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When It Rains, It Pours

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One of the projects for my 8th-grade science class was to create the fastest toy car possible. I decided to model my car after a phoenix and spent hours meticulously decorating my car, painting each of the feathers a gradient of reds and oranges before gluing them on. My father even helped me fashion wheels out of old medicine bottle caps.

I was about to show my parents the final product when I heard a loud wail. I rushed downstairs, toy car in hand, ready to investigate. I stopped short at the vision of my parents, crumpled on the living room floor. My mother had collapsed, crying loudly, and gasping for breath. My father was holding her tightly, a grim expression on his face. The home phone lay on the floor a couple of feet away, forgotten. I watched them, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that something truly terrible had just happened. At the time, I did not know exactly what; I could only feel the pain radiating from my mother's resounding, desperate cries. It was only later that I realized her cries signified the cancer had returned, but I can hear their echoes even today, a memory that forever haunts me.

During the summer of 1998, before a family vacation to Florida, the doctors found a grape-sized mass in my mother's breast during a routine health checkup. The doctor assured her it was probably benign, but she consented to a painful biopsy procedure just in case. They biopsied a piece of tissue from her breast and sent it away. A week later, the doctor explained that they found a breast ductal carcinoma. He told her truthfully: that it was the most common type of cancer, that it was only stage one, and that it would be easily treatable.

My parents had originally planned on moving the family back to Taiwan from the States. The house was sold, the furniture shipped overseas. My dad, who had already gotten a job there, and their five-year-old, my brother, were in Taiwan, were waiting for my mother and their two-year

old daughter, me, to join them. She was going to become a professor there. Now all these plans were shattered. This cancer diagnosis had thrown a wrench in her dreams, as she now faced her mortality with a young family in tow.

For several weeks she was numb. She wondered if the cancer diagnosis was a punishment from the gods or the result of extreme stress at work; the bitter irony of working in the cancer drug industry was certainly not lost on her. She didn't have any family history of breast cancer. Perhaps this was fate, a test of strength. But she had a family to support, there was no time to wonder or to complain or to grieve. For all intents and purposes, life went on. It could only go on. At least the cancer was detected early. The doctors told her to enjoy the family vacation and think about treatment options afterwards. She was lucky, they said.

The plan was to temporarily stay in America to pursue cancer treatment. She accepted the standard procedures without complaint: a lumpectomy surgery to scoop out the growth and adjacent lymph nodes, with radiation and chemotherapy to kill any remaining cancer. Since the cancer was hormone-related, the doctors also gave her a cocktail of hormone suppressants, including Tamoxifen, an estrogen receptor blocker. She studied cancer drug research and knew what the effects of these drugs were. Tamoxifen would reduce the chance of breast cancer recurrence, but would increase the risk of uterine cancer, among other things. A risk-benefit analysis was necessary.

And thus, the cancer was quietly and tactfully scheduled into her life. She juggled a career and cancer alone, driving from work directly to chemo sessions every day. To move forward, the semblance of normalcy was crucial. She requested that the nurses administering the chemotherapy into her arm to hurry so that she wouldn't be late picking up her daughter from daycare. Since the house was already sold, she temporarily moved into a friend's attic, hiding from the landlord. When the nausea struck, she would take her daughter for fresh air to walk in the park. She thought, at least her daughter was with her, at least she could concentrate on being strong for her. She only told a few people-her boss, necessary family, and close friends- but even after opening up, she always downplayed the severity of her illness, resulting in surface-level understanding but not truly sympathetic. She could endure the physical pain- the toxic treatments, the nausea, the weakness of her bones, but to suffer other people's worry and pity

was another burden entirely. To share her experience was to relive it, and there was simply no time to do that.

Six months after my mother's cancer diagnosis, my father was diagnosed with kidney failure. Our family decided to stay in America for good. My father returned to Boston for treatment and was eventually put on long-term dialysis. My mother went back to work full-time, as if the cancer never happened. But constant worry filled her mind: a chronically ill husband, her kids at home, and the demands of her job. The years went by, the daily memories gray and fuzzy, but the concern was always there.

Ten years later, amidst the growing stress and pressures of work, she felt a lump again. Another biopsy and a fateful phone call confirmed that the cancer had returned. She shouted at the cold voice of the doctor on the phone. It could not be true. She could not believe it. After everything, the cancer had returned in the same spot, a seemingly vengeful act. It did not make any sense; she was a good person, and this curse had struck her twice now. This had to be fate. Her education did not save her. Tamoxifen did not save her. Praying did not save her. Her husband, suffering his own illness, could not save her. What could she do but deal with it alone?

This time, the cancer would not respond to radiation and chemotherapy. Her connections as a cancer researcher meant that she could consult some of the best cancer specialists at Dana Farber. They presented her with the treatment options, survival rates, and other statistics. But that did not make the treatment any less painful or invasive. They poked and prodded, removed 21 lymph nodes in her arm, and cut out the entire right breast. She woke up from surgery with her flesh and identity as a woman removed in the name of a cure. Thankfully, the recovery period was relatively short, and complications were minimal; only a jagged scar remained where tissue used to be, a daily reminder of what she had gone through. But it was hidden at least. She preferred it this way. She did not want anyone to look at her differently, to worry about her. She considered herself lucky to have survived again.

I spent most of my childhood and adolescence largely unaware of my mother's cancer and how it profoundly affected her life. I always saw her as a strong person, but back then I did not fully grasp what to do in her times of weakness. The night my mother learned of her cancer recurrence, my father told me, his exact words lost in my memories and the toy car still in my hand. I watched my father prepare homemade soup for her. When we visited her after the second surgery, she lay in the hospital bed, asleep. I think it was raining that day. I wrote a get-well card

and left it on the table, next to the home-made soup and some flowers. I do not remember if she saw it. I regret to say I do not remember very much at all.

My understanding of my mother's illness only began long after her battle was over. Each time I asked about her experience, the story grew a little bigger, a little stronger. But even now, almost two decades later, my mother's story remains a mystery. She does not tell me the details; she cannot remember what the doctor said. She says she forgot what she felt, but I do not think cancer can ever be forgotten. Instead, she is always determined to hide it, to cope with everything alone, to protect herself and others from the truth. She promises to be more careful, to eat more healthily, to exercise more, and to worry less. She finds solace in time and hopes to help other people by continuing her work of cancer drug research. After everything, she always tells me to take care of myself.

During winter break, I went home to Boston to see my family after a long semester apart. My mother picks me up at the airport and we hug a little too long. The sky is grey, the leaves have already changed colors, and the highway home bleeds with Phoenix red and orange. At some point along the way it began to rain, splattering like teardrops across the windshield. I complain about how stressed I am at school. My mom threads her fingers through mine and squeezes a little too tightly. I yelp in fake pain. This is our silly tradition. A reminder that we are here, together, and now. This is her declaration of strength. This is her silent way of transferring her strength and love to me, to shield me from her pain. But I know there is real suffering hidden deep somewhere that I cannot even begin to comprehend. I can hear the rain sprinkling and slowly becoming louder. I soon hear the pattering of the unrelenting rain pelting our car, the rumbles of thunder awakening. But we are safely ensconced inside, speeding away from the rain, away from cancer. I squeeze her hand back to tell her she is not alone anymore.
