

As a dying man reveals a dark secret, the story of a troubled young woman unfolds. What happened the night their paths crossed? Pieces of "the dream" would come together, like a mosaic...

Picasso Dream

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# **Picasso Dream**

**Allison Harris Ludwig**

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## **I. Shahida**

**T**o look at Mr. O, he was harmless. I suppose we all are in the end. The last night I saw him, he was lying on a big burgundy sofa, underneath a monstrous pile of blankets. Mr. O was pretty stoic about pain for someone with terminal lung cancer. Coldness, on the other hand, he would yell and scream about being cold, no matter how many blankets you piled on him. I remember he always had his television turned on, with the volume all the way down. He never paid any attention to it, but I knew better than to turn it off. With Mr. O, you quickly learned to abide by his rules, else face his wrath.

His full name was Bruce Kenneth Ostermann. I think the aides started calling him “Mr. O” to try to be more casual and friendly, since he was just the opposite. Most of our staff truly disliked coming to his apartment, especially those of us who were anything other than pure Caucasian like him. He was cruel, verbally abusive, and an unabashed racist. He was even

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crude and sarcastic with our hospice chaplain. I really tried to be a compassionate nurse with him, especially since there is no telling how I myself will act when the time comes. But he was hard to deal with. That last night, he was ashen and gaunt, swaddled in his big patchwork quilts, shivering.

“Goddamn it, I am COLD! What, did you turn on the goddamned air conditioner in here? Hey! Big Bertha. I'm talking to you!” A nasal cannula snaked from his nares to his neck, across the quilts and the burgundy sofa, and down to a humming oxygen machine on the floor. It took him a while to catch his breath when he yelled.

I sometimes wonder whether patients like Mr. O were always so miserable. I usually meet people so late in life's journey; it is hard to tell for sure. Some dying patients seem desperate for some semblance of control, since they no longer have control over staying alive. Then there's dementia, organic brain disease, and of course, people can't be held accountable for their behavior in those situations. But I have taken care of patients who were sweet, no matter how much they suffered. It makes me wonder if a person's true personality emerges when they are the most stripped down and vulnerable. Whatever the

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reason, I am certain Mr. O had always been a mean person. The best indicator of one's character is whether anyone cares enough to sit by him when he's on his deathbed. Mr. O never had a single visitor.

“Nurse,” Mr. O croaked, eyeing my name badge. “Shahi...whatever the hell your name is. You people and your made-up bullshit names.” He squeezed his eyes shut, attempting another cough. “*Please* go into my bedroom closet. There is a brown metal box on the top shelf. Bring it to me. And you’d better find my lighter, or else! I know one of you people took it.”

*Or else what?* I remember thinking, stifling a giggle. “It's pronounced Sha-hi-da. It has been around much longer than your name. Anyway, I will get your box for you, Mr. O. But *no lighter*. You know you can't smoke cigarettes anymore.”

“Well, what the hell does it matter now? My lungs are already shot.” I went to his closet and pulled down the brown metal box. I remember that when I brought it to him, he snatched it from me with a strength I did not realize he still had. He started to open the rusted latch, then stopped and leered at me suspiciously.

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“Do what you have to do, Nurse. Then please leave.” Mr. O had a loud rattle after every breath. He set the mysterious box on a little table next to the couch. I listened to his lung sounds. *Diminished/crackles bilateral bases, expiratory wheezes throughout. Nebulizer treatment given,* I documented on his chart. I read through his history while administering his breathing treatment.

*PHYSICIAN'S NOTES: Positive for tobacco abuse, two to three packs per day times approximately forty years. Denies ethanol or illicit drug use. Patient was working as a truck driver until his first hospitalization for shortness of breath, with subsequent diagnosis of advanced inoperable non-small cell carcinoma of the lung. Patient is not married, and does not have any children. Patient states he has no living relatives. Patient is noted to be a veteran of the armed services. He will be referred to a VA facility pending bed availability. Discussed poor prognosis with patient, recommend hospice care...*

Mr. Ostermann inhaled the nebulizer vapors the best he could, periodically coughing up dark bloody yellow sputum into Kleenexes. Wadded-up tissue balls dotted the carpet where they had just missed the plastic wastebasket. I knew the end was near

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for him, as the dying process had become kind of routine for me by now. Everyone is a little different, but there are notable phases: ailing but able to function, weakening as systems fail, then clinging and barely hanging on (if there is something worth hanging on for), and finally a last burst of fight from adrenaline or the confusion of oxygen deprivation. Some people die quickly, while others linger for days and days with vital signs that should not be able to sustain life. Sometimes they still have an agonal breath here and there, making it hard to tell if they have yet passed. There are patients who stop breathing, but their hearts continue to beat for a while. I remember watching the electrocardiogram tracings, when I worked in an intensive care unit. I saw many variations of what dying hearts look like, on monitor screens and on spools of smooth paper with red grids. Sometimes the electrical paths catch in the ventricles and fibrillate; spiky waves flatten into ripples, then into lines. Even more fascinating are those who have no heartbeat, no pulse, and no circulation; yet to look at their electrocardiograms, a “pulseless electrical activity” remains. PEA often forms a very normal-looking heart rhythm. Although these patients are clinically dead, some form of electricity lingers...

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“What's in the box, Mr. O? Seems important.” I felt his radial pulse and counted, using my watch's second hand.

“Why are you still here?!” He closed his eyes. “I'm so cold. If I could just get warm. You're not helping. Get out!” I left Mr. O's apartment not long after that. It had seemed like a routine visit at the time. Looking back, I wish I had peeked inside that metal box. I wonder if the box had anything to do with the way he died, which was...bizarre.

## **II. Bruce**

**B**eing sick, you spend a lot of time laying around and thinking. Mainly, I thought about the fact that I could not breathe. I could barely move a little air in and out, and that was only if I remained still. With the slightest bit of activity, like trying to stand up, I was instantly gasping and wheezing. It was pathetic how helpless I became. I was, for all practical purposes, incapacitated, chilled to the bone, lying on my couch, thinking. Thinking was the worst part.

I kept waiting for the nurses to tell me it was finally time to open the MAGIC BOX. I had heard this box contained morphine: liquid heroin, in my refrigerator! I considered drinking it all up and getting it over with. But I lacked the strength to go far, unless I planned on staying wherever I landed. Besides, what if it didn't kill me? Then they might have taken away the good drugs I had in pill form. Not that the pills made the pain go away; rather, they helped me escape pain by

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daydreaming or sleeping. The nurses reserved the morphine drops for the very end, to help with what they called *air hunger*. I told those stupid nurses: “But I have *air hunger* now!” They just smiled, real patronizing-like. Their looks implied that my breathing difficulties were going to get much worse. I could not fathom how that was even possible. I frequently held myself back from getting really violent with them, the nurses, even though I knew they would have just laughed at me if I tried. Let us just say those nurses were lucky I was not as strong as I used to be.

A lot of my memories from Iraq came back, during those months on the couch. I witnessed some things that most people would consider gruesome. I was deployed there twice while serving in the Army. The second time, I was a Staff Sergeant. Being responsible for the welfare of soldiers made it more difficult to fly under the radar, but the military was still a pretty good place to hide. My unit escorted civilian and military convoys all across Northern Iraq. The missions were usually routine, but improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were a constant worry. For years after the war, I swerved to avoid potholes. We were lucky quite a few times, only because the Hajjis had buried the IEDs too deep beneath the roads. Though

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most of us managed to stay in one piece, those explosions would still blow your damn truck off the road. The vibrations alone were so powerful that, after one explosion in particular, I couldn't feel my legs. I was afraid to look down, because I was sure they were gone.

I eventually regained sensation to my legs, but I later found out those same vibrations had rattled my brain. TBI, they called it: traumatic brain injury. I had trouble with my short-term memory for a while, but that seemed to improve over time. I do not know if it was the TBI or just being in Iraq for so long, but somehow the experience changed my personality. I had always been a pretty angry person; however, prior to my second tour, I easily hid my intentions. Something about that injury exposed my extremely short fuse for a while. When I got home, I isolated myself and avoided talking to people because, without fail, they would piss me the fuck off. I almost blew it, everything, because I could barely control myself. It took a good two years to get my mojo back. I am lucky I did not die in the slammer.

After I was discharged from the Army, I started driving trucks. It was a lifestyle that suited my desire to lay low. I was

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almost invisible, driving from point A to point B and back, watching ribbons and ribbons of road skate underneath my wheels. It was monotonous and mind-numbing at times, however I found unique opportunities to “express myself” while out on the road.

Once, on a night mission, a terrific explosion lit up our lead gun truck. Ironically, the first thing that came to mind was how incredibly beautiful it was; white, billowy trajectories stretched out like arms. Reality hit me, though, as I felt the blast wave hit our truck. I immediately started calling for a status report of gun truck one, gun two, requesting an ACE report (Ammo, Casualties, Equipment). Green meant good, everything was okay. Amber meant there was a problem with one or more of the three. Black meant they were running out of ammo, or equipment had been destroyed, and/or there were casualties. After two radio attempts, there was no report, just dead silence. Suddenly, screams came across our radio: “We're on fire! We're on fire!” The medic and I exited our truck despite almost zero visibility, running toward the lead truck through thick white smoke. My throat felt like it was going to close, my eyes burned, my skin itched. At first, I thought I was just being paranoid. But after receiving status reports from the other gun

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trucks, every team was experiencing similar symptoms except for one. Multiple IEDs, white phosphorus rounds, and high-explosive rounds had hit us. Chlorine and other household chemicals were used as incendiary, we found out later. I feared a horrifying death from chemical agent exposure that night. Our trucks were quarantined, and twelve of us had to go to the CASH for decontamination. Mustard gas, they said.

I don't know what it was, but I was never quite the same after that night. For one, I never shit right again, and these weird skin lesions showed up on my arms and my torso. For years, I had episodes of headaches and aching joints. The doctors seemed to imply it was all in my head. There was definitely something wrong with my head, but that wasn't anything new. The quacks acted like I was making physical symptoms up, chalking it all up to post-traumatic stress.

One day, after returning fire in the town of Ramadi, I went to see where our mortar rounds impacted. I traced their paths back to the civilian home of a family of five, including a little girl. They were all dead from our Howitzer rounds. I saw at least five civilian houses destroyed. I saw some dude's head and some lady's leg, lying in the street, their bodies MIA. I once saw

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a man shot so many times in the belly with a squad automatic weapon, when you picked him up you could see his spleen. The Army offered me counseling for post-traumatic stress. But I did not want to talk to them. I knew my true thoughts on what I had seen would not be appreciated. They would have stuck me in a sanitarium for sure.

I did ask for medicine to help me sleep. They asked if I was having nightmares. "I have dreams," I told them. "Little kids have nightmares." What I had was worse than nightmares. When I dreamt about Iraq, I was still *there*. It was still *happening*. I woke up yelling, shaking, sweating. Shapeless black forms stood by my bed and tried to smother me. I do not think I was asleep when I saw the demons. After two years, the night sweats and physical symptoms subsided; at least, the episodes were less frequent. As far as my brain injury, I eventually learned to adapt, as does every animal who wishes to survive in this world.

Joanna cropped up in my thoughts a lot, especially when I sensed my end was near. Mainly, I was concerned with the fact that I still had possession of her journal, and I needed to find a way to get rid of it. My last mission, planned and executed from

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my death-couch, was to ensure that no one would ever find out about Joanna, or any of them. Even though I knew I would already be worm food by the time of my hypothetical trial and sentencing, I still preferred anonymity. Allowing myself to be famous, which at the time amounted to gross exploitation, was not worth the trade off. Besides, attempts to analyze people like me are in vain. We are chameleons; we look and act just like everybody else. Potentially exposing my methods to the whole world would spoil the mystery that was me. I would rather hide forever in the darkness, unknown and everywhere.

### **III. Joanna**

October 3<sup>rd</sup>

**T**he day of her car accident, Sydney asked me to come with her to interview a band for our high school newspaper. When I told her I had to cheer at the football game that night, she grabbed my shoulders, hugged me, and told me that she missed me. It was like she knew that would be the last time she saw me. One split-second decision on a Friday afternoon, and I barely escaped death or serious injury.

I remember one morning, after I had spent the night at her house (which I did often), Sydney told me she'd had a dream about me. She called it a "Picasso dream," where body parts from her and me intermingled like a mosaic. I did not really know what to think about it at the time.

Now, I just feel helpless, like she is caught between life and death. They said she was clinically dead at the scene of the

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crash. But they revived her, and now she is in a coma, on life support. I cannot tell her goodbye yet. I want her here with me, laughing and rebelling with me. I want her back, the girl who made my boyfriend jealous, the girl who went to dance classes and theater classes with me, who competed with me and made me a better person. I took it all for granted: her company, her advice, her playfulness. Everything she did was to the extreme. She was all over the place, multitasking and socializing with her throngs of fans. Maybe she knew she had to cram it all in, because it was not going to last long.

October 5<sup>th</sup>

Tonight I let Sydney go. She has already crossed over, I think. Part of her is still with me, just as part of me has gone with her. Everything will be different. Sydney always knew that superficial, material things would one day be insignificant to me. I feel a burden has been lifted, like she is free from the frustrations of this world. She gives me strength, and I will always love her. I leaned over onto her in the intensive care unit and cried. I told her all of the things I felt like saying. But looking at the machines that breathed for her, the tubes and

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lines everywhere, the patch of shaven hair, I knew she was not there anymore. I stroked her bruised face and warm neck, traced her eyebrows and nose. I ran my fingers through her remaining hair, memorizing its color and texture. I could never forget.

My boyfriend is afraid something will happen to me. I was thinking the same thing the other day. I do not care about that anymore.

October 11<sup>th</sup>

Yesterday at 4:30 P.M., Sydney's body died. I say body, because the true Sydney, mind and spirit, left that poor chamber last Saturday at 2:20 A.M.

I have not completely accepted it yet. Last night, I went to a party. Before I left, I took five Prozac. My usual dosage is one per day. My heart was beating rapidly. I wanted it to stop so I could join Sydney, but it didn't. God wants me to pull through all this and live my time and help people. But right now I feel like anger has made me desperate, and I am struggling to find the will to live.

Her funeral is tomorrow.

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No one understands my pain, because they didn't see us together. The few who did are the most comforting to me. We were witches; we had power. Together, we could do anything. We touched and fascinated such a wide range of people. Our synergy was an incomprehensible force. We were going to move to New York or Chicago after we graduated high school. She was the actress, and I was the writer. No one knows this, but I guess it does not matter anymore. They do not know how I suffer. I can't fathom how they effortlessly spurt forth tirades of tears, while I am unable to break this invincible barrier that represses all emotion, except for anger. My rage charges forward in everything I do. An irate motivator intensifies my ambition and drive. I try to feel, but I am smothered with mad, passionate fury...and I proceed to take it out on myself.

God is making me strong, stronger than I want to be. I want to be weak, and go with my sister and companion. Nothing anyone has done does her justice. But He will take me when it is my time. If I take my own life, I will have defied Him and I will never get to see her. My soul will die and decompose with the shell that holds it.

Sleep calls me. I hope I find her soon, wrapped around me so that I cannot sense the world.

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October 13th

I am sitting outside the mausoleum in which Sydney rests. There are many bouquets and arrangements for her—she would love that. The funeral yesterday was both infuriating and beautiful. The service, at first, was extremely impersonal and tiresome. The priest did not even know her; he just read lists that he had been given of the activities she was involved in. The casket was open, but the body inside was unlike Sydney in every way: bloated, wrinkled, swaddled in layers of thick makeup, peaceful and powerless. She was buried in her seventeenth birthday dress.

I wanted her to be beautiful, as she was in life. But I knew it would be impossible to depict her beauty in death, because a big part of her appeal and charisma was her unstoppable movement and energy. Her black eyes danced from person to person, so intelligent, mischievous, sad and young. Everyone always seemed dull standing next to her. I always thought she would be famous, because she had this light about her. She was special. Sometimes people thought we hated each other, because our fights were so intense. We were like sisters. She finished my sentences. She helped me come out of my shell.

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She called me out when I needed to be taken down a notch. I only hope that she will remember me when I come to Heaven.

She lived 17 years, 5 months, and 23 days on Earth.

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