

As Is

When I was in the hospital being treated for cancer,
The one person whose presence I welcomed was a Jamaican woman
who came to sweep the floors with a large push-broom.
Of the fifty or so people that made contact with me in any given day,
She was the only one who wasn't trying to change me,
the only one who didn't stick things in, take things out, or ask stupid questions.
For a few minutes each night, she rested her broom against the wall
and sank her immense body into the turquoise plastic chair in my room.
All I could hear was the sound of her breath going in and out, in and out.
It was comforting in a strange and simple way.
My own breathing settled down, following hers, and became calm.

One night she reached out and put her hand on my foot.
I'm usually not comfortable with casual touch,
But her hand felt so natural being there,
on one of the few places in my body that didn't hurt.
I could have sworn she was saying two words with each breath,
One the inhale, one on the exhale:
"As... is... As... is..."

On her next visit, she looked at me.
No evaluation in her buttery brown eyes,
No trying to figure me out.
She just looked and saw me,
Completely.
Then she said quietly, firmly,
"You're more than the sickness in that body."
The words seemed larger and fuller than herself.
I was pretty doped up, so I wasn't sure I understood her correctly,
But my mind was just too thick to ask questions at that point.

I kept mumbling those words to myself throughout the following day,
"I'm more than the sickness in this body."
I remembered her voice clearly.
It was rich, full, like maple syrup in the spring.
It carried me breathing deeply into a fog of silence.

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When the nurse came with my shot of morphine the next night, I refused it.
I wanted to find out if my nighttime angel was real or a drugged hallucination.
An hour or so later, I heard the sound of her broom brushing against the hall floors.
Her body filled up the whole doorway, and cast a shadow on the floor of my room.
She sank into the chair.
The pain I was feeling was intense.
She breathed loudly, then, after a few minutes, said,
“You’re not the pain in that body.
It’s there, but you’re more than that pain.”

I reach for her hand.
It was cool and dry.
I knew she wouldn’t let go.
She continued,
“You’re not the fear in that body.
You’re more than that fear.
Float on it.
Float above it.
You’re more than that pain.”

I began to breathe a little deeper as I did when I wanted to float in a lake.
I remembered floating in Lake George when I was five,
Floating in the Atlantic Ocean at Coney Island when I was seven,
Floating in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa when I was twenty-eight.
Without any instructions from me,
This Jamaican angel had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper
than pain or fear.

It’s been almost three decades since I’ve seen this woman with the broom.
I spent months trying to find her when I got out of the hospital, but to no avail.
No one could even remember her name,
But she touched my soul with her compassionate presence
And her fingerprints are still there.