

Teddy understood that he was dying of a brain tumor; at least as well as any nine-year-old could understand the concept of death. He switched on his Gameboy to play X-Scape as the morning sunlight bled through his bedroom window, casting bands of white light on his Spiderman bedspread.

His parents called him Teddy. Most everyone else called him TK, except his teacher who insisted on using full first names and called him Theodore Karl Mullins.

Now ten years old, he was eight when they discovered the brain tumor. He had complained to his parents of headaches and blurred vision. CAT scans revealed the tumor to be deep inside the brain, and inoperable, so the family agreed to radiation and chemotherapy. TK didn't get to participate in the treatment choices; it seemed adults always made the decisions. That was okay; he trusted them, most of the time.

Had he known he would go bald, how sick he would become after each treatment, and how other boys would tease him about his loss of hair, he might have refused treatment.

Death sounded weird to TK, more like something on a TV program. His parents said he'd go to sleep forever, and eventually, all his family and friends would be with him in heaven; he decided maybe it didn't sound so bad, especially at times when the pain was really bad.

"Teddy? It's time for breakfast! You'll be late for school!"

So what? He was dying; what if he didn't go to school? It wasn't like he was going to graduate someday. The doctors had told his parents, who told him, that from the time of the diagnosis he had two years at the most. He liked that his parents were honest with him even if the news was scary.

He didn't want breakfast anyway because he was still feeling nauseous from the last chemo treatment. "I'll be right down, Ma." He grabbed his coat and schoolbooks, pulled his favorite red beret over his bald head, and ambled down the stairs.

He poked at the corn flakes in his bowl, watching them float back to the top of the milk and poking them down again until they stayed there.

"Teddy, don't play with your cereal. Eat, so you keep your strength up."

He ate the cereal, mostly to make his mom feel good, then put on his jacket against the chilly October day and headed for the school bus stop hoping that Phil wouldn't be on the bus today.

"Hey, Baldy!" Phil hollered, as TK climbed the bus stairs. The back seat filled with Phil's friends erupted in laughter. So much for hope, TK thought to himself. Phil was a real jerk and a pain in the ass.

"Leave him alone, Phil!" One of the girls on the bus scolded.

"Aw, bite me, Nicole!" Phil shot back. Nicole shot Phil a look that would have been withering if Phil had a brain.

TK sat down behind the driver, shutting out Phil and his big mouth and visualizing himself as being healthy, with all his hair, as the captain of the soccer team, and surrounded by his many friends.

The doctors had taught him visualization, suggesting, or hoping it might make the tumor go away since they seemed helpless to do anything. TK loved to read and researched everything on his laptop about his tumor, visualization, and chemo. The tumor was still there, but the visualization stuff helped him ignore people like Phil, and sometimes dulled the pain.

The bus rolled to a brake-squealing stop in front of the school expelling a loud hiss of air. TK dashed out the door ahead of the other kids, leaving the wondering stares and taunting behind. All the other students ran toward the open school door while TK stood aside, watching them disappear as if the building were swallowing up a parade of ants.

A muffled rumbling sound made him turn around. Ten feet away sat a huge brown and white Saint Bernard. Unsure if the dog was friendly, TK moved cautiously toward it, speaking softly. As he closed to within about five feet of where the enormous dog sat, its great brown and white tail swept back and forth like a giant street broom, sending fallen leaves spiraling into the air.

The dog stood up and closed the remaining distance between the two of them in a playful bound, sitting down directly in front of TK. Its soft brown eyes, on the same level as TK's, seemed to peer into his soul. The dog's long pink tongue, hanging from its mouth like a slice of ham, dripped saliva like a leaky faucet.

TK decided to hug the dog, burying his fingers in the lush sienna and white fur. The warmth of the dog's skin and its musky doggy odor was like a tonic, making him shiver with happiness.

"I have to go to class, or I'll get in trouble," he announced to the dog as if it could understand, then turned and ran toward the school with the dog on his heels.

TK put on the brakes. "You can't come in, silly, but I sure hope you will wait for me after school."

The dog sat down, tilting its head as if it was considering what had been said. TK kissed the top of the dog's head.

"TK, please return to your seat! You may not get up and move about the classroom without asking my permission."

"Yes, Miss Allred."

"He's crazy, Miss Allred," Phil volunteered. "All that radiation has fried his brain."

"That will be enough from you, Phillip!" Miss Allred glared at Phil. "Another comment like that and you'll be in the Principal's office!"

"I was looking at . . . at my dog," TK mumbled.

"You don't have a dog, Baldy," Phil sneered.

"I do so! He's sitting by the door waiting for me! You can see him out the window!"

Phil and several others leaped from their desks and ran to the window as Miss Allred sputtered in a red-faced protest.

"There's no dog out there!" Phil declared. "Like I said, you're a retard!"

TK rushed to the window. Phil was right; his dog wasn't there, now.

"Theodore Karl Mullins, and Phillip Dalton! Return to your seats at once, or you will both be sent to the Principal!"

On the way to their desks, Phil whispered, "Nice looking dog, Baldy."

"Screw you, Dalton!" TK was devastated. It was bad enough putting up with Phil's teasing, and the laughter of his friends; he didn't need this embarrassment on top of all that.

All he could think about for the rest of the day was the Saint Bernard. He was so good at visualization that the line between imaginary and reality sometimes became clouded, but not this time; he knew the dog was real.

He decided to name his new dog Brandy, after the story he had read of a Saint Bernard who saved a man lost in the snow by letting him drink brandy from a small cask around its neck.

Arriving home on the bus, TK's heart quickened when he saw Brandy sitting in front of his house. He was going to say something to the other kids on the bus but decided not to.

Running across the street, he threw his arms around the dog's neck as Brandy lavished him with slobbery kisses.

TK tore through the front door. "Mom! Can I keep him? Can I keep him? Can I?"

"What are you going on about now, Teddy?"

"My dog," TK cried, "Brandy! He followed me home!"

TK's mother went to the door, led by TK's determined grip on her wrist, but there was no dog in sight.

"Is this another of your fantasies, Teddy?"

"No Mom, honest! He's real, and his name is Brandy. He was at school today, and he was here just now when I got off the bus!"

"Well, maybe he went back to his real home," his mother said.

TK walked dejectedly to his room mumbling, "This is his real home."

That night, TK heard his mother telling his father about TK's imaginary dog, Brandy.

"He's dealing with the idea of death the only way he can," his father said, starting to choke up. "This fantasy world is his way of coping with the knowledge that his young life will end soon."

They just didn't understand, TK thought, as he fell asleep. Brandy was a real dog. Sure, he was worried about death, but that had nothing to do with Brandy.

"Hey, Baldy! Did you bring your invisible dog today?"

TK dismissed Phil; he didn't matter anymore. When he got off the bus, Brandy was waiting by the swings. Running as fast as he could, he hugged the big dog tightly as a tear rolled down his cheek.

He was fifteen minutes late to class, explaining that he was playing with Brandy and lost track of time. Several students snickered as Miss Allred went to the window, saw nothing, smiled knowingly at TK, and returned to the front of the classroom.

Over the next months, TK spent every free minute with Brandy, running and playing, rolling in the grass, and taking long walks as he told Brandy what he thought death was like, and how heaven might look.

"Why can't anyone see you but me?" he asked Brandy.

The big dog sat silently, looking at TK, and wagging its tail.

"Okay, I know you can't talk; that's okay. I hope I see you in heaven someday. My parents keep telling me what a great place it is, so I figure they have to have dogs there."

His parents accepted his stories without question. His teachers and most of his friends concluded the hallucinations were a side effect of his treatments, as well as the growth of the tumor.

TK was one week shy of his tenth birthday when the end came. He dropped out of school when the headaches got so bad he could no longer concentrate on anything and was soon bedridden and on pain medication, but he would get up and go to his bedroom window every day to watch the school bus drive past the house. Brandy was always outside, staring up at his window. His life ended peacefully one night as he slept.

Under the slate-gray November sky at the cemetery, his family, classmates, teachers, and friends, their eyes swollen and red from crying, gathered on the patch of artificial green turf surrounding the site where his small golden coffin sat suspended on gray canvas straps, waited to be lowered into the gaping black hole.

The minister read a short passage from the Bible; a woman from their church sang Amazing Grace, and the mourners sobbed as TK's father removed the small crucifix from the coffin, and his distraught mother placed a single red rose on the casket.

The fall morning quiet was shattered by a mournful cry that started as a low rumble, like distant thunder, then rising in pitch and knifing through the barren trees to settle over the crowd of people gathered at the gravesite.

The people turned toward the anguished sound and saw a large sienna and white Saint Bernard sitting atop a rise about twenty yards away, its eyes riveted on TK's tiny casket, its howls of grief shattering the morning calm.

The End