



SHADES

OF

a novel

Light

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 INTERVARSITY PRESS | ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

October

Time for your medicine, Wren.” Kelly, one of the kinder nurses, entered the room with a little plastic cup of pills and a glass of water.

Wren set her pencil down on the bed. She had been so immersed in drawing she hadn’t heard the summons to the nurses’ station for morning medications. Kelly, thankfully, wasn’t one to scold.

“That’s really good,” Kelly said, studying the sketch of a woman carrying a bucket. “I didn’t know you’re an artist.”

“Just an amateur.”

“Well, I can’t even do stick figures.” Kelly handed her the cup. “I’m glad you’re drawing.”

There wasn’t much else to do. Sleep, sketch, attend groups. Now that the immobilizing lethargy had lifted and the racing, terrifying thoughts had begun to quiet, her creative impulses stirred again. She swallowed her pills dutifully.

“The others just went down to breakfast,” Kelly said. “I’d bring you a tray, but Dominic wouldn’t like it.”

No, he wouldn’t. Her new case manager had given strict instructions about the importance of engaging with community as much as possible. “I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll walk you down. Come find me at the nurses’ station when you’re ready.”

She waited for Kelly to exit the room then returned to her sketch. If she couldn’t expunge the image of the whales and the rescue mission, even all these months after first reading the news story, then she needed to work with it.

That’s what Dr. Emerson had recommended during their last appointment together, just before he retired in June: be open to what the image might want to reveal. And get on the schedule with one of his colleagues. But she had never bothered to make an appointment with another therapist. She was tired of change, and it required way too much energy to start over again with someone new. If she could even find a good match. That was always a challenge. And then if you found someone good, they might move away. Or take a maternity leave and not return. Or not take your new insurance. Or retire.

She shaded the woman’s hair with the edge of her pencil. Maybe it wasn’t a rescue mission. Maybe the woman was carrying a bucket to make a sandcastle with a child, like the red plastic ones she and her mother carried years ago whenever they walked the Australian coastline near her childhood home, looking for shells. The purple ones were their favorite.

But her grandfather always warned her that blue-ringed octopuses lurked in the tide pools, concealing themselves in shells or beneath rocks. She had to be vigilant because with one bite they could paralyze a girl and knock her unconscious and make her unable to breathe. Pop knew a girl who—

She needed to breathe.

—was looking for starfish with her grandfather when—

Breathe.

She placed one hand on her chest, the other below her rib cage, and inhaled slowly through her nose to allow her diaphragm to fill, just as a therapist had taught her years ago. She tightened her stomach muscles as she exhaled through pursed lips. Keep the chest still, very still. Once. Twice. A third time. There. Settled.

See? You're fine. Just keep breathing, nice and slow.

After her morning group she would draw a relaxing day along the shores of nearby Lake Michigan, where no whales could beach themselves, where no venomous octopuses lurked in shadows, and where children could skip and play and build castles to their hearts' content, happy and carefree children, not terrified or traumatized or abused like the ones who came to Bethel House, but laughing and splashing, innocent and protected and safe.

She tucked her notebook inside her pillowcase so her current roommate wouldn't find it as the last one had. Then she fastened her shoes with a plastic grip that had replaced her confiscated shoelaces and shuffled toward the nurses' station.

As Kelly escorted her to the dining hall, it was impossible not to overhear an anguished groan and cry of protest from behind a closed door, the same groan and cry of protest that had run on a continual loop in her own head the past few days: *I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here. Please help me.*

For the last several months she had convinced herself that with more than ten years of therapy and six different therapists behind her—not to mention her training as a social worker—she had collected all the tools she needed for fighting the good fight whenever her nemesis reappeared. But she was mistaken. She'd also been naively hopeful, thinking she could wean herself off her medications without talking to her doctor. Some would say it was her fault, not being proactive about pursuing care when she needed it. But she thought she could manage on her own.

And she had, at least for a while. She'd made it almost four months without Dr. Emerson and eight without Casey. Some might say she deserved a bit of credit for lasting that long without breaking, especially with the ongoing strain at work. All the whales. Too many mama and baby whales.

Scattered along the hallways at Glenwood Psychiatric Hospital and on countless remote beaches lay God-only-knew how many helpless ones sighing and moaning, dazed and disoriented, hoping

for a mission of mercy, a cup of cold water, a rescue from destruction, a resurrection from death.

For the past three years she had been one of the rescuers. Now at twenty-seven she was one of the stranded ones, weary of fighting against the rip currents of fear, despair, and the sensitivity that could morph from gift to crippling liability without any warning. If others knew the mental battle required just to keep from disintegrating under the daily burden of sorrow and stress, maybe they wouldn't be surprised she had landed at Glenwood. They might even be compassionate. But she hadn't told them. Her friends and fellow social workers thought she was on a much-needed vacation.

She would have told Casey the truth, and he would have understood. He had needed rescuing himself. Many times. She had often been the one to help lead him to safety. But no more. That was his wife's job now. She hoped Brooke would be vigilant.

She spooned firm scrambled eggs onto her plate, poured a small cup of orange juice, and sat in the corner with her back turned toward the other patients gathered at rectangular tables near the center of the room. Chewing slowly, she stared at the framed art, no doubt designed to compensate for the cheerlessness of artificial light and window views of a brick wall. She wondered if those who chose the prints understood the significance of selecting Van Gogh's sunflowers and irises and wheat fields and gardens to decorate a mental hospital. Maybe they didn't know he had painted some of them during his own stay in an asylum. Maybe they selected the paintings without giving thought to the context of his work, how he accessed his pain and channeled his suffering into the creation of something shimmering and transcendent, capturing the sacred in the swirling light of stars or in the weathered face and weary posture of a peasant laborer.

However the art came to be on the walls, Wren was grateful for the presence of beauty in the midst of desolation. Here, in a place where she hadn't touched a blade of grass or a tree in five days, Vincent could be her eyes to the radiance of the natural world, reminding her there were places where her soul could breathe, like in

the walled courtyard where she was permitted to sit twice daily and where a patch of blue or gray sky above the concrete walls was a little square of infinity that beckoned her and gave her hope that someday she might be free of the oppressive darkness pinning her down like a boulder on a dragonfly.

Vincent, at least, had been permitted to take supervised walks around the picturesque grounds of the asylum and paint outdoors when he was well enough. She wondered who had determined that patients in a mental hospital like Glenwood would benefit more from austerity and scarcity than from beauty and abundance. If only there were a garden to sit in with green and growing things to tend to. If only there were flowers or birds or a pond. Something alive and enlivening.

She set down her plastic spork, its tines blunt and harmless, and stared at Vincent's golden wheat fields under a whirling sky, the vast blue calling to mind the Australian sky she had loved as a child. That was a scene where she could travel in her memory and imagination—to her grandparents' house, where she and her mother lived until she was ten, a house that kept evolving, growing new chambers like a nautilus as Pop added on a veranda here, a bedroom there. He'd built it on land he'd cleared in the bush, the eucalyptus trees dense around the paddock where the horses grazed. She pictured herself there, a little girl reading under the willow trees that rimmed the pond. She watched Pop carve bristly banksia pods into wooden balls and bells to adorn Christmas trees. She lay beneath the Southern Cross, scanning for shooting stars to wish upon. There she was, happy and at peace.

But inevitably the shadows would descend, tainting the picture of joy and contentment. The relentless, ominous dark would press in as it had for Vincent, the storm clouds gathering, the crows hovering, the destroyer lurking at noonday and breathing menacing threats, always prowling, always encroaching, always obscuring the halo light of the sun. She hadn't had words for the darkness then. Later, she would learn them. *Depression. Anxiety.*

“Groups are starting,” a voice called from the doorway. Though the multiple daily groups were not mandatory, attendance was necessary to demonstrate progress to the case workers. She hadn’t missed one yet.

With a final glance at Vincent’s skies, she scraped the rest of her eggs into the trash, poured out her juice, and followed the other patients down the hall.



“Wren? What kind of a name is Wren?”

Every single day, the same exact question from the woman who rocked constantly in her seat, wringing her hands.

“Leave her alone, Sylvia,” the man beside her muttered. “It’s a good name.”

“It’s a bird name. The name of a bird. Like a little birdie. She’s a little tweety bird. Tweet tweet.”

Wren stared at the floor, trying to summon pity and patience while she waited for Krystal, the social worker, to take control. At Bethel House she had led many groups like this one, with adult outpatient clients and temporary residents who arrived troubled and traumatized, some of them battling demons of addictions as well as the anguish of domestic violence, some a danger to themselves and, on the rare occasion, to others.

She didn’t belong here. They had promised her at the intake exam that it would require only a few days to get her mood stabilized with medication, and she could gain some new coping strategies for stress. Then she would be free to go. She was exhausted, she told them, mentally and physically and emotionally and spiritually exhausted, and all she wanted was a brief respite from her life, a place where she didn’t have a cell phone, where people didn’t constantly bombard her with their needs and their heartaches, where she wasn’t continually assaulted by chaos and tragedy on every street corner around the globe.

“Tweet tweet, little bird.”

Wren rubbed the side of her nose.

“Little bird, tweet tweet.” Sylvia laughed, long and hard. “Did you see a pudgy tat? Get it? Get it, Tweety Bird?”

Stop, Wren silently commanded. *Stop it*.

Sylvia leaned forward so her face nearly touched Wren’s, her breath thick and sour. “Tweeeeeet! Tweeeeeet!”

Wren jumped to her feet, hands clenched, nostrils flared. Someone grabbed her from behind, pinning her arms behind her back. She struggled to free herself but couldn’t twist out of the vise grip. *Tweet! Tweet!* The taunting shriek pierced and sliced through her like a serrated blade, and she dropped to her knees, pleading, shouting for all of it, all of it, to stop.



An hour later, Dominic appeared in her doorway with his clipboard. “Okay to talk a minute?” he asked, then entered without waiting for an answer. He hooked the desk chair with his sneaker and dragged it closer to the bed.

Wren pulled her knees to her chest and lowered her gray sweatshirt hood like a monk’s cowl over her head, her fingers in search of the drawstring, a lifeline to tug, an umbilical cord to ground her. But the string had been confiscated along with the shoelaces. “I wasn’t going to hit her.” Her thin voice sounded as if it had arisen from a much younger version of herself.

He scribbled something without looking at her. “Dr. Browerly is going to want to see you when he gets in after lunch.”

She knew what that visit would be about: Was she noticing an increased fluctuation in mood swings? Aggressive thoughts? Did she have a history of assaultive behavior? She knew the checklists.

“I’m not sleeping,” she said, realizing too late that this would be noted in her file, with yet another medication prescribed. How could she sleep with the flashlight safety checks every fifteen minutes, a roommate who snored, and the nocturnal wanderings of a patient from down the hall who sometimes slipped past the nurses’ station

without being seen and stood in her doorway, silent and staring? What hope did she have of making progress with her anxiety when everything fed her sense of helplessness and vulnerability?

She wanted a rest. She wanted to sleep and sleep and not wake up. “Please don’t send me back to South Hall.” South Hall was where the severely mentally ill were kept. Wren had spent three hellish days there, not because her presenting symptoms warranted such a placement but because that was the only bed available. “Please, Dominic.” Her South Hall roommate had brandished dark stitches on fresh wounds up and down her arms and would sometimes scream with night terrors. Daily, Wren had begged to be moved to North Hall and daily was told, “Probably tomorrow.”

She stared at her wristband. That was her name and birthdate printed on it. But this was not her life. This couldn’t be her life.

“Krystal indicated to me that you were provoked by someone else in the group, that your reaction seemed to be a post-trau—”

“No.” She knew all about post-traumatic stress disorder. She didn’t have it. Though she might develop a good case of it if they sent her back to South Hall. “I’m tired. That’s all.” Not crazy, she added silently.

He looked up at her. “Were you hurt when the other patient restrained you?”

“No, not bad. I mean, no.” She had insisted to herself and others that she wouldn’t have struck Sylvia, that she would have maintained control, that she had only leapt from her chair because she wanted to escape the taunting and flee the group. But maybe the other patient had saved her from doing what she didn’t think she was capable of doing. She didn’t know what she was capable of anymore, she was so tired. “Please don’t send me back to South Hall. I just want to sleep.”

Dominic scribbled a few more notes, then rose from the chair. “Everyone else is in groups right now. Maybe you can get some rest before lunch.”

She waited until he left the room, then rolled onto her side, determined not to cry. Because if she started to cry, she wasn’t sure she could stop.



“Dominic said I could bring you lunch.”

Wren pushed back her hood and scooped herself up in bed.

Kelly handed her a tray with chicken salad, a cup of melon, and a whole grain roll, then sat on the edge of the mattress. “How are you feeling? Looks like you slept for a while.”

She rubbed her eyes. “I guess I did.” She glanced across at her roommate’s empty bed, the sheets rumpled. The two of them hadn’t had much conversation. The more normal someone appeared, the less likely they seemed willing to disclose the reasons for being there. “If I could get a few good nights of sleep, I think I’d feel a lot better.”

“It’s hard for that here, I know.”

If she had known how difficult it would be, she might not have come. But her reliable coping strategies had stopped working. And she was scared. She didn’t know what she was capable of, she was so tired. *Your fault*, the voice inside her head reminded her. *If you hadn’t stopped going to counseling and taking your medications . . .*

She hated the thought of needing drugs in order to manage her life.

Only Casey and her parents knew about the cocktail of anti-depressants and anxiety medications she had started taking in high school. Casey had been on his own cocktail for bipolar disorder. Whatever stigma was attached to mental illness, they’d shared it together. It had eased the burden. And complicated it.

“Dr. Browerly wants to meet with you before your next group,” Kelly said. “And I thought maybe you’d like to have a bit of time in the courtyard after you finish eating. It’s nice outside. Cool, but sunny.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Clouds, rain, hail, it wouldn’t matter. A bit of fresh autumn air and a place to breathe without music videos or news blaring from the television in the common room across the hall would be a gift. If she had ever needed to be recalibrated with a sense of gratitude for small things, then confinement at Glenwood had already accomplished that.



Periwinkle. Cornflower. Aquamarine. Turquoise. Azure. Cerulean. Blue, oh, the wonder and glory of blue! She leaned her head back and looked up, the white clouds brushed in thick impasto strokes like Vincent's churning skies. She shut her left eye and traced two fingers along the brow of a cloud, imagining the feel of her palette knife as she mixed and molded white with violet and a bit of citron yellow, spreading the paint like icing on a layer cake. Sweep, swish, swirl. There were no palette knives or oils or canvases in the art room at Glenwood, only watercolors and soft brushes and sheets of white computer paper. But at least there was paint. For the first time in months, she felt a desire to return to an easel and create something beautiful. That, her case manager would probably say, was progress.

"Hear that?" a voice from behind her asked. She turned to face a gray-haired man who was pointing toward the sky. "Wait for it," he whispered. "Wait for it . . . there! There! Did you hear it?"

Wren heard only the sound of a light wind rustling through unseen trees that had by now, she imagined, become flaming torches of amber, vermilion, and copper. "No. Sorry. I don't think so."

"Listen. You got to listen. Close your eyes."

Unsure how safe that was when she was in a confined space with other patients, she squinted.

"Listen for it now, okay? Like a cough. Churt-churt. Churt-churt-churt."

And then, just as he'd described it, the call sounded. She opened her eyes. "Yes! I heard it that time."

He nodded his approval. "Red-bellied woodpecker. They've got a different call this time of year. Usually, it's kwirr kwirr." He closed his eyes. "Cardinal. Blue jay. Chickadee. Woodpecker again." While she'd been reveling in clouds, he'd been reveling in birdcalls. "Know the most important tool for birding?"

Wren thought a moment. "Binoculars?"

He made the sound of a buzzer. “Your ears! That’s how you know what’s around. Even if you can’t see them, you can hear them. You have to know how to listen.”

She hoped he wouldn’t ask her name. She didn’t want to reveal that a woman named after a bird knew so little about them.

“Michigan,” he said. “This is a good place to be, right on the migration path. You get them coming and going.” He scanned the patch of sky. “They’ll be going soon, some of them, anyway. Heading south once the weather turns. You seen the way the geese fly in those V’s, how they take turns being the leaders?”

Wren nodded.

“Know why one side of the V is longer than the other?”

“No.”

“Cause there’s more birds on that side.” He laughed, then signaled to a staff member that he was ready to go back indoors.

Wren sat down on a bench, eyes still fixed on the patch of blue, ears now tuned for a variety of songs she couldn’t identify. Her mother probably knew some of the calls. She loved birds. She loved telling the story of how a bird had saved her. Or rather, how God had saved her by sending one.

Maybe she’d call and ask her mother to tell her the story again, to remind her she wasn’t alone, that God was with her. Despite how it seemed.

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