

# George and I

By Danna De Boer

Everyone has a version of me inside them. George has me, but more importantly, I have George. I've been with him since before he was born and I'll be with him when he dies and the time after that won't matter.

I live in George's heart but he doesn't know. He probably wouldn't be too keen on having a little monster living in his heart, but my work is important and I don't get in the way. I'm in here almost all the time holding his heart up when he's too weak to do it himself. Blood flows past me, the muscles pulsate around me, and while he's living and experiencing outside, I'm supporting and giving him strength from within.

Sometimes when things are good, his heart stays up by itself and I get to leave. While he's sleeping, I carefully crawl up his throat, gently pry his mouth open, and exit.

He's changed a lot throughout the years. When George was a little boy, he had fleshy cheeks and dark brown hair that hung over his face while he slept. His skin was smooth and his breathing was always regular and he wore navy blue pajamas with astronauts. Years later, he abandoned his boyish haircut and the astronaut pjs. His cheeks lost their round shape and his skin broke out a little, but he was still handsome and he was still George. I wasn't able to leave his heart for a while after that, but when I finally could, he had changed even more. He had a groomed beard and a new haircut and even a woman next to him in bed.

I didn't have to work for a long time. His heart stayed up by itself and all I did was sit inside enjoying his happiness. It surrounded and engulfed me and I was grateful to drown in it. When I left his heart, I was delighted to see pictures of children on his nightstand, a dog on the floor beside his bed, and a sleepy, faint smile on his face.

His heart eventually needed me for structure again, so I went back to holding it up for him. From that point on, the weight of his heart fluctuated from unbearably heavy to joyfully buoyant

and everything in between. I couldn't leave his heart for a long time because he needed me often, and it's been like this for a while until about a month ago.

A month ago something happened. I don't know what it is because I am sure if I leave, his heart will implode. I've labored day and night all month and I've never experienced this kind of weight before. I can tell from it that whatever happened has made him suffer and he's in a lot of pain, and I'm miserable because he is.

His body hasn't been acting right either—I think he's sick. He hasn't been breathing well and sometimes his heart speeds up; other times it seems like the only reason it's still beating is because I'm in there holding it up.

Today has been different though because it's been easy. He's falling asleep and the moment his body goes on autopilot, I have a feeling that it's time to crawl out. Even if I didn't want to, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself; it feels like something somewhere is forcing me out. I haven't left in a while and on my way out I notice he has false teeth, which is new. Once I'm outside, I look up at him.

He still sleeps on his stomach but his skin has cavernous wrinkles and sunspots. There are tears on his pillowcase and a photograph inches from his face. It's a picture of George when he was a young man and he's at the beach. He's in the water up to his calves and he has the most genuine expression of happiness on his face, which would normally delight me, but not today because he fell asleep crying. The woman is in the picture too.

I peek over his shoulder and see that she isn't in bed next to him anymore. The room is completely still except for our breathing and I sit down next to his pillowcase. I'm admiring how happy he is in the photograph and examining how he's changed over the years. His brown hair is now mostly gray and disappearing. Even his eyebrow hairs lost their color and thinned out. These

changes are okay because he's still George, but the bags under his eyes look heavy and make his face dull.

Suddenly, he opens his eyes and sees me sitting right there, inches away from his nose. He's never seen me before because I've always been very careful about getting caught, but he doesn't even seem shocked to see a little heart monster right in front of him. He's breathing soundly and calmly and we're staring at each other.

I've never seen the color of his eyes before. I've never even thought about it, but I'm looking at them now and they're so blue. The whites of his eyes are red and swollen because of the crying, and even though he's looking at me with composure, I can tell he's still in pain.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm pushing myself up and hugging his nose. I'm not in his heart anymore and this is the best thing I can think of that will support him. That will comfort him. I want him to know that everything is okay. He closes his eyes and his breathing slows down until in a few moments, it stops completely.

I sit back down and I look around the room. There are photographs everywhere—framed on the wall, propped up on his nightstand, taped onto his dresser and bookshelf. Pictures of the woman and children, of these children when they're adults with children of their own, various pets and friends and family. In the soft gray light of the room, I'm appreciating all these memories and experiences George had. He got to live to an old age and love and travel and learn because I was inside supporting him the whole time. I feel a bit of sorrow but I'm also grateful because George had a full life.

I remain with his body while somewhere in the stars his soul starts a new adventure. He's taking new forms and going new places and I won't experience any of it with him but it's okay. I did my job and now I can relax for the rest of forever. Time doesn't matter after George.

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