

Requiem

**Lessons from the residents of Christian Haven Nursing Home.*

By: Avery Rant

Sheryl

“Babe, it's all in the warm-up.”

I let out a snort. “I see. But maybe we could take it down a notch, yeah?”

“Nah, it's all or nothing, kiddo.”

I don't even fight her, happy to let myself be amused by the woman before me. I remember meeting her and just staring. In the small sunroom filled with white hair, thick sweaters, and nursing home prescribed walkers, she was a complete oddity.

Lavender hair that sticks out like the flames of a fire, and fingers stacked with rings upon rings that glitter like Christmas tinsel. Mismatched clothing that produces an exotic bohemian-aunt-vibe and an attitude that politely says, ‘no fucks left’. All wrapped up in a lopsided grin.

swoosh

swoosh

swoosh

The plastic bowling ball swings back and forth, her whole body jerking along with it. The sways become bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and just before I step in to stop her from hurting herself, she lunges, releasing the ball. It goes flying across the room with deadly precision.

With the strike comes the hollering, the clapping, the congratulations. She takes a bow and turns back to look at me. There it is. The lopsided grin.

“All or nothing.”

Drexyl

Every day you sit there,
in your padded chair, turned just so.
Every day you sit there,
your lifeless arm, body half asleep.

What happened to you, my friend?
I see you sitting so still,
confined in a body
that is no longer yours.

Every day you stand,
a little wobble, a little stumble, a moment needed to steady.
Every day you stand,
your head held high with a strained breath.

How do you find the strength, my friend?
to learn how to rise again,
and in your slowing age,
join the world around you?

I thought the answer
would be more profound,
a secret from you to me.

Standing there,
haloed in the sun,
I hold my breath,
waiting for your answer to come.

“Every day I stand,
ready to celebrate what I still have left.
Every day I stand,
to enjoy your company.
Every day I stand,
because there is no other option.”

Gary

Imagine me and you, I do

The room is magical tonight, with red balloons suspended above our heads and streamers swaying on the walls. The lights are dim, and the music is achingly sweet; the singers crooning about love and times that once were. I am alone on the dance floor admiring it all when you walk up to me.

I think about you day and night, it's only right

You hold out your hand and ask, "Would you mind dancing with an old fart like me?"

"There is nothing I would rather do," I say as I grab your hand, moving the walker just out of reach.

With a goofy grin, you put your hands on my hips and lead me into our first dance. You guide me around our small square, turning and twirling me into a second, third, and fourth song.

To think about the girl you love and hold her tight

As we start to slow down, preparing to change partners or collapse on the couch, you put a hand on my shoulder and look me straight in the eye. "I used to dance with my wife. We would dance for as long as we could stand. You dance just like her."

I blink back the tears in my eyes and rub his shoulder. "She sounds like a great lady."

So happy together

Paul

You come in and say hello,
Your face aglow,
With your shirt tucked in,
Ready to begin.

And though your mind may be elsewhere,
No one's enthusiasm can compare.
Everyone preening for your praise,
The awe in your gaze.
Now you are called up,
Standing with a jump,
Across the floor you go flying,
Your wheelchair gliding.
They tell you to slow down,
But all you do is spin around and around.
You never listen to the reprimands,
Waving them off with your slender hands.
And as I watch you from this view,
I only wish to be carefree like you.

Dear Lucille

That afternoon was picture perfect. The late summer leaves were a bit droopy but still green, and the flowers in the garden swayed to the rhythm of the bees. It was a day to be savored.

Is this the reason why I felt so shocked?

Is this the reason why her words were so incomprehensible?

If the weather was nastier, colder, and darker, would I have been more prepared for it? Or was there never any armor that would have shielded me from the pain and numbness?

I remember walking. Walking past the receptionists and their obnoxious phones. Walking through the dining hall full of empty chairs. Walking down the white, narrow hallway, reading the names on each door. Walking up to yours.

I grabbed the knob. And opened the door.

Tap, tap, whirr. Tap, tap, whirr. Tap, tap, whirr.

Your fragile frame was almost nonexistent under the shabby knitted blanket. Your thin breaths whispered lightly through the room. Your once clear and present gaze no longer met my eyes. My pain grew as yours lessened.

Do you remember me? I sat in the chair right next to your bed.

I will remember you.

Do you remember me? I took your hand in mine.

I will remember you.

Do you remember me? I talked to you one last time.

I will remember you.

I never cried in your room. I did in my car, in my mother's arms, and in the following days. But not in that room. Maybe because it was too much like a dream. Maybe because I thought that, with you still in front of me, we would never have to say goodbye. It took me a long time before I was able to leave your room that day. As I rose, I paused in the doorway and looked at you one last time. There you were.

My Lucille.

I smiled and walked into the afternoon sunlight.