



degrees of Sickness

Sharon
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Sharon Maria Bidwell

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Dedication

To the love of my life, always, and to those who already know I write many different things in many different genres and continue to support me in everything that I do.

Degrees of Sickness

I lay in bed trying to remember my name.

Call her Edie, my grandmother said but my mother had refused – too ‘insipid’; it was years before I knew the meaning of that word. You cannot remember anything you hear said in the cradle, or so I’ve been told ... but I remember that.

My grandmother didn’t take no for an answer easily; never could. Mother died when I was age six, or was it seven? Then they seemed to blur. I couldn’t distinguish the memory from the reality of the woman who took care of me.

In bed now, I feel my mother’s grip about my wrist. It’s a death-grip, a claim made in competition from the grave. I’ve been aware of the musty smell for an age.

The phone rang some time ago but the machine cut in. Just as well. I haven’t the energy to move.

My cheery voice came through loud and clear. I wonder what people think when they hear my message. Will they ring the number once more just to hear my voice after I am dead?

Inspid: bland, unexciting, boring; in other words, wishy-washy. I don’t know why Gran thought the name inspid but I think it would have suited me. I can’t remember my true name but I’m sure it’s something that sparkles. I lay waxen and shallow. Pale and pasty do not cover it.

Father tried to tame me after Mother died, but I had heard enough of his hatred and her loathing that would spill over at all hours of the day and night. It wasn’t his fault in retrospect, but every time he looked at me or

I at him, it was an accumulation of all those bad memories. We could have made some good ones, better ones, perhaps ... if I'd given him half a chance.

It was a dance. People tip-toeing around each other at the cemetery, bright dresses as though we were living in the USA and it was prom night, and then someone screamed in discovery, and I left, dress turning to rags at midnight. I got lost on the way, trying to find my way home. A strange man found me, and I was crying in the rain. The man was Tom and he tried to kiss me, apologise. But I pushed him away and then Gran was there and my little hand was safe in hers, but that was a lie as well. I spent too much time walking, crying, in the rain, and by the time I reached home, I was sick. Just not as sick as I was of the lies. Dead was dead, but what else can we dream of but heaven when it's hell on earth?

I lift my hand weakly, only to witness it fall back almost lifeless and heavy against the cover. Still trying to follow a train of thought, I'm certain I have two events mixed up somewhere; both times suited to the same emotions; times in my life when my heart broke.

The phone rings again and I patiently wait for the machine to come alive, reply, though it must be almost full by now. It's taken so many messages over the last ... what has it been? Two days? Three? The bedding is soaked with sweat but I remain cold.

"Hi, I'm not here right now. I'm either out doing something, or someone, so please leave a message after the beep..."

Why do I not say my name, introduce myself? Am I ashamed, ashamed of my name or of me? But then maybe I should be ashamed after a message like that. Who leaves messages like that in reality? I try to recollect my life, and for a moment, it is within reach, then it fades and I have to let it go. I wonder what kind of person I am.

Someone is asking if I'm there, demanding I pick up, but still no name. The importance of my name takes precedence suddenly. It's as though if I hear my name, I'll remember who I am and what it means to be me. I'll know if I have friends, people who love me.

I shift my gaze in compensation for being unable to turn my head. A ghastly-decorated figurine of a Buddha stares down at me from the top of a chest of drawers. Did I really buy such a figure for myself? Was it a present from someone? Do I even know how to meditate?

The caller rings off and I sense frustration, exasperation ... maybe even concern, though I didn't catch enough of the words for any of it to make sense. Is there someone out there worried about me? I hope they don't call again. The answer phone is so impersonal, and I'm unable to answer personally. I don't have the strength to reach the phone and besides, my mouth is full of vomit.

I wonder, not for the first time, if I have the strength to turn my head and spit it out, if not on the floor, at least into the pillows. With a kind of detachment, I realise I am surprised I managed to be sick; it's like I don't have the energy. Short of the exertion of heaving, this sickness simply crept up inside me, spilling its way out, but not enough. If I focus I'm aware of the sour taste, but I don't want to think about that. It's not like I can do anything about it. A small part of me is afraid I'll choke to death if I continue to lie like this but though it's getting no better it seems to be getting no worse. I can breathe through my nose now and as it is, I'm breathing shallowly.

My heart skips a beat.

I wanted to live with my grandmother and she was only too willing to have me.

"Your grandmother was the cause of our falling out of love," my father told me. I didn't see how. Love was meant to be forever. I think I told her what he said once. She laughed.

"He never looks on his own doorstep, your father," she said. "He finds it hard to keep his eye and other things from wandering."

I understood none of it.

Later, she told me she had taught her daughter to be virtuous; a man shouldn't be so demanding. An ill match had no one to blame but each other, I guessed.

Mother stabbed Father once; he forgave her. Grandmother always looked at him with the glint of a blade in her eye but I failed to recognise it.

My throat hurts, though suddenly I'm breathing more easily. Some of the sickness has dribbled out of my mouth. I feel it trickle down my cheek to be lost in my hair.

Goldilocks. I remember someone calling me that once. It suited. There were three bears...

Father was the baby, I realise now.

I cough. The pain fights its way up as though it has been living in my bones waiting for the moment to cramp my muscles, render them. I am a statue, all tightness, inflexible.

Mother was the mummy bear, always ... mother and mothered.

I spray vomit and then phlegm. I am dying I think. It is an interesting realisation. I wonder what it will feel like.

The biggest grizzly was Grandmother, of course.

I stopped taking her calls shortly after I moved out of the house. I would have phoned my father instead, but I'd left it too late, turned his dislike into loathing. I tried to find another man to love me instead.

My heart out pounds my head. Tissues adorn the bed but I stopped blowing my nose yesterday. I think I've dried up, or else I must be consuming the sickness. There's a newspaper on the bed, out of reach. I know I bought it the day I grew sick but the date still wouldn't tell me how long I've lain here. I can't even remember what it's called. I'll call it The Pneumonia Times for my purposes.

I'm sick, skin slick with fever, clammy to the touch like a cooling corpse. I died so long ago now that it's hard to remember the date.

Mother stabbed Father once. He forgave her but I never could. I pushed.

The blanket is my shroud. Sickness burns my throat, rots my teeth. The phone rings, insistent. Go away, whoever you are. The voice of my grandmother assures me 'I am only trying to help you, my darling'. She offers only the kind of help no one wants or needs.

"Come with me," my mother kisses my fevered brow. And for one moment, I want to go with her. I want her forgiveness.

The wheels of the bus revolve ... I'm a child again and my tale is almost told. My father forgave but I never did and I pushed...

I want to let go but a man's voice, the voice of my father I mistakenly believe for a moment, calls me forth from the enclosed space to which I have receded. There are shouts, a thump, the sound of breaking wood and glass but I think I'm becoming aware of these sounds in reverse. They are distant memories.

"Two degrees off dying," I hear someone mutter. There is a call for ... nice? Yes, I want someone to be nice to me, even if they have to tell lies in order to do it. I'll even take Tom's lies of fidelity this night. Instead, I am roughly lifted, my nightie leaving me no dignity. For a moment in time, I am outside of myself looking down and I see a young woman, hair slick with sweat and sick, mottled lumps of yellow bile staining the gold of my hair into a furious yellow. My white cotton T-shirt that I wear for a nightie is so short every one in the room knows I'm a natural blonde. I believe the rest of me should be pale like the garment, but I am grey ... and this more than anything makes me afraid. My arms and legs are akimbo, lifeless, hanging like awkward twisted limbs of a tree in winter.

In a hot bed, I was cold. In a bath of ice, I am hot. The relief is momentary.

I want to be forgiven. I need to forgive myself. Why do I always ask for the impossible?

Two degrees sound like nothing at all. I suspect that soon even the water will boil. I am the lobster.

I had to live with grandmother. Her blood and words were caustic, but father forgave my mother her sins even though I never could. I pushed,

and the wheels went round and round. Life went on but in time, I realised how many lives I'd destroyed, including my own. Every time my father looked at me or I at him, it was an accumulation of bad memories.

The ice begins to melt...

The End

Sharon Maria Bidwell

Sharon Maria Bidwell was born one New Year's Eve within the London area. Since having her first short story accepted and the editor announcing her as "a writer who is going places," her work -- poems, articles, short stories and novels -- have appeared steadily in print and online publications. She links her most favoured and often most successful work closely to fantasy, though her writing crosses genres.

She loves reading, the movies and going to the theatre and spending time with a few very special people. Her friends are waiting to discover something she isn't good at. She often thinks about moving but lives primarily in a world of her own. Visit this diverse writer's site at:

<http://uk.geocities.com/theviewoveraonia>.

Reviews...

Sharon Bidwell is definitely one to watch. 'Silver Apples of the Moon' (ROADWORKS#13) was a story I couldn't resist. It had all the elements that are important, including originality, great characterisation - you can almost feel the pain and anguish - and sensitivity that makes the reader remember the story long after reading it. As an editor, I read a lot of stories, most of which I don't remember, but this one had me gripped from start to finish. This is a writer who's going places.'

-- Trevor Denyer, Editor, Roadworks.

'Sharon Maria Bidwell's work is like strawberry threads in a sweet azure world. With her delicate, flowing, miasma-like prose, she weaves a world around her readers, takes them on a journey, and lets them peer through her own unique looking glass. Sometimes through this glass you will see a world of rainbow colours; sometimes an altogether much darker place. Her writing is an intense and mesmerising experience, I find each of her works - be it poetry, a short story, or a novel in progress - always a fascinating marriage of beauty and terror.

In the case of Bidwell's short stories, I always appreciate her progress of action to a cathartic climax while all the while being able to treasure the observations of people's behaviour that hit the mark. Spot on, every single time.

Her poems do not fail to impress. I remember being spellbound upon reading one of her pieces entitled 'Foam'. Sure footed, not a word out of place and the ending really is 'laugh out loud'.

Sharon's work covers a giddy range of subjects, themes and settings. The protagonists could be madwomen or they could be men, the period could be now, it could be the second world war or it could be seventeenth century New England.

She is as diverse in her style and approach as she is in her themes, with the tone going from comic to tragic through whimsical to surreal and back again.

-- Stuart Thorogood - Author

This was a very demanding and challenging project for all involved - especially Sharon - who may not have had some of the more backbreaking aspects of the project to deal with but had to write many reports at short notice: literally from the birth of an idea, the design itself, its eventual construction and a behind the scenes look. She also had to include details covering arthritis and disability and do her best to promote not only the reason we had decided to do this but precisely why it was so important to many of us, even for those who are not afflicted and may not even have an ingrained 'love of gardening'. On a personal note, I feel she has proven her writing skills are such that they may take her in many directions.'

-- Kathryn Moore, The Really Wild Nursery
Breaking Down the Barriers Garden Project

Sharon Maria Bidwell has penned an exceptional tale in ***Snow Angel***, one that resonated with me long after I finished it. At times, the emotions were so intense, so painful, that it was hard for me to read, but then I would turn the page and find something incredible to keep me going.

-- Joyfully Reviewed

This is a relationship that seems based on desperation. They cling to each other and enjoy the passion they share but there is so much pain in both of them that the reader hurts with them. ... *Snow Angel* is a fast paced story with a storyline that draws the reader in and involves them as they join these characters in their search for the truth about their feelings. This is a story that makes an impact and will leave readers thinking about how many people may find themselves in similar situations. I encourage readers to add this memorable love story to their reading list.

-- The Romance Studio

This story is an emotional roller coaster, and more for the reader than the characters themselves. I'm still not sure whether I like this story more than I dislike it. However, I do know that it inspires me to debate with others who've also read it, and will remember SNOW ANGEL long after I've forgotten most other stories. And that is a mark of true originality.

-- (RRT)

In a word? Unique. Undoubtedly a word you have heard before, but let me tell you this word fits Snow Angel to a T. Going in, I didn't know what to expect, but I can say this: I wasn't expecting what I got. These characters are very strongly developed, Dean being the most dominant - both in development and in personality. He really stands out. At times, I guarantee you will hate this character, but in turns be fascinated, intrigued and inclined towards him.

-- JERR

The fact that it was common and accepted for the Swithin to take lovers of both genders made for a very interesting read. This was the story of a very giving, understanding, but lost, leader who depends on his friends to ground him and keep him safe. I found it interesting, entertaining even though it was a little disconcerting. A good read that will have you thinking and make you want to call your best friends and thank them for all they do and who they are. I recommend this book to all that like to read about political intrigue, magical powers, and the more emotional aspects of relationships and how they form.

-- Two Lips Reviews

The character of Bray of the typical beach bum was hysterical. Alex's response to Bray's offer for a last 'butt'(Sex) was highly amusing. Alex's response to his initial encounter with Mani was memorable! Mani's strangely beautiful looks hooked Alex in spite of his promises to himself. The situations that Mani got Alex in were both comical and intriguing. It was wonderful to watch the evolution of Alex and Mani's relationship and how they overcame their differences. Thanks goes to *Ms. Bidwell* for such a heartwarming story.

-- Teresa, Fallen Angel Reviews