

Sublime: From Solid to Vapor

by
Sherilyn Lee

On the outside Jan still looks much the same with wispy blonde hair, hazel eyes, round wire rimmed glasses, and a cutting-edge, business-casual wardrobe. Although she can no longer operate the driving simulator, Jan still designs computerized roads for its upcoming experiments. We now carpool to the office every day.

The cancer has spread from what's left of her colon, to her second rib, and on to her brain stem, leaving the left side of her body numb, one eye dilated, and she is unable to hear well. She speaks much softer, for fear of sounding like she's shouting. Jan now walks cautiously with one hand out to keep her balance. She eats slower, but smiles easier.

I carry her briefcase as we return to her apartment at the end of the day. She thumbs through her keys as if she were counting freshly minted 100 dollar bills.

"Take your time," I say. I don't want her to struggle, but I can't bring myself to take away her remaining independence.

She finds the right key and carefully guides it with both hands into the lock. Jan opens the door and slowly steps inside. She is evaporating.

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Jan's bulletin board hangs in our office behind her desk, like an iceberg resting near its mother, the glacier. Shiny purple and green strands of Mardi Gras beads haphazardly circle one of her creations, a colorful mosaic piece she created in an Adobe Photoshop class. A burned capacitor, the culprit of a small fire in the driving simulator last year, hangs by its charred wires like a silver carrot. Carefully chosen "Far Side," "Dilbert," and "Doonesbury" cartoons succinctly analyze body image, the working world. Strips of paper with quotes like "When I said I wanted to be somebody, I should have been more specific," and "If we're here to help others, what are others here for?" are tacked to the middle. A flyswatter hangs from the bottom of the bulletin board like a lemon pendulum, ready to take action at a moment's notice.

There's even room for work on this bulletin board with pictures of child car seats, notes from industry colleagues, and the company phone roster.

There are many photos. These frozen bits in time show her now-adult sons back when they were Little League baseball players and kindergarteners. There are the posed and beautiful pictures from company Christmas parties and then there are the others, Dean flinching for no apparent reason and a blurry profile shot of Karen's blonde hair. Another photo captures Ron when he had his mustache and Dave when he wasn't married. My favorite photo of Jan hangs on this board. She wears a white t-shirt, dark green pants, and her glasses, and sits behind her desk pretending to inspect her nails.

* * *

"What were you thinking about sending Mary for her new baby?" I ask.

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," Jan says. She scoops up a handful of pills from her desk, shakes them like dice, "I don't know. It's hard to say what Mary needs," she continues, as she washes down this cocktail with a swig of water so large that it forces her to tilt her head back.

I am hypnotized by the water as it bounces in the clear plastic bottle, and I stumble on my own words. "Well, maybe we could do a group gift. I mean, it would save on the shipping to Ireland ." She nods while gulping down the last of her pills. Jan lets out a hearty "ah-h-h" while forcefully screwing the cap back on. She gives me a facetious smile.

Our conversation dissipates as we settle into the routine of the day. We sit as mirror images behind our gray desks, safe in the quiet monotony of shuffling papers, typing emails, clicking on mice. When Jan's phone rings, I try to concentrate on the whirring of the space heater to drown out her voice, but still catch her faint whisper into the receiver, "Mom, I am going to die of this cancer. And I'm frightened."

Contributor's Notes...

Sherilyn Lee is a nonfiction writer whose other published work explores commuting on the LA Freeways and the Metrolink Trains, eating orange food, Geocaching, researching her genealogy, and working with women bullies. Ms. Lee graduated from Antioch University Los Angeles with an MFA in Creative Nonfiction writing and lives in southern California with her partner, Grant Palmer. Her web site is www.sherilynlee.com.

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