

Saved

Sue Eisenfeld

Sleep had nearly drawn its shade when the dream washed over me.

We're walking back to the car, parked in the shade under one of the grand oaks that must be more than two hundred years old. It is a nearly perfect autumn day in these rolling Blue Ridge foothills, somewhere between Charlottesville and Lynchburg, Virginia. The mountain skyline is a reclining woman, the silhouette of hips and waist and breasts and neck, and the sky is vast and white; brilliant vermilion and ochres and burnt siennas paint the lower two-thirds of the landscape, the ground, the trees. We admire the view, my husband Neil and I, and remark about the beauty of this terrain, the regenerative nature of nature, the near-immortality of trees. We've just come from my friend Julie's funeral. We've just witnessed our friend being lowered into the ground.

I always knew this day would arrive. The first time I met Julie—tall as an oak, fit as an Olympian, a fast talker with a quick and irreverent wit—she announced to the class, via the personal essay she submitted for critique, that she had less than half of 1 per cent chance of living five more years. She had Stage IV breast cancer and, as she always clarified for people, there is no Stage V. Her tie-dyed T-shirt stood out among a sea of pressed shirts and dress pants, and our first conversation revolved around the strange cherry smell that centipedes give off when you hold them.

I had signed up for this class, along with some art, photography, and meditation classes, as part of my campaign to start up some of my hobbies again, meet new women friends, and form more of a community for

myself—that married-but-childless-professional-woman's syndrome in a town full of transients. She had come to chronicle her waning life, to get her stories out before she began "circling the drain." She was thirty-three, three months older than I, and we would tango some type of friendship dance for three more years.

The vision came to me like a movie reel after returning home from my last visit with her, in early December, returning from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts in Amherst, Virginia, where paths lined with split-rail fence frame the lovely rise and fall of unspoiled countryside, to see where she had been awarded her third writing fellowship, to see this place that was nurturing her, her final pieces of writing, and where she had encouraged me to apply and follow in her footsteps. I had hugged her goodbye as I always did, my arms stretched high over her great form, cheek to cheek, boobs meshed together, but not too close. And I smoothed my hand down her woollen arm and told her to take care of herself. She didn't smile. I didn't know I would never see her again, but each time I left her I always wondered if it was the last.

I was always intentional with Julie. Although you can never be sure your friends will be around for another weekend, I felt safe in breaking plans with nearly anyone else to be with her instead—a quiet evening in the courtyard of an art gallery with her and her partner, Karen, listening to bluegrass; an evening at the Kennedy Center watching her play her first-ever tuba; listening to her regale us with stories of her whitewater bravado and near-catastrophes while making pizzas at her house with dozens of toppings she and Karen had laboriously chopped, set out carefully in small pottery bowls.

Who else would I so fearlessly agree to go whitewater tubing with than a whitewater river guide who was trained in swiftwater rescues and led advanced wilderness kayaking trips for kids? One day in June, I cancelled plans with another friend, and Julie suited me up with a life vest, gave me the best of her three truck tire inner tubes, and set me afloat in the Rappahannock River, directing me the whole way down. "Paddle yourself straight into the middle of this chute!" "Now back-paddle to turn around and get over the left where we'll pull over and get out and jump off a cliff." This, despite her one collapsed lung. I followed her blindly and effortlessly because I trusted her more than anyone—that

she could save me if she had to, that she was still the controlled, confident leader she'd always seemed. Because I'd take risks with her that I otherwise wouldn't take, and because I felt so alive when I was with her, she made me feel I could do anything; she was a drug.

Neil gets in the driver side and I get in the passenger side of our silver Honda Civic. The oak branches overhang our car like great arms and fingers. The tree is very tall, over one hundred feet, and very wide. Under its watch, we sit in the car and talk quietly about the memorial service, how it went, what we liked. And the wind begins to howl. It howls like a wailing woman, leaving this earth too soon. And the leaves blow, and even some branches fall. And then we are silent with our grief, and we hang our heads and we sob.

When a friendship has the time and space to be whatever it is going to be over the course of a lifetime, we don't often question outright, "What is the nature of this friendship?" A friendship can just be what it is at face value—an office friend, a book group friend, a yoga friend. And generally we don't obsess over the particulars: "How close are we really to each other?" A relationship either develops or doesn't. We either respond to another personality or don't, initiate invitations to spend time together or don't. It's taken two years before we and our similarly aged, also childless next-door neighbours have gone out socially together, for example, because we understood and respected the neighbour contract. Although I don't get together with my oldest friend, whom I've known since we were preschoolers, more than every few months and have gone huge swaths of time without living in the same town or being in touch at all, there is that sense that we are just on the brink of picking up where we last left off. Some dear friends who have moved across the country have become once-a-year holiday card friends, the people we talk about backpacking with again "someday." Time is not tapping us on the shoulder, hurrying us along, whispering in our ear to keep the friendship going. These types of friendships follow their own natural, meandering course.

But I never really knew where I stood with Julie. The water rushed by so fast, the route had never been navigated before, and the risk was so very great.

In sharing writing, we had discussed death and dildos, babies and abortions far earlier than two female acquaintances might normally. We took the frightening leaps together of putting fears and longings into

words and airing them to the world, asking each other for "embarrassment checks" before submitting to publishers or class workshops. "I think you did the whole lesbian-love affair pretty well. No cheese. You go, straight-girl!" she wrote after reading my first short story. "That's the best rejection letter I've ever seen," I encouraged her, when she forwarded me a kind and encouraging response from the *New Yorker*. And we'd attend readings and go to writers group together, and keep tabs on essays that appeared in print, especially those written by people we knew, usually tearing them to shreds to boost our own sagging writer-egos.

At the same time, she had grown up as an Army brat and told me early on that she never kept friends very long because she was always moving. And I never really felt I was her type of friend. If it weren't for the writing connection, I wasn't sure we would have ever bonded. She was a tomboy with short spiky brown hair, was athletic, talkative, loud, and daring, always competing with herself if not with others: Could she start a fire with no kindling? Could she become a carpenter, with no training? Compared to her I felt reserved and wimpy, "a girly-girl," as she once called me good-naturedly when I took too long fixing my hair before going out to eat.

But early on, we found we shared a love of the outdoors and nature, the same taste in music, a fierce protectionism of the environment, an anti-corporate and left-leaning approach to the world. And, more than two years ago, when the cancer floating around in her body hadn't yet executed its full-on invasion, I had asked her to come with me on a writing assignment to go dogsledding, snowmobiling, and snow tubing—high adventure with minimal effort—and I guess that was enough to secure the thread that tethered us together. From there, although we lived over an hour apart and saw each other only a few times each year, we emailed each other weekly, sometimes more.

Then long periods would pass without a word from her. No updates on her health. No keeping tabs on each other's plans. No chit-chat about her post-corporate-lawyer, odd-job career, or my what-am-I-going-to-do next dilemma. Maybe she was busy, I reasoned; maybe she wasn't feeling well and didn't want to be bothered. But being a new friend, a somewhat peripheral friend, a mostly email friend, I never wanted to push it, to barrage her with calls or messages. I knew she had a large flock of

supporters, people she'd known longer, people to whom she was closer, people who lived nearby, people she called on first.

Then one day, after weeks or months had passed, a postcard from a faraway place might arrive. "Hey! I hiked this beach today and it looked exactly like this . . . Sure wish we had been able to do this [writing] residency together—we would have had such fun!" Or a five-page handwritten letter would come, delighting me with nature details about starfish and tufted puffins on the Oregon coast, and an invitation to dinner when she returns home.

Or a sweet email might finally grace my box. I'd open the message before anyone else's, before my mother's, before my husband's. "Has your class critiqued your fiction piece yet?" she might ask after telling me she'd actually been in back-to-back doctor appointments for the past two weeks to find out why she was going blind in one eye, or that she had been rushed to the emergency room in the middle of the night recently, unable to breathe, or that her oncologists had officially announced that her second round of chemotherapy had failed. "I'm a bit wiggled out; feel my life has just been shortened by three months," she'd say. "But you're writing the Great Lesbian Romance Novel! Woohoo!" Once she mentioned I was the only person who sent her a birthday card to the camp in Vermont she worked at in the summer.

And then I felt we were back in the dance, that she'd never really left. But she was always so close.

Suddenly a loud banging at the passenger window startles us away from our sorrow. It is Julie. In the flesh! At my window! Beating it with her hands in a great, anxious fury. She is wide-eyed, a full crest of hair on her big round head, her face flushed, her body fit and full in a plaid flannel shirt and Carhartts. And she is adamantly banging on the window urging us to "Get out! Get out! Come on! Come on!" And her look is so mad and eager that we both bolt out of the car and slam the doors behind us and we run, having only considered for a split second how crazy it is that we just saw her put into the ground and that she was dead and how no one will ever believe what we are seeing in her alive but this is so typically Julie and we know she must have something, some small adventure, in store for us. And so we run, so fast I am panting. And Julie is pumping her arms and legs with an even breath, which is insane because last time we saw her she could hardly walk up a small rise

on a walking path without being winded. But now she is running faster than Neil or I and we struggle to keep up. And she waves her hand behind her for us to catch up as she continues running down the hill, down the hill to the river, as if she has something she wants to show us. Is someone hurt? I wonder. Is it some cool nature sighting? A great blue heron? A bald eagle? We don't know, we don't care. We follow her because if she says to follow her, we do. We would follow her anywhere.

What can I do to help you? I'd beg her. Accompany you to an appointment? Cook you dinner? Go shopping for you? But she'd never bite, as most people won't when you offer. So I'd send her birds of paradise, my favourite music on CDs, small art projects. When I'd visit I might bring wine or homemade pesto, mint iced tea from my garden in the summer, ingredients for peach parfaits. I'd ask about her health, rant and rave with her about everything that sucked, and share in the dreams she was still planning to fulfil. But it never felt like enough. "What I want most is a magic wand, or at least to feel like a normal human being again!" she'd say in an email. "A person could lose their sense of humour over this shit! :)" I wanted to give her the magic wand, the unexpected elixir, to be the magic wand that would rescue her from churning waters and paddle her to shore, but I knew I never could, no matter how hard I tried.

After my millionth offer of help, she tells me in an email in November, "I may need an 'executor' of my 'writing estate.' You'd be my first choice if you're interested." But then she retracts and decides to designate Karen, which makes perfect sense. But I'm crushed because I feel so helpless.

We run several minutes down the hill to the river with the wind soaring through our hair. And then we see her disappear into the tunnel of the forest canopy, the trees and woods around the river, and we go in too, into the darkness toward the river, which is loud and rushing and wide and deep with waterfalls and boulders. And we look for her, we look left and right, we look upriver, we look downriver, we look in the woods, we look along the shore, and we wonder where she could have gone; she was just here. We don't see her anywhere and we wonder what, exactly, she had wanted us to see. After a few minutes, we shrug our shoulders and turn back around, befuddled, questioning our sanity, confirming with each other what we have just witnessed. And we begin to head back up to our car, chins down, battling the winds, our tired steps crunching on brown grass.

She looks and acts truly sick for the first time since I've known her when Neil and I drive down South to her writers fellowship studio in early December. She isn't laughing or even talking much; she's slower, a bit clumsy with her partial blindness. Her face is puffy from medications, and she shows me how her thighs have atrophied several inches from nearly complete lack of use. But I tease her anyway about silly things like her propensity for frou-frou drinks, as I remember her cackling over mai tais and "anything colourful that's set on fire." But this evening she's sipping a plastic cup of Bailey's Irish Cream because it helps her sleep at night, and I realize what a buffoon I am for recalling days past. I dig myself even further into my hole by warning her, as I give her another music CD of favourites, "even though there are love songs on this, I am not trying to send you a message." But I know that maybe I am. Or maybe when the heart is broken it's hard to tell where the pieces belong.

And then as we drive away from the evening, making the three-hour trip back home at midnight, I realize I didn't really even ask her much about herself, I was so interested in seeing the place I would be applying to, the buildings, the grounds; listening to her stories about the wacky artists there and then meeting them, wondering what it would be like for me to get the fellowship. And I begin to regret that, in all our few years, I had never really sat with her face to face to flat-out acknowledge her impending death, to ask her if she was afraid, to tell her directly she will never be forgotten, how much she's meant to me, how empty the universe will feel when she is gone. Neil tells me maybe she wouldn't have wanted it that way. Maybe it was better to have always believed that she would out-compete even cancer and God.

We get home, I drift off to sleep, and I find her banging on my car window.

Two days later, her second to last email thanks us so much for visiting and gushes over the music and my gift of Crazy Aaron's Thinking Putty, intended to help her crank out her writing. And her very last correspondence, the same day, asks me to review her book proposal, her last gesture to the world, a compilation of her essays called *A Weight Like Hope*. She tells me, "Be ruthless, really." And I am. I fire off an email the same night, with ideas and fixes and strategies and suggestions.

Then a week goes by with no response. And I question the tact of my ruthlessness, and I send more emails asking if my comments were helpful, and apologizing if I was a total bitch. And another week passes. It's Christmas, so I figure she's with family, she's with friends. This is a time to be with those who are closest, this final year, as her doctor had warned her in June. I won't push it. I'll wait.

But two days after the holiday, I get a call, and she's gone. "She was just in the middle of emailing you back," her partner tells me.

And then we crest the hill, the hill just below our car, where we had parked for the funeral, where we had sat weeping about our loss, where Julie had rapped on my window furiously, where we had fled upon her urging. And there it is, the answer to everything: that two-hundred-year old oak, with its fingery, army branches that had spread wide over our car and had provided shade from the autumn sun, lying like a slain dinosaur across the landscape. With our car—driver side, passenger side, hood, roof, trunk; the bones, organs, and flesh of it all—crushed to its death.

And then I knew.

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Discussion Guide

Qualitative Study: Clinical Euphoria, Case #117

How does the author subvert medical terminology to create an ironic statement on his condition?

Is the author finally claiming to be happy or unhappy?

Does it seem as if the author of this piece is himself an MD? What vocabulary would suggest this?

The Eighth Day

How old is the author of this memoir at the time of writing it? How does the reader know this?

What role does the author's relationship with his mother play in his recovery?

What might explain the delay of almost thirty years between the time of this event and the author's ability to recount it?

Do we know whether the narrator has made complete recovery, and if not, what do we know?

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What image does the author use to create the sense of a completed cycle, and how does this impart a sense of hope for the reader?

In the author's view, what is the difference between most normal friendships and this particular friendship? Is this friendship more significant or important because of this difference?

Is there a way in which the writing of this story acts as an atonement for something the author feels has been wanting in her?

Sunday Nights at the Shangri-La

The narrator of this story writes, "The truth is there's no one you can really talk about it with," and mentions parents, friends, pastors, guidance counsellors, and shrinks among those who are insufficient. This

Discussio

explains why the online group is so important, but raises the question: What role do we, as the readers, play? Are we being warned by the author that we too will be insufficient unless we have suffered the same loss?

The story ends abruptly, leaving a sense of incompleteness. Do you help the reader appreciate the feeling of irresolution that haunts the narrator and the other surviving siblings?

The Wong-Baker Scale

In this piece, the author compares and contrasts medical treatment with parental care. Which appears to have the greatest curative impact at the end of the story?

The author describes two objects with beaks, the otoscope and the birds in the drawing at the end of the story. How does this structure unify the clinical aspect of medicine and the loving aspect of parental care? Is there a resonance between air-borne and ear-borne?

Does the narrator see the Wong-Baker Scale as a sufficient measure of the degrees of pain, or is the scale described as a comment on the human dilemma of trying to understand the suffering of others and to make our own suffering understood?

Walking an Old Dog

This poem contains a poignant recognition of his dog's advancing age and a profound understanding of how it affects his dog's bodily experience, especially his sense of smell. What is there in the poem that suggests that the poet recognizes a parallel in himself and other creatures?

Dream of the Surgeon

What is the predominant feeling underlying this surgeon's vivid description of a forthcoming procedure? How does this mood express itself in the surgeon's observations outside of the operating room? Does it appear that this surgeon has experienced some clinical failure, and if so, how is this apparent?