

2017 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

Honorable Mention: “Romantic Expectations and an Uncooperative Tale” by Brooke Dimond

I knew what a near death experience was like. Years of reading dramatic poetry and fanciful classic literature had taught me all I had to know. There were ever so many romantic, exhilarating, fainting couch utilizing ways to have a brush with death, many of which resulted in a new profound sense of meaning or a wealthy suitor. According to my brother, I was being delusional and naïve. According to me, he was being pessimistic and lacked imagination. There had to be some sort of exciting element to narrowly escaping death. Then I experienced it.

“She has to be checked out, we can have someone bring you down to the emergency room now.” I tried to nod understandingly as the surgeon gave us an update on my little sister’s surgery. I figured that the surgeon would tell us what went wrong, but was just giving my parents a minute to process first. Then the conversation ceased to progress, everyone sat there blinking at me.

“Me?” I questioned.

“Yes. The surgery went well and your sister is fine. She is in recovery now. You, on the other hand, are yellow.” The surgeon explained.

I folded my arms and shifted my gaze to the floor, trying to make my face less obvious and show as little skin as possible. My slightly more lemony complexion had not escaped my notice that morning, but it was nothing that couldn’t be explained by a brief lapse in my sun protection skin care routine.

“How about it?” The surgeon broke my train of logic justifying my temperamental skin tone.

“What?” I asked, trying to sound engaged.

“Your mom will stay here with your sister while she wakes up, and you and your dad can go to the E.R. You could have a plugged bile duct.”

Great. A plugged bile duct didn’t sound like something that could be fixed with a twenty-minute consult and a pill. I did not have time for surgery. My sister was already post op, she would be coming home that night, and unpacked suitcases blocked the majority of our bedroom. Still, there was no getting out of this.

Dad and I followed an employee through the hospital to a back entrance of the children’s emergency room. Two heavy, silver doors opened to the hallway of the E.R. by a desk with staff typing away on computers and exchanging folders.

Doctors looked up from their clipboards and the stream of typing and chatter ceased. Everyone was staring at me. Some looked terrified of me and some had a gleam in their eyes like I was a new walking science experiment, but most of the people simply looked disturbed. My face started sweating as I nervously gulped.

“We have a room ready right over here.” A woman waved us into nearby exam room. Almost immediately, people began hooking me up to pulse oximeters and blood pressure cuffs. I

tried to convince an antsy resident with a notebook that my shot record actually was up to date while a nurse held a thermometer under my tongue and stuck a flashlight in my mouth.

“When did you first notice you were yellow?” A doctor bluntly inquired. Calling it plain “yellow” sounded so unflattering.

“Maybe a few days ago.” I guessed.

“You noticed it a few days ago? Is this the first time you had it checked? He looked at me wide eyed.

“I just thought I was getting a slight sun tan from slacking off on the sunscreen.” I shrugged.

“You thought you were getting a sun tan on your skin and eyes?” He questioned.

“Well, they look more vibrant today. Before, they just seemed a little more cream colored than usual.” I continued attempting to justify my acceptance of my appearance.

After that, things slowed down a little and people stopped shining lights in my eyes and sticking needles in my veins at such a rapid pace. Dad left to go see Taylor, and I waited for Mom to come down to begin her shift as parent with the yellow kid. While I was sitting on the edge of the bed and twiddling my thumbs, a frazzled, hurried looking doctor scurried in.

“I am a pediatric gastroenterologist, they called me down to consult about your case. Where are your parents?” He asked.

“Mom is coming.” I replied. I had a *case*? That sounded kind of fancy.

“How old are you”

“Seventeen.”

“Okay. The reason you are yellow, is because of all the bilirubin in your blood, it causes a condition called jaundice. It means that your liver is very sick. The ultrasound showed that there are no plugged ducts, so we still have to find out what’s wrong. We will have to admit you to the hospital.” He spoke too quickly for me to fully comprehend everything. I had taken Intro to Anatomy a year or so before that, but I still had to wrack my brain to remember what in the world the liver does. There must have been something you needed it for.

After Mom came in, the doctor repeated his introduction and went on to explain the results of my blood tests.

“Her liver enzyme levels, ALT and AST, are way off. One is a little over 1,500 and the other is over 3,000.” He stared at me intently. I could tell that there was something I was supposed to be getting from this conversation.

“Um, okay. Should those numbers be something other than that?” I tried to understand the logic behind his stunned expression.

“They should be around ten or twenty.” He replied. My mouth had been open in preparation of defending my so called “way off” labs, but then it shut. After speaking with the gastroenterologist, I was admitted and sent to an inpatient room while my little sister was being discharged.

The next morning I woke up feeling dazed. Like every morning, I swung my legs of the bed and went to get a drink of water. A sharp sting pierced my arm immediately upon standing. Now I remembered. I wasn't in my freshly cleaned bedroom ready to put my domestic skills to use by looking after my recovering sister. I was hooked to an IV pole, being useless. Frustrated, I yanked the IV wires from the outlet and proceeded to shuffle toward the sink.

Before long, my parents and a few close friends and siblings had arrived to visit me. My oldest brother sat on the couch with Dad, discussing whatever business marketing type topics they found interesting. My younger sister was enjoying her post op status, directing my older sister to push her wheelchair in whatever direction she wished. Some friends of mine who were aware of my delayed maturity brought me a stuffed alligator and a big, plush lamb. The world seemed relatively normal.

Then the gastroenterologist from the E.R. came back, even more frantic and rushed than the day before. He ran straight to the whiteboard, not even stopping to say hello or introduce himself to Dad.

"Okay, these numbers are your levels from yesterday." His speech was fragmented and fast as he furiously scribbled a discombobulated chart of numbers, circles, and lines across the board. "These numbers, they were bad. They showed me that your liver was sick. These numbers over here, from today, they show me that your liver is failing."

My mind went blank as I stared at incoherent scribbles on the board that spanned the length of the room.

"We will have to get blood tests every six hours from here on out. You will have to be moved to a pediatric transplant facility as soon as possible. The closest one is in Detroit." A second doctor walked up to the side of the bed and tried to speak in a low, calming voice. I continued staring straight ahead as he spoke. That was the first time I heard anyone say the term "transplant facility," and it rang loudly in my ears.

My face started burning and my vision went blurry from the tears welling up. I dropped my head onto the pillow I was holding and commenced crying. I glanced up long enough to make eye contact with the two doctors, hoping for a sign that they knew what to do and had the situation under control. What I saw was two doctors staring down at me, looking every bit as scared as I was and appeared to be on the verge of tears themselves.

Eventually, my tear supply ran dry, but my eyes still ached. All I could do was lay on my yellow, tear soaked pillow and gnaw on a wet sponge, the only food or drink hospital protocol allowed me to have. When the ambulance arrived, they strapped me and my stuffed animals onto a gurney like a package being prepared for delivery and off to Detroit we went.

We arrived at the Detroit hospital late at night. Because the blood tests showed that hepatitis viruses were out of the question, I didn't have to defend my shot record. Instead, I spent the evening explaining to the doctors that I didn't drink or smoke, and even if I did have an illegal mushroom, I would have no idea what to do with it.

My next clear memory starts on my second day in the intensive care unit. How I ended up there, I am not entirely sure of, but I believe it had to do with trying to take a nap on the bathroom floor. I woke up feeling hazy in a small, concrete room. There was a bed, a sink with barely enough room to brush your teeth in front of, two folding chairs, and room for nothing else. The walls consisted of a window facing the hallway with broken blinds and no mirror.

Adjusting myself to a comfortable position was difficult, and rolling over was impossible. Every extremity I have was attached to some sort of cord. Stickers covered my chest, abdomen, and scalp. The skin of my fingers was red and raw from the constant placement and removal of sticky pulse oximeters.

When I asked a nurse where the bathroom was, she brought in a bucket. Upon inquiring about a shower, she informed me that there was not one available for patient use on that floor. Coffee was a no go as well.

The next day, they decided that the treatments were working well enough for me to return to the regular inpatient floor. Once I was back in my old room, I shut myself in the bathroom and looked in the mirror. It actually made me jump. Vanity set in. My skin was a deep golden color. The whites of my eyes looked neon. My already angular face looked skeletal, which, in addition to dark brown eyes, made look like an alien. My liver had swelled so much that I could see it under my ribs. Bruises and bandages covered my arms from the excessive blood tests.

This was not the near death experience I had pictured. There was no heroic or exciting story. Instead of bravely facing the situation, I hugged stuffed animals when I felt upset. Receiving blood

tests every six hours didn't even cure me from hyperventilating when they came at me with a needle.

Later, I explained my disappointed hopes to one of the doctors.

"Acute liver failure has a high mortality rate, and you are in the small group of people who can spontaneously recover. Few life threatening situations are truly heroic, but I'm sure you will still get a wonderful story out of it." She explained.

It has been a little over a year since my nine day hospital stay. Attempts to make my story sound enlightening have stopped, because it wasn't. My experience wasn't wrong. Rather, I began with the wrong expectations. A romantic story sounds exciting, but now I know mine is better. Mine is real.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS:

The narrator of this personal essay accompanies parents to the hospital to support a sister having surgery. Events take an unexpected turn when the doctor notices the narrator's jaundiced condition and insists on tests, which reveal a life-threatening liver condition. The story moves forward through well-constructed dialogue, and occasional touches of humor keep it from becoming maudlin despite the narrator's dire condition. The essay doesn't succumb to the temptation to draw conclusions, except to note that the narrator's formerly idealized notion of the romance of near-death experiences has been thoroughly dispelled.

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