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A Journal of Brief Literature

Collateral Beauty

(https://citronreview.com/2017/12/21/collateral-beauty/)

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by Jennifer Lang

When a fellow passenger offers to play musical seats so that a father can sit in my spot with his two little boys, I agree to move rather than endure the overnight flight from San Francisco to Tel Aviv next to sleepless, fidgety kids, rather than rant at the flight attendant in front of hundreds of strangers with whom I have to share the same oxygen for the next fourteen hours, rather than fall apart, which I sense imminent beneath my calm façade, for I'm barely upright after having kissed my seventy-nine-year-old mother goodbye in her rehab hospital bed, one week after I arrived, two weeks after surgery to repair the left side of her brain where unbidden blood seeped and gathered in the wrong place, wreaking so much havoc on her system that she endured four post-op episodes when she couldn't utter more than two words and her right side went numb.

A neurologist diagnosed her with symptomatic epilepsy and doped her up with a medical cocktail: Keppra to prevent seizures; Dilantin, making her so woozy and unsteady that in the middle of the night, when she went to the bathroom and fell on her knees, nurses came running and doctors revoked her freedom-of-movement privilege *and* delayed her imminent release, so the next day, she told anyone within earshot—me, nurse, physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, neurologist, rehab doctor, social worker, technicians who wheeled her away for yet another CAT scan—I'm depressed, and, as if that weren't bad enough, red, itchy welts erupted on her chin and chest, an allergic reaction to the drug, which the doctor immediately stopped; then Trileptal, which kept the seizures at bay; Benadryl

to prevent the histamine from spreading and, as expected, brought on an intense, full-body fatigue, my mother drifting in and out of consciousness like a heroin addict, her eyes fluttering open, closed, open, closed, unable to hoist herself up, unable to swing her legs out of bed, unable to walk to the bathroom, belittling the now necessary walker, unable to wipe herself, resulting in a urinary tract infection, which made her delusional, and a diaper; antibiotics, anti-depressants, anti-this, anti-that.

Finally, on my last day, my mother's body adjusting to the onslaught of pharmaceuticals, she was alert, lucid, able to track conversations, understanding that at 5:30 in the afternoon I had to leave, to catch my plane, to fly home, halfway across the world to my husband and kids, and I said to her, *You're going to be okay*, because I needed to believe that too, and we exchanged *I love you's* as she waved me out of the room and I trudged down the hall toward the elevator bank, passing the nurses' station, where I paused to thank the on-duty one for taking such good care of my once feisty mother, who had declined so drastically, and the onyx-eyed woman smiled and told me not to worry, but I welled up anyhow and continued to the car, over the Bay Bridge, to the airport, through security, into the United lounge, onto the plane, toward the back, to sit at my window seat and keep to myself, my emotions like a vase about to hit the floor.

So when a foreign-tongued father assumes he can leave his male charges next to me and sit across the aisle, in the middle seat, I react, or maybe overreact, seconds away from screaming, crying, collapsing onto the industrial carpet, until a stranger—a man with pudgy cheeks and Elvis hair—intervenes, suggesting we three change places, insisting he can sleep anywhere, telling me everything will be okay.

I accept and, once seated, overcome by his kindness, I weep, my shoulders shaking, pent-up devastation releasing, and this stranger gently strokes my arm over and over and over and passes me tissues, compassionate, maternal, until the plane takes off into the San Francisco night sky, and me, spent, empty, alive, I catch my breath and whisper *thank you*.

Jennifer Lang's flash has appeared in *Miracle Monocle*, *The Tishman Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Gravel*, *Thread*, and forthcoming in *CHEAP POP*. A Pushcart and Best American Essays nominee, she earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and serves as Assistant Editor for *Brevity*. Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, she now lives and writes near Tel Aviv, where she runs Israel Writers Studio. "Collateral Beauty" is excerpted from her memoir-in-progress.

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