

Art saved *me*. Passing the morning hours at Yale was always the hardest as I agonizingly waited for the day to start, the sun to rise, the rush of doctors to come in like a stampede of chaos, and then to be left with time monotonously ticking away until the night shift of nurses arrived. I was used to waking up and feeling overpowering sadness. That's why as soon as the nurses could rearrange my wires at the break of dawn, I'd hop out of bed with my tubes dangling and leaking and fling myself onto the yoga mat I tucked beside the hospital overbed table. The sooner I could start moving, the less I'd have to think about—or feel.

One morning, my sadness was paralyzing. I didn't want to move at all. But if I couldn't exercise my way to numbness, what was I supposed to do? Just *be* with my feelings? I longed for the safety to actually feel, but Yale was a hotbed of too much uncertainty to even try. But if I ignored these feelings I would only hurt more.

I needed a Plan B before this despair threatened to swallow me whole. Some strategy to cope with emotions that were too big to run from.

I remember the exact moment I painted for the first time. My mom had brought in some cheap art supplies—canvases, a few brushes, and a set of kid craft acrylics with lids to screw off—along with various gadgets, games, and anything else she could find in the lobby gift shop to help us pass the time. For a while, the canvases and paints just sat there, crowded in a corner with the rest of the cluttered distractions. That morning, a solemn feeling of stillness washed over me like pale tint of blue paint. For the first time, even my racing, anxious heartbeat could not drown out my despair. I needed something to hold onto. So I went for the paintbrush, still wrapped in plastic, in the dark of the morning.

*I don't know what I'm doing. but I'm feeling something really strongly, and I can't run from it right now. I am just going to hold this paintbrush and whatever this feeling is, I'm just going to put it into this.*

I remember holding that paintbrush so strongly that my IV was trembling as I pressed down hard on that canvas to drag one smooth wavy line. I don't remember letting go, as the brush dipped from brown to red to blue. What I created was “Singing Tree.”

Nurses who had written me off as the restless manic patient now saw that I had a heart. A quick glance at my medical history should have been enough, but, as I made art, they found compassion for the pain I was going through. And, they really liked my paintings.

Suddenly, creating art became a way to express emotions that were too overwhelming for words. I found my voice again. The Amy I could recognize, who no medical intervention could surgically remove. I used everything in my art—even toilet paper from the hospital bathroom. I painted my trees that I missed; I crafted my inside and outside worlds, bursting with joy and pain, tears and hearts, lightning bolts and flowers.

Each morning before the medical team came in for rounds, I would take out a plastic palette tray and stare at yet another blank canvas, like the answers the doctors were coming up with. I would dip a small paintbrush into that kids' set of paints and paint a brown wavy line—always a call out to my trees to ground me. As the lines thickened, so did their trunks, and my sense of confidence. I could know where to go from here, even if doctors could not.

When I was done, I would put each canvas outside my hospital room. Soon the unit began to catch on. Nurses started walking their patients by my room to see what I had created each day, and having an impact on others through my improvised brushstrokes filled me with unanticipated satisfaction - a meaning. Art was sustaining my aliveness. My life had changed, but my *self* was still vital as ever in whatever colors I dipped my brush in.