

## La Fantasma

Dr. Saffron handed me the forms to submit to the pension board for disability, but the letters on the page all jumbled together, so I couldn't read them. Rikki's breath caught in his chest as he reached out to hold my waist. I looked over at his eyes already pooling wet and looked back at the paper.

"Advanced incurable colon cancer: terminal." Well, shit. That doesn't sound optimistic.

Did the doctor not notice my recently waxed eyebrows, the way my new lipstick makes my chemo freckles look like a tan? Did he not hear my latest marijuana joke? What part of this overweight ball of enthusiasm looks terminally ill? Why am I having surgery if this cancer is incurable? Oh... I get it. More time. That was exactly what I prayed for. More time.

So I took a week to sink into the abyss of grief. Then I took a week to look for a way to climb out. Here is my problem... the struggle between being and not being. One foot needs to be in this world, where we pass the salt at the dinner table and hear the mundane details of teenage angst. The other foot has to be statistically pragmatic, contacting the lawyer and the funeral director. How can anyone coexist in this purgatorial space of participation and observation?

I had just written a strongly worded letter about returning the "finishing" bells to the Fain 3 infusion suite- to give us all something to look forward to. Now I realize why they took the bells down. The music of remission upsets the dying. I may ring them three more times, but who the fuck cares? I am still going to die with this disease.

What about the 15% chance it won't come back? What about finding a more aggressive surgeon? What about going back on my vegan smoothie diet, and Planet Fitness, and babysitting, and work, and my aged grandmother, and, and, and? My nurse compassionately calmed me down with semantics. Carolyn and her staff just call it "chronic cancer." No one knows the future, and there is nothing to do about it if you did, but to hunt for some light and some joy. Live.

Talk about an oxymoron, I suffer from acute apathy. Because I can't do both simultaneously: I cannot fight for my life if I wish to be at peace with my death. The dual realities contraindicate. I am grieving and I am hopeful. The afflictions are co-morbid. Morbid.

But, Tina and I joked about skipping out on useless commitments by explaining, "Oh, Tuesday -no – I am too busy cheating Death that day." And I know that my defiance has been my salvation during this whole five year journey. I have written about our endurance, my mother's legacy, enjoying every blessed sunset. Conversely, I writhe in sadness for six days, speak incessantly of the "what ifs," and scare my friends with self centered updates while forgetting to ask about their lives. Cancer has consumed all normality, but not me.

Today I filed the disability papers in my kitchen drawer. Unsure, I turned towards my family watching "The Big Bang Theory" and I giggled when I heard Sheldon explaining the Schrodinger's Cat Thought Experiment. You see, a cat is placed inside a sealed box and the subject does not know if the cat is alive or dead. In fact, he will never know until he interferes with the experiment to look. So if he does not interfere, the cat is simultaneously alive and dead. Both possibilities exist. Ah-ha. Not the first time in this fight, I surrender. However, I do not give up. God's plan for me is really none of my business. I can't have this precious family start their grieving process yet. They are all smart enough to understand similes and metaphors and this hugely erroneous hyperbole: "Advanced incurable colon cancer: terminal" (has a band riff about it, don't you think?).

This is the ladder out of the chasm. Nothing has actually changed, but the words. Dinner still has to be made, and my grandmother must be visited. I have no regrets, nothing left on my "bucket list", and I wake up most mornings choosing optimism. So if God takes me tomorrow- I'm good. But until He

does, I live in limbo, pleading for more of what I have already been granted while wondering who I actually serve with my selfishness. Decidedly, Hope should rule this anarchy. For in either realm I find myself, I am certain this spirit will be smiling at all the beauty found in the intimacy of everyday life.

Submitted by Alicia McCormick