

The Will to Live - a true story

by Janie Reynolds

On Monday evening I suddenly started to shudder uncontrollably. My teeth were chattering, my breaths fast and shallow. A sudden headache hit my head like a wrecking ball and the light from my bedroom light fried my eyes as it I were staring straight at the midday sun. I felt like I had been shot. I crawled into bed and pulled the duvet over my head. Nothing human was functioning.

My legs, feet and chest felt like they weren't there anymore. It was difficult to breathe. My headache was blinding. But I was OK. Inside the small bubble of me-ness, the same one that has suffered from Long Covid since April 2020, I am used to having no control of whether my body decides to be ill, or when. I am used to being ill, most of the time. I'm used to A & E. You could say it is my new normal.

I asked my Lily, aged 14, if she would make me a hot water bottle. Lily is also used me being ill. I have been ill since she was 12 when I returned with a tropical bug from Uganda. I haven't cooked a meal for her since. I don't know what she eats any more.

When making the hot water bottle, she must have told her friends about her convulsing mother, because, when she brought it up, she said,

"Morgie says you should go to hospital."

"Who is Morgie?" I asked, pulling the hot water bottle upon me and melting around it.

"Just one of my friends."

The hot water bottle felt like pure medicine. I tried to sink into it and let it sink into me.

“It says here that it’s pneumonia,” she said in a serious voice I didn’t recognise. She was googling my symptoms and had diagnosed me.

We took my temperature. It was 39 and I am normally 36. Oops. We took my blood pressure. It was 125/80 and is normally 100/60. Oops. She took my pulse. It was 112. Normally 80. Oops.

You have to call an ambulance, she said. And so my whole ‘me-bubble’ burst. My ‘I am used to being ill and hiding in bed and no-one knowing’ bubble.

“Please, Mummy.”

I called 111. They told me they would send an ambulance but it would be more than two hours. That was 10pm. I lay and shook and dozed and sweated and finally slept until 6am. At 6 the phone rang. It was the ambulance service apologising for not having come yet. I was so delirious I didn’t understand. I just said ‘Yes’ to everything and hung up. Turns out I had cancelled the ambulance with my ‘Yeses’ because it never came.

Next morning, I drove myself to A & E, on auto-pilot. It was busy and there was nowhere to sit because every other seat had a ‘Do not sit here’ sticker on it. Pale, abject people leant against the walls, trying to hold themselves up from sliding down to the hospital floor.

No one spoke, not even the couples. People want to stare at you but don’t. They try, secretly, but look away as soon as you detect them, ashamed by their promiscuity. It is as if everyone has an unspeakable secret, at the centre of an un-sharable drama.

Despite the obsequious silence amongst the morose, resigned A & E ensemble, that part of the hospital was cacophonous. Doors that you can’t see, creaking and clicking shut. Unidentifiable bangs. A shrill landline. Beeps. Pings from other people’s phones. Multiple conversations going on out of sight that you can’t make out. An unharmonious ensemble of moans and piercing name calls from overweight nurses, every ten minutes. Never your name.

A large, triangular lady with a grey bob, dead eyes and a downturned mouth is lying in a blood-splattered blouse, her back upon the floor. Her husband sits cross-legged and upright, on a chair above her, arms folded, looking away, anywhere but as his wife. They don’t speak. Her milky eyes gaze at a spot on the ceiling above her mask while his dart around behind his thick spectacles.

A baby is crying in pain, but the mother just coos and chuckles. It’s cry pierces through the restrained wails of the adult infirm. All classes must wait just the same, but the well-dressed middles still scorn at the working in their heads. An insipid-faced young woman clutches a handbag tightly to her chest as if it were her baby

Nothing in here relates to me. And yet I'm here because I think I am important enough to save. But there's nothing to live for in here. The whole place makes you want to die. The desire to survive is stripped from you here. As the hours pass and you tire of waiting, you think, 'I must remind myself to breathe – almost remind my heart to beat. Or I will take the path of least resistance and just slip away now.' And as you do, you find there is a certain peace you feel, when the will to live has gone.