

The Bed

“Why are you disinfecting the place?” The news glowed in my husband’s face. He shut the flap of his ipad.

“This could be Judy’s last book club!” I pushed the vacuum under the bridge of his long legs. His size twelve feet took up most of the space on the coffee table. *Lucky me* I thought. “Last time I saw her she was anorexic and high!”

“Well, she’s on enough morphine to kill a small elephant.” His voice was small. We sighed in unison.

I nudged him to get up, “time for bed, bath, and beyond. They’ll be here soon.” He rose without argument.

I poured myself a glass and a half of wine and heard the high-pitched giggles from my daughters, our youngest being the same age as Judy’s son. Only my husband could get those girls so happy. *Lucky us.*

I could feel the flames from the kitchen and a sense of pride surfaced. Using real fire for heat was new to me. I came to learn that wood stoves are the only proper way to stay warm in the soggy months of a North Vancouver Island winter, a cold that invades your bones.

They started to arrive in packs and I led Judy over to my favorite recliner – a pin stripped lazy boy strategically placed as close as possible to the heat source. She eased down and folded over herself. She was so small, so young. We took our places around her in semi-circle. I wasn’t the only one who thought this would be Judy’s last book club.

I handed the real drinkers tall glasses of red or white and the teetotalers each got their irrelevant choice of beverage. We stared at the winking flames reflecting in Judy’s trendy lenses. No one was ready to talk about the book. Collectively and silently we pleaded for just one more Judy story. *Please, something from your teaching days or better yet a Darryl’s story.*

Bravely someone asked Judy about the new bed that Darryl had just bought her. They needed a solution to her tumorous nights of agony and fear. Judy bolted upright, “He’s totally going to have sex with my

replacement in that bed. No wonder he spent fifteen thousand dollars on it!”

My living room erupted with gasps of glee. Judy took her time surveying the reaction from each member of the room. The smirk under her close-pinned nose was faintly audible. I was reminded how animated she had been when we first met, two years prior. That night she slyly mentioned something about being in remission while performing ‘Darryl’s New Adventures in Biodiesel’.

Back then I suppose we all thought Judy was free. Her diagnosis had come in her late twenties, while she was pregnant. Starting motherhood on chemotherapy seems like sufficient tragedy for one lifetime. Dry-heaving on the toilet while listening to the shrill cry of a newborn is pure devil’s work.

She had been told her disease was nearly undetectable and Judy and Darryl trusted that miracle. They had even started trying for another child. One night she sought my advice for tricks on conception. Funny how people think midwives have secret knowledge on all things related to sex. In fact we do.

Over the next few months a small pain in her gut grew to one that could no longer be ignored. She was told that what she felt was entirely unrelated to a pregnancy. Her worst fear came to fruition. *It* had spread.

Our humble community made a valiant effort to prevent the inevitable...fundraisers, healing circles, delivered meals, etc. Judy called me one day wondering if I would ask my husband to become her doctor. Things had not been working out with her current GP. Wanting to do anything I could for her, I assured her (with John Luc Picardian conviction) that I would ‘make it so’!

My husband agreed to take her on, although he was cautious about treating friends. Professional and personal lines would likely blur. He couldn’t help becoming fond of the unique spirit that was Judy. I wonder what won him over. Was it her spiky multi-coloured hair that dotted the air as she told stories from her native Prince Edward Island? He never told. It was this doctor-patient experience that would eventually change his career path. Judy was the impetus for my husband to specialize in palliative care.

Many calls had come to us from Judy's home in her dying months. At first they came from Judy. She had endless questions about medications, tests, or her prognosis. When she was too weak, the calls came from Darryl. Finally when Darryl was beside himself, the calls came from their family. Most conversations were panicked, as Judy's deterioration was rapid and intense.

In the twilight hour of an early spring evening the final call came from Darryl. When I saw my husband's face, I knew she was gone. I had seen that look before. I pictured my forty-something father standing in the yellow kitchen of our old house. He said my grandfather had "expired". His attempt at disguising the news from us had failed. "Daddy, what does expired mean?"

My husband left immediately for Darryl and Judy's. I stayed up late that night waiting for his return. When he got home he sat on the edge of our bed and spoke through his moist palms, "the kid was jumping on the bed around Judy repeating one word".

I rose and held him from behind, "what word?"

"Mom".

I stayed with him as long as he wanted and left to check on the children. I slept with my kids that night.

Judy had been gone for two years when I began practicing midwifery again. I had heard through the grapevine that Darryl was dating. One day I looked up to meet my next clients and there stood Darryl and his new partner, Cherrie. I hope the surprise was not evident in my face. I gave Darryl a hug and he returned it. The last time I had seen him was at Judy's life celebration. I remembered him standing in the corner of the hall with their son on his shoulders. They were watching the slide show of Judy's life.

Cherrie seemed indifferent to my previous acquaintance with Darryl. I suspected that she was growing used to dealing with Judy's legacy. After they left I asked another midwife to make sure Cherrie and Darryl were not uncomfortable with my care and potentially being at their birth. Both Darryl and Cherrie had no objections to me.

As fate would have it, I was on call when Cherrie went into labour. They were planning a home birth and they welcomed me in. Cherrie's heavy breathing and swaying was framed by the deep autumn tones of a living room I had known when Judy was alive.

Her labour lasted a full day and full night. Cherrie was strong. No weakling could do what she was attempting to do, to become a mother with a man who had already buried the love of his life.

Birth was finally imminent. Cherrie chose to go on her hands and knees near the sofa. It was the same cracked leather sofa where I had removed Judy's staples one day after delivering a meal. She hadn't had the strength to go to the clinic that day. I was happy to oblige.

With a guttural groan the baby was born into my hands and the shaky hands of Darryl and his son, now five. Their home held such extremes of desperation and happiness.

Cherrie did not birth her son on the bed that was originally bought for Judy. Instead she made a safe place for herself in this new life. After everything was cleared and a meal was shared, I tucked Cherrie, Darryl, and the two boys into bed, Judy's bed. As I left the room I glanced back at Cherrie who was stroking the head of her suckling newborn. She looked up at me and smiled. *Lucky them.*