

*The Quandary* - written by Victoria Reeves

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I'm all about Ram Dass. Being here now. Speeding down Highway 41 on my motorcycle, I take in the night air. A campfire in the distance, the moist smell of a lawn sprinkler - visceral cues keep me grounded in the ever-evolving present. Despite everything, I realize I am happy. I have what I need: my favorite radio show streaming in my headphones, a future of possibilities laid out before me and that wonderful feeling of being in flow.

My phone rings. I pull over to answer it.

"Vic, you're coming with me to the appointment tomorrow - right?" my sister says, gasping for breath.

"Sure Cin, I'll be there. Are you ok right now? Are you in pain?" I'm staring at a huge fir tree and trying to remain calm.

"I'm just afraid," she says. She's crying and coughing uncontrollably.

We've entered into a new world. This is not a person who cries or says they are afraid. This is my big sister Cindy. Bastion of success. Billionaire with a B. Armed with her constantly ringing phone, stunning outfits, gift of gab and white TESLA, she used her grit to become a real estate dynamo.

Always in control, she had to win every argument. My dad used to provoke her by saying, "All losers to the back of the bus." Fear of failure fueled her incessant drive.

I remember last Christmas - our grown kids together debating about the state of the nation. A precious moment, but Cindy never sat down. Straightening tablecloths, serving ornate meals on china, she fluttered around making sure everything looked perfect.

She exhausts me. "I'll be there tomorrow, girl. I promise. Just try to rest. Love you." I hang up and pull my Suzuki back out onto the open road..

"Fucking Cindy." I mumble inside the plastic visor of my helmet. "Now I have to be nice to you?"

I'm pissed off. She has not been nice to me. She has condescended, ignored and minimized me. Like last week, when I drove out to her house. I always take North Avenue west from Chicago,

observing the energetic changes. Approaching my sister's 14 foot, smiling face on a Remax billboard, I know I am close. I begin to feel unmoored.

Cindy, my niece Katy and I sit in her backyard, surrounded by flowers and a pond with koi swimming lazily back and forth. A gifted gardener, this is her sacred space. I'm playing them an archived recording of a storytelling show my husband and I produce.

"I'm so excited about Soul Stories Live! People from all over the world are tuning in. I love working with the tellers." I say.

"That's so cool, Aunt Victoria. I know it's helping people understand each other too." Katy smiles.

"Yes, girl. Yes. I'm so glad you get it." I say. She is perceptive, a healer by nature.

My sister, who's been weeding this whole time grunts, "Good job, Vic." Then she turns to Katy and says, "Don't be like your Aunt Victoria and wait until you're 55 to finally be successful."

Did my sister really just use my life path as a cautionary tale?

Wow. Unbelievable and total crap. I've been successful all along.

1. I'm true to myself.
2. My work makes a difference.
3. I've supported my family for 20 years as a creative entrepreneur.

Wait. Why am I quantifying my choices?

Moving through space, I pop Jamiroquai into my headphones and try to forget about everything Cindy. I need to restore my peace. I speed up, balancing my 400 pound Suzuki against the pressure of the wind on my chest.

When I get home, I walk up the rickety back stairs and open the wood door to the kitchen.

My favorite Eleanor Roosevelt quote is on the fridge, "Do the thing you think you can not do."

"You can do this, Victoria. Detach from drama. Just be present."

I light incense, lay on the wood floors and meditate.

Centering myself, I try to envision a reality where we can find some common ground, but I can't.

Whatever. We're different. Me with my bi-racial family and BLM demonstrations. Her with her homogeneous world of straightened hair and gleaming teeth. Oil and water. She is the yin to my yang. I've kept her at arm's length forever, showing up for obligatory gatherings and trying not to go off. She is my only living relative.

This arrangement was working fine, until fate drew us together.

After months of weird symptoms that kept getting worse, she has been diagnosed with a rare illness. Me, my sister, her husband, and 3 daughters sit crammed together in a stuffy exam room at the University of Chicago Hospital. We balance laptops on our legs, take furious notes and try to understand.

Channeling the drive down on Lake Shore Drive, my hair frizzed out, I stare at my cowboy boots and smile.

The oncologist looks at his chart, "Without aggressive treatment, you have 6 months to live. You have a rare disease called Cardiac Amyloidosis.

"Can you spell that please?" I say.

"Cardiac Amyloidosis. Protein deposits are clogging up her heart. Renegade blood cells are replicating in her bone marrow." He educates us.

"So what's the cure?" my brother-in-law Tony asks.

"There is no cure. Only some treatments to perhaps buy more time." he continues.

My God. I try not to freak out. Hit from all sides, my sister is out of breath. She keeps coughing.

He asks about her symptoms. Cindy begins to cry.

"I just get these strange waves of energy all over my body. I don't want to eat. I wake up 3-4 times a night, covered in sweat." She's holding herself in a ball. "I'm so cold."

"It's ok, mom," Katy says, "we'll figure this out."

I hand my sister a box of tissues from across the room. I'm sitting on a folding chair, shoved into the corner. Cindy sits on the bed, surrounded by her daughters. At 95 pounds, she looks tiny and sad. Her wrinkled sweatshirt has a stain on it. Her hair is pulled back with a scrunchie. I realize I've never seen her with stains or scrunchies.

I want to stroke her hair or comfort her, but we are too far apart.

My feelings are all over the place. How did I get tasked with supporting my nemesis? I've been given Medical Power of Attorney. I will do what needs to be done. I was raised to be there for family.

"So chemotherapy every Tuesday for the next three months. If you stabilize and gain some weight, we may do stem-cell therapy in December." he continues. We are all looking down this dark tunnel, together.

Then it hits me. This is not about me. I can't react to all the toxic things that will be said and done.

Tectonic shifts are happening. My ball-buster of a sister is out of her element. She, the one who kept the Oak Brook Macy's open way past closing time because she was looking for that perfect pair of shoes.

"Yes, Mrs Banks, no problem Mrs Banks, take your time." the saleswoman said, as all the lights around the shoe department shut down and we stood, cloaked in a private cone of service.

Never mind that the saleswoman probably had to get home to relieve her babysitter. Cindy's American Express Centurion Card was like a key to an elite kingdom.

But none of this matters now. There is no status in the cancer ward.

Watching her, I go through the grief cycle, yet again: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.

I'm grieving for her, and for myself.

Breathe, Victoria, breathe. Have grace. Find that point of humanity.

I know I will be 'on call' for doctor's appointments, facilitating hard conversations, and being present for late night moments of terror.

Be big, Victoria! Get over yourself.

I just want to go home to my husband. I long to lay on our hardwood floors and let Acid Jazz music wash over me. I want him to hold me.

We all go to the cafeteria to talk over burritos and Starbucks.

My brother-in-law says, “Even though that doctor was Indian, he seemed smart and his English was pretty good”

“Tony! Don’t be ignorant.” I snap. “He’s the head of Oncology.”

I’m doing one point meditation, staring at my Om ring.

I’d rather be anywhere but here.

“Well, I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin, so all of this is new for me,” he says.

“THIS” is the University of Chicago Hospital system. A virtual hell for somebody like him, where black and brown folks from all over the planet work together with white folks to heal and get healed.

I keep asking myself, “How will I go through this process with these people? How will I be open, kind, generous and free - with them?”

Our mom died from complications due to MS. We’ve been down the incurable illness road before. This next chapter will include overwhelming feelings and a need to depend on others, but nuance and powerlessness are not the purview of the uber-successful.

This is a foreign language to them. I will try to escort them into what’s next.

My sister is sick, so I try not to judge her. And then - I try - again.

So much trying.

She is picking at her burrito and everyone is begging her to eat.

I read my notes to the group. I suggest we schedule who will drive her and sit with her during chemo.

The duality of this undertaking paralyzes me. I know these people. They will yell and throw their weight around. What a shit show.

I can see it now. Tethered to an IV, wishing they could tip the nurse to get her to move faster. Trying to sell houses to the hospital staff. Giving everyone business cards and smiling like Cheshire cats. Real estate is their family business. It's what they do. It's who they are.

Fortunately, they have many connections and are calling in favors left and right. She is getting fast-tracked to see specialists and has the money to cover massive medical bills. It could be worse.

But for her disease there is no cure, only remission. It's a game of time and she has little.

This is NOT how my sister wants to spend her winter. She wants to sit by the pool at her Arizona house, ski in Tahoe or visit her timeshare in Thailand. She wants to reap the benefits of her hard work. This I understand.

For a brief moment I see how we are both tenacious. We are matriarchs. We are members of a clan of spitfire women who know how to handle adversity. This is our legacy, after all.

My big sister is trying to navigate this terrifying, vulnerable space of not knowing. This may be her biggest challenge yet.

Ironically, this is my strong point: living in the gray area and jumping into the unknown. My quiet power is needed here.

Looking around the table, I see bags under everyone's eyes. For once, nobody is checking their phones.

I put my arm around her. "It's going to be ok, Cin, it's going to be ok."

My role in all of this becomes clear. I will be who I have always been - the one who feels, who listens, who iterates and creates. I will bring beauty into chaos.

I will try to move past our differences and forgive her. Ironically, I may learn how to respect and understand my nemesis. Because then, and only then, will I be able to say goodbye.