

ENCOUNTERS

The hummingbird

If this story were a play, the first scene of Act One would be set in a physician's office. Everything in the small room, the walls, the furniture and the stock nature pictures of fields and barns, appears overwhelmingly beige. There is nothing that might provoke or distress, nothing that speaks too personally of the people who practise here. Neither is there anything to inspire, to comfort, or to reflect the significance of the life conversations that must occur within the office walls. It is a beige limbo.

In the corner, with her back angled against the wall, a young woman sits reading a beige pamphlet. The beauty and vibrancy of her youth is almost shocking against the backdrop of beige; fair skin and long hair, rich with earthy hues found only in nature's pallet. The young woman, so freshly through the threshold of adulthood that the echoes of skipping songs still ring, sits. Invisible strings pull her shoulders forward and her breathing is barely noticeable. Only those closest to her would see the signs in her eyes. Those dark pools that were once deep with old soul wisdom and lit with sparks of curiosity are dull with exhaustion. She is body tired and soul tired. Pamphlet in hand, she appears to read. Perhaps she is reflective, perhaps relieved, perhaps overwhelmed or perhaps frozen in the limbo of the beige room.

Across the room sits a physician, the second woman in this cast of three. Her short gray curls tuck neatly around her gold frame glasses. She has a kindly face, a face that could belong to anyone's grandmother and one that appears to be basking in the radiant light of a nearing retirement. It is the only thing that hints at a different shade of life in the pallid room.

The third woman enters the room on invitation. She is slightly built for her height and her hair is still transitioning, still more brown than grey. Like many parents, she wears a variety of hats in



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day-to-day life; today that of mother, nurse, holistic nurse, and invited support person. Thirty years of nursing have stamped "patient advocate" on her career passport and holistic nursing has emblazoned it with the power of possibility. Though the young woman across the room is beyond the age of her guardianship, it doesn't quell the full pulse of a mother's love from rushing through her veins. She tries to contain the red of parental passion from spilling into the beige room.

Introductions are followed by snippets of polite conversation. The physician takes an audible breath and adjusts her glasses to signal the time to focus on the task at hand. Leaning into her desk, she assumes a position of dignified

authority. She reviews selective history, signs and symptoms to set the scene as if arranging cushions of information in anticipation of supporting something weighty. With the information appropriately arranged, perhaps the weight of diagnosis would land less abruptly. But the weight is real and compresses everything into a tight configuration.

In her nurse's hat, the woman feels its solidness. Images flash across her mind in rapid succession. Heavy words land on the already breath-stopping weight: long term ... increasing doses ... manage ... risks... known side effects ... efficacy. The words seem to suck any light and space out of the diagnosis.

The woman dons her holistic nurse hat and looks for a crack, any sign of

light, of possibility, in which to slip a wedge. Where there is possibility, there is space. Possibility can slow and expand against the inward pull of compression until something new can fill the crack and counter the pressure. The woman reaches back into the archives of her experience and looks forward to the promises of tomorrow. What about resources, research, support, options, possibilities?

The physician smiles gently and her eyes fix. She is being squeezed into a professional corset, strings tightened by time constraints, finances, politics, accountability, protocol and her own empathic struggle of parent and professional. She smiles and slowly repeats the clinical offering.

The young woman sits quietly, with little to say about the offering, perhaps confused, perhaps resigned, perhaps distraught or perhaps indifferent. To the nurse, it sounds unfortunately appropriate, to the holistic nurse it sounds inadequate and to the mother it sounds meagre. The possibilities that had rallied to fill the crack were starting to melt. Mother and daughter are gently guided to the door unburdening the beige room as the next patient rises to enter.

Scene Two: It's dark. The woman sits at the computer desk late into the evening. The ultimate motivation, her child's well-being, spurs her on. Piles of articles litter her desk and books tagged with scraps of recycled paper lie stacked on the floor. Her head nods

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often; a bobbing rhythm like one of those dashboard ornaments. The black and white print offers hope. She adds another file to the growing folder and bookmarks the latest article. Perhaps it's another piece to fit into this unfamiliar puzzle. Days flow into weeks.

Scene Three: The young woman sits quietly in the passenger seat staring out the window. Perhaps she is listening, perhaps she is questioning or perhaps she is glazed by the medication. The

woman glances over and slows her speech to temper her rising excitement, but the animated look in her eyes gives her away. She describes new research, lists possibilities, options and resources. She tells stories of change, hope and success, trying to squeeze each bit of black and white information into the crack to expand the space. Nothing grabs. It bounces back to lie at her feet. The light seems dim.

Scene Four: The woman sits in the paint-splattered studio surrounded by other students, yet alone.

The black and white letters that had solidly infused her brain the past weeks drift apart and float aimlessly. All that had once seemed clear now looks hazy in the light of the studio. She takes another deep breath and drags the paint-filled brush across the canvas. Broad strokes of white, blue, red and yellow then begin to flow from her palette. She moves without thought, vision or plan, just an intention to reflect this moment in time. She dabs, drips, smudges and swoops the paint from place to place with hands and brush. Abandoning structure and will, the paint is free to commune with her inner landscape. Yellow mingles boldly with blue begetting green, shades of plum arise surreptitiously from blue's liaison with red, and



It's not until the woman steps back that she sees her — the headless female torso, full voluptuous breasts, angled across the canvas. She chuckles to herself, "obviously not representational." But then the veil lifts and she fully sees the orchestration of her brush strokes. Her eyes well with tears. To her, it is now so strikingly obvious. The female torso, the embodiment of a mother's love, fills the canvas and gracefully extends her arm to offer a space of sanctuary. There suspended in the shelter between arm and

body is a small, yellow hummingbird. The tiny bird hovers there freely facing away from her body. Memories of years when skipping songs echoed in the yard and imaginary hummingbirds eased her child's chronic pain float to the surface. Without a second thought, the woman reaches

out and in one sure stroke she lengthens the tiny beak that the bird might feed itself more fully. She smiles deeply. What was hidden is revealed, what was dark is light, what was separated is united.

Scene Five: The woman places all her summarized research into a non-descript large brown envelope. On the front she writes "for whenever" and slips the envelope into her daughter's belongings. She takes a deep breath and exhales, relieved.

Act Two, Scene One: One year later the young woman sits quietly beside the sunny kitchen window; perhaps basking in the warmth, perhaps gazing at the garden's blaze of colour, or perhaps in quiet contemplation. "Mom ... I've been thinking. I'd like to explore some options."

The remnants of a breath I didn't know I'd held for a year were released with the flight of a hummingbird.

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"The hummingbird" won third prize in the prose category of the 2012 *ARS Medica* and *CMAJ* Humanities Poetry and Prose contest. All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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