

Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

Volume 7
Issue 1 *General Issue*

Article 14

2022

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alicia strand
N.C. State Alumni

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Recommended Citation

strand, alicia (2022) "Excerpts from These Forever: Hiding, Dancing, Sinking, Running, Sleeping," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 14.
Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol7/iss1/14

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Excerpts from These Forever: Hiding, Dancing, Sinking, Running, Sleeping

Cover Page Footnote

by, alicia strand

Hiding

I always found her in the darkness of the downstairs half bath, no bigger than a coat closet, tucked behind the kitchen on the other side of the mudroom. She must have thought no one would see her, no one would know she was there. But I always found her there. I was the only one who looked for her.

"Are we playing hide-and-seek, Mommy? I found you. You're it!"

Her silence was different from my father's silence. His silence was violent, a signal to hide, walk softly, and camouflage with the walls.

I reassured myself she was just playing a game. If she wasn't hiding it meant she was gone, and if she was gone it meant I was alone.

"Mommy, are you in there?"

No response. The door was shut. She was hiding in the darkness and silence behind it, or beyond it, or on the other side of it. Where was she, really? She always called me her little mouse. I was good at being quiet and small, especially when she needed me to be. A little mouse wanders a haunted house in search of its mother. She wanders and wonders if her mother is a ghost. She wanders and wonders if she, too, is a ghost.

I opened the bathroom door slowly, quietly. Daylight intruded through and exposed my mother's crouched form tucked into a ball on the counter. She looked so small like that, almost as small as me.

"Mommy," I whispered. "Where were you? I was scared again."

"Shh," she said.

She always said that when she didn't want to talk. She held out her hand and pulled me inside.

"Let's just hide together," she said, and closed the door behind me.

I climbed on top of the bathroom counter and into her arms. I couldn't tell the difference between my eyes being open or shut. The darkness was just the same. Fast blinking didn't wake me up. I wasn't in a dream. I was in the small tucked away bathroom behind the mudroom, the smallness of me tucked into the smallness of her.

The silence pierced every part of me. Together with the darkness and silence, a little mouse and her shadowed mother hide, waiting. I felt her warm tears landing on my bare arms and wished I could fix everything. Mommies weren't supposed to cry. But I couldn't control her sadness just as much as I couldn't control my fear. If I sat still enough and she cried slowly enough, her tears made tiny puddles on my skin. If I was still enough, they dried there. But they didn't evaporate. I absorbed them.

This silence and sadness was our secret, something only my mother and I shared. My brother and sister were too old to play hide-and-seek, too loud to pretend to be mice or ghosts. No one ever came to look for us in the small darkness of the downstairs bathroom. We knew we weren't playing a game.

We were hiding.

* * * * *

Dancing

I observed my mother live her life as if she was a caged pet. If I didn't watch her closely enough, I thought she might die or run away. I knew her sounds and her silence equally. I understood the objects she had relationships with, like the sewing machine that kept residence on the dining room table except for holidays when we had company. On the same table she laid out holiday meals, she made Easter dresses, bathing suits, and bedroom curtains. No matter the season, there was always something to sew. The foot-pedal controlled motor made rhythmic hums, fast, then slow, then fast again, fluctuating in volume and speed as she pressed and released her foot.

I danced around the dining room table in hand-me-down nightgowns and bare feet to the sounds of her sewing machine. She was home, twirl; she wasn't hiding, arms up with kissed fingertips; she wasn't dead, arms back out, whisking myself into another twirl.

As the sewing machine continued whirring, I continued twirling. She lifted her foot to pause, cocked her head and raised an eyebrow at me. Her lips were pursed around a spare sewing needle that dangled gracefully from her mouth like my Uncle Frank's toothpick. So as not to prick herself, she spoke in a careful mumble.

"Slow down. You're going to fall. And watch your step."

I navigated sewing pins with tiny colorful heads stuck through fragile paper patterns strewn across the dining room floor. I hopped over the patterns while I danced, careful to keep my feet on the rust colored carpet, in the rusty puddles of lava in between the crinkly paper islands. I had to stay in the lava or I'd be stabbed by tiny pins and I'd ruin the carefully cut shapes. If I didn't stay in the lava, I'd ruin her creations before they could be stitched together by the guidance of her hands and feet, pulling them through the machine as she pressed down just right on the pedal, not too hard, not too soft.

More than anything, I needed to be near her silent bravery. How brave to make clothes and curtains with a needle that bobs up and down a million times a minute. How brave to stay in a war zone despite all signs and warnings. The battlefields were places like my parents' bedroom and the kitchen table, but the graveyards were in dark closets and small tucked-away bathrooms where we hid, cried, and buried ourselves alive.

* * * * *

Sinking

It always began with the loud clang of his keys against the silver coins in the ceramic change dish. It sat on the counter just inside the kitchen door leading in from the garage. CLANG. Door slam. Dad's home.

Then, dinner table rituals of red-sauce stained lips, spit-yelling grievances as silverware jumped off the table like tiny metal fish against the contact of his fists. The silverware made the same clangs as the change in the dish. He yelled at no one and everyone all at once. He yelled about nothing at all and every little thing.

Everything in the house seemed to be built wrong side up. If the ceiling was the ocean and the floor was the sky, he was the weather in between. If one could analyze, precisely, the air in the house we breathed, such an expert might discover the exact chemical structure of confusion and fragility.

My mother was like an upside-down ship sinking in the upside-down house. I felt like her tiny ship stuck inside a glass bottle just like the one that sat on the bookcase next to my father's stereo. We were never allowed to touch the stereo or the glass bottle with the tiny ship stuck inside. I touched it secretly, spun it around, held it up to the light every which way. I wished it really was me, perfectly intact and beautiful, inside a clear glass womb for people to hold and admire. I secretly wished I wasn't born yet. Still perfect.

I pulled at the arm of my mother's faded oversized flannel shirt, the one she always wore when she cleaned. I pulled on it every day, pulling her close to my face, the long sleeve in between us like a lifeline.

"Are we running away today, Mommy? Are we? Can we? Please?"

I needed her to be stronger than she could be. I needed her to hurry up, run away, and not forget to take me. She needed to keep up with her new job, the groceries, cooking, cleaning and laundry.

Her hair was pulled away from her forehead in a red bandana which was folded into a triangle and secured with a knot behind her head. She generously sprayed a cloth diaper with Lemon Pledge and handed it to me. The diaper was once my sister's, then my brother's, then mine.

"Take this rag and dust the dining room table, chairs, and legs. Then go in the garage and clean out the litterbox before your father has a fit. Hurry up," she told me. "Go. Go, hurry!"

I hurried off, not because she told me to, but because I wanted to be close to her again quickly. I couldn't lose sight of her for long. What if I never saw her again? What if she dropped her cleaning supplies right there and ran away into a new life? What if she vanished into a cloudy lemon mist, leaving behind only a crumpled flannel shirt and creased bandana on the floor?

I also stayed close because it kept my father away. He never came for her in front of me. I was her rabbit's foot, her talisman, her healing crystal. Whatever powers I had, he never came for her in front of me. I needed to stay close because she needed me.

I could never protect her when they were in their bedroom alone after dinner. Instead, I sat on the staircase with my brother and sister. Their bedroom hung above us in the stairwell, floating like a ghost, far away and unreachable, only

the sounds making their way out. We listened to the booms of his voice, the crashing of hurled objects against the wall.

Together, we sat quietly, a huddled heap of three. We weren't calling each other names or yelling at each other to go away. Instead, we sat and wondered whose fault it was this time, who made him mad. It didn't matter who, because she always took the blame. Dad was always angry. Our mother always took the pain.

As long as I stayed near her, my father stayed away. I was the only one who looked for her, the only one who found her. I was the only one who protected her.

* * * * *

Running

"I'm running away tonight."

My sister Lia stated this as a fact. Not a wish or a threat but a fact. She was the oldest. She always did what she wanted.

I sat criss-cross applesauce next to my brother Alvie on Lia's bed. Alvie's real name was Salvatore, but everyone else called him Sal. I called him Alvie because he would correct me when I called him Sally. I was two and I put the "ie"/"y" sound at the end of everything. Blankie, cuppy, dolly, Mommy, Li-Li, Sally. But never Daddy. Just Dad. Lia's real name was Liana. I didn't call her Li-Li anymore. Just Lia.

Salvatore was six when I started calling him Sally. He was determined to teach me how to say "Salvatore," not "Sally."

"I'm Salvatore, not Sally. It's Salvatore, not Sally," and so on.

After a while, the Salvatore and Sally ran together enough that I heard "Alvie." Now, five years later, he was still Alvie to me. Sometimes just Alv.

Alvie fidgeted with his Rubik's Cube while Lia packed. He flipped his head upwards to flick away a loose strand of chestnut hair that kept falling over his right eye. He flipped and flicked as he turned the color-coded squares this way, then that. Turn, flick, turn, flick. He didn't seem to notice Lia's announcement. Or he didn't care. It was so easy for boys to choose what they wanted to care about. He chose BMX, Rubik's Cubes and boomboxes. He was lucky that way, lucky to be a boy who didn't care about much else.

Lia was 16 and already a woman. I could never imagine being a woman. I wanted to stay seven forever, just in a different forever.

A large suitcase gaped open on the bed waiting to be filled with Lia's future. She usually took her small drawstring bag when she left; she usually came back. The suitcase could fit all the things she loved most, not just the things she needed to stay away for a few days.

"Where are you going when are you coming back and why are you taking that doll?"

The questions spurted out before my brain could separate them. Tears followed as I exclaimed that that was my favorite doll. Its cloth face was stained with

lipstick and the yarn braids were cut off from when I took care of it one day when she never came home from school and still wasn't home by bedtime. She was always going somewhere. I never knew when she was coming back. Not coming back was scarier than how mad she was at me about the doll. Her absence hurt more than her anger.

"Don't be such a baby," she said.

I cried harder, louder.

Her face contorted with indifference and impatience as she let out a long, loud huff.

"Come on. Stahhhp. You want it that bad? Fine."

She hurled the rag doll across the room towards me. The doll's name was Holly Hobbie, but I had named her Jessica, just Jessica. Jessica landed in my lap with a soft thud, staring straight up at me. She was wearing a smocked dress with pearl buttons our mother made for her and a matching one for Lia when she was seven. When she was my age. I didn't have a twin doll. I didn't even have a Cabbage Patch Kid. I had my brother's old BMX from when he got his new one and now I had Jessica.

"You ruined it anyway," she said. "It looks like a clown-dike now."

I wondered how the doll looked like an ice cream bar and cried harder.

"Just *stahhhhp* crying. If he finds out I'm running, I'm dead."

Alvie shot me a pleading look. I swallowed hard and wiped my face on Jessica's dress as Lia gathered and packed her things.

One by one, the suitcase was filled with colorful striped sweaters, bell-bottomed corduroy pants, Jordache jeans, high-top sneakers, flowy dresses and high heels. Next came the curling iron, hair dryer, and a can of extra-super-hold Aqua Net.

I watched all of her things, all of my favorite things, leave her drawers and shelves and get stuffed into the deep pockets of the suitcase. Like an insatiable monster, it seemed to devour everything. There went the makeup case with 50 shades of blue eyeshadow, the fat-sticked waxy lip glosses in root beer and bubblegum flavors, the Love's Baby Soft body spray. Her flute, her jewelry box, nun chucks, Dubble Bubble gum, and an assorted flavor pack of roller-top lip gloss followed. She took all my favorite cassette tapes: Bowie, Prince, Scandal, Joan Jett, Bryan Adams, 38 Special, Triumph, Supertramp, Journey, Segar, Pink Floyd, Rolling Stones, CCR. The tapes were hers but the music was ours.

She turned her attention back to me and gave me another warning. "Listen. Don't go around tonight like you do. If Dad wakes up and finds me gone he could kill you, he'll be so mad."

Alvie stopped flicking and turning to tune into her latest broadcast.

"First he'll kill you, then he'll kill all of us. Joke's on him, though, 'cause he won't find me. I'll be long gone."

She tossed back her feathered hair and laughed uneasily. I knew she was scared. The only thing that made her feel better was making us feel more scared. I sobbed as quietly as I could. I didn't want her to leave us. Even though she seemed to hate us, I didn't want her to leave us. She was the only one who stood up to our father, the only one who didn't seem afraid or indifferent. She was the only one who would yell right back at him.

The house suddenly shook with either the wind or his feet against the floorboards. We froze.

"Come on," she said. "Dinnertime. Not a word from either of you, got it?"

Single-file, we slowly descended the stairs, sister, brother, me. If I went slow enough, maybe I'd never get there. Maybe they wouldn't notice. We took our respective places at the dinner table and silently passed the food around, each dish making its first stop at our father's plate. He was a bear of a man, six-foot-six, two-hundred-eighty pounds, his large frame absurd against the kitchen chair. It creaked and moaned beneath him as he shifted his weight.

He didn't say much. He cleared his throat, wiped his nose, passed the platters and bowls around after helping himself. He didn't say thank you, how are you, or how was your day. He didn't say I love you, I miss you or goodnight.

"I'm going out tonight."

My sister's declaration startled my mother. Her eyes widened but she stayed quiet. I couldn't tell if she was scared or mad. Either way, the dinner table only held enough room for my father's reaction.

"Like hell. It's a school night."

"You have homework," my mother reasoned, holding her dinner fork like a tuning fork.

"Are you coming home early or late?" I blurted out.

Lia gave me a shut-up-or-else look. I raked my peas into my mashed potatoes and back out again. If I started crying I'd let her secret out. I had to focus on the food on my plate, squish it and smoosh it around, until I forgot why I was so upset.

"Can you please pass the applesauce, Mommy?"

My mother handed me the glass jar, relieved for the distraction.

"It's fine," she told my mother, "no homework this week," she lied.

"Midterms are coming up."

"Then you have to study," my mother said, more so pleading with her than telling her.

His fist slammed hard against the table, the knives and forks jumping up. Tiny metal fish jumped like this. We were playing Shark and Minnows. He was always the shark. We were always the minnows.

"You're not going anywhere," he bellowed. It was not so much an order as a dare.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever," she muttered.

I was sure he would kill her right there and then.

"Do you hear me? You will go to your room and you will stay there all night. Now!"

She jumped out of her chair and was halfway up the stairs by the time he got to the "Now!" part. The slam of her bedroom door shook the house in its wake.

My father looked around the table at each of us, looking for his next reason to fight.

We looked at our plates like we had never seen them before. My mother wrung her hands together and shook her head as if trying to erase what was happening. She always tried to erase what was happening.

I stared at her hands. The nuns had taught me how to smack felt erasers together. Maybe if my mother clapped her hands together she'd have an easier time erasing.

"Oh, I'm the bad guy, right? That's right, I'm *always* the bad guy."

Here came the lava.

"God, damn it, I'm so sick of this shit."

He stood in one fluid motion, his chair flying out from behind him and crashing to the floor. Three little minnows were still seated at the table and jumped in their seats, Mother, Brother, and me. The game was now Bear Versus Minnows.

"I can't even enjoy my dinner now."

He stood over us and hesitated, trying to decide which direction to take the tide that only he controlled. We held our breath, kept our heads down and braced for the next wave. He stood over us, bear without fur, king without crown, cleared his throat, and stomped off.

"He's going to pay."

Alv and me were back in Lia's room after the dinner that never was. We listened to her plan.

"Billy's coming at midnight. He's parking down the road and walking up the hill to get me. I'm going out my window and tossing my stuff down from the roof. Then I'm climbing down that tree and I'm gone. He'll be sorry when he finds out I'm never coming back. I'm getting the hell out of here."

She held an unlit cigarette between her lips and inhaled on it hard enough to calm her. She tucked it behind her ear for later and carried on with her plan. Saying it out loud made it real. She was really going to do it. She was really leaving.

"He'll be asleep in his recliner by eight, bring himself up to bed by eleven and then, come midnight, I'm gone."

Alvie just shook his head and sighed. "You'll be back." He never believed her as much as I did.

I remembered the video on MTV about the young couple who were in love, ran away together, and had a baby. Everyone in the video was happy and dancing, running through the streets with bright clothes and no worries. It was a modern-day fairytale. Just then, I wished I had a Billy to come get me, too.

"Don't mess this up for me and roam around tonight," she told me, "because then you'll have to pay. If you wander around tonight and he wakes up and finds me gone, I hope you're prepared to die. Because when he finds out I'm gone, he'll kill anything and everything in his path, including you."

"I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't," was all I could say. I tried not to cry. I didn't want her to see how scared I was, how mad I was, how much I hated her, how much I loved her, how much I feared her. She was leaving. She would be a ghost. She would be free.

"Billy's coming for me tonight," she said, "and I'm gone."

She never said goodbye, or hugged us or told us she loved us. All she said was, "I'm gone."

* * * * *

Sleeping

Morning sunlight cut through the slanted blinds on the window. I was asleep on the floor of my mother's side of the bed wrapped in a single blanket, covered in lines of shadow and light. My hand was wrapped around a large metal crucifix as long as my forearm. I carried it through the night for protection, then held it close when sleep finally took me. While some kids had soft, mouthless teddy bears, I had a cold naked Jesus, skinny and dead. I knew every curve and bump of his crowned head, outstretched arms and crossed legs. My fingers traced the vertical inscription above his head, I, N, R, I.

I grasped the metal hard enough to form indentations in my skin. I tried to hold onto morning just as hard. But the morning, like my mother, was only an illusion, something I couldn't grasp or keep, something that would soothe me and leave me repeatedly.

Before collapsing into a blanketed heap the night before, I had stood there on my mother's side of the bed watching her sleep. I wished I could be as peaceful and still. Her pale face illuminated the dark room like a secret moon.

I stared at her face and cried. I tried to stop the moans I made, tried to stop the tears, the thoughts. I tried to wipe away everything before my tears would land on her. I stood there, clenching my teeth, and convinced myself she was dead. As dead as Jesus, as dead as every good thing I could ever imagine for myself, she was dead. I was there, and she was dead.

The room became unrecognizable, the shadows darker and longer. Time began to stretch like Silly Putty, and the room stretched with it. As everything else stretched and was pulled further away, I became smaller. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't think anything other than she's dead. Drip, drop, moan, stop, tick-tock, tiiiiiiiiiiiiick, tooooooooooock... no. She's not. Yes, she is. Tick-tock, moan, stop, no, yes, tick... tock.

As I whimpered, her eyes began to slowly open. I had always half-expected the eyes of my Jesus to do that on his crucifix. I held it up close to my face to see if he, too, was waking. Her voice was scratchy and tired, her head barely turning towards me, when she, the still moon, began to speak.

"What do you want?" she said.

The large mound beside her that was my father began to stir. Shh. Head bent down and on tip-toe, I stood still. The only way to hide was to become another shadow in the room until his deep breathing began again. Dark, round holes settled into where my mother's open eyes had been like artifacts left behind, like fossil eyes.

I stood as long as I could, holding everything tight, silently reciting Hail Marys until I crumpled to the floor, overcome by sleep. Don't wake the bear. Don't talk to the moon. Just quietly shrink away, unfound and unseen. It was the only way I could stay, the only way she wouldn't make me leave. It was the only way I could be sure she wouldn't quietly leave me.