

Sherlyn Assam
The Life We Give

When my sister split the corner of her head open and stumbled out of my parents' bedroom, blood leaking between her fingers, so began my lifelong mission of trying to save everyone around me.

Ashley – a natural gymnast, an enthusiastic dancer, and perpetually stubborn – made a stage out of everything. At ten, it was common for me to yell at her to stop cartwheeling and front tucking her way onto a submissive floor, just for her to get up, try again, and land even louder.

That day, I was reading in my bedroom as her body crashed onto my parents' bed, legs hit the headrest, and heels punched the wall...every thirty seconds. Rage was festering more than I care to admit, not knowing how soon the anger would be replaced by despair.

I stomped my way to the doorway, screaming at her to stop fooling around. But no sooner had I relocated downstairs, there was a ruckus accompanied by dangerous silence. My feet charged back up the stairs, but my mind wanted to be left behind, scared of what was to be discovered.

When my sister and I came face to face, she was clutching the corner of her forehead, hands covering her eye. Crimson tears dotted the carpet. I unleashed a scream that shocked her into momentary silence. Then, I saw her eight years of life in hot flashes, for each second her wail matched mine.

Nailing the role of the emotional wreck, my older sister pushed me out of the bathroom as my father dragged Ashley inside to press towels to a wound I had yet to see.

I grabbed my giant stuffed dog, Brownie, and ran back to where I was reading not even five minutes ago. I squeezed him against my chest, waiting.

And I stayed there. As my dad rushed Ashley into the car, as Valmy followed closely after, as my understanding of what it meant to be a big sister slipped away from me; because at that age, going to the hospital was a death sentence.

After countless sobs, a phone call with my mother, and my older sister returning home to serve me dinner I barely ate, I learned Ashley was fine. She had hit her head on the corner of my parents' dresser, just above her eye. Any lower and she could've been blind. The doctors found the gap on her brow, wiped away all signs of blood, and stitched her back together.

When I woke Ashley up the next morning, I pulled her into my chest, hugging her until my arms begged me to ease up. That day, I walked around with a guilty awareness of the fragility of life. How could we be so careless with ourselves? How could I be so carefree with my loved ones?

I have always loved my family, but after that day, I felt like I needed to hold their hand at every cross-walk. Suddenly, I remembered each and every “I love you” we exchanged, rationing our affection so it would last us a lifetime. No one could leave the house without getting a hug from me. Going to bed in a fight with anyone, big or small, made me wonder if I would regret my anger into old age.

This kind of care is not necessarily bad, but it made me wonder why we don’t live in urgency with all the people we love before signs of trouble. Why did we remind people of our love for them when they would soon be out of reach?

At 21, I was still falling into this trap. I was doing everything I could to return home to my grandma between work and school. I feared she would die while I was away, making my mind wander into a forest of “what if’s”.

So, I prayed, and I planned, and I called her twice a week, and I appreciated her, and I loved her, and I wondered why it took seeing someone on their way out to begin enjoying their company. A trap, I say, because as I grew older, I noticed everyone around me was dying in different ways.

My sister had an accident, my grandmother is aging, my friends’ minds are convincing them that they have no significance in this world – and I was trying to defuse these bombs with an embrace.

But it simply isn’t sustainable to make a job out of calling and spending all my time with the people I love, as if my presence can deter accidents, reverse time, and medicate brain chemistry.

Some days can’t be about treating people to lunches I can’t afford, joining them on walks through the park on deadline, or hosting movie nights even though I’m exhausted. Some days I have to let myself sit on my couch, watch the ceiling fan spin, and wonder if anyone else has ever noticed the hum doesn’t quite keep pace with the blades.

I am learning this love I am trying to perfect may be a weak attempt to save myself – from the hurt I would experience when they leave, or by offering the love that is sometimes too hard to give myself.

But at 25, I am also learning this love is a privilege. How lucky am I to set reminders to talk to people across an ocean and remind others to text me when they make it home safely? How could I ever be grateful enough that I can cry for someone who crochets enough shirts to clothe everyone around him?

So maybe I'll get used to watching the fan, or the TV, or my career. And maybe I'll forget to schedule time to see the ones I love. And maybe it takes a phone call telling me they are gone when I was too consumed with someone else to notice their retreat.

But maybe remembering to see someone after a month of silence is the reason I go to bed with tired eyes but a renewed spirit. Maybe that phone call is the hardest conversation I have all week.

Even so, I am learning that I cannot threaten myself with this reality. Because to live that way; to covet everyone as if every breath is their last one, is not loving them, but loving a memory of them. And to spend every waking moment loving other people so hard for fear of them leaving is to make myself disappear.

I used to think that when I collapsed on my couch and watched that ceiling fan whir without noticing how much time was passing, I was running out of life to give. But these people are life: in laughter, in jest, in accidents, in advice, in attraction, in criticism, in sadness. I cannot run out of something that overflows from me. I spent too much of my life trying to reason my emotions away from my sleeve.

This affection that spills out of me, flowing between fingers that sometimes just cannot keep up, is no sign of death.