I'll Make You A Rainbow

By Linda Bremner

There is nothing that can truly prepare you to lose your own child. Looking back, I've often thought the doctors should have written a death certificate for me as well as my son, for when he died, a part of me died too.

Andy was almost twelve. For over three years he had been battling cancer. He'd gone through radiation and chemotherapy; he'd gone into remission and out again, not once but several times. I was amazed at his resilience; he just kept getting up each time his cancer knocked him flat. Perhaps it was his pluckiness and grit that shaped my own attitude about Andy's future, or maybe I was simply afraid to face the possibility of his death; whatever the cause I always thought that Andy would make it. He would be the kid that beat the odds.

For three summers, Andy had gone to a camp for kids with cancer. He loved it and seemed to relish the week he could forget about hospitals and sickness and just be a kid again. The day after he returned from his third camp adventure, we went to the clinic for a routine check-up. The news was bad. The doctor scheduled a bone marrow transplant for two days later in a hospital 300 miles away from our home. The next day we threw our things in a suitcase and left.

One of the things I tossed into my suitcase was the present Andy had brought home from camp for me. A plastic sun catcher shaped like a rainbow with a suction cup to attach it to a window. Like most mothers, I considered any present from my child a treasure and wanted it with me.

We arrived at the hospital and began the grueling ordeal the doctors felt was my son's only chance. We spent seven weeks there. They turned out to be the last seven weeks of Andy's life.

We never talked about dying...except once. Andy was worn out and must have known he was losing ground. He tried to clue me in. Nauseous and weak after one of the many difficult procedures he endured on a regular basis, he turned to me and asked, "Does it hurt to die?"

I was shocked, but answered truthfully, "I don't know. But I don't want to talk about death, because you are not going to die, Andy."

He took my hand and said, "Not yet, but I'm getting very tired."

I knew then what he was telling me, but tried hard to ignore it and keep the awful thought from entering my mind.

I spent a lot of my day watching Andy sleep. Sometimes I went to the gift shop to buy cards and notepaper. I had very little money, barely enough to survive. The nurses knew our situation and turned a blind eye when I slept in Andy's room and ate the extra food we ordered off of Andy's tray. But I always managed to scrape a bit together for the paper and cards because Andy loved getting mail so much.

The bone marrow transplant was a terrible ordeal. Andy couldn't have any visitors because his immune system was so compromised. I could tell that he felt even more isolated than ever.
Determined to do something to make it easier for him, I began approaching total strangers in the waiting rooms and asking them, "Would you write my son a card?" I’d explain his situation and offer them a card or some paper to write on. With surprised expressions on their faces, they did it. No one refused me. They took one look at me and saw a mother in pain.

It amazed me that these kind people, who were dealing with their own worries, made the time to write Andy. Some would just sign a card with a little get-well message. Others wrote real letters: "Hi, I’m from Idaho visiting my grandmother here in the hospital..." and they’d fill a page or two with their story, sometimes inviting Andy to visit wherever they were from when he was better. Once a woman flagged me down and said, "You asked me to write your son a couple of weeks ago. Can I write him again?" I mailed all these letters to Andy, and watched happily as he read them. Andy had a steady stream of mail right up until the day he died.

One day, I went to the gift store to buy more cards and saw a rainbow prism for sale. Remembering the rainbow sun catcher Andy'd given me, I felt I had to buy it for him. It was a lot of money to spend, but I handed over the cash and hurried back to Andy’s room to show him.

He was lying in his bed, too weak to even raise his head. The blinds were almost shut, but a crack of sunlight poured in slanting across the bed. I put the prism in his hand and said, "Andy, make me a rainbow." But Andy couldn’t. He tried to hold his arm up, but it was too much for him.

He turned his face to me and said, "Mom, as soon as I'm better, I'll make you a rainbow you'll never forget."

That was the one of the last things Andy said to me. Just a few hours later, he went to sleep and during the night, slipped into a coma. I stayed with him in the ICU, massaging him, talking to him, reading him his mail, but he never stirred. The only sound was the constant drone and beeping’s of the life-support machines surrounding his bed. I was looking death straight in the face, but still I thought there’d be a last-minute save, a miracle that would bring my son back to me.

After five days, the doctors told me his brain had stopped functioning and that he'd never be "Andy" again. It was time to disconnect him from the machines that were keeping his body alive.

I asked if I could hold him, so just after dawn, they brought a rocking chair into the room and after I settled myself in the chair, they turned off the machines and lifted him from the bed to place him in my arms. As they raised him from the bed, his leg made an involuntary movement and he knocked a clear plastic pitcher from his bedside table onto the bed.

"Open the blinds," I cried. "I want this room to be full of sunlight!" The nurse hurried to the window to pull the cord.

As she did so, I noticed a sun catcher, in the shape of the rainbow attached to the window, left no doubt, by a previous occupant of this room. I caught my breath in wonder. And then as the sunlight filled the room, the rays hit the pitcher lying on its side on the bed and everyone stopped what they were doing, silent with awe.
The room was suddenly filled with flashes of color, dozens and dozens of rainbows, on the walls, the floors, the ceiling, on the blanket wrapped around Andy as he lay in my arms — the room was alive with rainbows.

No one could speak. I looked down at my son and he had stopped breathing. Andy was gone, but even in the shock of that first wave of grief, I felt comforted. Andy had made the rainbow that he promised me — the one I would never forget.