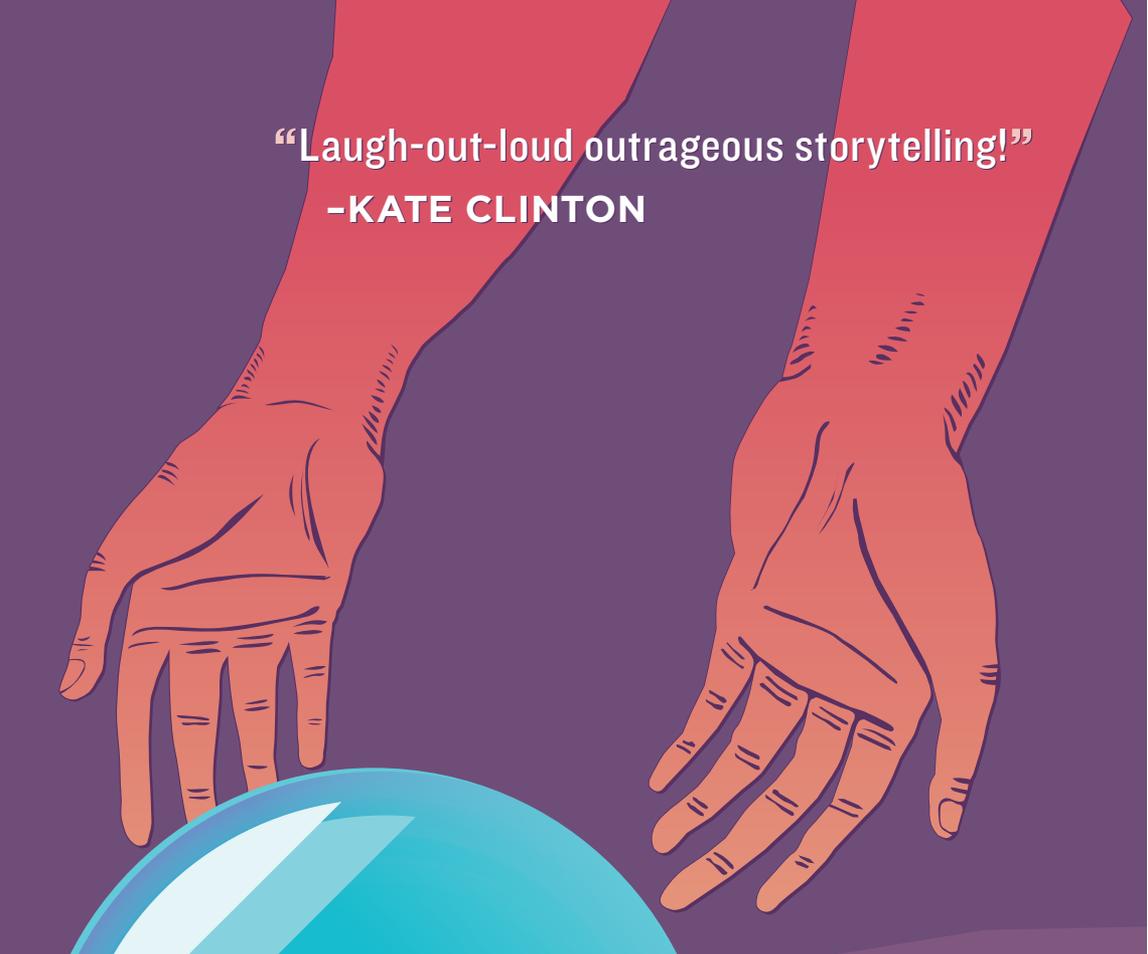


“Laugh-out-loud outrageous storytelling!”

-KATE CLINTON



FREAK
of **nurture**

essays and stories by

KELLI DUNHAM

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lucky. There are so few people in the world who have been loved by someone the way I have been loved by you.”

Heather had great support in Portland and so I did too. But while I knew I didn’t have the option of completely falling apart, I could feel pieces of me breaking off in the brittleness of thinking of life without her.

We were at her favorite Whole Foods when she left for another aisle without telling me. When she returned I was crying.

“I couldn’t find you,” I explained in response to her expression of consternation.

She made silent eye contact for a long moment.

“Were you thinking that one day you’ll come here and you really won’t be able to find me?”

I nodded, quietly sobbing now.

She thought.

“When I’m dead you won’t be at the natural foods store buying organic produce. You’ll be back at Safeway picking up \$1.99 hot dogs.”

She took my hand and we finished shopping.

Snowballs and Snoopy

We started with home hospice after the New Year. The hospice nurses made everything easier, but I think we confused them a little bit. On the afternoon they were coming to do intake, there had been a rare Portland snow and it was very wet. It was the kind of sticky white stuff that makes perfect snowballs.

Heather was outside smoking, I was attempting to shovel the sidewalk in front of our house with a broom. When I walked past our car, I scooped up a handful of snow.

Heather said, “I know you aren’t about to start a snowball fight, boi.”

I countered with a question. “Um, am I?”

I was thinking furiously because I couldn't figure out if it was an awesome idea or a horrible one. I lobbed a test snowball in her general direction.

She responded by grabbing two huge handfuls of snow and putting them down the neck of my thermal, and when I tried to run away she pelted me with more snow, hastily grabbed from the roof of our car.

I ran across the street and threw snowballs at her from behind the safety of a neighbor's SUV.

Just then the hospice nurse drove up. We both adopted a very innocent demeanor. It is entirely possible that I whistled.

The hospice nurse said "Are you all...were you...I mean...was this? Are you guys having a snowball fight?"

Heather sniffed. "A person's got a little stage four ovarian cancer and all of sudden she's not supposed to be having snowball fights? What's it gonna do, kill me?"

The hospice nurse nodded and said "That is a very good point."

We all went inside and I took a moment to go downstairs and collect myself. Heather and I couldn't look at each other for the rest of the visit without breaking into giggles.

We confused the hospice folks a fair amount.

One of the most effective tension breakers in our house was me, doing the Snoopy Dance. It started originally as part of my stand-up act. Because I went to a fundamentalist Christian high school that labeled dancing as "the devil's work," I never learned how to dance socially, and so everything I knew about dancing I learned from watching the kids in *Peanuts*. Arms straight out, hopping off alternating feet, head turning from side to side.

I started doing it for Heather when she needed cheering up and somehow it became a strip tease. Not really an erotic dance, but I did take off all my clothes. When Heather's sisters were visiting, she asked me to do the Snoopy Dance

for them and I reminded her that it was a strip tease number. She shrugged. “You’re a comic, improvise.”

So I did the Snoopy Dance for Heather’s sisters, incorporating various props from around the living room and not taking off any of my clothes. I was running out of moves when I hit upon around the idea of inserting a random scene from *Cats* halfway through. Since I’ve never seen *Cats*, I simply improvised, making cat pawing motions and then, spying a Sharpie on the living room table, drew cat whiskers on my face.

Once the Snoopy Dance was over, Heather went upstairs to take a nap. Somehow the conversation with her sisters turned to the subject of microwaving peeps. They had never seen the carnage that results when a peep is microwaved, which seemed impossible and even a bit sad to me, so I showed them. We became quite taken with the idea of microwaving various sugary treats and since it was just after Christmas the house was full of them. Soon we had a paper plate full of Jujubes, a sour apple Now and Later, cherry jelly slices, and red hots in various states of melting.

Forty minutes later as I was cleaning up the mess from our kitchen science experiments, I heard a knock on the door. Forgetting both the cat whiskers I had drawn on my face, and the fact that I held a painting pallet of melted junk food, I answered.

It was the hospice nurse.

Heather had started on a central IV pump for pain medications that week, so I sat down with the nurse to go over some of the details of flushing the pump, checking the tubes for patency, and administering meds. If she thought it strange to have a discussion with another nurse about the nursing procedures for end of life care with someone who had cat whiskers drawn on their face with a marker, she gave no outward indication.

Although I can't help thinking she went back to the her office and said, "those queers, they're sweet, but when they're sad, they have some *awfully* interesting grief and caregiving rituals."

The Decision

The next few weeks grew steadily more difficult for Heather. She had unremitting pain that continued even when we were giving her intravenous pain medication around the clock. She had also been essentially unable to eat and many nights we were up until sunrise, sometimes with hospice present, trying to get her symptoms under control.

Physician assisted suicide is legal in Oregon and Heather had already begun the paperwork to obtain the meds to help her hasten her death if she got to that point. One night in early February, I was sleeping curled up beside her when I heard her talking on the phone.

"Yeah, you better get here as quick as you can. I've had enough. I'm doing it tomorrow." I waited until she finished the phone call and then poked her with the very tip of my pinkie.

"Hey, my Queen," I said, continuing to poke her lightly, "when a person decides they are going to use assisted suicide to hasten their death, they're supposed to tell the person sleeping beside them *before* they start telling the world."

"Ooooh that's right," she said, almost mocking me, "I'm sorry. I forgot that was the procedure." And then kissed me, open mouthed, for a moment. And then we didn't say anything more. Because when you're in the middle of a hot kiss, you don't stop to talk about the fact that in a few short hours the person you're kissing will be gone from you forever. You just enjoy the hot kiss.

We looked at each other for a moment and then I got out of bed, put on some water for tea, and started helping Heather make her phone calls.

Nor is any Disney song.
Nor the soundtrack from the movie *Beaches*.

Planning the Funeral

Heather is the kind of person who wants every detail of her funeral planned in advance. When we are finished, I am crying.
She hugs me and says, "It will be no fun, when I'm done."
And then adds, "How's that for Dr. Suess meets Elizabeth Kubler Ross?"

All These Tests

You know the dream you have, the dream where you're panicking because you're at school and you have a test, but you haven't been to class all semester?
I feel like that a lot.
Like all of life is a test I didn't study for.
Heather died at home, and once the hospice nurse declared the death, I called the funeral director to come pick her body up.
Three hours later they still hadn't showed.
I called again.
The funeral director said "Oh were you done with the body?"
I stuttered. "What. We. Um. Oh. Um."
What were we supposed to be doing with the body?
My friend Stacy said "We kept expecting the grown ups to show up."
Turns out we are the grown ups.

I Have the Raw Material For A Practical Joke But No Ideas For Completion

What am I supposed to do with all these Amnesty International return address labels

emblazoned
with my dead lover's name?

Everyone Cries on the A Train

I cry a lot on the A train, but, I am noticing, so does everyone else.

I am an aggressive crier though.

If someone stares, I say, "What, ya never saw a bulldyke cry in public before?"

And then add, "Well stick around, because there's about 20 more minutes just like this."

I Am Visiting My Grief Counselor

I am visiting my grief counselor at the Cancer Resource Center. Her services are free because Heather died of cancer.

If Heather had been hit by a bus, I guess I would be paying out of pocket.

I am sobbing. For a very long time.

My grief counselor says, "It doesn't seem like you are having any trouble accessing your emotions."

Free or not, sometimes I want to punch my grief counselor in the head.

The Tragicomic Odyssey

A.K.A. The Year I Stopped Getting Invited to Parties

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: I know who you are Kelli Dunham. I am approaching you in this social situation because stand up comics often make humorous comments in casual conversation. My life is hard sometimes and I was hoping you would make me laugh. Also I would like to engage in vaguely flirtatious banter with you because of your status as a Z list celebrity in the LGBT community. Meaning, of course, you have many friends on Facebook but no significant TV credits.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. 200,000 people died in the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE) I am approaching you in this social situation because stand up comics often make humorous comments in casual conversation. My life is hard sometimes and I was hoping you would make me laugh.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. My girlfriend was diagnosed with cancer last November.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE, GLANCING UNEASILY FROM SIDE TO SIDE) I am approaching you in this social situation because stand up comics often make humorous comments in casual conversation. My life is hard sometimes and I was hoping you would make me laugh.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. Eighty-five percent of people with the type of cancer my girlfriend had are completely cured by chemotherapy. My girlfriend developed a reaction to the chemotherapy and died.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (LONG SILENCE) I am approaching you in this social situation because stand up comics often make humorous comments in casual conversation. My life is hard sometimes and I was hoping you would make me laugh.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. Most people are saved by chemotherapy, but my girlfriend died because of it.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE)

KELLI: Sometimes people find irony humorous.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE, THEN THE SOUND OF CRICKETS)

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. Thanks to the lawless military industrial complex, our environment is very toxic and dangerous. My last girlfriend also had cancer.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE) I am approaching you in this social situation because stand up comics often make humorous comments in casual conversation. My life is hard sometimes and I was hoping you would make me laugh.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. My last girlfriend also died. She used the assisted suicide provisions of the Oregon law to take her own life because she was in intractable anguish.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE)

KELLI: I called my most recent girlfriend my miracle love because I thought I would never love anyone after my other girlfriend died. She developed, and then died from the same disease my first girlfriend had. Having two partners

who die of cancer within a five-year period is an extremely statistically unlikely negative situation, which is kind of the opposite of the concept of a miracle.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (VERY LONG SILENCE)

KELLI: Sometimes people find irony humorous.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (VERY LONG SILENCE)

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. I have a friend who was trapped for six days in a collapsed building after the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE)

KELLI: Both her feet had to be amputated because of the substandard medical care she received in a field hospital operated by the United Nations.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE)

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. Have you ever seen maggots in an open wound?

RANDOM PARTY GOER: (SILENCE)

KELLI: I did not mean that as a rhetorical question.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: I just remembered I have something important I need to go do.

KELLI: I am sorry your life is hard sometimes. (PAUSE)
I hope I have made you laugh.

RANDOM PARTY GOER: I just remembered I have something important I need to go do.

KELLI: My name is Kelli Dunham. I am a very funny stand up comic. Hey where are you going?