

Under The Sun

UNDER THE SUN

Volume XIV, No. 1

Summer 2008

An essay is a short piece of prose
in which the author reveals himself
in relation to any subject under the sun.

J. B. Morton

A journal of informal essays sponsored by the
College of Arts and Sciences
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN 38505

Website: www.tntech.edu/underthesun

The Empty House

Sue Eisenfeld

I couldn't see through to the other side of the fog the day my thirty-three year-old next-door neighbor left his Cape Cod nestled in the woods and checked into a hospital to wait for a new heart.

Helen knocked on our front door one morning as my husband and I were getting ready for work. I don't think she'd ever come to our door before in the year and a half since she and her husband moved in, except once to leave a box of homemade Christmas cookies while we were out. She handed me a key to her house and told me Nate could no longer live at home—"He's in heart failure," she said. She was going to live at her mother-in-law's near Baltimore, an hour north of here and closer to the hospital. "It could be a week, it could be a month; we have no idea." Then she hurried off, and I watched her and Nate—silent, shoulders slumped—and his mother step into their hazy blue car and drive away.

For fifty-two days I looked out our bay window in the den, or the picture window in the living room, or the pane of our front door, and stared at that empty house. It was winter, so the bamboo they cut down last summer that once served as a privacy barrier between our homes was not actively reclaiming its ground; no need to trim anything back while they were gone. The dogs were with Helen at her mother-in-law's. The garden was dormant—no obvious stirring of tulips or crocuses, and many months too early for deadheading the marigolds that separated our driveways.

Only the leaves fell during that time, from early December to late January. It was one of those strange winters that started off strong and early with a November snowstorm, and so the oak leaves fell on top of a layer of snow—sepia handprints on white, like a Wyeth painting. But then the snow melted, and there were just leaves. Lots of leaves.

And so we raked. What else could we do? We raked their front lawn, scraping over the odd arrangement of "burning bushes" and pachysandra, pink cement stepping stones, and a hastily built brick

path the previous neighbors had designed. And we raked the side, that extra half-parcel of theirs that blends into park land, with a view of woods and sky but no houses—the private half of the house we never see. And we raked the back, which blends into the park, lined by the county bike path where neighbors train for marathons, and the bald man walks Lucy and Ricky, and Laotian ladies pick mushrooms. And we piled the leaves in front and bagged them. And we waited for the leaf collectors to take them away, those dead, shed skins of trees hovering and quivering over our roofs like fate.

And we brought in their mail and packages and recycled their newspapers. And for the first week we put out their trash at the curb. We kept an eye on that empty house: its still hallways, its absent television flicker. And we missed them, Nate and Helen. We missed them now that they were gone.

We weren't socially friendly with this couple, though we are roughly the same age. They, like us, were quiet and kept to themselves. We welcomed them when they moved in. I made them a batch of fresh pesto once from my basil garden. We invited them to a party where conversation was awkward because we had no shared history. We went to one party of theirs, where we compared music collections and subway mishaps. We saw each other in the yard, Nate hacking away at the incessant bamboo or pulling English ivy, Helen planting annuals, my husband building a stone wall, and me weeding, mulching, and trying to conjure a vision of how to bring the yard to life. When we took breaks and met each other at the property line, we talked herbs, we talked tomatoes, we talked weeds, we talked invasives. And my husband and I always wondered why Nate's face was blue as dusk. But we never asked.

I remember the night of our party, when I invited them—insisted, really—to take a tour of our house. We have the exact same house, though some floor plan details differ, so I thought they'd get a kick out of seeing how ours was arranged compared to theirs. It was

in the master bedroom at the top of fourteen stairs where I noticed how deeply blue he had become, like an ocean. I looked at Helen for a sign (*He's OK, I wanted her eyes to tell me. Or, Whoa, that's strange, my husband is blue. Are you alright, honey?*). I got nothing. My first aid training manual ran through my head like a printing press. But how could I pry?

I had always noticed that Helen drove their car and Nate was the passenger. I'm not surprised by nontraditional gender roles, but it seemed like an unusual regular arrangement—he being a fairly robust young man, and what man doesn't like to drive his own car? I had also noticed that when Nate was not outside sawing off bamboo, they rarely left the house. But then again, apparently neither did we, because we were home to notice it.

One suffocating August day about a year after they moved in, when I was pruning ivy near the fence and Helen came out to water and clip, she told me: *Nate has a heart condition. He might need a heart transplant.* Her voice was quiet and shaky, like a breeze whispering through a grove of Asian grass.

We'd been reading his hospital blog during those fifty-two days, and in this age of technology, we came to know Nate more from reading his blog than we ever did in real life, both of us couples too painfully shy to have normal neighborly relations like relaxing over a drink in the evening or sitting outside on a stoop together. But on his blog we learned his favorite books, music, movies. We read his daily postings and laughed at his sense of humor: "Things I can't do (once I have a heart transplant)," he wrote early on, "Drink the water in Honduras, sex tourism in Thailand, eat raw meat, eat things that fall on the floor, get a new job where I have to handle raw sewage or animal feces..." And "Nate's list of crappy things about living in the hospital," he wrote after a few weeks: "Not going outside, not seeing my dogs, peeing in a bottle, the Internet is dial-up, when I wake up in the morning I smell hospitably..."

We dreamed right along with him for his new life in the future: "Dreams: Hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, learn how to surf, express myself through dance (or not), and get something done in a day other than work and sleep." Our hope plummeted when his did: "Woe is me...I have the same To Do list every day. At the beginning of the day: Make it through the day, get a new heart. At the end of the day: Get a new heart." Or "51 Days and Counting: I barely remember life before entering the hospital. In some ways this is good because I forget what I am missing."

And all the while, everyone he knew was morbidly hoping someone would die. Not die, really, but be brain-dead with a vigorous beating heart. And not just anyone: an under-thirty-five, same-height, same-weight, same-blood-type, free-of-any-heart-defects, brain-dead individual, in the state of Maryland, where Nate was number one on the list.

Christmas and New Years ticked by, the high season for brain-dead organ donors. And so we all waited—Helen, Nate, their families, their friends, their coworkers, the doctors (eager to get their hands on that failed organ for study), my husband and I, and that empty house. A daily reminder of the vessel that is our bodies, and the essentials inside that keep us going.

The day my new friend Janice revealed she had terminal breast cancer was not among Nate's fifty-two day never-never-land absence. Nor did those fifty-two days contain the day that an old friend of my husband's, Margo, admitted she had been diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer that had also spread to her colon. Those dark days had happened at least a year before. But it was among those fifty-two days that I became acutely aware of the finality of a day. Time lost its breath on the days I heard those pieces of news, but not until the fifty-two day period did I feel the oppression.

I met Janice in a personal essay-writing class where she wrote of sleeping under stars with hippie kids in Vermont, where she led a wilderness adventure camp. Broad and strong as an Olympian, nearly always clad in tie-dye or plaid flannel, and with enough energy to power a Mack truck, she traveled nearly two hours to this class each week to write about coming to terms with her illness, the moments that changed the course of her life. "I want to publish my stories before I begin 'circling the drain,'" she often chortled, with her trademark irreverent humor. And I felt that rare recognition inside that, in this ladder-climbing, rat-race of a town I live in, I had met someone who was my kind of person.

Once, when we traveled together on a writing assignment of mine, I inadvertently bemoaned my upcoming thirty-fifth birthday. "Well, I'll be really excited to celebrate my thirty-fifth," she said. So full of life and determination, it was hard to remember she was sick.

Margo is an ex-girlfriend of my husband's whom he's known for twenty-six years and whom I've known distantly for fourteen, whom we visit every few summers, ten hours away. Though we seemed more cut out of the same cloth than many of my husband's other friends—both of us being Philly girls, prone to wild fits of laughter and suffering an addiction to shoes, the miles kept us from cultivating a friendship. I can't even remember now when we finally made the connection, but by the time we were at the phone-calling and e-mailing stage of our friendship, her cancer had already metastasized and she'd undergone major surgery and two rounds of chemo. We haven't discussed percentages and prognoses, but when I flew up to New England last winter for her forty-sixth birthday party, her wish—as she blew out her candles—was to live until fifty.

My heart wrapped around both of these women.

And then Nate entered the equation. His was a rare condition found in only one person out of every ten-thousand in the United States. Seventeen percent of all sudden cardiac deaths in the young are attributed to the disease afflicting my neighbor's heart, and eighteen people die each day waiting for organ transplants. When he left for

the hospital that overcast December day, I etched his pale, pudgy face into my mind and wondered if I would ever see him again.

...

But when does neighborly concern cross the line into obsession? I thought about Nate night and day, that empty house accosting me with his image no matter how hard I tried to forget him for awhile. I began to fear I was becoming a blog stalker when checking Nate's postings became a several-times-a-day habit. *Did he post anything humorous today? How is he feeling right now?* Or maybe I was just nosy. If I saw a relative pull up to the house, I'd rush outside and ask how Nate was doing, what the doctors thought. I left Helen notes for when she came home to pick up mail, offering any help we could provide. To alleviate his boredom in the hospital, I sent Nate our stash of Seinfeld DVDs, then Wallace and Gromit, my husband's Ren and Stimpy collection, and homemade music CDs for his laptop or ipod. As if somehow knowledge and intention and the sending of gifts would assuage the real fear churning inside me: *If Nate dies, there's no hope for my other friends either.*

And then one day, I checked the blog, and everything had happened: "Nate has a new heart!" Helen posted on his fifty-second day away from home.

I was at work when I read this blog notice. I gulped down the lump in my throat, the suppressed explosion of joy. I wanted to run down the halls and yell, *Nate got a new heart! Nate got a new heart!* I wanted to run outside onto the city street and yell, *Nate got a new heart! Nate got a new heart!* But of course no one knew who Nate was; he wasn't someone I'd mentioned to anyone else. No one would know how he had lived on the edge for fifty-two days. No one would feel what it had been like to live next to that empty house, with the windows dark, the silence of the dogs, the empty trash can and recycling bin, and the wilting ivy uniting our boundary line through the fence. Except my husband, of course. I called him at work, and we both choked back tears as I read the posting aloud.

...

It would be nineteen more days until the doctors released him from the hospital, but with marvelous irony, he arrived home with Helen and the dogs in their familiar blue car on Valentine's Day—that celebration of love and hearts.

There's a warmth and relief I feel knowing he's home, though I haven't seen either one of them venture out of the house in the three weeks he's been back. A glance out the window, and I see the car in the driveway, lights on in the far rooms, tulip greens poking through the soil in the flowerbeds, and I feel like the stars have aligned over our tiny neighborhood in this small corner of the world. Some sort of providence saw fit to bestow life on this man in our midst.

Meanwhile, Janice's recent "scary scan" indicates her metastasized breast cancer has taken up residence in her lungs. The doctors switched her meds and told her to wait three months to see if the cancer cells respond. In the meantime, she continues traveling, kayaking, and attending cross-country writing retreats.

Margo is living with relatives in New Jersey near her cancer clinic, where she is too depressed to talk on the phone to "everyone else who is healthy and enjoying their lives and moving forward."

"I wish I was at home doing house projects and going to work and visiting with friends," she wrote me in a recent e-mail.

I'm not sure I can really compare the insidious takeover of cancer in the body, like the spread of black mold in a flooded New Orleans living room, to an organ replacement that's more akin to repairing a plumbing problem. But I can't help linking the fates of these three people in my life: Janice, the one who makes me feel alive; Margo, the one who welcomed me belatedly into the folds of friendship; and Nate, the one who's helped me believe in hope.

...

Spring emerged early this year, as winter did. It is seventy degrees in early March. The neighbors' daffodils have surfaced, my periwinkle is blooming, and it's nearly time to break out the clippers

and begin my weekend garden ritual, which waters my soul. I am reading the newspaper in front of the sliding glass doors of my dining room, overlooking the park path with its confetti of color whizzing by on bikes. Through the mountain laurels and tufts of ivy blanketing the back yard next door, I see two figures appear, slow and tentative like an elderly couple, each step carefully placed.

I watch as they pass my house like a slow-motion movie, hand in hand, sweatshirts unzipped. And in about seven minutes, I watch them return: the daily outing, I know from reading the blog; week six in a six-month recovery. Leg in front of leg, and back into the house. The house, no longer empty.

** Note: Names have been changed to protect privacy.*