

Mortality stirs the self-absorbed

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was a glorious Sunday two weeks ago. One of those exquisite autumn days where the sky lights up in a halo and the air is crisp. I awoke to the sounds of birds and the brilliance of a blood-red poinsettia tree under the window, setting the green hills on fire.

Although all the loveliness crossed my mind, I didn't have time to ponder. I was in a rush. A terrible rush. I had slept in. We were due to leave for a luncheon party at midday and, as is customary among my friends, we were asked to bring a dish.

I had been too busy the day before to wrap my mind around the lunch. Now I'd slept in and was starting the day in the same fluff as the last: preoccupied, consumed and completely unaware of the subtleties of the world around -- a way of life I had hoped I'd left behind in the city.

Time was slipping through the hour glass, so I decided to go for simplicity. Instead of the complex Thai dish I was planning to make, I placed the prawns I'd bought on to a large plate amid avocados, lettuce leaves and a simple, lime-soy dipping sauce.

But I was still in a rush because we all needed showers, hair needed to be washed and dried, and the trip was a good hour's drive.

The morning became peppered with familiar cries of "Come on, we're late", "Get ready", "I told you to put on ...", "Where is my ..." as three people collided along corridors and over sinks.

Finally in the car the screaming stopped. But the tension didn't. Though we were driving through some of the most lush, exquisite rainforest in the world, I was barely able to enjoy a second of it due to the ticking of the clock. We were to be there at 1pm. It was 12.30pm with another hour of driving before us.

"Move, move!" I grumbled uselessly to the car in front, which was stuck on 60km/h in a one-lane 100km/h zone. "C'mon, you mongrel," we grizzled together, as a truck spluttered and puffed its way up the hilly incline at 20 km/h. "It's your fault we're late," we bickered with each other along the magnificent ravine.

Eventually we arrived at our friends' house, a Balinese-style retreat built into a mountain, smelling of sweet timber and exotic worlds. I took a deep, euphoric breath before moving on with the show.

Even now there was no time to savour the moment. Having arrived late, I had to get my dish ready, everything unwrapped, poured out of old coffee jars, and laid out on the table.

"This is Edward," said the host, introducing me to a tall and handsome guest as I stood shaking lettuce into the kitchen sink. "He's been reading you for years and has wanted to meet you for a long time," she grinned, as the stranger held out a hand.

I looked into the eyes of Edward and found a gentle place. But there was no time to linger. I still had to get our wine open, the plate arranged, and my child into a warmer jacket. "Nice to meet you. I'll just get myself organised and we can have a chat," I said, as breathless as I ever was in my old city life.

Edward nodded and walked outside and on to the balcony, which towered over jagged rocks below. I reached for a glass of wine to help myself chill out.

I could hear him from the kitchen telling a group of friends about himself. "It's been a hard few years. But I'm finally getting my life together. I'm finally feeling happy," he was saying.

And suddenly there was screaming. "Edward! Edward!" I ran outside to see my friends hanging over the balcony, looking down into the ravine.

Edward was lying on the rocks. He looked broken. His arms were flayed, his body curled in a weird foetal position. "Call a doctor!" his girlfriend was screaming as several people went charging down the stairs to his body.

"Is he dead?" someone screamed as a doctor friend was putting his hand over Edward's mouth.

"No. He's breathing," the doctor yelled, but we remained rigid with shock.

"What happened?" I asked. "He was telling us this story when he just passed out and fell backwards over the edge," said a startled friend.

Time had stopped. We all stood paralysed, waiting. There were infinite possibilities: brain damage, spinal damage, internal bleeding. His life was hanging in the balance, and we were balanced with him in that mysterious, precarious world between life and death.

Slowly he opened one eye. Then another. With agonising slowness he moved one toe, then another, one finger, then another. We were transfixed, felled by fear, swimming in a place where everything moved in slow motion. Everything was suddenly irrelevant, except whether Edward could move his leg.

As we watched life's sideshow, the colours around suddenly seemed more intense. The trees so painfully beautiful. I noticed the food on the table, a celebration of living. Would Edward be enjoying another meal?

"Life is so fragile," said a woman leaning over my shoulder. I turned to her and we gazed into each other's eyes, the terrible truth of mortality passing between us.

By the time I looked down again, Edward was sitting up. Within another space of time, he was walking to a room in the house where he would spend a few hours before going home. Apparently he was diabetic and had ingested something he shouldn't have. But he would miraculously make a full recovery -- not one broken bone -- before leaving.

Perhaps it was the last, ironic words Edward spoke before his fall that so punctured my soul that afternoon. Like a slogan I once read on a toilet wall: "You finally get your shit together. And then you die."

We all spent the afternoon in a much quieter, slower place, watching the sky turn violet then crimson, then a dark, brooding blue.

Sitting on Balinese cushions, drinking wine, our children and loved ones -- whom we take for granted in the rush of day-to-day life -- curled around our bodies, we relished each second, contemplating how marvellous it is to simply be alive.

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