

Sometimes I Pretend

By Kany Aziz

Sometimes I pretend I'm a princess. In a tower looking down at the peasants and commoners, people I never meet. Princesses don't mingle with peasants. The window protects me from the outside world. The dirty air and the dangerous birds. One day Prince Hodgkin comes to rescue me. I have no hair to let down but I think he could find a way. He fights his way through the castle, takes the stairs not the elevators, runs past the front desk lady, to hell with sanitation, bursts through the door and his deep voice rumbles with the sound of my name. I rip off these plastic chains, these shackles they call IVs, take his hand and run away with him. I've always wanted to be a princess.

Sometimes I pretend I'm the smartest girl in school and I graduated valedictorian. My parents, being absentminded, never notice my acceptance letter to the most prestigious school in the world, Hodgkin University. But as fate would have it, the dog runs around with an envelope one day and my younger sister rips it from his mouth only to discover what it is. From that day on, I am college bound, focused on my future, and nothing can get in my way. On my first day of school, nervous and intimidated by the historic buildings, surrounded by juniors and seniors who seem so confident in their step, I sit on a bench by an old man. An old man whose age I can't determine but somehow I know this encounter is serendipitous and so I make the most of it. I turn to him and offer him a piece of gum. He declines. Then he asks how I got here and I relay the funny story about my dog. Then he laughs and tells me he can tell I am smart and that I have a bright future. He hands me his business card and says, "If there's anything you need, call me." And with a graceful turn he walks away. I stare at his back, wondering who he is, only to look down at the card and see the name Hodgkin, *the* Hodgkin, who founded this university. And I spend days, weeks, months learning a new language and all kinds of science. I learn words like *lymphoma*, *thrombocytopenia*, and *alopecia*. Such exotic words, like a rollercoaster for my tongue. And I call my friends and teach them the words I learned. *Chemotherapy*, *radiation*, and *oncology*. They "ooh" and "aww" at my advanced education at Hodgkin University. After all, not everybody gets an acceptance letter.

Sometimes I pretend I'm a deep-sea diver. I wear a modified scuba diving mask, something called a nasal cannula, and it allows me to breathe underwater. The deeper I explore, the more oxygen I need. One day while exploring fish and reefs, I get lost. I almost panic but then suddenly I see a cave and swim to it. As I enter the cave, I find a hidden city. An underwater city! I look at the treasures and wonder how nobody else could know about this. Was I the first to discover it? Then I notice a bar of gold and just as I'm about to pick it up, a voice speaks from behind me. "Who dares touch my gold," a man exclaims, his voice echoing in the cave. I nervously tell him my name and hope he spares my life. He introduces himself as Hodgkin the Pirate and invites me for supper. We sit and I'm enthralled by the stories he tells. He explains that he used to be the most celebrated admiral known to all the seven seas until one day he got tired of keeping up a happy face for people. And so he stole a ship and sunk it himself, just to live alone in the cave. He says, "No one understands what it's

like and so why talk to people?” He says, “When life is tough, the only person I can count on is myself. Everybody else is just watching from the outside.” I stare at him, mesmerized, wondering how he could feel the same things I was feeling. How did he know my thoughts? Sometimes I just want to be alone. I know people are trying to help but they don’t understand. They try to understand but they never do. I ask him if I could stay in this underwater city with him and he makes a dashing bow, saying, “Of course, you’re welcome to stay for as long as you like.”

Sometimes I pretend I’m a ghost. My parents are in the room, crying and hugging each other. The doctor sits across from them with a sad, stern expression. He’s sorry for what he’s said but he doesn’t take it back. And I hover over them and make faces because they don’t see me. I would secretly tie my sister’s shoelaces together. I would steal all the markers from the dry erase board and laugh as the nurses searched for them. And then I would go back in time to find out who Hodgkin was and why I had his lymphoma. Think of all the things I could do if I was a ghost. My parents save so much money on food because I never have to eat. I never need new clothes. They never have to pay for college tuition. I can still sit at the dinner table and listen to dad’s boring work stories. I can still play with the dog. I never worry about brushing my hair or fixing my bed. I never wear shoes because I float everywhere. That doesn’t sound so bad.

Sometimes I pretend I’m a butterfly. I remember my caterpillar days fondly, the way I used to crawl up walls and chew on leaves. I loved springtime. The sun was shining and the birds chirping. Sometimes it rained but I could hide under a flower petal. I made friends with bees and hummingbirds. I used to race snails and centipedes. The centipedes would always win, of course. But it was fun nonetheless. My cocoon days weren’t as nice. It was dark and crampy. I remember feeling afraid and alone. I wondered if it would ever end. The days dragged on and my limbs were morphing into something unknown. And then, without warning but not suddenly, my cocoon cracked and a bit of light entered my tight dwelling. I remembered there was a sun. The cocoon slowly broke away and before I could fall, my wings—I had wings!—unfolded and lifted me up. I looked around stunned. I forgot there were flowers! I forgot about the snails and birds! Were they there the whole time? How glorious is the wind! I remembered how much I love springtime. And just as I’m about to fly away forever, I look back at my cocoon, hanging from the branch of a Hodgkin tree. I stay for just a moment, just long enough to remember. And then I flap my wings towards the horizon. Second chances are for butterflies.

Kany Aziz is a third year Internal Medicine and Pediatric resident at West Virginia University. She completed her undergraduate and medical school at Florida State University. She was featured in the Fall 2017 issue of the Intima journal. She enjoys writing when she's not seeing patients. Her interests include traveling, tea drinking, and palliative care.

