

Against the Glass

By Will Moody

My friend died today.

I was sitting in a pleather chair while my eyes hovered over a faux wood floor in a place I knew too well—my oncologist’s office. Surrounded by imitation, it was easy for me to pretend that the life I found waiting for me there was fake too. I thought I could keep my lives separate. In one life, inside that office, I owned pain, anguish, and fear. In my other life, on the outside, I borrowed bravery, resilience, and tenacity. My existences began to blur.

Several years before I discovered that lump in my neck, I was preparing for the next chapter of my life. I was off to tour my dream school with family friends. Conveniently, they had a cousin that already attended the school, and she was charged with entertaining us that day. On the day of our campus tour, we were approached by a girl that was only a few years older than I was but had clearly overcome any teenage awkwardness. At 17, I was reaching the height of insecurity. Where my friends had started to fill out and have their acne replaced with bristling facial hair, I was gangly and nursing a pimple erupting from my chin.

Two thoughts immediately struck me. She was beautiful, and I wondered if she noticed my cheeks were turning an incandescent red. As she showed us her home, I learned that she was an artist. She enthusiastically showed us her life in a place that I hoped to call home too. We soon passed the buildings where she created her artwork. I had not seen her work yet, but I already knew it took after her. I left that weekend with nothing more than the perfunctory remark to call her if I ever needed anything.

Time passed. I did not get into my dream school. She was diagnosed with a rare cancer. Our lives had seemingly diverged. Then, a month before my college graduation, I heard the words that made my face slick with tears.

At 22, I was marooned on an island. I was too old to qualify as a pediatric patient but far too young to see myself in the patients around me. The structure of my life crumbled. The surety of tomorrow vanished. Stability became a memory. They offered support groups, social workers, even a buddy system. But, I knew that even if I went, I would end up nowhere, lost among a sea of white hair.

When it felt like I had no place to turn, I received a call. It was her. I was so grateful to talk to someone that could offer me more than just thoughts and prayers. I had received a mountain of sympathy, but I craved understanding.

I had begun to feel increasingly guilty. Because cancer is often the last disease that physicians suspect when a previously healthy young person reports that something is amiss, it is a long process to confirm the diagnosis. As I hurtled towards the three words I was desperate to avoid, I began to think that if it turned out that I did not have cancer, I had just put my friends and family through a traumatic situation without cause. My logic was horrifically flawed, but in my fragile state, it's what I believed. In a way, I wanted it to be cancer.

I asked her a question that felt wrong to have.

I wanted to know if she had been relieved it was cancer. The very thought was disturbing.

She said, "yes."

Instantly, the shame washed away. I was not alone. I had never expressed that feeling to anyone before. I rarely did after. Her compassion and validation helped me understand that there is no right way to handle an impossible circumstance. We left off the conversation by acknowledging that we would always be bound together by the same string of fate. That day, I started to feel a little more whole.

Later, I began to write. I asked her if I could use one of her pieces as the cover for my new website. She immediately agreed because she was the kind of person that found beauty in everything, and she was happy to help me share mine. I am no art critic, but I knew what I was looking at was special. Her work moved me. I came across an abstract rendering of one of her MRI scans. It depicted a tumor in her chest. When I was first diagnosed, I, too, had a large tumor nestled against my heart. I knew this was the one. I felt hers like it was my own.

Sitting in my oncologist's office, the plastic leather on the chair, masquerading as something it would never be, brushed against my leg. I thought about my friend. She was very ill. I had been searching for the right words to say for some time. While I straddled my two realities, I felt a tug on that string. I left a simple message. I wanted her to know how grateful I was to have been touched by her life and how proud I was to have her artwork representing something so important to me.

She passed thirty minutes after I sent my message.

Two days after that, I sat watching the live stream of her funeral. Speaker after speaker etched pieces of her soul into those who were gathered. Friends and family members spoke passionately about her life and what she had accomplished and valued. I realized that we are prisoners of our own inadequate experiences when we comment on the life of another. Each person was adding just a single star to the constellation of her life. She was a breathtaking artist and an effervescent writer, and we honored her memory.

That day, a duality sat amongst the pews. They do not attend the funerals of those who live to watch their hair gray. They remind us that when a life is cut short, we do not just celebrate the past. We mourn the future.

My eyes filled and emptied, like the ebb and flow of the tide. I caught myself imagining my own funeral. It was not that long ago that my death seemed like a concrete rather than an abstract idea. I thought of a quote I had come across early in my journey from the poet Jason Shinder, "Cancer is a tremendous opportunity to have your face pressed right up against the glass of your mortality."

At the time, the quote inspired me to live a deeper and more meaningful life. Seated there, I could feel the cool glass on my skin. I remembered that one day I would press against the glass and meet no resistance.

When I think of her, I picture her gazing at her reflection in that glass, day after day, year after year, earning wisdom no young person should have. She used it to change the lives of those around her and my own.

My friend carried a beautiful light within her. No one person could possibly capture the vivacious and gentle person that brought me clarity and forgiveness when I needed it the most. I know that the text I sent to her will always remain on "delivered," but there is not a day that goes by I do not think of her.

Now, when I look at my reflection, I see her staring back at me.

Works Cited

Thernstrom, M. "The Lure of Death." *The New York Times*, The New York Times. 24 December 2008. www.nytimes.com/2008/12/28/magazine/28lives-t.html.

Will Moody graduated from the University of Denver in June 2020. In May 2020, Moody was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. After undergoing treatment, he was informed that his cancer had returned in November 2020. He is currently writing and spending time with his family while he continues treatment. His writing also appears in Pulse, Aspiring Docs Diaries, and his blog, The Rest of Your Life.

© 2021 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*