
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2016

A Healer of Its Own

By Connie Shi

“Well, he has a very nice name. All dogs have a name ...”

Ellen trailed off and looked at me with a puzzled, unreadable expression.

“What color is he?” I prompted. Although most hospitals don’t allow pets, that never stopped Ellen’s canine companion from making frequent appearances, and I was curious to find out a little more about him.

“Brown,” she replied.

“And what type of dog is he?”

Ellen tugged at her frizzy white hair. “Well, normal size. Not too big.” Her gaze shifted to the corner of the room. “Look, there he goes!”

I turned to look in the direction she pointed, knowing I would see nothing there.

Five years ago, Ellen began describing to her family images of dogs and cats, children playing, and small cars driving themselves inside the house. Gradually, it became apparent that in addition to the bizarre visuals she claimed to see, her memory was suffering too. Within a few years she could no longer take care of herself or make her own decisions. Memory problems, cognitive decline, and visual hallucinations – particularly of people and animals – are classic symptoms of Lewy Body Dementia, a neurological condition that is unfortunately progressive and presently incurable. I met Ellen and her mysterious pet dog after her memory issues culminated in an accident that brought her to the hospital where I was a rotating medical student.

A few hours later, I came around to check on Ellen again. She was in the middle of conversation, addressing the transparent form beside her.

“Now Murray, don’t you move from there.”

Hearing Ellen mention Murray generally made people uncomfortable. To the medical team, Murray was a symptom of the pathology that was irreversibly eating away at her synapses and neurons. To Ellen’s son and daughter, Murray was another sign that their mother was drifting further into an unrecognizable reality, losing sense of her former self. Murray was an uncomfortable reminder of how much their mother had changed since her diagnosis, which affected not only her memory and thinking, but also the most essential elements of her mood

and personality. I learned from Ellen's children that while she had been extraordinarily even-tempered before dementia settled in, any slight provocation – from wearing an uncomfortable sweater to taking her medications – would now anger her, resulting in daily outbursts of crying and screaming.

But Ellen never directed any anger toward Murray, I noticed. Nothing seemed to particularly bother her during her one-sided conversations with the dog sitting dutifully at her feet. In fact, Ellen was calmest when she spoke to him, chatting idly about one subject or another. She delighted in watching him run back and forth, and in those moments, I saw in her eyes a true warmth and joy that was rarely evident otherwise. Murray's presence seemed to coax out the real Ellen, the Ellen that her dementia had stifled.

Murray appeared and disappeared erratically throughout the day, as hallucinations in Lewy Body Dementia are apt to do. Yet he was often nearby, silently standing guard, when Ellen was alone and at her most vulnerable. Ellen saw him perched near the window when she awoke in the mornings. And at the end of the day, Murray was there with her when the door closed and she clambered silently into bed.

I never asked Ellen whether she knew Murray wasn't real. There wouldn't be any meaning in that question, because Murray was real enough. Not in a physical sense, and not in a sense that I or any other observer could tangibly grasp. I couldn't see Murray, but I could perceive his form in her smile and serenity amid the confusion of her daily life. No scientific discovery or technological marvel could breach the strangeness of the universe that dementia had constructed for Ellen, but Murray brought the comfort of a mutual companionship, perhaps an equal therapeutic to anything that medicine could offer her at present.

Ellen's convoluted reality – still indecipherable by modern medicine – had somehow created a healer of its own, indispensable to her survival in that world.

Connie Shi is a medical student at Harvard Medical School. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan, where she won the Department of Women's Studies McGuigan Prize for her essay examining survivorship and breast cancer. Her narrative medicine essays have also appeared in KevinMD and the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society. "A Healer of Its Own" was chosen as an Honorable Mention in the 2016 Intima Essay Contest, "Patients, Providers and Pets: One Health for All," a call for stories that reflect the term zooeyia, which has been coined to account for the salutary effects pets bestow upon humans.

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