

Writing Life

Three pills in her palm.

For a moment she forgot what they were. Or why she had them.

Suddenly she smelled spaghetti. How long had it been since she'd eaten spaghetti?

Months. Years.

She was in a hospital room. A murmur out in the hallway. Just minutes ago someone had given her the pills, a warm hand enveloping hers.

Pain clawed up her, as if trying to get out. But it was familiar, a too familiar feeling. She sat up. The pain lessened slightly. Dad had come, was it that morning? His long Stan Laurel face. And then longer when she demanded to go home. *I want to go home. Please take me away from here.* The old family home wasn't that far away. There was her bedroom, and Felicia's across the hall now used for an office. Set up with legal pads and pens and the drafts of her memoir. Dad helped her feel like a real writer. He had made the desk himself. And the chair with its special ergonomic cushion.

You are in high cotton, he'd say.

Smelling of sawdust from his workshop, a sweet odor. And his hands, smooth yet rough, patted her cheek. Like the pill hand. Had he given her the pills?

Three. Why three?

Then she realized. *Three* for the sections of her memoir. *Hair. Mumbai. Cancer.* Right. It was a mathematical clue. Dad loved the *Alice* books, the riddles. And the pills were for each section. A magic spell.

With his glasses on his nose, tablet on his knee, Dad had read the pages and liked them. He really did. What an amazing life she had--

And would have, of course.

My Katie, he said. *My Katie bug.* *Katie did*, an old family joke. On the wall was a cartoon drawing of a katydid.

Katie did... Yes, she did.

And would.

Dad wasn't a reader, his judgment not the best perhaps. But he knew how to build things. He naturally compared her book to building a house. Strong, sturdy sentences, words aligned and stacked like bricks. He was a carpenter and woodworker. He made armoires for senators and crafted Veronese flora at Folger's... They lived in Alexandria, on the Potomac. Stench of fish, crab in milky mist. Colonial houses like illustrations in a book.

In his workshop Dad also made Rubik's cubes. He manipulated the painted wood faces... Twisting, twisting.

He handed her the cube. *Now you solve, Katie bug.*

Katie didn't. Can't.

Mind not logical like his. Sorry. For years a social worker and now a writer. The laptop stayed shut, however, the LED too painful. Putting actual pen to actual paper, she joked that she felt like a nineteenth-century Russian. Everyone loved her writing at Candlelight, and encouraged

her to continue. She took the opportunity to read aloud in-progress selections. At the podium, shaking a little, she cleared her throat. *Some think it's an affectation to not use a computer, but I promise I draw the line at using a crow quill.* Laughter, an oceanic sound. She read for fifteen minutes. At the end, breath gulped, bits and pieces of applause rose. Never had she received applause before.

Katie did.

Can.

But Felicia mocked her. Hated her, even, for taking her old room. The hours Katie sat in the room writing and feeling a cold presence, Felicia just...

No, no, not Felicia. She was always forgetting that.

Fatima.

Felicia had changed her name after 9/11, adopting Muslim dress and customs. And then dated only Muslim men. She wore a headscarf and complained about people whispering in restaurants. When she couldn't get jobs, it was clear religious discrimination.

Like the whole family, Fatima was white, just a white girl from Virginia. When this was pointed out to her, that it was hard for someone like her to plausibly claim discrimination, she grew furious. Then one day she disappeared on her recumbent three-wheeled bicycle.

On Facebook she claimed Katie had tried to murder her. And that Dad was a tool of Satan.

A bastard file, Dad said smiling.

But he wasn't worried. *She'll turn up,* he said. *When she's least wanted.*

Katie didn't think it was funny. She hated being alienated from Sis. She spent hours obsessing over where Felicia could be, wondering if she was safe and calling various shelters and filing a missing person report. It was the social worker in her. Then months later, just as Dad had predicted, Felicia showed up during a rainstorm, soaked through under her headscarf and accompanied by a very young Arabic man. They needed money.

No, it wasn't funny. And Katie resisted putting her sister into her book. If Felicia wanted to be in a book, she could write her own. In fact, she could write about her mental illness...

Yet just like in real life, Felicia popped up in her book anyway.

During Katie's wedding reception, Felicia-- *Fatima* stood up and made a toast in Arabic. Felicia actually knew very little Arabic, not even that much about the Koran. But she had memorized a blessing. And she practically sang it for the baffled, awestruck crowd.

The phony theatrical toast became the perfect symbol for a phony marriage. A great way to end the first chapter.

Katie had met Zach at a Halloween party. He'd gone as a Pepsi can, while she was a sexy nurse. Her friends dubbed him *Pepsi One*: he had pep for about one minute, and then he stood around utterly inert.

But he was sweet and gentle and had a sly sense of humor. And he was a great kisser. He actually bought her flowers on their first date and picked up the restaurant bill. On walks he had no problem holding her hand. She had met a real man at last.

Hands. The difference between Zach's and Dad's. One veiny, protuberant. The other feminine, languorous. She wrote a paragraph about them, never expanded upon. Like so many notes and fragments and scrawled slips of paper across her desk.

Zach was like an aborted note, unfinished. Soft and fuzzy, the lines of his face never came into focus. Then he met someone at a software conference, a Thai lady who may or may not have been a hooker.

The morning after Zach moved out, I woke with my head almost completely bald. A light bulb of shock and pain. Like a field worker I picked out clumps of hair from the bedsheets and sinks and carpet. I picked out hairs for weeks, something that became an almost ritualized ceremony. Goodbye, hair. Goodbye, me.

It took her a long time to find herself, regain her sense of center. In those days even oxygen came dear. When she was fortunate enough to have forgotten him and his stupid blurry grin, the baldness reminded her. *Oh, no you don't*, her head said. *This grief is real. Real as a motherfuck.*

She initially found comfort in wigs. *Cranial prostheses* they were called. Like mounted butterflies, purple and piled and frosted, the wigs sat ready to fly up onto her head, waiting to assume an identity, a strutting player before Dad's wooden castles.

Her serious writing began from that period. She wrote and published online an essay about mirrors and being accepted by society. The pressure of conforming to the male gaze. The idea of beauty, of baldness. The meaning behind it all.

Then there was the scene a year later when they ran into each other at a Starbucks. Zach gaped at her. *You look like Joan Jett*, he said, and laughed. She patiently explained that she had alopecia and that it was triggered by stress. Zach nodded, not seeming to make the connection. Distracted, holding a coffee, he said he had to get back to work. After he left, waving through the

window, she realized she felt nothing for him. He was a total stranger. And Joan Jett looked back at her in the glass. Another stranger.

Not long after, she switched to headscarves.

Scarves, red and blue and printed with paisleys, were simple and attractive. And were much cheaper. In her excitement she published another online essay entitled *Down with Wigs!!*

But Felicia was angry again. She saw a picture of Katie's new look online and felt she was being "bullied." After several nasty email exchanges, Felicia showed up at Dad's birthday party to borrow money and then demanded Katie take off her "disrespectful" headwear. Katie told herself her sister was being irrational, but Felicia knew just the buttons to push. *You've never had an original idea in your life. You're always copying me! Just like when I was playing with Kristy Schaak and you tagged along on your bike!...* Katie retorted that Felicia's own headscarf was just a political fiction. A delusion versus a medical reality! Felicia started wildly slapping, a tactic from her childhood, and tried to pull off the offensive scarf. Yelling that it was his birthday, their father jumped between them and all three landed in the cake.

After that the sisters didn't talk for two years.

Three pills.

Katie couldn't remember if she was supposed to take them all at once, or one at a time, or two and then one at intervals.

Wasn't someone supposed to help her?

Dad?

No. I have to get out. I have to go.

Pain clawing.

If she was going to die, she wanted it to be at home. The colonial with the white paneling, the screened porch. Her cool friendly bedroom, smelling of cherrywood, surrounded by her books and photo albums and stuffed animals. Katydid smiling down on her.

And the other room, Felicia's, filled with the precious handwritten sheets. Her many friends on Facebook encouraged her. Candlelight writers offered to critique her latest chapters. An agent had expressed interest. It was all there, just inches away, just needing a little more shaping, a little more pruning...

At the end of *Hair* she thanked her ex-husband: *Thank you, Zach, for being the jackass I needed you to be.*

But the next two sections still needed work. In the chaos of the last few weeks (months?) she had lost her way in the labyrinth of her writing. She had repeatedly begged people to bring her the manuscript pages, but no one ever did as far as she knew. If she could just see the sheets, have the pulp of the papers palpably in her fingers again, she'd feel better. Touch the core of her life. Bring sense to everything.

I have to go. GO.

She raised her hand. She was suddenly feeling strong, centered, focused. Inhaling deeply, she unhooked and pulled off her oxygen.

The machine beeped.

Fuck you.

No one came.

With a triumphant gesture, she threw the pills across the room. Then she pushed herself from the bed as if from a tar pit.

I pushed myself out of bed as if from a tar pit.

The machine complained.

Beep beep beep...

On legs like spaghetti she made her way to the door. A cart went past. Muttering voices from somewhere. Her bare feet stepped across the cold tiles, hips clicking. Her gown billowed and she caught it with her hands. She hugged herself as she passed the nurse's station.

A voice called after her. The elevator doors opened and she slipped inside.

Ding, ding, ding...

Light brighter and brighter. More voices. She trotted. The doors swung, air whooshing, the outside tilting vast.

Out!

Out!

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She squinted.

The sunlight was butter.

But, no. That wasn't hers. Josie, her travel companion, had come up with that when they were in India. *Butter on the domes*, she had said.

They had been pretty hungry when she said that.

Josie had helped her get a teaching job in India, and it couldn't have come at a better time. But India turned out to be more of a trial than a deliverance. All on her first day, she lost her luggage, a man yelled at her in Hindi, and a camel shot poop right by her face. Then in Jaipur she took a ride on an elephant and threw up everywhere. In Agra she had colored powder thrown

on her, which brought on a violent sneezing fit. She spent most of her time sweating and looking for toilets. Then Josie had to leave because of a family emergency. Stranded in Ramthambore, truly alone, Katie told her female students they didn't need to obey their husbands or their fathers and brothers. She was fired the next day. Crying, she called Dad and asked for money to get a flight back home. Waiting for the wire transfer at a café, she met a dapper silver-haired businessman. He greeted her politely and asked if she would like work as a nanny for his three children. Katie said no, she wasn't interested. Being a nanny seemed beneath her education level. But most importantly, India had defeated her. She was exhausted and demoralized. The adventure that had promised rejuvenation after her divorce had instead been a nightmare of Hieronymus Bosch proportions. The man persisted. He had a calm, confident manner, the kind of personality who always got his way. He bought her a good meal, one he knew an American would enjoy, and placed a thick roll of rainbow-colored currency bills by her elbow.

His name was Raju and he lived further south in Mumbai. His wife was a renowned concert pianist, playing in Asia and Europe. A week later, Katie met the children. They were docile and adorable, two older girls and a toddler boy, four years old. Gupta stared at her with his father's preternatural calm. Eyes like she had seen in Hindu temples.

The pay and situation was good. It wasn't until later she learned that she was just unattractive enough, lacking hair and being a little overweight, for Raju's wife to find Katie acceptable. The previous American nanny had apparently caused problems. This Katie learned from the older sisters who loved to prattle during their English lessons. As for Gupta, Katie often took him to the nearby park and they would laugh at the monkeys jumping in the trees.

Trees swayed and sighed. Down the streets, her feet getting scratched on the sidewalk, Katie hugged herself and kept her head down. Any minute she expected to be shouted at, to be fingered, to hear sirens...

Dad's house was on North Ripley. She crossed Polk.

The bones in her feet felt like teeth.

Felt like teeth.

For a moment she paused and considered going back to retrieve the pills she had so wantonly thrown away. What if they were keeping her alive? Over and over she had turned in the furious blue water. Breathing hard, confused, she sat down in the grass. Her fingers tore at the blades and brought them to her face. Yes, this was real. Gone was the white air of the hospital. The blades were brown, yellow. Like hair.

The planet was losing its hair.

She went on.

Pleats of thick air, diesel exhaust. A bus rumbled by. The sun drooped in a varicosed sky, drops of rain.

Raju and his wife were often gone, very busy people. Alone, drinking hot chai on the terrace, Katie watched birds wheel over the ocean and marveled at the turns her life had taken. Twisting, twisting. Time itself braiding, forming exquisite knots... She started keeping a journal, intending to publish an essay or two based on her experiences.

A letter came for her. To her surprise, it was from Felicia. Without mentioning the Great Headscarf Controversy, Felicia wrote about having an abortion and then learning recently of her pregnancy with a new Muslim boyfriend and needing to sneak out to have an abortion again. The

abortions both happened on the same day of the year, like a negative holiday. The letter was so rambling and convoluted that Katie had to read it three times. Felicia finished by complaining that Allah was testing her, that her womb was a place of death. And she needed money.

That night, Katie forgot about her sister's difficulties and she marveled at how she had inherited all the writing talent in the family.

Home wasn't far. She turned up streets. Knox, Truman... A car slowed and pulled to the curb.

You lost, sweetheart?

Katie waved, shaking her head. The car pulled away, tail lights like bindis.

Raju asked Katie if she was lost. In life, he meant. His hand touched hers. She pulled it away. He was a nice man, eyes wrinkled with a wise sadness, and he seemed lonely. At night Katie indulged in erotic fantasies and even penned a romantic *Passage to India*-ish story in her journal. She later tore out the pages.

Light and smells, butter and oranges, hydrangeas and lotus. Mumbai and Alexandria flashed in double exposure. Memories amok.

Was that a monkey up in that tree? No, a plastic bag.

Potomac to her right. Arabian Sea to her left.

Then it happened. On a generous jewelled day the ocean swelled. A wall, dull and roaring, rumbled. And then WHAM. Water crashed through the house. Screaming, Katie managed to fall on Gupta and they were dragged out like criminals, cartwheeling through the violent ferocious water, impossible to tell what was up or down. She only knew to keep her arms around little Gupta. Then her foot hit something. A body, or something more solid. A boat's hull

maybe. She propelled herself through whirling chains of bubbles and exploded to the surface. Gupta wailed and coughed. Arms and legs thrashing, she pulled the child and herself to a blurred horizon. Closer and closer, the shore boiling. Buildings wept, brown waters shot out demons' mouths. Distant cries, sirens. Up the tangled sands she stumbled and fell. Gupta was with her, alive. They gasped and coughed and cried. All around them a broken city.

For days the giant fronds poured crazy music.

Everyone was accounted for except Raju. He had vanished. There was a suspicion he had used the disaster for his own purposes...

That was her tsunami story. Everyone at Candlelight agreed it was very powerful. They were amazed she had survived such an ordeal.

Yes, she had cheated death. And saved a little boy.

Katy did.

It wasn't until she was home again that she realized what she had been through. And to truly appreciate having survived.

Staying longer in India would have only tempted Fate further. I decided I was done dancing with Karma.

Out of work, savings gone, she moved in with Dad. He was only too glad to have her back. With Felicia having disappeared again, it seemed okay to take over her old bedroom and use it as a study. Katie had received so much positive feedback to her letters and Facebook posts about India that it was time to be serious about her writing career.

Here it was. The old home. On Ripley and Union. 1132. No way to miss it. There was the American flag hanging alongside the red FSM flag. Flying Spaghetti Monster. That was Dad.

Spaghetti.

She must have been smelling God.

Like a roll of dice her feet clattered on the porch steps as she fell.

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The rain had stopped. The low sun burned gems in the pavement.

She sat up. She had been passed out on the porch.

How long? A minute? An hour?

Hush in the trees all around. Dark humid shapes of birds, or monkeys. Watching. Water wept into her eyes.

Wiping at her face, she climbed the porch stairs. The door was open. An alien smell of cigarette smoke. And something sweet. Cinnamon.

A distant whine in the pipes. *Gupta swept into the ocean, wailing.*

On the kitchen counter was an unopened pack of Trident gum. Felicia's favorite gum. Katie paused, confused. A tickle, an itch, traveled down her leg. Blood shone on her knee. She had cut herself on the porch. Her skin was barely holding herself in. Made of paper.

The house stood empty. She called out for Dad, but no one answered. She went for the stairs. Close to her old room now, like Moses. A familiar pattern of light, lozenges of buttery pasta, danced on the wallpaper.

Voice of God in light.

Felicia hated the Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was an insult to Allah and Islam and to her belief most of all. The flag was raised as a provocation. *If you come to my house, you must laugh at God. And take communion with marinara...*

Creak.

Creak.

Each step made her shrink like Alice, her pinafore drenched in sepia.

Out of breath, Katie paused on the landing. Then down the hall to her bedroom. The notches on the jamb. Not her child-spanning height, but how many boys she had kissed during a torrid period in high school. Any one of them would have married her, and yet she had settled on Zach. The notches were a rebuke, mocking gashed mouths. *Stupid, stupid.*

The smell of her old room. The sneakers with the pom-poms, the posters, the closet full of Barbies and stuffed animals. Here, clutching Petey the Cowardly Lion, she had dreamt of all the things she would have in her life. And what did she finally get? A bad marriage. Hair loss. A Biblical disaster that should have killed her. Now disease. Inflammatory breast cancer, IBC, the worst. Hard to detect, and nearly always fatal. The doctors originally said she had about a year. That had been two years ago. Or three.

Being under a death sentence lent her writing an extra urgency. Lightning shot off her pen, words crawled from the primordial blankness... She wrote and wrote for hours until her energy gave out. But there were also some days, brutal days of chemo, that she couldn't manage even a sentence. A word, maybe. *Mumbai. Prosthetic. Pepsi.* Little notes, grains hopefully gathered someday into a castle of prose...

And then the irony of her headscarf. Years ago someone online had criticized her for adopting the look of a cancer patient, as if it were something trendy. Now that she really had cancer, the headscarf seemed a spooky harbinger. A curse, even.

While she thought superstitions were ridiculous, and sometimes mocked them in her writing, in her weakening condition she caught herself believing some of them. Maybe if she had stuck with the wigs? Or wore nothing on her head at all...?

She started a fragment about not wanting to be just a cancer patient, or a cancer survivor, or a cancer anything. She was more than just a headscarf. A head flying under a flag meant to represent some larger cause.

I'm just Katie. A nice girl from Virginia, trying to do my best in this thing we call Life...

Across the hall was Felicia's room. It was the laboratory where Katie had tried to fit her life together, twisting, twisting, to turn the chimera into a swan. She went to the desk. On it were piles of sheets, all handwritten, all waiting to be typed up by someone brave enough to make sense of it all.

But how could she possibly pay a secretary? Her medical expenses had long ago drained away her savings. The alimony from Zach barely covered her groceries. Dad often claimed to be broke, despite the money constantly going out the other way to Felicia. Yes, Katie knew. She knew he was still supporting Felicia. Probably even supplying her with Trident gum.

The pages were slightly crisp, the edges brownish. How long had it been since she had actually sat in here to do any writing?

Months. Years.

The window was cracked. The curtain stirred. And how long had the sun and wind and even the rain abused her memories....?

Suns of pain burst through her chest as she sat down. Her shaking fingers sifted the sheets. Nothing made any sense. She knew for sure she hadn't left her manuscript in such bad

shape. Had Dad gone through it? Straining, muttering, she tried to assemble the pages and chapters in the right order. Post-it notes covered some of the sheets like a leprosy, like a... And some of the handwriting didn't look familiar. It almost looked like...

That fucking bitch.

Who gave her the right?

Pages about the Cancer were mixed in with the Hair section, while Mumbai was scattered across all three.

She was feeling faint. Spots burned and bloomed at the edges of her vision.

The curtain suddenly came at her. She jumped. A wall of blue...!

There you are, came the voice.

It was Felicia. Fatima. Standing in the doorway.

Then, behind her, a bearded man appeared. Smoking.

It was Imad. The latest. Dad had told her about him just that morning. With a friendly, or perhaps patronizing, smile, he took out his cigarette and said it was nice to meet her at last.

You can't do this, Fatima said. *It's not good for you.*

Katie clawed up the sheets. *Leave me alone. Please! Just let me finish...!*

Come on, sis. We need to take you back.

Did you mess with this? I had them all in order! Did you go through...?!

You're tired. Did you take your medication? I gave you your pills...

Just go!

We'll bring you your writing. Okay? Everything you need. Come on. Just leave it and come with us.

No! You can't make me! I want to work on my book!

Look, we promise. Okay? Just--

NO!

We're trying to help you! Here, give me...

Felicia was edging closer. Imad hesitated in the doorway, looking off down the hall. But then Fatima hissed at him. He came in.

We're going to take you where you can get better. Don't you want to be better...?

Fuck off. Fuck you! Get away from me!

They fell on her. Katie shrieked.

I'm home! I'm home! Leave me alone!

Papers scattered, flew. A spaghetti monster.

Just, please-- Hey! Get her--

Let go!

Look, do you want me to call Dad? He's downstairs working on a project but he'll come up here, don't make him come up here!

You're lying. Dad's not here. I saw your gum!

What?

Your gum is here. It's just you! He doesn't let us chew gum in the house! Daddy said!

Come on, you need rest, Katie. Please...!

I don't want to! I don't want to!

One hand gripped the side of the writing desk, while the other clamped pages to her chest. Cigarette clenched, amused, Imad pried her fingers. They both pulled on her until she was

up in the air, shrieking and kicking, and carried her down as she stuffed papers into her screaming mouth...

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A very pregnant woman went to the podium. The audience at Candlelight hushed, their faces curious and attentive.

The woman looked out at the crowd. She placed a stack of printed sheets on the lecture stand, and then smiled. On an easel was a framed portrait of Katie Marie Empson-Richter, her smile matching her sister's.

"This..." Her voice broke. "This is for Katie. She was the bravest person I knew. And I loved her with all my heart. Here is some of her story..."

Someone whispered to their neighbor.

"The headscarf? It's in honor of her sister."