

Being Shaye

You do not necessarily notice her, but you know she is *always* there. She is there when the burden is too heavy to bear alone. She appears when you stumble and momentarily lose your balance; with a gentle steadying hand on your elbow, an assuring smile and those deep sparkling blue eyes, she beckons you to walk on just a little further with her, perhaps for just a little longer. She is by your side.

And you think you catch a shimmering wispy glimpse of her when you plunge headlong into the deepest and darkest recesses of your insecurities, your fears, and your unspeakable anxieties. Later, back safely in *this* world, you seem to recall that someone was there holding a torch. She was just a few steps in front of you, patiently illuminating the path back home.

But it was not always that way. And we do not know just how she came to be precisely who she is---although, her friends will tell you that they cannot remember a time when she was anything less. There was, of course, a raucous multigenerational childhood lived among the towering redwoods and the gentle sea breezes of northern California, replete with soccer practices on warm September sun-kissed afternoons. As a goaltender, you learn quickly to anticipate what others will do, and more important, what they may *fail* to do! The goaltender is the last line of defense, the quintessential catcher in the rye. Failure is an option---for others of course---but not the goalie. Isn't she always there to plug the hole, fill the gap, repel the thrust?

Her maternal grandparents puzzle over the headstrong young woman. She tells them flatly that it is unacceptable, *at any age*, to use slurs and demeaning characterizations of others, and that *she* will not tolerate it any longer in the home. The laurels of reaching an advanced age do not entitle anyone to bigotry. Grudgingly, and sometimes without even knowing it, they eventually acquiesce.

The tragic and pointless death of a close friend hit by a drunk driver was one of many traumas of her youth. Imagine the look of bewilderment and consternation that passes from brother to mother to grandfather around the dining room table when she announces that if she *ever* catches *any* of them attempting to drive after drinking, that she will in no uncertain terms phone the police and provide

their license plates, auto descriptions and destination. The awkward silence is broken only by her granny's fork coming to rest abruptly in the mashed potatoes. Her mother pauses in midbite to remember that her daughter has never been anything less---has never been anything less than passionate in support of her beliefs.

But who cares for the caregiver? Who catches the catcher in the rye?

Her perfect afternoon is spent roaming along the seashore. Perched atop an old weathered piece of driftwood she digs her toes into the sand and lets the surf carry in memories. Like so many seashells scattered along the beach, she picks up each memory and turns it over in her mind. She examines every feature and recalls what it meant, and she ponders what it *now* means to her, here alone with the sea on this idyllic breezy afternoon. Seconds blend into minutes, and the minutes get lost in the hours that pass. As the tide slowly rolls out to sea, so does each memory safely wrapped with fresh thoughts, and fortified for its long journey until it returns once more borne by the waves on some other day.

Once, the ocean was not so kind and gentle to her; but it was still her caregiver. She was surfing with her uncle. He is a carefree soul who loves the water, and he knows the swells and rocky secrets of the California coast like the characters of a favorite dogeared novel. They paddled out strenuously against the surf. He knew *just* the place where the large gentle swells suddenly begin to lift their crests high toward the azure blue sky. But on the way out this day, the coastal breeze had suddenly freshened and veered into alignment with the swells. It coaxed the crests to even greater heights. And she began to fear that perhaps she would be crushed by these mushrooming towers of rising water. They started to appear all around her. In this moment of dread and uncertainty, she saw the unmistakable shiny gray fin cutting through the slope of a crest ahead. In that instant she thought of what it would mean to her mother back on the shore if she did not return. From somewhere within herself, and certainly with the help of the ocean around her, she summoned the strength and determination to stand up on the board and ride those chaotic water towers, careening back toward the shore. Weaving in and out of the pipelines, she knew she must not fall.

On shore after the tempestuous ride of the sea valkyrie, her mother expresses astonishment at the surfing skills of her only daughter. She wonders aloud just

how Shaye came to be *that* accomplished. Why do parents miss so much of children growing up? With the adrenaline slowly subsiding, Shaye gives her mom a knowing hug and shrugs it off with the apparently implausible explanation that the ocean probably just brought her in! But in her heart, she knows that it *really* did. Mother and daughter *love*---but do not always *like*---each other. In their relationship, they are both the most perfectly matched competitors and the thickest pair of tricksters and merrymakers.

Back at the seashore on her perfect day, she overtakes a group of her friends from school. They all wander along, join in laughter, catch up on unimportant happenings and listen to very loud music. They make sand angels, sing silly songs, tease one another, and sometimes just sit in silence until the glowing red orb of the sun sinks slowly into the distant Pacific. Extinguished. And, as if on cue, the breeze gently and inexorably swings seaward for the night.

It is an over-used cliché attributable to no one apparently---although some like to erroneously give credit to Oscar Wilde---that we should all be ourselves because everyone else has been taken. Or, there is the “be yourself unless you can be a unicorn, then be a unicorn.” But in a more serious moment, I find myself thinking that if a few more of us could be Shaye perhaps, just maybe, those who labor on each day with affliction, doubt and worry, might all receive just a little more of the care that they so richly deserve.