



12 HOURS

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You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.

—Joseph Campbell

Writing is a form of making, and making humanizes the world.

—Richard Rhodes

12 HOURS

By Shala Sommerville-Henderson

As soon as I walked into the unit, I could hear multiple call lights and patient monitors alarming. Nurses scurried from room to room, soothing patients with quiet voices. It was a scene of tightly controlled chaos.

"Oh boy," I thought. "It's going to be one of those days."

One of my patients had a massive growth on his neck and required intubation to protect his airway because the grapefruit-sized tumor affected his ability to breathe. Surgeons attempted to resect, leaving him with an incision under his chin stretching from ear to ear. Staples held it together, looking like a disturbing smile from a jack-o'-lantern. I introduced myself as his nurse, and he smiled a huge chimpanzee grin at me and flapped his hands and greeting. I asked him how he felt, and he pantomimed a frowny face, pointing at his endotracheal tube. I asked him if he was thirsty, and he nodded his head vigorously.

"Be careful of your breathing tube," I said. "You have a lot of swelling in your throat, so it must stay in place." He nodded solemnly in agreement then promptly reached for his tube to try and pull it out.

My other patient appeared skeletal, his skin drawn tightly against the bones of his face and his hospital gown hanging loosely around his thin frame.

"My name is Shala," I said. "I will be your nurse today."

"What?" He bellowed at me. "I don't have my hearing aids. I can't hear very well."

"My name is Shala," I yelled. "I will be your nurse today."

"Did you say your name is Cheryl?" He screamed at me.

"It's Shala," I responded.

"Shirley?" He yelled.

"Shala," I screamed. "Like Shala-la."

"Oh, I got it," he said. "It's Charlotte." I just shrugged my shoulders, nodding in agreement. Charlotte, it was.

"Hey, Charlotte," he yelled. "I think I have to poop. I have an infection that makes me poop a lot." I mentally sighed but smiled at him while helping him onto the commode.

I walked up to the front nurses' station and cornered the charge nurse and resource nurse. They cringed when they saw me approach, physically bracing themselves for what I was about to say. In my mind, I thought, "You have got to be fucking kidding me! Do you hate me? Are you trying to kill my patients?" Instead, I mentally arranged my thoughts and forced my face to relax. "I am worried about my patient assignment," I said in a neutral voice. "I do not think it is safe. My patients are split across the unit. Bed 119 is weaning, is on a sedation vacation and is at risk for self-extubation, and bed 306 has C-diff, and his pressures are soft."

They looked relieved when I didn't yell at them. "Oh my God, Shala, we know, and we are so sorry; we had no other option." The three of us decided that charge

would call the nursing supervisor to try to get more help, and resource would try and watch my patients when she wasn't helping the other 23 patients on the unit.

My intubated patient pressed his call light. When I walked into his room, he pointed toward his notepad and pen. Peering over his ET tube, he stuck out his tongue with intense concentration and laboriously wrote me a message. He grasped the pen and fumbled with it, then proudly handed me the paper. "I don't know if it is a fart or solids."

"Do you need to be cleaned up?" I asked. He nodded his head in agreement and wiggled his butt at me like a happy dog while I cleaned his backside.

The doctors lined up outside his room, peering at his naked form. Everyone stopped at the threshold for the required squirt of hand sanitizer before filing into the room. The medical student proudly recited the pertinent medical facts, including lab abnormalities, medical history, hospital course since admission, and care plan. Each doctor chimed in, stating something that sounded impressive but meant absolutely nothing to the patient, and they somehow managed to forget the nurse entirely. The pulmonary attending made eye contact with me and said, "Hey guys, I think we forgot something." The team looked at their notes quizzically, not understanding. The pulmonary attending sighed. "We should probably hear from Shala before we leave."

At that moment, a robotic announcement came over the intercom: code blue, K-3, room 103. The doctors sprinted out the door, and I saw the charge nurse and resource nurse rush off the unit.

When I checked on my other patient, his blood pressure was 70/40, and he said he felt lightheaded. I called the team but couldn't get through to anyone because they were at the code blue. I started some IV fluids to stabilize him, and I called the nursing supervisor to see if we could get any extra help.

"Hey, this is Shala, a nurse in the ICU. I'm calling to see if we can get any help up here."

"Why do you need help?" The nursing supervisor asked. "Can your charge nurse or resource nurse help?"

I told her both are at the code blue.

"Can your educator help?" She asked.

"Our educator has a full patient load already," I said.

"Can your manager help?"

"She got floated to the ED to help swab Covid patients," I said.

"Why do you need more help anyway?" She asked.

"I have a patient who is at risk for self-extubation, and my other patient is going to need a central line and pressers, so I need someone to watch my intubated patient."

"Don't you have CNAs to help you?" She asked.

I reminded her that the ICU was not allowed to have CNAs.

"Well, we don't have anyone to float to you," she said.

I mentally sighed, wondering why she didn't just say that in the first place, but I thanked her politely before hanging up.

When the doctors got back to the unit, I told them I started fluids and sent blood cultures on bed 306, but we would probably need better access. One central line, one arterial line, two vasopressors, and three bowel movements later, I was finally able to leave the room. As I walked toward 119, the pulmonary attending stopped me in the hall. "Hey, just so you know, your other patient is fine."

"That's good," I said. "I was just coming to check on him."

"Oh shoot," he said, "you don't know. He self-extubated during the code blue."

As I peered into the room, I could hear the ventilator alarming and see my coworkers putting oxygen on my patient. My jaw dropped, and my eyes filled with huge alligator tears. "Gah," I said.

"Oh my God," he said, "it's OK. Why don't you go eat some lunch, and we will watch your patient?"

I was secretly grateful to have the break room to myself so no one would witness my tears slowly dripping into my soup. I miserably ate my lunch, feeling that I had somehow failed despite trying my best.

Afterward, I walked into room 119 and pointed my finger at him. "I heard you were a troublemaker. How do you like having that breathing tube out?" He smiled at me smugly, raised both of his arms above his head, shaking them in victory, and then gave me a fist bump.

"I hated that damn breathing tube," he croaked at me. "Can you help me call my wife? I haven't talked to her in two weeks." As I left his room, I could hear him crooning into the phone as he talked to his wife of 40 years.

When I checked on my other patient, his blood pressure has stabilized, and he was resting comfortably in bed.

"I wanted to say goodbye before leaving," I said.

"What?" He yelled at me. "I can't hear you."

"I wanted to say goodbye," I yelled at him.

"Thank you for everything you've done," he screamed back at me.

"It was my pleasure," I yelled back at him.

"What?" he said.

I shrugged at him but placed one of my hands on his shoulder. His face relaxed in understanding, and he reached up to squeeze my hand before gently touching my face. "You are a good nurse!" he yelled.

SENTINELS

By B. D. Gardiner

There she stands,
Watching over her charge with expectant failure.
No choice in this assignment.
No time to establish natural rapport.
Affection, concern, warmth and tenderness, born from what she is.
The whole of mortal knowledge tested, refined through prior blazes, inherently yields
a deleterious recollection.
Yet she stands, as guardian until the final breath has dissipated throughout the
atmosphere.

There he stands,
Partially ruined as the scene unfolds around him .
Screams from broken homes, friendships torn asunder, echo through the halls,
memories he will never lose.
His strength is not enough.
His mind darkens in the dwindling light.
Afraid his own tears will mingle upon the floor with the discharged grief, his burden
buried deep within.
Yet he stands, until all noise is cancelled out by empty space.

There they stand,
Steeled together in silent aftermath.
Whirls of machines now ceased, failed interventions litter the ground.
Tragic stricken loved ones, specialists of care, emotional tourists, all departed.
No one, save these four.
The dance of electric life slows its cadence.
No words are offered.
Slower still.
A tender hand gracefully offers final reassuring contact.
There they stand, refusing the dancer solitude in the finale.

We stand,
Beings of our own emotion, thoughts, hopes, aspirations.
Strengthened by souls around us engaged in such endeavors.
Knowledge multiplied.
Skills passed as treasured heirlooms.
Peace in existence found in each added bond.
Laughter, YES laughter, mends the darkest wounds.

Together we learn.
Together we grow.
Together we mourn.
Together,
We stand.

TODAY I WATCHED YOU DIE

By B.D.Gardiner

Today, I watched you die.
When first we met, you spoke to me,
Joked with me, confided in me, dreamed for me.
Medications, scans, tubes proliferated,
Surgeries-too many, blood.
The best I... not I. More
The best "we" could offer.
Assessments? Flawless.
Interventions? Precise
Your fears? "We'll get you through this."
A septuplet of days would pass between us...
Your kind expressions... still.
Your sense of humor... silent.
Decisions made, family absent.
As your nurse, strong, stoic.
As your friend, a tear in private.
Today, I watched you die.

Today, I watched you die.
Who you were, I never knew
That part, your part, had already departed.
You were young, younger than I.
Family behind, tensions abound,
"Do this!" "No do that!"
"Well, what about me?" I heard
Amidst the vocality and duality of personalities,
A mother wept,
"My baby, please wake up!"
Vocalizations ceased, stillness fell,
Decisions made, a mother stayed.
As your nurse, quiet.
As a person, whispered in the stillness of mind,
"I'm sorry."
Today, I watched you die.

Today, I watched you die.
I learned of your kindness,
Though, you could not speak.
I learned of your generosity,
Though, you could not move.
I learned of your love for others,

Though, your embrace remained stationary.
Your family, the biggest ever,
Crowded in your room.
Words of affirmation,
Stories of love and laughter fill the air.
A devoted wife, flanked by daughters,
Holds tightly to you hand.
She whispers,
"It's ok. I'll be ok."
"I love you."
Decisions made long ago.
An electric line dances smooth.
As your nurse, kind, soft.
As a husband, father,
Pensive.
Today, I watched you die.

Today, I watched you die.
An act repeated far too oft.
Tragedy, stupidity, inaccuracy, or destiny.
Families present,
All alone,
Friends now sundered,
The world unwitting.
Yet I discern,
I was there,
You were in my expert care.
I dulled your pain, enhanced your breath
Cleansed your body and robed your wounds.
As your nurse, you meant something,
A moment least not forgotten,
I pray peace discovers you.

Why this?
Not for glory, not for fame,
For wealth? Please, my wallet is a sieve.
I am who I am, what I am, why I am
As your RN,
To say,
Today I watched you live.

NURSE IN WONDERLAND

By Daria Cohen

I've been thinking a lot about gorillas lately. The way they walk, the way they furrow their brows, the way the young agitate the elders by throwing straw at them then run away just to do it again seconds later.

Well. What I really have been thinking about is my grandpa. Ok honestly, it's been more about how the fuck I'm expected to survive in wellness when the shit filled sewers are over-flowing and the good are dying. But for the sake of now, yes, my grandpa. He reminded me of a gorilla growing up and for as long as I can remember whenever I see a gorilla I see him. Gorillas and ginger street cats. He always wanted to have a ginger cat but it was the one thing my grandma wasn't submissive over.

My stuffy gorilla with the bitten off ear used to sit with him on his old and peeling fake leather chair he'd spend most of his wakeful hours at, smoking his pipe and blasting classical music. All the worries in the world, and all the love, escaping him through puffs of smoke turned imaginary figurines. Self care 80's style.

My grandpa was a socialist extremist. I wish he were alive today. I wish a lot were different today. I file my taxes in October and put away my winter clothes in July. I anticipate the worst and ignore the stable. Restless mind syndrome with no cure in sight.

I celebrated my one-year nursing anniversary the other day by calling in sick. "Alright... I'll mark you down," Charge grunted. '*Feel better*' would have been nice, but niceties are for pussies. I had woken up with chest tightness and my brain in a fog. My mind was running where I couldn't keep up. My place in space was spasming uncontrollably.

The world was an astounding animal... a mantra held on repeat in the brain that needed another bolus from the imaginary lidocaine drip I connected to. "It's not cutting it doc, I'm starting to feel." Nurse dose that shit, friend.

Dragging the IV pole behind, I stop at a cafe to slurp on the most buttery and exquisite coffee. The taste turns burnt when the most evil comedy show appears on television. Stand back, and stand by... Stand by... A roar is heard across the city, the country. The clunks of barrels. The stomping boots. The call to arms. Direct orders. We can hide in an attic, behind a library, just for a couple of years until this blows over. What kind of journals would my children write? Let's turn the whispers into screams; disconnect the IV and rush out. Storm the streets. Fight and yell and expose the wrong like my grandpa would. But the IV is magic and the numbness and tingling, addictive.

I'm strangled with new anxiety I never even knew existed inside my being.

The nights turn into days turn into nights turn into disoriented to time, place, and situation. A new grad during a pandemic, still in shit-stained pull-ups, trying to nurse those suffering from a disease that could have totally been avoided.

Out the window I see the 2015 Audi that's been accumulating street cleaning tickets for months now is finally getting towed. I imagine the owner got COVID back in March and dropped dead. He must've lived alone, and worked as an Uber driver, based on the sticker on his deserted car, so no one really knew him or checked up on him. And now no one ever will.

I start to drift to sleep only to be startled by a piercing realization that I parked on a first Tuesday street cleaning myself. I begrudgingly go move my 1999 lump of Japanese steel. The sun blistering my already blurry eyes, I'm instantly regretful to be out in the universe. I walk in a vortex of delusion. I wonder if it's just me or I'm staggering. The sidewalk is so damn uneven. It's not me, it's them.

I parked by 7/11 and I'm overcome with an uncontrollable desperation for chocolatey goodness in the shape of a brownie. This needs tending to. I proceed with my purchase, sanitize my hands, open the ooey gooey diabetes and gobble up the damn thing like an experienced lesbian devours an experimenting bisexual. It hits the spot just right and I could just pass out right here, on the pile of leaves that surely has been pissed on by a llama. It would provide just the right amount of supportive cushioning while also peacefully transcending me like a cloud in the sky looking down at the destruction below me. Because above all, is good?

Giddy, I grab a pile of leaves and throw them at passersby. They don't seem amused. I high tail it out of there on hands and feet screeching and chuckling in delight and rush home: to the safety of my bed and the dogs with the rancid breath who stare at me while I sleep. It's how they show love, I can't blame them. Much like how I show love to my patients: It's 0400 am. They're in a deep sleep. The room is dark. I walk in and whisper: "What's your name? Do you know where you are? Why are you here? And who's the president?" They answer. I leave. The room is dark again. And they wonder: *Where actually am I?*

Sleep. Blissful serene relaxation, it's just what the neurosurgeon ordered.

I get to work in downtown Brussels in September. It's not freezing cold, certainly not shorts and sandals weather but that doesn't stop us. It's comfortable and we match and it serves the purpose of our day. Just get through the day... Trying to playfully avoid the cracks of the tiny uneven bricks on the sidewalk (so not to be eaten by crocodiles of course), we pass by a group of extravagantly made-up women wearing long flowy dresses and high heels. There are 5, possibly 6, of them and they at once look the exact same, but we can tell them apart. Even if we group them as the same: hot chicks we'd take home for a fun filled night of drinks, laughs, deep conversation, and intense sex. They have their own stories, their own secrets, and the things that make them more and less attractive.

Every time one of their heels gets stuck between the bricks, we chuckle (and we end up chuckling a lot) and run to help, trying hard not to choke on the laughter or trip and fall ourselves. We laugh at the insanity of the situation: grown ass beautifully unique women, about to collapse any second and somehow we feel responsible to break their fall. We're the pawns in chess. Protect the queen at all costs. Even if we get eaten. Even if we want to live. Even though we are free.

God Save the Queen.

We take them on a long walk to tire them and get them situated in Paris' fanciest outdoor restaurants. Here we give them free reign to order to their heart's content. Slurping oysters, chugging wine, double dipping their baguettes in peppered olive oil.

But once I know they are situated and appear comfortable, I find myself standing in the middle of the train track in Poland, where Jews and gays and POC were loaded up by the millions, to be taken to concentration camps. Taken to either work to death or gassed to death (luck of the draw). This isn't Auschwitz I know, nowhere near, but I think I can see them. I think I can feel them pulsating through my body. An invisible tattoo is forever etched across my stretch-marked breasts and every so often I can feel the sting. It feels like homeland to be a part of it, but it's painful to know that I am.

I have to run.

0243, I lay my head down long enough for the reboot of my brain to complete and clear. I just administered a heparin shot infused with flesh eating bacteria on my patient in 35. Soon Stella Jane in 28 needs her dose of IV Levetiracetam, the anti seizure goodness infused with live microscopic worms. All quiet on the Western Neuro front and we are nurses for dead bodies they keep sending us from the ED. "Q1 hour turns, make sure the bugs reach all the orifices and folds." We've got to decompose the bodies as fast as possible or else we don't get paid.

0523, we made it to Vienna tired and nervous. One more crossing, a canal, and we get to a giant ancient church, one that mysteriously wasn't bombed during World War II, as hard as Germany tried. Free prisoners live here, wearing cages on their heads, they aren't allowed to make eye contact with anyone yet we stare at them in disbelief and they stare back at us with envy. Their tongues are dangling off, only held by a tiny vein. It's the only thing keeping their tongues alive but not enough to function.

I'm on my way home knowing the kids will be wide awake and ready to ask me all about my night. But if my worries were a rainbow-colored talking parrot on my shoulder, it's a 600 lbs gray nonverbal sumo wrestler ready to win the battle of her life. But instead of on my shoulder she's on my chest. And I've become painfully hyper aware of my breathing.

Or, the sumo wrestler is me? And I'm weighing in at said 600 lbs with all the shit I've been eating as if every single meal and snack is my devoted last meal before my inhumane execution. So where can I fight someone with my fists and knees?

I'll avoid the topic all together and chose to read them a book, just not the famous fairy tale book that's been gathering dust on my shelf.

I was 3 or 4, who can even remember anymore, and there was a terrible storm outside. Cliché much? I can't remember what language my thoughts were in, *Hebrew, German, English*? But I knew I was terrified. The universal language of fear, where your gut readies to excrete the bile that burns your throat and your brain is hyper-focused on the impending doom in which you partially created.

I remember sounds that I was sure would make the building collapse and sights that I believed would catch my room on fire. I was frozen in bed, wanting desperately to crawl into the safety of my parent's bed, right between the two of them. Screw their need for alone time.

Somehow gathering up the courage, I threw on my fire boots to protect from the flesh-singeing blaze. I grabbed the blanket to turn me invisible, and my favorite gorilla stuffy (before his ear was chewed off by a mischievous puppy some 10 years later), and started down the long hall. I kept tripping and falling over my protective gear and I knew: if I fall one more time I will end up in the scary pit of endless unknowns, just like Alice did in her acid trip of a Wonderland. I didn't make it to my parents, and stopped short in my sister's room. The one who about 5 years after this memory would get an aggressive case of meningitis and disappear. I would be told she went to live with angels, but where those angels live I'm still trying to figure out. I don't even remember waking her, saying her name, or asking for help. She just let me in.

She turned on her night-light and pulled out that fairy tale book. The one that rests on my shelf, between old birthday cards, my children's certificates from school for being most joyous and most helpful, and an old license plate from Aruba. I've never been to Aruba.

I hate this book. The man will save the damsel in distress, living happily ever after, cooking meals for your husband who worked hard, hardly working. That kind of misogynistic bullshit. *Barf*. I refuse to read this to my daughter. I've convinced myself that not reading her this book will protect her from the rotting burning shit out there.

But as a 3 or 4 year old, the stories sounded nice. Comforting. My sister's words like soothing cocoa butter on a bleeding bug bite. Or a depressing song when feeling down, relatable enough to not feel alone but not too depressing to send you over the edge. Her voice perfect, even if the words might have been butchered, slurred, or made up. Even if her accent was different. Even if her skin was peanut butter mixed with Nutella and her eyes the color of a dead crunchy leaf on the ground. Her smell, an intoxicating one, made me feel safe.

And now, some 30 years later, waking to that same smell: It's my old dog with the UTI, who peed on my bed beside me. It's an unexpected alarm clock - but who doesn't like surprises? Time to wake up, and seize another day, one foot itching my ear like grandpa's favorite gorilla knows best, and one foot getting ready for the dystopian tango I have grown comfortable dancing to with the beautiful tripping women wearing long flowy dresses. It's time to bruise some knees.

THE PICKWICKIAN

By Leigh Porzel

The Pickwickian
Tubed and lined, CIWA of 12
Code Brown back killer

Thank God for vitamin A
Hope you have a nurse's aide.

ANNETTE

By Katie Kellner

“Let me put my new headgear on before we go. One of my granddaughters made this one, isn't it great?” Annette says as she places a faux flower headband around the large EMCO circuit lines atop her head. “It matches the new cards they all drew.”

Annette, registered nurse herself by trade.

Annette, matriarch of her large and caring family.

Annette, maternal caregiver to any soul that entered her infused-lavender-scented room.

Annette, whose heart had failed only medically.

“Let’s walk a little further today” she requested, as she did every day.

She walked a little further,

or pushed her pace a little faster,

doing a little extra in some way every day

not only in an effort to make it to transplant

but also forward-thinking to ease of post-transplant recovery.

Weeks went by

thousands of steps walked

hundreds of squats were completed

-together, at her teasing insistence-

Hours of conversation with all passersby sprinkled in the mix of our sessions.

Annette was nothing if not a bright light and nosy social butterfly.

Then

Annette’s kidneys failed.

Her other organs began to follow suit.

The transplant team regretted to inform her she could no longer be considered, and she was being taken off the list.

Which is easier:

Choosing the day of your death?

Or living each minute of each remaining day

relishing time with family

while also on edge

waiting for that one final ECMO circuit alarm?

My therapy orders were completed.

Annette and her family decided it impossible for them to choose the day of her death.

Her nurses continued to care for her,

shutting her door quietly with each exit,
dimming the
 pump swoosh pump swoosh pump
 sound of the ECMO circuit,
often with tears brimming in their eyes.

Every day, we waited for the lines to clot.
Every morning, I checked to ensure the lights of room 230 were low,
 the curtains closed,
 the glass door shut,
just as she preferred.

As with all matters,
Annette was not a quiet mourner.
Her pleas,
 her sobs,
 her laughs
filtered into the hallway for weeks.

One morning,
I entered the unit to the strong smell of bleach.
The lights of room 230 were ablaze,
 door wide open,
 walls bare
 TV blaring,
as environmental support finished mopping the floor and wiping the bedrails.

I noticed none of Annette's primary nurses on the unit.

The environmental support staff exited the room,
cheerfully singing. "Good morning! Room is ready for the next patient."

SHARON

By Leigh Porzel

Favorite memory of Sharon

I snuck into her room right at 1800, room 436 this admission. "Girl you made it!" her face twisted into a smile. If you didn't know Sharon, her face might make you pause. You'd stare at it, knowing it wasn't quite right but not being able to put your finger on what was wrong. Her face wasn't quite symmetrical, one half just didn't line up quite right. One eye was more sunken in than the other. It was smaller too. Her mouth and jawline looked normal when expressionless, but Sharon was never expressionless. She was animated and engaging, even while being crazy. When her face moved with expression, it was harder to see that something was off—not right. She smiled and excitedly waved me in, "It's starting! Get your big butt in here!" I laughed and came in. The joke was old but somehow still funny. Whenever Sharon was admitted, which was often, I'd try and come watch RuPaul's Drag Race with her. Her face would go soft and wide with awe as she watched. "Look how beautiful they are!" she'd say. The real show was watching Sharon's joy at watching the drag queens. Her lopsided smile was amazing and her loud staccato laugh was as infectious as it was hard to miss. Most people will never experience a tenth of the trauma that Sharon did, yet here she was smiling and laughing. She had her moments though. Every year on the anniversary of her daughter's death she'd be admitted for something. Her beautiful but not quite right face stony with rage and sorrow. Her outbursts flashed across her face quickly, stony to loud, angry, and jerky. She'd stare at you with her one good eye and you could feel her pain. She'd refuse dialysis, wanting to end it and join her daughter. I couldn't blame her.

Sharon's death

She was naked in the hospital bed. ICU A room 8. ETT poking out of her mouth, her face expressionless. Cooling pads were wrapped around her torso, EKG leads, cheeta leads and monitor in place, and a spaghetti tangle of IV lines ran into her central line. It didn't seem real. The asymmetry of her face, pronounced by its lack of expression, made me think maybe that's not really her. Five nurses surrounded her bed. As they worked they shared concerned looks and told me the doc was on the way. "It doesn't look good" they said. I was angry that she was naked. She deserved better. Don't they know who she is? She was my friend. My favorite patient. I was there laughing with her just the month before. She was telling me that my butt was too big and that I needed to marry my boyfriend because he was too handsome and someone was going to steal him if I didn't watch out. We were laughing so loudly that someone closed her room door. "Your ass arrives 2 minutes after you do, you know that right?" I laughed and told her she was awful and that she was the only one who could ever say that to me. We talked so much that day we missed RuPaul. We took a couple of selfies

together and now those goofy pictures are treasures. “She coded in the OR; they think she showered clots.” I held her hand for a while and talked in her ear. I told her I was looking forward to watching the next season of RuPaul’s drag show with her. I told the nurse that she would not die alone no matter what, I didn’t care if it was in the middle of the night they were to call me and I would come sit with her. I hunted down the charge nurse and repeated it. It was just a dialysis fistula revision, it wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. I came back the next day to work and as soon as I changed my shoes I went to check on her. She died at 2am. No one called me. I was heartbroken.

I WANTED THE DANCE CLASS

By Stevi Soles

I wanted the dance class. We were asked to rank our creative arts choices and dance was a solid #1, writing was a distant second, a mere speck in the rear-view mirror of my drive to pursue musical movement. Ahhh, but the Universe—and randomization— had different ideas for me.

Don't get me wrong...I enjoy writing. In elementary and junior high I lived for English class and my opportunity to share my latest imaginative adventure. I carry my eloquent works of childhood around with me in storage bins, changing their scenery from house to house, city to city. In 8th grade, however, I lost my muse.

[Someone with whom I've lost touch but I adore: Jessica—uniquely beautiful, outstandingly creative, delightfully eccentric Jessica. She opened a whole new world to me by age 10. David Bowie/Ziggy Stardust, women's liberation, a small town global perspective, and the excitement of having a well-stocked library no matter one's financial situation. Complete love and acceptance. Encouragement to pursue the road less traveled. Disregard for security and stability, an education in walking the groundless ground. Wild freedom to explore the environment—both concrete and jungle. She was unruly curls that insisted on frizzing incessantly; a musty, earthy smell that covered an imagination on fire. I didn't know what I had until it was gone. My life has been forever enhanced by the few intimate years I had in her presence.]

Writing became a stumbling block after that, something only to be undertaken for documenting lab results and composing treatises on religious conflicts and medieval politics. My efforts at any "free writing" were constrained to my journal where I confessed my sins, detailed my daily adventures and dreamed of my Utopia.

And so this was the personal history I brought to this class. In reflection now, I suppose I entered this endeavor with the naïve hope of regaining my childhood innocence. Our first prompt, "The stone trough was still filled with water..." saw me inspired with visions of castles and knights. I wrote with the heart of a child but tried to fill the page with adult intimacy.

[I want to touch the water, immerse myself in its stillness, feel it slip between my fingers, feel my fingers move easily without stiffness. I crave the chance to caress the stone, to get caught in its edges, to enjoy its rough sturdiness in contrast to the fluidity and flexibility of the water. The water refreshes my spirit, reminds of life flowing, cleansing, washing away my stresses.]

I was so proud of that first piece. I silently congratulated myself on still having “it.” Then I heard the compositions of my cohort... and I realized I was completely out of my league. They were darker revelations, describing a harsher reality, but they were intensely eloquent and moving. At that moment, my inner child said Peace out, people, there is NO WAY I can hang with this class.

But I soldiered on. I attempted to incorporate the class lessons and elevate my ideas. My focus became more and more methodical and academic. I thought my results were deep and metaphorical.

[When you knew summer was over: Melting, lethargic, unproductive, useless---escape home to go to work where it's so cold I can wear sweaters, layers, to keep warm...so when I leave again I can shed it all to release myself. Take it off, let it go, unburdened, lighter, freer, me-er.]

...until I heard the intimidating projects of others. They were so raw and real. They drew you into the drama of their daily lives so you felt it to your marrow. Their lexicons and sentence structures were impressive. I felt incredibly basic, even as I strove to expose more of my own vulnerability and suppressed creativity.

At this point in the sessions, I was increasingly wondering what the point of the whole exercise was. An attempt to alleviate burnout was becoming a stressor of its own. I started to question my own worth as I was surrounded by individuals who inspired me weekly with their professional and creative contributions. It became a struggle to remain committed to the process. Free writing weighed me down with the mental chains of performance anxiety. Suddenly grocery shopping with my mother became more enjoyable than attending class. As a Cancerian, I retreated to my crab shell and held my tongue when volunteers were requested to read.

Then came the threshold moment, literally and figuratively. The assignment was to write about a situation in my life that had a strong emotional impact. Overwhelmed, I told myself not to think, just to write. Listening to my heart, I shared a critical memory of leaving the one place in my life where I was happiest.

[It was snowy day in Northern Michigan. The trolls would have called it a blizzard but for us Yoopers it was just another winter day. Our little Pinto was loaded up with all the tangible comforts and securities that seemed to matter most; the functional items were already in a truck heading across the state.

I stared out the car window, searing every physical piece of memory I could upon my young brain. The yellow house with the peeling paint where my best friend Michelle lived, the corner store where I committed my first petty crime of candy snatching at the delinquent old age of 5, and my home—1004 North Fourth Street—heaven on Earth as I knew it. I had a posse here. I started school here. I learned to dance here. My soul was forever tied here. And yet we backed out of the driveway... slowly... excruciatingly... painfully... like maximizing the torture of a bandaïd removal. I felt my emotional ties snapping as we inched further and further away from all I'd come to

consciously know in my short life. This was my whole world, and I was leaving it.

Out of the driveway, snow falling harder, visibility shrinking, we turn the corner but I continue to crane my neck back, holding the precious sight of HOME as long as possible, clinging to everything I knew as ME until the last possible moment. Then it was all obliterated and buried in white.]

I was surprised at how vividly the image appeared in my mind's eye. While I struggled to translate my vision into words, the emotions that were inspired threatened to drown me. In sharing this piece with the class, I felt incredibly exposed and shy. The theme of HOME was discussed, as well as the provocation of nostalgia. I was encouraged to pursue the concepts further, possibly highlighting other moments of my life where that sense of comfort, warmth and confidence ruled. That simple recommendation sent me on a journey inward, on a quest to reconnect and rejuvenate the fallow, forgotten pieces of myself.

And just like that writing took on a new purpose and passion for me. Revisiting earlier writings I discovered nuggets of insight and clarity.

[Vivid early memory: I have a cassette tape more than a memory. "Daddy, don't you want to play with me?" in my small, whiny voice. In the background is the rich, warm rumble of my father's voice cooing at my new baby sister. He laughs because whatever she has done has delighted him; there's no acknowledgment of my request. I try again, more insistent and plaintive this time...still no response. Finally it's time to be more forceful, make sure my message is heard. I am louder, angrier, walking the edge of a temper tantrum as he tries to dismiss me with platitudes of patience. Suddenly my sister is crying...and the tape ends.]

Perhaps they resonated as hollow, simple words to others but, to me, they felt like glimpses of authenticity and self-discovery. I found healing in these rough and incomplete streams of consciousness, in the challenging and cathartic exercise of sharing my voice, in the mere presence of being in our stuffy top floor retreat. Moving forward I recognize how I am becoming more thoughtful in my expressions, more descriptive in my observations—both within and outside of class. Journaling is no longer merely a list of accomplished tasks or rageful diatribes against the unfair nature of life. I am discovering color and variety in my language, and in my life.

As I evolve, the assignments for class have evolved too. Now I am required to contemplate quiet moments and revel in positive delights. These requests coincidentally correlate with recommendations from my wellness counselor to "find the brighter side of life in these dark times." The struggle is even more real... how in the hell in the smoldering blackness of 2020 is anyone supposed to find light? As I am confronted with "Once upon a time..." as a writing starter, I realize I've lost the magic of our first prompt.

[Fairy tales? Really? This far in? Five days...5 days is all we have left until utter chaos. And who will get to gloat and who will burn? The epitome of

uncertainty...yet still we trudge on. There is no knight to save us, despite falling back into the dark ages. Idiocracy rules the land. And once again we pit brother against brother, a mother against her daughters...]

A story of positive delight which should be inspiring and uplifting instead wanders through such an extensive backstory that it ends up going nowhere. But the endeavor has still made its mark as I am now compelled to seek out these experiences. I have reconciled myself to my inner demons, can I give myself the grace to embrace my inner goddess and all the goodness she embodies?

I chased the blossoming full moon on my drive home from our last class, sensing myself budding with potential. At the start of this experiment, I was searching for outside validation of my skills, a common issue with my professional and personal life. When that didn't prove successful, I retreated out of the spotlight, hoping to simply finish unnoticed. But the thing is I want to live a life of significance.

As I consider what I want to be when I "grow up," I am called to advocate, to educate, to connect. That inherently means I need to take risks to make my voice heard—whether through writing or speech or any alternative means necessary. I cannot rely on the judgments of others if I want to inspire change. That being said, I now submit this document to you all for feedback and subsequent revision... So I humbly take that leap outside my comfort zone in regards to my creative writing. I have discovered over these last few weeks that it is not only a release but an inspiration. It is another opportunity to grow into a better me. I am incredibly grateful for the adventure. My snippet of my entry for the "Some of you will never go to Long Island..." prompt seems like a fitting final tribute:

For all the adventures I taken and new passions I've pursued, people ask if I've ever been afraid. I have been. I've felt the overwhelming panic, the paralyzing thoughts of "I can't", the violent upheaval of my stomach contents...yet I've taken a deep breath and jumped anyway. I've leapt and danced and frolicked my way into unique and soul-satisfying experiences. Life is too short and security is fleeting. There will never be a "right time" to explore, connect or express ourselves, no matter how long we wait. Nothing is holding you back but you. I, for one, am ready to break free of the psychological shackles!

AUTHOR BIOS

Daria Cohen is a Neurosciences Registered Nurse at University of Colorado Hospital (where she both ponders her life decisions daily and cries in her car, and where she enjoys the most crude and black humor with the best coworkers in town, laughing until her gut begins to spasm uncontrollably).

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Stevi Soles is a pharmacist with Children's Hospital Colorado and an adventurer who would like to be a mix of Dr. Strange and Indiana Jones. She has singlehandedly raised three incredible young men who continue to amaze her with their individuality and generous spirits, though they would argue they did most of the work. She looks forward to adding more color and vibrance to her daily expressions and observations.

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