

To See Lee Again

A person may die in a story, but through the story they never cease to live...

“Doctor Steve, do you think I could visit Lee (pronounced “Leh”)? Do you think it would help?”

“It wouldn’t hurt. It never hurts for someone to know that there’s another person that cares about them.”

And with those words, my mind and heart were set, though not wholly prepared for the days ahead.

For almost a week prior, Dr. Steve’s heavy heart had become apparent during our dinnertime conversations. Over rice and curry, he had shared the ongoing struggles of a particularly troubling patient, allowing us to share in his quandary, if only for a moment. Lee was dying. He didn’t have to die, but his despondent heart had begun to poison the rest of his already weakened body. Dr. Steve, a general surgeon at the Immanuel Lutheran Hospital, knew a great deal about fixing bodies, but fixing the spirit, that can often be the more complex and heart-wrenching task.

About five weeks earlier, Lee’s family had rushed him from his home in Anji to the hospital in Mambisanda after a conflict had irrupted between him and a relative. They say that in cultures dependant on subsistence farming, the life of a person is tied to the land. Yet, to maim or kill a person, especially a relative, over a land dispute—I cannot wrap my mind around it. In this particular scenario, as happens far too frequently here, bush knives had been involved, and the results were devastating. One arm was completely gone from the elbow down, the other cut deeply and completely paralyzed.

As severe as Lee’s injuries were, the damage to his psyche proved to be even more detrimental. In a land with few and costly academic opportunities, no access to formalized physical therapy or prostheses, and labor-intensive occupations as the norm, Lee hadn’t just lost his arms. He’d lost his purpose in life. How would he care for his family? His wife? His three children? And what would he do with his time? He could not read, and even if he could, what would he read? He didn’t have a T.V. to numb his mind to the world and fill his days. He did not have the finances, presence or audience of Christopher Reeves to triumph over his circumstances and inspire a nation. He *could* try to drink away his sorrows, but who would hold the bottle to his mouth?

Dependence would be the course of the rest of Lee’s life, and the prospect of this type of existence had left him utterly desperate. He had sunk into a deep depression. He had stopped eating and drank very little. Now weeks later, he was in renal failure and was slipping away with each passing day. Dr. Steve was at a loss. Each day he would go up to the hospital to offer medical advice, a bit of encouragement, some sort of fluids, and a few of Julie’s homemade cookies, and would return with a melancholy expression.

And so I went, unsure of what I could possibly do, but willing to do whatever I could. Sunday afternoon, I found myself in the Intensive Care Unit, which only distinguishes itself from the other wards in that there is always a nurse within yelling proximity, the patients have IV poles and there’s a suction machine along one wall. Upon closer inspection, one might notice the evidence of life-threatening illnesses and injuries on various parts of these critically ill bodies or see the intensity etched on the faces of the family members who cared for them. Otherwise, each ward resembled the next: same beds lined in a row, same cement floors, same walls covered with various lively murals of Jesus.

After checking with Dr. Steve to determine Lee's location, I made my way to a bed nestled in the far corner of the ICU. About eight people, family members of various sorts who had come to look after him, were seated on the adjacent bed and on floor along the walls. "Are you Lee?" I asked as I drew near. His eyes fluttered open, and a light entered them. Another whiteskin had come to visit him! A whiteskin *girl* no less! "Mi ting yu ken helpim mi. Mi traim lainim tok pisin, na mi ting, sapos mi ken stori wantaim yu, em bai helpim mi lainim tok pisin mobeta. (I think you can help me. I am trying to learn pidgin, and I think, if I can story with you, it will help me learn pidgin better.)" I said. He and his family smiled and offered me the wooden stump closest to his bed.

The first visit was brief. Lee's energy had already begun to wane, and he struggled to even keep his eyes open. However, his family encouraged me to come again that evening, which I did, this time armed with the Kool-aid some of my deaconess friends had sent in a recent care package and a few of Julie's cookies. More alert now, Lee was more than willing to story... about his children, about my own family and childhood, about his condition, about the murals of Jesus adorning the walls.

Over the course of our visit, I was able to persuade him to try two sips of the Kool-aid. Each time he would gag and subsequently groan for several minutes as his body reacted to the now unfamiliar habit of swallowing. The guilt I felt over causing more pain was intercepted by a memory, a memory of myself. I was a six-year-old girl with a tummy ache. In my child's mind, I decided that the solution to a tummy ache was not to eat anything at all. Why risk making it worse? Especially when nothing sounded good. Yet as time passed, the pain only intensified as gas began to overrun my little stomach. After several days, it became unbearable. A six-year-old cannot identify the difference between gas and significant danger and cannot express that difference to her parents. Therefore, I was taken to the doctor for a serious of scans and tests, through which the doctor concluded, "She has significant amounts of gas in her stomach, but I can detect no other problem. She needs to eat; small and gentle items at first, but that should help. It may not feel good to her, but it's necessary."

"It's necessary," I thought, as I watched Lee struggle. "If his body doesn't get fluid and nutrients, it will continue to wither. If he doesn't learn how to eat again, he will never survive." Perhaps it was a fool's hope that survival was even possible, but deep down I wanted it. I *wanted* him to live. I didn't want this to be the end. So I sat there as he tried to drink, hand on his shoulder, congratulating the effort and empathizing with the difficulty. Before I left, I promised to return again and encouraged him to keep trying. "Yu stap poroman bilong mi nau. Yu mas traim dringim samting. Bodi bilong yu i nidim dispela" (You are my friend now. You must try to drink something. Your body needs this.). Later, his family informed me with a smile that he had taken another sip after I left. This was a small, but mighty feat, an attempt at life, one of the last he would make.

I returned again on Monday, once again bearing a cookie and a drink. However, these gifts soon became merely treats for his family. Lee was beyond trying. The renal failure now left frequent marks of dementia and exhaustion, making us increasingly grateful for those rare moments of wakeful lucidity. Yet, even as Lee slept or rambled, the moments with his family were priceless. We laughed together as Lee would winsomely refer to me as a girl from one of the Northern tribes. We shared concern over Lee's abiding anger towards the relative who had taken his life from him. We described pieces of our histories. We took turns talking with Lee and comforting him as he endured the intense pain of his "phantom limb." Finally, I left once again with the promise that I would return again the next evening.

On Tuesday, our dinner was interrupted by the urgent news that Lee had taken a turn for the worse. We were told that in the process of trying to stand, he had collapsed. Dr. Steve and I hurried to the hospital. After examining Lee, Dr. Steve informed the family, “*yu mas save, sapos em no pulim win, mi no inap mekim samting.* (You must know, if he stops breathing, I can’t do anything now.) A pastor was there and upon hearing the diagnosis was asked to pray. He spoke a prayer asking God to banish Satan and save Lee from death’s grasp. I could tell Dr. Steve bore my same displeasure at this well-meaning, but potentially damaging prayer. Therefore, I inwardly rejoiced when Dr. Steve consequently reminded the family that God was God of life *and* death. Whether Lee lived or died, Satan had no power here. God would be with Lee through it all.

After Dr. Steve left, I stayed with Lee’s family for a few more hours, even as electricity once again abandoned the hospital and surrounding regions. In the freedom of darkness, the outline of her face illumined by a single flashlight, Lee’s wife confessed her frustrations and sorrow. She described how Lee had continued to express anxiety over not being able to care for his family. She had tried to assure him that they would be cared for, but he could not hear it. He did not want to hear it. She had tried to comfort him, but he would not be comforted. We talked about what the future might hold for her and her family. We talked about faith. She confided that before the fight, Lee had not been a church-going man. Yet, here in the hospital, many pastors had visited him. He knew of Christ’s love, but that still did not ease all the burdens of his heart. He needed time to cope with all he had been through, something he now did not have. Somehow, to him heaven seemed better than a life without arms.

When the lights returned, the family distracted themselves by asking me questions about America. What holidays do you celebrate? What’s your family like? How do people meet and marry? In return, they taught me several new words in Tok Pisin. All this attention seemed oddly placed to me, especially at a time like this, and I found my gaze habitually returning to Lee. Yet, he continued to sleep, somehow looking more peaceful than I had seen before. It wasn’t until I was about to leave that he awoke. I made my way back to his bedside. “*Lee, mi mas go nau, tasol yu bai stap long prea bilong mi.* (Lee, I have to go now, but you will be in my prayers.)” I told him. “Would you make a prayer now?” asked one of his brothers. Having never made a spontaneous prayer in Tok Pisin before, I was surprised by how readily I agreed. The prayer was slow, at times haltingly so, but the Spirit interceded where words failed. As we finished, I leaned over to Lee and said, “*Nau yu ken slip long han bilong God. Bel isi, pren bilong mi. Bikpela i holim yu long han bilong em. Jisas i dai pinis long yu, na em no bai lusim yu. Na mi bai lukim yu gen, tumora o long heven.* (Now you can sleep in God’s hand. Peace, my friend. God is holding you in his hand. Jesus died for you and he will not leave you. And I will see you again, tomorrow or in heaven.)” Lee looked at me with yellow eyes and responded in tok ples. Confused, I looked across the bed to his brother. “What did he say?” “He said, ‘I will see you.’”

I would not hear the sound of Lee’s voice again. When I checked in the morning, his family informed me that he had in fact survived the night, but he was still sleeping. “Good, let him sleep,” I thought. I assured them I would be back in the evening. However, just as we were finishing dinner, we received word that the nature of the visit had changed. Lee had died.

My legs seemed to have a life of their own as I raced to the hospital. Upon entering the room, I was met by the familiar site of family scattered across the walls. The

only difference was the tears streaming down their faces, and the site of Lee curled on his side with his eyes open, no breath. I greeted each of the members of the family, saying with my eyes and a handshake what my mouth could not. Their eyes reciprocated. As I made my way around the room, I noticed that one of the women was gently closing Lee's eyes. I put my hand on her shoulder and then on Lee's shoulder for one last time. Eventually, I found a place of my own on the cement floor along the wall and buried my head into my knees.

Soon Dr. Steve and Julie joined the mourners. Dr. Steve himself visibly shaken by the death of someone he had cared for as a doctor and as a person, expressed his condolences. He reminded the family that while tragic, Lee's death should not bring more tragedy. He earnestly implored them not to take vengeance. Julie too offered a few words of hope and a compassionate handshake to the family before the two made their way back to the house.

Then I watched. Through a blur of tears waiting to spill, I watched as they began to dress Lee and wrap a blanket around him. I watched as two of the women laid their bodies over his, one over his chest and one over his legs, and began the krai. I watched as the men too cried, rubbing their hands over their heads and faces, pulling at small tufts of hair. The wailing and keening was soft and lonely now, but would be joined by many voices in the days ahead.

I don't know how long I sat there. It felt like forever and not enough. However, eventually I rose, and walked over to Lee's wife and mother. I told them I would be praying for them and their family. I reminded them of what I had told Lee the night before. We would see him again. They endeavored a smile and said, "Na mipela tu bai lukim yu gen sampela de. (And we will see you again someday too.)" Turning towards the door, I was struck by the realization that I would not be able to make it to Anji for the funeral. I *didn't* know when I would see them again. I only knew *that* I would see them again. It was enough.

As I walked out of the hospital complex, I soon became aware of the evening rains pouring down from the sky. In my rush I had forgotten an umbrella. I didn't care. I stopped and let the rain wash me, each drop feeling like a cleansing tear upon my skin. I prayed and I cried. I cried for the family who had lost a son, a brother, a husband, a father. I cried for the violence and hatred that led to this tragedy. I cried for the futility of it all. I cried for the doctors who frequently find the limits of their medicine. I cried for the place where so much is dependent on the use of one's hands. I cried for the emotional starvation that had led to Lee's physical starvation. And I cried in joy for the hope of future reunions.

How is it that a person, a family can change you in a matter of days? Can touch your heart in a matter of moments? It is a gift. One I do not take lightly, and one I hope and pray that I can share.