the apple to the rabbit. “How about a piece of cheese?”

“I don’t know. Lets find out.”

Mary smiled even bigger and got a piece of cheese for me. It was strange, but I ate it because of Mary’s smile.

“Why were you crying when Jimmy left?” I asked.

She looked at her feet and in a week voice, even for Mary, she said, “I was afraid.”

“Was I that terrifying?”

“No.” Mary let out a soft laugh. “I was afraid Jimmy might not come back.”

“Why would you be afraid of that? He just went to get drinks.”

Because I’m not worth coming back too. I’m not very interesting. I’m not very pretty. I am a good listener, but so is that rabbit down there.”

“I think your interesting. I’d like to get to know you.”

Mary started crying. I felt terrible. I waited, but she didn’t stop. “I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

Mary sniffled. Her tears slowed. Then she looked up at me. “No, you said something right. These are tears of relief.”

I heard a strength in her voice. It was louder and very pretty so I told her so. “You have a very lovely voice.”

Mary smiled again. “I like you.”

“I like you, too. I have an idea. It’s kind of a strange idea, but what would you think about me going home with you?”

Mary started laughing and then she actually called out to Jimmy in the other room. “Jimmy, come here.”

Jimmy was obviously surprised by the loudness of Mary’s call because he came running and said, “What’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” She threw her arms around him and hugged him. “Can Air come home with me for a few days. Please. He said he wanted to.”

Once Mary released him, Jimmy shrugged. “Its fine with me.”

Mary was radiant like the sun rising in the morning.

I spent the next two weeks with her, until my wing was healed. It was a wonderful time. What started as compassion ended in love.

I spend at least one evening with her every week now and I’ve seen her grow and open up. It makes me feel so good inside.

I’m so thankful that Jimmy didn’t hit me with a rock, but instead changed me from the inside out.

by Doug Clarke

Progress

Like I said in my last newsletter, now its you’re turn to keep me honest as I work towards getting my novel edited and flushed out by the end of the year. To be on track I should have edited 35 pages by now. I glad to say I’m ahead of pace at 54 pages. I was also supposed to have written two more stories. I’ve just written one so that makes me a little sad, but it is a longer one and points to one of the human capacities that I value, compassion. It was fun to think about how a bird that had never experience compassion might react to being the recipient and then feel it himself. I’d love to hear your thoughts on compassion.

Okay, now its your turn to keep me honest. Will you congratulate me for being ahead on my page count, come down on me for failing on the story count, encourage me to balance the two goals, or just let me slide and say nothing. I hope everyone doesn’t choose the last one. Let me know at doug@agoodtale.com

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