Cells

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2014

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

Plans for Revision

This thesis is the precursor to a book I intend to write in the future. Because the current version is incomplete I have included my revision plans to be considered along with this draft.

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I discovered that, if I started my manuscript five years post-cancer, the narrative could be linear. (My cancer experience wouldn't be.) I had a great dream, where I realized the primary (post-cancer) narrative could be told through all my Disneyworld experiences. And through my Disneyworld scenes, I could dive into my cancer experience. (That weekend, I had caught a cold, or an allergy problem, and had been watching a fantasy show with fairy-tale characters living in the real world called *Once Upon A Time*.) When I woke up, I realized this was impossible. But I could use the concept of hyperreality. Supposedly, hyperreality tricks your consciousness into detaching from any real emotional engagement, making you instead find happiness through artificial simulation, rather than interaction with any "real" reality. Throughout my life, it seems I've jumped from one representation of hyperreality to another. These places have made me feel immortal.

It appears I've also been the most self-destructive during the hyperreality-living periods of my life.

I can also argue that my "real" reality is far different than those my age who haven't experienced life-threatening diseases (or anything painful to the body, like pregnancy). My reality has made it hard for me to connect with others my age.

Representations of Hyperreality:

1. South Florida, where it's spring break all year (if you want it to be). It's a perfect place for those who want to be young brats forever. Florida is the state known for the Fountain of Youth. We don't want to know that we're dying. So we treat Florida like it's America's Never Land.

At the Broward County courthouse people sing: "Florida: Come on Vacation, Leave on Probation."

2. Disney World. Orlando, where I went to college, is built around this fabricated world. Right after cancer I spent as many days as I could at Disney. The "real" world, where people complained about traffic, was what I couldn't live in.

Baudrillard says Disneyworld is "meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act like the child in order to foster illusion of their real childishness" (*Simulacra and Simulation*).

No one dies at Disney World.

3. Fetish community: I eventually turned to South Florida's fetish community. Why? If not to see why the body/mind yearns to hurt itself – though fetishists do it for "pleasure." One of the beliefs of cancer is that people give cancer to themselves through mental sabotage -- ha ha. Nope, sorry, I was just born.

In this world, I hoped to understand why people enjoyed pain.

It's also a world where appearances mean everything. And I needed to blossom again, after what cancer did to my looks.

I was also searching for a sexual awakening, though I never did find anything odd to add to my sexual repertoire.

4. Medical World. What happens to you after you become the patient.

5. Dreams. And how I need to stop waking up so disturbed, after I dream about my late best friend or late father.

6. Instant Messaging. I've fallen for too many men because of their online personality, which was quite different than there real one.

Some Threads Circumnavigating the Post-Cancer Book:

Buddhism thread.

When I was little, I found a dead kitten in the milk bowl. I picked it up and carried it to my mom to show her. I said, “Look at this,” as I outreached my hand, so she could get a closer look at the kitten. She screamed and ran out of the room. This thread will show how I am getting back *there*: looking at death without fear has been my biggest struggle.

Having a clear belief of what afterlife is would make me accept my mortality. Painting that picture has always haunted me. “It is because we have ideas about nirvana we suffer. Direct experience is the only way” (from *No Death, No Fear*). It has taken me until very recently to understand this.

Something I retweeted a long time ago but still adore: “@OSHO: ‘Life is a pilgrimage to nowhere, from nowhere to nowhere. And between these two nowheres is the Now-Here.’ OSHO.”

Motivation/Sense of Purpose.

With mortality looming, it was too hard to be motivated. Really, what has kept me going was the need to write this book about my cancer. I started writing about my cancer experience way too early. I made it "my purpose." And because of this lack of time to heal and reflect, each stage of my writing reflected only what I could see at the time. First, I wanted to write a John Hughes' *Pretty in Pink* with cancer -- just to show that the cancer patient doesn't have to die but can have fun and get the guy. Then it was going to be a fiction book, showing how one woman's

cancer got her to love herself. And when this program started, I switched it to nonfiction because I became aware of how I was still heavily mourning my own mortality. I accept that I don't have to write the book if I don't want to.

Although I have been able to work on this project, it's been eight years after cancer and setting up long-term goals is still something I can't do well. (I decided to go to grad school four months before apps were due). Will I ever be successful at postponed gratification? Being able to plan for a future I am all too aware might not happen?

Therapy.

In the summer of 2008 (almost two years after my cancer was declared gone), my boyfriend C, who I started dating in the midst of chemotherapy, and I broke up. Living with him, I had a stable home life, and without him, it was the opposite. A few months later I started therapy. After many therapy sessions (like two years), I learned that I didn't love myself because I didn't know how to – I didn't know how to take care of myself. It took me a long time to realize that because I had thought that I'd loved myself too much – because I always deserved the guy (so I went after the most unemotionally available ones, excluding C, because I'd be the one who got them. This was a game where I was always the loser.) I did what I wanted, when I wanted – selling out friends, not showing up to work, or appointments, on time. I played by my rules. So I was in the same mess post-cancer as I was in pre-cancer. And my cancer experience was making my post-cancer life worse – because I was shown how precious life was yet I couldn't live my life. Sad emotions consumed me. I've come a long way.

Ending therapy reconnected me with my father's love.

“Writing about illness, especially if one is gravely ill, can be torture. Writing about illness if one is not only gravely ill but also a hypochondriac is an act of masochism or desperation. But it can also be a liberating act.” -- Roberto Bolano

Surrounded By Water

I arrived in Fort Lauderdale after my three-hour journey south from Orlando, and it was like how it was before any hurricane: completely hot and sunny outside, with rumbling, pounding thunder in the distance, the sound of Byzantine Empire war drums, an end-of-the-world battle siren. But it was Thanksgiving break my fourth year at University of Central Florida, and hurricanes rarely hit in November. I was always proud how my birthday, the 30th of this month, ended the season. My oldest brother's started it.

If a hurricane were approaching, I'd turn on the TV and all the local news stations would give life-threatening hurricanes pleasant portrayals. "This is a good-looking hurricane," the news anchors say here. "And so organized." There was never any terror. Say good-looking in a brooding way, at least. Say, she was mysterious. Say she had a mission. Damn, say temper.

I was at my mom's house, which, because of this last hurricane that passed through a couple months ago, had no power. No fully functioning roof.

The newscasters could explain why my mom's house was the only house in the neighborhood that still didn't have power.

Wouldn't be that hard to believe that the mood in the house was glum. Glummer than usual. My family and I were living off a huge generator roaring right outside the sliding glass doors in the living room.

And my dad passed away five months back. Mom was in her bed. No frozen turkey lay on a silver platter waiting to be cooked. Carrots, stuffing mix, and potatoes weren't thrown in various arrangements around the counters. Yams weren't waiting to be marshmallowed.

The only thing that felt like Thanksgiving was me, who felt like a nonexistent turkey.

To save the holiday, Jack, my other brother, and I sneaked off to Benihana's to celebrate our Thanksgiving hibachi style, with a Japanese chef cooking in front of us, every so often using his knife to flip shrimp tails into his pocket or top of his chef's hat.

After my dad's death, mom asked me not to return to school in Orlando. The family needed to stay together, she said -- implying that if I left I'd take all of Fort Lauderdale's air with me. I went back to school anyway. I knew my only survival would be to leave, or I'd get pushed fully off the dock; my mind already swam in the Dead Sea.

My mom was in bed the next night when I decided, after a chiropractor suggested it, to go to the ER. I told her I was going to a hospital we've all been to before -- and Ray was coming with me.

The population of our neighborhood was heavy, a billion stray cats living in our backyard, and I wondered how the cats survived the hurricane.

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I drove home to Lauderdale for the summer after my third year, when I had a really bad chest cold. I drank out of the juice carton, even though I knew that was wrong. I sweated out my fever 20 feet from where my dad slept. Dad was bedridden with bad organs. He caught my cold. In days, he was dying in the hospital. I was too sick with a cold to visit him. I liked being sick because he was whittled down, dressed in a silver-bagged cocoon to keep his temperature up, and I didn't want to see that.

For two weeks thereafter, I couldn't move from my family's couch. Eventually, I did wake up. It was the middle of the night, when a public service announcement for Meningococcal

Disease came on the television. The PSA showed a male college student running in all his glory on top of some very healthy grass. The following shot was the next morning, the student dead in his bed. And the PSA ended with the painful million-dollar question, “Do you want this to be your child?” No mom didn’t; that’s why she didn’t believe I was life-threateningly sick. Both my brothers and my mom were asleep, and I cried because I was scared I had what the kid in the commercial had, and I wouldn’t make it to the next morning.

For a long time, I thought it was my fault that he died because I drank out of the carton.

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I walked through the doors of mom’s house and shouted, “I have a mass!” – while she slept in the backroom. I heard her get out of bed, stepping unto the wood floor. Her getting up made me realize I was dying.

“They said a mass?” she asked, stopping before coming too close to me.

Remembering what the ER docs said, I headed to the computer, saying, “Yeah, they were hoping for lymphoma” -- and sat down at the computer.

She said, “I wouldn’t look it up.” My brother Ray, who went to the ER with me, was now sitting on the couch, agreeing with her, but I typed it in, spelling the medical jargon right the first time, impressing myself -- before focusing on what I could click on. My eyes strained trying to focus on what lymphoma was. My legs got heavy and it felt like my torso’s weight fell into them. I hadn’t known until now the hope was for malignant cancer.

I told them how startled I was. It was apparent Ray had known what lymphoma was when we were in the hospital. He watched a lot of medical dramas. He didn’t want to be the one

who told me.

Little did he know that at the ER, when I made eye contact with him, the saddest eyes I'd ever seen, it was like having the tragic encounter of making eye contact with a lizard on your windshield as you gunned the car on the on-ramp to the superhighway. You wanted to save him, but you had to gun the car. So you tossed the little guy a melancholy wave goodbye as he flew past your driver seat window. Because when I heard I had a mass, I felt oddly complacent about it. If I died, I was leaving this world. I was excited because I felt there were other places to go. Other worlds. A place more serious than ours. Life was intense, but it had nothing on the emotions that were felt in the other -- this next place couldn't be handled in human form. Earth felt like kindergarten.

But he got me back. When Ray and I exited the emergency room, while walking up to my car in the parking lot, he got me really scared suggesting that he should drive my car. I let him drive. I told him to drive real slow. On the way to the Walgreen's pharmacy to get my painkillers filled, the drive felt like there were two lizards riding on the hood of the car, and we were driving so slow so that they'd survive – and this was a good thing, because his license had been suspended due to multiple car crashes.

When Jack got home from work, we hugged for a long time.

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My family didn't want to tell me, yet, when I found out I had a mass, cliché images of family flashed before my eyes, like a little movie reel: my cornea the stage, my pupil the spotlight, the skin that covers my eyes the curtain. And during the movie, I only felt love. I tried to figure out

the logic of this (I read somewhere that you can only feel one emotion at a time) because that was not how I felt toward my family unit as a whole. While I watched my family movie, I couldn't hold onto any other emotion. I wanted to write each one of them pages upon pages of love letters (I was thinking 10 pages for each would work), telling them not only how much I loved them but how that's the only reason why humans live. I panicked – because I didn't know if I had time to write these letters.

I never did.

I was angry with my whole family for a long time because they didn't attend my high school graduation, primarily my parents. I imagine how this must've fueled my anger when three-and-a-half years post-graduation, when I was in the hospital forced to wait for my mom and brothers -- my oncologist wouldn't say what was wrong with me until I had a support unit. Why should they be invited to this grand show?

It's strange looking back. I didn't expect them to go, so the night before the rehearsal I got really drunk and slept through it. The rehearsal was when we received tickets for our guests. I didn't even have tickets to give to them.

Dad had gotten dressed to go, but he was blind and very weak at that point, and wouldn't be able to climb the stairs at the War Memorial Auditorium. So, under my mother's influence, he stayed at home.

I didn't know this till years after the fact, when my mother told me. She told me how confused he was: of course he had to go; of course he wanted to go – even through his sickness.

And I was barely talking to him.

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When my oncologist had something new to say to me, I waited. It was my body, my body, my body that belonged to the nurses in the morning and to my family in the evening. It was disgusting.

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We used the church/funeral parlor, a block away from our house. My mom and two brothers and I were the only guests. No one watched a processional on the road.

After entry into the parlor I stood in the empty room, which could've been even emptier had they not made one of those temporary walls and felt dissatisfied. The funeral people happened to have a couch on the side of the room. We moved it right up front and center. It felt like we were in our living room, watching a really insane interactive TV program. The couch was irritably cramped. Not sure if he wanted to be cremated, but we did that.

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A few years ago, for my funeral, I wanted to be burned like a king, lit on fire in the middle of a lake, when I saw that I might die in a hospital too.

Now I consider myself very lucky because I have two people (maybe three) I can count on to bring me to a lake, if that really does become my final plan. Would I really put them through the trouble?

What could my family do? My mom asked if I needed anything in the hospital. I needed clean underwear. They bought me superhero and cartoon underwear, which made me super happy because I'd always wanted those, and a laptop.

Eating Bugs

Dad was a Vietnam War surgeon. While in 'Nam, he wouldn't wear anything but his scrubs. His bosses were pissed he wouldn't wear the uniform. Off-duty, he played chess with the big-wig officers, who helicoptered in from other camps just to play the game – he liked telling me this. But my half-sister told me how during this so-called off time, he sewed dead soldiers back together. After one phone call with my half-sister I hadn't spoken to in several years, I had to think about whether he came home from war a different man.

I'm sure everyone would feel returning the war-torn bodies back home to their families in pieces was distasteful and cruel. But of course dad would have to be the one who stayed behind and sewed back together the dead. I used to envy his calmness, taking time to be part of all the death around him.

But her mother knew him before the war. They may have already been married. When he returned, he was detached. Allegedly.

Would a detached man drive home during a hurricane to make sure the dogs weren't scared?

My mom, his second wife, never knew him before the war, which saddens me the most. She told me not to listen to any of it. After my father returned, my half-sister's mom would soon cheat on him. But my half-sister said the opposite: My dad cheated on her mother. When I knew my dad, he wasn't a very sexual creature, so I became thrilled hearing my half-sister's sad rendition; the idea that he did sleep around when he was head of the neurosurgery department still makes me happy.

My mom and dad met at that hospital. She was an X-ray technician back then. She fell in

love with his skill.

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When I was a kid, when my family went to the horse track, my dad made me drink Coke, though I wanted to drink Sprite, because I wouldn't be able to drink the Sprite once I saw all the dirt floating around inside the cup. He said that if I drank Coke, since it's dark brown, I would never see what was in there. He told me that everything in the world was covered in a coat of germs, so what's the point of worrying about a few things in your soda.

Denny's was where I saw how disgruntled my father was because I got wildly upset that a Denny's employee's hair was in my food. I was supposed to act like it wasn't there and chow down. Whenever we were at Denny's, I would find a hair. I was cursed. Heard it numerous times: He ate bread with bugs in it during the war.

One time, he grabbed my plate and ate my eggs. I remember the lone, long dark hair on top of the white and yellow. The hair was wet. The eggs were runny. I don't remember liking sunny-side up eggs as a child. I was a pancake person. I wonder if I even wanted to eat my food.

After he did that, I wouldn't let my family eat at Denny's at all.

I wish he were with the time I was at Denny's in Orlando, post-drinking in college. It was 2 a.m., and I was about to order my meal, and there was a cockroach running across the grey, carpeted wall, with another following that one, and a Denny's employee ran with a vacuum hose, which flailed over a table full of drunk kids, and the roaches got away; but the employee couldn't give up, so he chased the roaches down the room (fast roaches) with the vacuum's hose flailing

over yet another table of people.

Or Denny's at 4:30 a.m. on a Saturday in Miami, the Magic City, five years into my recovery, when there was a lady who had dollar bills, kept in place by her black fishnet stockings, stuck all over her thighs and calves. In the booth behind, a baby sucked softly on his momma's well-exposed tit as the mother ate her meal.

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Dad’s Vietnam bosses may have not wanted him to save people badly wounded, but that didn’t matter when a certain high-ranking soldier of importance came to him. A canon had backfired. Dad couldn’t believe it when they asked if the high-ranking man would survive. Didn't they notice half of his entire head was missing? He only had half of his brain.

I can still see dad’s face lighting up while telling this story: being entertained by their dumbness and hypocrisy.

This was just like the story he told me when I was in fifth grade, when my class all wrote mini-memoirs, which called for one story from each parent. This is what my dad thought was the funniest thing he could remember: My dad’s story was about a boy in his high school who handed in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “The Clouds,” saying it was his own. The teacher played along and gave the student first prize. The boy recited the poem before the whole class, when everyone laughed.

In my fifth-grade mini-memoir, it mentioned how my dad went to the Mayo Clinic to become a brain surgeon, but I don’t need the book to remind me.

His neuro residency at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota corresponded with Ernest Hemingway's stay there in the “mental” ward (his room was on another floor). Every night when my father was off-duty, he sneaked into Hemingway's room and played chess with him. Dad only told this story to my godfather, who told me in my late twenties, probably because I mentioned I wrote.

Hemingway ended up shooting himself right after he left the hospital. That’s why my dad wanted nobody to know. My dad was humiliated the hospital didn’t fix Hemingway. Guilty. My guess. And my father wasn’t even Hem’s doc. No one knows much about Hemingway during this period. Perhaps the best part, what my father knew, has been left out of Hemingway’s history.

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He died five months before my diagnosis of Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. I missed out on all the conversations my father, a prior neurosurgeon, and I could’ve had: Tumors were his thing. He always told me not to complain when I was sick because it wasn’t like I had one.

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My favorite photograph of dad is one of him near the water (ocean?) in some city in Europe. Mom was with him but not in the picture. My brothers and I were born but at home. He has a quiet smile, one arm leaning against the wooden railing. He dons a maroon cardigan.

And I live on the west coast now, surrounded by the almighty Pacific.

Everybody Is A Doctor

Orlando, Florida, where I lived prior to my diagnosis, was a hoax of a city. A city flooded with fairy tales. My friends called themselves “doctors” as they handed out drugs.

In Florida, people who don’t need doctors liked pretending to be them. And each time I heard “doctor, doctor, doctor” in my living room, the chant reminded me of how they were not actually sick, but that I *was*...

Ten doctors on this one house call.

You would think the land of magic would be an incredible thing, but the thing was, a land of fabricated magic killed the chance for any real magic.

And this was not good for me. I took any available painkiller or antianxiety med near me. Or the parade of wanna-be docs left to party as I miserably sat on the couch, guzzling Nyquil, trying to get into a late-night TV show. I couldn’t find the right doctor. The only thing left to do was to self-medicate.

I was not an addict. Something majestic happened when alcohol flooded my brain: I didn’t feel sick anymore. I had energy and felt a part of the world. Even keel with *everybody*.

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There was never any point in showering until I sweated out the fever, so I waited, and then turned the temperature on maximum hot. I rushed to throw back on clothes, and then the next round of us headed to our bar Devaney’s.

Once inside, Cheyenne bought me drinks. She was my numero uno. I was fortunate to have Cheyenne at such a crucial part of my life. She had been Margo's roommate, and now Margo was dead, and we both needed not to think. Her hair was wildly curly, wild like flames coming from a greaser car -- not flames painted on – her hair was so wild it was like a car on fire.

We sat at the corner stools, when a guy from my science class plopped down next to me. "Yo," he said, "you look like death, albeit in the hot way."

"I feel like I'm shutting down," I said as the bartender came up. I ordered. "Jack and Coke, please."

"Vaginas can get depressed," Science Boy said.

I gave him a stern look. "Uh, my whole body would get depressed. I don't think *she* would do anything that significant on her own."

Cheyenne walked off to fish for men. Never would her sun package get depressed.

The bartender, the missing link between the frat guy and the doofus, perched himself in front of me with my fresh drink. I debated how I could drink while on antibiotics. Others shook their heads. Science Boy asked, "Are you getting any better?"

"I'm definitely getting worse."

"You got a mild psychosis," he said, "and possibly a dark childhood incident."

"But it doesn't cancel them out," I said. "Sure, drinking weakens the immune system and antibiotics are meant to build it back up, not exactly a win-win, but what can you do?" I took a sip of my drink.

"If you want people to believe you're sick," he said, "don't plead your case in a bar."

A couple hours later, I found myself sobering up, sitting next to an unappealing, strange

boy yapping my ear off, so I began talking about how sick I was. I wanted to know how I got myself in this position. I gazed to my right, left, down -- I hadn't moved from my original stool. "I can't explain it," I said, "I just know -- you know how people just know when they're pregnant?"

He shook his head. Of course, he didn't know. The poor kid asked me if I was trying to get better. All I knew was that this was going to be another night repeating to myself that I only knew me and I only knew what was real and I would remain sane.

I ditched him and approached Chey -- now disappointed because it was obvious she was going to take home the guy in the boat shoes. "Don't get offended," I told her, "when I call you the lush right now, but you're loaded." I tugged at her sleeve. "Don't worry, I can drive."

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Orlando was one giant parking lot wrapped around chain restaurants and Disney World.

The nights I tried to stay in, it happened: waking up inside a fever, heart racing, head fogging up. Staying in felt like dying.

Nothing was going to happen.

Yes, it wasn't Orlando's fault I went out at night because there was the promise to meet *somebody*. Fate didn't hang out in the deodorant aisle in Publix, not to me, but as much as I didn't want to be alone, I was never satisfied when out.

If you thought you could trust fate, you were sorely mistaken, I thought.

I also didn't like the idea of everyone having fun without me.

So since I partied, everyone in Florida thought I was fine, not sick, just overreacting;

hungover. I was always suffering from a hangover. I wished for people to believe that I was sick. And no one would anywhere I went. This was a very hot death trap of a town. It came with no ocean breeze.

Despising the word “hypochondriac,” the worst of this meaningless drivel would always be when the man from Boston said: “I think you pretend to be sick to pick up men.” He was my roommate’s boyfriend and witnessed how my sickness garnered attention: Men thought I trusted them because I told them about my body. A young attractive college gal experiencing constant night sweats, daily fevers, was good conversation indeed -- all these wonderful talks prior to knowing about the tumors. And the tumors would end up making even better conversation.

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During the summer before my diagnosis, when I found out I was anemic, I was beyond happy, it being a huge relief that I was anemic due to iron deficiency; and all excitedly, I told all my friends who followed my sickness this, because I finally knew why I was so tired, and was happy to report out, and it didn’t seem that serious. It seemed like a problem, which could be handled. It was a huge relief until I kept hearing, “Everyone’s anemic. My mom’s anemic,” enough times for my hope to plummet.

I could hate on Orlando (and Florida for that matter) because I continually woke up feeling like crap. I returned to school now in my fourth year (on the five-year plan) at University of Central Florida -- and my health had hit a low. October was a drag of a month because of the fevers every day. I couldn’t even sleep for more than ten minutes straight, and I knew I should be dead because many people told me that. I was eating a few chocolate chip cookies a day because

chocolate cookies were so easy to eat. Something was keeping me alive. It wasn't normal. I wanted to know, I didn't want to know.

In late October, my hematologist called with the latest blood work results as I lounged with classmates before our Introduction to Creative Writing class. Not only was I anemic due to iron deficiency, I was also anemic due to chronic disease. And she wanted me to come home to Fort Lauderdale the first chance I could, so she could take my blood marrow and test it. She connected me to the appointment handler, before I could process what she was saying. I knew getting my bone marrow taken was the scariest test I'd been asked to take. I knew real sick people were asked to do this. But "the first chance" didn't sound like an absolute emergency to me. I tried to make the appointment for the next month when I'd be in Fort Lauderdale for Thanksgiving break. I couldn't because my hematologist was going to be out of town, so I made it for winter break.

I sat back down with my classmates, telling them how having to get my blood marrow taken comforted me; that though I knew this test was a big deal, I wasn't intensely worried because I was able to wait until the semester was over. I thought I could ignore the everyday fevers and night sweats, the waking up feeling like a tide had dragged me on top of my bed, until then. So did my friends.

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During this period, I knew I was too sick to consider going out, but my friend wouldn't have it. We were going out because I had already sold her out too many times. I pleaded, but she wouldn't listen, "We'll go out for only an hour tops," she said. She told me I'd been a shitty

friend, like the time when she needed me to pick her up at a guy's and I didn't. While we are at the bar, I sucked on my Jack and Coke and it shot right back up my throat, not even slightly decomposed nor absorbed at all by my body. I told my friend my body was rejecting liquor. For the both of us, this was a good enough reason for me to go home.

Ah, the rib pain that soon mysteriously developed had come in handy, though, a great excuse to give to men when I didn't want to hook up with them.

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The day after Thanksgiving, I walked outside of my mom's house and called my hematologist's office, even though my hematologist was out of town till Monday, and conversed with the doctor who was on duty. I was asked to go to the hospital by the chiropractor I saw earlier that day due to this mysterious rib pain. The doctor on duty thought nothing was wrong – well, no emergency at least.

It was Friday night and downtown Fort Lauderdale was a goddamn roulette wheel of bars rigged for the winning. So why not wait till Saturday, during the day? Why waste my Friday night? What could happen in one day, anyways?

I called a friend who I planned to hang out with that night, so I could think out loud. I had to remember how sick I was. I had to question if I thought I was really hospital sick, if I was a sick enough person who needed to go to the emergency room. I had to accept that I didn't have what everyone else had. No one scraped by like me. My zombie swagger wasn't a *thing*. I had something very serious and scary and no one on this planet knew what it was.

"You're fine," my friend said. "Don't be dramatic."

But I was going to be dramatic.

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The night after I went to the ER and found out I had a mysterious mass in my chest cavity, I was at the Melting Pot with my two closest girlfriends eating dessert. One told me that I had chocolate on my cheek. Tears rolled down my face. I had been talking for a long time, not taking a bite. The chocolate was there for all that time, and nobody told me. She said she didn't want to interrupt me. I started crying harder. They asked what was wrong. "You want my outside to be as ugly as my inside," I said. My friend smeared chocolate all over her face. One thought I was dying, the other thought I had nothing serious at all.

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Less than a year prior to my diagnosis, my friend Stephen said, "Come on, let me give you a piggyback ride." And to stop his nagging, I went for it, and he failed to grip my legs. I fell backwards, head landing on the curb, my body falling down a few inches more slamming into the parking lot. I was knocked out, with the sidewalk as a pillow. When I came back, I wasn't able to move my arms and legs, for at least a minute.

That was when our bartenders walked out the door to see what was going on and saw me on the ground. One bartender handed me the dirty rag he used to clean the bar up with, for my head. I didn't use it. Friends asked if I should go to the hospital, but I didn't want to because I didn't have health insurance. And since there was only a smidge of blood on the back of my

head, I knew I didn't need stitches. A big bump was forming.

We headed back to the apartment. When we got there, Chey got scared for my wellbeing. She called 911. She tried to reach her ex-boyfriend who was a paramedic in the surf town about an hour away. She didn't get ahold of her ex, but she did get more paramedics before shutting her bedroom door to have sex with the guy she just brought home from the bar. I was amused. She was going to freak out when her liquor goggles disappeared. I was also amused because this meant I didn't do the stupidest thing this night.

On the stairs outside my apartment, I sat and waited for the paramedics with my other friend, when a nurse who lived somewhere nearby found us on the staircase. She followed my sobbing – which I didn't know I was doing until she told me I was. She said not to fall asleep for a few hours. Good chance of death after a concussion if I did. I cried more, not wanting to die. I cried while some paramedics came and also when they left. I cried while I told everybody I was OK, and when I said I wasn't going to the hospital.

The nurse freaked me out. I sat on the stairwell and feared death. It was coming. I was sick of being drunk. So I decided I didn't want to die fucked up. Ever. Dying intoxicated disturbed me, and I promised myself I would never die all fucked up. I would be fully alive when I went. I stuck my finger down my throat.

The second set of paramedics found me puking on the stairs. They rushed toward me, and I told them, I was fine. They warned me that throwing up after a concussion was a sign something was wrong. I guaranteed that the vomit was self-induced. They left, and my friends either fell asleep or went back home. I was alone and sad, and thought, what did it matter, and went to sleep an hour or so after my concussion, not knowing if I would wake up, thinking no one cared if I lived or died.

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When I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, what did friends do? While in the hospital, a girl, who was my first best friend – we were 5 -- brought me chocolate-covered strawberries. A high-school friend's older brother training to be a firefighter came to wish me good luck. People called my cell, wished me luck, tried to make conversation: "I'm a horrible person because when I found out that you had cancer I didn't call right away."

"They can't remove the cancer?" Not that kind, I said. "But's it's the best cancer you can get, you say, right?" I clarified: Yes, for serious cancer. "Yeah, for real cancer," they said.

Cheyenne, my current party twin, a blurry blond vision in the corner of my eye, waited for me to fully wake up in the hospital but I never did. Later, this prompted me to ask that day's nurse, "How drugged up did I seem today?" as soon as I did wake up out of a drug-infused hell, not knowing if it was day or night, always purgatory, always being probed, the majority of time spent on me either losing myself to the drugs or thinking about whether I should ever brush my hair again, which I thought I didn't have to. It was a tangled rat's nest back there.

During the day Cheyenne used to ask me, "Do you wanna waste some time?" and my heart would flutter. Yes, let's toss back some painkillers, in the light-hearted *Garden State* kind of way, and watch *Garden State*.

She used to also say, "People do it all wrong. It's not a big deal. We need to figure out what to do and just do it. I think we've been very good with handling our problems."

Yeah, like putting up tinfoil to cover the windows so we could sleep all day. Knowing I will die was the motivation behind the choices I'd make now.

Cancer Story

With babies it's easier to tell when they spring to life inside the body than it is with tumors. Even worse, cancer has no birthdate to commemorate; no death date to celebrate; and it can live for years before it's found.

No one realizes how hard it is to find cancer. When we found mine, I had it for years.

I was even looking for mine, as much as somebody could look for an undiagnosed disease. My outward signs weren't severe enough. Seven months before I found my tumor, I even gawked at a frighteningly thin girl, a sick girl, who got her blood taken in the small laboratory in the middle of the internal medicine doctor's office. I knew better than to look at her because she looked so sickly and judge her life by it, but I did nonetheless. She must have envied me, I thought, because I was not sick like her. Born with her illness. How funny that sounds now.

I entered that examining room, a room that belonged to me for at least ten minutes, and sat on the examining bed, when the internal medicine doctor entered, sat down on a stool, and rolled it toward me. His knees brushed against my knees. He rolled forward until one of his knees hit the examining bed while the other knee slid down between my legs. A bulge pushed against my inner thigh. His balls rested on top of my thigh. He was not aware. Definitely not aware as he tried to figure out why I was constantly sick, why I was fatigued. He checked my tonsils. He thought it was a weight issue. He told me to take antibiotics and drink a few milkshakes (more fat, better health apparently). He thought I would regain my energy and that the virus would pass. Then he removed his balls from my leg. I didn't care what he did or said, as long as his balls were off my leg.

When the antibiotics were finished (I even drank a milkshake or two), my blood work was retaken. As he noticed that not one number improved, he turned ghostly like he caught whatever he thought I had. His brows and mouth weakened. “I can’t help you anymore,” he said.

With all the normal fix-its and doctors used with no success, I knew I was dying of something.

For six months, I went to my oncologist’s cancer-finding place, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I presume why it took so long to find my cancer, why my case was slow, was because cancer doctors usually see patients after they’ve found their lumps, not before. Not me. What kind of strange arrangement it was that I saw one before. The internal medicine doctor had told me to see a blood doctor, a hematologist, so I did. Mom got the in for me. She faxed my blood work straight off to my father’s old hematologist, and no wait for an appointment, out of respect for him since he’d been a doctor himself, a neurosurgeon. Just weeks after his death, I took over his spot, his blood doctor becoming my blood doctor (then my oncologist. Blood and cancer specialties somehow go hand-in-hand). And my oncologist said she would figure out what was wrong with me, thinking what plagued me was some Mediterranean disease. People with ancestry from that region happened to be anemic. And I was.

After two un-titillating months in her care – costly blood tests weren’t being done because I was waiting for my school insurance to kick in -- she gave me permission to take a summer vacation in New York. I must not be dying, I thought, since sick people didn’t get permission from doctors to travel for *leisure*.

But, during that trip in New York, while with my mother over one of Central Park’s covered ice rinks, I sat at the table eating lobster and sweating through my clothes. I started

shaking, like having the fever shakes. I drank an incredible amount of liquor the night before, but I felt like a severe alcoholic with-drawling, someone who drank day and night, bottles a day, and that wasn't right.

***

A couple of months before I found my tumor, at a doctor's appointment at University of Central Florida's health clinic, the doctor told me that since I didn't have a fever in his presence it was a viral infection, so antibiotics couldn't help me. He asked if anything else was wrong. I told him about my heartburn, pointing to my chest, and he dismissed this as nothing to be concerned about. I left him, realizing later that I didn't mention that my ribs hurt. My rib pain was something, but I thought I should only bother my chiropractor about that anyways. I must've pulled something at the gym, the one time I went a few weeks back; when after accomplishing a few exercises, I needed to sit down. I believed you had certain doctors for certain matters, certain body parts. I felt weird bombarding doctors with everything, especially when some have told me that that wasn't their area when I brought all health issues to the examining table.

Unfortunately the doctor didn't pay attention to where I pointed, to what I thought was heartburn -- because it wasn't heartburn. That heartburn was really my tumor's attempt to be felt. Two months later, when it was found, it was three-fourths the size of a lung. It pushed my left lung an inch to left, which pushed on my heart, which pressed on my ribs, making my rib cartilage sore.

When I found my tumor, my soon-to-be cancer doctor was out of town for the Thanksgiving holiday. My chiropractor was also out of town for the holiday, which shocked me,

because I couldn't picture her vacationing – but she had a fill-in chiropractor, a male, who was going to see me. My chiropractor was the one who, upon first seeing me this past summer, said: "Your color's off," when I entered the examining room. She saw my sickness first, and sent me to get my blood taken.

I told the fill-in about my rib pain. "You can't pull anything there," he said. "There is nothing to pull, no muscle. In fact, you shouldn't be sore there at all." He set my bones in place using an activator, a small machine, which created the force, while my lady was hands-on. He looked at my chart, her notes, and said: "You need to go to the ER today." I said, "OK, I will," but who was he? He was not my doctor. And I left not knowing what I'd do.

He called my cell an hour later, telling me that he called my chiropractor, and that she told him to make sure, make me promise, that I would go to the ER that night. Apparently, she had been waiting for this pain to pop up.

My eldest brother, Ray, and I made our short way to the hospital, the one my father died at just under six months ago, recalling that the last time I was in the hospital, it was because my father's organs failed him, and feeling empowered nonetheless because I was driving to my answer.

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The Broward General emergency room waiting room was small and filled with plain, plastic seats attached to each other like a betting room at a horse track. Horse tracks were dirty places full of people you couldn't picture anywhere else. Just like the ER waiting room.

There was no thrill or danger in the ER. I didn't see one fire victim. Not one gunshot

wound. There were examining beds in a circular row, with thin curtains, sheet-like, separating them. The patients could see each other if we just stuck our heads out a little bit. Hearing coughs made me sense that my chance of being the most critical person was high.

The female ER doc strode up to me, asking why I was here. Good question. She was in her mid-30s, tall and thin and secure. I complained about my rib pain.

"It's probably just some sore rib cartilage," she said.

"Don't I feel stupid," I said, "coming to the ER for that."

"Don't," she said as she gently touched my ribs. My rib cartilage was sore, and she walked away. But she returned, asking: "You have a fever now?" – even though she already had the answer from my preliminary screening, which took place in the cubicle in the back of the waiting room.

"When do I not? I always have fevers."

She leaned back, connecting my symptoms dots. A doctor on her back heels was something I never wanted to see because it meant I was real sick. The weight of the universe pulled my torso and chest forward. My body belonged to this woman.

And she wanted me to take a chest X-ray. It was a novel idea, not being able to remember the last time I did one. In a hospital gown, I stood before the X-ray machine explaining to the nurses that in no way, shape, or form could I possibly be pregnant. I came up pregnant in my blood work. It was absurd, but they swore the test was right after redoing it three times. I was getting congratulations. "I promise I'm not," I said. I haven't been sexual for a while now. I felt icky in bed, icky while showering -- I felt too sick to shower. In the shower, after I turned the temperature on maximum hot, I shivered still. I quivered before the X-ray machine, disturbed. A couple days ago, Wednesday night, at the bar, a guy I sort of knew asked if I wanted to get

something to eat. I said, yes, so we left, but his friends took us straight to their place, where he happened to be staying in one of their rooms. I didn't want to sleep with him. It was never my intention. I was really fooled into thinking we were eating. He didn't understand why I didn't want to sleep with him. To him, I came home with him. What if he raped me while I slept? What if anybody did? I was beyond disturbed, shaking off this notion that a guy touched me without my knowledge, especially while I was so sick.

Tired, I tried to lie down in the little ER spot they gave me, but the examining bed's back was lifted, turning it into a large chair. Wiggling and scrunching, I lied down when another doctor trudged right up to me. He was new and male and introduced himself as the head ER doctor. He talked like the crème de la crème. Someone important.

He held up my X-ray for me, and said: "See this over your left lung?" He pointed to the middle, fuzz, what seemed like everything on the X-ray. "You have a shadow here."

I waited to take my first-ever CT scan, and was horrified when they moved me to a room meant for the sick. I have seen these rooms on TV and film, when only really sick people took CT scans, getting X-rayed *inside* loud machines. The machine resembled a thicker, much nosier tanning bed. My insides were tanning. When they told me I was done, I slowly lifted myself up and out, like a breakable porcelain doll.

I was ready for the big news. My diagnosis was supposed to be instant like how it was on TV or film, but I was hearing nothing. They were only talking among themselves, getting ready for the next scan. I looked to their faces. Their faces didn't show clues? Would they not look devastated if something bad was happening inside me? They had seen the inside of *my* body on a screen, and they knew if something was there, and they wouldn't tell me, and I was really pissed off. I was tricking myself because of what I'd seen on TV. I hadn't yet figured out that we, the

television viewers, were always privileged with the doctor's eyes. We were the doctors looking onto the sick, but I was the patient now and the patient waited more or less an hour until she was told if she'd live or die.

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When I returned to the waiting room, my brother Ray knew something was wrong, and I knew that he knew that and that calmed me though we didn't talk about how or what he knew. A couple minutes went by with us sitting in silence until the nurse came up to us and asked us both to follow her. The hour wait was gone; why? We were escorted past the ER and into an enormous, closed-off room for the super important privileged emergency cases where the doctor waited for *me*. Hospital omens were helpful, soothing, a way to feel prepared.

My shadow was a mass, he told me. My insides rotated. I turned into a carnival ride, a spinning spaceship, gravity working against everything inside my body, planting my insides to the cushioned side of my stomach as it went around and around. "It looks like lymphoma, which we hope it is." I tried to listen, but instead I was thanking my skin for keeping me together. Lymphoma wasn't a word I recognized; I would look that up later. "Unfortunately," he continued, "it's inside your lung." I tried to listen, but I was feeling the bed under my hand. It was solid and I was glad because that meant I wouldn't fall through into the floor. "I'll give you painkillers to help with the pain. You said you have an oncologist, right?"

The spaceship went down because I built it wrong. "She is out of town until Monday," I said.

"Call her then." He turned his back, after wishing me luck, as I was stuck staring at an

ugly corner of the carpet, the carpet some kind of heathery mix of gray and red. The last thing I wanted was to stare at red fibers that were stuck in the ER's decrepit floor. Sub particles. I directed my eyes: My attention was here, lifting up red fibers off the carpet, pushing the grey ones down, the damaged, fuzzy, grey threads, impossible to move.

I looked up and my arms and legs kicked, reflexing like appendages of an abused cockroach left on her backside. I was twitching, not able to stop them. Not looking at my brother or the nurse because I'd lost bodily control and it was humiliating. But no one said anything, and I could feel my flailing limbs working toward something.

I wouldn't let the fear of being diseased of its humiliation take control of me. Humiliation wasn't an emotion worth having. I didn't care what happened. I wanted to live.

All this weight, all this gravity, was gone. Lightness took over my body. I felt invincible. It happened. It was over. I'd been told. This was the grossest thing I could ever hear about myself. I had a disgusting, gross mass inside of me. It was relieving – it dawned on me that I had not wanted to find out what was wrong with me because I didn't want to be embarrassed by what was wrong with me.

I thought about how hearing I had a mass was different than hearing about somebody you love dying. The unglued part was the same. It was the twitching that was new. It meant I was not dead yet. I was given the choice. I was lucky. Others just died. "So I can just leave?" I thought of my family and got sad. I asked the nurse, "I mean," I asked her, "am I even going to make it to Monday? Is it time for me to say my goodbyes to everyone?"

Holding my hand, responding with such kindness, she said, "What we found today didn't happen overnight. It can't take you that fast either. Let's hope that it's lymphoma. It's your best choice. I'll pray for you."

Wishing to be incarcerated until I was healthy, I became envious of those who get locked up because of their illnesses.

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Three days later, when my doctor returned from her vacation, I waited until her workday was almost over to call her – one of those ways a person who has a mass tries to postpone the evitable. I told her I found a mass, and she said to pack a bag because I was going back to the hospital, but this time to Northridge Medical Center, where she worked.

I waited in the ER for her to admit me. As I waited, they transformed me into a patient: In a hospital gown, they placed me in a bed not to move, a bed with wheels so I never needed to move. They could just roll me around. The bed was high off the ground. I was high in the air like a princess, being constantly cared for. I waited for her as a young man in scrubs laughed at the jokes I made about losing my hair. I was happy to still be funny.

When she arrived, my oncologist was merry, comforting me with a greeting, chuckling about how the other ER thought I had been pregnant (tumors secrete the same hormones). She threw my X-ray on the screen. “Wow!” she said. My size of my mass, an oncologist’s wet dream. She asked me, “Have you seen this yet?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Come on over,” she said. I got out of the comfy bed to stare my mass down. “It’s not in your lung,” she said, pointing to something resting next to it.

“It’s the size of a grapefruit,” she said. But I preferred “large orange,” to lessen the intensity. She humored me.

My third day in the hospital, which happened to be my 22nd birthday, I found out I had a great cancer, the best cancer possible for a mass of my size. I was happy, depressed, drugged up, confused, and hopeful. My mom and two bros stood at the end of my hospital room. My oncologist stood next to my hospital bed, staring into my eyes, not theirs (it was a good start), saying: "It is Hodgkin's Lymphoma." She didn't break eye contact. "I happen to specialize in lymphomas." I didn't have any idea when this biopsy took place.

"The treatment is standard," she said, which made me wonder why it was so special that she specialized in lymphoma if everything was already stable. Six cycles, 12 doses of chemotherapy, then radiation afterwards. The names of the drugs weren't easy to memorize, but their nickname was ABVD. The nickname of one of them, I'd find out later, was Red Devil. "The treatment is highly successful with an 80 to 90 percent cure rate."

"Why does the web say the success rate is lower than that?" I asked.

"Don't trust what you read on the web, OK? The web is already outdated. Studies can never be current. You're reading the past."

It was all very convenient. Too convenient. This was the best birthday present I'd ever received: something I could beat, not a death sentence.

She was ready to talk again: "We have to know everything to be able to treat everything." I felt it all falling apart. "Sometimes lymphoma can be a complication of having HIV. But don't worry, people live very comfortably with HIV these days." This was good to hear because the shock of just having cancer had worn off. My mind made me see black for several seconds, because knowing my luck, the massive malignant tumor wasn't enough, having HIV with it would be. "The chance is greater that you have it because your cancer had symptoms." I was sick all this time. She thought I had it. I despised anyone who did.

A set of scrub entered to take my blood. It seemed unlikely. But if my history showed anything, I would be the one who got it. Watching the film *Kids* in middle school has haunted my whole life thereafter: watching the HIV guy go around collecting girls' virginities, willingly giving them HIV as he declares his puppy love, while the sex-hungry girl is HIV free. The one with fewer notches is the one who gets HIV. My friends had a lot of notches.

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She wished she could freeze my eggs. Chemotherapy could destroy them. There was no time. I needed to get chemo right away. We couldn't wait, she said. I was far too advanced. I was supposed to be late stage three, but my oncologist would go with early stage three because I felt that was more reasonable, better chance for mental survival. "How about late, *late* stage two?" I asked. But she wouldn't go as far as to falsify records. I have tumors in my upper and lower body – that was stage three.

I wanted to wait. We were rushing – I was dying *this* fast? I was dying this fast if she thought starting chemo in two days was worth me giving up the chance to bear my own kids. I felt like everything I'd ever seen showed that when a woman was pregnant, the mother chose her death over the baby's. Always. Unconditional love. Well, I was not pregnant now, so I had to survive for myself. Only myself. If I happened to be a few weeks along, apparently, the fetus would be dead in no time.

Why couldn't we wait so I could save my eggs? The answer to this question told me more than anything else that I would die if I were not treated right away. I wanted to ask, Why don't you grab some eggs at the same time my chemo port's put in. I wanted to demand it, but I was

too embarrassed to ask. Part of me figured it had to be medically impossible. My embarrassment hoped this was the case. So I gave up having my own children, before I even introduced the fantasies of my future family into my life.

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How many years have passed since I've been in remission? Long enough to name the residual mass, which was left over after treatment, Large Marge. She had to be very dead before she got named. But *just* enough that I'm not completely threatened about her return. But when a mysterious symptom pops up, everything can be a tumor.

Lab Animals

Rolled into my living quarters, passing a roommate -- I was sick and my roommate was sick (and old and female), and we'd share this Hospital World together.

The Hospital World started earlier than the regular world. Before morning, the nurse bombarded into our hospital room and turned on our lights: There was no light outside to fill the room (I was near the window). She didn't care to be a tiny bit quiet as we slept. We were the nurses' lab animals now. The only thing I could applaud was how I was shown this instantly. My roommate didn't mind. Of course. She had given her body over a long time ago.

But the nurse was humane. The nurse didn't probe me until her upbeat introduction of how she would be with me the whole day was over. "We are partners," she said, as she wrote her name on the dry erase board in the corner. She used big bubble letters. And I decided from here on out I would like that day's nurse by how she wrote her name using that dry erase board marker. It was a new day, new female nurse (never had a male, well... never was assigned a male), new handwriting to judge. Thursday's nurse wrote her name in sharp, tight letters that pointed on the top, like a squid's ECG. Luckily, I was drugged out of my mind, or I would have refused to let her touch me.

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For whatever reason, later in the first day, I received my own room. During that night, I was terrified to be by myself. A lady screeched down the hall -- like mini-chainsaws (not scalpels) attacked her bones. I pulled the covers up over my chest. I wanted to pull the covers up over my

head, but I was afraid I wouldn't see someone enter my room if I did. Her screams vibrated and echoed off of my walls.

***

Daily, my oncologist massaged my armpits checking for swollen lymph nodes. Would they just pop out overnight? I had no clue why she made this morning trip just to rub my armpits. The exciting stuff happened when she returned after she saw all her patients at the office.

Never again would I complain about waiting to see a doctor at an appointment. It felt like this woman was giving up her life for me. This is where some doctors are in the morning before they get to the office. Sometimes stuff happens at the hospital – like figuring out the tumors -- and that's why they're late to the office. That's why they leave the office at 5 or 4 or 3 p.m.

***

No matter how curable my cancer was I still had to get my blood marrow taken to see what stage my cancer was in, though my doctor said no matter the stage, it was treatable all the same. I wasn't allowed to decline having it done. This would tell me if the cancer had reached my bones yet or not.

My oncologist was behind me, warning me that it would be painful. She has to drill into my hipbone, having to go all the way through to reach the inner side of the next part of the hip for the bone marrow. It was painful, I reminded myself, but people gave it to help others. People survived. It was doable.

She numbed me but said that it wouldn't help, and that I couldn't move at all during the procedure. I had to stay still. The pain was horrible, absolutely atrocious. "You have to stay still." How could I not move? "Do whatever you have to," she said, but I didn't understand what she meant.

She drilled into me, and I cursed. "Let it out. This isn't a part of the job I'm fond," she said, as she kept drilling inside my hipbone, plucking me like plucking a chicken on fire.

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Upon entering the Hospital World, I was given a general doctor who'd look over my everyday health concerns, which who knew what those could be at this point. He was an optimistic man who smiled and reminded me of every doctor who I had who always thought nothing was wrong with me. He seemed to be the lowest on my doctor food chain.

Since that first ER doctor wrote me a script for painkillers, he followed suit without question. The rush of not having to talk people into thinking I was sick made me relax. I didn't even keep an eye on the clock. After four hours, a nurse hooked me up with meds, even while my oncologist massaged my armpits checking for swollen lymph nodes.

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The general doctor caught up with the Hospital World and found out that I had lymphoma – it was only the next day after I was diagnosed but I'd already met the heart surgeon, when my heart surgeon had said that he was putting something in me that would make chemotherapy easier.

“Your port,” he said, “will be your new best friend. Get the chemo straight to the main blood supply by entering the heart.” My best friend indeed. Once the drugs went into the heart, it would make sure the chemo pumped everywhere.

***

I’d never been put under anesthesia before, so on Thursday I was freaking out about this the most. It felt like they were putting me to sleep like a dog or monkey. They were God. I had no control. I was asking too many questions, so they gave me enough antianxiety medicine to calm someone like me down.

In the operating room, as the anesthesiologist put me under, the Doors played, and I felt happy like I would survive the surgery because a heart surgeon who listened to the Doors during surgery was someone to trust with your life.

When I woke up from the anesthesia, my limbs jerked. They felt hard like dead weight or thick tree branches trying to detach from my body, the bark.

I told the heart surgeon how cool it was that he listened to the Doors during surgery. “The Doors?” he said. “I don’t remember. It was the radio.”

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Back in my hospital bed, I couldn’t drink water because I didn’t want to use the restroom; the pain from the port was too severe. My port (my new best friend) looked like a large, plastic square Ping-Pong ball under my skin, below my left breast, over my rib cage. It attached a tube

to the central vein that went into my heart. Which vein? No clue. I didn't even know how stable the vein was. I didn't know what it felt like when a tube attached.

But eventually I drank enough that I did have to use the restroom. Hurting too much to move, I lied there in agony, fearing my bladder would burst. The nurse came in and said, "Use a pee tray," and pointed to one next to the bed – so close – then she left. She said it so nonchalantly like it shouldn't be a problem for me to use a pee tray. She didn't know that I needed a therapist to get me to use the pee tray. No one wants to be someone who needs to use a pee tray. As long as I went to the bathroom in the toilet, I was not completely lab animal.

But for a moment, I accepted the idea of using the pee tray. I lifted my pelvis up off the bed, picturing putting the pee tray underneath me, and squealed. Getting on top of the pee tray even seemed too unbearable.

I was lying down on top of my hospital bed, and couldn't pee here – though it seemed more appealing than using the pee tray. An accident is just that. Using a pee tray was signing over my ability to take care of myself.

After an hour of internal weeping, I removed myself from the bed and entered the ninth circle of Hell, where I expected to find the head-bobbing heart doctor.

The Man In My Hospital Room

My body must have sensed danger (I was in a hospital bed) because it woke me up unexpectedly, with no knowledge of what time it was; I was on too many drugs for it to wake me up for another reason. A blue-scrubs-wearing man sat in the guest chair facing my bed.

We were in the dark. And I was frightened because anybody would be frightened in this situation. I was in the hospital trying to save my life, and I woke up seeing the lifesaver just staring at me. He was staring at me. He was sitting down, facing me, hands on his lap, staring at me contently.

I thought he was going to rape me.

If he was in my room, he wasn't going to just leave. He was going to do something to me. I would finally get raped, and it was going to happen here, of all places, in the hospital.

As far as I saw, patients weren't courted with extended glances. Sure, I may not know the hospital industry well, but having gone to many bars, I knew how the hospitality industry worked. It was etiquette for a bartender to refuse to make eye contact with any lady or man who approached the bar. Eye contact started conversation. This was what he wanted. He was breaking the rules. When eye contact was made, the person wanting a drink knew she could speak directly to the person serving the cocktail. "Didn't mean to disturb you," the man in the scrubs inside my hospital room said to me. "Heard you got your blood marrow taken today. Want a massage?" Our eyes were locked. He wanted me to know that I could talk to him.

But this wasn't etiquette. The bartender had to follow the line at the bar, starting on the left, working his way down to the right -- and I didn't think this scrubs man had asked this question to everyone on my floor. I said, "no."

“Are you sure? I’ll massage your feet, or wherever you need.”

“No, no,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Hodgkin’s Lymphoma,” he said. I finally looked at the door. I knew I risked showing him how scared I was of him. I knew the more scared he knew I was, the more he would want to hurt me. He wanted an easy victim. It was unfair. I looked at the door because I needed to figure out a plan. I needed to visualize my escape route. The door was shut, as expected. How close would I let him get to me, before I screamed?

“Stage 3. You’re lucky.” I looked at the door because I started thinking that rape didn’t start this way. “It’s the best cancer you can get.”

I was in shock because, in that middle of the night, since I awoke so frightened, I hadn’t remembered what cancer I had. Why I was in the hospital never crossed my mind. After he diagnosed me, for a minute I tried to recollect, but I couldn’t remember being told before. But it made sense. I was in the hospital. This was why I was here. Upon reflection, in defense, I was only told less than a day earlier.

I was in shock because he was not going to rape me after he said my cancer. I was unafraid now. He leaned forward. “I know how you feel,” he said. “Two years ago,” – he looked down to his crotch, frowning, his upper body sagging – “they found a tumor in one of my testes. They had to remove both of them.” I was in shock because I was entering the world where now everyone with cancer stories shares them.

I was really able to stare back now, and he was upset, young, and wrinkled.

At the time, I knew I was learning something grand; I was realizing how others became the sacrifice. It was awful how much I recreated this situation. Finding others’ weaknesses, getting it out of them, watching them transform. What made him special was how threatened I

was by him – how much that turned around. He allowed me to teach myself how he'd always been too weak to attack me.

"You should be getting your rest," he said as he shut my hospital door behind him. "I'll leave you alone."

Cocktail Party Banter

I hated being part of the Google generation because comfort didn't radiate from the computer screen. Numbers on a screen were what told me what lymphoma was, if I could survive or not. Do you know who died of my type of cancer? Dumbledore in the first Harry Potter movie. One of the first facts I found out.

If I couldn't have felt my mass before, I could feel it then. It was so heavy I couldn't lift myself up off the desk chair. It was so heavy that when I lied down in bed I couldn't get back up unless it was time to take more painkillers. A dead elephant sat there on my chest.

I hate how I was told. But that is how it is now.

***

Could you imagine if this wasn't so?

***

It's Thanksgiving, and my dad, mom, little brother, and a couple neighbors and some extended family are about the house. Mom's talking about how she wishes she only planted tomatoes. ("If you plant lettuce," dad says, "and the lettuce grows, don't blame the lettuce.") My little brother, Grayson, is very fond of G.I. Joes and playing with them.

"Grab a drink," my mom says as swirls her drink. "It's the holidays."

"Nah," I say. "I'm too tired to drink."

“Tired? You just woke up!” Mom shovels the champagne bottle into ice, saying, “Youth is wasted on the young.”

She’s right – why I am tired? I must be getting a cold. I go pour myself some orange juice. “Perhaps some vitamin C will do the trick.”

“Ah, hogwash, that’s why champagne goes in orange juice!”

Dad enters the kitchen, and chimes in with: “You declare anything yet?”

I shake my head. How can I declare anything when I don’t know why I have a cold? I need to declare that first.

“You need to figure that out,” he says.

Mom sits behind her easel, mixing what she calls “crazy concoctions.” She glances from her artwork to the frozen turkey on the table. “It’s not like going to the moon for Christ’s sake,” she says, as she puts the turkey in the oven.

“You pick something,” he says. “ You carry through. The end”

OK, syphilis? Tuberculosis? Mono? Chlamydia?

He hits his hand on the dining room table. “I don’t want you to be on the fast track to nowhere.”

I grow pale. He’s right. Chronic fatigue syndrome? MS? Flu?

He takes a deep breath. “You being safe at school?”

No, I’m going trick or treating for brain damage. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“Saw a disturbing PSA last night. The ones only on in the middle night, to really disturb the hell outta ya. It was some dorm disease. You got that? No. But it’s there. It’s on the climb. And the commercial asked, ‘Do you want this to be your child?’ Well, why the hell I don’t, so be safe, you hear me?”

“Dad, I don’t live in a dorm.” But my place is like one. *Can* I have that?

The dining room table is messy with paints, where Noodle, mom’s German Shepherd, sits in a chair. And sure enough, Noodle, the German Shepherd who sit in chairs, is being all human-like licking a plate on the table. Do I have some dog disease?

***

“Anything new at school?” Jerry, the neighbor, asks.

Some disease, I want to say. “Guidance counselor told me to take the year off to figure things out.”

“How is my wandering minstrel?” my aunt asks. “Still undecided?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. Her purse hits my ribs on the way to fill up her drink.

***

I find my uncle, the chiropractor in the family.

“Besides the rib pain,” asks Uncle Quack, “how is your general health?”

“I have the flu.” I’ve decided.

“I ask because your color’s off.”

“Really?”

“It’s yellowish. Could be an iron deficiency.”

Oh, I’m anemic. That makes sense.

“Are you’re susceptible to getting sick?

Yep.

“Where’s your pain?” he asks.

I tell him, and he adjusts my neck in the living room. He presses on my ribs. “You can’t pull anything in this spot. There is no muscle here. In fact, you shouldn’t be sore here at all. You must have a mass in there.”

Would mom spill the beans at Thanksgiving dinner? Can I wait until Thanksgiving is over to say something? I glance at Grayson, who’s smashing his G.I. Joe in the bowl full of potatoes, making mashed potatoes. I smile. I don’t want to say it in front of him. Mom’s next to him about to notice.

“I have something to tell you guys later.”

“Tell us now.”

“Be prepared for the worst. Mom, follow me.” I walk off to the corner of living room.

“You’re pregnant!”

“She shouldn’t be drinking if she’s pregnant,” offered a tipsy female wasp that lives down the street.

“I am not pregnant. But I do have something gross growing inside of me.”

“What?” My mother spits out a little bit of her wine.

“Uncle Quack found something.”

My mom calls out, looking for my father.

“I need a doctor,” I say.

“Carl is one.” My mom drags me to him. He’s having a cocktail in the backyard. As we get to the backdoor, I bolt in the opposite direction.

“Where are you going?” asks mom.

“Out!”

“Don’t get me wrong,” dad says. “I personally have no idea what you’re going through, but that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Come sit in the family room,” says mom. “Wait, she shouldn’t move. Stay there.”

“Mom, I can move.” I sit on the couch and wave to Mrs. Slinger who’s pouring herself a glass of wine. I try to look into her eyes. “I have a mass.”

“Carl!” yelps my mother. She’s drunk off of Chardonnay. “Come!”

As mom walks toward me, she stubs her toe, hitting the weird cat statue next to the wall. “Owe! Owe!” she says, moaning, while hopping on one foot. “I hope I didn’t break it.”

“Are you okay?” Carl Slinger, MD and our neighbor, asks as he walks up. He’s the neighborhood doctor. He fixes kids’ wounds on the sidewalk at night. “Here sit down,” he says to mom. There goes Carl, the kiddie MD off to help the real patient here. He asks her to sit on the ottoman. She sits with her glass of wine still in her hand. “Let me examine your foot.” Doctor Carl slides down and takes his time examining her toe.

“God dammit,” my father says, clenching his fist in mid-air, refraining from hitting the brick wall. “I knew you were sick! Jesus, you would complain all the time about not feeling well, but then you'd go out and get shitfaced. I knew you were sick.”

Was he supposed to know? I knew. Sure, moments ago, I thought maybe I had some weird blood disease like syphilis. More plausible.

“I hope I don’t have to get one of those boot-things,” says mom. They’re so hideous, Carl.”

“No, it is not broken! You can wiggle your toes! What’s this,” he says, “I never noticed you had a mole on the bottom of your foot.” He raises her right foot higher. “Looks innocent

enough, but we'll keep a watchful eye." Blubbering idiot. Mom giggles, then abruptly stops, grabbing a piece of paper on the counter. Carl is looking at me in my living room while drinking with my parents.

"I don't feel well," I say. "I'm just going to go to my room." I grab rice cakes and a banana in the kitchen, so I can skip Thanksgiving dinner.

***

I lay down in my bed, remembering what my guidance counselor said, "Look for clues of what you want to be when you grow up. Look at your current interests." My bedroom is decorated like quarters of a half-inspired hobo. I'm locked here -- there's black- and white-striped wallpaper on the walls. Mom every-so-often calls up to me, screams up the stairs, Do you need anything? I can hear her yell at my little brother for pouring paint all over the fruit on the table. Downstairs there is a cocktail party taking place. The grandfather clock chimes.

There is a knock. It wakes me up. Carl enters and sits on the foot of my bed. My mom, standing at the doorway, looks at her wine and says, "Okay, I'll grab some ice."

"Tell me everything that's bothering you"

I tell him how the anemia is exhausting me to where I can't move. I have a fever. How I've just woken up in drenched clothes.

"I've known your parents for years," says Carl. "Your mom has the most wonderful tomatoes in the spring, and now I'll be getting to know you better. You're sick. And I can help you. What are you studying in school?"

"I'm undeclared."

“You should be a doctor! You’re about to learn the ins-and-outs.”

“Dr. Slinger, when will I know what I have?

“You can’t build patience by always demanding instant answers.” He sighs. “You have cancer.”

***

My mom enters my bedroom.

“I have to go to the hospital,” I say.

“Please tell whoever I send my condolences.”

Alien Liver

I'd done so much damage, enough for my body to need to create an alien liver to help with the damage. An alien liver would need to grow where an alien liver would, inside my chest cavity. This spot was important, my heart so close. My alien liver. It was a tumor. It was a tumor that joined the richest region of my body. Joining the heart and its great vessels as well as the cardiac nerve,

the esophagus,

the trachea,

the phrenic nerve,

the thoracic duct,

the thymus,

and the lymph nodes of the central chest.

It was beautiful that the word "lymph" is called after the Roman fresh water deity Lympha. In regards to my tumorous body, Lympha was the fluid inside of me, which contained my faulty white blood cells. I may have had a blood cancer, but it had more to do with water.

Lympha socialized all throughout my lymphatic system, distracting my system from doing its job carrying my cancerous cells to other parts of my body. By having the cancer cells on the move, my lymphatic system allowed my lymph nodes to interfere and trap the cancer cells – what happens with every human being. But my Lympha nodes did not. Lympha must have seduced them into doing her will -- and my chest cavity said, "Tumor grow."

And to grow, my white blood cells divided too fast. Or they stayed around way past their due dates. Whatever she wanted.

To think my enormous tumor was once a group of cells on a trip at a water park, sliding down water slides, nothing stopping the smooth ride -- right up to the piled-up landing inside my chest cavity.

It was atrocious to have to ask, but my oncologist said I was not at fault.

The cancer came from one of two choices. Option #1: I have had mono; side effects like this occur. A kissing disease could cause this. If I ‘d known, I would have kept my lips to myself a little more. It was sad that mono has the same symptoms, the exact same symptoms as lymphoma, because I would never know if mono had been what all this sickness was, before it was *more*.

It felt like a trick: fever, fatigue, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes -- just been from the cancer?

Option #2: My immune system at birth was the reason. What was supposed to protect me from infection and disease couldn’t, because it couldn’t protect it from itself.

I think everyone can relate to this.

***

Moments after I was diagnosed, my oncologist explained why lymphoma happens. In the hospital that day, I thought she said that if I did have mono, since it was untreated, lymphoma happened. For seven years, I thought since I waited so long to see the first doctor I could’ve caused my lymphoma. Seven years later I found out no one can treat mono – it just passes.

After hearing mono is untreatable, I looked up mono and lymphoma. An article published five years before I was diagnosed said it was rare for mono to cause lymphoma, but if it does, the

estimated average time between mono developing into Hodgkin's is four years, with “risks peaking two years after infection.”

***

Whenever I get sick and am very tired, I always think it’s mono. Test always comes back negative. They never find the antibodies. I’m giving up on waiting for this illness.

Company

The wooden hallway led down to the nurses' quarters, where I was dead woman walking with her two wardens, mom and oncologist toward her second chemotherapy appointment.

The chemo room was a three-walled nook, which extended from the "L"-shaped nurses' desk. On top of the nurses' desk, a large glass partition was there to block out whatever oozes or gets thrown out of the bodies of chemo patients. Beyond the sneeze guard.

"Choose your throne," my oncologist said to me as she, my mother, and I entered the chemo room. Thick, light blue recliners filled the room, the chairs still looking medicinal, perhaps because they came with trays, perhaps because sick people occupied them. I hopped into one of two recliners that were empty, the rest filled with elderly people. Everything smelled of chemicals, like Windex. My mother sat down in the recliner next to me, which I was not sure she could do, thinking you should have cancer to get one of these fine seats. Other chairs, smaller, harder, like classroom chairs, were kept next to the giant recliners, for the noncancer folk.

The nurse prepared to set up my port, and I didn't want mom to see any of it. I had to lift my shirt up to the bottom of my sports bra. The nurse had to pierce through my skin. A thin tube would be pushed into a port that's inside my skin, under a breast no less. I didn't want to my mom to see. Maybe if she didn't see any of it, she could never talk about it, remind me of it, bring it up like an ex-boyfriend. Sometimes she didn't have impulse control. I'd plead for her not to bring it up, but that was the bell for her to.

I asked her to leave the chemo room while the chemo was set up, and admirably she got up quick. She decided to use the cleanest restroom, the one near the rear door.

I tensed my whole upper body as the nurse inserted a needle into my port, into the

"septum," a resealing rubber center. A salty substance filled my mouth. The nurse asked, “Do you taste saltwater?”

I confirmed.

“Good!” she said. That small tube of sterilizing water, Heparin, flushed it, keeping it clean, to prevent any blood clots from happening. I saw my mom at the doorway and waved her back over.

“Now I am giving you steroids,” the chemo nurse said. “Remember it will make your bladder hot.” I liked her so much for not saying it in an embarrassing way.

“I remember.”

“Warm?”

“Yep.”

“Good,” she said, as she got up to leave.

“Bet that feels good,” mom said, in her recliner.

What the noncancered folk think.

***

“She has” – mom lowered her voice -- “Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.” My eyes were closed when she said this – I was trying to handle the sick feeling the chemo drugs caused. I wondered whom was she talking to. I cringed because she kept openly talking about my condition.

“I am so sorry to hear that,” said a male with a light voice.

“My daughter,” she said. I opened my eyes. The man looked at me. He sat in a chemo recliner across from the chemo room. Of course, he had cancer too, which was not the focus. I

was. He continued though, saying I was lucky, my cancer was the best cancer you could get.

I started talking to her so she wouldn't talk to anyone else. Soon I snapped and pleaded for her not to ask any questions because it hurt to think. Free conversation, I thought, would be easier. I asked her for only statements, but she managed to ask me what we should do for New Year's. I was spending New Year's with my family? I guess I was. I whined, telling her how I couldn't drink. "You can drink," she said.

"How can I drink?" I thought she had lost it. "I have cancer."

As the nurse hooked me up to another chemo drug, mom asked her, "Can she have a glass of champagne on New Year's?"

"Sure," the nurse said. "That's alright. You can drink a couple, but don't go too overboard."

"I can't think about drinking," I said.

"Yeah," mom said. "You'll retract that statement rather fast, when this is all over."

I saddened. My excitement of finally believing I'd find out what it was like living life sober was gone. Now that it was only up to me to stop drinking, there was no stopping.

Mom tried to start conversation multiple times, and I kept telling her I didn't want to.

***

Soon, I'd refuse to let her take me to chemo because of her voice. During chemo, the only voice that wouldn't drive me insane was my brother Ron's. His pitch, tone, whatever it is, soothed.

When mom came with me, I wished I'd come alone because I couldn't have anyone depend on my sickness as a way for him or her to be happy. She treated taking me to

appointments like it was her job, and jobs gave purposes, and with purposes people were happy, and nobody was allowed be happy about anything that resulted from me having cancer.

My sickness couldn't turn into an excuse for why life couldn't get better either. We couldn't heal like that. Friends had been using other friends' problems as an excuse to party – to mourn together. Drink until minds were erased. And painkillers were not fun to take when you were prescribed them. Not fun when actually in pain. I couldn't heal while I thought others were using me as a reason for why they couldn't. I didn't know how anyone could. This needed to be my room.

Also, I was angry because I wasn't getting the attention if she was there. "How is your mom doing?" my cousin once texted me. "Is she okay? I would be asking you this question, but I know you'll be fine. It's her I'm worried about."

***

Girl laughter inside the chemo room, and my eyes opened to two women talking; close friends, I guessed. It dawned on me that I hadn't considered bringing a friend to chemo, becoming momentarily jealous, because why hadn't I? Because what would we do? What would we talk about?

Her friend sat in the classroom-style chair next to Robyn. The friend brought snacks, a bowl of fruit. The citrus smelled horrible.

Robyn was almost two decades older than I, yet she was still the youngest person who had done chemo with me. Not too comforting.

When I was first diagnosed, my oncologist introduced me to another patient (we all

happened to be in the office). The patient was only two years older. We had the same cancer. Hers was not as far advanced, though, so her chemo was getting cut off at 10, instead of the typical 12, which I was doing. The fact that she had to do only ten made me so jealous I was not going to friend her. Her cancer spread out in small bits along her chest cavity. Not a giant mass like mine. Her symptoms weren't as severe. Before she found out, she only was fatigued, not zombiefied.

She had just gotten married. She thought the exhaustion was from wedding planning. I was envious of her treatment but not of her timing. I thought that being fatigued would be a shitty way to spend your honeymoon. It would be horrible to go through chemo during your honeymoon period. I was OK about my timing.

She told me about some licorice tea she drank when she got nauseous. I wrote it down, but never tried it. I didn't like licorice. We never talked since.

***

"I beat the 30 day mark!" Robyn exclaimed when she saw me looking in her direction. This was a great opener for conversation in the chemo room. The hope to keep hair would turn mortal enemies into best friends. She still had her hair – a healthy thing to promote. It was bleached hair, a few inches below her shoulder. If she still had her hair, there was hope I would still keep mine.

"Maybe," she said, "I'll keep my hair this time." She laughed. "Unfortunately" -- she blew her bangs out of her face -- "people will realize I'm not a natural blonde when the red roots grow out." Wanting to watch her was enough for me to try to carry on a conversation. Chemo

had just started. I had a shot.

"Aww," she said, "you're too young to have to go through this. Do you mind me asking what you have?"

"Hodgkin's Lymphoma." My cancer rolled easily off the tongue.

"Oh, you're lucky," her friend said while eating her non-chemo-friendly fruit. "That's the best cancer you can get."

I won the cancer lottery.

Robyn didn't pay attention to her friend's remark. She probably knew how stupid it was. She continued on with: "It's my second time around here with breast cancer." She looked at me like she wanted to know more about me. "Which chemo are you on?" She shouted, "You still have your hair, too!"

"Number three out of twelve," I said. "They tell me not to count on keeping it. I was supposed to lose it after my second chemo."

"Good! They say that to everyone," she said. "You never know. If it starts falling out, call me, and I'll come straight over with a wig. We'll have a wig party. I got a platinum wig with your name on it." She told her friend to give me her number.

I liked the idea of that. I said, "I'm so worried about when it'll fall out."

"That's why I keep a wig in my car." She never missed a beat. How could she be so full of life in here?

"I wouldn't cut it if I were you until it's falling out," she said. "If it starts falling out, call me, and I'll come straight over." She smiled at me. "The first time I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I chopped my hair off right away. This time," she said, "I want to hang on to it as long as possible."

“Wigs are fun,” she said. And I believed wigs were fun for *her*.

“You get to try out new looks,” she said. But I thought I wouldn’t look good in *new* looks. I wouldn’t look good with blonde or real red hair. Or with a pixie cut. Or in her platinum wig.

“How do you have so much energy?” I asked.

“My secret is my little girl,” Robyn said. Now she was a total MILF, too.

“I could never let my baby girl see how sick I am,” she said. “My daughter comes first. If she wants to go to the park, no matter how exhausted I am, I will take her to the park.”

I couldn’t do that right now. I became more content about my timing. I didn’t have my own family. I would never want to put this on my children.

Back then, I didn’t feel like I was ever put first my entire life.

***

Why did I believe Robyn?

She was pretty, and I reclined in awe of what she stood for: someone cool enough to handle cancer, but more importantly, a mother I wanted to be like.

She could work. “The first time around I had to quit my job,” she said, “but this time I have the energy to keep it.”

Everyone around me had told me to do nothing, but I went against their advice. I was taking two online college classes. I didn’t want to postpone my life. Of course it ended up being stupid. I got an F because I couldn’t keep up with the workload in my beginning short story class. I didn’t medically withdrawal because that requires you to drop all your classes, and I’d

have to get a note, and I had put in so much hard work in the beginner level world literature class. I couldn't accept seeing that "A-" not count toward anything.

***

Toward the end of her chemo, Robyn's cell phone rang, and she silenced it. "That's the guy from the club that I had sex with," Robyn said to her friend. She eye-rolled in her recliner. "He won't stop calling."

That got me excited, though I didn't know if she was going against her oncologist's orders, if she was putting her health seriously at risk by going out and partying. If I mentioned something out loud, I didn't know if she'd get caught, or if she'd feel bad about what she was doing. But I was too curious. "You can go to clubs?" I asked. "I mean I don't go to *clubs*, but if I wanted, I could?"

"Oh," she said, "I run around at the club the night I've gotten chemo."

"You can go out *after* chemo?"

"Yeah, I hit the gym straight after this and then go out. Use it," she said. "A guy never turns down sex. Not one guy has cared I have cancer. Tell them the truth, and it's a typical hook-up."

I prepared to go through this experience alone. I was already learning that casual hook-ups weren't what I needed because I needed someone who cared about me. The process of hooking up when you needed someone to love you was heartbreaking, especially when you didn't know how to self-love yet. She wanted what my friends would want.

***

I slouched in my blue recliner, saddening, knowing the likelihood of surviving breast cancer twice was extremely rare. She wasn't even 40 yet.

But around two years after I met Robyn, I'm pretty positive I saw her at a burrito joint during my lunch break, as I worked as an editorial administrator at the alt-weekly *New Times Broward-Palm Beach*.

When I was recognizing her, she glanced my way, but there was no look of her remembering me. So I didn't say hello. But was happy to know she was still alive.

I was in awe of Robyn. You needed to point out the lunacy of what she said to me that day for me to even see how, my God, she isn't the mom I want to be.

***

At my eleventh chemo, two big bald women were in the chemo room. They were middle-aged. They had supportive husbands. They all laughed, made jokes with each other. Both women were excited about their upcoming procedures of liposuction and new breasts (total reconstruction). They talked about how it would make them feel good. Their jolly, their hope -- they were what "bigger than life" meant. I wished I had seen people like them way sooner. They made me feel comfortable.

***

Many times I walked through the entrance of my oncologist's office, and sat down waiting for the nurse to call me into the blood-taking and -processing room, located right by the front door. When she did, I greeted this wonderful woman, who greeted me back telling me my father was watching over me, because, of course, she knew him, since he'd been treated here; something was wrong with his blood.

On this day, as she took my blood, she talked to my brother Ron, who told her he'd been on the roof trying to fix it. Years later, she will continue to ask me, "Your brother still on the roof?"

The dirtiest bathroom was in the waiting area of the oncologist's office. Old people, people disabled in some way, peed all over the toilet and floor. So I'd hold my bladder until I made it through the locked door to the examining rooms. They kept the door locked between the people who waited and the people who were being treated. It made one feel real special when let in. I loved to leave that puzzle spread out all over the waiting room counter, without ever touching it once because of the germs. But the real honor was being let into the chemo room. The highest honor is being invited into one by a cancer patient.

Why Jack was invited into the chemo room was rather unorthodox. I'd seen him snort painkillers, knew he liked and was on them, and since he wouldn't be able to absorb what was really going on (I thought), I invited him to stay with me during chemo. I loved having him with me. I never revoked the invitation.

He would say I always seemed pretty good, taking chemo like a champ. Even if I had kicked him out of the chemo room. During chemo, if he started talking too much, and I was struggling talking back, I'd get annoyed beyond belief, and he would leave the chemo room and wait in the car until I finished. We had the relationship where I didn't feel bad having him wait in

the car. I could scream and be incredibly bitchy, and he wouldn't get upset or mad or annoyed. He was (is) wonderful.

He didn't sit in the chemo chair until the nurse suggested it to him. It was hilarious when he fell asleep in it – like the recliner was his hotel room bed.

One time, as I waited to be hooked up to chemo, we were sharing a recliner. "If I could," he said, "I would take the chemo for you." He was the only one who said this to me. I knew other people probably said such things to their loved ones, but I never thought they meant it. I knew that it was true. Jack meant it. He cared more about me than him. I grabbed a disposable camera out of my bag, wanting a photo so I could remember that moment. Remember how comforted I was. How un-alone I felt. How happy. Pure happy. In the chemo room.

Car Rides

My mom didn't know that when she came to the chemo room to drop off a lox and bagel from Einstein's that I was hungover. She didn't know that was my go-to hangover meal. She didn't even question why I even asked for coffee and drank some of it. I didn't tell her that last night was great for most of the night. She didn't need to know that I went out and got shitfaced, the night before my fourth chemo. It was a small birthday party at Cheyenne's apartment for some girl I didn't know. I was going to cut myself off after two glasses of red wine. But there were weed brownies. How can I be a cancer patient and not eat the weed brownies? Chey gave me an antianxiety med. Soon, I forgot all about chemo the next day. I drank another glass of wine. Then it got weird. A guy who never liked me but decided to this night got crazy because his friend asked me out on a date, which I was thrilled about because guys really didn't care about my cancer. I made out with him, and he had a lip ring. That was a big win because the birthday girl liked lip-ring boy.

Cancer beat noncancer.

But I woke up to Chey having sex with her boyfriend on the right side of my body. I had passed out in her bed. This really disturbed me.

I woke up again around 8 a.m. hungover and knew I fucked up, but the damage was done. All I could hope for was that getting more sleep would alleviate the hangover. I drove to my bed and fell back asleep, waking up at the exact time I was supposed to be at chemo. I jumped out of bed, panicking. I was already scheduled for the last time slot given, two hours before the office closed -- my chemo took exactly two hours. I sped, getting there less than an hour before close. I pleaded with the chemo nurses to still give me chemo. It was too easy -- I

was getting my chemotherapy that day because my oncologist would be furious if I was turned away. Every day mattered. I felt really bad because they were going to stay an hour after close, until the nurse said they would rush my drug intake, so we'd all be able to leave at 5.

I did not tell my mother any of this.

I did not puke at all in the chemo room.

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I masked my nausea as I floated out the backdoor, and down the hallway, into the elevator. Fortunately, the oncologist's office was a building of no importance. As seen from the road: It was a one-story parking garage that hides two-floors of apartment-looking offices. I could make it the one flight down the elevator. I could. As the elevator opened, but before I could walk out of it, I vomited clumps of my lox and bagel on the ground right outside of it. My throw up also hit the floor inside the elevator. I contemplated if I should press the elevator button to go back to the doctor's office to tell them something was wrong while I was still in there. Chemo had never been this bad. I'd never thrown up after before. Just been as nauseated as 500 pregnant women. And couldn't eat anything besides things like crackers or bread. But I couldn't make it back up the flight. I needed to vomit again. I trampled to the corner of the parking lot and puked next to the silver Buick. I didn't want anyone to see me, and I was not seen. The puking was not stopping. Should I head back upstairs now and tell the nurses how sick I was? I didn't think I could make it all the way there. And the door could already be locked, and then I would be stuck upstairs. I didn't want to go back up there and explain what I'd done.

Better to be stuck in my car.

I wanted to be in bed. I had to leave before the nurses got to their cars, especially if they parked in this lot.

I drove out of the parking lot.

I made it five minutes on the road before I pulled into a local market parking lot, and, before I could see if there was a vacant parking spot, I opened the door and threw up on the ground next to my car, right there in the middle of the parking lot. Figures of people walked toward me. I didn't want them near me. I shut the door and drove my car to the back end of the lot and into a parking space. I got out of the car, and stumbled away from the vehicle, so no one knew I was driving. What would I say to them? Don't worry; I was not drunk. I was just driving while on my chemotherapy drugs. No reason to be scared.

I was stumbling in the parking lot, telling myself I wouldn't vomit. I made the bush my target, and I threw up all over it. I couldn't see straight, but I made out my red jeep and headed back to it, gathering that the longer I stayed in one spot, the likelier I'd get caught, and have to deal with people. I started back up my car and drove onto the highway, focusing as much as humanly possible on my lane. I feared for pedestrians. I would not kill anybody while I was killing my cancer. I felt sick again, so I stayed in the left lane approaching an intersection. It was a red light. I opened my door and puked and was fascinated by how no one on the road was noticing how I was throwing up out of my car door in daylight. On a faraway curb, some pedestrians looked disgusted. Maybe they'd seen. I gunned my car. I needed to be more stealth, so I started throwing up in a plastic red cup and kept dumping it out of the window, as it got full.

I made it home and parked, thanking whatever just got me here. I went up the stairs to lie on my bed, but, upon reaching it, it looked too soft. I needed something sturdy to help with the nauseated feeling. Had practice with handling this. I grabbed the comforter and pillow and

headed to the hard bathroom floor, and lied down. I was totally OK with staying on the bathroom floor as long as I had to, even if it was for the next two days. And I really didn't know if I would die.

I cringed. Wasn't learning.

Never learning.

***

Two years before diagnosis, when I thought I was really insane, Chey and I drove to the gas station to fuel up the tank for the drive south, Orlando to Fort Lauderdale. Chey, my driver, and I had just spent the past three hours being the judges of a rumrunner contest at our bar before the two-and-a-half hours on the road. We sat at the corner stools and listened to the bartenders bicker about who could make the best rumrunner. Never upsetting a bartender, I said they were all delicious, then went to the bathroom and poured the drink out. Or I bent down and placed the drink on the ground next to my stool.

At the gas station, Damion exited the store with a 24-pack. We had called our friend Damion for help because we both didn't have our fake IDs. My mouth dropped. A 24-pack? "You don't want to run out on the road," he told us, like it was a proverb. I knew this was bad. We finished pumping gas. The 24-pack of Miller Light was locked securely in the middle of the backseat.

We got on 1-95. A bit into the journey, I stopped drinking, barely finishing a beer. I never could make the switch over from liquor to crappy quality beer.

I couldn't wrap my mind around what we were doing, though I'd done it before -- my

usual ride down south liked drinking too -- but she never was tanked, especially not before the start of the journey.

Not before long, I sobered up.

I feared for my life.

Cheyenne was gabbing on the phone, smoking a cigarette, and cradling a beer between her legs while flying down the middle of two lanes on the superhighway. She was not aware she was driving in the middle of two lanes.

I looked across the barren lanes – wondering why were we so fortunate that no one else was on the road. I told myself that everything was under control.

Wheels hit bumps before I demanded that she got off the phone, so she could help me help her drive. “Pull over.” I said. “I’m taking the wheel.”

“No, I got this.”

“You’re flying down the middle of the highway. You don’t feel those bumps?”

I thought she was mad at me. Margo died. They were roommates. Maybe she hated the fact she was left with me. Maybe she hated the fact that I used her car all the time. Why wouldn’t she let me take the wheel?

***

Cheyenne may have not wanted me to drive her car. I crossed some sort of boundary. But I had to make sure that we wouldn’t both die. Whenever she crossed the white line, I told her. She swerved the car back into our lane if she had to. We slowed down, after I said it would be better for us to go the speed limit. No matter how scared I was she was not going to stop driving. I was

going to die. I was going to die.

We were getting close – I was feeling more optimistic we'd make it -- heading to a house party a little north of Fort Lauderdale, so I opened another beer, even though it was warm. We took the Sample exit and went east toward Lighthouse Point, pulling into a closed gas station along the way to call and get directions. She was finally going to let me take the wheel. I exited the car to get my make-up out of my bag in the backseat when flashing red lights came toward me. It looked like a moving Christmas tree. The sirens ruined the pretty picture. When the cop car stopped, I threw my full beer upward, it falling right through the sunroof back into the car. It had to be spilling everywhere. "This," said the cop as he approached us, "is where I would normally ask if you guys have been drinking."

After roadside tests barefoot, she was in handcuffs, being put in the backseat. It was pitiful. She should have used the ghost pitch. Said our car was haunted, said, "Officer, have you ever been on the Haunted Mansion ride at the Magic Kingdom? When you're about done with the ride your buggie chair flips in front of a mirror, and you see that a ghost has been riding with you the whole time. Well, officer, you need that special mirror to be able to see him, but he was the one driving."

The cop came back to me, telling me how wasted my friend was, asking why I wasn't the one driving. I decided not to tell him that I was about to.

Two of our friends then came to the gas station to pick up her car. But they were both drunk, and the cop noticed that as they approached. The one who drove over was now getting a DUI too. He was so angry at Cheyenne.

The cop now said I needed to find a ride home because the car was getting impounded.

My mom came, and when she arrived, the cop told her how well behaved I was. We

fought on the car ride home. She said, “A good friend would be in jail with her right now.”

That statement, although I was 19, made me run away once we reached home. I cried on a playground park bench nearby. But she was yelling for me, and I didn’t want her walking around the neighborhood alone, so for her safety, I returned.

Mom and I would fight again in New York three months before my diagnosis, the night we thought a couple drugged me (I could’ve been that drunk). After the bar and after the fight started, I was inside a corner market in Times Square, when a woman came up to me and grabbed my crotch. She asked me to go back to her hotel room. She was with a man. A really good-looking man. They both wanted me to go back with them. I told mom this. She said absolutely not. I said I was going to go because I didn’t want to go back to the hotel room with her. The man approached mom, saying, “Don’t worry, my wife can be really aggressive, but your daughter will be safe.” Mom replied, “You think I’m going to let you turn my daughter into a sex slave?” At this time, the woman was trying to push me down a dark alley. Mom grabbed me and wouldn’t let go. The woman tried to pull me back. Like she was going to beat mom, yeah right – that made me happy. I didn’t want this woman touching me. To get the woman off me, I told her I’d sneak out of the hotel room once mom fell asleep. She made me repeat her hotel room number a few times.

On the way to the hotel, although we were just down the street from it, I was trying to find out where Central Park was. I wasn’t going to meet up with husband and wife, but I still didn’t want sleep in the same room as mom. But my aunt didn’t want me to sleep in Central Park, so I didn’t. I slept in mom’s and my hotel room. I took a little piece of her Xanax and slept under the air vent to drone out her snores.

For the year I got treatment in Fort Lauderdale, I lived at one of my close girlfriend’s

parent's house. It was a couple blocks from mom's.

***

After that weekend not leaving the bathroom, that was not going to happen again. When I saw my oncologist, I owned up to what I'd done, driving while being so sick. Sure, I also told her because I wanted to be certain that the sickness was caused by my hangover, and that there wasn't any bigger problem. She took away my driving privileges.

And I wasn't going to have Chey drive me recklessly to my chemo appointments, she talking on her phone and smoking a cigarette at the same time. I was not going through chemotherapy to die in a car crash. Chey would drop her cigarette on her lap. My knees would be against the panel in front of me. When she finally realized she didn't have three arms, it would be too late. We'd crashed into another car. A typical fender bender.

I was on the way to chemo, so of course I'd jump out of the car and scream. I had to make it to my chemo appointment. Even worse if this car crash would've happened on my way to my last chemo. Then I'd fiercely head to the right side of the car to see the damage. The lady who we'd hit would get out of her car and look at me. Me with a shaved head. And she would run back into her car and push down the lock. She would call someone – probably the police. Would they give me chemo in jail?

"What?" I'd say to the lady. "Do I look like a killer to you?"

The scared, poor woman would mouth, "Yes" -- through her window. A long yes.

I would hear Chey behind me: "Yeah," she'd say into the phone, "I should go now. I see cop lights coming." She'd hang up, face me. "I know you're mad."

“Oh shut up. I can’t even snap at you right now. I’m all snapped out.”

Two police cars would pull up, one after the other, and the second officer would be an extremely attractive male.

First cop would say to Chey: “Looks like your fault.” He’d ask for her license, registration, and insurance. Was that sweat or were tears strolling down my face? I wouldn’t know.

“She needs to get to her chemotherapy appointment,” Chey would say, pointing to me. “She can’t be late. Can you take her?” Jesus.

***

On the way to one of my chemos, before we took off on our journey, I watched my brother snort a painkiller in the car. You can’t win every time.

Chemo Toxins

The chemo nurses, three of them, one clearly in charge by the way she gave the other nurses directions, were in my hospital room for my first chemo treatment. They hooked up a bag of steroids to my fresh port, the new plastic implant under my left breast. The woman said: “Expect to get warm down below,” in a coy tone of all things, so I knew something humiliating was about to happen. I tried looking at my whole body at once. I wanted to be the first to see what was happening. “You know” – she then offered -- “in your special spot.” I looked down to my genitals, feeling warm at my bladder. I didn’t know if I was about to pee myself, if I was going to have some sort of alien discharge. My bladder warmed, but no liquid escaped my body.

They left, and in my hospital bed, I laid there, alone, arm stuck to my side, making me question if I was having a heart attack. All I saw was yellow. I couldn’t take in any air. The most unglamorous death was my fate: I was a cockroach sprayed with Raid, paralyzed and humiliated, but I was proud that as I died I felt bad for poisoning bugs, and not just for myself. Did cockroaches even get heart attacks? I would die just realizing that cockroaches had hearts.

I was going to die because I couldn’t reach the hospital remote a few inches away. Many people died in their hospital beds because of this issue (no proof needed), and this will never be portrayed on the silver screen.

I couldn’t turn my head. Same with my eyes -- eyes didn’t come with a panoramic view without the function of moving the head. I told myself to calm. Breathe. Accept. Accept it. I told myself to just lie there. I’ve done this before, with a couple men.

During my expected last seconds, my arm just shot out and hit the hospital remote. I was amazed that my arm knew exactly where it was, my thumb pressing down on the right button,

making it all feel like some beautiful, sick joke I was playing on myself, like I couldn't reach the hospital remote, of course I could.

I felt like I could be saved for the moment. But I sank deeper into my hospital bed, and it was clear I was going to die before any nurses answered my call, that I would die waiting.

Then I saw the outline of a nurse, walking slowly into the room. Her features weren't visible, but I knew she wasn't the right nurse, the one who would save me. My chemo nurses moved much faster; chemo nurses moved much faster. If I didn't yell that I was getting chemo, I would die because she wouldn't know whom to get, and that would be my fault. But I wasn't able to speak. The nurse saw all this, and ran out. I was alone in my room again and would die alone, waiting.

The chemo nurses bolted into my room, swarming over me, yanking out the tube attached to my port. "Tube is clamped," one said. My bicep tightened. They were too late. My arm was telling me that the damage was done. But I took in air. The yellow was disappearing. When I figured out that there was a blood pressure meter wrapped around my arm, I knew I would stay alive. I could breathe, and I would regain my strength.

All the nurses and I, we all took a breath together, so I thought we were all in agreement that the chemo treatment was over. But they reattached the bag. And drip by drip by drip I took in my first chemotherapy treatment, while a nurse babysat me in my room.

After an hour, she asked if she was still needed. I shook my head. I wanted to be left alone. And I was, besides hearing girly chuckles, as a group of hospital workers bounced past me down the hallway. I wished that they weren't allowed to laugh while in the hospital. Then I felt bad: It was wrong to take joy away from them; this might be their only chance to laugh. I prayed they wouldn't get a glimpse of me. If they did, they would send somebody, and I wouldn't be

alone anymore.

***

A few patients were in the chemo room. This was a communal room. A social gathering. If I were a dangerous case, if I were going to die, they wouldn't let me get chemotherapy here at a group oncologists' office, and the rest of my chemotherapy treatments will be here. I would not get my chemo done inside the hospital. People died from chemo inside hospitals.

The safety I felt didn't add up yet though. In the hospital I was the only patient for three chemo nurses, and they still almost killed me, and here there were almost double the patients than nurses.

But I couldn't die in front of all these cancer victims. They wouldn't allow it.

My oncologist informed me, minutes before my second chemo, in one of the many examining rooms (1 of 12) in the oncologist group's office that during my first chemo treatment at the hospital, two weeks ago, my face had turned a deep purple, giving *everyone* in the hospital a real scare. *Everyone.* My God, I was talk of the hospital town.

I had an allergic reaction to one of my chemotherapy drugs during my first treatment in the hospital.

"What happened during my first chemo is not going to happen again, right?" I had asked, like it mattered but it didn't; nothing would stop it from happening. I would be getting my second chemo treatment that day in the chemo room.

I was in my seat, and I wanted to ask my oncologist if it was OK that I took one of my mom's antianxiety meds, a Xanax, before coming to my appointment. I didn't want to cause any

more damage to my organs than what was necessary. But I didn't want to be told that, since I'd taken it, I couldn't do chemo today.

I wanted it over.

I didn't want to be told I shouldn't take Xanax again. It was the only thing that got me to this room. And my oncologist had already decided that I wouldn't be taking any more painkillers or antianxiety meds because she didn't want me to have a drug addiction when this was all over. She wanted me to be "right back to normal." She never did ask if I did drugs recreationally before my diagnosis. I was on Xanax at the hospital during chemotherapy; it had to be OK.

It had to be OK.

My oncologist rolled up to me on one of the stools kept in the middle of the chemo room, as I was not getting comfortable in the comfortable recliner. "I'll be watching over you the whole time making sure nothing goes wrong," my oncologist said. With that promise, I was no longer scared. "We're giving you Ativan," she said, "It's antianxiety medicine, and it will calm your body down, and your body will react better. It'll absorb the chemo drugs better. Ativan is a wonderful pill, but you'll be getting it in liquid form. It makes your mind and muscles and memory relax." She rolled away from me, and I got emotional with her off to my side, because I was seeing that she was letting the nurse take over. A nurse had grabbed a stool and was now rolling it in front of me. "They'll watch over you better than I even can," my oncologist said.

How I got that wrong scared me. Like *she'll* be watching over me the whole time. I was relieved I didn't embarrass myself by saying anything out loud about how happy that made me. I'd seem like I didn't trust the nurses. Was that supposed to be relief? Having her here?

Yes it was.

Ugh.

She gave me to her nurses as she joked about her spaciness. She *was* all over the place when she thought hard, but still. “Promise,” she said, “you won’t make any big decisions while Ativan’s in your system.” She wasn’t moving until I said something. “Promise?”

(I promised, but that didn’t stop me from becoming a clepto. I’d still stop by my mom’s after chemo and grab shirts, all her clothes, whatever. I enjoyed the power of taking whatever I wanted.)

***

The chemo nurse was about to flush out my port with saline. I looked at the ceiling. She pulled the skin covering my port. It pinched. The muscle under the port pulled the pinched skin back. The pinched skin felt like it ripped.

Saltwater filled my mouth. I reopened my eyes to remind me where I was, which was not at the beach, not in any ocean of any sort. I would be in locked indoors, in cancer rooms, forever. Waiting in my blue recliner, hooked like bait, my body attached to a bag of steroids. My body was the bait.

My cancer was the fish.

“Do I *have* to take steroids?” I asked the nurse.

“Yes, why? They really help with the nausea.”

“They also make you gain weight.”

The nurse sighed. “We want you to gain weight. It’s healthy to have extra pounds on you right now.

“I don’t really get nauseous.” The nurse raised one eyebrow, which said I didn’t

understand anything yet.

A cute male, frail nurse in glasses, who turned out to be my other chemo nurse, reclined my chair on the way back to the nurse quarters, shocking me. I was happy he did that, because I wouldn't have allowed myself to get that comfortable, therefore never knowing how much better it was being reclined.

"Would you like a blanket?" my female nurse asked.

"No." The blankets were kept along the wall. It creeped me out to share old people germs. But the chemo room was extremely cold. No more wearing sandals.

My body absorbed the Ativan, turning me completely liquidy and smooth, turning me idealistic: I couldn't stop making decisions and they were all positive. I was going to survive. There was a good lymphoma and a bad lymphoma and I got the good lymphoma. I heard crashing waves of hard soles walking down the hall, a symphony of crashes, as this new world began, consisting of me, my mind, and chemo. The conversation started when the first chemo drug entered my bloodstream, after I let myself be taken over by two bags of Ativan. Eyes closed. I was not in the chemo room anymore. I found myself on a dingy, engine off, floating in the middle of the ocean, with ten-foot waves: huge, monstrous, crushing waves.

I reminded myself that my chemotherapy drugs were extremely effective. I chugged whiskey bottle after bottle on my dingy. My insides burned.

***

It was my fifth chemotherapy appointment, so I've gotten a good look at the drug room. The nurses kept the drugs in a real cold room on the right side of their desk. The chemo room was

cold to keep the drugs good. The nurses guarded the doorway. The nurses' bodies moved back and forth to cover any view of it. We, the sick, would have to pummel through at least two of them to reach the front hinges of the door. That was a very expensive room. We would all get rich if we stole our drugs and sold them.

But the nurses had time to block the passageway to the back exit. We couldn't even make a run out of the chemo room for the back door, if we wanted to. The chemo room was perfectly arranged to combat a takeover.

How dangerous were the sick?

The jolly nurse approached me with my assortment of chemo drugs in a bucket and said, "Here's your cocktail." I didn't think I would ever have a cocktail again. She hooked me up and walked away, and my cocktail wasn't touched. "Alright," I said, when she returned. "Show it to me. Which one of these is the one that makes you lose your hair?"

The nurse appeared nervous, probably thinking I was about to freak out. I understood. But I felt stable. She stared at me for a moment longer. "This one," she said. She pointed to a small tube of bright pink liquid, the only chemo drug of color. The one chemotherapy drug that was actually pretty is the one that took away my prettiness. It was in a syringe. It was the shot, which boosted into my port while another horrendous bag of chemo moved into my vein. "And that's?" I asked as I pointed to another bag.

"The Bleomycin" she answered. For the rest of my life, I'd have to tell doctors I'd taken Bleomycin due to the lung damage it could cause, of what lung damage it does cause. If an anesthesiologist gave me too much air while putting me under for surgery, he or she could off me.

I hated this drug. I read the Lance Armstrong book of course finding out that he refused to

take Bleomycin. Because if he did take it, he wouldn't be able to compete in another Tour de France. My oncologist told me I could live a very normal life. But Armstrong had the choice that I never would. The effectiveness of taking ABVD, my cocktail, to treat Hodgkin's Lymphoma was far too great. During his cancer, he was the power player. He was someone who got to say, "No, I'll risk it, find me another drug."

I didn't like thinking of the little pink drug, which was making me lose my hair. Because of the drug that started with the "A" I could get serious heart damage. And because of the Bleomycin I would never scuba dive. I had never scuba-dived before, but now I could never. Right after my oncologist told me this, she explained the pain of having to say this to a Hodgkin's Lymphoma patient who scuba-dived all over the world, many times a year.

***

During my seventh chemo, since I was yearning to rip the Ativan tube out of my port, I reminded myself that chemotherapy was first treated on lymphoma, treatment found during World War II. Just another bright and shiny day having WWI warfare mix kill everything inside me. It burned right through. I visualized jumping into the ocean, deep and dark. Something lit the way home, but I saw no faces.

I was nauseous. This must be what an atomic bomb felt like: the vapors burning right through, a severe stabbing in my chest. My left arm numb. I was in too much pain. I kept searching for the nurses, any nurse. I couldn't call out, nor wave to get any of their attention. I thought this was what I had to go through: My body tolerated chemo less and less each time.

Every now and then I paused the music on my iPod and looked for the nurses. I was putting all my faith in them. I trusted them. If something wasn't right, they'd rescue. If they looked over and did nothing, it meant I was OK. It was just my body reacting to the chemo. I kept hearing from another recliner a: "No, ah geeze, no, no. That's not right" through the waves. She was across the chemo room, and I wondered if the lady was talking about me. My nurse swung by and hooked me up to my first chemo bag. She didn't see anything wrong, so I didn't say anything. As she walked away, I stared down at my chest. I had on a sports bra. Under it, my left breast had swelled into a giant water balloon, twice as big as my right breast.

I waved her back. She hustled to detach my chemo drug. The steroids and Ativan were loose inside my body. If it were a chemotherapy drug, my life would end here.

Sent to the ER, where my cardiologist met me, removed my old port, inserted a new one right on top of my left breast – and I was back the next day inside the chemo room to get my chemo. Every day mattered. Because my port was so new I got a shot of morphine. I didn't tell the lovely morphine administrator that my port wasn't that sore, that the port under the collarbone was incredibly more comfortable than it was under my left breast, and, to boot, it was barely visible.

I wanted the morphine.

I loved the morphine.

And at my eighth (and ninth) chemo I begged my oncologist for more morphine because my body didn't jerk when I got chemo on it.

The answer was no.

Fine, I said, then load me up on so much Ativan I'll know why I'm not allowed to drive myself to chemo.

She did.

***

My brother brought me a protein smoothie. I leaned over and threw it up next to my chair. My jolly nurse was so kind not to care cleaning up my vomit, right next to me.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"It's a protein smoothie."

"Protein smoothie? You wanted to drink that?" She was in disbelief. "Never drink that again while getting chemo."

My two chemo nurses switched every other time. Was it because the patient needed the break from the nurse, or was it because the nurse needed the break from me?

This chemo's nurse, who was the round, optimistic lady who enjoyed the simple pleasures in life, showed others the inside of a Hallmark card. Why didn't she show me?

***

I rolled the I.V. pole on toward the restroom -- my chemo was attached to me. The bathroom was on the far side of the chemo room. We sick people would watch each other enter the bathroom. The nurses would watch us enter it. The chemo chairs were arranged in a "U"-square, so nothing blocked the nurses' views. The only way chairs could sit on the side that was missing was if the chairs faced the nurses. Then the nurses could see the patients' faces, not the backs of their seats. But if there were chairs there and if those chairs did face the nurses' faces that'd just be too

uncomfortable for everyone involved. The sick patients in those seats and the nurses would be right in front of each other -- like those backwards wheelchairs, when the person who wheels it and the wheelchair-bound have inches between their faces. Kill me before putting me in one of those wheelchairs.

I was making it to the bathroom. And it was fun to walk. I had a tow, a mighty staff. I felt good. I was in control of the ocean. I tripped over the bottom of my staff but didn't fall. I looked down. My I.V. pole had run into the ridge of the bathroom doorframe. I wanted to yell back at the nurses and ask them, "You think we can lift these things?" There should be a little wheelchair ram for it. I lifted the staff up over the ridge -- the nurses were lucky I was able to raise my staff -- into the bathroom. I finally got my privacy.

***

At a checkup, inside an examining room, I told my oncologist that I felt like I was coming down with a cold. "You want us to hydrate you since you are here?" my oncologist asked.

I thought that was an excellent idea. I sat down in the chemo room in one of the recliners, squirming, because all I could think of was chemo. But I could do this. Do the motions of chemo if it was going to safe me.

They hooked a bag of water up to my port.

Then later, they pumped these drugs in me at an alarmingly slow rate, so my body wouldn't resist them.

Sex and Dating

Is It Normal

To buy a book about the health problems that come with having cancer, but never open it. Yes. If you do open it, is it normal for you to fall into depression? Yes, but only if it's because of the thickness of the book and from seeing all the symptoms yet to arrive. Is it normal just to take the symptoms as they come? Yellowish tone on splotches of skin, on fingers. Dark, sullen circles under eyes. Black rug burn on knees, but not remembering any rug. Metallic spit. Yes. Is it normal to notice that these books don't teach you how to date on chemo? Yes. Should that make you mad? No.

How To Get Your Head In The Dating Game

Step One

Ignore your doctor. "You don't want anything," your oncologist will say, "to deter you away from the one important thing you should be concentrating on and that's taking care of yourself. No bars, no drinking, no smoking."

Step Two

Lie. "You don't have to tell people you have cancer" – your mother's advice. "You actually don't have cancer. You have *lymphoma*. Cancer's not part of the name, so you're actually not lying." Take the advice further: Don't tell yourself you have cancer.

Step Three

Envision how dream dates will go, so you'll actually date. Note that restaurants will solely be based on the quality of their French fries from now on because that's the only food that tastes right. On the first date, your guy must say, "They have great fries here," for your heart to go aflutter.

Picture a gorgeous plate of thick steak fries being placed in front of you. He watches you shove them all into your mouth. "No problems with fries," he'll say. He's probably picturing you shoving other things into your mouth, but you'll ignore that thought for now.

Obviously, in your fantasy, you'll speak with a mouth full of fries: "Not saying that I wasn't a fast eater before, but now maybe I should consider it a calling." He now wants you even more because your dream date is into big eaters.

He'll say: "I have so much respect for your eating habits." And you know he means it because he wants you so badly, he's drooling.

The One Step To Prevent You From Not Getting Laid

Remember how a year prior to diagnosis, you toyed around with the male druggie who, after getting fucked up, enjoyed walking around the room in five-inch heels. He wanted to be with you. But he needed to get off probation first. And needed a job. And needed to use his girlfriend's car, and he lived with her. He couldn't pay his own rent. He mentioned how much he cared for her, and how he didn't want to hurt her until the timing was right. He guaranteed you that they didn't have sex anymore, and that they hadn't for a long time. She confirmed this as well.

Then one night, he, his girlfriend, another male friend, and you all headed to some rundown, boxed-in strip club at Coco Beach. You didn't have fun because you couldn't: You

were sick and everything was too open, which is strange for a strip club. Later, he and you went out to the ATM a couple blocks away to get cash for blow. You didn't usually pay for it, but giving blow to the gang was like giving them gas money. You hated it. Your brain chemistry couldn't handle it: way more downs than ups. But who wanted to be the odd woman out? You made out with him for a couple hours, and it was the first time you didn't enjoy kissing him because his breath reeked of expired nicotine and orange juice. That was really gross.

That night, you guys all slept in a skuzzy hotel room near the Atlantic. His girlfriend paid for the room. He and you fell asleep in the rollaway bed after making out some more. He and you woke up in the morning when she called out his name, asking, "Why are you in her bed?" Her remark made you smile, how disgusting.

On the road trip back to Orlando, while in the backseat, the other male companion whispered to you about how repulsive you were. He heard sloshing sounds in the middle of the night and thought you gave the druggie a blow job. "Not true," you said, knowing you would never go further than kissing and cuddling with a druggie.

How To Look And Feel Your Best

First

Wait until you're stuck in a rat tunnel between chemo and your bed. When you want a change, have your friends talk you into going to a local music festival in downtown Fort Lauderdale. Let them insist.

Put two shirts in your hands. Place the first one over the chest. "Does this one say cancer?" ask yourself, then swap: "Or this one?"

Later that evening, outside a gothy bar, meet a cute boy named C. You're calling him C

now because your world revolves around “C” words – and he is no different. In this case, it’s a term of endearment.

Tell him you’re going to get a tattoo on your scalp after you shave your head. He’ll love it.

When he asks you if you’ve ever had an “Anchor Steam” beer, be honest and say, no. He’ll ask if you want to try his. You can’t help but freak out and say, “I don’t know, the germs.” He’ll say, “Well what happens when I want to kiss you later?” Then you’ll take a sip of his beer to show that you’re OK with receiving *his* germs. He’ll ask for your number, and you will go home not yet being kissed, but you’ll know that it’s coming soon. His pursuit will create more certainty that you’ll survive.

Second

Realize the best part about dating is being sober and being able to carry a conversation. You spent the last couple of years talking about all the stupid drunk things you did. The day after drinking you were always too hungover to talk about anything but what happened the night before. Please note: Hangovers may kill conversations, but you will now be replacing all the stupid drinking activities with talking about cancer.

It’s not an aphrodisiac.

C and you hang out for entire evenings, and you guys don’t even have one drink. This makes you happy. He says, “I looked some up about Hodgkin’s. Can you tell me more?”

He’ll give you the best cancer pick-up line. “You know,” he says, “when I met you, I didn’t see someone with cancer. It was like it was already in your past. You were already a survivor.” You’ll rely on this. Later, you’ll think Florida is full of natural liars.

Be warned that strengths are also weaknesses. You'll tell your friend, "I almost don't want to meet anyone new because to be truthful I have to talk about it and everything is so defined by it. I have cancer, cancer, cancer."

"You've grown," your friend will say. "You have to come to some sort of truth with yourself to keep yourself open."

"That's the thing," you'll say. "I feel like I've been closed off for so long. And now, there is no hiding cancer. So what the fuck, might as well throw everything in the air."

"There's hiding cancer," she'll say. "People hide things. Maybe that's why you and C will work. You've opened up and you caught something good too." The good thing was C; the bad thing you caught was cancer.

Questions About Sex And Birth Control

Can I Have Sex

"What about sex and stuff?" you ask your oncologist at a bimonthly checkup, before chemotherapy.

"This isn't a time to rush into anything," she'll say. "Some married couples decide to abstain from sex during the whole time of their treatment."

"Really?"

"As you'll see, it's a very sensitive time."

You want to tell her that you don't need anyone. You just want to know if you can hurt someone physically. "But I *can* have sex, right?"

"Yes," she says, "just wait 48 hours after chemo. All the drugs are flushed out of your system by then. But no kissing or swapping of any liquids until then, OK? Obviously, you'll

have to use contraceptives."

So I Can Get Pregnant

"Of course," your oncologist will say, "but a baby can't grow in there right now, and I don't want to put you through the alternative." By saying this, your oncologist is unaware that she has encouraged you to think you turn babies into monsters.

Abortion is worse than cancer? Your oncologist brainwashes you, perhaps appropriately, perhaps not, into believing this is true.

"Can I have children one day?" you'll ask her.

"Yes," she says, and you don't know if you can believe her. It's always an awkward conversation talking about the birds and the bees. Now imagine talking about birds with disabilities. "But not for two years," she says.

For Safe Sex

Address all lover candidates as such: "48 hours after chemo, which is a WWI warfare mix by the way, it's safe for us to make-out. My pee is no longer toxic. I have remembered to flush the toilet twice for your safety. And now both of us can do the deed. During sex, you shouldn't go anywhere near my head. Do not touch my hair. Do not pull it. Don't even think about brushing it to the side. Please be gentle because my port's sore. Your hand should not be anywhere close to my face. Actually barely move. But if I get pregnant, you're in luck, if you don't want any children."

How The Reproductive System Works

Period still arrives monthly, even though it's supposed to stop. A great omen for future fertility, but this also means you have PMS on the day of chemo.

Body Image

Weight Gain

Yes. You eat a lot; you take steroids.

Hair (on top of your head):

First

You cut your hair to your shoulders after the second chemo. Normally, your hair would be too thick this short. It would bush out, but now, since you're a couple chemos in, the haircut looks great. Your hair has thinned out perfectly, and it's still shiny and pretty (but remember, after subsequent chemos, the hair will fry).

Second

It won't help matters that the night you met C (one/third into chemo), the first thing he did was compliment your shoulder-length hair.

"You have beautiful hair," he says outside the bar.

"Thanks," you say, "you should've seen it in its heyday, but I have to cut it all off soon."

His friend will shoot you a deadpan look. He wants to protect his friend. He knows you are sick. But he can't get C's attention. He shakes his head because he knows C's going to say it: "Why?"

"I have cancer."

That is how you meet, and, within two months, every time you raise your head of the pillow,

he grabs as many hairs that've fallen out as he can and throws them behind the bed before you can see them.

Third

You ask C to shave your head. If he'll do that, then surely he has no problem staying with you after you lose your hair.

"Shave my head," you say. And he wigs out and you fight and he pours the red wine he has opened down the sink, which makes you even more furious, which makes him even more confused because how could you be in the mood to drink it after what just happened? Ha.

Fourth

During an oncologist visit, an old couple, sitting in waiting-room chairs, speaks loudly so they can hear each other. The old man stares at you. "Is that a boy or a girl?" he asks his wife, loudly.

"What?"

"Is that a boy or a girl?" He is still looking, squinting. "These days, I just can't tell."

Fifth

Now you are afraid to see C after your head is shaved – it would easier to just get rid of him. But you won't do that. When he does see you, he smiles and says, "My very own All American GI Joe."

Sixth

One day inside Best Buy, you compliment the cashier's earrings. She looks at you frightened, ignoring what you said, but as soon as C joins your side, she decides to finally say, thank you, once she realizes you aren't hitting on her.

Seventh

You run into a guy who has always wanted to date you but you haven't since he's an idiot inside

a CD store. He asks you while your hair's cut close to the head, "Going through your butch phase, are you?"

Pubic Hair

A pro! Some unflattering hair does fall off: no bikini line hair, minimal pubic hair (thin, soft, fuzzy, like a newborn's. Your pubic region has never been like this. When puberty hits, it's like boom! Coarse hair!)

Under Arm Hair

None, after it falls out.

How To Deal With Feelings

Why Giving It A Chance Matters

Your mom asks you how old C is. 26, you say and ask why that matters. You're 22. She says, "It is so nice. You guys can grow up together, share everything together."

Sleeping Over

Sleeping over at C's place will have its complications. C lives in the same house from early childhood and has no roommates; his parents moved to another state. Mornings you won't have the energy to leave his house. Tell him that on the phone when he calls because what if he comes home early from work, and you are still there! Surprise! You're still lying on the couch, not even watching TV, but hanging out in the dark, in complete silence. He would think you're an insane person.

Be honest, straight up, and find a suitable time to leave, which still gives him space.

Around 7 p.m., muster up enough strength to drive to your own bed. Only garner the strength because you will not become the girl who never leaves.

In the middle of the night, starve at first. It feels like intestines eating fellow intestines. Learn to eat as late as possible, and then as fast as possible get comfortable enough to where you can eat his food late at night. Eat fast and go back to sleep.

When you suffer from major chronic fatigue, make his house a nest: like a premature bird, become dependent. Basically move in. When you wake, he'll be already at work. And you won't have the energy to make yourself food, but you will lay on the couch and stare through the front window at the large shrub, which guards the house from the road. It's the castle wall -- as tall as his single-story house, and three-feet thick. In the middle of the shrub, there is a door-sized hole, so you can exit the front door. The shrub and you will sit in silence, until C comes home, and by the time he does get home, you're well-rested enough to act like you have energy, for a few hours.

Find sleeping music. A bird lives in your shrub. His chirps are lullabies to the Earth after a hurricane has passed through. After a chemotherapy treatment, noises such as your brother putting clothes into a grocery-store plastic bag can make you scream, but not the bird. Do birds chirp when they're depressed? you'll ask yourself later. Because, if they do, you decide, this will really change everything.

Female Arousal

For the few first chemos you are with C, the two of you enjoy having sex the night before. Trying to kill the panic you have because chemo is the next day is a rush.

Sexual Complications

There will be many, but about a month or two into your sexual episodes, when you say, “I can’t lift my arms,” because you can barely raise your left arm about shoulder level, something is definitely wrong.

Meeting Your Parents

Take your port breaking as a good opportunity to introduce C to your family. You’ll be sent to the ER, where your cardiologist will meet you, and remove the old port and insert a new one (this one on top of your left breast).

C will be lying in the bed holding you after the surgery as your family enters the hospital room. They’ll meet. You’ll have C make-out with you while they are there because you crave everything to be as awkward as possible, because that will make you the most comfortable.

How To Deal With Relationship Issues

Warning #1

Things become obsessions. You’ll be jealous over everything, no matter what it is.

Jealous of a prostitute. It’ll become an obsession as you continue to read *Memoirs of a Geisha.* You’ll want *exactly* her pain. You’ll want your father to have sold you as a child because he fell too ill when your mother died. Disturbing passion in that. To be physically pushed away from your parents when something tragic has crippled them. No continually watching the pain of the parent in agony.

And there is something erotic about orphans. Something commendable about being

alone, because when that life-threatening siren sounds each soldier runs with nothing to face but his or her own mortality.

You envy being alone because for many years you think you can only do great things alone. And you only count the great things that you did alone as yours.

The whole time you're connected to the prostitute, the narrator, your geisha, you are under the belief it is a memoir because of the title. But three quarters to the end, you find out inside the cover that it is a novel, fiction. You feel betrayed, falling for fake manipulation. It isn't this woman's pain on the page. A man has written it. Even worse, an American man. In kinship with your geisha, you have wanted to please ugly, old men. You have wanted your whole life to be dedicated to the art of seducing both men you didn't want and those you did and not caring about the difference; to enjoy sex no matter who the man was, no matter if you found him attractive or not; to be always in it for the pleasure, and always getting the pleasure.

You have wanted all those hours spent solely getting your makeup and hair done, to be all beautiful, so men couldn't resist you. But you'll finish the novel anyways because you're invested in the love story.

Warning #2

Because of your interest in orphans, C gets you into the *Harry Potter* books, which he's a huge fan of, to the point you'll refer to him in the future as your Harry Potter Romance. When your chemobrain is in full force, this will be how you fight the damage of chemo, reteaching yourself how to read. When you are in Harry Potter Land, you're not in yours. It is wonderful.

Warning #3

A man falls in love with you while you are in the middle of chemo. You'll realize you have done him a great disservice when you figure out that you didn't want someone sexually. You needed companionship. You've loved him with what you thought was your whole heart – but how can that be? You misled him.

On How To Let Go

In passing, C tells you he has the next day off. "You have the day off tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"You have the day off tomorrow and you didn't bother asking to take me to chemo?" You feel betrayed. This makes you feel unloved. It burns a figurative deep whole into your chest.

"I figured you didn't want me there," he'll say.

"You didn't offer to take me to chemo?"

He confesses that he didn't want to see that side of you. The pain this causes is unbearable.

Having cancer already made you feel dejected. And the only thing that made you feel normal -- in any way you may have felt normal because you are in a relationship dissolves.

At the start of a subsequent chemo, your iPod dies. You'll make him bring you his iPod, dropping it off inside the chemo room. He'll see you, before it's over.

(Give him points for driving to Orlando to take you to radiation.)

When Is It Time To Move On

Chemo is over, but your shaved head is not. You do not want to meet C's parents. He tells you his father is travelling down to upkeep the house. When his father arrives to modernize, you

slither back to your bed, remaining there till his father leaves. When some of C's old high school friends are in town, you fight with C, so you can stay at home. He tells you not to care about your hair. How can you not?

You return and see that C and his father tore down the large shrub. The walls of the kitchen and living room used to be painted dark blue; the hallway wall a bright yellow. Beatles and Miles Davis had hung on the walls. They painted all the walls light colors. They buffed and polished all the floors. The bathroom was remodeled. The bird is gone.

C wants you to go back to school in Orlando, when you're healthy. He wants you to leave? This will fucking hurt. But you do it. You'll graduate, then move back home to Fort Lauderdale and officially into C's house. You'll stay in Florida when the relationship ends and he leaves the state, you feeling even more diseased thinking it's shitty that he never saw how beautiful you are (the hair-growing-out process wasn't flattering) because that would've left a better lasting impression.

You'll find it odd that the healthier you became, the less the relationship worked. You wonder if this is like when one person in an alcoholic duo gets sober and the other one doesn't.

Covering Up Being Sick

When I got cancer I was in the process of worshipping my hair. It was past my breasts, long and brown and thick. It was one of my best features. My hair was my identity. Now I would lose it.

A bag of wigs were promised to me from a girl who had leukemia when we were in high school. She was a year older than me, and, when she returned (presumably post-cancer), she won Homecoming Queen or Prom Queen, something of that nature, probably Prom Queen. I wasn't sure if she wore a wig in the celebratory yearbook shot. Maybe she rocked a short 'do; maybe her new hair was growing out. It didn't matter. Either way, her story terrified me: to be special because you were diseased, win because you were diseased, seen as beautiful because you were diseased.

Although I felt ugly losing my hair, I felt uglier wanting to hide it for vanity reasons.

My neighbors were Islamic. Everyday a group of women dressed head to toe in Islamic clothes hung out on the front lawn, next to mine. I wanted to walk into their house and walk out wearing their clothes. I wanted to be covered head to toe. There was no religion attached to why I wanted to cover myself: No modesty, no morality. I wanted to wear the veil.

As a child, I only wore hats when I needed to hide my hair. Two times a year, my family and I vacationed on cruises. Once we were off the cruise ship exploring the Bahamas, if my hair was down, the long, thick, dark-chocolate hair called every Bahamian woman to me. They all would scurry toward me, caress my hair while serenading me with compliments, telling me how gorgeous my hair would look in braids. Sometimes I wanted braids, but the times I didn't, my mom would tuck my hair into one of my brother's hats before we got on the dock. Sometimes the hat didn't even work. I would be serenaded with the hat on. And once the Bahamian women

saw my hair fall, they swooned.

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I wanted to be able to forget all about the concept of the safety wig. Pick up any wig. But I had finally grown into the beauty I felt I was supposed to have. I didn't know who I was without using my looks. So this wasn't my chance.

I could pick up any wig. Try something new. Go blonde. Go crazy. Wear fun wigs, a leopard one, a light blue one.

But I picked up my wig like picking up a dead brown creature because it matched my hair color perfectly.

***

My hair stylist (for the past 10 years), my mother, and I walked through a department store to enter the mall, to further enter the wig store. It would look like a salon if all the wigs were gone. It looked like a salon if mad laughs didn't come from the backroom. It looked like a salon if a neurotic lady didn't sway through the doorframe, which was covered with a dark sheet. It looked like a salon if the mannequin on the counter in front of me didn't look so bald.

My hair stylist cut my hair to my shoulders a couple weeks ago. Now I sat in the cheap barber chair, not staring at myself in the mirror – not wanting to look at myself before. The wig woman stood behind me. "Look at that hair color." She grabbed my hair -- petted it like it would not fall out. She wore plastic gloves. "This is the only color for you. Beautiful. Where we can

have fun is the accessories!" And the wig woman left and returned with an ugly, short hairpiece that matched my hair color perfectly. She hung the dead creature on top of the mannequin.

She struggled to conceal all of my hair under hosiery. "Your hair is so thick," she said. "It'll be a mess when it decides to fall out."

"What's the hosiery for?" I asked.

"Germs," she said. "I can't sell wigs once there're germs on it. Cancer patients are so sensitive. Don't get me wrong; I get sick every time I just answer the phone." She picked up the phone next to her, pointing the receiver to me. "Once you buy it," she said about the wig, "you can do whatever with it you like." But I didn't think a cat would even mate with it.

"It's really puffy," I said, the brown wig with hair about shoulder length, the dead creature, now on my head. If it was my color, I thought, that when I went out, the attention would not be on me. I looked like an ugly indoor suburban soccer mom. I didn't want to walk into a party with my hair like this; fantasies crushed. Wigs in movies looked so real. Why the fuck do they get this privilege? I tried to push the wig down again, but it remained puffy.

"Don't worry," the wig woman said, as she brushed my fake hair. "It'll be a lot smoother once you're bald." She tugged at the back of it. "See? You look beautiful *and* it's sturdy."

"If you want," the wig woman continued, "I can shave your head right in the back when it starts to fall out." She pointed to the sheet hanging from the frame.

She told me how once, when she was shaving a woman's head, the woman just ran out of that backroom. She told me that I needed a nice turban. "Turbans are real popular right now," she said. She grabbed one and placed it over the wig, which was placed over the hosiery, which was placed over my hair, which was placed over my scalp.

"Yeah, OK, no thank you." She took it off, but not fast enough.

I left the barber chair and started looking at other wigs. “You can try those ones on,” she said because they didn’t need to be cancer proofed. And they were not expensive. Mine was $500. Hair was cosmetic. Insurance didn’t cover it.

“Make sure you practice drawing in your eyebrows. Just in case you lose those too.” Wig woman told me to take pictures, so I would know exactly where to place them.

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Wearing a wig meant you were dying, and you wanted to hide that fact, even though you knew you never could.

I had to learn who I was without hair.

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I wanted to know how horrible being bald would be. The outer body showed what the disgusting drugs were doing to my body. It was the one thing that screamed, “I am a sick cancer patient,” other things just yelled it.

I accepted the length of a broken heart. Or madness. But I needed to see physical results now. Like how I used to feel when I started working out. Stupid example. Only obsolete examples were in my mind’s bank then. This was before I developed new examples, diseased ones.

***

Chemotherapy made my scalp burn, so when the rumor reached me that if I kept ice on my scalp during chemo, it would prevent my hair to fall out, I was all for it. But my oncologist told me not to bother. If my hair wanted to come out, it would, she said, ice or not.

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Now, I was barely touching my hair. Too scared as I shampooed it. Too scared when I brushed it. Using baby shampoo gave me no relief. Combing my hair with my fingers gave me no relief.

***

“Your hair is jeopardizing your mental health,” my oncologist said after I asked her if I should shave it off. No shit, I thought.

***

My oncologist was happy – it was expected to fall out after my second chemo, and we were reaching eight. “You have some strong hair follicles,” she said.

She said just to get a boy cut and not shave it, not if I didn’t have to. “No one who does this wakes up the next day happy with the decision,” she said.

***

I had heard about a woman who lost all her hair in one swoop, when she walked under a fan, and I wondered what would happen if I lost my hair to the wind. It wasn't hurricane season. When a hurricane was near, the world was still. Everything was alive; every tree, every leaf felt the pummeling nearby and respected it by not moving. Even if it was sunny, it was dark. Dark skies were over yonder. Dark skies were on the other side of the mirror.

***

When strands fell on my arms, I felt spiders crawling. Every time a strand hit my arm, I shook. When my scalp tingled, I prayed. The longer it tingled, the more frightened I got -- tingling meant it was dying, detaching from me -- by my follicles. If it only tingled for a few hours, I talked myself out of believing it was falling out. If it lasted a day, I thought I'd be bald within five minutes.

Of course, I slept and dreamt about people losing their hair.

***

Reminding myself that the old me was very sick relaxed me a tiny bit. Before I always felt drained, never understanding why people had more energy than me. But I wanted some of that old me. I wanted my hair to be thick and long passing my chest. I wanted to hold a cranberry-and-vodka in my hand. I wanted to smile with friends around me at a bar. I couldn't imagine

being at a bar just to drink anymore. You didn't do that with a baldhead.

Planning to shave it all off relaxed me the most. That I'd never let myself look like the *Tales from the Crypt* host: a skeleton that had no hair on the top of his skull but had long straggly hairs going down the sides and back.

***

My closest girlfriends offered to shave their heads, too. They gave me the option. They'd only do it if I wanted them to. And after they would offer, they cried and complained about how ugly they'd look.

I told them not to. Relieved, they'd offer to buy a "crazy" wig, so when we went out all the attention would be on them.

***

"Don't shave it," my mom said. "You'll hate it. You think guys like short hair? They won't be with you with any type of hair."

This was a classic example of her denial. Thanks, mom! I was going to have no hair! Glad to know how repulsive I'll inevitably be.

***

My hair stylist refused to cut my hair real short. I asked her if she would shave it if it came to that, and she said she wouldn't be able to handle doing it. I was sitting in her barber chair, watching her about to have a meltdown. She was too fragile. As she trimmed it, strands of my hair fell out alongside the cut pieces like tinsel off of a dead Christmas tree.

I somehow thought that I needed a man salon, but I was too scared of what even that haircutter, a stranger, would say. I'd sit in the nice barber chair, staring at my reflection to show my confidence, as the male stylist named Mark covered me with a smock. I'd tell him to shave it off. He'd tell me that I'd look awful. And ask if I was getting over a bad break-up. He'd tell me that no guy is worth me doing this to my hair. He'd want to get permission from his boss. I would have to sign something. So I couldn't sue after.

***

My brother Jack and I drove back from what should have been my last chemo, but it got pushed back till Monday because I had a cold and was too sick to get treatment. I was furious because more hair was falling out by the day. If I could just get the chemo done that day, maybe I could save it. On the way back home, I said: "I'm losing my hair!"

"No, you're not," he said.

"Oh, you don't think so?" I grabbed the hair on the side of my head, tugged, and threw the detached pieces at him, while not looking, not wanting to see the chunks. I grabbed more, peaking toward his face to make sure the next batch hit it.

"It's only coming out," he said, "because you're pulling on it. See" -- he gently pulled some hair. It dropped on the floor. "I'll shave it as soon as we get home."

He put a chair in the middle of the living room, and I kept circling the chair. “I can’t do this,” I said, pacing, circling. “I am not going to do anything,” I said, as I kept moving in circles around the chair. “I can’t sit down. I can’t do this.”

“OK,” he said, “I won’t do it.” I stopped pacing, and he yanked my arm, throwing me into the chair. The buzzer took off a streak of hair on the back of my head before my butt could bounce off the chair to fight him back. I felt the hair fall. It was heaven. Because it was too late to have him stop now. I wasn’t going to walk around with a landing strip on the back of my head. The decision on whether to shave or save it was gone. The only thing left was to keep going. And somehow he got the clues. After that first streak fell, he only paused for the moment I needed to understand, and then he continued.

When he finished clipping me, I had some scratches and wounds because the clippers he used were damaged. I didn’t care. I rubbed my hand over my head anyways.

“Do you want a mirror?” he asked. My brother had never shaved anyone with clippers so close to the head.

“No, no,” I said. “I think I’ll just go lie down.”

There was a mirror on the way to the mattress, where I planned to plop facedown, absorbing my freshly shorn hair. I looked and, although I knew I was going to see myself with barely any hair, I got scared. My hair was about an inch long, some areas lighter, some areas darker. I knew I could deal with it. It didn’t look half bad, I thought. I screamed anyways.

I rarely looked at myself in the mirror from that point on.

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I never had a hair tie when I wanted the car window down. All my hair would fly in my face, blinding my view of the road. I put the windows down. The breeze.

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With my haircut, in the gas station, the line at the cashier dissolved. They all told me to go before them. I never waited in line anywhere.

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My jolly nurse right away said she liked my haircut (the whole doctor's office gave me positive feedback), which made me feel good. She checked out the wounds and hoped they didn't hurt too badly. She told me that I had a few bald spots in the back. I was furious that I wasn't told before. I was very pleased that I didn't have to see them -- I acted like they weren't there. And that I could do that was great since I was against wearing hats. Would never do the cancer bandana. I showed my sickness, rather than hided it. In a baseball cap, there was a ripe chance someone would look at me long enough to place what was strange about my appearance. They'd see that there was no hair tucked into the cap. They'd see that there was barely any hair at all. The cancer patient image would pop into their heads because I didn't live in a city where gals walked around with haircuts like mine. It was not a short 'do; it was a second-rate cut with no girly flair. It was not styled by a hair specialist. It didn't highlight the features on my face. I looked like a punk.

Butterflies

Freshman year of college, Cheyenne, another friend, and I drove down to the Florida Keys for Spring Break. I was drunk on a nude gay pier, where dicks of all sizes, many with intricate piercings, had shined all day. I checked my cell phone as the sun set. I was in my bathing suit; happy I didn't have to handle a voicemail that scared me, naked like everyone else was. I knew my best friend Margo never took her meds to stop her seizures because she hated how the medicine made her feel. Spiritless.

I didn't mother her about it. You wouldn't want to break her spirit. A few days before the Keys, she forced me to buy costume butterfly wings to wear to Ultra, the upcoming giant techno festival in Miami. She wanted me to wear wings alongside her. It was humiliating.

That morning, as she sat down in the bathtub shaving her leg, preparing for the spa day ahead, she had a seizure. She fell back. Her head hit the drain of the tub. Her hair tangled around the open stopper, perhaps closing it.

Her hair trapped her under the rising water.

***

In the summer of '98, Margo and I grabbed a composition notebook, labeling it, "Summer Plans." Only the word "Changes..." was written on the first page -- because that was what all 14-year-old girls couldn't wait for. We wanted to change in Fort Lauderdale fashion, which meant we wanted to be prettier. Margo wanted to run and tan and eat junk food only once a week and have her braces off. But before that, a whole section was dedicated to her hair. She wanted to

grow her hair to the mid-back, get blonde highlights, grow out her bangs, have her hair cut straight across. She also wanted to get a facial once a month-- not only that: She wanted a monthly manicure, pedicure, and eyebrow wax. She wanted to watch the news daily.

I wanted to highlight my hair a shade lighter, grow it till mid-back, have long layers (full head), and learn hair do's. I wanted "to be one with my hair." I wanted the same physical regimen stated on Margo's page. But I wanted to shave constantly.

Margo wanted to gain two pounds; I wanted to lose two pounds.

In high school, Margo used to dye her hair orange. All the time. By accident. She was a beautiful girl. When she had long hair, it looked great. When she had short hair, the same.

When she had big scabs on her face from hitting the ground when she seizured (which may have happened because she was riding in a friend's helicopter), she was still beautiful enough to get the attention of the guy I wanted.

***

After our beauty do's, on the next page of our composition notebook, was Leonardo DiCaprio's address. Must be his agent's. What followed the address was the headline: "15 Ways to Make Him Want You Bad." I wonder how plagiarized the advice that follows.

We weren't delusional, though. We had eyes on other men. Margo and I wanted to date twins like all best friends hoped to do. But our hope was way more legitimate than everyone else's because we actually knew twins and they were our age and they were cute.

***

I talked to Margo's boyfriend at the end of the Key West pier. When I hung up, everyone had left. A red beach ball was deserted next to an empty white beach lounge chair. I picked up the red ball and wrapped my arms tightly around it. I placed all my feelings inside of the red ball. I brought it back with me to the hotel room.

The red ball became my travel companion. Key West is the southernmost Key, so, when my friends and I and the red ball travelled back to Fort Lauderdale, near the hospital Margo was being kept in, we passed the growling pirate on the side of the road. Then the giant fake lobster. The neon tiki huts followed. We speeded past the huge Key lime-themed playground.

The red ball hung out on the balcony while Margo's high school ex and I tried to have sex in his bed at his parent's house, both too wasted to make it work, while Margo was still at the hospital; brain dead.

We all joked that if anything would wake her up, me hooking up with her high school ex would.

After her funeral, I travelled back to Orlando, where I went to college at University of Central Florida, leaving the nameless giant red ball behind.

***

Our college bartenders gave Cheyenne, my other friend, and I each a mourning bucket, a white, plastic bucket with beer slogans on it, when they found out Margo died – full of shit that was kept behind a bar, thrown into the buckets like partying favors. I found a certain happiness in this act. Was it because I was obsessed with one of them – a long lingering desperation? A sadness

that I turned into anger, turning livid at my friends for not forcing me to tell Flynn that I liked him?

***

Margo liked to live. If she had a crush on you, you knew it.

She liked using drugs (just not hers that were prescribed). The first time I tripped, it was with Margo. We were in high school, and we used mushrooms, which were grown out of the poo north of West Palm Beach. Her friends found them. When the trip took off, we were laying on my bed, where the comforters and unfolded clothes tried to engulf me like one of those human-eating sea plants with a quicksand mouth. I calmed myself down pretty well. I chose to relax and absorb the idea. It helped looking over at Margo, who didn't seem to find anything wrong. I now went with it. Taken in like a sea anemone would a clownfish. (I wish sea anemones took in other fish besides just the clownfish, some other name I wouldn't mind comparing myself to.)

After I calmed down, I touched my head. The side of my head was cold and wet. I thought I was shot. I couldn't believe how I'd let this happen. I let someone come into my room and shoot me. I should be really panicking. I looked at my hand. There was no blood.

I thought if it could be water. Yes, water. Just wet hair. I took a shower right before the trip started.

Later, Margo and I ventured outdoors, where sailboats along the docks moved all jaggedy like a moving Van Gogh painting, and a guy's pit bull turned into a shark. I was scared. But I knew I was going to survive. Sometimes I wonder if my little experience with tripping had helped me prepare for chemo.

***

Death was the last thing I wanted to think about. And there was never stopping any thinking about it. On painkillers or antianxiety pills, death didn't bother me.

I've never taken acid or mushrooms since Margo died. I didn't want to return to the acid zen garden in my mind. Death waited for me at the garden. He was eager to talk to me, and I didn't want him explaining what death was in a place where life was simple. I have asked the zen garden in my mind, Why I am here alive on earth? She answered. I didn't want to hear because I should be. (Though I like that idea now.)

Death set it up so I'd get cancer, and at the time I wanted him to know that I knew that we were having this conversation.

Want to hide from me? Death doesn't ask this.

Would it be comforting if he did? He should encourage us all to meet him face to face, like he has done with me.

Chemo was death, death eating me away, eating the bad cells, the ones gone horrible awry, along with all the good cells.

Chemo killed both the good and the bad. Just the same as any other fucking drug.

***

After Margo passed, I tried my hardest not to think about her. I drank a lot – on Xanax.

For a long time, I thought I had fucked everything up because, when thinking about

Margo, she felt one-dimensional.

I'm sure the chemo didn't help, but that would mean more if I knew chemo caused certain memory loss. Tis practical.

My dad felt one-dimensional too. But when I moved to Seattle, after I had to say goodbye to my therapist, my second father, the result was spectacular. Seven years after his death, how much he loved me rushed back into my being.

Feeling that love makes me feel like he's with me, a presence. It had been absent several years. So I wait for that heartbreak that brings Margo back to me.

For now, I'll enjoy the strange rush I get every time I see a butterfly, because something deep inside of me makes me want to shout, "Margo loved butterflies!" – out loud.

I lie in bed with my boyfriend and a bunch of butterflies fly unto the computer screen to cover up a wine bottle, and I keep the impulse to myself.

Cancer Beat It

She stays slouched in the chemo recliner, opening her eyes or muting the iPod to sense what's around her (never both at the same time). When she looks around, she thinks having a history is nice, when it comes to doctors' offices. She tries to find details to hold onto. On the wall, inside the chemo room, there's a poster, which has the possibility to drive any sane person mad and any mad person sane. It reads: "Cancer beat it." Yes, no punctuation marks are between the word "Cancer" and the words "beat it." Signs are meant to be preventative aids. Today's inspiration: *Cancer beat it*,

Cancer beat it,

Cancer beat it.

At the end of check-ups, her oncologist tapes the notes, and she's always shocked by how well her doctor thinks she's doing.

When she's in pain, she wonders what it feels like to keep company during trying times. When she's in pain, she's a loner -- in solitude, her mind can fall into a deep pit -- but she's starting to see that this isn't her. She doesn't want this. During chemotherapy she's learning how her life has no worth if she feels so absolutely alone on this planet. She hears the voices of people who love her, asking if she is OK, before chemo, after chemo, during chemo. She longs for voice: imagining the Victorian era, when people waited for horseback to bring words. In letters the tone is not there, no excitement. She speaks to others like she's trapped in a letter. She has to wait. She's thousands of miles gone. She asks people not to call the Friday to Monday after chemo because she needs those days to recuperate.

There is no point of anyone staying with her. She believes it's because she can't

communicate while she gets chemo.

But she knows she doesn't want anyone to see her like this.

She doesn't want them to see how she's not brave. She does not feel brave. She would quit. Give up chemo. Her life isn't important enough to go through this pain. She'd rather not beat the cancer. She begs for the stop. But she wants permission, from her mom or brother -- it has to come from someone who loves her like they do.

Until she thinks of cancer as war. If she does this, she'll get back to herself faster. She can't be this dependent. She has to remember, it's a war. War doesn't care who chooses to start it or why. Once it starts, war doesn't belong to anyone anymore.

But cancer is personal.

She is tumorous. The word "tumorous" doesn't exist in the Oxford Dictionary word yet. Autocorrect would change the word to "timorous," which means she is full of apprehensiveness and is timid, a far better adjective to describe her fuck that attitude.

Already a fallen soldier? she asks herself. No, she's not. A horse cascading off a cliff is a fallen soldier. And she is not there yet.

If today, getting chemo, were her last day on earth, it would really suck. Chemotherapy. She can't believe she has to do 12 of these. She feels like she is being exterminated. No, if today, getting chemo, were her last day on earth, she would be going down fighting.

***

She's halfway done with treatment. There are no shades of the grey on the night before a follow-up of a CT scan. All her problems are on her surface. She feels alone (no one can be there or will

be there for her), and it is miserable. Her dreams are dead. She doesn't try to keep company right now. Because deep down she believes we are all alone. She feels absolutely and utterly disconnected from the whole human race.

She likes hero's journeys, though, and it's not a proper hero's journey unless the hero is orphaned. She pretends to be, but she is not. She feels like she's on the unhero's journey.

Her scans show that her tumor is shrinking. Her night sweats stopped after the first chemo. There are no more fevers.

She won't waste having a mediocre life after.

Her eyes shut, and she thinks of her mother. And she is scared. She is scared she might die before she meets her husband. Scared it will be over. Scared she will have no family. Scared she will die before she does anything. How can she shake these thoughts? She can't concentrate on death. She can't accept it. But she can't ignore these realities, can she?

Has she been too silent? "You have to scream out loud," says some celebrity with breast cancer somewhere in a magazine.

Right now — maybe -- this is the best she can do. She's sitting in silence because no music can comfort her at this point while her brain feels cooked from the chemotherapy, like putting an egg yolk out on a South Florida sidewalk in June. She is a slob. She is in sweats, basically pajamas. They're called "cancer sweats." She wants not to have her appearance be as important as it is. She wants to be humble enough to be OK about not having her looks. She sometimes knows that this isn't a time to judge herself. She's dealing with her life.

What helps is when she asks herself, "What was I doing one year ago today?" And she instantly feels much better. She thinks about her life before, and it was always worse than the present. Back then she was always sick, and now she is fighting to get rid of the sickness forever.

Fighting to be healthy.

***

She is not here to cause any more agony. But when she feels lonely, she doesn't miss particular people ever. She doesn't know why she has to rebel against everyone when they're all here to help her. If she is not getting closer to anyone it's because no one can relate to her. No one.

She has to remind herself, that yes they can. We all need the same things.

She eventually sees glimpses. She goes into Holy Cross Hospital to get some shots that'll boost her white blood cells count and sees a lonely male getting chemo. She can see how lonely he looks and how she doesn't want that. Holy Cross Hospital, the place is clean, she thinks. A guy knitting something, a sweater, during chemo in the chemo room, didn't seem right to her because he is alone.

She doesn't like this feeling of being alone after chemo, so she has her brother stay with her. Watching a gang movie where one girl gets viciously gang-banged is highly disturbing, even more so on chemo. The more chemos she has, the more comfortable she becomes hanging out with her friends after chemo. She won't stay alone after chemo. She refuses to. She can't understand why she would ever do that to herself. Friends wanting to hang out with her after chemo means *Cinderella*, vanilla milkshakes, pot.

Her last chemo she gets a balloon. Her oncologist puts a white baseball-style cap on her with the "Cancer beat it" slogan. She drinks a glass of red wine with her friend's parents after to celebrate. She has to trick herself into drinking more toxins. Before she picks up a drink she tells herself that it's okay – she's allowed to just have fun. Doctors will never tell you want you need

to do. In college, when she would go to the school clinic because she was sick, she'd get antibiotics, and they'd tell her to drink fluids and get rest. But what they didn't say was not to drink alcohol. She'd go out and drink and then sleep in the next day. She got her fluids and rest.

She feels like a whale that's dived into the water swallowing a seed that grew into a memory of doubt. Nothing is bringing her closer to anyone still? Has this always been the case? She has been able to relate to others. Or is this why all her friends started drowning out sorrows at age 15. Drinking didn't calm her nerves, did it? Drinking, surely, got her through to this point.

***

Survivor's Guilt starts the second she is spared, and the farther she gets from her chemo experience, the more scared she is that she'll lose what she went through.

Her subconscious mind has been wrapped in a cocoon -- what floats all around it is depression. She couldn't feel it. She couldn't even label it until now. Progress! She only knows it is depression because her cancer taught her that it's depression. While waiting to be checked out of a check-up, she had once read a pamphlet that said 90 percent of patients have depression once chemo is over, once they survive.

The environment in her mind is dangerous, dark, and it attracts danger and sickness. She is trying to protect herself from dark, depressed souls who hurt. They continually hurt others, who knows if it is deliberate or not, but the end product is that they feel better, and they only feel better because she feels worse. They feel important because of how much they can affect her. Well, newsflash, she realizes, everything is created in her mind. No one has the power. She'll exit her cocoon and trek through the dangerous environment. She will imagine it as tough as it is:

Nature at its most destructive: tornadoes, hurricanes, thorns, the lightning bolt of cancer.

She'll learn to leave her invincibility chamber, the dangerous territory where fools run, and it rains self-destruction.

***

She wants to believe that the heart is simpler than the brain. The heart simply feels. It is also weak. It cannot stand on its own. It needs the mind to help protect it. But the mind is mean. It plays tricks with us. It puts up invisible walls without ever letting us know they're there. When her thoughts stop racing, she panics. Mind, you are her greatest ally and her greatest enemy. You will always be both. The hardest part for her will become how to balance what to do in the present and what to do in the future because she has learned that she cannot wait (nothing is a guarantee) -- but for some things you just have to.

She does not want a family now but then she may die before she has a chance to have one. That thought is too scary for her to think about. She wants to curl up into a ball and cry, but she doesn't. She's cringing. This is the same cringing feeling of when she first found out she had cancer. Same feeling when she found out her best friend died, when her father died. She doesn't want her limbs to feel separated again. She wants to feel united. She guesses this is where faith comes in. Faith will hint what is expected from your life.

She wonders why the process of recovering from a death is so much harder than having cancer. So much scarier to handle. A separation of two people is just a separation. The most haunting thing she remembers from that period is when a mother of a friend told her that she'd never be the same when her best friend died, that a piece would always be missing.

But that’s not how she will feel. She will feel whole. She will feel complete.

***

Death sucks. This hasn’t changed post-cancer. She knows people will do anything not to see it. This is where resistance is the greatest. We spend almost two decades being immature and dependent on others. People we may not even like. Making stupid choices because everyone is born naïve. If parents did their job right than the child is to believe that the world is ultimately good and that they can change the world for the better. But no one can tell you to be okay with death. What consoles her the most about it is the simplest truth -- everyone dies, celebs die, presidents die, everything dies -- some of us will live long lives, some of us will not -- that this is a battle that she does not face alone.

Everyone needs to come to terms with it. But her cancer made her fight for her life. It switched the focus from death to life, to what she can do in this life.

She is angry. She can’t help it. It won’t go away. She wants to believe that this anger is going to help her. She wants to believe that it’s going to be her fuel -- to fight against time. She does not believe anything can take away her anger. Anger is her very close friend, and she is happy with him.

She has friends who are more destructive to her wellbeing than to her happiness. She keeps them because she thinks they get her – like how her anger does.

Her first two decades were wasted by ignorance and inexperience. She is twenty-two, and she cannot think she has time to start things later when she is more experienced. She hopes she’ll be able to spend the next decade trying to gain experience by school or working. She has no

money. She has no seniority. Then hopefully will come her 30s and 40s, where she will try to give back. She hopes she will start a family and give up all she has. There are reasons why a love for a child is the greatest feeling in the world – she doesn't need to be told why. She understands. She'll ask herself why cancer survivors believe that cancer has been the best thing that has ever happened to them. She will admit that seeing death and saying, "Fuck you," is a profound feeling. She doesn't think that car accidents or food or alcohol poisoning necessarily makes you face death. A near fatal car accident where you walk off unscathed might give you a minute of what-ifs, but your mind has a way to forget what had happened.

Red Doors

Early on during chemotherapy, although you'd sworn off support groups, you went to Gilda's Club for mom, because she wanted you to see that you weren't alone, and because she wanted to be a member, in case she needed company. And she could only join if the physically cancer-stricken attended an orientation interview.

As soon as you entered the red door, the color signifying it was a Gilda's Club or a Sigma Phi Epsilon chapter house or an Elizabeth Arden Spa, a lady, a worker or a volunteer, grabbed your arm and rushed you over to the couch. She sat down next to you and peered at you. "Don't go looking," she said, "for a reason for all of this. You're not going to fall in love with your doctor or anything. It's just an experience to show yourself how strong you are. This is something you can cash in at the bank later. Everything is just a gravy train from here on out."

Resist these words. Allow them to make you furious. Grab on to any meaning that you can.

Later, live by them. The red door is not simply a red door anymore. Listen to the folk legend that the red door signifies that the home was a safe house of the Underground Railroad. Follow the long line of red door believers. People who believe that the red door has power beyond being just a passageway.

The red door wants to help. The red door is Christ's fire-truck red blood saying something holy is behind the door. A non-red door desires to face south -- because it's as simple as feng shui, when the door is painted red because red blocks out negative energy, red retains positive energy. When the door swings open, it lets only positive energy enter the mouth.

Wet Dreams, Coping through Fantasy

As I attempted to kill my cancer, I did not care to record how I was going down – or up.

Then gabbing to acquaintances about my cancer story -- with each telling coming the need to mock my poor 22-year-old self – that did not felt good. It was a price paid back then, but my dignity shall keep dying little by little with each sharing. So, when I became *healthier*, I didn't want to point out, each time, how I was once a reckless fool, an idiot. I didn't want to write it down, the permanent record haunting me -- having who I was become a permanent being, the chance of not being able to separate her from the me today. I wanted then what I have now, though this means nothing because I don't have cancer now, don't know how I'd react if I did get cancer now.

So for a time I wanted nothing to do with my story but to fictionalize it. I'll even admit, no matter how foolish it sounds, that I wanted a protagonist to experience cancer fearlessly.

That's why there's Dean. Dean needed to be with me from the beginning. Forget about the hospital roommate I did have, the old lady with no face, no name. No spirit. Know Dean.

Dean's like one of those old-time thermometers: the ones where the heat makes the Mercury rise. As his eyes expand, everything turns to liquid. He is the fever. He is the wind, which moves around trees.

Telling the lies all comes to this because the truth adds to my attractiveness now. How I've hated the disease. Hated my part in it.

***

A man with grey eyes is the man I wake up next to my first morning in the hospital. The man I have to pass to use the restroom. I don't want him to know I'm here. I am here. I'm here next to him. And I don't want to introduce myself. No, I am still asleep, and will never move.

My bladder makes the choice, heading me directly to the bathroom. But I won't look at him on my way there. But as I walk past his bed, the man whips out something silver, sharp. Turning my head, I see he has whipped out a knife, freaking me out, so I run into the bathroom, close the door and lock it. My heart pounds as I sit on the toilet. I hope his pee is not on the seat. I wait there for a few minutes scared to leave. I exit the bathroom and hover near the hospital room door to see if I am in any danger.

He's carving chunks out of his apple with a switchblade with an ivory-covered handle. He carves the apple like it came from the good-and-evil tree from the Garden of Eden. His grey eyes smile at me wickedly.

I have done my business, so I'm heading back to my bed, studying his face. I like how he looks: rugged, beat up (and not in the old way, in the hot shot way), a man from the Old West. This is a cowboy. James Dean if James Dean had made it to 60. He's Dean.

Dean's eyes never stop staring from whatever is in front of him.

Dr. Slinger enters, and he has some news. And somehow, because Dr. Slinger waits until my family arrives to tell me the news, my doctor and Dean's doctor are both in the room at the same time. "Alright, kiddo, good news!" Dr. Slinger says joyfully. He looks at my mom and talks directly to her because they're drinking partners. "She has Hodgkin's Lymphoma."

"It won't be too bad, sweetie," my mom says, "you were going to bum around there. Now you can bum around here." This is the first time Dean looks at me. We make eye contact. Oh God, he has cancer too. His spunky female oncologist is talking about his throat. Throat cancer.

Mom says something else, but I don't listen because Dean has cancer too.

Mom says another thing, but I still don't listen, then I say, "What do you want?"

"Don't snap at your mother," Dr. Slinger says, scolding me.

"As far as I know," I say, "none of you have been diagnosed with cancer today. Don't I get any leniency? None of you have been diagnosed besides me and" – I gesture toward Dean with my eyes – "him." We look at each other; our eye contact revitalizes me.

"You know the drill, Dean." Dean looks so calm. He looks like how Jesus probably did waiting on his cross. I lie here, focusing on him. He makes me high, my life switching from waiting for death to fighting for life.

Everyone leaves Dean and I alone – and I say, "This is a fucking nightmare."

"No, kid," he says, "the family is." So I wouldn't have to.

Dean would've been in the room with me, when the strange man wearing scrubs enters in the middle of the night, wanting to massage me, wanting to tell me how the docs removed his cancerous genitalia. He enters our room and sits down in the chair as Dean asks, "Do you not have any balls, son?" before the man could even begin.

"Well," the strange man says as he looks down. "Actually--" And we are done with him.

Dean then looks at me and says, "You don't know what you'd do if they cut off your tits."

Then Dean prepares me for the future by saying, "Everyone's going to throw their cancer story down your throat."

"That'll be fun."

"And everyone will use your sickness to make themselves feel better."

"Even better."

"But you'll develop a complex about yourself. You'll feel like a God. Something about

knowing you're dying makes you feel immortal."

***

Eventually I meet Dean's whole family. Dean is 63. Dean's son is 48. Dean was 12 when he got his math teacher pregnant, making me feel an adrenaline rush run through my whole body, while his granddaughter has such a sorrowful look in her eyes. Why? Because her family wasn't perfect? She thinks he's the flaw in their family. When Dean leaves the room to take some tests, the granddaughter tells me in her delicate manner that Dean's all screwed up. I scowl because she doesn't know that you don't ever be delicate when talking about insanity.

I know what Dean wants. Why he worked, dropped out of school, moved to Europe, to Amsterdam, left all responsibilities behind. Why he wanted to meet his son, so he came back. Why he was about to embark again but then decided to stay because Dean found out he had throat cancer.

Lying in my hospital bed, I try to untangle my headphones, so I can listen to music. He asks, "Do you think you deserved this?"

"I don't know." I'm guessing he's referring to my cancer. "No. I guess."

"Then say fuck you and move on."

"Wanna play Six Degrees of Cancer?"

"What is that?"

"You know Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon?"

"The hell with this nonsense."

***

Dean leaves the hospital before I do, but that's OK because all I can think about is the note he left next to my bed as I slept. It says: "My doctor's moving to Atlanta. Looks like I'll be seeing yours."

***

I run into Dean in the parking lot of the oncologist's office smoking a cigar. He still smoked, even though he had throat cancer. What kind of death sentence is that? His last name should be Smoker, but it isn't. What an unfortunate surname to have as a cancer patient, nurses yelling out "Smoker!" in the cancer ward, everyone turning around to look at the person who didn't care about his life -- but that doesn't have quite the punch line as if it were someone's last name who actually didn't smoke.

Soon we are in the chemo room, where we talk at length about the death penalty while getting chemo. Because what would be creepier to talk about in the chemo room? Would it be worse to die by electrocution or chemotherapy? After that, I put on my headphones.

On my way back from the restroom, I throw up on the back of another chemo patient's chair.

"Shit happens," Dean says. "Don't waste time having a mediocre life after."

"If today is my last day on earth," I said. "It would really suck."

"If today was your last day on earth you'd go down throwing up."

"Thanks."

“Go to church with me this Sunday.”

“I have a date Saturday.”

“Stop feeling invincible,” he says. “It’s knowing you’ll die that motivates you to make the right choices now. Be bombarded by desire. Let it make you crack. But you have to go to church. The family is making me. I need a support unit. There’s a special service for the sick.”

***

It’s time for church. Last night I made out with Dean’s granddaughter’s boyfriend. Yes, I did that. I snuck in there when I could. And he’ll be there. This is incredibly awkward. It’s time for Satan to go underground, but I can’t.

“Maybe you should put on your wig,” says mom. “You might want to look feminine."

“Because God cares if I look like a woman,” I say, as I eye-roll.

“It wouldn’t hurt for you to take faith seriously,” she says, “especially with the current circumstances.”

“I’m going to church. Jesus, I can’t go to church.” I take a deep breath. “I haven’t prepared.”

“Haven’t prepared?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, “like I need to be really good the week before.” I stand up and walk over to the mirror. “I’m simply screwed. The only reason why I am going to church today is because I have cancer. God knows it, and I know it. We all know it. I need to bathe in holy water to wash away my sins.”

Dean picks me up, and we drive to the church. I need a white, trashy building with a

purple trim that has a cloth banner hanging from the roof that reads “Free.” I’ve seen one of those before. I need a strip club turned into a church, made for people like me. But a beautiful church with stain-glass windows comes into view, and we walk inside.

It’s a packed house! Everyone is there because the hurricane is coming to tear down their houses. Or because everyone is sick. I’m here praying I keep my hair.

Dean’s whole family is here, and we join their pew. Dean’s granddaughter’s boyfriend is five people to my left.

When it’s time to give donations to the church, I pass. I know that if the collectors don’t get you the first time, by the time they come around with their money-collecting sticks the second time, the guilt takes over your body. They feel like debt collectors coming after you. I’m used to that feeling. It’s easy picturing everyone in the church being sick. People really sick. Giving money away, money they don’t have. Money they need for hospital bills.

And here I am about to embody Christ, walking down the aisle – thinking about all the women who have left their purses in their pews. Why is there such trust here?

After communion, I return to my pew and feel my phone vibrate. Dean’s granddaughter’s boyfriend has texted me, “Look to the left, at the picture.” I look. The mural or mosaic or painting has the word “stripping” on it. He texts again, “Later?”

A little boy behind me follows my eyes, now looking at the mosaics representing the crucifixion, and asks his mom, “Why isn’t there blood everywhere?”

The choir sings, and I text back, “Tempted.”

I only half-listen to the scripture reading from Matthew because I’m already in sex mode. I hear: “Even though there are so many cares that you carry, I want you for a moment to come and rest in his arms. Stop the striving and just come and rest in his arms. Now feel my hand

protecting your hair. In this moment you will know and understand love. You will understand how little I expect of you."

All the families stare at Dean and I when the congregation says prayers for the sick. "You're probably scared as a cat," some old lady says to me.

"You'll sleep sounder at night," Dean says, "knowing there was fifty, pious moms rooting for you."

"I need an exorcism." I say. "I have a confession. I am ruining your granddaughter's life."

"No," he says, "you're ruining yours. You're already learning that this experience gives you a high. You're able to tackle the world. Nothing can set you down. Then you'll lose it. You don't have a chance on keeping it, and regular things will bother you. Bother and bother you. You'll get into a funk, real stuck in it, and your only hope is to remember how you felt at your strongest. You need to find something that can take you back. Growing for the sake of growing is shit. Go back to where you lost balance and actually grow from there."

Fairy Tales

1.

Peter Pan loses his shadow once. What if Peter Pan's shadow then turns into something evil, like a shadow-murderer. A shadow-pickpocket. Malignant cancer.

2.

My hair is of a fairy-tale princess beauty: long pretty locks. One of my traits most complimented, one of my traits that make men pine for me. So there was a chance for me to be Sleeping Beauty -- or Rapunzel. But I can't be Sleeping Beauty. Not at all. When I was in the hospital, my three fairy god-nurses gave me chemo.

Then I had to chop off all my hair.

And as it grew back, it was grey and fuzzy. It was a fro for months.

3.

I'm basically doing the same thing as the red-haired beauty Arielle in *the Little Mermaid*. The deal: I give the sea witch my voice; she gives me my chance to survive (continue being human). But I feel like I'm transforming into a shriveled-up, sad mermaid before the contract's up (the boy will kiss me by day three).

4.

"Choose your throne," my oncologist says as we enter the chemo room. Choose my throne. I can choose what princess I am! But I want to be as accurate as possible.

During my first chemotherapy treatment, I turned purple because I was allergic to the one of the drugs. I'm choosing a throne as Violet Beauregarde -- a purple-faced one instead of blue, and will be OK with it. The oompa loopas need to drain the bad purple juice out of me.

Like Violet, I'll learn through torture. This is what I was missing. The fight. She was selfish. To get rid of the juice would be to get rid of all of my negativity.

Prove I am good. Prove I've not been a bad person. I am not selfish. Or mean. Or gross to others and myself. That it is OK I am alive and that others are dead. They are not angry I am still alive. I deserve to be alive.

"OK," says my chemo nurse. "I am going to access your port and flush it with Heparin. You're going to taste saltwater in your mouth. Ready?"

I would close my eyes and exhale. "Hey, sleeping beauty," he would say, joking, "What are the fairy godmothers' names?"

"Flora, Fauna--" Something pulls at my port. "Owe! And Merriweather."

He inserts it, and I taste saltwater in my mouth. I am a less fortunate Violet: My chemo drugs aren't administered through tasty pieces of gum.

5.

I am in the wig store by myself, browsing the selection, when a cute boy with thick, dark blond hair that hangs a little beneath his chin, enters the wig store carrying a box of wigs. He thinks I am a stripper buying wigs for work. In return, I think he dates strippers for returning wigs.

"What," I say to him, making the first move, "do you only date strippers or something? What's with all those wigs?"

“My exgirlfriend had cancer,” he would say, his mouth all doll-like.

“Me too! Well, have.” His eyes light up. And that would start our romance.

He starts asking questions about my past -- “How did you find out?” -- and next thing I’m telling him everything. The way his eyes thirst for my everything is intoxicating. He hugs me. He hugs me for over 60 seconds – he likes me.

“You gotta get out of here and live!” He yells, and he buys four wigs for me: a light blue one, a leopard print, a multicolored, and dark wine. The light blue one in my hands is $35.

I’m told that the only reason why a guy won’t shave your head is because he wants to have sex with you. I want to ask him if he would shave my head, but I can’t.

“Let me know if it's alright to invite you for weekend fun,” he says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m getting chemo on Friday and need a few days to recuperate from the chemo fog. Don’t know if my white blood count is stable, if it’s safe to go outside. I took five bone-aching shots this week.”

Soon I’m in the Guy Who Loves Sick Girls’ bed. What the hell am I doing? It is a king-sized Tempur-Pedic. He must’ve lived with his last cancer girl because this bed is the only way sleeping next to someone every night during chemotherapy’s tolerable. As I lay in her spot, I wonder if the last cancer girl was better than me. I don’t want to know. If I am here, he couldn’t possibly love her. Is she competitive? Is she the one who’s winning? “Sometimes,” he says, “I don’t know when to cut loose. Or I cut loose too much when I get excited and am in a rush. I've got a sense of urgency, and it has nothing to do with you as a ‘sexual’ partner.”

“I shouldn’t be with anyone right now,” I say.

“You want to be with somebody.” He grabs my leg and stares into my eyes. “Mind over matter, hun. Anything you visualize, verbalize, and virtualize you'll eventually materialize if you

put enough focus into it. I understand chemo, darling, killing the libido."

"I don't think I like you like that."

"Look," he says. I turn around to see him pumping his left leg into the air. "I'm doing aerobics on the bed, and you wouldn't even know if you weren't looking this way."