

Darkness Behind Her Eyes

Lyn watched with envy as Vanessa, her neighbor across the street, pull out her mail. Almost every day just before lunch time Lyn looked out from her kitchen window. , She saw Vanessa glide out from her front door. With her back to Lyn she would collect her mail. Holding one or who knows how many pieces of mail in her hand, she waved at Lyn and walk back and disappear back inside the house. Someone somewhere had a lot to say to her and she to them, Lyn would think. How fortunate Vanessa was to be literate and be able to pour her heart out. Lyn wondered what people wrote to her. Did they write about their daily troubles and joys, their loving families, their life experiences or about exotic places they lived in? Lyn would try to breathe out jealous pangs but the feeling of envy refused to leave her.

At age 72 Lyn lived alone in a remote Pennsylvanian farmhouse. She was born in the house but one by one all members of family had either moved elsewhere or died. No other families lived close by for miles except for Vanessa, her spinster neighbor.

Lyn could neither read nor write. She always wanted to. Circumstances kept her from going to school or even enabling her to read. After her mother's death, twelve-year-old Lyn was the only female in the house. So she had to take over the responsibility of caring for the young family. Throughout her teenage years she was occupied with household chores and looking after her younger brother. Then her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. For sometime he was able to manage as the assistant manager of the local grocery store but the pain took over and disabled him. He was forced to stay home at the time when his son and Lyn's brother, Donovan went to college. Donovan visited his family during short holiday breaks. After graduation he got a job in the west coast. His returns to the town dwindled to once a year, if that. Lyn took care of her father whose body she watched deteriorate. When he finally died Lyn was in her late thirties.

Lyn was neither bitter nor lonely. Temporariness and death had mellowed her. Her life experiences had taught her to focus on what was at hand and find solace in her solitary existence. Having lived most of her young adult life taking care of the people she loved, she had matured and grown to like solitude. Her only regret was that she never got time to attend school.

But today as Lyn watched Vanessa pull out her mail it did not bother her so much. Her favorite niece, Meredith, was coming to spend summer and autumn months with her! Meredith planned to write her first book in Aunt Lyn's farmhouse. "Your home is one of the most inspiring and peaceful places, Aunt!" She had said on the telephone. The news of her coming gave Lyn the thrill of her life. Meredith in her mid-thirties had been a journalist of repute. But she had given up her job because of her deep

desire to travel and teach. Two years ago her desire had come true. She was teaching English to children in remote villages worldwide.

When Meredith left to teach in other countries, Lyn prayed for her safe journey and stay at those unknown places. After her return she fascinated her aunt with stories about the children she taught. Meredith was going to write a book was about her experiences in various countries teaching children how to read and write English.

Meredith is coming! Meredith is coming! Lyn couldn't think of anything else. Every ten minutes or so she peeked through the bedroom curtains, looking for a car on the distance road.

Lyn imagined Meredith in some far off village in India teaching English to a class of girls with oiled hair and tightly combed braids, and with smiles on their lips and hope in their eyes. She imagined Meredith in sneakers on dusty unpaved paths and dirt roads. She recalled her thick blond hair and freckled face. She imagined her niece helping each student understand the foreign language word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence. Lyn knew her niece would teach well. When the girls would neatly copy what their teacher had written in white chalk on the blackboard, when they would read it aloud she would giddily at "her" girls and feel proud of them.

Across the street Lyn spotted Vanessa, taking out her mail. As Vanessa was walking back she looked up and gave Lyn a smile. Lyn smiled back and sighed, *it sure would be nice to get heart-warming letters.*

"Hey, Vanessa!" cried Lyn with excitement. "I forgot to tell you my niece is coming to stay with me for the whole summer."

"How nice!" Vanessa said and walked right in her front door. Her indifference did not even enter Lyn's mind filled with the excitement of her niece's arrival.

Lyn paced to and fro from the bedroom window to the kitchen. The wind coming through the windows blew her grey hair that haloed her wrinkled face. She imagined Meredith now in an Indian village teaching under the shade of a tree, now at a Guatemalan open-air class, now in a Mexican brick school.

Lyn blinked. Many decades ago when Meredith was ten, she too had wanted to drive away, simply drive away until she could reach the end of the world. At one rare holiday gathering her father's sister's family had come to visit. Her uncle asked her if she could have wish what would it be. Her life was led by fate but she was allowed to imagine. When she declared her wish of being in an exotic land teaching, everyone looked at her as if she had lost her mind, except Meredith. She admiringly gazed at Aunt Lyn. She had walked up to her, held her hand and asked, "Why don't you then?"

What Meredith didn't know then was that Lyn didn't even know the alphabet. But now Meredith was coming from the world out there. She had seen it, smelled it, heard it, tasted it and touched it. And now she was planning to write about it. She would tell her aunt about the world out there as if she too was one of "her" girls.

Lyn saw something glinting in the sun driving towards her house. She ran down the steps, rushed out the front door and down the path as Meredith drove in and parked her car.

"Meredith!" Lyn ran towards her and hugged her tightly. "Welcome!"

Meredith hugged her back. Then she held Lyn's face between her palms to kiss her. "How're you, Aunt Lyn?"

Lyn's eyes welled up. She could not say a word. She just choked.

"Why are you crying?" Meredith asked.

Lyn gently removed her niece's hands from her face, linked her fingers to hers to make sure she was not dreaming. "Because you're here!" she said, giddy with happiness.

Lyn was standing in the presence of this adventurer, this teacher, this beautiful blond girl who had passed through cities and towns to reach remote villages to shine blazing light of literacy. It was a different world from that of Lyn's. The world of rolling hills and vast spaces—north, south, east, west—landscapes of cerulean and cobalt blues, sap and moss greens for miles around. Today those colors were shining like neon lights because of Meredith. For a few minutes, Lyn did not know whether to keep standing or go inside the house.

"Are we going in or what?" Meredith had takes her suitcase out of the trunk and was ready to pull it inside.

"We are! We are!" Lyn said ready to lead. As Lyn turned to go in she saw Vanessa glide outside her home. Lyn did not expect her neighbor to watch them with her mouth open, speechless. Vanessa walked to her mailbox. Lyn turned with a swivel and looking towards Meredith she hollered, "Vanessa! Meet my niece Meredith."

"Nice to meet you, Meredith!" Vanessa cried and waved the envelope in her hand. "Wonderful! From my old friend Sarah, wonderful!"

"Well, isn't that nice!" Lyn cried back.

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A week passed. Meredith looked comfortable and settled. It was as if she had lived at that farmhouse forever. In her room morning sunrays shone through the windows as the gentle breeze flapped bringing the aroma of fresh coffee from the kitchen. For her, each single moment was laden with possibilities and abundance.

Meredith would get out of her bed, pull the white muslin curtains, flung the windows open and let the mountain breeze flow in. The air was fragrant with pine, the birds stirring on its branches. At breakfast she said to her aunt how she loved to listen to the buzzing of insects, gaze at blossoming flowers, watch honeybees collecting pollen, and grasshoppers flinging themselves. Then she would get back in the bed and lean against large sturdy cushions. She would write, write, write until the sun returned to the western horizon.

“I have a big breakfast ready for you!” Lyn hollered from the kitchen.

“What are you going to spoil me with today?” Meredith cried back.

“Well, today, my darling you will eat poached eggs, my homemade bread, sausages and your Indian cocktail, sugary coffee-milk.”

Meredith came to the table as Lyn was setting the bowls laden with breakfast. She continued scribbling in her notebook with her long yellow pencil.

Finally Lyn sat and said, “Tell me all about your travels, your teaching and your girls.”

“I will Aunt Lyn, I will! But first let me enjoy all this food you have cooked!”

Meredith tasted a bite. “Yummyyyyyyy! To die for! I can have it every day any time of the day!” she said and went back to scribbling.

In a breathless spell Lyn watched as Meredith wrote and then lazily rested the pencil on the notebook. She was thinking as she pressed the pencil with her index finger and moved it to and fro. Lyn had never held a pencil or a pen. Her hand twitched on the handle of her cup as she gulped a sip of tea.

“How does it feel to write?” Lyn asked.

“Hmmm?”

“I said how does it feel to write?” Meredith looked at Lyn and made marks on the pad.

“I will tell you how it feels but first tell me what does this say?” Meredith pointed to the words she had just marked.

“You know, darling, I can’t read.”

“I know, that’s why....” Meredith said pointing each letter one by one, “Look at this. This is *L* and *y* and *n*. That makes *Lyn*.”

“My name!” Lyn grinned widely and excitedly. She pushed a slice of freshly baked bread with a layer of homemade strawberry preserves towards her niece. “Eat!” she commanded.

“Thanks!” Meredith took a bite into her mouth, chewed, gulped it and said, “Do you want to write something?” She pulled out a new pencil and a small notebook from her bag.

Lyn smiled widely. “No, I don’t think so. It’s fun watching you write, though... although... I would love to write a letter... get a reply... but I don’t know a soul... who will write to me?”

“But you can’t receive a letter unless you write one, can you?”

Lyn looked at the pencil in Meredith’s hand and held her breath.

“Come on, let’s write something!” Meredith extended her hand holding a pad and a pencil.

Hesitatingly, Lyn took it. She placed the pad on the table, held the pencil in her hands and gazed at the pad. She turned to Meredith.

“Go ahead try!” She looked thoughtfully for a few moments at her aunt. “There is darkness behind your eyes, Aunt” Meredith said. “But learning letters and words will make you see.”

Lyn squinted her eyes, licked the sharpened head of her pencil and set it down to the paper. She breathed in deep, gathering courage to start a new venture. At that moment she saw Vanessa float out of her front door like a flower on the rippling river.

“I need to mail a few letters. What time does the postman come?” Meredith asked.

“I don’t know, darling. I don’t pay attention. Come to think of it I don’t even know who the postman is, Vanessa would know. She gets mail almost every day.”

After breakfast Meredith went back to her writing and Lyn to cleaning up and preparing lunch. The constant sound of Meredith’s pencil scribbling, every instance she passed her room, animated Lyn like nothing else did.

Summer days turned to weeks and weeks to months. The days when Lyn had time on her hands she would walk to Meredith’s room and stand behind her. Lyn considered a quick smile from her niece as a permission to watch her write. In wonderment she would observe how she made curves, dots and lines. That these shapes had meaning was like magic. At one such occasion as Lyn lovingly gazed at Meredith’s right hand. She tilted her head and said, “Sorry to interrupt you darling, but it amuses me to think that I recognize your hand better than your face. I know every part of your hand, every bump and crinkle, that makes squiggles and doodles.”

“You look amazed,” Meredith said resting her long yellow pencil on the paper.

“Read me something.” Lyn said. She sat at the edge of the bed facing Meredith’s writing table.

Meredith thought for a moment and then took out a book from her bag of books, flipped a few pages and began to read aloud. “What sets us above all other creatures on this planet is our ability to read and write. What we thus understand determines our relationship with the world.”

Rapt and wide-eyed, Lyn said, “Read me some more!”

Meredith flipped through a few pages, scanned through one, and then flipped some more. Then she stopped to read.

“Listen, aunt,” she cleared her throat. “When you teach someone to read and write you educate an individual; when you teach a woman to read and write you educate a family-nay, an entire community.”

Lyn’s eyes welled up. How different would her world be? What new things would she really see if she too could read and write! She did not know that a literate woman could benefit her community more than a literate man! What other hundreds of things did she not know would happen to a person when they learn to read and write?

She perked up and said, “Darling, write what I say.”

Meredith smiled and nodded, and waited with the pencil in her hand.

“Write ‘Meredith loves Aunt Lyn.... She will teach her how to read and write letters.’”

Meredith wrote down what Lyn had said. When she looked up, Lyn’s face was somber. “What’s wrong, Aunt Lyn?”

“Nothing....” Lyn said. Then she quickly added, “No. There is something. I am thinking, darling, about this whole process of wanting to say something, then putting it in curves, lines and dots on paper, sending it to someone thousands of miles away who

can then sit down and understand what this scribbling says. And then write back to me. This is amazing, so amazing....”

“I guess it is,” Meredith said casually, squinting her eyes at the pad.

“No, no, it certainly is! It is as amazing as the day you were born, almost miraculous!”

“Human birth is a miracle, but this is not a miracle,” Meredith said tapping on the words she had just written.

“It certainly is a miracle. You have power to birth what is in your mind by mere movement of a yellow pencil,” Lyn said. Her ears and cheeks flushed.

“You can learn it too.”

“At my age?”

“At any age! You want to start right now?”

“Are you serious? Can I?”

“It depends how much you want to.”

“You can’t even know how much I want to, darling! I didn’t think it was possible!” Lyn said with a glint of excitement in her eyes.

“Wait a minute.” She got up and went to her room and returned with a tablet and a brand new sharpened yellow pencil.

“Who gave these to you?” Meredith asked.

“I bought these for myself. In my gut somehow knew I would need these someday, that someone will teach me. I didn’t know when or how or who. I simply felt and believed.”

Meredith carefully scribed L-Y-N W-I-S-S-E on her notebook making the sounds of the letters as she wrote. Lyn slowly copied the letters Meredith had written. She wrote

them over and over again until she memorized how to write her full name, LYN WISSE. When she felt ready, she said, “Now.” She opened the first page of her tablet and slowly marked her name saying aloud each letter as she wrote it. Meredith nodded as she watched. When Lyn was done, “Great beginning, Aunt!” Meredith exclaimed.

After that morning, every single day Meredith tutored and taught her aunt. And her aunt spent hours practicing the letters and words. The teacher would write a word, pronounce it aloud, and then ask her student to repeat it. Lyn would copy the words. Thus together they constructed sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph and read them aloud. Lyn read, copied and memorized several paragraphs every day. Her learning was quick and her progress speedy. She didn’t miss a day of reading, writing and memorizing. During the first month she worked only after lunch but later she added after dinner hours to practice what she learned during morning and afternoon hours. In short, when she was not cooking, cleaning or going to the market to shop she was learning how to read and write.

Lyn worked so hard that in four months she was at the middle school level of language comprehension. She started to read stories to Meredith, first slowly, in broken sentence by broken sentence. When she made mistakes Meredith corrected her never saying a word that may discourage her. And when she did well Meredith would say, “Aunt Lyn you can’t imagine how proud you make me!”

“Nothing to be proud of, I am simply doing what I should have done long ago.” Lyn said.

“Believe me Aunt, you’re one of a kind! Your resolve, your determination is exemplary!” Such comments strengthened Lyn’s confidence.

Soon it was time for Meredith to leave.

“I couldn’t have completed my manuscript if I had stayed back in my New York apartment—so distracting.” Meredith hugged Lyn to say goodbye. “And thank you so much, Aunt, for taking care of me and spoiling me! We had fun, didn’t we?” She held her aunt tightly in her arms. Lyn’s pangs of separation made her eyes well up.

“Don’t cry! You should be so pleased with your work,” Meredith said. She kissed Lyn’s cheeks. “I’m so proud of you.” She put her arm around Lyn’s shoulders.

“Without you the house will feel empty,” Lyn said.

“You won’t have time to miss me! You’re going to keep very busy with books and audiotapes and instructional material that I will mail you as soon as I get back. You must know before I leave—you have been one of my prized students.”

“Love you, darling!” Lyn smiled as she wiped her eyes. “And come back soon.”

“Love you back!” Meredith said and gave her aunt an ivory paperknife from India as a parting gift.

The books and tapes Meredith mailed from New York helped Lyn make up words and roll them on her tongue just like Meredith rolled out words on the paper. She held her pencil with a strong grip the way Meredith did with her delicate fingers, as she lovingly inscribed each vowel and consonant.

Without missing a day, Lyn practiced the lessons she had learned from Meredith. Complementing the lessons were the instructional tapes. Together they helped her reading and writing levels even further.

One morning Lyn sat at her study desk looking through the front window. She was practicing her lesson listening to the tape, when she glanced through the window and noticed Vanessa getting her mail. She too could get mail! What was she waiting for?

Driving her courage she set out to write a letter to Meredith. She carefully composed a letter, a thank you note. Lyn sat on her comfortable pine chair on a cushion, pulled it close to the study table where she had learned to scribe and practice her skill. The window next to it overlooked the silver ribbon of a road that meandered through the low hills through which the mailman drove to her house. She took out her new sky blue stationery pad with coal border. With a black pen on the upper right corner she scribed LW. Then lower down on the left side she lovingly scribed, Meredith. Then slowly and steadily she wrote one word and then the next and the next. Each sentence she formed was gratifying. When she finished writing she looked at her handiwork. It felt like an award to her self. A sigh of satisfaction escaped her. She signed her name, took another good look at the completed letter, folded it firmly and put it in a matching blue envelope. She neatly named and addressed it. Her whole body felt energized with the delight. With a feeling of euphoria she walked to the local post office, stamped the envelope and mailed it. Then she eagerly waited for the reply.

A few days passed. One pleasant afternoon, up the blue hills and through the tall fiery green pines and the long dusty road, came the sound of a car riding along until finally, at the bend, it came to a full thundering stop.

Lyn came running out of the door. It was the mail truck. She saw the mailman stop his car and lean out of its window and call, "Ms. Lyn Wisse?"

"Yes!" she cried.

"Mail for you, ma'am. I need a signature." He walked out and held a large packet toward her. He asked for her signature. She inscribed her name at the line he pointed to and took the packet.

Vanessa was watching from her window. The mail truck dusted away down the road. She stood watching.

Lyn Wisse read her name aloud on the front of the packet. She walked back, entered her house and went straight to her study table. She sat on her chair, picked up the yellow pencil and turned it in her fingers over and over. She opened the parcel with the ivory paperknife with due carefulness. Meredith had made arrangements for Lyn with a correspondence school for advanced instructions in reading and writing.

Meredith's reply to her letter lay on the top of the pile of papers. Lyn read the letter aloud to herself, savoring each word. Her eyes half shut, her mouth moving the words. She repeated each word and then went on. The letter was like bright sunshine on a cold snowy day.

My sweet, sweet Aunt Lyn, the reply from Meredith read, this is the reply to your first letter you ever wrote in your life! Isn't that exciting? It is historic! Perhaps you would like to frame it along with your first letter, (enclosed). So I'll keep it short....

Lyn read it again, then again. She savored its contents, memorized them, and then treasured the two letters with her jewels in a locked box.

Lyn read the rest of the papers in the packet including an official letter addressed to her. It said:

Dear Ms. Wisse, Enclosed in this packet are full particulars on how you can complete our six-month course through mail and earn a certificate in writing via the International Correspondence School.

As Lyn worked to complete the course she kept a regular correspondence with Meredith who was working on a project in a village in Chennai, India. The project had a two-year timeline. Slowly, she started to receive not only letters from her niece but also

from her “girls.” Numerous letters from girls in Chennai arrived in Pennsylvania, describing the place Lyn had never seen. *Dearest Aunt Lyn... Dear Ms. Wisse... Dear Lyn...* One girl wrote, *We love Meredith Teacherji so much so we would love to have you, her favorite auntie, spend winter in our village.* Letters kept coming and kept Lyn busy. She replied to each and every letter she got. She read and she wrote and replied and wrote some more. On a particularly hard day of writing she was forced to soak her hand in Epsom salts. Her mailbox was never empty any more.

Writing and reading letters had become a morning routine for Lyn. It was the best time of the day, pleasurable and productive. She felt she could share her pleasure with someone other than the girls she had corresponding with. What about Vanessa? For months she had simply waved at her either from her study room curtained window or when Lyn collected her mail. Recently, she had not even noticed her floating out from her front door to her mailbox. Vanessa seemed to stay in all the time. Lyn felt guilty for being so unfriendly with her neighbor. *Was Vanessa not doing well? Should she call her? After all she was the one who had inspired her to read and write.*

Lyn settled down on her chair and composed a letter in her mind. Writing down a thought, erasing it, writing a new feeling, revising it until she had a pretty good idea what she was going to write. Then she wrote:

Dear Vanessa,

It feels funny writing a letter to you who lives just across the street. But you will know why I'm doing this when you read the letter. For so many years, I watched you walk to your mailbox. How I envied you as you pulled out a letter or two! When you mentioned the contents of letters from your loving cousin Bill or childhood friend Sarah or devoted nephew Timothy I envied you so much!

But I am happy to say that I was able to change my pangs of envy into learning. My niece, Meredith, God bless her, made me realize that learning to read and write was not a gift but a skill. It could be learned by any one, at any age. When I

understood that, I went ahead with total dedication. Now my dream has become a reality. I can write letters and receive them. Thanks to you!

I had felt guilty for envying you. But I believe writing this thank you letter will redeem me of my guilt. Please forgive me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for inspiring me.

*With best wishes,
Lyn*

Lyn dropped the letter in Vanessa's mailbox. The following afternoon she went to the market to mail Meredith her favorite strawberry preserves.

As Lyn walked into the post-office, who did she see? Vanessa talking to Jack, the man behind the counter. Lyn walked towards a bench to wait her turn. As she passed Vanessa she heard Jack read, "I had felt guilty for envying you... I thank you from the bottom of my heart..." He finished and raised his head. When he saw Lyn he said, "There she is!"

"There who is?" Vanessa turned and seeing Lyn, raised her eyebrows.

Waving the letter at Lyn she said, "Now, why on earth would you write me a letter? Couldn't you tell me what you had to say?"

"Was Jack reading my letter to you?" Lyn said. "Why? It was for your eyes only. Why did you show my letter to him?"

"First tell me why you, who lives across my street, would *mail* me a letter?"

Vanessa crossed her arms and straightened her posture.

"Why? Because I wanted to surprise you. To thank you through the written word for inspiring me to fulfill my life's dream."

"How do you mean?" Vanessa's head tilted, her arms fell to her sides and her posture eased.

“I watched you receiving mail everyday--”

“Oh, please, you wretched woman!” Vanessa interrupted. “Don’t make me feel worse than I am feeling.” Vanessa huffed, made a sudden turn and walked out briskly.

And before Lyn could finish saying, “What did I do, now?” Vanessa had left the building.

“What did I do?” Lyn said turning to Jack.

“Why would you write a letter to someone who doesn’t know how to read?” John asked.

“Can’t read! Is that why she came to the post-office? To get my letter read?” Lyn’s jaw fell open.

“Yes!” Jack replied.

Lyn ran to catch up with Vanessa but was unable to cross the road with speeding traffic. Vanessa turned around the corner and was out of sight.