

Not The Last Word:

Reflections of a Lay Leader

“El Besador” — A Very Short Fictional Story



A hospital delivery room can be a scary place, with lights focused and instruments at alert, sterile and shiny. As the mother-soon-to-be is wheeled in, one can taste the tension, to be shattered only by her baby's first cries. But Lenny never cried.

Moments after his birth, the nurse rushed him out, saying that he was sick. But Lenny was not sick. Lenny was never sick. Lenny was simply different. Born without arms or legs, profoundly retarded, deaf, mute, and blind, Lenny was — Lenny.

I never met Lenny. He died eighteen months before I was born. But I knew his mother well, and she often told me stories of him. Wonderful stories. For his seventeen years of life, she loved him, held him, kissed him, fed him, clothed him, bathed him, read to him, sang to him, talked to him.

Lenny kept his body continually in motion, stretching and rolling, expanding and contracting. These were not spasms or responses to pain or frustration, as the doctors first thought, but deliberate actions by Lenny. For hours at a time, he would do a kind of crunch sit-up, until his abs formed bands of steel.

Lenny loved to lie in the sun. Bare-chested, he would flip himself over face down on the soft grass. In winter, he preferred his mother's sunroom, swaying gently in a velour-covered platform rocker.

When Lenny was two, his mother hired a new housekeeper, Lupita, who encapsulated the very heart of Mexico — family and life and love. Each time she passed by Lenny, she would kiss his forehead or cheek and accept from him a kiss in return. It was she who nicknamed him “El Besador” — the one who kisses.

Perhaps it was this nickname that enticed visitors to kiss and be kissed by Lenny, until people came to visit for no other reason, because Lenny's kisses were different. Not just different from other people's but different one from another. No two people ever received the same kiss from Lenny, and rarely received the same kiss more than once. When one was sad, Lenny's kiss bestowed compassion. When one rejoiced, his kiss offered joy. In despair, one received a kiss of strength. In confusion, one of clarity. In uncertainty, purpose. Lenny's mother said that for her his kiss was the faintest touch of a butterfly's wing.

Men and women, young and old, would often depart from Lenny weeping, as if, through Lenny, they had been kissed by God.

Shortly before Lenny died, someone asked his minister if it were not tragic that Lenny suffered so many infirmities. Yes, she answered, but without them, Lenny would not be Lenny. And Lenny, she said, somehow understands God in ways we can only imagine.

As I said, Lenny was never sick. One morning he simply didn't wake up. The doctors wanted to perform an autopsy, but his mother refused. We were blessed to have him with us for a while, she said, but now he is gone. Though she favored cremation, somehow it seemed a sacrilege to cremate Lenny's body. The casket, no bigger than that of a child's, rests in the garden of Lenny's church, surrounded by grass and dappled by the sun, beneath a paving stone engraved simply “Lenny — El Besador.”

I never knew Lenny. He died before I was born. But I can never forget him because, you see, Lenny is my brother.