

BLUE EIGHTEEN

Artist Statement

Ten years ago, a colleague in Seattle who I had never met reached out wanting to understand a technology I had helped deploy nationally. We exchanged emails, discovered a shared sense of humor, and developed an easy professional rapport.

Then she disappeared.

Six or seven months later I learned she was back at work and we reconnected. Our professional relationship quickly became a friendship. Around Christmas that year, she told me why she had disappeared: after a breakup, she had attempted suicide and spent weeks in the hospital recovering. I remember knowing I was at a crossroads: I could back away because she scared me, or I could stand with her.

I stayed.

Over the next several years we became what we both called best friends. She was beautiful, intelligent, profane, hilarious, lonely, loving, manipulative, generous and extraordinarily volatile. I learned that despite her hospitalization and apparent recovery, suicidal ideation remained part of her life. I also learned that caring deeply about her demanded accepting responsibilities I never anticipated: welfare checks, an involuntary hospitalization and round-trip drives to Seattle to ensure she didn't lose her health insurance.

I sometimes wondered, and certainly my family wondered: Why am I doing this?

I knew I had made a commitment, but it was to something I hadn't realized would be so overwhelming or induce such a sustained period of crisis.

Fortunately, I had help: Bailey, her Bichon Frise. From time to time she'd plead with me to find him a home so she could end her pain. I knew she wouldn't abandon Bailey, so I refused. Her fidelity to that little dog was sometimes the only anchor keeping her alive. He gave her purpose and became a safe vessel for her enormous capacity to love. I believe that between the two of us we helped keep her alive.

That's pretty intense.

About two years after meeting her, I asked permission to write her story. She said yes.

But then something unexpected happened.

I didn't write her story.

The suicide attempt was real. The family estrangement was real. The childhood sexual abuse was real. Bailey was real. But there was no road trip, no Andre, no daughter's wedding, no necklace made from baby teeth and no blue eighteen. There was simply an incredible character, grounded in love, who wouldn't leave my imagination.

And as the script evolved, I became interested in something larger: What does it cost to stay beside someone who needs you when staying is emotionally exhausting and there is no promise of hope? If my friend had died, I think I would have been devastated.

Instead, she found new strength.

Andre is entirely fictional. He enters Beth's life carrying his own grief and guilt, and what develops between them isn't romance but something more fundamental: two damaged people discovering

another human being willing to remain present. It's a unique and maybe not even very healthy friendship.

But it works.

Blue Eighteen deals with suicide, sexual abuse and estrangement, but it's funny and moving and everything in between. Just like Beth. Humor is how Beth and Andre communicate and sometimes how they survive. I locked them in a truck to explore part of the harsh American landscape and the landscape of the wounded, with a few Elvis songs, melting ice cream, prairie dogs, absurdity and moments of genuine joy.

Then they get to the wedding.

Beth finally tells the truth she has carried for decades but isn't rewarded with redemption or absolution. Instead, her daughter simply asks her to stay.

The real story has an epilogue.

Today my friend has moved away from Seattle, mastered a challenging new career, bought a house and found some peace with her family. Bailey died, but she loves a new dog now. She's avoided dangerous men, and in a recent conversation she was funny and smart and lovable.

And we talked about the future, not the past.

Blue Eighteen is about friendship and hope and staying. We can't fix the people we love or guarantee their futures. But sometimes we can stand beside them long enough for them to discover a future.