

I dreamed of a little boy with curly red hair, a boy who loved dinosaurs, Legos and me. His name was Peter. At just five years old, he was a master of disguise, a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle one day and Captain Hook the next. Through every adventure, every costume change, every hook and sword, there remained one constant—a worn pair of black cowboy boots handed down from his best friend Ben.

Peter stole my heart. His love for each great adventure flooded my imagination with dreams for his future. I dreamed crazy, super-sized dreams – dreams of Peter winning the most-valuable-player award in the Super Bowl or flying as the youngest scientist aboard one of NASA's shuttles. But I also dreamed of ordinary things that now will only come by way of miracles: Peter earning a high school diploma, finding true and lasting friendship, driving a car, and encountering his first love.

Five months before kindergarten, Peter was swept up in his most dangerous adventure of all, one I had never dreamed for him. He had been struggling with unexplained headaches and vomiting. After a long MRI and a trip to the local university hospital, a neurosurgery resident enthusiastically announced that Peter had an "impressive tumor" at the base of his brain. I learned a new, ugly word. Medulloblastoma. It meant brain cancer. Within days of the diagnosis my red-haired future Super Bowl star had surgery to cut out the tumor. Suddenly Peter could no longer talk, he could no longer walk, he could no longer swallow his own saliva. Now, even the smallest of my dreams for his future seemed lost.

Over the course of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and many, many months of physical and occupational therapy, the tumor stayed away and Peter slowly learned again how to talk and walk and swallow. I started to believe that he was going to survive this terrible disease. But he didn't come back the same adventurous and unstoppable boy I had said goodbye to months earlier before he was wheeled into the operating room.

I was grateful beyond words for Peter's life and returning health, but I felt a terrible ache in my heart. The ache grew in intensity every time I drove past a high school football practice. I yearned to see Peter on the field but knew I never would. That ache rose during every school assembly when Peter was overlooked for an academic award even though I knew he had worked harder than anyone. And deeper questions haunted me: questions about Peter's ability to live on his own, to find a job he loved, and painful questions about the possibility of marriage and family.

I felt guilty about the ache. How could I allow myself to feel so sad when Peter was right there beside me? Why couldn't I just be happy with what I had left? What was wrong with me? The answers came from the most unlikely place, from a mother just like me whose son had had a brain tumor. But unlike Peter, this mother's son did not survive his illness. Her words to me were surprising and deeply healing. "You've lost something too," she said, "and no one has given you permission to grieve. I give you permission."

Permission to grieve.

The dreams I had stored up in my heart for Peter's future had indeed taken a fatal blow and this mother was telling me that it was okay to feel sad about my loss. But her answer brought me to a new question. Would I let go of the old and take hold of something new?

Psychologist Ken Moses speaks of the importance of embracing new dreams when old ones have been lost. At first, embracing new dreams for my broken boy seemed beyond my reach. But as I grieved what was lost, I discovered I was able to take my first, tentative steps toward the possibility of dreaming again. I felt like Dorothy following the yellow brick road on a journey of discovery, wonder, and terrible danger. Upon reaching the end of her quest, Dorothy discovered her dream, one hidden deep in her heart all along but discovered only through peril.

What did I find at the end of my yellow brick road? I found Peter, a boy who cares deeply and profoundly about people; a boy who loves his family, his neighbors, his classmates and winning at chess; a boy with the best heart of anyone I have ever known; a boy with an unquenchable sense of humor and a keen mind stocked with dozens and dozens of knock-knock jokes. And I found a dreamer, a young man, almost seventeen now, who dreams of helping people by becoming a missionary or a teacher. And somewhere, somehow, deep inside, if I look hard and long, I can still see my astronaut and Super Bowl star.

Have I completely let go of my old dreams? Mostly. But every once in a while, I imagine a handsome, ruddy football player named Peter, with his face to the wind and the ball in his grasp, being cheered toward the goal line by thousands of screaming fans.

I've come to love Tolkein's Lord of the Rings. I love it because Peter loves it and because it's about some very ordinary people on a dangerous journey, people like me who would rather be safe at home than out fighting deadly battles. Tolkein writes about what I've learned on my own long journey: "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all the lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater."

And so, with Peter, I will keep loving. Keep hoping. And keep dreaming. \*



**Kathy's** passions are writing screenplays with her husband and professional partner Chris, and helping parents whose children are diagnosed with

brain tumors. She is co-founder of the We Can Pediatric Brain Tumor Network.