

## Wanda

By Barbara Levin

She is wailing ... She is screaming ... Crying ... Slumping to the ground. And what I hear is ... Why did you bring her ... Why did you bring her. I told you I was coming in tomorrow. Why did you do that. Why.

And outside, outside ... It is a beautiful summer night ... Clear, starlit ... that Feeling good weather. Happy weather. It is about 8:30pm. I sit in my office, a place that feels like home to me most days ... actually, think I live there ... Steve rushes in and says she's on terrace, Ms. Barbara ... She's on terrace. I scramble into my shoes, run downstairs ... Jump into his SUV and we ride around the corner. **Shotgun.** Lab coat and all. I have been desperate to find her for a few weeks. I have everyone looking .... But Steve, Steve he told me when he saw. I hear her first ... And then I see her. My Wanda ... She looks like a what she is an addict ... Who is selling herself for money and drugs. ... I recognize her through the shocking make up she is wearing on her face and the "my body is for sale" outfit she is wearing. She, Wanda, was holding court as we drove up. You see, Wanda has a very strong and commanding presence. I believe she sees me, and she begins to cry ... Collapsing in the street ... Why'd you bring her ... Why'd you bring her. She is devastated. She is crumbling ... and people are watching this. They are coming out from everywhere and watching ... drawn to the spectacle like ants to sugar. Children, pimps, mothers, grandmothers, drug dealers, everyone. I hear them murmuring ... Who is that? ... Her mama ... Who is that ... And then I hear people say ... that's Ms Barbara. She looks for people. She will come and get you.

**Everyone knows**, she has been looking for Wanda.

Wanda at this point has totally collapsed into a ball of tears and wailing. The tears streaming down her face has made her stage makeup look like a big confused swirl. I knell down near her and I embrace her in my arms. I sit on the ground and cradle her until she quiets down a bit. And I take her with me ... I become her eyes, her legs, her guide .... A guide hopefully towards another chance for survival.

I am thinking about the Wanda I know ... The Wanda who is a student, a mother, a grandmother, a wife, a friend. A pleaser. The elected president of our student council. One of the strongest and brightest women I know. A leader. I see her as a leader. And for the very first time ... For the very first time, I see Wanda as an addict. Truthfully, it scares me ... It engulfs my being with sadness and pity. I want to cry. I had heard about this ... But this is **my** Wanda ... All the hope I held for her future ... All of that ... I had to re-enforce. She needed me ... And I, I still believed in her. I still had hope and belief in her survival.

And what do I attribute this relapse to. Is it despair. Is it weariness? Is she just tired of everything? Or is it everything ... Just everything. I am thinking it is all that poverty entails. Poverty. Is drug addiction just another obstacle on her path to having a "normal" existence. I

see her struggling towards normalcy. clawing while existing in abstract poverty. A victim of what a caring society has to offer. Part of a population that is both aided and shunned.

My Wanda is present right now in this space in time. Trying ... attempting to attend school, hoping to improve herself ... hoping to earn independence when she completes her training. Hoping to honestly earn her keep ... Claim her dignity. **And it is my hope too** ... I plan that this education she is pursuing is the first step towards pursuing the life she deserves. I fear for her. I fear that she will still need to rely on the system. She will still rely on the system. I see a system that is throwing her that round life preserver. That is, by the way, way way too small ... lacking and too fragile to save her. But still, we, present it to her as an option ... as a gift ... Wrapped in tattered gift wrap ... As an aid to assist her in her survival. To keep her from dying. Dying ... we present all this as the means to an end.

Six months earlier, I was sitting in my little office. Cramped space. I am currently the Student Advisor. Office painted to nurture. I see and hear ...

This is my youngest daughter, Ms. Barbara ... This is Ms. Barbara ... And these are her children, my grands. Wanda was so proud. As proud and loving to her family as you or I. She'd retrieved a relationship with her daughter. Wanda was so proud as she introduced me to her daughter and grandchildren. She knew my big mouth would blurt out accolades about her achievements here at school. And how very proud I was of Wanda. I blurt out ... Your mom is our top student. Did you see her name on the high honor roll chart? Has she shown you're her awards for achievement and attendance ... She routinely receives those awards. Wanda is beaming from the inside out. I instruct Wanda to show them the honor roll posting. I hold her grandchildren in my lap and we laugh together. I warmly embrace each of them goodbye. I am left happy for Wanda. And her family.

Ms Barbara why did you do that ... Why did you come for me. How could you do that. That is dangerous.

I am ok ... I am fine. I can do this Ms. Barbara ... Really really ... I am coming back ... Really!

I know ... but I need you to stop for a second and inhale ... take a look at everything. Through those weary glistening eyes ... And look through the stains of your life and see if you can find your children, grandchildren, yourself. Look at what you can have and who the you are now. Look closely. Even now ... You know the possibilities.

I will ... I will ... I promise you I will.

But I continue ... I feel my words falling like hot coal on her heart ... The embers searing her brain.

Don't promise me ... Don't make a promise to me. Give a chance to your children who keep trying to understand and love you. To those grandchildren of yours that need to have a grandparent. Maybe you can give a chance to your partner who is understanding of your situation and is clawing towards a better life with you. Maybe you can stop promising everyone and do something ... To save yourself. I know YOU can do this.

I know ... I know ... Ms. Barbara.

Or you can just surrender to this life ... It is up to you ...

Wanda that night decided to join a rehab program. She went to the hospital. Eventually they found a bed for her. Eventually she returned to school and excelled. Again ... Top student. Good friend. Great person. Still poverty stricken. Drug/alcohol free.

Again She excelled in her studies. She regained her leadership role in school. You see most of my students understood what Wanda was going through. It was woven into the fabric of their lives. She went begging for money to get an apartment. I spent many days in conference with Wanda and our wonderful job placement counselor trying to secure money and a job for Wanda while she as in school. We tried ... She finally was able to rent a room. She and her partner. They secured that without our help. She was tenacious. She gathered her family in her bosom and did what she could to mother, grandmother and befriend them. She was for the most part happy ... Moving towards her future.

And then, I only saw a smiling and happy Wanda. My Wanda.

Wanda participated in an outpatient rehab program. That participation was private. She never shared any of that experience with me. I only saw her continued struggle to survive school and everyday life. I witnessed her thrive while at school. That is the way she wanted it. I respected her and her wishes.

On another bright and sunny day, Gail enters my office. Hi Ms. Barbara. Classes were tough today ... But you know, I rose to the occasion ... And I, I compliment her on how great and neat she looks in her set of scrubs. Very professional, I say. Professional in appearance, demeanor and knowledge. I tell her that I am proud of her. So proud. And I am ... But I can tell she is making small talk with me right now. I am sensing she has something else she wants to share. She fidgets with the nameplate on my desk ... And looks away ... Then mumbles slowly, quietly ... Wanda has cancer. I just want you to know. Because she didn't tell you and we figured you did not know. And every word Gail uttered was daunting ... Stifling, choking ... I could not speak. I struggled to breath .... It hit me in my core ... In my heart. Gail sensed this. She and all my other students knew what I would feel upon hearing thus news. Gale got up and walked out of my office. And the instant my door closed tears, tears streamed down my face. Once again, someone had the courage to tell me when they saw Wanda in trouble. Someone who knew I needed to know. Because this time ... This time I was the one who was completely

devastated. I was the one wailing and sobbing why? why? ... However my crying and hysteria could only be heard by me. In my heart ... in my mind ... Screaming with sorrow. **Contained** inside of me.

And another thing. I was shocked. Wanda had not told me. She had not shared this with me. I think she wanted to spare me any more grief on her behalf. I hope that was why I wasn't told by her. And later ... Later I called her into my office. And I confronted her about her battle. Once again, I inserted myself into her personal battle. But this time, this time I did not wedge myself into this battle. I respected her wishes.

And it was true.

It was true ... Wanda had become a victim of breast cancer. Poor and critically ill. And I was told by Wanda in a very matter of fact way. That for reasons that were financial in nature, Wanda walked a mile or so each day to and from her treatments ... She did not have carfare. She lived in a world of poverty. But she was fighting to stay alive. She added this battle to all the other battles she was in the midst of. She fought for a better life ... for housing ... for food ... Mess ... She fought for life. Sick yet hopeful she struggled on.

And, she wanted to fight this on her own. She wanted to have the dignity of handling this herself. And I let her. I respected her wishes. I still think she knew my heart was breaking ... Breaking ... And could not stand the strain. I don't know.

I watched her regain her place in school. I watched her rebuild friendships.

However, I do know that she fought in abstract poverty ... while attending and excelling in school ... She fought while eating inferior food ... she fought while trying to keep the lights on ... trying to pay the rent. She fought through all of the stress that poverty brings ... she was a strong woman .... As strong as she could be.

To be honest with you I am not clear as to the day to day activities around Wanda up until the time she became too sick to continue. I saw her come to school and excel academically and socially. I still see her smile and the twinkle that mischievous twinkle she had in her eyes. I saw my Wanda up until the time she vanished and succumbed to cancer.

One of the things about this ordeal still pulls at my heart ... Was discovering that she walked most days to her cancer treatments ... miles ... Before **and** after treatments ... If she felt strong enough. If she was physically strong enough ... If she was mentally strong enough ... If she was spiritually strong enough. If she had one or more of those strengths, she was able to keep walking. It was obvious that she wanted to live. Could I have been that strong if I was in a similar situation. I am a strong woman. But ... I really can't say if I could have been that determined.

There were many cheerleaders for Wanda .... Many. We were an army of encouragers. ... An army. Her family, friends, classmates. All struggling ... All poverty stricken. Sometimes she saw us ... Sometimes we were the sheer drapes she passed through as she went on her journey towards her peace. Mere sheers. We loved her. Admired her.

She kept trying ... she kept trying. And eventually she faded away. The last time we spoke, she presented as a conqueror.

Then ... Then someone enters my office ... Sits down ... Hi Ms. Barbara. You look nice today. My grades are improving ... Nervously she continued to make small talk ... She then edged up to the hot topic ... Ms. Barbara ... Ms. Barbara ... I know you would want to know this ... Wanda has cancer. She has cancer Ms. Barbara ... Cancer. And then she exited my office.

And I ... I closed my office door and wept. Often ... Still I weep for my Wanda ... My Wanda.

However, ... Technically speaking ... According to our equal, helpful, society ... Cancer killed my Wanda ... but I believe that poverty killed her. My heart feels that poverty killed her first ... Cancer was the chaser. Cancer was the period at the end of the sentence that was her life.

I love Wanda. I will always love that wanting child.