

A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy

by Mary Sherman Hilbert

~~Narrator~~: Several years ago, a neighbor related to me an experience that happened to her one winter on a beach in Washington State. The incident stuck in my mind and I took note of what she said. Later, at a writers' conference, the conversation came back to me and I felt I had to set it down. Here is the story, as haunting to me now as when I first heard it:

~~Ruth~~: She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sand castle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea.

Wendy: "Hello!"

~~Ruth~~: (Nod, "hello", not really in the mood to bother with a small child.

Wendy: "I'm building,"

~~Ruth~~: "I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring.

Wendy: "Oh, I don't know. I just like the feel of the sand."

~~Ruth~~: That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by.

Wendy: "That's a joy," the child said.

~~Ruth~~: "It's what?"

Wendy: "It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy."

~~Narrator~~: The bird went gliding down the beach.

~~Ruth~~: "Good-bye, joy," I muttered to myself, "hello, pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

Wendy: "What's your name?" She wouldn't give up.

~~Ruth~~: "Ruth," I answered, "I'm Ruth Peterson."

Wendy: "Mine's Wendy." It sounded like Windy. "And I'm six."

~~Ruth~~: "Hi, Windy."

Wendy: She giggled. "You're funny," she said.

~~Ruth~~: In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on. Her musical giggle followed me.

Wendy: "Come again, Mrs. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

~~Narrator~~: The days and weeks that followed belonged to others: a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, and an ailing mother.

~~Ruth~~: The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwater. "I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat. The never-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed. I had forgotten the child and was startled when she appeared.

Wendy: "Hello, Mrs. P," she said. "Do you want to play?"

~~Ruth~~: "What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance.

Wendy: "I don't know. You say."

~~Ruth~~: "How about charades?" I asked sarcastically.

~~Narrator~~: The tinkling laughter burst forth again.

Wendy (laughing): "I don't know what that is."

~~Ruth~~: "Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face. "Where do you live?" I asked.

Wendy: "Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages.

Ruth: Strange, I thought, in winter. "Where do you go to school?"

Wendy: "I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation."

Ruth: She chattered little-girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed. Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood even to greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home. "Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today." She seemed unusually pale and out of breath.

Wendy: "Why?" She asked.

Ruth: I turned on her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" - and thought, my goodness, why was I saying this to a little child?

Wendy: "Oh, she said quietly, "then this is a bad day."

Ruth: "Yes, and yesterday and the day before that and - oh, go away!"

Wendy: "Did it hurt?"

Ruth: "Did what hurt?" I was frustrated with her, with myself.

Wendy: "When she died?"

Ruth: "Of course it hurt!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off. A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn-looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door. "Hello," I said. "I'm Ruth Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was."

Mom: "Oh yes, Mrs. Peterson, please come in." "Wendy talked of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please accept my apologies."

Ruth: "Not at all - she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant it. "Where is she?"

Mom: "Wendy died last week, Mrs. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you."

Ruth: Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. My breath caught.

Mom: She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no. She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks she declined rapidly " Her voice faltered. "She left something for you, if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?"

Ruth: I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, anything, to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope, with MRS. P printed in bold, childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues - a yellow beach, a blue sea, a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed: A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY Tears welled up in my eyes, and a heart that had almost forgotten how to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, "I'm-so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together. The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words - one for each year of her life - that speak to me of inner harmony, courage, and undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand - who taught me the gift of love.

Narrator: This story is a powerful reminder of how often we are blind to the gifts we are given by those persons who touch our lives. Sometimes even persons who we encounter only briefly. Through the story we are reminded to open our eyes and to open our hearts to those around us with precious gifts to give. Ruth was wrapped up in herself, in her problems, in her grief & sadness. She went to the beach to find some sense of peace and serenity. What she found instead was Wendy. Wendy was offering what she needed most, love and joy. But Ruth saw her as a distraction. She resented her presence, probably thinking that she was keeping her from finding the peace she sought from the sea. Sometimes we are not so different from Ruth. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in ourselves, in our troubles and worries, that we are not