

Lost and Found

Category: Stories

written by Julie Evans | January 18, 2013

Julie Evans

When Mom died of alcohol poisoning on her sixtieth birthday, I was seventeen and then I didn't have a mom anymore.

My heart was crushed, but there was no time to grieve, because my dad was dying. A man in his late fifties, he'd battled emphysema, a brain aneurysm, colon cancer and then bone-marrow cancer.

Over the following months, and after starting my first year at the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis, I'd pace the halls of St. Mary's Hospital as Dad met with the doctors or had his lungs suctioned out. With no health insurance, and no hope of improvement, he was eventually moved to a nursing home. He died a few weeks later, when I'd briefly stepped out of the room.

In 1973, there were no systems in place for a young girl like me—nowhere I could go to talk to somebody who could help me. Instead of feeling lonely or abandoned, I felt numb. I majored in journalism, but also worked as a nursing assistant with cancer patients at the University's Masonic Hospital. It felt very sustaining; my parents had loved helping people, and so did I.

One day during my sophomore year, walking downtown on Hennepin Avenue, I spotted a thin, peculiar-looking woman standing beside a telephone pole. She was talking to a short, fat little dog, whose leash was wound around the pole.

"Sparky, stop jumping," she pleaded.

I walked over.

"That's a cute dog you have," I said. "It looks like he's all tangled up. Mind if I unwrap him? Is he friendly?"

"Oh, Sparky wouldn't hurt anybody," she said. "My Sparky is the friendliest dog in the world."

She tilted her head sideways and averted her face, seeming uneasy.

I studied her more closely.

Huddled inside a threadbare coat, she looked about fifty. Her mousy brown hair was anchored by countless bobby pins; under quiet eyelids, her eyes lay closed and sunken.

I realized she was blind.

I untangled Sparky. When the woman started to walk away, I walked alongside her.

"My name is Julie," I said casually. "I go to the University. I'm hoping to get into medical school after I finish up...I work at the Masonic Hospital. It's sad, really, all those people with cancer."

She reached up and touched my cheek—maybe to "see" what I looked like, maybe to comfort me, I didn't know. Her touch felt electric.

"My name is Odny," she said.

"I just want to make sure you get home safe," I said.

What I really wanted, though, was to see how she managed.

Odny fascinated me. She was blind; I had nightmares about going blind. Fragile though she was, she also seemed very capable, and I felt so clumsy and incapable. Here was someone who could show me how it was done. I wanted to absorb everything I could.

When we reached her building, I said, "Well, I'll be going now."

"Oh, no, come inside," she insisted. She dug through her bag for her key, felt her way along the building, found the doorframe and the lock, inserted the key, turned it and walked in, as Sparky barked and jumped, nearly knocking her down.

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Watching Odny skate along the edge of the hallway towards her apartment, her hands gently brushing the wall, I tried to imagine being her.

When she opened her apartment door, a horrible stench hit me. Inside, I saw bare light bulbs dangling from stripped wires, water-stained wallpaper and plaster peeling from the walls, and dirt and dog poop piled in the corners.

I felt furious: As a society, weren't we supposed to care for the sick and handicapped? Clearly, I thought, Odny's caretakers were taking advantage of her.

"You know, I love to clean and fix stuff," I said tentatively. "If you wouldn't mind, there are a few things I could help you with."

"I have a girl that comes in once a week, but I don't think she's too good at her job," Odny answered. "When I open my refrigerator, it smells like something's going bad. You could look in there for me."

I opened the fridge and felt like throwing up. Everything inside was rotten; the bratwursts were furry with mold. As I started chucking it all out into a paper bag, Odny settled her things on her card-table "desk."

"Were you born blind?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I could see. I lost my sight—from a fever, they said—right before my mommy and daddy were killed in a car accident. I was only sixteen." She, too, had been orphaned young...the knowledge made me feel close to her.

"You know, we have a lot in common," I said. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to stop by a couple of times a week. Maybe we can go out once in a while."

As easily as that, I became Odny's advocate—just as I'd been for my dad, and as I'd wished I could be for my mom. I cleaned Odny's apartment, took her to the doctor, complained to the landlord and got things fixed. We bought her a guinea pig. (After she had that little critter to hold, her blood pressure dropped from a dangerous 180/90 to nearly normal.)

Our visits became routine. Though I'd help her with some things, she managed her own money and paid her bills. Whenever I visited, she'd be busy listening to the radio or an audio book, or reading her Braille bible. I could see that her faith truly fed her.

I didn't have much money, but once a week I'd take Odny to Professor Munchies, a local hangout, and order her a huge omelet. After cutting it up, I'd quietly slide a few bites into my mouth, not wanting her to know I couldn't afford enough for us both. This ritual summed up our relationship—whatever I did for her I felt I was also doing for myself.

Two years later I moved to New York City, hoping to get a book published. Odny's life went on; when I visited her again, twenty years later, she was still in the same apartment, but it was clean and safe, and she had pet parakeets for company.

In the years since I met Odny, I've tried to learn everything I could about alternative medicine. I have worked with hospice and have spent years caring for people with cancer. The most important things, I've learned, are to watch and to listen.

Losing my parents when I was so young made medical school seem like too big a dream, but once I realized how much of a person's story I could find locked in his or her muscles and bones, I studied massage. Now I use my hands, my ears and my heart to listen for what a person may need, and to try to provide it.

I've met countless others like Odny—people who have enabled me to find myself by losing myself in caring for them. Now and then, someone comes along who gives me more than I could ever imagine...but that's another story.

About the author:

Julie Evans is a poet, essayist, inspirational writer, teacher and host of the television program *Just Say So*. She has just completed her memoir, *Joy Road*. At Empire State College she is an adjunct instructor, offering studies ranging from Native American narratives to therapeutic writing. "I believe that words are our best medicine, and I strive to find the cures that only writing can reveal."

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