

My Brother's Keeper

By Pamela Fordham

Costa Rica wasn't on my bucket list. I didn't have anything against the country or the people living there, and I had even heard nice things about the culture and the carefree lifestyle, but I hadn't planned to visit. Even after my brother, Barry, moved there to continue chasing his dream of living and teaching abroad, I still had no interest (besides visiting him) in taking a trip to the place he described as paradise. He had invited me to visit many times, and whenever he sent videos of the turtles or talked about the easy access to fresh fruit, I could hear in his voice that he was happier than he had been in years. Maybe it was the stories he told me about the baby boa constrictors hiding in the bookshelf in the classroom where he taught, or maybe it was the audio recording he sent me of the monkeys "whooping" in the trees outside his window. Those stories smothered any desire I might have had to visit, and I convinced myself that he would return home for the holidays, and I would see him soon enough.

Frequent Facetime conversations fooled me into believing that although I hadn't actually seen him face to face in several years, the bonds of our kinship were as strong as ever - stronger than most. We weren't just siblings; we were friends. Our heartfelt talks had survived his three-year journey from Columbia, South America to Egypt to Costa Rica. Most conversations began with one of us saying that we had just called to say hello. The minutes usually stretched into story after story (preceded by the phrase, "Oh, I forgot to tell you one more thing..."), and I'd look at the clock and realize that more than an hour had passed. Despite the distance, we always managed to find our way back to the easy laughter that defined so many of our childhood days.

But I never visited.

Sometimes when I missed him the most, I told myself that he was the "big brother," so it was his job to come check on me. He didn't, and I forgave him time and again for choosing to be absent because he was living a "glorious life" on "his own terms." The price of doing so meant he missed birthdays, and holiday celebrations, and even getting to meet his grand-nephew - the first grandchild in our nuclear family, but he always called. We were connected, even if it was only through sometimes staticky phone lines.

My daughter was the first person to say something about the shakiness of the video messages he started sending. I had noticed the unsteadiness of his image, but I

thought that he might be walking, or in a car, or maybe the wind was blowing. For months, the images got more unsteady, and there was no denying the shaking was his hand. Simultaneously, our connection - in all its forms - was also fading. Even with the most advanced generations of wireless service plans, WhatsApp, and Facetime, something was wrong that couldn't be communicated on our devices. During one of our last conversations, he was in a car headed to a hospital in San Jose. I didn't press him for details because I had gotten used to the evading tone that sometimes seasoned his mood. Ironically, one of the things that defined our friendship was the unspoken awareness of the boundaries that existed between us. In time, he would tell me everything I needed to know because he always did.

I anticipated his call, telling me that he was on his way back to his apartment. I figured he would tell me he had eaten something that upset his stomach, or maybe he had been bitten by a bug, or maybe he was just exhausted and dehydrated. Each time he called me from the hospital, his tone shifted toward one that was more unfamiliar. At times, I thought he was angry or frustrated. He rambled from one brief anecdote to the next - the food was terrible, but the nurses were pretty. The bed wasn't long enough for his 6'8" frame and his legs were cramping. He assured me that a doctor would call to update me, and he gave me what felt like an endless list of first names of people who were involved, but most of them didn't speak English or were difficult to contact. I repeatedly suggested that he *just come home*, promising him (and myself) that he would be comfortable, and that I would make every effort to help him resolve whatever medical issues he was facing. I imagined him - our living patriarch - sitting on my deck, reminiscing about the "good ole days" with friends and family. But he refused to even consider coming home. I felt angry and frustrated about him involving me and simultaneously preventing me from helping because he didn't provide me with any concrete information. When I think about those conversations now, I realize our inability to communicate was because he was trying to tell me something he had never said before. *He was afraid.*

Then suddenly for three awful weeks, there was no connection at all. Within a few days of the extended silence, I became connected to his closest friends who were also dismayed and beginning to think of worst-case scenarios. Many of us had never met, but we had all heard of each other. Barry was the common denominator, bringing us all together. No one had spoken to him in weeks, so as a group of strangers we became allies in the investigation. At times we cried in frustration, wondering why he would play such a cruel disappearing act on the ones who loved him the most. Then in the next

moment we shuffled around the words to say the unspeakable things that might have happened because Barry would *never* play such a cruel disappearing act on the ones who loved him the most.

Keren, one of Barry's Costa Rican friends, said two powerful words that changed everything forever. Through Facebook posts and Instagram messages, she found Barry's daughter, Zia, and reconnected us all. I didn't understand Spanish, and her English words didn't provide the details that I needed, but the words *hospital, leukemia, surgery* and *infection* settled in between dropped calls. I later found out that Barry had developed an infection in his hand. The infection along with his overall deteriorating condition prevented him from using his phone, and no one knew his password. Keren was part of an even larger group of Barry's friends and colleagues at the Del Mar Academy. Dan and Verena, and so many others, sat with Barry waiting patiently and praying that his family would find him. They made sure he was never alone. When Keren connected with us, her softly spoken words - "just come" - broke through the language barrier, and landed in my ears and then my heart, capturing the deepest meaning of all the other words.

I arrived first and finally saw with my eyes everything he wanted me to know. I saw his phone on the table next to his bed. I saw the outline of his atrophied legs folded in right triangles beneath the sheet. I saw his discolored, swollen and useless hand. And I saw relief and recognition behind his half-open eyes. He communicated with desperate grunts and pointed fingers, helping me decipher words that I could no longer understand. He wrapped his hands around mine letting me know that it was ok to finally breach the boundaries and make the hard decisions. Later that day, my daughter arrived, and then Zia and her mom. We stood in a circle around Barry, singing, praying, comforting, and nursing him like avengers, united to protect his peace and uphold his dignity at all costs.

Barry passed about 48 hours after we arrived at his side. While 48 more years would never have been enough, those two days were filled with connections that I will cherish for the rest of my life. In that overcrowded room a flimsy faded green curtain was the only thing that separated us from 8 other families living through their own hellish endings. We were connected through an orchestra of unveiled and smothered sobs, dying sounds, cries of indignation and resignation, whispered prayers and chanted scriptures. In a distant country, where neither of us spoke the language, while I held his hand, Barry helped me understand what it meant to be "my brother's keeper." For a few

short hours, for the last time we weren't just siblings; we were friends, and Barry led me back to the easiness that defined so many of our childhood days as he took his last breaths.

In those two days, I realized that being connected to people isn't something that happens serendipitously. The words, "thank you" will never be adequate, especially since I've never met so many of the people I could thank: his colleagues who tarried in shifts with him at the hospital, thoughtful interpreters, everyone involved in carefully packing his belongings, Ana the driver with whom we only communicated via Google Translator, his students and neighbors, and even the other patients and family members in the hospital room who shared in our collective sorrow. I will always be grateful that despite the despair and finality in that room, even after he passed, his Costa Rican friends and colleagues stayed connected and helped me see paradise through Barry's eyes. I briefly experienced the transformative aspects of the landscape and culture, but I will forever be impacted because I was the beneficiary of the kindness of so many people who were in one way or another connected to Barry.