



### ***Nathan's wish:***

My neighbor, Miss Sandy, is a Raptor Rehabilitator. That means she takes care of injured birds of prey, like owls and hawks, until they are well enough to fly again.

Every day I watch Miss Sandy mix medicines, give out food, and clean the big cages in her backyard. No matter how tired or busy she is, Miss Sandy always takes time to talk to me about the birds.

More than anything, I wish I could walk by myself. Then I would help Miss Sandy with her chores instead of just watching her. But I have cerebral palsy, and my muscles don't work well enough for me to get around without my wheelchair or walker.

One day Miss Sandy shows me a Screech Owl with a broken wing. Even though the owl's wing is set in a splint, she flaps against the sides of her crate, trying to escape.

"She'll have to stay here until her wing heals," says Miss Sandy. "What do you think we should call her, Nathan?"

The owl's bright yellow eyes flash with anger. "How about Fire?" I say.

"That's a good name for her," says Miss Sandy. "I hope Fire will calm down soon."

But day after day, Fire fights to be free, and I worry that she might hurt herself again.

At last Miss Sandy takes the splint off Fire's wing and moves her to a cage.

"Fire needs to practice using her wing a little at a time," she tells me.

As the weeks go by, Fire's wing grows stronger and she is moved to a bigger cage. Sometimes Fire ignores the dead mice that Miss Sandy puts into her cage and peers out at the sky instead. I can tell that Fire wants to go hunting for her own food. "How much longer will she have to stay?" I ask.

“A broken wing takes a long time to get strong again,” says Miss Sandy. “I believe you are as impatient as Fire, Nathan!”

Miss Sandy is right. I can't wait for Fire to be free. When I see a bird flying outside the window at school, I think about Fire and forget to listen to what my teacher is saying.

At night I hear a ghostly cry coming from Miss Sandy's yard and wonder if Fire is calling to her friends.

One day Fire's cage is empty. She is inside a small box that Miss Sandy is holding in her hands. “I'm going to put Fire in the flight cage to see how far she can fly,” Miss Sandy tells me.

My heart thumps in my ears as I follow along. Maybe if Fire flies well enough, Miss Sandy will let her go today!

I suck in my breath as Miss Sandy gently dumps Fire out of the box and into the huge flight cage.

Fire springs forward and soars through the air, looking strong and beautiful.

But suddenly she tilts to one side and begins to drop lower in the cage. Even though I squeeze my eyes closed, hear a soft thud as Fire tumbles to the ground.

When I open my eyes, Miss Sandy is shaking her head. And all at once I realize that Fire can never be released. Her wing isn't strong enough for her to survive in the wild.

“Poor Fire,” says Miss Sandy. “She wished so badly to be free.”

I turn away so Miss Sandy won't see the tears slipping down my cheeks.

I know just how it feels to wish for something that can't come true.

After that, the light goes out of Fire's eyes. She refuses to eat and doesn't even try to escape from her cage. “Please don't give up, Fire,” I whisper. But Fire sits as still as a statue on her perch.

There must be some way I can help Fire. I search on my computer for information about injured birds. I read about a Great Horned Owl who is nearly blind. She takes care of orphaned baby owls until they are old enough to be released.

Maybe Fire could do that, too! I print out the article and show it to Miss Sandy. “It's worth a try,” she says. “I have three nestlings who were orphaned in the storm last week.”

Miss Sandy puts the nesting box in Fire's cage. The baby owls bob their heads and make funny peeping sounds. But Fire does not seem to care about the hungry nestlings, or anything else.

I cannot bear to see her looking so sad.

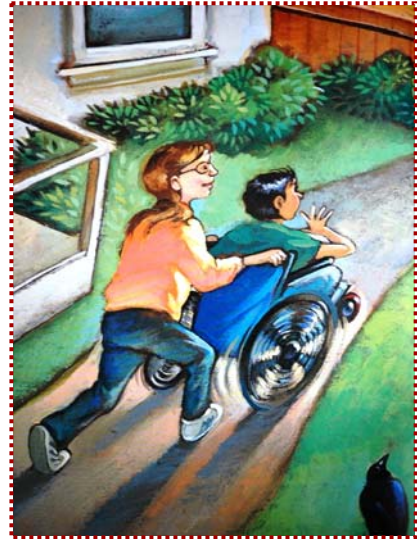
I stay at home feeling sorry for Fire—and myself.

One evening I hear a pounding at our door, and Miss Sandy comes rushing inside. “Come with me, Nathan!” she cries. “You must see Fire!”

Before I know what is happening, I am bumping along the path to Miss Sandy’s house.

Miss Sandy parks me outside of Fire’s cage. “Look!” she whispers.

I can hardly believe my eyes! Fire picks up a piece of meat from the ground, hops up to the nesting box, and stuffs the meat into a baby owl’s mouth.



Although Fire’s wish to be free can’t come true, she has found something important to do. And that gives me an idea!

The next day I go to Miss Sandy’s house and look around her yard. I may not be able to walk by myself, but I am going to find a way to help Miss Sandy with her chores.

I know the buckets are too heavy for me to carry, yet maybe I can fill the birds’ bathing basins with the hose. It takes a long time to untangle the hose and drag it to each cage. But I don’t give up until all the basins are full.



When I see the mail truck coming down the road, I hurry to the end of the driveway and wait for the mail carrier to give me Miss Sandy’s mail. I tuck the letters into my jacket pocket and take them inside.

When it’s time for Miss Sandy to feed the birds, I offer to stay in the office and answer the phone for her. The phone rings four times, and I carefully write down every message.

Before I leave for home, Miss Sandy reaches out and hugs me. “You were a big help to me today, Nathan,” she says.

I duck my head and my cheeks burn. But I cannot keep from smiling. Now I know just how proud Fire must feel!



Laurie Lears  
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