

Ms. Dale Writes

THE ONE I CAN'T FORGET

She keeps me awake at night. The little girl in the closet. She's peeking out watching the old man on the bed masturbate. And she's terrified. Her parents are in prison or rehab or maybe they just skipped town. That's how she ended up with Grandpa. I don't know her name. I always avoided that when I reviewed medical records. In spite of ever-changing names, the histories kept repeating. Hers was not among the first disability files I ever read and it certainly was not the last, nor the most graphic, nor the most savage. But somewhere between my first day in Social Services and my last, her case made its way to my hand. An unbound collection of coldly documented childhood abuse. A file about an adult, damaged beyond repair as a child.

When I interviewed at the county's Senior and Disabled Services office, I claimed no humanitarian ideals. I accepted the position to tide me over until I decided whether to finish law school or get married. I just wanted to hang out and make a few bucks until I got "motivated." I reasoned, "I kind of like old people. And, hey, I don't mind helping a few people in wheelchairs. So how bad could it be?"

I learned that case management is an emotionally draining, physically exhausting way to take years off your life, similar to picking up after several hundred hyperactive, demanding children. Only these "children" are adults who behave like children. Adults with mental illness. At first their behavior seemed quaint. Peter spoke in sentences of only four words. Paul washed his hands from left to right counting out each digit from 1

to 10 as it was lathered. Mary ate with a fork only if it were placed “just so.” It took her at least twenty minutes to find the proper alignment. Joseph took a hammer to imaginary spiders on the walls of his apartment. As case manager I was their new best friend.

My unruly caseload, hundreds of adults with disabilities, grew continuously. Not every single client was abused as a child. Not all were mentally ill. But almost all were both. I didn’t get any of those “nice old people.”

For some reason, on a dreary morning, coffee cup in hand, I faced the tower of new client files on my desk and began with a hospital admission report. The admitting doctor described his patient as a thirty-nine year old woman who spent her childhood confined to a closet where her grandfather maintained her as a sex toy. Well, nothing new there. Portland harbors a glut of casual parents who consistently prefer drug-induced euphoria to the rigors of parenthood. Without them I would have had little to read. No mold-caked diapers. No meth-burned baby flesh. No child for coke swaps. To survive, to stifle my own nightmares, I learned to skim.

For some reason, I read every word of her file, every chart note. As office din dissolved and scheduling lost its importance, I saw the little girl looking out from behind the closet door. A ribbon of light from the old man’s bedroom is running up and down her tiny torso. The rest of her is in shadow. One sad illuminated eye, moisture around it glistens in the light. She is six or seven-years old; her hair, long, matted, dirty. Her face is smeared. Her dress, a long T-shirt, covered with wrinkles, circles of wet spots from where she has chewed on it. Her jaws ache, her mouth, cottony. She looks out of the closet, watching her grandfather slide his hand up and down his penis. Soon he will call her out of the closet to “play.”

I visualize the obscenity, the self-gratifying use a male animal could make of a child's body. In my mind, I become her. I imagine my own screams withered into whimpers. I relive the touch and the smell. I hear the background noise of my own heartbeats. Would I plot an attack? Could I bear my fingernails, flash my teeth, plunge myself into Grandpa's belly and run? Not likely. I am a child repeatedly diminished into submission. My only escape is inside my head. I stand alone on a beach. I open my arms to wind and sea spray. The roar of the surf isolates me. Water drips from my hair, streams down my flesh, trickles onto my feet. Sharp sand slips away under each bare toe as I dissolve day by day into a dream. Analgesic rhythmic surf.

I interviewed her in a locked facility, the new one out in East County. Without a sound, she had been escorted down the carpeted hallway from her room, to sit across from me at a small table. My eyes searched for recognition. Was I expecting matted hair and a chewed T-shirt? The two of us had been brought together because she was a neighborhood nuisance, a homeless embarrassment, peeing in the park. Scrubbed, with newly braided hair she ignored me. I supposed sedation accounted for her lack of response. I had forms to fill out to place her, to "get her into the system." She clutched something wrapped in cellophane.

She stared without purpose over my left shoulder. Her eyes focused far beyond the beige wall behind me. I felt invisible. A vending machine hummed. The clock on the opposite wall clicked. She placed the candy bar on the table, fingered the seam with unclear intent. I repeated, then reworded the questions. I needed phrases that I could scribble above dotted lines. At last my probing dislodged an old memory.

Out tumbled several rapid fire sentences about driving up from San Francisco with a boyfriend, a history dating back to her twenties. Boyfriend. A man who introduced her to heroin then broke her arms so she couldn't use "his." He's mentioned in her rehab reports, as is the one who smashed her leg with a tire iron so she couldn't run away and the guy who slept in the back of a tavern who twisted a broken beer bottle into her left breast.

Her words stopped. She split the wrapper and bit the exposed candy. She chewed but did not speak again. Communication from her world was over. I carried her name on blank forms back to the office.

That year I saw her often from my window on the second floor. A great view of a phone booth and MAX train tracks. By August she had two shopping carts, covered with blankets and newspapers, so heavy that she had to handle them one by one. She pushed from behind until each got stuck in the tracks. Then she went around to the front and pulled until her weight nearly seated her on the pavement. People walked by. One shabby man talked to her as she struggled, but he didn't help her, not even when some of the newspapers fell off. I wondered what possible conversation he could be making when she obviously had her hands full. She stood in the phone booth for hours.

That winter she told me and everyone who would listen that she had cancer. She cursed the chemo, such brutal treatment. She couldn't eat and her hair fell out in clumps. True, her body shriveled. Her head, covered with thin dry patches of hair looked small atop her withered neck. Suspecting a terminal diagnosis, I requested records from all the local clinics, her counselor, her psychiatric nurse practitioner. For weeks, the pages of her recent medical history peppered my inbox. All the new entries included her cancer story,

much as I had heard it from her. “Complains of . . . alleged cancer.” No one was giving her chemotherapy. There was no oncology report. No MRI. No CT scan. No cancer treatment. No cancer diagnosis. No cancer. Did she know that she had pulled her own hair out?

My career in Social Services is over. It was not a rescue mission. My job required spontaneous damage control for several hundred broken adults. My hand never reached the closet. I did not save one single little girl from a pointless future. No one appeared to caress her, bake cookies with her, take her fishing. There will always be a little girl in a closet somewhere, a girl aging in place into adulthood.

I saw her the day I left. A Friday in June. The MAX train held up traffic, stopping my car close to her phone booth. I smiled but she looked through me much as she had the first time I saw her. When the train disappeared down the tracks, she remained behind, encased in glass while I drove off to my future. I escaped back to a world of legal briefs and courtroom drama where humanity merely provides framework for fascinating work product.

I have filled my life with friends and festivities. I buy suits at Nordstrom’s and art glass by Chihuly. I’ve strolled hand and hand with loved ones through magical sunsets. Yet I seldom slip past her on my way into deep sleep. When I lie down, she finds me. I close my eyes and I see her, the little girl in the closet. She’s looking out at her future. I have seen it and I am terrified.

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