

Finding God in the Calluses of My Husband's Hands

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Inspirations

I dedicate this book to our children. Jake and Libby have already learned so much from Erin and Cy. Now, I hope they can all see the perfection and the strength of love in the face of fear and difficulty. Just like their father showed me.

I can almost hear our church organ playing “Awake, Awake to Church and Love” (by Geoffrey Studdert- Kennedy) . “To give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee. To spend thyself, nor count the cost; to serve right gloriously.” Accordingly, I wish to acknowledge all the people who give, in hopes that they inspire the rest of us to make a difference.

Our family was blessed by countless individuals helping in innumerable ways. So many, in fact, it would be difficult to name them all. However, I want to honor the kindness of a few outstanding people; Jane Lobdell, a.k.a. Bambi, who left her life to become mother to us all; Janine Vasas, who slipped in to fill every vacant role; Barbara Roach, whose whole family taught me how to actively show someone you care; and Laurie Whitman, representing the Johnston High School community, who forged a friendship out of illness, and stood taller than was ever necessary. My family has been ever-changed by their thoughtfulness.

The structure of the writing was inspired by the vignettes of Sandra Cisneros in her book, House on Mango Street; the movie, “Juno”, which told a universal story in the smallest personal details; and the ache in my heart that, through venting, gave me the strength to heal.

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Forward

Dear Reader,

Thank you for sitting a spell in the dark corners of my year. I began this piece as a dying tribute to my husband – they were just supposed to be ordinary observations and off-beat love poems. Through that writing process, I noticed that my circumstances could belong to anyone, for we have all been touched by illness and struggle. We all should, more importantly, be inspired by hope and love.

My support system turned out to be tenfold what I had known; my family rallied, my friends surfaced from all corners of the world, and complete strangers wept with the intensity I felt was only mine. And somewhere in the middle of this abyss, rereading my own words altered my future. These vignettes moved a bed-ridden woman into a furious fight for her life.

Whether you are a patient, a care-giver, a survivor, or just a tender soul, my wish is that you be moved into action. Take care of yourself and our community. Please allow my story into your heart so you may see the world as the delicate gift it is. Live with love.

Respectfully,

Alicia

Prologue

I knew the exact day my friend, Jerry, would die. It was as if someone whispered it in my ear while Rikki, the kids, and I hiked in the woods. And after, the words just sort of floated through the trees, kind of like the shafts of light that poured around my husband as he passed behind the fallen timber. The voice told me it would be December 14th. And I didn't know if it was good to know.

It wasn't as if I needed to be right. In fact, I felt like I ought to be wrong. After all, why should he go on some random day between the major holidays? Lyn and I held hands and flinched on the couch when the nurse told us it would be soon. Why didn't Fate choose a more symbolic date? Like Thanksgiving night, after the festive meal Rikki served to all of Jerry's friends. Or maybe it should have happened on December 1st, the national day for AIDS awareness. Or even a less flashy time, like one of our dress-down days at work, where we collected money for cancer research. But it didn't.

Jack was right. One day he said that the backdrop of Christmas was important. Like a sub-plot, I thought, in a personal narrative. I walked out of that room as Jack and Bob were arguing quietly about lighting or not lighting the tree before Jerry's sister came, and I wandered into the kitchen where Louis was assuring Lyn that Father Alexander could administer the last rights on any visit. My mind floated again to the day that Lyn and I canned peaches in the kitchen so Jerry could entertain in the living room. We all had a role to play, and friends are as symbolic as any season.

Advent is a time for spiritual waiting and preparing. I don't know many people more spiritual than Jerry. I thought that living with a minister for a father would drive someone away from the structure and rules of

organized religion. I thought the fire and brimstone threatening every Sunday would push Jerry out. Instead he found tradition and sanctification a way of centering and prioritizing. He found that ritual and text applied to every scenario. No exceptions. Not even on December 14th. Jerry's devotional book on that very day taunted me with the title from John 14:27, *"The Great Life: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you... Let not your heart be troubled."*

Unfortunately, we were not waiting for the birth of a baby, nor were we preparing for the coming of the Lord. On the wreath, the first candle that is lit is called Prophecy. It reminds us of the prophets who foretold Christ's birth. Our culture commonly refers to this as the candle of Hope. But for what did we hope? We used to hope he would heal, then we hoped for more time with him. Then, our hope became specific and confusing; don't let him suffer long. Hoping to understand him; does a nod of the head mean that we are choosing the correct scripture lines to be read today? Hoping that his weakened smile did not signal frustrated sarcasm. Hoping that holding the spoon in front of his mouth, as the applesauce drips onto another clean shirt, for another eight seconds, is not as patronizing as it feels.

We held a family meeting with Hospice as the candle of Bethlehem was lit. This symbol of Christ's cradle, we refer to as the candle of Peace. I failed to convince Jerry to consider entering the Hospice center, for he was adamant about remaining in his home. Back then I missed the irony of the cradle and the death bed. I missed the whole point of peacefulness. We called his sister because we didn't miss the fact that it was time.

The candle of the shepherd came with Mary Gail. This one is pink, the candle of Joy. I stood at his kitchen window, looking out at the dirty snow on the Pawtucket street, pissed off with a teenager spinning her wheels

trying to go up the slick hill. Not terrifically joyful, but fortunate that Mary Gail made it in time to witness the miracle.

Inevitably, time catches up. The weathermen forecasted a storm on Thursday, so Rikki asked me not to go. Alas, I am an English teacher, trained in deciphering the art of foreshadowing. Knowing I would not to be moved, he weakly refrained from an argument. I had to be there. I walked in and resumed my smile. I complained about drivers and of gifts, and I settled next to Jerry's bed to read. I looked at Lyn, his eyes red-rimmed, as usual. I heard him, I think, say, "It's perfect. Everything's done. It is even snowing." I gripped Jerry's bible more tightly to my chest.

Not perfect the way we normally mean the word. Certainly this wouldn't end like a story-book. There were no Christmas carolers, even though they were scheduled to come on Saturday. Nor would Jerry humor us by dying in his sleep like we had dreamed. It was just a Thursday, and we were ready. We had stayed up all week making sure that the will was written, the cards were stamped, and the service was scheduled. Did he simply wait for us to finish?

Mary Gail came in to hear me read that odd Thursday, December 13th. She asked for a perfect passage. I did not bother to admit my ignorance or inability to find particular passages, for I recognized that the familiar scriptures gave her a similar peace I offered to Jerry. Obediently and automatically I opened up the marked book to a random page and started to read Jerry's highlighted text: *John 14: 1-6 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the*

way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jerry knew the way.

I drove home, with a foot of snow on the ground, getting out to push and to be pushed, tuning the radio dial to Christmas carols that I had avoided all season. I kissed my children on sleepy foreheads and collapsed into my husband's arms in the kitchen. I poured a glass of wine and walked onto the back porch, listening for the voice in the trees that would tell me something comforting. Anything. But the blanket of snow muffled all noise. I will miss him.

Rikki came from behind, placed his chin on my neck, and sighed. My tears came more quickly, realizing that this Sunday we would light the candle of Love together. For Jerry. For us. For everyone who has ever lost anyone.

Desperate

“You sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” Who would make up having blood in her stool?

“It shouldn’t be red. It should be black.” Rikki grunted out of bed and came to the bathroom door.

“I’ll be sure to tell that to the turd right away.” As I collected the “sample” in an old Country Crock tub, the odorous lab work began. Swiping, smearing, measuring into labeled vials, shaking and wiping up after. There is a reason I didn’t do well in science class. Life is gross. And the end product is grosser.

Now, Murphy’s Law insisted that I repeat this process three times. Once because I didn’t follow the “clean collection” rules, another time since I missed the live culture deadline. And each time I brought my “product” to the counter, in a zip-locked biohazard bag, inside an IGA plastic bag, placed gingerly at the bottom of a Whole Foods paper bag, folded and stapled at the top to be sure no one could see or smell my work. I cringed. Finally, the lab tech told me I had done it correctly and the office would have my results in a few days.

“Dr. Ryan’s office called. They want you to call back. I bet they have your results.” Rikki put the half and half back in the fridge, and pulled out the milk for my tea.

“Since you’re driving me to work today, can we just swing by on the way home?” The kids clamored into the kitchen arguing about whose iPod charger was left plugged in. “Libby, go brush your hair. Jake, go brush

your teeth.” I smiled as they continued to push into each other, jockeying for some unseen position of authority.

Rikki yelled, “Did your mother just tell you something? GO!! The bus will be here in five minutes!” Feeling almost detached, I watched their faces turn away from each other, and back to the routine. Rikki continued, “Maybe we can stop by the office on the way to get the oil changed.”

Dr. Ryan was new to our medical practice. She seemed very kind and very young. Pleased that I stopped by, she asked if I could wait in one of the examining rooms while she went to see my chart. Rikki stayed outside in the car while I dutifully turned in to the familiar room.

This is when the movie started. Remember, I had no preconceived illness about which I was anxious. I am a logical, healthy woman who thought it was advisable to check with a doctor’s office to find out why my crap was bloody. So when I saw Dr. Ryan walk in the room as if someone had slowed the movie reel, I paid closer attention. Her eyes were as big, brown, and bright as they were three minutes ago, but I could see more of the whites, somehow. My head flickered a joke to myself and I considered asking her if I should take her blood pressure. But her seriousness stopped me.

“Alicia, you have blood in your stool.”

So I sort of waited - as serious as she was. Since this was the symptom for which I sought her advice, the news was, somehow, not as shocking to me.

I nodded my head in the best impression of stoicism that I could muster while I waited for the desperate news. Desperate. That was what I read in her face.

But it didn’t come.

Awkwardly, we waited like that for a few seconds. Following my silence, she advised me to see a gastroenterologist and gave me four names. I thanked her, shook her hand, and shook my head on the way out to the car.

“Well, what did you swallow?” Rikki asked casually in the front seat.

“Confusion, apparently. I have to get a colonoscopy. Is Dr. McMahon on this list?” My head was still perplexed. I tried to explain the movie quality to Rikki. He tossed it up to her youth. And we continued on to the car dealership, pleased that Rikki’s doctor was one of the four GI guys.

My colonoscopy, the sequel to this movie, was just as surreal. The twilight medicine that they gave me didn’t knock me out, just made me swimmy. I could see the mass on the television screen, but I was clearly unfamiliar with the frame of reference. “What is THAT?”

“That, my friend, is the source of your bleeding.” Dr. McMahon kept looking around. I must have faded out, because the next thing I really remember is him saying that I probably wouldn’t need a bag. I, of course thought my clothes were still with Rikki, so I was completely unconcerned that we had no way to carry our things. He patted me gently, and smiled. “Let me clean up. I’ll brief you later with your husband.”

Rikki came in and helped me get dressed before we saw that same look together. We turned to each other, our expressions inaudibly asking, “Did you just see that?” Our nods were barely perceptible as Dr. McMahon continued speaking. With that look. Desperate.

“The mass needs to come out!”

“Is this a big deal, Doctor?” Rikki asked, catching his breath.

“Yes, Immediately! I will refer you to Dr. Kent, the colorectal surgeon. He will get you in soon. If not call me. If you have any questions or changes, call me.” We were winded.

As if that wasn't bizarre enough, it wasn't done. We met the colorectal surgeon. He came in, shook our hands, looked sweet, and talked about the weather, finding the office, and our kids. He grabbed our file. Then he coughed. Then he excused himself. And there it was again. That desperate look.

As a teacher I train my students to see three as a magical number. In literature, repetition is the key to foreshadowing. The number three is also the foundation of most every religion. And if one is looking for stability or balance, which would have been very helpful at this cinemagraphic moment, one only has to look at the engineering of the movie maker's tripod. So naturally, I began searching the small room. For hints. For God. For anything to hold me upright.

Rikki took off his glasses and rose to the examining table where I sat with my coat still on. He leaned down to my puzzled face and pressed his cheek against mine. I still didn't understand his actions, nor my own. I am not sure which one of us was crying. This nightmare simply blurred into a crooked embrace. I had never before felt so one with another human being.

We heard Dr. Kent on the other side of the wall asking for specific counts. He came back in accompanied by a somber nurse. She moved closer to us while he turned and gently pushed the door closed. Holding our file in his left hand, his right hand rubbed invisible stubble on his cheek. He exhaled deeply before addressing us. “Your tumor is cancerous. I am afraid that the biopsy showed that it is malignant. You have probably had it for a long time. I can explain how I intend to remove it...”

And so began our clinical discussions about oncology and tumors and surgery. We were diagnosed with stage four colon cancer with lymph involvement and six lesions on the liver. And so began this pact that Rikki and I never needed to speak. After seventeen years we have, simply and finally, become one.

Chapter 2

Gertrude

She expects me to feed her!

Every time I lay down, to nap, read, or write, she howls for attention. Starving her, though, is not effective- I hunger with her. The louder she gets, the more I succumb.

This tumor, who infiltrated my digestive tract about eight years ago (according to the latest measurements), certainly does not want to leave. She has sent troops to rally for her. She constantly interrupts my mornings, my dinners, my mothering, and my marriage.

She is strong. Instead of war paint, she concealed her face with my good health. While waiting, she manipulated and matured. In the night she infiltrated my lymph nodes, traversing organs to erect camp sites in my liver. I can picture her scrambling, marine-like, on her belly, ever alert, through the trenches of my blood stream. She sways in my pelvic cavity when we try to reach her by chemical warfare. Where does she rest to strengthen between battles?

Trying to quell the nauseous beast, I sit at a bowl of tuna fish and spinach. I take tiny bites, and hear her sigh in relief. I wonder if she feels, like me, that she's dying. I wonder whose will is stronger.

Are the other tumors like her children, who peck her cheek quickly, as they run onto the school bus? Does she walk unsteadily around her farmhouse at night, turning off lights, smiling and remembering? Does she hold her cup of tea at the window breathing in time with the horses, which look up, knowing she is watching? Does she love?

We should name her before she comes out. We should definitely empty the contents of her pockets. See her motivation. Carefully remove her dog tags. Offer her a three gun salute to honor her courage in her solitude. She served her cause well. Taps. Taps for Gertrude.

Chapter 3

Aggie

Rikki and I waited, a little less than patiently, as the front desk girl reminded me to drink quickly. Rikki nodded to the cup for the twelfth time and I grumbled. The thick gunk just sort of sticks to your throat. Each time I brought the plastic container to my lips I was surprised by the innocuous orange freshness. The grayish white slime met my lips with a viscous snarl and simply wouldn't slide down.

“Enough. Just chug.” He didn't even look away from the article on Mariah Carey when he said it.

“You drink it. He'll never know, then I can get in early.” I tried pushing the cup towards him. He blocked me with his elbow and smiled, pretending to shake a crease out of the four-month-old magazine.

I gagged as I slurped, but he continued to half-ignore me, his half-smile still in place. “Just wait until you are radioactive.”

“Yeah, YOU wait until I am radioactive, Shithead.” He turned the page.

“Agnes!” Everyone in the waiting room looked expectantly to the young orderly. Agnes got up slowly and cheerfully showed off her empty cup. As the orderly nodded, she leaned down to kiss her husband. “A pre-PET scan romance. Gotta love this job,” the orderly giggled. And we all smiled for Agnes and her husband.

Rikki closed the frayed Rolling Stone. “See, you won't be called until you can make all-gone like Agnes.” He reached his arm around my shoulders as I scooped into the crook of his shoulder and muttered

something close to, “Bite me.” He slapped the top of my head and closed his eyes. I almost finished the drink.

“Alicia.” A different nurse appeared at the door.

Rikki didn’t lean in to kiss me. Instead, he ratted me out. “She didn’t finish her Barium.”

My look was not as scathing as I intended, but I was tired. So was he. He just winked when Robert introduced himself and informed me of another bottle waiting for me in the next room. My shoulders hunched at the thought and I followed him into the corridor without looking back at Rikki.

“I’m serious, you know,” Robert claimed as he opened the ten-inch thick door in front of him. “You have a half-an-hour break. Then you have to drink the next one.” I was still not sure if Rikki paid him to kid with me or not, so I just continued my weak smile, knowing that I would do exactly as they say. Again.

The room was long and narrow with three plastic-covered recliners facing the sliding doors to the scanning machines. Agnes, in the middle chair, did not hold a new cup. I smiled at her and wondered.

As a fellow PET scan patient, they were looking inside her body the same way they were looking in mine. Immediately I wanted to ask her if she knew what they were looking for. But I looked at the wrinkles on her face and realized it didn’t matter. Her hair was styled like my grandmother, who goes to the salon once a week and sprays it to keep that look. She wore a freshly pressed, emerald green running suit, which greatly contrasted my faded, blue, Johnston High School sweats. And I knew I would like her because she was reading a thick, tattered paperback novel.

“Agnes. Sorry to be late with your drink, would you like yours with an umbrella?”

Robert's quick comments were no match for Agnes, "After you," she replied, tipping her head. We were instantly friends.

You get to know people when you wait for nuclear waste to be shot into your veins. There are a good many jokes (all of them heard by Robert several times, we were sure) that follow the terrorist looking metal vial opened from a cryogenic frost. After thirty more minutes of this banter, I found out that everyone calls her Aggie. She is a twin, has always been a reader, and she likes this drink about as much as I do. Robert even went out to complain to our husbands that we were ganging up on him. Apparently the men weren't much help to him.

After another wave of laughter, Aggie and I returned to our reading material.

When Robert returned he was carrying the plastic bottle. "Your turn, Alicia. Umbrella or pineapple?"

"You know, I thought it was the cancer that was killing me. Then I started chemotherapy. Who knew it would be the orange scented Barium?"

"This one is chilled." And he left.

I moped into my cup, sniffing it suspiciously, when Aggie cleared her throat. "I am sorry to intrude," she started, "but I was given three months to live." I gasped. "That was six years ago," she smiled.

Tears spilled down my cheeks as she reached over and squeezed my arm. I pretended to go back to reading. So did Aggie.

"What did you do," I finally sniffled, "When you thought you were dying?"

Aggie looked up, shut her book and sighed. "I balled my eyes out. Then I gave up. But I am a Christian." I waited to find out what Christianity had to do with her death sentence. She saw I was waiting.

“See, I read the Bible. God talks to me there. I kept ignoring Him, because it was way too hard. I shut the book, I slammed the book, I talked back, even.”

While she was talking I kept nodding, as if I understood her trials. I didn't fool her. She continued, “The instructions are clear. Give it to Him. Give your worry to God. But I had trouble with that message. I'm a Leo.”

“I'm a Leo, too,” I whispered.

“Are you as controlling as I am?” she asked, lifting her head and chest.

“Yes,” I whispered, again, as if I had something by which to measure her control.

Laughing, she added “Stubborn is something I am good at, but God is more stubborn than me. He kept repeating His word until I heard him. It was painful. For everyone.” I couldn't tell why she was still smiling. “But I got the hint. I'm still not sure why He wanted me to give Him my troubles, but I'm glad He did. I haven't had to carry them for the last six years.”

Aggie stopped speaking while her words echoed in my brain.

We were both looking at the closed door to the PET scan machine. I don't know how much time passed before she added, “I guess I'm here today for some unfinished business. I never did figure it out... what God wanted me to do these past six years. But, you'll see, Alicia. It's easier on you when you hand it over to Him.”

I felt sort of foggy. I felt like the bearer of a gift. I was honored that I could hear her reflect before she faced her “cancer” in the next room. I thanked Aggie for her story. She held my hand and prayed for us both.

I felt warm when Robert came back in. “Okay, Aggie, I get to break you two up now,” he smiled.

Aggie was slow to rise, but she returned the smile. “You can’t break us up. We go two by two...”

I stood to hug my new friend. But, she turned abruptly, putting her first finger to her pursed lips. I paused when she said, “Hmm. Maybe this was what I was supposed to do.” She nodded, more to herself than to me, and added, “Good luck, Alicia. Listen well.”

I stared at the doors closing off her image. Did she really mean that God could have spared her life simply to have this one conversation with me?

I collapsed in the empty room, feeling impossibly important to a woman whom I will never know. However, I will continue to feel the pulse of her reluctance and her faith in the beats of my heart.

Rikki was sitting up, munching on a Lorna Doone when I got out. Ignoring the radioactive vapors, both his arms gripped me to still the hicking of my sobbing story. “This is all part of the journey, Alicia.” He assured me that angels loved me as much as he did.

So, now, I expect that I’ll have to learn to listen...

Chapter 4
Beautiful

Wind through the pine trees.
The warm sun spot on the kitchen floor.
Jake, five-feet-ten, full out on the couch,
Busting out bursts of laughter
While watching TV.
The faint sound of swing music.
Puppy drool drops on my lap.
Fuzzy socks.
Libby's leg, hanging over the side of the chair,
Dangling in time to the Disney songs
That loop on the DVD in the laptop.
Fresh flowers in the middle of the table.
Crumbs of Oreo cookies left beside the vase.
Rikki grumbling at dishes in the sink,
And the wink that comes when I touch his back.
A plush red bathrobe wrapped tightly.
Peanut-buttered rye toast, cut in half on a paper plate.
This is my life.
Beautiful.

Chapter 5

Pain

“On a scale of one to ten how bad is the pain?” Doctors and nurses ask these questions to help. I realize that I am in an argumentative frame of mind at this time in my life right now, but I can’t figure out how they expect any sort of reliability.

“One to two.” It is never my intention to mess with them. I am just so frustrated.

“And does that number ever change?”

“Yes, during the infusions and directly after.”

“How high does the pain go?” But these are difficult questions to answer, because what do I know of pain? I fell off a horse, broke my shoulder, and cried for two days. That was pretty painful, maybe a seven. I slowly helped my friend, Jerry, to die at home. Could that have been a nine? I watched my mom, bald and paralyzed, recuperate from brain surgery. Can you give me an eight and a half and a hallelujah?

What is queasy? How do you quantify “feels like shit?” Who can measure, “I want to be done now?” Pain has a completely different meaning after all of this. I am not in pain. I am in limbo.

I have a new ball, in the pit of my belly, not the tumor itself really. More like a sea-sick guardian prepared to fight for her. The ball simply sways from side to side reminding me that he is ever-present. With hostility, he waits until there is a bit too much food, then tries to rock it back out. Almost sated, but simmering on top.

This process reminds me of Sisyphus. No matter how many times he rolls the boulder back up the hill, at some point does he find a feeling of satisfaction... a job well done, an isolated moment that doesn't last forever? How long must eternity be? Does he ever have one fleeting feeling of contentment? Unlike Sisyphus, my burden is not so heavy, my internment is not so long. It is just so God-damned constant.

But is this Hell? It is so very hard to tell, since I am still here to look upon my babies' faces everyday. I am allowed glimpses of who they will be. I watch Libby sneaking mascara and hip-hop moves. We laugh at the YouTube videos she finds. I notice Jake flexing after three pull-ups on the door jamb before he takes off for the middle school dance. As Rikki drives away with them, I think of city streets, college towns, and dirty old apartments, of boyfriend troubles, lost jobs, and weddings. And I sigh.

How do you measure pain? It is the 80% likelihood that I will miss the scenes flashing through my head right now.

Chapter 6

Cancer Can't Claim Me

In bed I calm my mind.

My breath bounces evenly off Rikki's bare chest.

I become the river following God's tough terrain,
speeding, serpentine, southward.

I am the act of cleansing, washing Gertrude smooth,
as if she was the river stone,
with my worry and my resolve.

In my dreams I float above myself and this wilderness.

I see the cancer patient, frail, in her bed,
entwined with a man whose eyes stare blankly at the ceiling.

He rhythmically caresses her back
as tears stream, silently, down his cheeks.

I am not saddened by this sight.

Strangely,

I am humbled.

These two are Every Woman, Every Man,
and every single person who has ever struggled.

Their obstacle is neither higher,
nor further,
nor more complex.

They will, somehow, find the strength to believe in grace and endure.

Like everyone else before them.

And after.

Chapter 7

A Garden

Deciding to marry my husband did not transpire in a traditional way. Why should it? He is not a traditional man. Nor are we the traditional couple. No, my husband persuaded me that we were made for each other. I would have used the word coercion. He disagrees.

I used to work at an old foundry building in East Greenwich. I liked my job. It was a huge step up from the Olneyville Burger King where Rikki first proposed to me. But, that's another story.

Anyway, I shared an office with an extremely sweet and striking woman. Randi, and her romantic life, was a weekly source of frustration. Every Friday, Randi's boyfriend would buy her a dozen, gorgeous, long-stem, red roses. I have no idea how Randi had room in her house for all of the vases, for never a Friday passed without the delivery man calling Randi to decorate her desk, right behind mine, with a colossal fountain of true love.

One monumental Friday, Rikki had the misfortune to phone after such a delivery. Oh, did I whine. Certainly, Rikki would not buy into the Hallmark moments that moved Wall Street. He was a realist. Although I could agree with him on many fundamental levels, I so coveted my neighbors roses. That day he heard all about it.

As usual, he allowed me to finish, told me that he was sorry my feelings were hurt, and proceeded to hang up the phone. I sat right there and cried. I truly wondered if I were insane for staying with a man who wouldn't dignify my envy with a simple bouquet. How could he deny proof of his affection? Why would he choose to allow me to feel second rate to

this model? Disheartened, I wondered if perhaps we were not going to work out, after all.

Mail call on the following Tuesday was dumped on my desk and I began sorting through the familiar envelopes. I picked up a small, recycled box. I recognized the hand lettering on the cover from Rikki. Why would he send mail to my work when we already lived together?

The box contained a package of Burpee sunflower seeds and a note, “I’d rather plant a seed and watch it grow with you.”

Did you ever see the movie, “The American President?” Well, there is a scene where Michael Douglas tries to send his date flowers. He failed. But the best part of the whole movie is when Annette Benning opens a package and lets out a whooping, completely not passionate laugh, when she declares that the president of the United States sent her a Virginia ham! He won her in that awkward glitch.

Gripping the crinkled seed package in one hand, peering into the empty box still in the other hand, I knew that there was no other gift, no other moment in time, no other unromantic notion that Rikki couldn’t solve with his inelegance.

If that isn’t coercion, I don’t know what is.

So, when Randi received a two carat diamond ring for an engagement present, I got really excited. Rikki simply pointed to our home and reminded me, “You’re living inside your engagement ring.”

If that isn’t, “Shut up,” I don’t know what is.

Chapter 8

There, Art Thou Happy?

When I was told I could die, the journey was of great import. Rikki and I revered the statistical five years. For, if all the time I have left is measured, how would I spend it? I would be blissful, thrill-seeking even. I would model exemplary behavior to my kids and my students. I would continue to work, bald and all. I would drag my sorry ass to church to be a testament to God's grace. We would travel, and sing, and live.

How is it now that I am sucked into the quagmire of details? Now that I see the pragmatic side of suffering, I desperately desire to skip this road. What happened to problem solving and positivity? Careening into hopelessness, I am adrift in a stupid list of side effects.

Am I just another foolish, tragic hero? I feel like Friar Lawrence should scold me as he did Romeo. I have time to put my house in order. Time to watch my son set off a stink bomb in front of the principal's office, while my daughter rolls her eyes at her father for not knowing the title of her newest novel. There is the gift. My husband and I are home together, to giggle and strategize, all day. I can pour a bowl of cereal, sign a field trip form, and let the dogs outside when surgery is pending in less than a month. There is the gift. I have job security, sick time, and insurance. My dad checks on me everyday. There is the gift. I have a twenty percent chance that this forgone year of my life will produce a cancer-free, long, happy life, whose scars will simply stand for lessons of gratitude and possibility. There is the gift. I am a mother, a stepmother, a grandmother, and a godmother.

Every one in my life knows how much I love them. This is “the pack of blessings that lights upon my back.”

Now, if I could only drag my sorry ass out of bed to tell God that I am grateful.

Chapter 9

Confession

One of the definitions of irony is something turning out the opposite of what you expect. I once heard of a librarian who died under a collapsed shelf of over 1000 beloved tomes. Some irrelevant factoid calendar told of a yoga guru who didn't have enough balance to avoid falling off the edge of a cliff. A Providence Journal article named the "dumbest criminal" a man who shot his own face off while stuffing stolen money into his chest pocket; he forgot to switch hands with the gun. However, there is nothing ironic about the details of my illness.

In fact, the particulars of my demise could be predicted. A strange way to go, as selfishly as I have lived. Of all the character flaws I was working on with God, self-centeredness and lack of thoughtfulness were at the top. Thus far, my life has been an extended metaphor for egocentricity.

Now, looking at the end, I worry about all the times I failed to let my mom have an equal share in our relationship. She never started the conversations, nor ended them. I never paid enough attention to the call to remember when I shouldn't call. I never allowed her to vent the details of her day since I dialed her number to tell her something I thought was earth-shattering in that microsecond.

I worry about my husband pulling the weight of two parents. Catering to my every whim, he always let me have the first choice and the last word. I always expect him to acquiesce in any fight since I am, of course, right. Not to mention that he should take the role of the "heavy" when I riled the kids up too high; and to calm that situation down without raising his voice.

I worry about the fact that being a conscientious teacher isn't quite enough; I want the newspapers to herald my achievements. I feel the need to broadcast my spectacular ideas in the teacher's room, to advertise my latest reading material, to brag about my solid relationships with such unruly kids. Good deeds ruined by hubris.

I whole-heartedly agree with Hillary Clinton, "It takes a village." Then I watched as the neighborhood agreed. One neighbor helped me find and care for my first horse; the opposite neighbor helped me build our pasture fences. His wife trained my dog to stay out of the road. The police dispatcher educated panicked callers how to calm the wayward bitch when she appeared vicious in our yard. The village has been good to me.

With trepidation I look into this future and see more of the world catering to my needs. The aforementioned blessings have grown. My town has organized weekly dinners, my church has tended to my community obligations, my school has arranged a fundraiser, the local barn has volunteered to board my filly, my friends have begun shopping for our essentials. My mother arrives every Sunday for an old-fashioned, albeit portable, family dinner complete with all the fixings and many of the cousins. My husband sends me to bed at every yawn only to fetch my books, socks, pills, and warm Gatorade. My kids come downstairs to complete all of the untended chores, they finish their homework alone, and offer unsolicited comfort.

I am free to meditate, complain, pray, write, and worry. I get up only to take nourishment, bathe, and pretend to socialize. I still call my mom with every detail of every side effect of every process of chemotherapy. I still suggest that Rikki should talk more sweetly to the kids, be more

consistent with the puppy, fetch me a different vegetable in my smoothie since this one now tastes odd.

Crisis should be a time for epiphany. A time to regroup, prioritize, and change. How have I changed? I now seem to have added an excuse for living my life in this selfish manner. Suddenly, I have people who feel I deserve this attention and group response. According to me I deserved it before, for living so honestly and rightly. Now?

Vulnerable is a curious way to examine my vanity.

Chapter 10

Hands Down

It snowed all yesterday and last night. Like so many New England snowstorms, a beautiful, sundrenched morning followed. Preparing for another week of chemo, I just kept crying; over cold, over beauty, over ugliness, over teacups.

Cancer immersed me in the grieving process. I remember the books in college on Kubler-Ross' stages of grief: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. Then we seem to have added one, since I'm not dead yet. Hope. The problem is that we seem to swing from stage to stage pretty quickly, then repeat the cycles as if we had never seen them before.

"Eighty percent chance of return does NOT mean only twenty percent chance of survival! Would you please look at this article again?" Rikki brings the Coping magazine back to my bed, gripping his coffee mug with his other hand.

"No, I left the article out so you could see it is time to start having different conversations." I was already sitting propped up by pillows. "You want to live in the fantasy world of extreme success stories. I want to get out of this God-Damned bed." Now, I was bolt upright and probably done barking.

Rikki flinched, unaccustomed to this phase. "I think we do have to talk more. What is it that you think is happening?" I was almost more upset by his soft, slow response. I slumped back into the cushions and frowned. "Moping is not helpful," he reminded me.

As he placed his hand on my leg I felt his warmth come through the covers. He could always still me with his hands. Rikki has working-man's hands. They are relatively small, but so is he. His hands are always chapped, rough, and calloused. His nails, though not chewed or filed, lay flush with the top of his fingers. I guess they get worked off. He cups them gently around my body and I am forever changed by their strength. I can't help wondering from where he will get calluses now, working so hard at this new job, dressing his cancerous wife.

"You have to let me be more independent when I feel well." I burst into tears, "If you want to convince me that I'm going to live, stop treating me like I'm dying!" But he didn't answer me. He just embraced me hard so I couldn't see his tears.

He finally acquiesced by allowing me to walk the dogs into the back field, if Jake came with me, and he supervised my layering of sweaters and gloves, and extra socks, of course. The first breath of air was crisp, and hard, and wonderful, while bouncing off my scarf. Jake seemed to glisten in all the brilliance while dancing and pouncing. The empty pastures served as canvases for the dog's webbed feet to scroll zig-zag paintings that celebrated their zeal. I stood still in one spot and smiled, feeling the sun on my already taut cheeks. I marveled at the naked, pale birch trees bowing under the snow, looking at my tracks slow, and not so steady, next to the careening madness of my chaperones.

Tired and giggling, Jake and I rounded the corner to return to the house. "What is this, Mom?" He stopped at the corner of a strange shape on the snow. My brow furrowed, trying to place the familiar looking stain in a completely unrealistic pattern.

“I have no clue. I would have told you urine, but animals don’t move like that.” Jake carefully circled around the mass cocking his head like a dog. I watched him more than the mark.

“Awwww, gross!” He said, pretending to retch.

“What?”

“It says your name!” He pointed, not looking. I moved next to him, still confused. But there it was, like a hidden message that you had to position your magic eye just right to see the image. Written, as only a human animal could, were the cursive letters, A-L-I-C-I-A, in pee.

We ran back to the house, laughing, to find Rikki waiting at the door, wearing a half-smirk, hoping we found his artwork. “You are completely disgusting,” I managed in my fake mad voice.

“It was in my own hand,” he laughed out loud. Jake’s guffaw caught me by surprise as he headed to his staircase.

“Who would have thought that your hands could make me this happy, Richard.”

“Just call me Dick,” he declared as he helped me back to our room. We snuggled into each other’s exhausted bodies, with smiles almost touching. “See, you can’t die. I’ve left too many hidden love notes for you to find.”

“Will we just beat cancer the next time it comes?” I asked in a very small voice.

“Only if you’re not the twenty percent – I think you will never have to worry about it again. Really, do you think cancer will want to come back to visit in your body after they fry your ovaries? You’ll be a menopausal bitch!” He cupped his rough hand around my chin and moved my mouth up to his smiling kiss, as the sun sparkled on the snow outside.

Chapter 11

My Mom and Amazon.com

“You sound tired,” my mom sighs into the phone.

“I am. It’s a good tired, though.” I was fixing myself into my bed. Lately, I adopted a ritual for propping myself up to rest without shutting out the world. “Rikki brought me to see the horse at the barn. She looks good. She’s definitely unhappy that she is alone in the paddock, though.” I grimaced as I stretched my arm toward the tissues. “I even went with him to pick the kids up from the dance tonight.”

“That’s great! Do you feel like you over-did it, though?” I have a nice relationship with my mother. She’s a shrink, so she understands boundaries. Not that she never steps over them; after all, she is still my mother. But she is very easy to talk to, even about nothing.

“Only because I am tired right now. I’ll probably sleep better tonight as a result.” I tilted my head to the side trying to get comfortable while still on the phone. “If I only had a bolster for my legs.”

“A what?”

“A bolster. You know, the rolled pillows to prop your legs up. Hey, are you coming up for this Sunday dinner even though you are staying for my chemo on Friday?” I let my eyes close to the sound of her voice as she answered, deep and smooth and soothing.

“Yup. I’ll be there Friday, then again on Sunday.” I could hear the background noise of her nightly routine, too, so I said goodnight and dropped the handset on Rikki’s side of the bed.

I have always felt close to my mom. Although my friends all thought she was strict when we were growing up, I found her obnoxiously fair. Jane never doled out idle threats, she meant every single one of them. And even to a teenager, though she could never truly understand me nor my oh-so-individual-how-can-you-even-pretend-to-know needs, she listened to everything I had to say.

So, it shouldn't have surprised me when she showed up on Friday with a TJ Maxx bag with a beautiful satin bolster with tassels on each end. I laughed, barely even remembering the reference.

It is in these gifts that I tend to find comfort and the will to keep moving forward. In our cheerful places, we feel gratitude and camaraderie. The Bible says that our life should be measured in our service to others. So, in my not-so-cheerful places, these gifts have been another way I can torture myself. How will I possibly repay all of this kindness?

Amazon.com has been almost as faithful as my mom. I desire it, and it appears in two days. In the struggle to feel less alone, the struggle to feel proactive, the struggle not to succumb, I keep looking for support. I have read 27 books on cancer so far. But most of them either bunk chemo, talk about sexuality after losing a breast, prescribe vegan alternatives, or share the shock of the day her hair fell out in clumps. These survivors do not speak for me. I am still alone. I still have my breasts, my hair, and my family. Still sedentary. Still gag on the wheat grass juice. Still feel like a scared victim.

My whole life I have strived to be weird. It was never my intention that my cancer would be weird, too. I can't find a book on any 38 year old surviving colon cancer. This feels like the down side of not fitting in. I ordered a set of four more books when I was down with chemo, they arrived

when I was up. And in this magical delivery came a book that I needed. Kris Carr, a 31-year-old (really?), wrote Crazy, Sexy, Cancer Tips after she produced a movie journaling her stage four (yup, I'm listening) inoperable, incurable (holy shit) cancer in her liver and lungs. Being unique herself, she wrote the book including all of us that don't fit the mold.

A book that speaks to me. Weird? Yes. Crazy? Perhaps. Sexy? Well, maybe to Rikki.

By flirting with the reader, empowering her sisterhood to stay in the game, talking about the impossibilities (and what happens when they really are impossible), Kris Carr reminded me to rethink.

My mom wants me to be strong. My husband needs me to be strong. Jake and Libby actually think I *am* strong. How do I look for strength when walking down one aisle at Stop and Shop is an Olympic achievement? Certainly it can not be measured by the fact that I surround myself with pillows before the strenuous task of putting on a leg of clean underpants. No, strength has to be more about point of view.

People in pain speak, incessantly, of silver linings. We keep counting our blessings (mostly to make sure they are still there). Kris Carr decided to defy cancer. Lance Armstrong rode through his pain. Gilda Radner laughed in the face of her mortality. I may not be that strong. However, I can look at my situation from my mother's point of view. In her line of work she has to repeat the question, "What is the function of the symptom?" Ona Faida Lampley sinks into her disease, hoping to find something of value. Dr. Bernie Siegel keeps asking, "What are you supposed to learn from this trial?"

I have learned several things. My husband is a capable mother and father. My son is responsible and centered despite his ADHD craziness and

anti-school attitude. Way too young to be this moody, my twelve year old daughter is a natural nurturer, who fills me with love and pride. If cancer doesn't kill me, these lessons are enough. Now, I need to look around to other opportunities to learn. To thrive.

My girlfriend from church reminds me that God is so good, His sense of humor must be equal. "So, you gotta be careful what you wish for. 'Cause if you pray for patience, He's gonna damn-well give you something to be patient about." Well, I'm not sure I ever did pray for patience, but I guess I have always wished for the world to slow down. Being weird and all, I have struggled with choosing priorities and maintaining focus on things that matter.

God gave me the gift of time. Out of work and in bed, I have time to think, to pray, to cry, to look, to grieve, to hug, and to focus. What matters? Now. To give yourself today. I have cancer. I also have a family. And God gave me today. I hope I don't waste a blessed minute of it.

I don't have the luxury to wait for cancer to be done with me before I remind my kids I love them. Nobody knows how long the battle will take, nor who will be the victor. Whittle out the time to take that trip. Say those words. Buy that bolster.

My mom is a genius.

Chapter 12
Seasons Change, Surgically

I forfeited March and April
To watch my children mature.

In the hospital or on pain killers
From lion to lamb.

Culling disease from my organs
To give hope a chance to thaw.

True to the seasons,
Recovery brings more rainy days than tulips.

But in my sleeplessness
I can still hear the birds chirping out my window.

And, as brief as the sun may be,
My children's delight is palpable.

Next month heralds the promise
Of many more cycles to come.

Cancer free.

Chapter 13

Deconstruction

“He is the one true vine. We are His branches.” This Sunday, praise and worship have new meaning for me. Reverend Connie continues from the pulpit, “God will prune each of us to make us more fruitful.” I can’t help but to feel the effects of that divine plan. I have been pruned.

Dr. Uchino’s resident announced, “Alicia, we are going to take the staples out now. It may be uncomfortable, but it won’t hurt.” Uncomfortable was an understatement, since the staples went from my pubic bone to my breasts, but it wasn’t horrible.

Fading in and out I heard, “Abide in Christ and everything else will be given to you.” Based on my last surgery, three weeks prior, removing staples was a good indication that I was close to coming home.

Home. “You looked like an alien,” Jake said looking down at the table, “That was the worst part.” And I did. With a vacant look from behind the morphine, the forty pound weight loss drew my face into an absurd angle. I don’t think it helped that my layers of clothes draped and sagged, exaggerating the loss of form underneath.

Think about what just happened. God went in and took each dead and fruitless branch, in turn. Or, at least he sent Dr. Uchino to do it for him. First, there was the primary tumor in the sigmoid colon, removed and resectioned. Then the affected lymph nodes had to go. My liver was involved enough for two surgeries. Scoop out the tumors on the side that is staying, tie off the blood supply to the half that is going. Finally, remove the lobe that is too far gone. I am down to a stump.

Fruitful will take some time, I am certain. Weakened branches need time to re-grow. In the first hospital visit I had to be taken to a shower room to hose off the shit that spilled out unexpectedly. The second surgery was supposed to be easier on my body. But, I guess it was too soon, for the ten day stay yielded more vomit than they could collect.

“This certainly isn’t draining well.” Dr. Uchino excused himself after looking at my incision site four weeks post operative. When he came back in the room, he made conversation about the candy we had in the hospital room, opened a package, and came over and sliced my stomach open. Yes. Cut me open on his examining table. Was I supposed to be the branch or the vine?

“Can you believe it?” I asked the visiting nurse as she was unhooking me from the “wound vac” three weeks after that.

“He’s a surgeon. They cut.”

I am still unsure if she has no sympathy, or just steels herself to the truths of the medical universe. “I see why the vacuum hurts though, every time you walk the sponge is scraping the inside of your incision, which still run two centimeters deep.” Feeling less crazy, and indulging my self pity, I cried again.

“This just seems so hard,” I complained to Rikki. “I can’t walk, eat, shit, or shower. What does this have to do with cancer?”

He pulled my head into his chest and reminded me, “No doubt, it sucks. But you have no choice and no breaks. Cry and be done.”

And so I do. Often. And in very strange patterns. Sometimes I cry because of the pain. Many times I cry as I watch the tall pasture grass undulate in the spring wind. Mostly I cry because of the time the kids fended without their mom. Today I cried when I heard Farrah Fawcett ask

the TV cameras, “Why was I given cancer?” I never believed that Gertrude was a gift, a curse, or a punishment.

But the question reminds me of Reverend Connie. Her sermon, far more brimstone than usual, holds the imagery that completely relates to my life right now.

I wonder how to abide in Christ.

And the answer reminds me of the disciple, Paul, who declared, “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” I have not.

This is the first time I actually feel like a survivor. I am not finished. I am open to the gifts God would bestow if I learn how to believe.

And with all this pruning, I definitely wonder what type of fruit God wants me to bear.

Chapter 14

Feeble Mothering

Libby, Rachel, and Jackie veer toward another store in the Emerald Square Mall while I finish my Coke at the door. Almost unaware I find myself staring at my own daughter as she descends deeper into the garments. I begin to think, “When did she grow up?” So I shake my head to look for my little girl.

Her hair, thick with strands of brown highlights and lowlights, bounces as she walks toward the clearance rack in the back. And I remember the bald spot on the back of her scalp at two years old. Oh, and the Velcro bow that held the strawberry wisps off her forehead so everyone knew she was a girl in her brother’s hand-me-downs.

As she scans the area I recognize that her eyes are as liquid blue as her father’s. However, hers are deeper, darker, like the sky in August next to the big puffy clouds that give a moment of respite from the heat. Her eyebrows arch grandly over each eye, even when she furrows her brow to let Rachel see her distaste for that particular blouse. The gesture pinches her small round nose. Her lips, though very full in the morning when she rises, are thin and pink and curl slightly at the corners. I can almost see the laugh lines she will have at thirty.

She catches me looking at her and smirks from above an armload of clothes. And I think of the day she climbed under my covers to read to me. She had given me a book she had enjoyed, The Host by Stephanie Meyer. I was frustrated because the chemo blurred my vision. Her voice was steady and methodical, like she had been reading aloud her whole life. Her body, never quite gangly, was warm next to mine. I closed my eyes and let myself

sink into this weird science fiction, aliens and your kid tucking you in. I smile now without taking my eyes off of her.

When she exits the dressing room I realize that other shoppers in this store see a shapely, young lady. I hear her feet flap in her wedged heeled sandals as she walks to the check-out counter. While I approach with the credit card, I push out the image of the hour-glass shape of those same soles sticking out of the water at the YMCA when she learned how to swim. I think of pink toe nail polish to match the walls of her room, which are now adorned with posters of gothic, literary vampires.

My innocent baby is nowhere in sight. I must rely on my minds eye to bring back the awe in her open face as she watched the finale of Free Willy. I have to return to photo albums to resurrect images of her mouth, corked with her treasured binky. I keep annoying her with stories about her silence and serious observations of the world from her vantage point in the baby back-pack.

But I won't annoy her today. No, this trip is for Libby. Saying yes to Paramore concert t-shirts and gummy lobster candy is to say thank you. It is to say that I treasure every moment that she has been patient, and kind, and responsible. This day is to celebrate the opportunity I had to sneak a peak into the soul of this woman that I once knew as a child. And I realize today, that she and I are doing a wonderful job so far.

Chapter 15
Between

I feel whole.
Somewhere between surgery and chemo
Strength surfaces.
Longing for life resumes.

I plan.
Travel, write, kiss, pray.
Drinking tea on my sofa with friends,
While laughing heartily.

I feel alive.
Driving the kids to the pond by myself,
Staying up late enough to watch karate class,
Making it through half of a church meeting.

I hope.
That I stay strong.
That the kids endure.
That treatment ends soon.

Chapter 16

Unbearable Uncertainty

My minister, Connie, is a cancer survivor, as are her mother and sister. She gets it. Her sister, Jamie, has prevailed over her struggles with pen and paint. Some of her art has been compiled and published with other survivors in a book titled, Unbearable Uncertainty. It is, unfortunately, the best term I have heard so far. A seemingly simple dichotomy of realities forces an unanswerable conundrum for our elite group, “How are we to live with the impending threat of recurrence?” And, equally painful, “How dare we not?”

We all look to inspirational stories of “the one who beat all odds” for comfort and hope. Well-wishers would have us believe that cheery attitudes, positive thinking, and a decent mantra are cures for the strong. But statistics are not fabricated out of faceless weaklings. Cancer is ubiquitous, as is death. Metastatic breast cancer patients are given two years to live while metastatic colo-rectal patients are given five. I don’t want to be “given” anything. I plan to fight for more than my share. Therein, we confront the same dichotomy.

Rikki and I learned to meditate, eliminated processed foods, increased raw and vegan recipes, researched treadmills for post-operative exercise (after my two-foot long abdominal incision heals), counted and recounted our blessings, received cards, dinners, and care packages from three different countries. There, you have cheerful.

Conversely, life sucks. I sit on the toilet bowl for three hours each day, force tepid liquids to stave off dehydration, abandon sleep because of

abdominal inflammation (from radiation) and painful neuropathy in my jaw (from chemotherapy). My balance is off, my leg muscles twitch, my hands shake, and I can not tolerate bright lights nor cold. Did I mention the nausea?

The aforementioned list certainly seems well worth the price of life. We have spoken to women in the chemo suite who have made terrific bargains to reach humble milestones. I, too, would gladly suffer ten-fold to ensure seeing my children graduate high school or fall in love. But the dues to this club act more like lottery tickets. Some people make it. Some do not. Who am I? Certainly not the smartest, the most kind, the most physically or emotionally fit. I am you. I am her. I am tired.

How does one fight when one is so weak? So incredibly oversensitive to smells, tone of voice, and words left out of sentences? How long can my support system brave the fragility of the meaning of “Stage Four?” How many times can a body be poisoned so it can love?

Using cancer jargon, I have no doubt that I will “fight” and win this “battle.” Chemotherapy forced my children into more accountable roles in the house and school. Radiation taught us all to be patient with pain and the anger it causes. Surgery resurrected neglected faith, while recuperation engendered compassion. My husband and children will be wholly different people when I return to my role. As will I. It remains to be seen if the effects of such devastation make the unit stronger. Or will this journey make each individual stronger? I am holding my breath.

But what about the “war?” It is with the same unbearable uncertainty that I will make love to my husband, return to work and church, adopt more horses, and travel with my children. Who will I be then? Although, “cancer-free” has a beautiful ring to it, the diagnostic term does not include

the risk of recurrence. Will it embody itself as the anxiety of a shadow lurking behind me, a stiffness in my neck and shoulders for which I see the chiropractor, or a constant lump in my throat as I kiss my family goodnight?

Chapter 17

Chemo Suite

Through my curtain I watch a strange, yet familiar oncological world. I nod to Jonathan as he hunches around his IV pole, making his way to the restroom. Ruth sits in the stall opposite mine, ignoring the incessant beeping of the infusion pump, as she unravels the last row of her needle work. A woman I have never seen before vomits into a kidney shaped pan that fills up too fast. My eyes linger on her too long. Her hands are transparent, her veins raised and blue. I try to assess if she is any older than I am before a stocky nurse in surfer scrubs snaps the curtain closed.

My nurse, Jen, is tall and strong. Her smile matches the pink she applies to her cheeks. Her curly hair bounces as she jokes and readies the supplies on the table. I feel a preparation of sorts in the sound of her voice. It begins with the taste of surgical alcohol in the back of my throat before she connects the tubes that will allow the drip to pulse into the port in my chest. The ripples of nausea rush down to my gut. I sit here – hours – in my cubicle pretending I can nap, while Rikki folds this month's Reader's Digest in half and rests his foot on the arm of my recliner.

Contradiction rules this world.

Patients are poisoned to cure disease. Heavy metals and saline begin a hunt from my heart to my hands and feet. They destroy anything moving and growing: cancer cells and new abdominal muscles. While our bodies endure this toxicity, Gail swings by with a walkman and a bench to offer Reiki. The healing of energy, touch, and music steadies my body as I try to picture wellness and light. Then there is Fletcher, the pet therapy dog, with

his bangs bouncing over his eyes as he steps in the room. He and his owner politely offer simple companionship: maybe a smell, a memory, a reason to believe.

I tend to eavesdrop on families on the opposite side of these thin walls. Rikki and I glance at each other from time to time as they convey their secrets. I echo all emotions: the grief of plummeting white cell counts, the joy of a clean scan, the horror of the reality of any prognosis, and the swell of indescribable fatigue.

The lights are bright and the nurses are busy, while Rikki and I settle again into this routine. I curl up, cold, and he fetches me tea and a tuna sandwich. He touches my leg as I close my eyes, and gently caresses me with each little moan I make.

The sick is not so much, just so unsettling, so unwell. I have to remind myself that the sessions have become their own timeline; a final countdown has begun. I have six more infusions. I am grateful. I am ready. I am a survivor.

Chapter 18

Questions for the Oncologist

Who are the beneficiaries of receiving six more cycles to clear my cancer-free blood?

When will the feeling come back in my toes?

Does my low white-cell count mean we can't travel?

May my mother call you with questions after she Googles words like neutropenia and bevacizumab?

For what was I spared?

Now that I have gained weight, should I start a whole food diet?

What is a BRAC test?

Can you prescribe something for the sheer sadness that immobilizes every part of my body, except my tear ducts, every first day of treatment?

Will the nerve damage causing jaw pain really be permanent?

Did I mention I am having trouble swallowing?

What defines a prescription drug addiction?

Should I avoid the risks of hormone replacement therapy for my menopausal night sweats and sleeplessness?

Would bananas help the twitching?

Which four letter words do not offend God?

Am I going to receive a list of symptoms for recurrence?

How much exercise oxygenates your blood enough to keep cancer out?

Would you smoke marijuana if you had teenagers?

Can I take homeopathic creams for hot flashes?

How will I stay cheerful knowing this can come back?

Are you going to adjust the prognosis now that I feel well enough to kayak with my children in the sunshine?

Will Rikki have me back in October?

Chapter 19

Moments

I feel hot. Cold. Blue. Nauseous. Fine.

Yes, really. Fine. I yell for Jake to come downstairs, and I hand him his helmet. There is a question in his eyes, but not in his smile as we hurry out the door. I can barely fit my butt on the back of the bike. I pass him the keys and he deftly begins the sequence to start. The engine's whine drowns out the strangeness of wrapping my arms around my baby for support. He is still too skinny to be a man. But he backs up anyway and I hold on tighter.

I already yell that we're going too fast. His bony back lurches with silent laughter, but he shouts that we haven't even broken eight miles an hour. The sun warms my cheeks. The puppy chases us up the hill, past the thick clover patches and into the southern-most empty horse pasture.

He shows me where he burns rubber. I show him where Lady and I used to jump. We turn back to the house, avoiding old manure. When we switch places, for me to drive, I learn that he doesn't trust me as much as I don't trust him. So we laugh again. But he doesn't hold my waist, and I don't slow down. My teeth dry in the wind all the way back to the exact same spot, Daisy still loping after us with her tongue flopping sideways.

I feel hot. Cold. Blue. Nauseous. Happy... in each salvaged moment that we are Fine.

Chapter 20

Calluses

My eyes simply leak. The cascades flow down my cheeks and Rikki sighs as his fingers gently follow the path of the tears. He returns to gently massaging the toes on my right foot. “Can I do anything to make this better?”

His words almost confuse me. I don’t have the energy to ask for more. I don’t have the strength to think about what I may have forgotten. I don’t have the will to plan ahead. “Just touch me.”

He moves his left hand to my hip and caresses me slowly while humming something familiar. I get lost under the heat of his hand. I doze in and out of the sweet feeling of being held. I breeze in and out of memory.

He used to use these hands for painting. Before we married, Rikki began to develop carpal tunnel syndrome. At night he would have to rub his palms back to an open position. I would sit on his couch and kiss the tips of his fingers and thank him for working so hard. These hands would cup me against his body and that same warmth would pass through my blood.

Years change people and purpose. We live far from the city college where we met. Here in the country, a set of hands fuels a home. We have pitched hay for horses, herded pigs to slaughter, collected eggs, and apples, and berries. We’ve lived heartily and honestly.

The kids come in from stacking wood. “Is she awake?” Jake asks.

“Sort of. What’s up?”

“Libby wants to go to the barn, but I was hoping to go swimming.”

I smile weakly up at my husband. I am certain he will get up, empty his cranberry-lime seltzer can, and drive the kids where they want to go. I

can picture his hands at ten and two on the minivan steering wheel. So I put my head down on the pillow and already feel the cool absence of his palm.

But he doesn't leave just yet. The kids go running upstairs after they spoke in the kitchen. I don't hear the conversation, but I hear music from the living room. He plays guitar with those same hands. His calluses get so rough that his fingers catch on my clothes. He strums old folk songs while the house is still stirring, but always plays the Beatles, "Blackbird" to serenade me to sleep. He always has.

I don't know how long my eyes are closed; but he touches my cheek before his lips find mine. I shiver at the holiness of his touch. "Can I do anything for you before I leave?"

If I was honest, I would say yes. Take me and hold me so tightly that the rocking stills my insides and I can't feel anything but the heat from your heart while my breath bounces off your chest and tastes of all of our past love-making. If I was kind, I would say no. You have done so much already being mother and father and nurse and cook and friend and I couldn't imagine any day without you. If I was anything other than sick I would say thank you, bless you, and peace in all you think and do.

But I shake my head, sort of smile, and close my eyes again.

Somewhere, fairly far away, I feel him squeeze my shoulder and tell me he loves me. And I think how odd it is that he still uses words when he has those wonderful hands.

Chapter 21

Yeah, but...

I truly do not think I can keep doing this to my body, to my mind, to my family, nor to my soul, which begins to wither downward towards the depths of hell.

“Yeah, but, you are cancer free!”

The sadness is swallowing what used to be me. Tears pour from my eyes while I make pancakes. Full sentences are interrupted by fitful sobs. Receiving no more sympathetic cards, but experiencing all the same suffering. I don't even have the right to explain that “I have cancer.” So I am frozen in place as I try to straighten my stomach and my hips when I catch the dirty looks of the man on the curb after I just pulled into a handicapped spot. A good comeback eludes me. How about, “I am undergoing treatment for a cancer that I don't have anymore.” Or ever so much more accurately, to the skinny woman with the high pony-tail, who reminds me that the key to happiness is joining a gym, I can retort, “I am way too busy grieving for my life while I wait for my cancer to come back.”

“Yeah, but, you are almost done!”

Only eight weeks more of treatment. Today I can never imagine ravaging my body three more times. I begin to devise more efficient ways to kill myself. Never having felt suicidal before, I am alarmed by how many thoughts come immediately to mind. White cells are low. Anxiety is high. Hope has plateaued. And the word “only” occurs in the same sentence as three more trips to poison myself with heavy metals, then to thrash in bed for six days, to shit my pants while running to the john. Because that's not

so bad so long as nobody turns on the lights and I can keep taking pills that distract me into more sleep – away from my kids and my responsibilities.

“Yeah, but, you must be so grateful.”

Some days I am. And some days look quite a bit uglier. I have become the celebrated captain of the Envy sports team. I hate anyone who rides by on horseback. At 2:45AM, I hate all sleepers. I hate yoga, and good mothers, and vegetarians. I feel heat in my cheeks at the sight of travel commercials. I even begin to dislike my chemo comrades who handle these cocktails well enough to keep working. I am mad at every person who has his health. These are the days I should not come out of my room, should not answer the phone. Perhaps I should not burden my poor mother with the details of such negativity that burn both of us far worse than Oxaliplatin.

“Yeah, but, you look so great.”

The days that I am out of bed I slowly pluck myself out of the cocoon my husband repeatedly weaves for me. I put on lipstick, brush my hair, and lie to myself that I feel well. The lies come more easily as I smile at people who haven't seen me in a while – who thought I would die. One part of me musters up the strength in order to say, “Ha! You thought I wouldn't make it, but here I am. My strength is unparalleled.” But knowing that my strength has very little to do with the miracle of survivorship, an equal part feels like hunching over a bit more dramatically and slowing my walk so that the acquaintance will better understand that my suffering continues, despite the fact that the shell of my covered body looks normal. The whole idea is absurd. To think that someone could peek at the suffering or the strength of this invisible illness.

“Yeah, but, you have the rest of your life to look forward to.”

I do. Laughing, and passing popcorn, in a dark theatre proved that the fight was working. Only five times during Paul Blart, Mall Cop did I worry that Gertrude would show up again. In my liver, my lung, my pelvic cavity. How is it that anyone can gracefully move forward while her head is peering back over her shoulder? I speculate about recurrence, about death, about the entire minutia I have missed in Jake's and Libby's lives. I fret about keeping relationships, paying back kindnesses, and how my kids have changed. I agonize about what modifications I should be making to find meaning out of all this unpleasantness. Yet, today I was content that my children watched a dweeb-ish old man and his chunky daughter end up being the superheroes.

“Yeah, but...” FUCK!

Fuck cancer, fuck chemo, fuck pain. Fuck bridges that collapse, school budget problems, and lost puppies. Fuck this, fuck that, and fuck you. Fuck everyone who doesn't care equally as everyone who doesn't call. Fuck the LiveStrong binder that tells its tales of other “thrivers”. Fuck the world wide web, rosary beads, and platitudes. Fuck me.

Yeah, but...

Chapter 22

Ebb and Flow

Do you really want to know how I feel? Honestly?

Take a drive – in the rain, alone, – to any of the major South County beaches. When you pull in to the pot-holed, pitted parking lots, look for two oil-slicked puddles side by side. You could get out of the car and stand next to them while succumbing to the wind-swept wet. Or you can stay in your warm, dry car and just imagine someone else's condition.

One of those puddles is pain. The other is nausea. Mercifully, I don't drown in either puddle. God took cheesecloth and dragged equal amounts from each pool and allowed it to hover between. That flooding is my physical affliction. Yet, it is only one side of this cancerous yoke.

More complicated, the other side of this load is on the other side of those dunes. Strapped to my neck are these tender, flashing moments of becoming me. On tippie-toes, remembering vacations here with my grandparents. Moody, I stood at the shoreline as a teenager, with my mother, for the first time exploring the presence of God in a single approaching wave. I dated my future husband, ignoring the sand pressing into my backside. A young mother repeatedly dug and refilled the same holes, for hours. I watched my pre-teens strutting before diving through the undercurrent, devoid of their mother's fear.

Take these memories in a broken yellow sand pail and pour them onto the beach. Watch as they sink into the earth, allowing the little blowholes to open, where I always imagined that the clams lived. And cry. Cry for the knowledge that each new moment may have to be remembered by somebody else. And cry, because we have the great fortune of knowing there will be

new moments. And, for God's sake, get out of the car and feel His tears as the ocean roars in affirmation!

Sit for six days in this discomfort. Then get on your motorcycle, your horse, or whatever you miss, and ride away from this lot. Stay far away for the next eight, beautiful, yes-saying, laughing, money-spending, hugging, memory-making days!

Chapter 23

Communion with Nature

“Ready?”

“Yup. Let me just get my rain coat.” I closed the lid on my Facebook page and grabbed my new, white, Gortex slicker. The dogs circled around my feet, understanding that we were going in the woods.

Rain or shine, Rikki and I have worked our way up to an hour of hiking everyday that I feel well. We left through the back door and reached for each other’s hands as the dogs ran up ahead into the path that led to our trails.

“Did you drink that smoothie you made?” He asked when we picked up the pace.

“No, it was really too gross. I think I will go back to juicing for a bit. Hey, did you pay the last bill for Miriam Hospital?” I always notice that the trees look greener in the rain. The fallen leaves squish underneath our cadence. I put up the hood of my jacket before the canopy closed in on us and dripped down my back like last time.

“Yeah, remember? I paid it with the electric bill.” His answer came in between his quickening breaths. At this point our hands have to unclasp so we can walk single file across our makeshift bridge and into the wet fern. I generally set the pace ahead of Rikki. But today, he went first and whistled for Daisy who disappeared chasing a bird. He didn’t see me nod that I did remember the mail that went out yesterday. “What do you want to do about Jake’s attitude?”

My feet seemed to independently find the footholds of moss-covered rocks and root systems until we came back to a well-traveled deer path.

“Nothing. I think this is age appropriate. He is tolerant when I am sick, so maybe we can let it go. Besides, he’s fourteen. Aren’t we supposed to hate him now?” Buttercup pushed past me through the taller shrubs as I noticed the orange mushrooms had sprouted.

“OK,” he answered. Whenever we walk, I look down at the earth. I love admiring all the details and the changes. I have a distinct knowledge, my own internal GPS, for where we are, depending on the degree of the ascent or the shape of that rock. I feel stealthy knowing what has passed before us from noticing items moved, new prints, or variations of manure. Rikki, however, always looks up. He sees the wavering of the leaves. He navigates by following the angle of the sun and seeing clearings over yonder. “I need to talk to you about Gail,” he said.

“Sure. What’s up?” Gail is one of our friends who has fought cancer for five years. She is the Ever-Ready bunny. Sadly enough, she has lost a leg, a breast, a lung, a son, and yet she keeps going with some inexpressible force. She has become a beacon to me of all that is strong.

“John called last night. She got the result of the last biopsy. Alicia, it doesn’t look good.” Ambushed by an all-over body sweat, I slumped down on a stump and thought of her twin boys, a year between Jake and Lib, of her middle daughter ready to give birth, her eldest daughter who needs help being a mom, and her deceased son. I thought of casseroles and get well cards and phone calls. What could possibly speak to this grief? I rocked slowly for her pain, for my worry, and for our complete and utter impotence. How could it be to suffer and fight (and believe you were winning) for five

years, then still have the horrific misfortune to be told, “You lose?” What was the point of all the lost time, all the solitude, suffering, and sadness.

Wiping my nose with the back of my sleeve Rikki reached for my shoulder. Knowing my thoughts, he placed his arm around my middle to guide me towards home. “We have an appointment.” I nodded.

We continued like that, single file, in silence, for several minutes, both of us wrapped up in our own way of wondering how to help our friends. It had to be quiet work, for there are no rules. Could or would she fight again? Does anyone participate in conversations to stay or go? How would John handle being left? Who would the kids turn to in their grief? Too many floating and rolling thoughts. “I think we’re lost,” I announced.

“And?”

“You’re not worried?” I asked, actually stopping in the thick undergrowth, looking behind us to see if a path would sort of materialize like the magic eye images that jump out of the picture books.

“Nah. We’re together,” he answered. He, too, had stopped in the short brush, but hadn’t bothered to turn around. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

I shrugged, again unnoticed, and started toward him. He moved to the side letting me go first again, as if regaining some control would help me feel less anxious. Looking at the ground I spotted ancient tire tracks in the earth that turned toward the west. We followed them through brambles for some time. I lost the tracks in some muck, but noticed an arch and sunlight ahead. My racing heart skipped a beat as we entered the clearing and found an historic cemetery next to a manicured pond. I had to marvel at Rikki’s surety and faith.

“Look, it’s Potter Road. It may not look it, but it’ll always be this easy,” he declared.

I turned to stop him. “What if ours comes back?” I asked more boldly than usual. Recurrence is the always avoided topic in our house. But I have all these metaphors dropped into the woods. I turned north on the dirt road kicking rocks out of my way, still looking for clues on the ground. Rikki resumed walking ahead of me trying to keep up the pace so we wouldn’t be late. Now seemed like the perfect time to discuss it for real.

“Let’s just get home for your appointment.”

So, instead of talking, we went for our bi-monthly infusion. We took our place in cubicle twelve and we watched as the nursing staff organized for their long day. I snuggled up in the covers Rikki fetched for me and only hazily wondered where he went when my eyes closed. Once when I was stirring, I caught him peeking around the cubicle corner. I smiled and asked him what he was doing. Smiling back, he emerged with a woman my age. I had seen her earlier sitting with a pale man asleep in the cubicle next to ours. “This is Fiona. Her husband, Ron, has colo-rectal cancer too.”

I invited her to sit with us, but too much energy and too much worry forced her to stand. She did stay. We compared notes, commiserated, and understood. Ron was 41 years old. They have been enduring this disease for two of the five years they have been married. As she paced in front of us, using her hands to make sure we fully appreciated her words, she whispered the details that scared me. “Three weeks after remission, it had returned and metastasized.”

“Three weeks? Any signs?”

“Nope. He felt fine.” I didn’t hear the rest of their conversation. I was too busy grieving for this poor woman and praying for her poor husband.

I was angry – about three weeks, about bad news. Only one night earlier I brought up the subject of recurrence. Rikki refused to accept it as an option. He says that you can only hold on to hope, for, “negative thoughts attract negative things.”

I could never tell you that I completely disagree with him. In fact, my mom encouraged Jake to read the book, The Secret, by Rhonda Byrne. My son really bought the concept of keeping your focus on the action/ behavior/ outcome that you desire rather than “not wanting” it’s opposite. He explained that by phrasing things in the positive, you prepare for an action plan for success. While focusing on the negative promotes complaints.

On the other hand, I do not find it realistic to dismiss statistics and science when a family is involved. I prefer to be prepared for the worst, and be thrilled when anything magical happens.

And magic has been a very real part of this journey. Just look at my woods. This is the place I feel closest to God. I can almost hear Him breathe in the swaying of the leaves. Every scent of honeysuckle pushes me gently forward into a warm embrace. The world is muted, and moist, and lends itself for me to reflect. Here in the thicket, among frogs and finches, the quiet chorus conducts me in thought.

Depending on the season, the weather, my internal compass, or the Facebook newsreel, sometimes the thoughts are dark and lonely. Sometimes they are carefree and acceptant, no matter what. Often they are ethereal and intangible. Recently they have been mirrors of my grief, like with Gail and

Fiona. However, I mostly cling to everyday thoughts of my everyday life with my everyday husband.

I pray for thirty-nine more years of thinking among the trees. How will I serve these women? How will I serve my Lord? How will I serve myself? How do I join a community that pulls me to my knees in tears and heartache? How do I not? I ask you, ferns, how?

Chapter 24

The Bells

Did you ever play the game Ding Dong Ditch? When I was a kid we used to go out on “doorbell night,” October 30th. Dressed in dark clothes, we would walk around the neighborhood, ringing front door bells, only to run away and hide. I remember sprinting so fast that I could hear my heart thumping against my chest. I remember not daring to peek back at the door, afraid of being noticed. I even remember returning home concerned that my parents would have received phone calls from townspeople complaining about the mischief we made. I can’t remember the reason for the tradition. Nor can I remember why my brother chose to toilet paper people’s front yards instead. October was always filled with great anticipation and lots of sugar.

These many Octobers later, life is just as sweet – but very different. In the Miriam Hospital there is a bell to be rung on your last infusion. I was complaining to my mother that the hospital misses a terrific ceremony by downplaying the symbolism of that bell. Mary, from the group Peter Paul and Mary, died this year from cancer. If you are old enough to remember doorbell night, then you are probably old enough to remember their song, “If I Had a Hammer.” It seems a fitting message, for both Mary and me. Why not use that bell for all the chemotherapy patients? I would definitely “ring out danger, I’d ring out a warning, I’d ring out the love between my brothers and my sisters.”

On one visit to treatment last winter, a woman rang the bell, turned, and walked out waving goodbye. I didn’t burst into song or tears. I felt

bereft that that was all there was to the end of such an arduous journey. I started to play word association, metaphorically wishing the anonymous woman well. My list was long, and freakishly symbolic to my own struggle.

Being winter, I thought of the volunteers ringing and collecting for the Salvation Army. Yes, salvation. Picture a woman, bundled and cold, gently rocking the bell outside of Wal-Mart, calling the rest of us to action: help a person in need of money, of things, of hope. Of salvation. Being saved from death, or pain, or the treatment.

I thought of other Christmas-time bells. The freedom that comes with the blustering wind in my face as I ride a one-horse open sleigh. Stop to hear children playing a chorus of bells in the park. Watch black and white movies with my family as an angel earns his wings. Every bell resonates love and selflessness.

I heard the bell in the chemo suite again this summer, again without huge fan-fare. The new season, and my loss, conjured many different images then. Now I thought of school bells invoking me to learn from these trials. Cow bells, to keep track of my flock while I am busy tending my garden. I can almost picture a tan, buxom, blonde, in a pink bikini holding up the sign of the number three as the bell rings in the current boxing match, before I take the sucker down with one last shot to the jaw. I could keep this up for hours, while nobody at the Miriam seemed to notice.

But when I call my mom on the phone late at night, my spinach smoothie in hand, I don't recall these metaphors. Bitching for the 7,453rd time this week, I summon the Liberty Bell. A symbol calling us all to stand tall, and true, and strong. The rewards are our collective freedom. The source of the inscription on this famous bell is from Leviticus 25:10 which reads, "*And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout*

all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family."

I want that bell to ring for him, for her, for us – for ME! I want to proclaim that I am done. I want Jubilee to be my middle name. I desperately want to be returned to my family.

On September 22nd I received my last chemical infusion at the Fain building, third floor. It was an easier session than ever before. About thirty minutes before I was unhooked from the IV pole and connected to my travel pack, I saw Rikki escorting a group up the hall. My mother wanted me to have fan-fare. She wanted the bell that I would ring to mean something more than goodbye. For the 7,453rd time she heard me. She brought my family, the first string team that helped play this match. Jake and Libby had never been to the hospital before this. It seemed fitting I should honor their strength by having them participate in the end. My brother, Sean, from whom I borrow unspeakable courage. Soraya, Sean's girlfriend, followed this illness with kindness. Cousin Jimmy, who is really my twin, but our parents forgot to tell us, ignored his weak stomach and walked right into a medical building. And Janine... oh, Janine. I well-up when I think of how often she filled the empty spaces with her creativity, her love, and her humor. This united family gathered around the bell waiting for my disconnect.

As I reached to ring the hanging bell, I saw my family members take out bells of their own. Together we rang the bell of freedom. Of salvation. And everyone in the chemo suite stopped to cheer for us.

Janine had tied pink ribbon to craft bells. Each family member signed his own ribbon with a message that now hangs on my bedpost. As a

reminder that I am done. That I am not alone. That there is music in this pain.

It is October again. The chemo side effects are dwindling away. I certainly feel like I have been playing Ding Dong Ditch this whole year. I rang the bell at Death's door. Now I am running away so fast I can hear my heart, but it is singing. The life that passes before my eyes is rich. I have no regrets. I have no unfinished business. No matter how much time I have left – it is mine. And there should be sweetness (and candy) wherever I go!

Chapter 25

Fellowship

I had my PET scan today. Once more I was moved in and out of the oscillating machine so they can see inside me. And I realized that this is a perfect place to end the book. This struggle will now become a calendar marker for me and Rikki, from which everything in our lives will be mapped, “Darling, was that ‘Before Cancer’ or ‘After Treatment?’”

There really shouldn’t be anything else to say. It doesn’t much matter what the scan says. My oncologist will deliver good news or bad news this Wednesday. But the book should be over anyway. Because this is the true end for every survivor. I lived. I will worry. I will be watchful and hopeful. I will pray, and celebrate, and carry on. This dread will continue, or not, for years. I need to try it on and get used to it.

These vignettes served to save my soul. Every detail of this journey was vomited into a journal to vent and explore, even though some very important pieces did not get written into great stories. I wish I had added the chapter about how terrific my step-kids were. Erin’s compassionate phone calls when I was loopy on morphine, Cy’s change of Christmas plans, the babies’ drawings that still hang on my fridge. I wish I had written a chapter about Mrs. Murphy’s art class painting me a picture of a hippie chick twirling among butterflies. What a wonderful metaphor for the chrysalis and struggle for metamorphosis. What beautiful, fragile thing have I become? I wish I had a way to tell the tales of the countless phone calls, cards, and dinners. Facebook friends from my childhood. The sensual, first sips of red wine again. There have been a bazillion kindnesses, a trillion unspoken

moments that could have been included. However, like cancer, it is what it is. And it is done.

While I was waiting in the nuclear medicine wing, an older man was escorted to the plastic chair beside mine. He sat stiffly, staring into his cup. I could tell it was his first visit here. I tried to make him laugh about the “cocktail” and immediately thought of Aggie doing the same for me. When I relayed the story to my dad on the phone, he reminded me that, “God put you where you were supposed to be today.”

When I stopped to listen, I discovered that this random patient had stage four colon cancer and was getting a PET scan to determine if he was a candidate for liver surgery. His eyes filled when I told him of my prognosis, my journey, my spectacular weight gain, and my baby liver. As I was leaving, I wished him the best of luck. He stopped me to ask a hugely important question, “Do you still pass gas?”

Trying not to laugh full in his face, I assured him that, not only did I fart, I still wore diapers. He smiled and confessed, “I haven’t even told my doctor that, but I revealed it to a complete stranger.”

“We are certainly not strangers,” I reassured this nameless man as I smiled toward the door. Aggie would have been proud of my attempt to be as healing as she was for me. Maybe in a few more years I will have the hang of it. God will see to it.

Until then, it is time to finish. My friend, Donna, is coming for dinner tonight with her family. The kids will play man-hunt in the dark before disappearing into a video game. The men will stay in the kitchen, comparing dark beers. She and I will sit, with our feet on the couches in the living room, enjoying a glass of wine.

I will tell her that the technicians play music while you are strapped onto the moving bed. You can barely hear it for the whirling of the machine. However, today my thoughts were interrupted when I recognized a segment of a song I had first heard years ago, probably around the same time my cancer left my lymph system. “I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu-Man-Chu.” Surprisingly, I didn’t start bawling when I recognized the song, “Live Like You Were Dying,” by Tim McGraw. Rather, I felt a stillness of completion. Indeed, I did live like I was dying. I had purchased an RV, I played board games, I revered my husband, I passed gas, and packed lunchboxes.

All of our days are numbered. I am just more aware of how few they may be. I would hope I wouldn’t live differently even though I am still waiting for an epiphany. I can’t imagine going sky diving, or mountain climbing, but yes, oh yes, I will speak more sweetly, forgive, and love. Like tonight.

Once again (and maybe not even for the last time) Donna will hear every detail of today. She will nod her head in all the appropriate places, she will cry if I do, and swear at me if I need it. We will finish with spaghetti and meatballs. Yes, fellowship and a nice Italian meal with which to close the book. And maybe a salad.

Epilogue

The weather has been beautiful. Back to the routine: attend church, arrange my own appointments, and taxi kids to karate and dance classes. The first Sunday of Advent arrived while I wasn't looking. Not coincidentally, I am waiting to go back to work. I am waiting to feel agile when rising from a chair. Waiting to feel not so scared.

According to the internet, Advent has recently undergone a shift in many churches. The penitential aspect of the season is being replaced by an emphasis on hope and anticipation. It would do us all well to follow suit in our own lives. I hope my time with Jerry was as meaningful to him as it was to me. I hope that my kids can endure the uncertainty. That I can make time to play with my family and friends. That my husband knows how much I appreciate him. I anticipate a long and happy future filled with morning marital squabbles, teenage angst, and some nice old fashioned yelling.

The spiritual change is reflected in the change of colors used in the Advent candles. Many Protestant churches now use blue, instead of purple, to distinguish the season of Advent from Lent. It doesn't much matter to me, for both of these colors symbolize royalty. And both make me think of the night sky from my back field – maybe even as the magi once saw it. What gifts will I offer the King for His gift of life? Maybe the blue stands for the waters of Genesis, with the beginning of creation, the flooding away of my sins, my baptism into eternity. I will keep looking for the significance in this journey, or maybe just the beginning of the rest of my life.

Unchanged, the third Sunday of this holiday season, the Sunday of Joy, remains marked by the pink candle. No matter how sick I felt, how

scary it was, or how lost in my fear of the future, the world has turned pink for me. I am at peace, in love, indebted to the miracle. I am joy.

The biggest shift in my life is daily prayer. I no longer pray for my life, nor for my tranquility. Mine have become fierce prayers: prayers of humility, of submission, of service. They reflect the power of love.

And where, then, do we go now? What do I do as a survivor? How do I become a steward of generosity? Daunting is the mission to use this time wisely.

I saw a terrific bumper sticker that made me giggle, “Think Globally, Act Neighborly!” Does it simply boil down to the Golden Rule? And since when did treating others kindly become so complicated? Will I really stop gossiping over herbal tea? Should I quit my job and join the Peace Corp?

No. It comes down to my girlfriend’s horseback riding instructions, “ride every stride.” Instead of the pony ride of life I usually take, I need to realize that every blessed moment in our lives is a moral decision. Choose fairness. Choose benevolence. As a mom, it is simple for me to see where problems can become lessons. As a high school teacher, I will have plenty of opportunities to practice this difficult anthem, several instances to fail and try it again. As a friend and family member, I can utilize my new-found skill of observation. I should watch my community as closely as I examined the Earth this past year. If I see each person for who they are, be mindful of when his world is out of alignment, and patiently listen to his fears of restoration, then I have repaid some of the favors. That is probably a good start.

I will actually miss writing this book. The act of extracting function and beauty from my despair has been life altering. I have met so many brave people who face all sorts of “cancers” every day. Many on this road

didn't make it in the sense that I did. But I learned to listen. Now their voices, their courage, and their love live inside me. Especially Jerry.

I still miss him. I continue to wrap up in a blanket, take my tea onto the back porch, and piss and moan to the trees, feeling he hears me. And then I come inside, where the wood stove warms my heart. The tree is already up, albeit, a bit early. I breathe deeply, look at my family, and instead of hearing Cat Stevens, I choose to hear Jerry's low baritone sing with me, "Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning, Born of the one light Eden saw play. Praise with elation, praise every morning, God's recreation of the new day!"

Amen.