

From the Gentlemen at the Bar

Melinda and I are drinking Margueritas at Applebee's during our traditional post-Christmas debriefing. A life time ago, we were randomly assigned to be roommates at Slippery Rock Teachers College. Like an arranged marriage that turns out to be an enduring match of soul mates, we've been best friends ever since.

"Want to hear something crazy?" Melinda says. "The whole time Susan was in the hospital, I couldn't find my glasses."

Susan, Melinda's daughter, spent the week after Thanksgiving at Magee Hospital after she totaled her car on a cement balustrade on her way home from a sorority party. She fractured both ankles and needed surgery to reset bones and insert titanium rods. She's still convalescing in her childhood bedroom at Melinda's and won't be returning to her dorm at Duquesne this semester. Melinda, naturally, is still beside herself. I can relate. I have a daughter, too. Becca, five years older than Susan.

"I was dead asleep when I got the call," Melinda says. "Before I went to sleep, I was reading *Love in the Time in Cholera*—which you lent me, remember?"

I nod. I've been nagging her to read it for ages. Melinda and I are big fans of magic realism.

"I distinctly remember turning down the page—sorry, I know you hate it when I do that—then taking off my glasses and putting them on the nightstand where I always put them. And then the whole surreal nightmare thing—the call at 2 a.m., racing to the hospital. But I didn't tell you the part about my glasses. My glasses were not on the nightstand, so off I careened in my readers from Kresge's."

"I vaguely remember wondering why you were wearing the harlequins," I say. Melinda had called me from the hospital and I'd met her there.

“When I finally got home, I started looking for them for real, inside *Love in the Time of Cholera*, under my pillow, in the pockets of my robe, and then in crazy places--the refrigerator, the dishwasher. They were nowhere. And then I found them--the very day Susan came home from the hospital. Guess where they were.”

I don't even try.

“On the nightstand next to my bed,” Melinda says. “Where I always put them.”

“Stupid stress,” I say.

“You don't understand. My glasses were *not there* when I got the call.”

“Then where were they?”

“They'd disappeared. Sometimes things just disappear—for a time. Case in point, your car at the mall.”

“Okay,” I say. Melinda knows this story.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving I'd gone directly from Magee Hospital to the Century Mall in Monroeville, the biggest mall east of something or other. Hugely enormous, it sprawls in the shadow of an even more impressive structure--a smoking, glowing slagheap, an inland palisade as seemingly implausible as a multi-tiered butte. I spent the day shopping for Christmas presents with an almost feral concentration to distract myself from the very real possibility that Becca wouldn't even show up to open them.

And then, a more immediate worry. I could not find my car. I wandered up and down the rows for half an hour while an Arctic gale whistled down the slagheap and pulled at my plastic bags. Finally, I had to admit it. My car had been stolen. I went back into the mall to report it. The security guard, a twelve-year-old playing dress-up in a policeman uniform, said, “I wish I had a dollar for every shopper who thought their car was stolen.”

I went back into the cold to look one more time. And there it was, my '07 Camry, my second home. I'd taken it as a sign. My car had been miraculously returned to me. So might

Becca. Maybe my daughter *would* show up on Christmas to open and appreciate her gifts. And that's what happened, more or less.

"So where do things go when they disappear?" I ask.

"They never existed in the first place," says Melinda. "The whole universe is just a fabulous construct of our own making. And sometimes, when we're especially overwhelmed, we lose little pieces of it. Like my glasses and your car. We forget how to imagine them."

"I don't know," I say. "This Marguerita seems pretty real to me right now."

"Thanks to your own personal universe."

"Maybe the universe hid your bifocals so you couldn't see how banged up Susan was. A very special holiday gift from the cosmos to you."

"Oh, Alice," says Melinda, "even without my bifocals, I could see how banged up she was. Face it, Pollyanna. The universe, assuming it even exists, doesn't give a rat's ass about us."

I'm not so sure I believe this. I haven't told Melinda the whole story of my Christmas yet. She knows the highlight from our brief phone conversation on Christmas Eve: Becca did come home. But there's another part I haven't told her yet, and this piece snaps neatly into place right next to hers. Not that two little puzzle pieces form anything like a picture, but how true, how satisfying, when one piece out of a thousand, a million, snaps neatly into place next to another.

Our waitress, a young, cheerful blonde with an energetic stride, brings us another round of Margueritas. "From the gentlemen at the bar," she says.

"See?" I say. "The universe does so care about us."

Then I tell Melinda my Christmas story.

Becca came home at ten p.m. on Christmas Eve. I hadn't seen her since her birthday in March. I didn't know where, how, she was living. How could a mother not know where, how, her child was living? The mothers in my Al-Anon group ask themselves these same questions. What did I do, what did I fail to do, *why* can't I make my own child better? You can't, says Al-Anon.

You are powerless. Not the answer I was looking for when I started coming to meetings, but like any answer, strangely comforting. *I am powerless!* So much better than admitting I've failed. I'm sure a more spiritual person would have a deeper understanding of powerlessness, but for me, it's been a way to feel less guilty about giving up.

Becca looked good. A little too thin, slightly hyper, but mostly, good. Nothing like the other times. We spent an hour of perfectly lovely quality time while she opened her gifts, each and every one, she insisted, the exact thing she always wanted. She gave me a charming homemade coupon for pinking shears. The last time we spoke, weeks before, I'd complained that my blunt scissors gnawed the seams of the quilt I was working on, and she remembered. Gift enough.

By eleven o'clock, I could see that Becca was getting antsy. She said needed to go to Wal-Mart right that minute to get me a real present. Of course I suspected. No, knew. I said the usual things. That having her with me was gift enough. That the best gift she could give me was *not* going out.

But out she went. I could have tried harder to make her stay. But it was Christmas Eve. She'd come home. Would she, ever again, if this holiday degenerated into yet another dysfunctional scene, the two of us screaming at each other in the driveway? And maybe she really did want to get me a gift. Maybe this was her way of making amends. Maybe she really was working the steps.

"So which was it?" says Melinda. "Denial or Christmas miracle?"

"You tell me," I say, and tell her the rest.

An hour and a half later, as I was dozing and jerking awake in front of the TV, I got the call from Annette, Becca's best friend from high school, the one Becca always swore the Vodka, the pot, the paraphernalia belonged to.

"She was seizing!" Annette shrieks into the phone. "Grand mal! I couldn't bend her arms and legs for a full seven minutes! I turned her on her side and made sure her tongue was free,

but it went *on* and *on*. For a full seven minutes!” She’d timed it. The length of a seizure, it turns out, is crucial. Annette took the pre-nursing curriculum in high school. Now she works at Ed’s Tattoos While You Wait. “Talk to her,” Annette pleads. “She won’t go to the hospital. Tell her she needs to go to the hospital.”

I hear the chaotic blur of a phone being passed.

“Becca,” I say.

A long moment, then, “Mommy?”

“Sweetheart,” I say. “What did you take? It’s important. Tell me.”

Ecstasy, she says.

“Where are you?”

“Whether or not. Something.”

“Becca. Put Annette on.”

I tell Annette to call 911 and have the ambulance take Becca to the University Hospital (which sees patients without insurance)--I’ll meet them there. I hear low urgent mumbles in the background.

“I don’t know the address here,” Annette says. “Just . . . come get her. The Weathervane Apartments in the city. I’ll meet you out front.”

I realize no one is going to call an ambulance for Becca. But, a small miracle, I know where the Weathervane Apartments are--in a rundown section of Pittsburgh, twenty-five miles away. I’ve been there before, on another Christmas Eve, years ago.

I drive the twisty two-lane road over Algonquin Mountain way too fast. In the city I switch lanes, tailgate, swerve through gas station parking lots to get ahead of slow moving cars. I almost want the police to stop me. They can give me an escort, call an ambulance--and possibly arrest Becca when, if, we find her—because of course there are drugs in that apartment. Is that what I want? Becca in jail instead of a hospital? I drive like a maniac and leave it up to the universe.

Of course Annette is not out front. I hit her number on my cell. "I'm here," I say. "Where are you?"

"Becca's doing better now," says Annette. "She says she doesn't need to go to the hospital."

"Tell me where you are." Every word is its own sentence.

Annette gives me confusing directions. Bottom level, halfway down the block on the K-Mart side, around the back, up a few steps, down a few, off to your left, a broken lantern. I race up and down half-flights through a labyrinth of breezeways straight out of an M.C. Escher print. All the lanterns are broken.

The last time I was there, Becca was eight. I was still married to her father. I'd spent weeks shopping and sewing for the family we adopted from the Angel Tree at Community Action. Becca picked the tag. Two little girls ages seven and nine. My big and little sisters, Becca said. Crazy, I'd had the same thought. Becca is my only child. I miscarried the child that might have been her big sister, though of course Becca doesn't know that, nor that I miscarried again a year after Becca was born, after which her father and I stopped trying, on many levels.

I was supposed to meet the social worker in charge of the Angel tag family at her office to hand over the presents, but at the last minute she had a more pressing emergency. "The rule rather than the exception on holidays," she said with an airy laugh. Highly irregular, but could I possibly deliver the gifts? Otherwise the kids would have nothing for Christmas. She gave me the family's name, directions to the Weathervane Apartments in Pittsburgh, and complicated instructions about how to find this family's unit within the vast complex. It was tricky, she said, intentionally so, 3B next to 6F or else not marked at all—you'd think some drug lord devised the system to confuse the police. Again, that airy laugh.

I dragged my bags of gifts down one cement corridor after another. The place seemed oddly deserted—there was no one to ask. I knocked on a few doors, but surprise, no one answered. Give up, I told myself. You'll never find the family you're looking for. Go home, to

yours. What were they doing that very moment without me? Shaking presents to guess what was inside? Putting tinsel on the toy train tracks to make sparks? Watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for the hundredth time?

An elderly woman dragging an oxygen tank opened her door as I was lumbering by. "The Kerrs?" she said. "They're right next door! I'll knock on their wall." A few seconds later the door next to hers cracked open and there stood a thin, shirtless man fitting dentures into his mouth.

"I'm delivering these for the social worker," I said cheerily. The man opened the door just far enough to haul the bags inside, but before he pushed it shut, I caught a glimpse of two little girls, tangle haired, wide-eyed, barefoot on the concrete floor. How beautiful they were, these ghost children of mine, these sisters Becca might have had. I heard their squeals as they plundered the bags. Later, the social worker told me that when she did her wellness visit, they were still abuzz at the wonder of it. They'd seen Santa, they told her, and he was a *lady*.

Maybe Annette's directions clicked in my head, maybe other universal forces were at work, but I find her, Becca, my beautiful girl, slumped on a futon, shaky, befuddled, vomit caked in her long blond hair. A man sits next to her, his arm draped proprietarily around her shoulder. There are others in the room besides Becca, Annette, and this man, but I can't focus on them. They might as well not exist.

"Mike," says the man with his arm around Becca. "Sorry we had to meet under these circumstances." He has a shiny shaved head and a jaunty goatee. Small-boned, confident, polite to mothers--I know his type. Something expensive glitters in his ear.

"Let's go," I say to Becca. "I'm taking you to the emergency room,"

"They'll put me in jail," she mumbles.

I dial the University Hospital emergency room. No, I will NOT hold. "My daughter just had a seizure," I say. "Grand mal. Seven minutes long. She's afraid you'll call the police if you find drugs in her system. Will you?" I hit speaker.

Bring her in immediately, says an officious male voice. A seizure of that duration has most likely caused brain damage. The police will not be called. It's not a crime to have illegal drugs in your body. On your person, yes, but not in your body. Anything in your body is governed by doctor/patient privilege. She needs to be seen. Immediately.

"Where's my shoes?" says Becca. I fit her trembling feet into her high-heeled clogs and push my shoulder under her arm. We stand. She leans against me like a crutch. I bend to pick up her purse; she bends with me. Together we hobble out the door. Mike doesn't get up.

By the time we get to the hospital it's after two a.m.—Christmas Day, technically. The intake nurse behind the bulletproof glass insists that Becca sign in herself since she's too old to be my dependent. On the Reason for Being Seen line, Becca writes *seizure*. She spells it correctly. I can't say why this breaks my heart. "Grand mal. Seven minutes long," I add. We're told to take a seat.

The waiting room overflows with the casualties of Christmas present. Every seat is occupied. Every plastic table between every seat is occupied. The walls are lined with the stricken and their significant others sitting or sprawling on the floor.

We're called back almost immediately. Everyone turns their resentful eyes to us. Who are we to be so privileged? *Are we privileged?* Of course. But is that why we've been called back so quickly, or is it the length of Becca's seizure? Privilege, I pray. Let it be privilege.

Tests. More tests. Blood drawn, sensors stuck on her skinny torso, an IV piercing the shy blue vein in her left hand, the beep beep beep of machines telling her body's story in a language I don't understand. Her face is so white. I see freckles I didn't know she still had. They faded as she got older, but now, here they are again. Someone gives her a shot of something. What? They can't tell me without her consent, HIPAA regulations, doctor/patient privilege . . .

"Oh fuck, just tell her," Becca says in a low, slushy voice. *Oh fuck just tell her* counts as consent, apparently, even when the patient is high on yet another substance—this time a major dose of Ativan.

It turns out that Becca's had a "bad reaction" to cocaine—meaning she almost OD'd. No obvious damage to her brain or heart--a small miracle given the duration of her seizure. This according to the attending physician, a handsome young resident who in a perfect world would be Becca's over-protective boyfriend, but who in this one looks much too young to be a real doctor.

But she said Ecstasy, I tell him.

No trace of Ecstasy, he says. Cocaine, opioids, alcohol, marijuana, yes. But no Ecstasy.

"She lied to me," I say to Melinda. "Seconds after her brain jack hammered for a full seven minutes against her skull, she still had enough brain function to *lie* to me. The good news? Her brain still works like always. The bad news? See above." Melinda doesn't say anything. That's how good a friend she is.

The young resident tells me to take Becca home, follow up with her primary care physician, get her into rehab, pronto. I want to say, can you write me a prescription for a magic wand while you're at it?

Much later, a nurse comes into our curtained cubicle with discharge papers, a vial of Ativan, a prescription for more, and colorful printouts about free and private rehabs. I unstick the plastic EKG tabs that litter Becca's torso, help her out of her hospital gown and into her tee shirt, and once again, fit her feet into her high-heeled clogs. I drive home with Becca slumped against her seat belt, heavily asleep.

The sun is just rising when I get to the top of Algonquin Mountain. Far below, our town sprawls like a miniature village around a train set. I pull onto the shoulder and turn off the ignition. All is quiet. There are few cars on the road at this hour.

"Every Who down in Who-ville . . ." says Becca. I assume she's talking in her drug-induced sleep, but no, her eyes are open. She's awake. Of course she's being ironic, but when I reach to start the car, she rests her hand on mine as if to say, no, not yet. We settle back. The

sun rounds the horizon and melts the shadows below. Together, we watch Christmas Day arrive.

“We couldn’t have sat there more than ten minutes,” I say to Melinda, “but during that little bit of time, things came back to me. The way she could recite *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* when she was eight. How she’d sometimes say exactly what I was thinking the exact moment I was thinking it. All the good . . .” I take a long shuddery breath and start again. “Oh Melinda,” I say. “I think I forgot how to imagine her.”

Melinda takes a long swallow of her drink, mostly melted ice by now. The Margueritas courtesy of the gentlemen at the bar sit untouched in a puddle of condensation. One each is our limit when we’re driving.

“Christmas miracle, definitely,” Melinda says. “Still, doesn’t it suck how something really . . . *sucky* has to happen before the universe tosses us a miracle? Becca nearly kills herself but at least she’s back in rehab. Susan nearly kills herself but at least she’ll walk again--with a limp. You’d think the universe could do better, miracle-wise. Why all the *at leasts*?”

“Because that’s what we pray for,” I say quietly.

“You pray? Really? Sorry. I guess I’m still majorly pissed at the universe for letting shit happen in the first place. I know that makes me sound whiny and entitled. I know I should be grateful, joyful even, especially since your prayers . . .”

“Becca’s not in rehab. I don’t know where she is.”

When I pulled myself out of a dense, dark sleep to check on her a few hours later, Becca was gone. Also gone: her grimy gym bag, her vial of Ativan, her prescription for more. Not gone: the printouts about free and private rehabs, all her Christmas presents.

“Oh, Alice,” Melinda says. “The universe owes you one big fucking miracle.”

The universe, of course, doesn’t owe us a thing. Still, it has its moments. The way it turns us toward the light with each new day; Becca and I on Algonquin Mountain, watching it happen, together; Melinda’s hands in mine, the salt from our Margueritas chafing our wrists.

