

DEATH FINDS ME

A stranger found a place for her story

by Brenda

While on vacation in Thailand, five a.m. found me awake. I went to the hotel lobby to write while my family slept and the city began to stir. As I have said before, I am not a writer, and therefore I find it challenging and even cumbersome to find and create the space to organize my thoughts in a way that can express what is floating around in my head.

I was hoping to start writing a story on dementia. I literally had just written, "What toddlers, teenagers, the intoxicated, and those with dementia all have in common, is that they speak the truth. Granted it comes from different places, but they speak what is true in their heart." At that moment a young, very beautiful, and very drunk woman approached my table. She immediately began trying to engage with me, but struggling as I was to write I was completely uninterested. Yet despite my apparent disinterest, she was incredibly persistent in her attempts to connect. My mounting irritation remained unnoticed.

She asked what I was writing, so I took this as an opportunity to get rid of her and simply said I was writing about dying. My experience has been that in social conversation, people often get uncomfortable and retreat when I bring up death and my profession. But unfortunately this seemed to intrigue her more, and she pressed on. At this point I quipped, edging on rudeness, "I'm not interested in chatting right now, as you can see, I'm busy writing." Still she did not leave. In fact she sat down at my table and wanted to know more. I explained I was a hospice nurse and was writing stories of my experiences. By now I knew that the only way out was for me to move. But my ego was not ready to give up my territory, so I bluntly, and honestly with some righteousness, asked her if anyone close to her had died. Without hesitation and no change in her emotion she said, "Yes. My three-year-old son died five days ago."

My paradigm shifted so hard that my ego felt like it slammed into a wall. I immediately said, "I am so sorry." Again with no emotional change she said, "Well being a hospice nurse I thought you would have had something more profound to say than that." I didn't. I did know to become quiet and still and to lean in physically and emotionally. When she realized I wasn't going to flee and I was not uncomfortable, her bravado began to

soften.

I continued to stay quiet and asked only a few prompting questions like what was her son's name. It was Loyd. The more quiet I was, the more she revealed. Her name was Kristina and she was half Scottish, half Chinese. She had another son who was five years old. Lloyd was born in Thailand, and she was there to bury him. She was in the hotel where I was staying because that was where the father's child was staying. I assumed they were not together because of the anger she displayed when she briefly spoke of him. Yet at the same time I sensed she wanted to connect with him. This is a much more common human experience; people often hate the person they were married to or shared life with, but if we share children with them, there will always be a thread tying us to them. Kristina also revealed that she wrote children's books and it was clear she was educated and very bright. After a long moment of silence, she said that her son was electrocuted by picking something up on the beach. I did not ask details but just stayed as present as I could be.

Because of her raw grief, too much alcohol, and I'm guessing, lack of sleep, she was emotionally fragile, and it took the form of bravado and arrogance. This is what I had first seen. A few days before meeting Kristina, my daughters and I went to an elephant sanctuary. In order to be with the elephants, you had to be calm and cautious. As they sensed we could be trusted, they became more playful. But you had to remain aware. After all they are wild animals, and very large ones at that. I had felt this same kind of caution with Kristina-- no sudden moves.

Carefully I explained that I have worked with dying children and their parents, but I could not possibly understand how she feels, nor could most people in the world. A child dying is a different kind of loss. In fact in the English language there is no word for a parent whose child dies. When a spouse dies, the remaining person is called a widow or widower. When a parent dies, the child is orphaned. Even adult children with elderly parents like having this word to help give meaning to the grief they experience. Even more carefully I explained that the ability to love is often the only thing that tethers people to life when they have faced such profound and traumatic loss. And love is the only thing that can cocoon us while time heals or softens our pain into something with which we can live. It felt as though she was able to hear this, and after some time she said, "the thing I'm most proud of is my ability to love when I was not loved." Very gently I said that I was sure Loyd loved her. At this, a small amount of grief found its way to the surface for me to witness. But due to the intensity of it, it was only a fleeting moment.

She jumped to something more safe and asked if she could read one of my stories. Of course I chose one of my more recent and favorite ones--my ego still fully intact despite being humbled. She read it and asked a few clarifying questions while reading, and when she finished she said to me, "So where are you in this story? I hear that you care and that you are compassionate. I read the facts and it was informative and professional, but I don't see the person sitting across from me in this story." In her inebriated state of pain and grief that left her raw, she clearly saw one of my greatest weaknesses, which is to not allow others to see beneath the surface where I am vulnerable. She went on to say, "This is where the real story is." She was right.

This is when the hotel lobby attendant asked her to leave because she lit a cigarette. Her presence and state of being evidently made him uncomfortable, and the cigarette was an excuse to ask her to leave. With this she donned her cloak of swagger and bravado that she had come in with, and stood to leave. I stood as well, and at this, she pulled me into an embrace. When she realized I was not pulling away but rather leaning in, she broke for a moment and I simply held her. As abruptly as she embraced, me she pulled away and sauntered off.

As I told my daughters of my experience with this young woman, they, of course, had many questions, which I did not have answers for. My emotions and tears bubbled to the surface when recounting the story. I asked my oldest daughter, "Does death find me?" Her response was quick. "Of course it doesn't, mom. You're a hospice nurse! It's your awareness of it." This made sense, but I was left with a lingering feeling that death does find me.

When Kristina asked where I was in my stories. A number of things surfaced for me. The first was seeing how righteous and arrogant I can be. I really felt above being bothered by this woman. Of course we all need boundaries, but mine were not coming from a place of my safety being at risk, but rather my judging this woman for her public drunkenness and arrogance. Yes this can be valid, but I hope I question myself more the next time that I'm in an uncomfortable spot. Instead of that blink response of judgement and closure, I hope I can take a breath and stay open. Because look at the gift we gave each other in that brief encounter between strangers.

The other thing that surfaced for me was how Kristina's comment brought up in my face one of my weaknesses. Partly due to my nature and honed by my work, I am

comfortable sitting in the presence of others suffering. And due to diligence and openness of working on myself I am also comfortable sitting in my own suffering. Allowing others to be in the presence with my vulnerability causes me such deep discomfort that at times I can't help but pull away. I have been aware of this for some time, and I find this the most challenging. The irony of it, is this is what keeps me from the true kind of connection I desire. To receive is as important as to give. Maybe this is Kristina's struggle and why she recognized it in me.

What poked me the most--and I even find it difficult to write about it--is the thought of losing one of my daughters. I have grown a good life for myself, but my life has seen a lot of loss and suffering. I find myself telling myself I have lost enough and therefore it will not be a fate I will face. This is, of course, not true. For years now I have cared for dying children, which is hard, but I have the skill set for it. Guiding a child and their family through dying gives me a sense of purpose. Some children have such terrible diseases that their body can no longer contain them, and I accept this. The hardest for me, always, is watching a parent lose their child to death. We have no control over that. I have confidence in my physical and emotional strength, but if something could break me, I think losing one of my daughters, could be it.

Life is full of moments. I grew from this one, and I will hold it close.