

## Personal Effects

Kerry Leddy

Several times I turned the doorknob and stopped short. Other times I peeked in, only to immediately back away.

Finally, on a Friday morning, I steeled myself and headed in to the familiar maelstrom that was my daughter's bedroom. Mothering her for eighteen years I knew the room captured all that she was—her later darkness just as potent as her sunny younger self.

Sarah's burning incense lingered in the air. I breathed in the bitter-sweet smell.

The bed had not been made since the last time she was in it; the mattress still held her form. For a moment, I see her amidst the jumble of sheets, clutching a piece of her much-loved and tattered "Mommy blanket." The blanket I had crocheted for her before she was born, the one that she never slept a night without. When she died, a piece of it was wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet.

Staring at her bed, my mind flashed to the mornings I'd come in to check on her when she didn't come down for school. I would find her lying in bed, unable to lift her head from the pillow.

"I can't do it Mom. I can't go to school."

I could lift her out of bed, but I couldn't lift her out of the depression that enfolded her—a bipolar illness that gave her no rest.

Now, I look up and see Sarah's dream catcher hung on the wall next to her bed.

When she was five, our family traveled to Arizona. Finding herself in a strange bedroom, Sarah woke several times during the night with bad dreams. The next day we visited the Navajo reservation, where she watched a Native American man tie sinew strands into an intricate pattern, like a spider's web, and then adorn it with beads, shells, arrowheads, and a feather at the center. He described how the dream catcher hangs above the bed, snaring any bad dreams in its web before they reach your sleeping head. Only good thoughts can get in, slipping through the center, by gliding down the feather. Sarah was captivated.

A week or two later, Sarah and I were out for a walk. As usual, she was picking up found objects along the way—what she called "her treasures." She was busily moving her fingers as we strolled and chatted. Once home I saw she was carrying something in her hands. Sarah had bent and braided three thin, brown branches to form an outer circle, woven and twisted together by a spiral of thin tawny vines and reeds. They looped around inside the circle to form an intricate web with a single bird's feather gently tucked in the center.

"See Mom, it's a dream-catcher like the Navajos showed us," she told me. We found a hook and hung her creation over her headboard.

Now I wonder, is it possible that this talisman had somehow withstood her demons, protecting her, before their unrelenting force overtook its magic?

I turned towards Sarah's desk, piled high with papers, tubes of Chapstick, pens, pastels, and more. There sat a miniature wicker chair, a replica of the one from Van Gogh's "Bedroom at Arles." She found delight in the painting's crooked lines and the colors that popped like crayons tumbling out of a child's color box.

At least six journals, filled, I am certain, with inordinate suffering, were scattered throughout her drawers. Those I set aside. I have not read them. Will I ever?

Her phone was lying on the desk. I flinched. Once again, my Pavlovian reaction ripping through my body. Whenever it rang, terror would grip me and anxiety would shoot through my already tense and on alert body. Especially late at night. Was Sarah okay, was she out with friends, was she upset, panicked, suicidal? When it didn't ring, the same dread: was she okay, upset, suicidal?

I wasn't sure which was worse, my phone ringing or not ringing.

A mother-torturing tattoo starter kit lay next to her bed. Sarah had given herself a dandelion tattoo on her chest. I was initially horrified, thinking of infections and the pain she must have felt. She didn't show me until months after it was completed: a wild dandelion, beautiful and spare.

Books were piled haphazardly in the corners: *Religions of the World*, Dr. Seuss, *The Collected Works of Shakespeare*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, several yoga manuals. A book by Hermann Hesse lay open on her bed. Sarah had been re-reading *Siddhartha*, an inspiration for the novel she was working on. I rifled through the food-stained pages. For Sarah, reading was never a solitary act. She carried on a dialogue with the author in the margins. My fingers once again traced over her words: "reaching nirvana—is it just an illusion?"; "Why does reaching enlightenment take such a fucking arduous path," "The footprint is the dent that remains when my heel leaves the ground on my journey."

Her partially completed mural practically leapt off the wall, a scene filled with winged fairies flying over a field of dandelions. Butterflies flitted above large red-capped mushrooms, suggesting Alice in Wonderland, that gyrated as if in dance. In the upper corner, dark clouds gathered, a harbinger of an approaching storm.

Mismatched single socks were strewn about the floor, as were paintings in various stages of completion. Tubes of paint, scattered here and there, along with charcoal sticks and brushes. When Sarah had something she wanted to capture, whether in acrylic or in words, she grabbed what was closest at hand and went to work. I had long given up worrying about her carpet.

I reached for one of the canvases.

Months earlier, before Sarah took her life, I glimpsed her sitting on her bedroom floor, her colorful dreadlocks half tied back and half falling in her face. The heat lamp from her four-foot-long corn snake's terrarium infused the room with a bluish glow. Gwen Stefani's song, *Just a Girl*, was loud and pulsing from her iPhone. After Sarah died I had looked at her playlists and saw one titled "happy playlist" and another titled "sad playlist." Gwen Stefani was on the "happy playlist." She must have been happy that day.

She didn't know I was watching. The tip of her tongue stuck out the left side of her mouth, the way it always did when she was concentrating. A tiny 5x7 canvas was perched in her left hand, the brush in her right. I marveled at how she could paint in such a small frame. What was she seeing?

Slowly, in mid-brushstroke, she turned her head and smiled up at me and said, "Hey

Mom.” I continued watching as Sarah brought to life, in miniature, a scene she had told me about just a day earlier: two young teens, a boy and girl, leaning against a beat-up wall in Adams Morgan, a funky section of Washington, D.C. They were homeless, yet they looked like any two teenagers you’d see at school: in love, holding hands, taking care of each other. Next to the girl sat a shopping bag, filled with her belongings, and on the bag was printed “Medium Brown Bag”; the bag was from Bloomingdales.

“I mean Bloomingdales! Isn’t that wild? I kept thinking, was this something she found, discarded by some wealthy shopper? Or was it from her mom’s closet? Like, what life was she really from?” She paused and carefully dotted her canvas a bit more. She went on, “I wanted to talk to them, but Ioanna needed to get home. So, I gave them five bucks.”

Looking over her shoulder, I could see that she had captured every detail she had described to me—the connection between this young couple, their sad dead eyes. The brightly lit wall behind them, dandelion yellow, with splashes of reds and ochres, contrasted with the dark colors of their clothing. A couple of beat-up garbage cans, tucked back in the corner. The boy wore a t-shirt with the word “Euphoria,” with exclamation marks surrounding it. I wondered if Sarah added that touch— “Euphoria”—to capture the contradictions that had intrigued her.

As I propped the canvas against her desk, my eyes were drawn to several postcards thumbtacked to the wall. Postcards from a Modigliani exhibition that Sarah had taken me to a few months before she died. As we rode the metro downtown, she contrasted him with her favorite artist, Egon Schiele.

“Schiele is much more passionate,” she told me. “Modigliani is subtler, but wonderful in his own way.”

In the first gallery, sculptures lined the hall, pencil and crayon sketches hung from the walls. Then we passed through Modigliani’s nudes and in the last gallery, stood many of his portraits.

“Look, Mom. You could have been one of his models. You have that same elongated neck and almond eyes.”

I peered up at a painting of a woman with a sinuous neck and angled eyes, I recognized the likeness. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not,” I said with a wry smile.

“Of course, it is Mom! They’re beautiful, just like you. I will paint you one day and you’ll see.”

I never will see this painting. But now, gazing at the postcard, it is Sarah’s elusive face I see.

Turning away I note the familiar I Love Lucy poster that hung absurdly askew next to the Modigliani. Sarah was a study in contrasts.

We were fans of the show, and together we watched rerun after rerun, acting out scenes we knew by heart, like the Vitameatavegamin episode.

“Do you poop out at parties?” I’d ask.

She’d respond, “Are you un-poopular? The answer to all your problems is in this little bottle. Vitameatavegamin.”

Often, she would quiz me to see if there was an episode I had missed.

“Did you see the one where Lucy and Ricky go to France?”

“Of course,” I’d say, “they wear those horse feed bags as designer clothes.”

“Grrrr,” feigning frustration, “I’ll still find one you haven’t seen!”

She never did find one. She never will.

I stopped to look at the newspaper collage that covered an entire wall, reading some of the articles and headlines that had captured Sarah’s imagination. Some humorous—“Federal Agents Raid Gun Shop, Guns Discovered” and “Crack found on Governor’s Daughter.” Others more serious—“Hurricane Katrina Devastates New Orleans” and “Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement in Darfur.”

Next to the window, her 4-x4 “Got Milk” sign caught my eye.

I hear Sarah’s voice. I am standing in the dairy section of the grocery store.

“I love your sign,” she tells the man who is stocking the shelves.

“Thanks.”

“The lettering is perfect and ‘Got Milk’ is such a cool slogan. It makes you want to drink milk. It’s simple, but makes you think.”

“You know, you’re right, it does work,” said the man, pausing his shelf stocking to stand up.

“Hey,” Sarah said, “do you think I could have the sign when you take it down?”

“Mmm... I don’t see why not. We’d just throw it away. Check back in a week.”

Sarah looks down at his nametag, “Thanks, Tom.”

The following week we return. “Hi, Tom. How’s my sign?”

He laughs. “I have it right in the back. It’s waiting for you.”

I stared at the sign straining to see what she saw that day—the flashes of insight that defined her. She did not think like the rest of us. I wanted to look through her eyes, follow her footsteps, somehow trace her arduous journey.

I opened the closet and there lay an old beat-up pair of Chuck Taylors; Birkenstocks; bright blue-and-green bowling shoes with orange laces; and hiking boots—not the usual treasure trove of teenage girl shoes. From the time she could walk Sarah preferred her feet bare, happily wriggling her toes in the grass, a sand box, or the mud. She took pride that her callouses could withstand hot pavement, rocks and sharp objects. When I’d tell her to put her shoes on she’d say, “I’m tough enough to walk across burning coals.”

How I wish that were true.

I think of a self-portrait she sketched—one that I can hardly bear to look at—a simple drawing, done mostly in charcoal, where she appears to be sinking back into the paper, her eyes hollow and deadened. The only color appearing are the flames that blaze from her head, each strand of hair a shade of orange and red—a mass of wildfire. Some of the flames spring from her eyes. Looking into those eyes is like looking through the door of a red-hot furnace.

I now understood that no one could put out the flames that trapped Sarah. Suicide was her solution to the inferno.

Leaning in to her closet, I picked up an old yellow t-shirt with the happy face symbol, my fingers playing over the fabric, recalling how she wore that shirt with a colorful skirt the day we went to a portfolio review for art schools.

Suddenly, I am nine years old, looking into my mother’s closet, days after she died in a car crash. I ran my fingers along the different fabrics, the ribbing of some corduroys, the softness of a velvet dress. I held her white blouse up to my nose. It still had the faintest whiff of her. Straight-legged stirrup-pants, in brown and black, line up at attention. Her

favorite dress, the one she called her “Jackie Kennedy dress,” nestled beside her satiny green one that she wore for holiday parties. Rummaging through the pockets of one of her housedresses I found a rumpled Kleenex and decided to keep it.

I sat in front of her vanity’s mirror. My fingers lingered on the glass tabletop where she kept her makeup and brushes and an assortment of jars filled with face creams. I put on some lipstick, blotted my lips with the Kleenex. I spritzed myself with a bit of her perfume; a mix of flowers and something fruity.

I returned to her closet and opened the hatbox where her fox stole was stored. I wrapped the fur around my neck, and gazed at my reflection. I adjusted the stole this way and that across my shoulders. I didn’t know what I was looking to see. But when I stood up, my head no longer visible, for a moment it was my mother standing there.

In Sarah’s room, I folded the yellow T-shirt and laid it gently on her bed. I unhooked the dream catcher from the wall and turned off the light. For now, her familiar, multi-color Costa Rican poncho could remain draped across a chair. A book poised to be read, a canvas about to be brushed, her bed sheets all in a tangle, an apple core still in a bowl.

I walked to my bedroom and placed the dreamcatcher above my headboard— the feather, at the center, ready to catch wisps of memory.

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