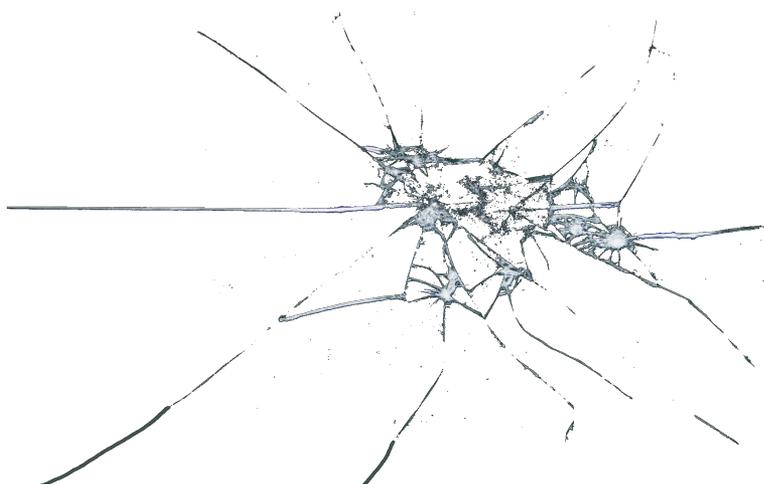


There's a hole in the world.

(For Lee)



There is a hole in the world today—a wound that may heal with time but whose scar I will always bear.

Many years ago (more, certainly, than I would care to admit,) I left my home and my family and moved some 850 miles away to Indiana. My plan was to go to college and work in ministry, and I did both of those things. I made friends, of course, many of whom are still friends today, but deep down...in ways I couldn't really articulate back then, I was *lonely*.

I can't tell you exactly how I *first* met my friend Lee Knauer-Straw (though it was just Knauer back then,) but the first clear memory I have of talking to her was at a birthday party for the girl I was dating. Lee was tall, quiet,

and striking. In a Hollywood film, a lonely boy like me would've fallen in love with that girl. But we weren't in Hollywood and romance was *never* the basis of our affection for each other.

I did eventually get my heart broken (a few times,) which only left me feeling more alone and things were happening back home that had me feeling powerless. I can't tell you why the grace that Lee brought into my world was *different* than my other friends, because I had good, gracious friends in abundance. But, as I look back on it, I think it was because Lee was *gifted* in a way that my other friends were not. She had eyes that could see past the *here and now* of you into your *potential*. She could look past all the nonsense of a 20 year-old boy and his foolishness to find a man who, *almost* successfully but most often completely *unsuccessfully*, would struggle and wrestle and crawl toward being someone *better*. She saw potential where I could only see the traps and snares I kept blindly stepping into. I was a schmuck and she was an angel of mercy in a dark time.

I mentioned once, off-handedly, dinners with my family at Steak and Ale and my love for the burgundy mushrooms they served with the steak. Lee invited me over and cooked me mushrooms. She wanted me to feel at home. I was invited to family birthday dinners. I was *included*. And it wasn't just Lee...that same grace was extended to me by everyone who

loved her. They took me in because *she* did. Lee brought dinner to me at work, she took me on grand adventures, and she *knew* me. She loved me. Often, in spite of me.

We laughed. We listened to music. We talked about art. We dreamed dreams of the future. She encouraged me to write. She listened to my stupid song lyrics. She shared her beautiful photographs. She cooked for me. She hugged me when I didn't even realize how badly I *needed* a hug...and it melted me. She loved me well. And her love healed me. It inspired me. It kept my loneliness at bay. And I loved *her*. More than I could ever really find a way to say.



I'm not sure why people tend to think that a man and woman can't love each other well and tap into a deeper friendship without romance being involved, but Lee and I always waved away those sorts of questions. We understood what we had and romance wasn't part of that blessing. In fact, it likely would have ruined it. But, as someone who loved her, there was a hope birthed in my heart that, sooner or later, she would find a man who *could be* all the things I wasn't meant to be.

And, thank God, Richard came into her world and welcomed her into his own. Getting to know the only man good enough to earn that place in her heart has been such a *privilege* and honor. Lee deserved the best and I think she got it.



Those of you that know Lee know that, when the news of her battle with cancer came, it was a blow. Not *Lee*, we thought. Out of us all, surely not *her*. She was the strong one. The one who *radiated* light and vitality. Surely not her. And we prayed. And we wept. We hoped. We comforted each other. And, for a while, hope seemed near.

Today, though, there is a hole in the world. We wear a scar that will mark us from now until we see her again. I don't know, of course, what *you* might believe about such things...but there is a **wild hope** within me. A promise that

I will cling to. The best stories always have their share of sadness and loss...and many of us will grieve by turning back a few chapters and reliving, through our memories, the joy of our time with Lee. The mad hope inside me, however, foresees a day when I turn the last page of my *own* story to find I've begun a brand new tale. And that new tale starts with a reunion. And what a reunion that will be.

Today, I hurt. For myself. For my friends. Most especially for kind Richard Straw...who *loved* my dear friend so well and endured countless hospital nights grappling with his own fear and heartache so that he could take care of that precious gift he had been given. I cannot imagine the weight he has carried, but he has carried it with grace and dignity. He has loved Lee well and I hurt for him. And I pray for him that the grace he lavished on my dear friend would be returned to him a thousand-fold and, over time, heal his wounds.

I hurt for Clayton and Chuck, Lee's brothers who only recently faced the loss of their Mom. I know all too well how losses that so quickly follow each other can leave you more wounded than you ever knew you could feel. Better than the rest of us, they know exactly what the world lost yesterday...and I pray for their comfort and healing. It doesn't come easily, but it comes in time.

Today, though, there is a hole in the world. The sky is a bit darker. The day a little

colder. When someone dies of cancer, we tend say they “lost their fight with cancer,” but I don’t think that’s true of Lee. It’s certainly how it feels, of course, but...that **mad hope** inside me chooses to think that Lee *won* her fight with cancer. She won by pushing through it to what waits *beyond*...and only the Author of her story knows what that will be like. So she turned the page. She stepped out of one beautiful tale into the greatest mystery story there is.

I’m certainly not the author of that part of the tale, but I’d like to imagine it begins with a feast of all the foods that cancer had robbed her of the taste for. And I’d like to imagine that there’s a book near her place at the table where she’ll read these words...and all the other fine things said about her over the years and in the years to come. And that she’ll see with new eyes just how much grace and love came *through* her to us. And how grateful we were for each moment she shared with us. I’d like to imagine there are familiar faces there, ready to celebrate her arrival.

Today, there is a hole in the world. But through that hole, I can still see her smile. I can still feel her warmth. As wounds go, I’ll *gladly* wear those scars. And I’ll pray that, for whomever God puts in my path, I can be the sort of light and grace that Lee always was for me.

J. Patrick Lemarr