

Boiling Oil

ELENA DENECOCHEA



WRITER'S COMMENT: I wanted to share my experience with bereavement in an essay that could resonate with the reader. I have often found it to be a disheartening experience when I fail to relate to my peers. It is vital that we talk about the reality of loss so that we can hold space for one another. Death taught me compassion and writing taught me how to share experiences that are too often buried from society. When Dr. Azevedo handed us the opportunity to share a profile essay with our peers, I saw this assignment as my window into sharing loss under the premise of social justice. Grief has an interesting way of pulling you under when you least expect it to. It comes up in effortless waves. While I was making plantains, memories with my fiancé flooded me. Plantains allowed me to describe the disease my fiancé endured known as sickle cell anemia, and through the re-telling of his illness I uncovered our shared experience and my own.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The first assignment in my spring 2020 UWP 104J: Writing in Social Justice class was a profile essay. With much of society closed due to shelter-in-place orders, I hoped a profile essay that allowed students to write about a familiar social justice topic of their choice would allow them to craft an informative and impactful piece. While there were several profiles that were better than any I had read before, none were as moving and skillfully written as Elena's piece about her partner's battle with sickle cell anemia. Her choice to write the essay to her partner allows readers a glimpse into their relationship and "the violent red blood cell disorder" that would have been otherwise hard to capture. Her use of plantains, for example, excellently describes the disease and the bond between Elena and her partner. In total, the essay stands as a testament to their relationship and is a call to action for the medical community and pharmaceutical compa-

nies to better serve those they purport to help.

—*Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program*

The first time I ever boiled oil, we were frying plantains. You were born in Panama and spent many days teaching me about your life, your culture, your religion, and your language. We poured the honey colored canola oil into a thin pan on the stove top and set the flames to life. You grabbed a long curved knife and cut off both ends of the plantain, and then began to slice it deep enough to break open the skin and cut a line down the side. When you handed it over to me I peeled open the plantain from the inside moving out. I wonder how something that looked like a longer version of a banana could smell so earthy, could lack any sweetness. The plantain is a bruised yellow color on the skin when it's ripe. On the inside it's white with a yellow tint; it moves off skin like butter. We cut round slices into a bowl together without a chopping board. You sprinkled salt onto them and shook the bowl. The oil was boiling in the pan and I was afraid I'd get burned in the process. You moved fast with your hands and spooned each handful of plantain slices into the oil, helping each piece float to avoid sticking to the pan, and flipping them to cook evenly. As they turned golden like French fries, you spooned them onto a plate with a paper towel to soak the oil from beneath. Then you took the salt and sprinkled them once more. The taste was surreal, a mixture of salty and sweet, like brown sugar burned to make creme brulée, but instead the texture underneath resembled a starchy potato. We paired them with rice and lentils, tilapia fish, steak, and sometimes salami chips. We enjoyed them like fries.

That was Spring of 2018. The food wasn't like that in the hospital. You had sickle cell anemia, you were 24 years old, and you were afraid of dying. But the way you lived it didn't seem like that, you drove fast and you wanted us to have a baby, and if it were up to you we would have been married in a courthouse. You didn't have time and you didn't want to wait for life to happen—instead, you moved fast and life couldn't catch up to you. After plantains, you took Percocet for pain, hydroxyurea and folic acid for your red blood cells. Sickle cell anemia is a violent red blood cell disorder; most people diagnosed this early live until their forties. The red blood cells are shaped like plantain slices, thin and round and full of oxygen, moving swiftly through your veins to deliver oxygen to your vital organs. Your blood cells were shaped like plantains before you slice them,

sickle-shaped, carrying less oxygen and prone to causing blockages in your veins—sticky like a plantain stuck to the bottom of a pan of boiling oil. The E.R. was a regular occurrence for us, you would wake me up at all hours of the night when the pain in your arm, chest, or leg began to build up. I drove fast and slept in the chair next to your bed, holding your hand as a nurse pumped you with drugs to attempt to control the pain. The pain of oxygen being blocked through the sickle cells in your veins. You once told me it felt like someone was tightening a rope around your limbs to the point where you could scream or cry. Sometimes the nurses thought you were a drug addict because you asked for more Dilaudid for the pain and Benadryl for the itching. There is a reason why people of color die at higher rates in hospitals; racism demands big pharmaceutical companies pump you with drugs instead of treatments, and then treat you like a drug addict when you're experiencing pain. I will never forget when the nurse demanded you to say your pain was a four, when you told her multiple times it was a six. Finally you said "okay, four" and I tried to help but you told me it wasn't worth arguing over, you just wanted to sleep. I remember they always forgot to give you warm blankets and water; veins expand with heat and water keeps veins hydrated.

You had professors who wouldn't let you do make-up homework or exams after your hospital emergencies. I started to believe college degrees were only designed for able bodies and minds, without room for disease or disorder. I remember we met with the Dean, after you were hospitalized, and she said it wasn't in her discretion to ask a professor to make accommodations in the syllabus. You didn't want to be a burden, you didn't want to be accommodated, you just wanted to feel like a normal college student. I remember you brought doctor's letters, hospital discharge paperwork, and what was left of your dignity to her office hours. I remember you cried, and we cried, and a couple of days later, between my classes, I received a frightening call. When I arrived, you had already died, and I will never know why. Sometimes, we think it might have been suicide, and I think about how a measure of kindness would have gone a long way. I remember you left tips in every jar we passed by, and I wonder who will leave kindness in everyone's jar, if not you.

Now, it's Spring 2020 and the plantains are not ripe, they are dark green and refuse to peel easily. I burned myself trying to boil the oil in the pan and nothing tasted sweet in the end. Plantains smell like the earth above your coffin, the soil fresh after rain. You died before Thanksgiving

of 2018, before your 25th birthday. Today I am 22 years old, this is almost year two of the spousal and partner loss bereavement group. It's another year of therapy for me, trying to make peace amid the hole of loss. I can't relate to anyone my age anymore. It's important to me that people know who you were, and who you are to me. It's important that you are not another statistic in a medical journal or a coroner report. You are more than a hospital patient and a name on a cemetery bed. You, the love of my life. When you died, people called you a drug addict and they blamed you for dying. People don't understand sickle cell anemia or big pharma. People don't understand that there is no treatment and no cure; that more money is raised for diseases affecting white people. When you were three years old, living in the United States, doctors gave you high doses of Tylenol, in your teens it was morphine, as an adult it was Percocet. Eventually you would run out of options, and eventually organ failure or stroke was in the cards for you; the oil would eventually catch fire. If you were an addict it was because pharmaceutical companies built your dependency for opioids to what is called pain management; they were both the flame and the oil. There weren't enough drugs in the world to take away your pain, there was no cure, and no hope. I miss you every day, and whenever I am making your favorite plantains. It is healing, writing about you, writing about us.