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My Body is Not My Body

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MY BODY IS NOT MY BODY

By

Crystal Bell

B.A. Husson University, 2021

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

Advisory Committee:

Morgan Talty, Assistant Professor of English, Advisor

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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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MY BODY IS NOT MY BODY

By Crystal Bell

Thesis Advisor: Morgan Talty

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
May 2024

This thesis is a memoir, featuring a collection of short pieces and essays detailing my experiences having and being around cancer. The purpose of this work was to explore my relationship with illness, death, my body, my loved ones, and the world around me during the time of my illness and in the years since becoming cancer-free. The pieces cover a variety of time periods, stretching from the day of my diagnosis to my routines now, and discusses many topics, such as medical procedures I underwent, messages I exchanged with family and friends, and struggles I have had accepting, such as being labeled a "cancer survivor." While my purpose was to capture a thorough and deeply personal view on serious illness from the perspective of someone in their early 20s, any meaning or takeaway or truth the reader stumbles into while reading is theirs to keep. Additionally, the writing of this thesis allowed me to negotiate my past and traumatic experiences in meaningful ways, which is evident in this final product.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Critical Introduction

This collection drew influence from a number of works, sources, and experiences. Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* was a particularly influential work of memoir for this thesis. I had read a relatively small number of memoirs previous to taking on this project, so this work was key for establishing what a memoir can look like, and the composing decisions that can be taken within one. I did take a creative nonfiction class as part of my undergraduate degree, but the vast majority of that work was writing our own pieces and not reading others. I read *In the Dream House* early on in my composing journey, so it had a significant impact on my initial plans for the project. It also impacted my view of what kind of work people are doing in the genre today, especially with how experimental much of Machado's work is. My personal favorite section in the collection was the "choose your own adventure" sequence, where your choices bring you through a seemingly inescapable loop of a day with an abusive partner, and which inspired me to look for moments of creativity not only in my use of language, but in my formatting. I also admired Machado's use of brief and highly varied sections, as she wove a number of different subgenres into her memoir. The very first piece I wrote for this thesis was a first draft of the section "My Body is Not My Body," where I initially used a lot of short, experimental sections, as well as shifts in tense and point of view. Much of this was inspired by Machado, and the unorthodox way she presented her own story– I even folded in the use of second person, noting how Machado was able to put me as a reader into her perspective so effectively with it. While "My Body is Not My Body" continued to change throughout the revision process, the sections within it stayed short, bouncing the reader from one traumatic moment to another. I also kept the more “experimental” sections in mind even after removing them, and ended up using them as section breaks for the larger works in the thesis.

I was also inspired by different authors and works from our workshop classes that examined the body, especially illness and medical interventions. We read Lincoln Michel’s *The Body Scout* in our fall ‘22 creative writing workshop, a science-fiction cyborg sports mystery novel. The procedures present in the book and the characters’ attitudes towards them pushed me to think about the way the body, surgery, body modifications, and the commodification of the body in sports worked together. As a lifetime athlete and a coach, I examined this material to consider the relationship between sports and my own body, especially during and after my cancer diagnosis. I also considered the way that surgery is thought about and written about, within *The Body Scout* and more generally. In Fall ‘23 we read Patricia Engel’s *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*, which contained a significant plotline focused on the chronic illness and death of the main character’s love interest. Class analysis and discussion on the novel, as well as my own personal thoughts, led me to consider the ways in which illness is commonly romanticized and/or de-centered in media, and how I could navigate that in my own work. As a result, I decided that it was important to not whittle my experiences and my illness down to a lesson, to introduce the lasting subtleties of trauma. I was also committed to working in my relationships with others and their struggles in relation to (my) cancer, while also staying within the scope of my cancer experiences.

I approached and persisted in the work for this collection with a few specific qualities in mind. The first was a sense of unflinching honesty, a commitment to telling (or writing) my experiences without censoring them, to not worry about making the reader uncomfortable or framing myself in an unflattering light. This became particularly difficult for me to work through when writing about close friends and family members, especially my mom, and how there have been hurtful and difficult moments with those people as well. I worked through this by leaning into the belief that these are my stories, from my perspective. I also kept in mind advice from my advisor, Morgan Talty, who suggested that you can build out dialogue and conversations from memory by keeping true to what you believe the person would say, if you don't remember what they did say. Additionally, it has been, and still is, common for me to use humor when talking about my cancer experiences. As part of my unflinching honesty, I decided that I wasn't going to use humor as a cop-out or a crutch for discussing difficult moments. Many of the stories told within this thesis have only been recounted previously with copious amounts of jokes and awkward laughter. It was easier to give serious, honest retellings on the page, because I didn't have an audience in front of me that I felt I needed to play to. With that said, it took much longer to tell these stories, and involved much more emotional processing.

As part of my commitment to providing honest and unfiltered accounts of my experiences, I also wanted to consider which uncomfortable and/or disturbing parts of my experiences were necessary. I never wanted to include something with the express purpose of making the reader unsettled. It's an impulse that is easy to fall into, especially as I have shared stories about my illness with people who were ignorant, disgusted, or simply uncomprehending. You get to a point where you feel that others can't understand you, and you want to punish them for that with shocking details that make them uncomfortable. Ultimately, that is not productive, and it does not resonate with how I want these stories to be read.

Another key concern for me was crafting pieces that were deeply reflective in nature. I wanted to do more than simply recount the experiences as they happened, instead pulling in the knowledge and understanding that I have now, as well as the years of sitting and struggling with my trauma, to reframe what I went through. I kept this goal consistently in mind with each piece that I wrote, making room for myself as a writer to work through the experiences I described, to take various angles on them and tie them together in unique and useful ways. I aimed to have primary and secondary scenes in each essay, which allowed the reader to be rooted in a particular moment, while also experiencing the connections to and reflections on other moments in time. This goal really culminated in the final piece of the collection, "-Crystal, 2024," where I responded to the messages that I received on the day of my diagnosis from my current perspective, having lived through the cancer, navigated that experience for years, and then written about it.

I also wanted to approach this project with a sense of compassion for myself as both a writer and as the person to whom these traumatic events occurred. There were some subjects and events, i.e., the death of loved ones, particularly damaging anxiety attacks, etc., that were incredibly difficult to think about, let alone put through the writing process. I took a patient and gentle path to detailing those experiences, an approach that I found important to capture within the work itself. There are some slow, steadying movements throughout this collection, particularly in the pieces "What did you tell them?" "Two Funerals," and "-Crystal 2024," which were necessary for me in my writing and for the reader in their path to understand my experiences.

I also had a couple primary points of focus that I kept in mind during my composition process, both of which were emphasized by my advisor. One key was maintaining a sense of separation between the character and the narrator. It was important to cultivate certain perspectives, placing character and narrator (and reader) in specific spots in time. This also helped allow for the reflection about my experiences that I wanted. I was careful to make sure the reader is grounded by details of what time and place the memoir is in– this was particularly important as I moved around in time, location, and context from one essay to another, and even within essays. The possibility of the narrator eventually becoming a character was mentioned by my advisor in our very first meeting, and that came to fruition in "-Crystal, 2024" when the narrator steps back into the story of 2020 Crystal, using later experiences to reframe responses to messages.

It was also important for me to lean into my recollection of events, to be more sure in what I was remembering and how I recounted it. This was also an important point of discussion in the creative nonfiction class I took in undergraduate school, where we talked through the merits of factual and experiential truth, examining what is true to the memory, and what role that plays in an "honest" retelling. While I did corroborate many of the events and conversations retold with others present, particularly my mother, I did my best to fill in hazy spaces with confidence. Many of my initial drafts had essentially no dialogue, because I felt uncomfortable speaking for others when I was not in a position to remember our conversations word for word. As I looked to fill in that space, I constructed those conversations using both what I remembered of that specific moment, and information about the context and the way that person spoke at the time. In the end, this created more truthful and detailed accounts of my experiences. As part of this, I made an effort to move away from "I remember" and other hedges when detailing memories, instead providing accounts of my experiences under the assumption that the reader understands that stories about my past are informed by my knowledge of said past.

As far as the individual pieces I chose to include and the order in which I've arranged them, I will move chronologically. I chose to start with "Messages from April 15, 2020" as the opening piece in the collection because of how immediately and chillingly it sets the mood. It felt more powerful to deliver the news that I had been diagnosed with cancer on my birthday with those messages, so divided in their happy and horrified tones, than it would have from explaining it in “One Year Older.” The news about my illness, the role of cancer in these stories, is delivered piece-by-piece as well, working from phrases like “I’m so sorry” to “it’s treatable” to “your diagnosis.” While these are actual texts that I received on the day of my diagnosis– and a couple in the days following– they are not ordered by the time they were received. Instead, I ordered them with the intent of guiding the reader into this difficult situation where they’re sharing terrible news on the worst possible day.

“One Year Older” similarly guides the reader into this diagnosis, and works well with “Messages from April 15, 2020” not only because they occupy the same space in time, but also because both deal with the process of delivering bad news about yourself to other people. Much of this piece takes place chronologically, working through the days around the diagnosis and the order in which I told people, but there are also interludes that move backwards and forwards in time. Telling my father about the diagnosis leads back to the death of his mother from breast cancer in the mid 2000s, and remembering tears on the early morning of my birthday jump forward to the days after my surgery, and even to a therapy session years later. This was important because it allowed for that reflection, that tying together of different events and ideas as I processed my experiences, and also because it established for the reader that the essays were not entirely chronological, and that I was approaching them from a perspective years in the future.

“Pressure” precedes “My Body is Not My Body” because it matches the physical, visceral nature of the sections within that essay. “Pressure,” and the other one-page interludes between the longer essays, were initially drawn up as parts of “My Body is Not My Body,” but made it too jarring a shift from the other essays. Looking towards “My Body is Not My Body,” this piece does the most heavy lifting in the collection in terms of examining my body and the relationship that I had with it during and after my treatment. There is also a significant focus on my relationship with hospitals, doctors, and medical procedures, all of which are intertwined together to emphasize how those people, places, and things became synonymous with my body and the wary monitoring of it. This essay has by far the greatest number of section breaks and scene changes, an intentional effort to emulate the scattered and disorienting memories that I have of being treated.

“Symptoms” has been placed before “What did you tell them?” for a couple of reasons. The first is that it describes some of the physical and mental symptoms of my illness that I was uncomfortable with others knowing about, and particularly with my mother talking about. The second is the final symptom listed, “death,” and how that became a reality for other young people with cancer that I knew in the following essay.

“What did you tell them?” was a very difficult piece to write, and difficult to even read back, and I am very proud of it. Discussing cancer experiences with others, especially other young people, from prior to my illness was meant to inform the sense of shame and awkwardness I felt about my own cancer, especially when it was talked about without me present. Conversely, the second half of the essay builds on a cancer experience that I had after my own diagnosis and treatment, with how my own perspective became aligned with that of my deceased childhood friend. I felt that the strength and the content of this piece made it a good early to middle essay for the thesis, as it pulled them in and primed them for later discussion of death and my own identity related to cancer.

“Unwelcome visitors to my neck” was the hardest section break to place, and I ultimately decided to place it just after “What did you tell them?” and just before “Two Funerals” because it draws together themes of discomfort and strangeness in the body. “Two Funerals” pulls together the stories of my grandmother’s death in the mid 2000s and my grandfather’s death in the fall of 2022. Similar to “What did you tell them?” my grandmother’s death was my formative experience with death, and influenced many of the feelings that I had about illness and death as I faced my own cancer diagnosis. My grandfather’s passing, on the other hand, came after my cancer experiences and was in turn influenced by those experiences and anxieties. It is compelling to see these experiences, almost twenty years apart, next to each other, as it opens up a space for reflection on death and the way that my view on it has been shaped, especially as I experience loss in different ways.

“Pass/Fail” is a list of tests, imagings, and procedures that I underwent from the beginning of my diagnosis to the end of my treatment. It is aptly named based on the way the results were often categorized, especially in terms of halting, progressing, or regressing in my recovery. The list is not only proof that I am, in some sense, a “cancer survivor,” but it also emphasizes how many of the happenings within my own body were beyond my own comprehension, and beyond my own power.

“‘Cancer Survivor’” details the most recent event in this collection, a “Coaches vs. Cancer” event this winter for the basketball team I coach. This piece was important for the collection because it wrestled with the concerns that I still have today in the way that I see and refer to myself in relation to my cancer experiences. It’s one of the things that, to an outside observer who hasn’t had my experiences, would seem like a non-issue about my cancer experience, so I wanted to challenge myself to capture those feelings in a tangible way.

“Self-Talk” notes a conversation that I had with myself many times during my diagnosis, my treatment, and well into my recovery, a tool that I used for times when the tumors or the scar tissue were pressing on my windpipe. I chose to place this section break before the essay “Lunch at the Olive Garden” because it exhibits the persistent sense of difference and wariness that I have after my diagnosis, even when the cancer is gone and my life should be, for all intents and purposes, normal again. “Lunch at the Olive Garden” turned out to be much angrier and more bitter than I was expecting. It was initially intended to be a more wise, thoughtful, and optimistic ending to the collection, but the writing took its own turn, reflecting some feelings that I had not even recognized myself about the post-treatment phase of my life. I made the decision to respect that and follow those feelings into a new understanding of myself and my relationships with others, and that decision allowed for a much more raw and honest commentary on my continuing relationship with cancer.

The final piece in the collection, “-Crystal, 2024,” occupies that spot for a couple of reasons. The first is that it bookends really well with my initial piece, featuring the messages that I received on the day of my diagnosis. The second is that it provides a clear moment of reflection, as the person I am now, with the knowledge that I have now, responds to those messages. For this piece, I chose to order the messages almost entirely in chronological order, so they are bringing the reader through those experiences as they happened on that day. However, I did switch the order of the final two, as I wanted to end with the message and response that I found to be the most impactful. This, rather than “Lunch at the Olive Garden,” offers the potential for a hopeful, though still cautious, close to the collection, while also continuing to consider my trauma and the difficulty of navigating through it.

Ultimately, all of these pieces offer insight into my cancer experience, as it happened and as the impacts of it continue to affect me. This collection was most important for me to write, not because of the emotional impact of my experiences or the “good stories” that I could see in my past, but for the opportunity to process that continuing trauma, and that is what this collection does best; capture those spaces of processing, those moments between emotions and between understandings, as I come to terms with the last few years of my life.

Messages from April 15, 2020

Omg… that’s crazy. I’m so sorry Crystal. I love you sooo much if you need anything please let me know!

I’m so sorry! That’s the worst thing to find out on your birthday 😣 but it’s super treatable right??

Oh no Crystal! I’m so sorry. Will keep you in my prayers. Didn’t realize this was your birthday. Happy Birthday!! I hope you can enjoy it, at least a little bit, under the circumstances.

I am so sorry to hear that. I have heard it is very treatable. I will be praying for you starting right now and if there is anything I can do for you, please do not think twice about it. May God heal, comfort and bless you. I have big plans for you so hurry up and get this done.

Awe… Crystal I’m so sorry to hear this! Praying for you!!! Keep us updated and let me know if you need anything! ❤️ And Happy Birthday!!!!!

I'm in grief over your diagnosis. I hope that the surgery goes well. I hope you don't mind, but I shared the news with the other faculty in our department so we can be in prayer.

Praying so hard for you crystal!! Love you girl! Also happy birthday!!

Crystal! I hope everything goes well you are in our prayers ❤️

oh my gosh im so sorry crystal!! i’ll be praying for you! and happy birthday!

One Year Older

My mother was the first family member to find out.

She wasn't in the room when the doctor told me. It was April 2020, the dawn of the pandemic, and only children were allowed visitors for their appointments. At 19, I was no longer considered a child.

So when the doctor gave me the news, the little comfort I had came from strangers. He saw something in my face, then. Perhaps the emptiness, the terror, washing over me. "Is there someone you can call?"

To my right, his assistant typed away at her keyboard. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* The worst moment of my life. What the *hell* could this woman be writing?

I called my mom. She had parked in the lot below, waiting in the car for my appointment to end, listening most likely to *Bob and Sheri* on the radio. Probably not thinking about *this*.

Our call reminded me of one from a couple months before. I'd woken up with a lump in my throat, an alien pressure that wouldn't subside. After finishing my morning classes, I'd rung my mom from my car in the gym parking lot. I'd done that a lot, in between classes and lunch. She told me to go to walk-in care, if it really felt like something was off. "You know your body better than anyone else," she'd always say.

I didn't tell her during the call. My voice carried enough of the message. "They want you to come up," was all I said. It wasn't my crying voice. It was opposite– my beyond crying voice.

She arrived in the exam room quicker than I'd expected. Her breathing was heavy– maybe she'd taken the stairs– and she looked nervous.

In retrospect, I could've told her on the call. Maybe that would have been easier for her. I'd sounded the alarm and then made her wait, every worst-case scenario playing out in her head. But the truth was a worst-case scenario. One of the worst things a human being can hear.

Truthfully, I didn't want to be the one to say it. Not yet. I let the doctor tell her about the tumors, and show her them on the ultrasound. He pointed at them on the screen, as the wand pressed down on my throat. I rolled my eyes up, trying to catch a glimpse.

She looked shocked. Horrified. The emotions were enough for the both of us– I felt nothing.

*

When we got home from the appointment, I told the rest of my family. I said it matter-of-factly, on my way through the living room and up the stairs, like I was commenting on the weather. "They think I have thyroid cancer."

Saying it small made it small.

"What?!" my little sister said. Apparently not the news she'd been expecting.

I repeated it over my shoulder, just as I reached the second floor. I walked into my room and shut the door.

I knew I was supposed to lay down and cry, feel sad or angry. I just didn't have it in me.

I couldn't tell you now how my dad reacted. I'm not sure that I ever knew, that I even looked at him after I said it.

It was cruel news to give him. His mother had died of breast cancer in 2005, when I was four. I remember that she used to give us pajamas every year for Christmas, and I remember her funeral. My parents crying, my little sister still a baby. Us cousins had absconded to the back room, while the adults mourned.

A fake fireplace had flickered along the wall, casting us in a strange glow. I put my hand against it, trying to feel the heat. One of my cousins grabbed the remote and changed the colors: blue flames, red flames, white flames. There was a bowl full of mints, and I stuffed a handful in my pocket.

A piece of my father had died with her. Dying as she was dying, in that slow and excruciating way of terminal illness. He didn't talk much about her, not even when my grandfather passed away last year. We visited her grave sometimes.

On a road trip we'd taken when I was in high school, he'd told a story about her. We'd stopped at a Boston Market, and he talked about the last time he'd eaten at one.

He'd been driving back from Boston with his mother and father, after an appointment in the city with a specialist. They'd removed a piece of her skull as part of her treatment. I'd thought about that a lot, after he said it. What might a human being look like, without a piece of their skull? Could you look right through to the brain?

The doctor had said, in as many words, that she was going to die. She had no appetite, she hadn't eaten. She'd thrown up in the Boston Market bathroom.

Now cancer, the shadowy specter of our lives, had attached to me like a parasite. It became tougher and tougher for him to look at me, and I knew what he was seeing– a dead woman, the worst loss of his life.

He didn't come to my appointments, unlike my mother. She came to every single one, notepad in hand, scribbling and asking questions about jargon. *Papillary cancer? Levothyroxine? Low-iodine diet?* She still comes to my appointments, just in case.

He didn’t talk about them either, just listened quietly to the reports I gave my family when I returned from a visit. Or maybe he asked my mother, when I wasn’t in the room. My therapist says that they may have been looking to my reaction, to gauge how to act. I didn’t give them much to work with.

The only question he asked was before my first full body scan. We were sitting in the living room late into the night, ten hours before I had to swallow a radioactive iodine pill and enter a seven-day isolation. The pill would kill off any tissue leftover from my thyroid removal surgery a few months before, and would light up on a scan where that tissue had been. At the time, I wasn’t sure how the scan worked. Apparently, neither was my father.

“And how will we know it hasn’t spread?” he asked, indicating that my mom should write that in the notepad she had out.

I flinched, or it felt like I did. I wanted to cry, to scream, to throw things. We didn’t ask those questions, the kind that could make things worse.

What if it doesn’t work?

What if it’s spread too far already?

What if it comes back?

*

We kept it quiet for two days, while we waited for the results of the biopsy. The needle marks on my neck, two red dots like a vampire bite, became blue and bruised. I touched them as a reminder of reality, as a small pain to ground myself in.

I texted my friends like normal, shooting quips back and forth about the contestants on the latest season of *The Bachelor*. I answered phone calls when I recognized the number, showed up to my Zoom classes and participated when prompted. A few weeks from the end of the semester, I crammed in as much work on my final papers and projects as possible, knowing that once I got confirmation on the diagnosis, the work would be harder to complete.

At 12:01 am on April 15th, my friend sent me a birthday video. She'd edited together dozens of videos of us hanging out, pictures of us hugging. It was overlaid with happy music and messages about how much she loved me, how much she missed me. HAPPY BIRTHDAY! it said at the end, bolded and in all caps.

I watched the video while lying in bed, about to go to sleep. Towards the end I started to sob, softly, but it was enough to rouse my mom. "What's wrong?" she asked.

We'd begun sharing a room a couple weeks before, when the tumors in my neck got me worried about my breathing. I couldn't fall asleep because I was afraid that my air supply would be cut off, and I'd never wake up. It wasn't an entirely new concern– I'd spent months in the fall and winter enduring relentless bouts of severe anxiety, and one of my most intense fears had been dying in my sleep– but the pressure from the tumors complicated things.

"Nothing," I said. "Connor just sent me a birthday video. I miss everyone."

"I know you do." She rubbed a hand soothingly over my back, a comforting holdover from my childhood.

She was probably expecting the crying to be about the cancer. But I hadn't cried about the cancer yet, I hadn't acknowledged the emotional weight.

It would take years for the tears to come.

I tried to make myself cry a few months ago, on the way home from a particularly raw therapy session. For the first time, we'd talked about the night that my parents dropped me off at the emergency room, a couple days after my surgery. The hospital had sent me home too early– my hands and feet tingled, the pain was unbearable, and I'd been throwing up all day– so they had to bring me back.

Every time I threw up I thought the wound on my neck would open back up. Despite the opiates it screamed with pain, inflamed by the heavy retching. I threw up all my food until there was none left, and then all the water I'd choked down, so there was only dry heaving.

My mother stopped on the way out the door to give my sisters instructions. *Don't forget to move the laundry over to the dryer. Unload the dishwasher when it's done.*

She couldn't follow me past the door to the hospital, and I was too weak to look back at her as they wheeled me into triage. It was late at night and short-staffing meant they worked slow. A stern woman took notes about my condition on her computer as we waited for a nurse to come down and assess me. "I'm going to pass out," I told her, and her look said she didn't believe me.

They told me my bp was dangerously low, once I'd been moved to one of those rolling beds. Probably severe dehydration. It took the nurse five tries to get the IV in, but I didn't feel the needle on any of her attempts. I watched her, though, the tremors in her hands, the unsteady probing beneath the skin of my arm. The vein did its best to stay hidden.

When I told my therapist about it I felt the helplessness of that night. The weakness of my body as people moved me from one room, one chair, one bed to another. Anger at my mother for her nonchalance, stalling at the door. She knew once we reached the hospital that I'd be out of view again, unreachable.

In the car driving home from my appointment I wanted to cry. I wanted it so badly I slammed the bottom of my hand into the edge of the steering wheel when the tears wouldn't come. I just couldn't find the sadness within me to cry– I'd been on the edge of it, and it had slipped away again.

An ugly question haunted me. If it didn't make me sad enough to cry, how bad could it have really been?

*

The call from the doctor's office came on the morning of my 20th birthday. They called our landline, and my mom put it on speaker. "The biopsy confirmed the presence of papillary thyroid cancer," the doctor said. It was surprising just how unsurprised I felt, like I'd known for months, like I'd always known.

He scheduled the surgery for April 23rd, eight days away. Without the pandemic clearing hospitals, it would have taken much longer to get in. It had taken over a month to see the surgeon, to get the diagnosis, because they'd halted all medical appointments. But now that they knew about the cancer, I'd been moved to the fast-track. Urgent and essential surgery.

The doctor reiterated how treatable the cancer was. "You'll die a long, long time from now," he promised, "of something that isn't thyroid cancer." I thought, *who wouldn't be optimistic, with something like that to look forward to?* But it did comfort me. I wanted to live a long time, far past this ugliness.

The phone call meant the fragile reprieve was over. I had cancer, no doubts, no extra tests just to be sure, and no more space to pretend otherwise. And so, the notification process began.

First, I told four of my closest friends. I opened my texts with them, looked at their enthusiastic birthday wishes, and filled them in. They were shocked by the suddenness, by the severity of it. As women around my age, they were struck by the same sense of wrongness that I'd experienced upon hearing the news. People our age weren't supposed to have issues like this. We were supposed to travel, stay out too late, sleep in too much. We weren't supposed to get sick.

Ann called me and we talked for an hour. I held my video chat up to my cats' faces, so she could finally meet them, and she showed me her dog. She'd returned to her family home in Nebraska during that initial spring and summer of quarantine, a place we always talked about me visiting. I've still never been.

I told her the details around my diagnosis, bits and pieces about my ultrasounds and biopsy that I hadn't said to anyone yet. At the end of the call she said that we should talk more often, but I never called again. Even the messages could be too much, the subtext of my cancer in every **how are you?** or **what have you been up to?** Other people's worry– no matter how well concealed– made mine heavier.

She sent me an email in spring of the next year, with a story attached. The story, in the truest sense, was about us. I read it a half dozen times, penned a response in my notebook under a spell of pure inspiration. But when I read it over, I knew I couldn't send it back to her. Living with my self-hatred had become easy, too easy, but to put it on display? It was better to never respond.

Shelby called me too, and told me she'd had to stop her mom from buying plane tickets to Maine. *We're in a pandemic, Mom! You can't just fly across the country!* She'd wanted to bring movies and treats, and hunker down with me while we waited for this to pass.

Shelby had been one of my first friends at college, always willing to put herself out there for the sake of others. A mutual friend once told me that she'd thought Shelby was fake, when they first met. That no one could really be that nice.

We both played basketball for our school's team. Homecoming weekend my sophomore year, her family came to the game to watch her play. My parents were halfway across the country, too far to visit for a single game. Shelby invited me to spend the day with her parents and siblings, enjoying the city. I'd felt that rush of entering a sacred space and being wholeheartedly welcomed. That day, they'd taken me out for pizza.

Connor offered anything I needed, especially a listening ear. I'd been that for her many times over the previous couple years, as she worked her way through break-ups and make-ups. I felt guilty for the unevenness of the trade-off. This was too much for me, and it was too much for everyone else, every person I told.

Our friendship had started over a mutual fascination with The Bachelor. Over the months, we got in the routine of crowding around the TV in my apartment, pints of Ben and Jerry's in hand, arguing over the contestants' petty dramas. It was the sole reason I'd looked forward to Monday nights, and it hurt realizing we'd never have that time again.

My best friend Becca was the most taken aback. *Girl*, she'd written in most of her messages. *Girl, I cannot believe this. Girl, how are you doing? Girl, this is crazy!*

We were girls when we met, playing soccer together in the fifth grade. Fast friends then, and best friends since. We went walking the summer after my diagnosis, on the Bangor Water Road in Eddington. She brought her dog Benny, and the three of us walked slowly along the pavement, talking about her classes at BU. The scar along my neck was still fresh, but she didn't stare at it. Outside my immediate family, she's the only person who never stared at the scar.

Becca took everything with me in stride. We'd known each other for over ten years at that point, friends already through multiple chapters of life. When you've seen a person through enough the new sides that emerge during tragedy look like distortions of old ones. The bullying I endured in middle school, her eating disorder, my anxiety, her parents' divorce, all reflected my cancer back to us like a funhouse mirror.

I couldn't bring myself to message any other friends. Any and all motivation had since left my body. Every "happy birthday" that came in was answered with a quick "thanks." It felt like lying, like I was projecting the happy, healthy image of a Crystal that no longer existed.

One of my high school friends sent a sarcastic message, the type that usually would have been welcomed with a wry smile. **Happy Birthday!** it read. **Congratulations on being one year closer to death!**

I laughed a little bitterly at it, and read it to my sisters. "Can you believe," I said to them. "Can you believe the timing on this!"

He'd summed my 20th birthday up to perfection. One year older. One year closer to death.

Pressure

Wrap your hand around your neck. Feel the way your palm molds to your windpipe? Be gentle with yourself.

When you’re ready, squeeze, squeeze like your throat has been cut and you’re trying to keep the blood in. Apply pressure like it can keep your body together.

Make note of the few seconds after you pull your hand away. That phantom pressure– that is the tumors in your neck, making space for themselves.

For you, the feeling fades.

My Body is Not My Body

The room is still dark when I wake. A woman stands over me, a cart behind her.

She asks for my birthdate as she scans the bracelet on my wrist. I can barely think to answer, barely lift my arm.

"*4/15/2000,"* I tell her.

My voice sounds strange, like hearing myself through the phone. They said it might sound different, because of the surgery. That after a few months, I wouldn't notice anymore.

The clock reads six, big hand dragging its way through the early minutes of the hour. *Morning or night?* I wonder. It's too dark to tell.

Maybe she warns me before the needle goes in. It doesn't matter, because this time it doesn't hurt. It's in there for a while, she's got half a dozen vials to fill. I don't know what they're for.

The blood spurts out in waves. I watch for the rich color of it, the thin consistency, like water. It comes fast, like it would rather be outside my body than in.

The woman organizes the vials before she leaves.

“You’re too young to be in here,” she says.

Is she thinking of herself? Her kids? Other patients she’s seen, too young for their illness?

I try to smile. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

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Sometimes I crave cream of chicken soup. I ate it in a hospital once, hours out from surgery, almost a day out from my last meal. In that moment, I’d never tasted anything so good, warm and soft as I tipped the bowl and drank.

For a day after the surgery, they had me on a liquid diet. They’d intubated me, so my throat was scratchy. They’d cut open my neck, and the bits left inside were angry. They raged every time I moved.

But that soup, it tasted like heaven. Maybe because I thought I might be dying when they put me under, those bright OR lights the last thing I’d ever see. That I’d never wake up, never again know taste and touch, hunger and satisfaction. Cream of chicken soup was the opposite of a last meal– a sign of life. I had to take those where I could get them.

For years after the surgery, I felt about hospitals like I feel about cream of chicken soup. I couldn't die hooked up to an IV and a blood pressure cuff, my blood extracted every six hours, a handful of nurses outside the door.

This is the safest place in the world, I told myself, every time I had to go back. *This sustains you.* I craved the cold, white floors, the antiseptic smell, the routine repeating of my birth date.

4/15/2000. They give you something. It keeps you alive.

Over time, the visits became less urgent. I wouldn't see my doctors for weeks, then months. I started scheduling so far out I had to check my calendar, think about any trips I was hoping to take.

For long stretches of time, cancer faded into the background of my life. Taking my levothyroxine in the morning became normal. My scar only ached on the coldest of days. Those rare appointments turned into reminders of the worst part of my life.

I visited my grandmother in the hospital a few weeks ago, and it scared me. Watching the nurse pick up her hand, clip on the oximeter, hook up IVs to the ports along her arms. Almost nothing said, just tests and transactions of fluids.

I could see myself in that bed. My grandmother is 92 years old, *and I could see myself in that bed*.

My mother, I think, was shocked by the shortness of my visit. She's seen people die in hospitals, more times than I have. But has she ever entered, believing she might be one of them?

****

My body is not my body. It belongs to me only as much as it belongs to the cells that tried to kill me, to the organ that was removed and discarded, to the strains of poison and destruction that lived within me.

I have a mind that makes decisions, tells my limbs to move, considers and suffers. But my body makes choices without me. To breathe, to grow and change, to wake from sleep slow and sinister even on the worst of mornings. To try and kill me.

I am a partial passenger, subject to unknown forces within and around myself.

Most people, I think, do not know this. They see themselves and their body aligned together as one. They see illness and suffering as uniform, felt precisely and equally between the body and the self. What they don't see is the orchestrator of that sickness living inside them, molding cell after cell, burrowing within tissue. Death, I know, is already within me.

The thought that I know something others do not makes me feel self-centered, guilty. It also makes me feel special. Like maybe I'm uniquely prepared for all the horrors to come.

Today my mother said that my sister isn't feeling well. That I "should understand that better than anyone." A throwaway line, of course, but it stuck to me. She likes to weaponize this experience she's never had– and never will have– of being 19 and told you're dying. Of having your body and control so suddenly and thoroughly violated, barely out of childhood. She molds it in her hands like a tool, like a conversation piece, like a memory.

But for me, the person to whom it unwillingly belongs, it is a wall, a prison, a weight on my shoulders. It doesn't fit so easy in my hands.

****

I'm walking towards the elevators when a bed gets wheeled by. There's a body on that bed, covered in clean, white sheets. It's a woman, immobile, with a towel covering her eyes.

My steps speed up, because I don't want to see this woman. The man in scrubs wheeling the bed smiles at me, but I don't have it in me to smile back.

She looks like a corpse, what a thing to think. But she's not moving, and everyone that passes is looking at her in this bright, daytime hallway, and she doesn't– will never– know it. And what's the difference between the dead and the unconscious, really, to someone who knows both intimately but has only experienced one.

Waking up in new rooms, disoriented. Feeling the shift of the ground but seeing only the patterns of the ceiling, then nothing at all. Falling into sleep so deep it's no longer sleep, but darkness. Having things done to me with no power to start them or stop them– no power to even know them.

I'm in the elevator before I know it, pressing the button a dozen times in rapid succession. I want the door to close so badly, before someone, something, gets wheeled in beside me. This place is my past, what waits in my future. Crisp beds, bright lights, and sleep that feels like death.

****

I had an appointment today with my dentist, Kelly. She used to feel around my neck with gloved fingers, rubbing gentle circles on either side of my throat. Looking, as it happens, for thyroid abnormalities. She doesn't feel there anymore. My neck has become a sacred area, where few dare to look and even fewer to touch.

The first appointment we had after my diagnosis, she apologized for not noticing the tumors. From the way she looked at me, I figured my mom had told her. But perhaps she'd read the paperwork I filled out for the appointment. Conditions: cancer. Writing it that first time had thrown me for a loop, the realization that every medical history form I filled out would now be changed.

She mentioned today how good the scar looked, said she couldn't even see it. No asking about what I put on it this time around.

At over three years cancer-free, and almost three-and-a-half since the surgery, the scar had faded. People had long-since stopped staring at it with wide eyes, or pretending to notice it for the first time when I mentioned my thyroidectomy. But the people who knew it was there seemed to enjoy tracking it.

Kelly kept a close eye on my scar. She had a good view of it, when she worked on my mouth.

Lying back in the chair with my eyes to the light felt familiar. I've always had that fear that she'd drop one of those tools down my throat. How could she fish it out, with my mouth open so wide? I worried like that before my surgery too. What if the surgeon slipped, cut through my jugular?

That's why they made me fill out that paperwork, before the surgery. Blood type, just in case. Arrangements for my body, just in case. A morbid decision hours away from surgery; burial or cremation? My mom sat next to me, watching as I signed the papers. I had wished I was still young enough for her to make those choices for me.

Kelly cleans my teeth. She doesn’t see the dozens of rooms I visit, where I laid back just like this. Operating rooms, imaging centers, and hospital beds, uncomfortable tables and giant, slow-moving machines.

I rub the scar with my hand, just once. If Kelly notices, she says nothing.

****

The first ultrasound was like going to a cinema. The technician dimmed the lights almost to black, leaned me back on the table, like one of those reclining seats. I could follow the proceedings on a screen to my right, like a grainy, confusing movie. Sound insulated like the room was built for it, so our voices and the beeping of the machine rang clear and heavy around me.

There was a pillow under my head, a towel covering my chest. The gel had been warmed, so the wand felt surprisingly pleasant against my skin.

When she reached the column of my throat, my body tensed. The probe pressed hard against my windpipe, getting a pass at least once from every angle. I couldn’t breathe, my fingers dragged against the table. This was the steady pressing on my throat that I felt every moment of every day, magnified.

I’ve come to expect this part of the ultrasound, but never gotten used to it. It’s not so much the pain as the lack of air, the helplessness. The understanding that this is what my body had reduced me to.

The images on the screen, too, always unsettle me. That first time, I saw valleys and ridges, a sea of black and gray tissue. No tumors, obvious as they were to the radiologist. So each time after I’ve watched the monitor with sick fascination, following the organic waves of my body under the steady pressure of the wand. *Is there something there that I cannot see? Is my body betraying me again, right before my eyes?*

****

On the way back from the hospital, I sit in the third row, corner opposite the driver. The doctor said that a fifteen minute drive would be fine, as long as I sat as far away as possible. I estimate there’s six feet of space between us, just under the recommended minimum distance. I hunch further towards the window, wondering if the inches will make any difference.

I cry a little bit, with my head resting against the cool glass. The pill hadn't gone down easily. They'd promised it would be small, that no one had struggled to get it down before. By the time I was staring at the damn thing, and realizing they had lied, it was too late. That $10,000 pill had been shipped from Boston to Bangor. I had cut salt, dairy, and processed foods out of my diet for a full month, and forgone my hormone medication for almost as long. I had to take it.

During those fifteen minutes where I'd choked on the pill and spit it back up, my mom had been barred from the room.

If she notices my sobbing now, she says nothing.

"This is so embarrassing," I keep saying. "What if I didn't get enough of it down? What if I have to do it all again?" My stomach rumbles, angry at the thought.

Back at the house I wait to exit the car, and follow a half dozen steps behind. The more distance I give, the less chance the radioactive iodine affects someone else. I head straight for the downstairs bedroom and firmly close the door. This will be my home for the next week, while the radiation leaves my system.

When my meals are brought in, they're left on a chair in the corner of the room. After I finish eating, my utensils get washed separately. The radioactive iodine leaves my body through spit, among other bodily fluids, so it would be dangerous to throw them away.

The downstairs shower is built on the other side of the wall, next to the head of my bed. It's the only working shower, and when someone hops in I have to move to a metal chair in the opposite corner of the room.

I feel like garbage. Sick from the pill, from the month-long impossible diet, from the weeks without my medication. I'm lonely and unbelievably scared.

In just seven days, my whole body will be scanned. They'll be able to see how much thyroid tissue is left to kill, if the cancer metastasized outside the lymph nodes. And then, if I'm lucky, it'll all be over. (Perhaps not. Remission, it seems, is forever.)

Symptoms

Pain; nausea; drowsiness; dehydration; scarring; heart palpitations; numbness; dry mouth; anxiety; depression; fatigue; bleeding; vocal changes; trouble swallowing; discomfort; headaches; radioactivity; dizziness; soreness; vomiting; rash; cravings; tingling in hands and feet; loss of consciousness; death

What did you tell them?

When I got home from my stay at the hospital, there were flowers everywhere. My mom fit the bouquets into vases and set them on tables and countertops, repotted the new plants and used them to top bookshelves and windowsills. I counted five or six additions during my slow walk from the front door to our living room.

Once I'd settled in, she brought every gift to me, one-by-one. *Look at all the support*, they said. *This person feels bad for you. This person wants you to stay alive.* I thought long and hard about what it would take for me to send someone flowers, how bad I would have to feel for them.

I knew then that it wasn't just the funeral-home flowers, with their Spring colors and sincere notes, that made me uncomfortable– it was the people who sent them. The first couple were from my aunts, which didn't bother me. I'd given Mom permission to tell them the day of my official diagnosis. My aunt Linda had already sent me a large box of Ferrero Rocher the week before my surgery, which I'd wolfed down, just in case. My aunt Donna had taken to sending silly GIFs, to cheer me up.

But the ones sent by my best friend's mom, by my older sister's friend, by my mom's coworkers, by friends of the family– I didn't know they knew. It occurred to me that people were talking, talking about my diagnosis, about my surgery. They were saying, *oh, I almost forgot to tell you*, and *you're not gonna believe this*, and *I got some bad news recently*. Friends and family spread the news outwards, like tunneling roots. My pain, packaged into a conversation piece.

I knew this web of cancer-talk intimately. Like many kids, I had a classmate get sick and pass away in high school. He was on the boys' basketball team, so I saw him leaving the gym before our practices. He wasn't a superstar, but you could tell he liked playing with a team. An unselfish player– a coveted quality for a point guard.

When he got leukemia, he stopped playing. I noticed he wasn't there, and wondered about him as the diagnosis spread across school. *Johnny has cancer*, someone told me. I went home and told my mom. Months later, the word was *Johnny's getting worse*, talk about the chemo not doing its job. About a year after his diagnosis, someone told me that he was doing *really bad*.

People don't like to say the word dying, when talking about someone who hasn't yet passed. My grandfather spent three weeks in the hospital before he died, but I didn't call that time dying until after we'd buried him. I'd told people he wasn't well, that we were *just waiting* for the time to come. I went to the hospital and held his hand, told him I loved him, knowing I'd never see him again. But I couldn't call it dying.

I know there's no shame in the fight, in the messy, determined struggle for your life, but I couldn't help it. The pity that I felt for my dying grandfather, for Johnny, for sick kids in TV commercials– I saw it turning its sights on me.

People were talking about me, and thinking about me, feeling bad for me. They sent me flowers, the kind you only get when someone dies or has major surgery. I imagined that their thoughts flashed up like billboard signs, letters so big and bold I could read them from miles away. *Crystal's not well. Crystal can't take care of herself. Is Crystal dying?*

I don't know if people really thought like that, but I did. I had those thoughts about myself.

I felt wholly overexposed. My body had gone rogue, and I couldn't heal myself. Doctors had cut me open and poked around inside my throat, while I lay unconscious. Daily medication kept my hormone levels in check. The only control I had left was the news of my diagnosis. But once it was out, that too spread unchecked.

The cancer wasn't a secret I could keep for myself. It showed on my body, in my actions. It was the answer to questions people loved to ask. *How'd you get that scar? Why'd you move home for school? What have you been up to lately? I haven't heard from you in a while…*

Regardless, I kept it to myself whenever possible. I knew that having cancer could change the image of a person. Already, it had unraveled the views I had of myself. Athletic, healthy, in tune with my body– accepted facts turned to falsehoods with no warning, no resistance. When they looked at me, I just knew they saw someone different.

A girl I went to high school with got Hodgkin's lymphoma. I read about it on Facebook, about a half a year before my own diagnosis. For many years I'd known her as the girl who made out with her boyfriend during our high school dances. They were notorious for drawing that horrified side-eye from nearby couples, from their sheer intensity. It wasn't just the slow songs either– they'd keep it going for two, three hours straight. You couldn't call it dancing, not really, not when Lil Jon told you to *drop that ass to the floor (you scared, you scared)* and they stayed straight-legged and groping like there's no tomorrow.

I didn't even know we were Facebook friends when I first saw the post. Every time I heard her name after I thought not about the dances, but about the cancer. *We're just so young*, my high school friends would say when she came up in conversation, like age was supposed to protect us, like her illness said something about our own youth. It scared me, too– she scared me.

Her mother wrote posts to update people on her condition, and tagged her so they came up on my feed. They went into excruciating detail about her worst days, especially when she got sick from the rounds of chemo. Sometimes it kept a tally on how many times she threw up each day. Even before I got sick myself it felt like a violation to read. It felt like someone exorcizing the demons in their life, asking for something no one could give.

I told my mom, under no uncertain terms, not to post about my cancer. I thought about that web of people talking about my illness, filing my pain down to fit their conversations, and tried to cut it off at the source.

But I couldn't stop her from talking about it. And I understood, even while it was happening, that it was traumatic for her too. That telling others could help her to process. That telling her coworkers would help explain disruptions to her work. So it was selfish, but I didn't want her to tell.

She talked about my diagnosis with a lot of people. Neighbors, distant relatives, old friends, elementary school teachers– anyone unfortunate enough to ask after me. If she saw them again later, she updated them on my treatment. She told an old AAU basketball teammate of mine while buying an ice cream from her at Houlton Farms Dairy. The next time I stopped in to get a cone, she charged me for a small but served me a large.

"You told her?" I asked my mom. I already knew the answer.

A year and a half after that, we ran into my middle school basketball coach. I hadn't seen him in years, but he'd been keeping tabs on my college team.

"I was surprised," he said, "not to see you on the roster."

I gave him my standard answer at the time. It was over a year after going into remission, and I'd grown comfortable with half-truth. "I came home for school because of the pandemic. And I got sick."

I knew that when I said it in that order– the pandemic, and then the sickness– that most everyone would assume I meant COVID-19, and I didn't mind that. The pandemic we had been through together, a collective trauma with built in empathy, built in responses. Suffering through it didn't make me different from anyone else.

My old coach had already accepted my explanation, nodding along in grim understanding, when my mom spoke up. "Well, Crystal had thyroid cancer," she said. "That's why she came home."

Embarrassment, horror, vulnerability hit me violently, but I kept my expression neutral, reminded myself to blink, to breathe. Beneath the surface, I simmered angrily at the way my mother had cut in, like she was helping with something I couldn't do on my own. When we'd walked away from him I scolded her, with a harshness I later regretted. "If I wanted people to know, I'd tell them. Let me say it."

With her interjection, the conversation had completely changed. He looked at me with shock in his eyes, and then squinted. Assessing me, trying to identify the ugliness that came with that word. Cancer. Everyone changes when cancer comes up.

It makes them look harder, to see the differences in me. The before and the after, because there must be a before and after for something so terrible. And it forces them to reassure themselves that they're not like me. Some intangible quality keeps them safe. By lack of it, my body let me down.

A couple months after my diagnosis, I started to ask my mom a couple questions every time she talked to someone we knew. "Did you tell them?" was the first. I never had to explain what she was or wasn't telling. It was the elephant in every room, for a couple years after.

Usually the answer to this question was yes. On the times that it was no, she often mentioned that the conversation was especially short, or that they hadn't been in a good place to talk. It seemed like, under ideal circumstances, she'd tell most anyone.

My follow-up question was always the same, “What did you tell them?” I’d use her answer to map out the conversation, to devise what their reaction had been. If she reassured them about my current health, they’d shown pity. If she explained the details of my treatment, they’d been curious. If she hadn’t told them much beyond the diagnosis, they’d been too uncomfortable to engage with the subject.

Eventually, my mother got tired of this song and dance. “What, don’t you trust me?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure how to explain that I didn’t trust her. Not because I thought she would lie, or share some embarrassing anecdote about my treatment, but because she didn’t respect my privacy. She’d taken the one thing I still had control over, and claimed it for her own.

After that conversation, I thought a lot about who had the right to talk about what happened to me. Whether it was a matter of pain, whose had been the greatest, whose had lingered on the longest. Or perhaps it was a question of who worked hardest during my treatment. I’d done nothing, just lying around, but my mother had worked tirelessly. Waking up in the middle of the night to give me pills, driving me to appointments and furiously taking notes, worrying after me when I was too weak to worry about myself.

The winter after my diagnosis, she ran into a family friend at the grocery store, Deb Aucoin. My mother found it funny that they met at the Brewer Hannaford, because Deb worked at a different Hannaford in Bangor, just across the river.

I had done summer track with Deb’s daughter Erin growing up. We’d started at age five, and became friends right from that first summer. When the coaches made us line up to do our dynamic warm-up, we stayed side-by-side and used the time to talk about Webkinz. In the midst of high knees and butt kicks we were sharing virtual recipes for rare food items, and our theories about which games in the arcade earned you the most Kinzcash.

Erin's older sister Allyson was the same age as my older sister Jocelyn, two whole years above us, so our families fit perfectly together. I looked up to Allyson the same way I looked up to Jocelyn, especially since they competed in track events with the age group above us.

Every year on Erin's birthday, I was reminded of a strange coincidence. She'd been born on May 4th, three days after Jocelyn's birthday on May 1st. I was born April 15th, three days before Allyson's birthday on April 18th. I always felt a special kinship with Allyson because of that, and because of the way our active, excitable personalities complemented our quiet, reserved sisters.

For many years we trick or treated with the Aucoins. Erin and I had a reputation for dressing up as cats, complete with painted whiskers and furry patterns that varied from one year to the next. We were both avid fans of the *Cat Warriors* series– Erin had lent me the first six books the summer before my 3rd grade year, and I'd finished them all within a few weeks. Jocelyn and Allyson showed a bit more creativity in their costumes, but my clearest memory is of them as witches, wearing black and orange striped stockings and pointy hats.

The Aucoins lived in a perfect neighborhood for trick or treating. They had neighbors that broke out the fog machines and projectors every Halloween, dressing up like spooky decorations only to jump out at you when you least expected it. And some of the houses were really big, big enough to promise full-sized candy bars or decked out treat bags.

We could race around those streets for hours, planning the most efficient route, filling our pumpkin baskets to the brim. By the time our parents called it a night our legs ached from the walking, and our arms ached from carrying around so much candy.

Back at the Aucoins' house we dumped our candy out onto the carpeted floor of their living room. We'd be sat in a large circle, our treats piled next to us like a dragon's hoard, and we would trade. I hated Skittles but loved Smarties, and bartered accordingly. By the third or fourth round of trick or treating together, we'd picked up on enough patterns to know when you could get away with raising or lowering a price.

When the trading slowed down, Deb brought us hot chocolate. Despite the rush of the candy, the thrill of collecting more treats than you could count, this was my favorite part of the night.

When I asked my mom what she'd told Deb about my diagnosis, she said not much. "Mostly, we talked about Erin being in pharmacy school." Erin was two years behind Jocelyn in the pharmacy program at Husson, a local university. Jocelyn told me they met sometimes, so she could give Erin advice about her classes and her professors.

If I'd pushed for more, maybe my mother would have told me all the things she and Deb had talked about. Like that Allyson had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Instead, I found out when Allyson passed.

I got home from school one afternoon, and my mother broke the news. Deb had sent Jocelyn– now living in Denver– a message that Allyson had passed away. She'd attached pictures of the two of them, in their orange track shirts and their silly costumes, wearing their bathing suits in the Aucoins' pool.

"Did Deb tell you about this?" I asked my mother. "Did she tell you about Allyson being sick when you saw her at Hannaford?"

She frowned. "Yes, she did. But I didn't want to worry you. I thought she would get better."

From halfway across the country, Jocelyn couldn’t make the funeral services. My parents and I went, sat towards the back of the church. We saw a lot of people that we knew, people I hadn’t seen since my days of youth sports. Erin and her parents sat in the front row. I could see the backs of their heads, bent low, the grief tensing up their shoulders.

They played a video of Allyson singing in a youth choir. She must have been nine or ten when it was taken, right at the age I remember her most. The cut of her hair, the shape of her face, the pattern of her movements, it was all so familiar to me.

The reception after was in a room full of photos. I scanned them and saw Allyson across her 24 years of life. The cancer treatments had changed her, but her smile stayed the same. I’d seen that smile a hundred times, memorized the brightness, the intelligence, the mischief of it. She had it in the old photos my mom and I had looked through at home, packed away in summer photo albums from my childhood.

It surprised me how many photos there were with me. Most of the time I was wearing my bright orange Brewer Track shirt, my hair drawn back into twin braids. Even more pictures featured Jocelyn, the platinum blonde of her hair catching my eyes.

One of my favorite photos was hanging up, hidden a little by the pictures surrounding it. Jocelyn and Allyson stood with their 4x100 relay team, holding up their medals for winning states. I cheered for them the whole lap around the track, taking cues from the passionate clapping and yelling of my mother and father. They’d been underdogs that year, making the win even more impressive.

Jocelyn ran the opening leg of the race. She was much shorter than her peers even then and had to be that much quicker to keep up with their long strides.

Allyson ran the anchor position, the final leg. To give your team the best chance to win, you put your fastest sprinter there. Then, if it comes down to the wire, they can turn on the jets and go. Allyson always did that well. She ran with her weight forward a bit, like if she stopped suddenly she'd fall right over. Her legs and arms weren't just fast, they were quick– her speedy steps ate up the track with efficiency. Her hair was always cut short, never pulled back. As long as she kept running it stayed trailing behind her.

That picture had found its way into the newspaper, next to a photo of me and my medals from that year. I'd been so proud that I had my mom help me to cut the whole feature out, and put it in a box for safe keeping.

I missed that part of my life. The joy and simplicity, the innocence of not knowing what awaited us. Afternoons spent on the track, training to run and jump. The admiration I felt for Allyson as she kept her eyes forward and attacked that last 100 meters.

Unwelcome visitors to my neck

1. Drain– *put in while I was unconscious / couldn't look in the mirror / a parasite inside me, hanging from my neck / the blood and other fluids wallowed in the tube / every few hours they measured and emptied it / in between I carried parts of myself, outside, around with me / when they pulled it out / it felt like it went on forever*
2. Tumors– *growing / unruly masses / pockets of my body, resisting / left side of the thyroid / latching onto lymph nodes / cancerous bumps on the sides of my neck / they marked these before the surgery / in wet, black marker*
3. Biopsy needle– *after the numbing agent / blunt / no pain, but I could feel / everywhere it went / inches deep / it played on the ultrasound / my eyes closed but the darkness resisted / let me know / the surgeon said / if I accidentally hit a nerve*
4. Radioactive iodine– *poison / well and truly poison / pooled in the bed of my thyroid / left hungry and wanting / leaving my spit and my sweat toxic / I willingly ingested / from a pill that turned hot the longer it sat on my tongue / a warning / of what I worked so hard to swallow*
5. Scalpels and other sharp instruments– *an honorary mention / no memories, just the after effects / three hour surgery / imagine the skin of my neck peeled back / holding me open / steady hands / sharp-edged metal / scraping out tissue with precision*

Two Funerals

The first fight my parents had in front of me was over a VHS tape.

I was eight at the time. It was the 2008 summer Olympics. As a young gymnast, I'd begged my parents to let me stay up and watch Nastia Lukin and Shawn Johnson battle for silver and gold. But my mom sent me to bed and promised to record it.

When we popped the tape in the next day, she realized it hadn't been blank– she'd recorded over the final video of my grandmother, taken just weeks before she died. My dad was livid. He brings it up even now, fifteen years later, asking why she didn't check before she started the recording.

I've heard him talk more about that tape than I ever have about my grandmother's passing. That stretch of time is untouchable, inaccessible, for him. The years just before and just after enclose a dangerous space, a sinking darkness.

My grandmother's death was a slow, excruciating process. I don't remember it that way, but I can see it in the pictures from her last months. There are shots of me and my cousins with her on Christmas, her cheeks sunken and wig slightly askew. We're crawling all over her and it shocks me how frail she looks. Our outfits are frilly fabrics in rich red and green, a contrast to the way the light washes out her face.

Looking at those pictures leaves me nostalgic and deeply unsettled. My mom once told me that Gram was determined to make it through that last holiday season, so the family wouldn't spend it mourning her loss.

It's strange to think about death that way, as scheduled around others. There's an inevitability implicit in that line of thinking, an endpoint, that we're not supposed to have. Sick people are told to be brave, to keep fighting, to want to live more than the illness wants you to die. Like having cancer is a cage match, and not an uncontrollable growth in your body, like chemo and surgery and radiation are right hooks and uppercuts to anything except yourself.

Leading up to Gram's death, we changed the frequency of our visits. We started traveling up to Presque Isle every weekend, to the house where my dad grew up. My older sister and I spent hours wrestling and devising schemes that would allow us to finally touch the textured paint along the ceilings, while my parents kept my grandmother company. I'm not sure if anyone told me she was dying. I can't imagine what that conversation would look like with a four-year-old.

The reality of the situation didn't set in until after the funeral. It was there that, for the first time, I saw my mom cry. She gave the eulogy, held my hand, floated listless between rows of chairs. I didn't ask her what was wrong. I understood her sadness, but didn't feel the bluntness of it. My sadness was circumspect, hanging over me like a shade, unsure how to settle.

The body in the coffin looked like Gram, but it wasn't her. I recognized her by the curve of her smile, the light in her eyes, the way she moved. Without those things, without life, I wasn't really seeing her.

Months later I told my mom that I cried sometimes from missing Gram, and she was surprised. Maybe she thought back to my mood at the funeral, or considered my young age. People often say that kids are quicker to heal from tragedy, to move on, but I was tender, impressionable. I didn't know how to put into words that I was coming to understand loss, but it sat like a weight on my chest.

Gram's passing was my first time knowing death. I had no experience with the permanence of loss, the recurring ache of realizing over and over you'll never see someone again. I had no idea what it felt like to love someone and then live the reality that they no longer existed.

My dad struggled mightily with Gram's death. My mom says that he spiraled into a depression that lasted months, a depression she feared would resurface after his father died. It must have been a suffering subtle enough to escape my young notice.

Her absence was handled carefully, like porcelain. The anniversary of her death wasn't mentioned until my dad started to celebrate it, ten years after the fact. When my grandfather started dating a woman named Patty, everyone talked around her, scared of what her inclusion in the family might mean to my grandmother's place. Patty came to my sporting events, signed my birthday cards, and even posed in family photos, but was only ever called my grandfather's "friend." When she died of brain cancer, my parents barely mentioned it.

My grandmother's belongings weren't dug up and distributed until my grandfather's death last year. Their will, compiled in the 90s, was finally executed. Properties had to be cleaned and possessions claimed by one child or another, and so her fine China, holiday decorations, and quilting equipment took on new lives in new homes. In that way, it was almost like they died together– like my grandfather was keeping her alive too, just by carrying on.

This experience formed the foundation of my beliefs about death and cancer. The terror of change and loss, the physical and emotional ugliness, the fluctuating threat of illness, the unspeakable absence of a person you love. Recurrence of my grandmother's breast cancer killed her, a thought that has haunted me as my own cancer continues to be diligently monitored for recurrence.

Since my diagnosis, I’ve been unable to stop thinking about cancer and death. One or the other, it seems, is always waiting at the back of my mind, ready to be dragged up and paraded around.

The reminders, of course, are relentless. There’s the medication I take every morning with a glass of water, the check-up appointments with my endocrinologist, the yearly ultrasounds, the blood tests. When I look in the mirror I see the scar where they opened me up, I run my hand along my neck and feel uneven skin underneath my fingertips, note the numb spots along my throat. It’s possible the feeling will never return.

Medical forms take longer to fill out, as I think back to the dates of my diagnosis, surgery, remission, the names of the treatments they did to me. Every new doctor studies my file a little longer, looks at me with searching eyes, starts the conversation friendly but wary. When the weather gets too cold or changes suddenly, my throat tightens in that same familiar way, like the tumors have never left.

Our family history has changed. When my siblings are asked if anyone in the family has had cancer, they no longer just list my grandmother– they list me. Extra tests, extra monitoring, extra risk. I know it’s nothing I can control, but I feel guilty.

People I haven’t seen in a while ask me how I’ve been, and I have a choice to make. If I tell them I’m fine, it’s a lie of omission. But if I tell the truth, it’ll make them uncomfortable. When people ask for news about your life, they’re not looking for bad news.

In that way, even the most innocuous of questions is a reminder of my illness. *How have you been? What have you been up to? Is the family good, everyone well?* It shocks me how loaded those simple questions have become.

Silly getting to know your activities have become fraught with danger. *If you could travel back in time, what time period would you go to?* In the 19th century, they wouldn't have diagnosed my cancer until the tumors were large enough to see with the naked eye, pushing against the skin of my neck. The thyroidectomy would have been sloppy and painful, and my chances of making it out of surgery under 50 percent. Any time before that and my death would have been slow, a painful descent into extreme hypothyroidism, while the tumors grew unchecked.

Another classic: *if you could bring one thing with you to a deserted island, what would it be?* While everyone else is getting clever with answers about boats and cell phones and food, I'm thinking about how I wouldn't make it in the wild without my thyroid medication, how after days I'd become sick, after weeks I'd be sleeping all day. Basically, the world's worst *Survivor* contestant.

And I know these are hypothetical questions, that I'm supposed to suspend my disbelief and be funny, but I can't forget it. I can't move past it. Ever since I was given that reason to think about it, that diagnosis, it's been impossible to stop.

It's like the boy who used to live across the street from me.

We went to different middle schools, but that didn't stop him from following me every chance he got, obsessed with tracking my movements. He'd walk by my house dozens of times an hour, take pictures of me playing in the yard, watch from afar with binoculars where he thought he couldn't be seen, make status reports about which of my friends came over and when.

When he stopped to verbally harass me the other neighbors knew enough to chase him off, asking where his parents were. They were never home, always out working. He spent his free days stalking me and pulling the legs off of frogs in the neighborhood ponds.

In our junior year of high school, he killed himself. Concerned members of the community made emotional Facebook posts and organized marches against teen suicide, but I felt only a sense of relief. For years I'd felt unsafe in my own home, wondered if on some unsuspecting night he might sneak across our yards and break in.

I can still look across the street and see his house, though, the house where his parents lived until his father's death last year. They have an outdoor cat, a lithe black creature with paws of white. An orange sports car sits in the corner of their driveway. And every time I look over, I think of him. The fear that he made me feel, the wariness over running and playing in my own yard.

Except cancer is not in the house across the road, it's in my body, in my mind, in the memories of my early twenties. I see it when I look in the mirror, when I revisit pictures of myself, when I think back to the best and worst experiences of the last few years, when I mark time. Our roof was struck by lightning the summer of my treatment. I finished my undergraduate degree a year after the diagnosis.

It's the end that you remember most, when reflecting on the whole. Especially as people in progress, caught within the motions of our lives, anticipating both the continuance and the end. And that's what cancer is– an end.

I know that's what I remember most about my grandmother. She gave us Christmas Eve pajamas, cuddled us, called us her angels. I can recall those moments with clarity, but they don't stand out like her funeral. The cold outside, my mom's hand enveloping mine, the dark green walls of the funeral home. Sitting in that chair and waiting my turn to see her body.

My grandfather died last year. I have so many beautiful memories of him, times when he came to my basketball games, weeks spent visiting his house in Florida, months where he lived at my house. He took me to see shows at Magic Kingdom, sent me letters with his name and the p.s. written upside down, always remembered my school and sports schedules so he could call after the big events. He was one of the most influential people in my life.

When his health really deteriorated he came to stay with my family. He'd wanted to stay in Florida and live out his time there, but my dad begged him to move in so we could keep an eye on him. He'd had health scares down there, including some trips to the hospital, and we were worried. At first he just moved slower, ate a little less, but soon we saw it was serious.

He had cirrhosis of the liver, but the doctors didn't diagnose it until it was too late. He had excruciating pain for months before his death, he couldn't eat or sleep. My cat Scrizzle used to sit outside his door and meow all night, because she knew there was something wrong. He lost weight alarmingly fast.

My parents had a trip scheduled to visit my little sister in New York, and I begged them not to go. I didn't think I could handle it if his situation went south. They went anyway, and he got worse. He came out to the living room to sit with me, but didn't have the energy to walk back to his bedroom. Instead he lay down on the couch.

He'd never done that before, just stopped like it was too much. When I talked to him, his responses were sluggish. I grabbed a blanket for him, showed him that it was one we'd bought when he flew out to visit me at school. I laid it over him so that only his head was showing, and he looked so small. At 6'3", he'd towered over me my whole life.

I called my aunt and uncle, and told them to come over. That he needed to go to the hospital.

They asked him if he wanted to go, and he said no. I left the living room to give them some space, and thought about going to my room upstairs. But I knew he was dying, and that I might not get to see him again. *If these are the only moments left you can get with him*, I thought, *shouldn't you take them?* So I sat down in the dining room and listened.

My aunt and uncle got my dad on the phone. I listened as the three of them begged him to go to the hospital. My dad was calling from a store he'd been shopping at, and I wondered about the other people listening in. Were they sick to their stomachs, horrified, pitying, sad as they heard him speak? Did his begging remind them of their own fathers, dead or still living but someday not?

I started crying when my grandfather told them to just let him die. It was too late for me to move then, to stop listening, but I wished I could. He told them he was done, to just let him die there, but they kept saying the hospital could help, that he could get better.

It took them a half an hour to convince him to go. I helped walk him to the car, let him lean on me as we shuffled towards the sliding door of my uncle's van.

"I'll see you soon," I told him, and "I love you." I didn't think I would see him again, but a couple days later I did. It took him three weeks to die in the hospital, so most of the grandchildren got a chance to visit.

He looked small in the hospital bed, but not as small as he'd looked on the couch. He told me that we'd go visit Florida again soon, just like when I was little. I wondered if anyone had told him he was dying, if he was even lucid enough for that to mean anything.

The funeral was closed casket, but they had a viewing period for the family. We sat and looked at him for what felt like hours, everyone crying and holding hands. Like Gram, the body didn't look like him. It looked like a wax figurine, an imposter. That was the last time I saw him. The last that I remember of him.

Pass/Fail

1. Blood test– *elevated thyroid levels; thyrotropin, triiodothyronine, thyroglobulin, and thyroglobulin antibody*
2. Ultrasound– *suspicious nodes on thyroid; .3-.5 cm; referral to head/neck specialist*
3. Ultrasound– *growth and spread of suspicious nodes; suspected metastasizing carcinoma*
4. Biopsy– *positive for papillary thyroid carcinoma*
5. Blood test– *thyroid levels consistent with papillary thyroid carcinoma; elevated thyrotropin, triiodothyronine, thyroglobulin, and thyroglobulin antibody*
6. Blood test– *negative pregnancy evaluation*
7. Total thyroidectomy with cervical lymph node dissection– *successful; 6 out of 29 (20.7%) lymph nodes removed positive for papillary thyroid carcinoma*
8. Blood test– *intact parathyroid hormone; levels within range; 20 pg/mL*
9. Blood test– *elevated tumor markers; thyrotropin (TSH) and thyroglobulin antibody*
10. Blood test– *falling tumor markers; thyrotropin (TSH) and thyroglobulin antibody*
11. Radioactive iodine therapy– *large-dose intake semi-successful; full body planar imaging shows notable uptake at the thyroidectomy bed*
12. Blood test– *falling tumor markers; thyrotropin (TSH) and thyroglobulin antibody*
13. Ultrasound– *imaging in the thyroid bed does not show any recurrent mass; the included adjacent portions of the neck do not show any suspicious lymph nodes*
14. Blood test– *tumor markers approaching suppressive levels; thyrotropin (TSH) and thyroglobulin antibody*

15. Radioactive iodine therapy– *small-dose intake successful; radiotracer uptake at the thyroidectomy bed and in the neck has considerably decreased; no findings raising suspicion for recurrent/metastatic disease is identified at the neck or elsewhere*
16. Blood test– *tumor markers at suppressive levels; thyroglobulin (TSH) between .5-.1 mIU/L*
17. Ultrasound– *no mass or nodularity is appreciated at the thyroidectomy bed; no findings for recurrent disease*

“Cancer survivor”– the girl who can’t get over it

Every year, high school basketball in Maine does a “Coaches vs. Cancer” week. The players wear pink jerseys and thread pink laces into their sneakers, or don warm-up shirts with ribbons and inspirational slogans. Referees trade in their typical black whistles for bright pink ones, which stand out against the white and black stripes of their shirts. The coaches are instructed to wear sneakers with their suits.

In high school, they gave my team purple shirts with white ribbons to wear during warm-ups. Our school colors, so they matched both our home and away uniforms. They must’ve miscalculated the sizing, though, because mine fit uncomfortably tight.

My sophomore year, the mother of one of the girls on the team was diagnosed with breast cancer. For “Coaches vs. Cancer” week we were given bright pink socks to wear for the rest of the season. Our team sneakers that year were white, and with every game our sweat bled the dye on the socks into our shoes. By the time we reached the playoffs, all of our sneakers were pink.

We had “Coaches vs. Cancer” when I played in college too. My freshman year they dug out old pink jerseys and did their best to match our numbers. I went from my usual number 40 to 41. My sophomore year we were on a week long road trip, so they decided not to bring our special jerseys. Instead, we kept it simple with warm-up shirts.

One of our opponents during the trip went all out. They had warm-up shirts with the same name across the back, special jerseys, lengthy announcements, a fundraiser, and posters hung up all around the gym. As we prepared to do the starting line-ups, I looked over and saw that most of them had started to cry.

Before the game, our coaching staff had told us to be kind to them. Their head coach had been diagnosed with cancer and resigned part way through the season. She was really sick, but planned to attend and support the players regardless.

As they cried, I looked around the room for her. I'd never seen this woman before, but her sickness would stand out. I'd seen it a number of times, with the dying people I knew.

They'd set a chair up for her behind the scorer's table. It was an elevated seat, above the heads of the teams and the officials. Good thing, because she didn't look like she could stand even if she wanted to. She could have been 50, she could have been 65. Her skin had that paper-thin look to it, somehow both too tight and too loose around her bones.

I knew that the girls weren't just crying because they'd lost this woman as their coach. They were crying because they were losing her as a person. I tried my best to understand what this day would mean to them, to her.

Just a few months later, I received my own diagnosis.

*

I was diagnosed with cancer at 20, and started coaching basketball at 21. "Coaches vs. Cancer" week is different when you've actually, as I phrased it to my mom, "Coach vs Cancer"-ed. It becomes so much more difficult to figure out where, exactly, you fit in.

This past season, our athletic director sent out information on the week in a text, on the day of the first "Coaches vs. Cancer" game. Just a quick, "sorry I forgot to tell you" and "make sure you wear sneakers tonight." I thought long and hard about my outfit. I wanted to wear something that would make the sneakers stand out, but I wanted to match. I settled on a black dress shirt, a black skirt with maroon patterning, and a pair of maroon sneakers, mirroring the players' maroon and white uniforms.

When I got to the gym, the kids asked why I was wearing sneakers. They always note my outfits, and get disappointed when I dress down into an Orono quarter-zip and black pants. They prefer suit jackets, skirts, and high heels. In a profession full of men who wear the same outfit every day, my varied wardrobe is a nice change of pace.

“It’s ‘Coaches vs. Cancer’ week,” I told the girls. “All the coaches wear sneakers with their outfits.” They accepted this, of course, but it didn’t feel like the answer I should’ve given.

I’m raising awareness for the fight against cancer, would have been more appropriate. Perhaps, *I’m showing support for people who’ve been diagnosed with cancer*.

These are easy things to say, you would think. They should fall unobstructed from my lips, light without dedication, or even consideration, to what they mean. But for me, these can’t be meaningless phrases. It’s impossible to ignore that I am one of the “people who’ve been diagnosed with cancer.” That I’ve lived the “fight” firsthand and hate hearing it called that.

After I coached the JV game, the varsity coach handed me a t-shirt to wear for their game. It looked like the t-shirts they gave us in high school, just with different colors. I looked down at my black button down shirt, the narrow cut hugging the waist of my skirt, and thought of how bad the t-shirt would look with my outfit. I put it in my bag instead.

The t-shirts read “TOGETHER” across the back. As the girls warmed-up, I sat and thought about that. I thought about how most of the people in the room have no idea about my experience with cancer. How most of them have never had it. How you can hold the hand of a cancer patient and comfort them as they get bad news, how you can cry for them and pray for them and mourn for them, and still have no idea what cancer is like.

Maybe it’s irrational, but I was mad at that slogan. To me it seemed presumptuous, and performative. Cancer isolated me more than almost any other experience in my life.

After the game, the girls bunched together to take a photo. The head coach and his assistant stepped in on either side, bookending the rows of players in their cancer awareness t-shirts.

My mother walked down from the stands and stood next to me. “Shouldn’t you be in that picture?” she asked, giving me an appraising look.

“I’m not wearing the shirt,” I told her. It wasn’t the real reason I didn’t want to go over, but it was the one I’d given in my head when I’d had the debate with myself.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “Aren’t you the person who most deserves to be in that picture?”

And there it was. The question I’d been asking myself all night, as I looked at the parents, players, coaches, and officials “rallying against cancer.” Who is this for? It sure as hell wasn’t for me.

*

I had a conversation with my sister last fall, when her college golf team signed up for a charity 5K.

“We’re racing for cancer,” she said, sounding quite proud. Maybe it had to do with me, or with her teammate’s mother who died from cancer. Maybe it was just the generic cause they picked.

Her phrasing made me smile. “You’re running to support cancer?” I asked. “That seems a bit insensitive.” And then I laughed, excessively, as she rolled her eyes.

I couldn’t help it. It bothered me, the absurdity of people needing to say they’re against cancer. It’s like saying you’re against cold-blooded murder. Congratulations on the basic human decency– where would you like your gold star?

I’m no longer one of the people who gets to make themselves feel better by wearing a t-shirt. The people who wear sneakers with their suits and skirts, and act like they're making a statement. That was me, what feels like a long time ago, and I wish I could go back.

For those people, the fight against cancer is charity events, words of support, and budgeted donations. The fight is present, and it belongs to them. The risk of themselves, of their loved ones, developing cancer is assuaged by their actions. By wearing a t-shirt that says TOGETHER on the back you can take control of the outcome.

So I’m not one of those naive people “doing their part.” But I’m not a cancer patient anymore, either. I’m not that dying coach, watching her players from the sideline. I’m not in intensive treatment, my days complicated by the likelihood of my survival. I’ve been through it, and now I’m supposed to be back.

But I haven’t passed through that threshold yet. After that game, I didn’t have it in me to say, yes, this should be for me, to stand in that picture wearing whatever outfit I wanted. To take ownership of that experience like it’s part of me, part of my past, to announce it and accept it.

The idea of the “cancer survivor” still eludes me. I feel strange even writing the words, cancer survivor. There’s a weight that sinks into my hands, a nervous tingle like the one you get in your lips after lying.

Cancer survivor, cancer survivor, cancer survivor.

I know that I had cancer. I know that I survived it. And yet, I've never been able to use that label for myself.

It's in part because other people have had it so much worse. There are stories about people who were diagnosed as terminal, and wound up cancer-free. People who've had cancer over and over, the same kind and different kinds, and outlived them all. I've known people who got so sick it changed the way they looked, the way they carried themselves, it stopped their entire lives.

I could've died, in some unlikely scenario, but I didn't almost die. Upon diagnosis, my doctors said that, due to my age and the slow-moving nature of my cancer, I had a 99% chance of survival. All of my procedures went to plan. For everything after that first biopsy, my test results were right on track.

I had a non-aggressive, treatable form of cancer. There were no hiccups in my treatment. I've shown no indicators of relapse. It's tough to equate myself with people whose cancer journey was much more fraught.

On top of that, I didn't have chemo. It's one of the first things people ask me, when I tell them I had cancer.

"Oh God," they say first, to be polite. Then, "What type?" and, "Did you have to do chemo?"

The reality is, chemo is the first thing people think of when they think about cancer. The hair loss, the sickness, the time spent in and out of the hospital, the way it's given in rounds– it's what people expect.

When I say that I didn't have chemo, they're usually a bit shocked. You can see the wheels turning in their heads as they wonder what cancer treatment without chemo looks like. They wonder how bad the cancer could have been, if it was fixable in other ways.

I can't blame them. Cancer, like most things, exists on a spectrum. In this case, the spectrum goes from bad to worse. Papillary thyroid cancer sits firmly on the bad side.

I also think about how "cancer survivor" sounds like such an active label. It's like this series of books my little sister used to read obsessively in elementary school. *I Survived…* they were all titled. Like, *I Survived the Bombing of Pearl Harbor* or *I Survived Pompeii*. All of them were dramatic retellings of historical tragedies, told from the perspective of a fictional survivor, involving the elaborate efforts required to stay alive.

On the other hand, my cancer experience seemed so passive. For most of it, all I did was lie around. People told me to rest all the time, to give my body a chance to recover. After my surgery, I slept intermittently for the better part of two weeks. During my radioactive iodine therapy, I napped constantly to pass the time.

There's nothing I did to earn my survival. The work behind my treatment came from the doctor's, as they operated on me and provided the medicine I needed. Instructions for which pills to take and which treatments to undergo were overseen by my mother. She woke me up every four hours after my surgery to give me my pain medication, and afterwards I slipped right back into unconsciousness.

I suffered, which is not easy, but it required no effort. To avoid the pain, I slept and watched mindless TV. For much of my cancer treatment, I dissociated. There are months at a time I can barely even remember, beyond flashes of hospitals and discussions with doctors. I don't even have the memories to work through.

And then there's the celebratory aura around cancer survival that other traumas don't seem to share. No one congratulated me when I survived a serious car accident in elementary school. No one sends happy cards in the mail after you have a mental breakdown. *Glad to hear the intrusive thoughts have passed. You're such a warrior!*

I hated hearing how lucky I was, how blessed, how excited I should be. Everyone talking about how great it was, when I became cancer-free. All I could think was that it shouldn't have had to happen, because I never should have gotten cancer in the first place. About how much better it would be if I could just go back and erase it all.

All of that together– the minimizing, the denial, the anger– lead me to think that I'm not through it yet. I don't have ownership over my cancer experience the way a survivor is supposed to.

*

I tried to talk to my mother after that "Coaches vs. Cancer" game, to let her know how I was feeling. I wanted her to understand that the cancer stuff is still processing, that I can't always step into that role of cancer survivor and feel comfortable.

But all I could think about was her telling me how well I was handling it, in those months after my diagnosis. She saw my silence as strength, when really I was just in shock. How can you cry over bad news when your brain and your body are shutting off to protect you from it?

Everyone else in my life has long since processed this and moved on. It was so much easier for them, is what they don't understand. They got to feel as it happened, work through the sorrow and grief, and revel in the relief of it being over.

They don’t seem to recognize that I’ve earned the right to wrestle with this. To get pissed off, lost, nostalgic, afraid. My sister told me how “lucky I was” and “what a great life I had” the other night. My cancer weighs so little in her estimation of me.

That horrible experience is just a speck on the timeline to them. A hiccup in my 20th year that we’ve moved way past. I wish they could understand that it can’t be that way for me.

I have yet to do that miraculous thing people expect, where I turn my suffering into strength. I’m not sure I ever will.

Self-Talk

Can you still breathe?

(I breathe.)

Yes.

Can you still swallow?

(I swallow.)

Yes.

Then you’re okay.

(I breathe. I swallow.)

I’m okay.

Lunch at the Olive Garden

On the day of my high school graduation, we stopped at Olive Garden for lunch. My parents were there, my two sisters, my grandparents, some aunts and uncles, my Mom's best friend Sue and her partner Michelle. There were enough people that they sat us at one of the big tables, booths all along one side and chairs lining the other. As the honoree, I was placed at the head of the table.

My hair was long then, and I'd straightened it so it fell all the way to my waist. I wore a spring-time dress, white with pink flowers. When I look back at the pictures, we're all smiles.

On the day of my final cancer treatment, my mom took me to that same Olive Garden. It was my first meal out in over a month, and I asked for cheese, cheese, and more cheese. The diet for my radioactive iodine treatment had meant no dairy, and despite my lactose intolerance that had been torture.

When I had my first radioactive iodine treatment, just months after the surgery, my endocrinologist drew out a diagram. "This is the timeline for the treatment," she said, her pen swift across the page. I could tell she had drawn this out many times, and that reassured me.

The first mark was the start of the diet, a month before taking the pill. She wrote out a list of prohibited foods. Nothing processed, no salt, no dairy, no bakery items, no eggs. No eating out at restaurants. A week later I went off my hormone medication, so that my thyroid cells would become active again. At week four, I took the pill.

"It's really not that big," she assured me, when I asked if it would be difficult to take. This turned out to be a lie, and not a good one. Most of the lies my endocrinologist had told me helped with the horror of my diagnosis. I needed to hear that a thyroidectomy was barely even a major surgery, that it didn’t hurt that bad. It gave me hope every time she told me my scar would only hurt for another 3-6 months, that the stretch and discomfort of the surrounding skin was temporary.

“If you have a recurrence, the blood tests will show us long before your body will feel it,” she told me once, when I complained that the tightness in my throat felt the same as before the tumors were removed. I’m not sure if this is true, but it’s helped a lot to believe it.

But the lie about the pill, that one hurt. When the technician brought it out from the lab, carrying it feet away from himself with a pair of metal tongs, and dropped it into my outstretched hands, it was the size of a horse vitamin.

It must have shown on my face, because he gave a little chuckle. “I’ll give you a few minutes,” he said, and left me alone. Other people weren’t supposed to be near the pill. It was designed to kill thyroid cells, in my case stopping those mutated, cancer-making machines from repopulating. But if people with healthy thyroids stayed too close, it could kill their cells too. I had to be isolated for a full week after taking the pill, couldn’t even come within ten feet of my cats.

I took a swig of water and put the pill in my mouth. I swallowed, added more water, swallowed again about a dozen times before the casing started to wear off, and the inside of my mouth felt metallic and warm. Scared of the side effects I’d been warned off, including permanent dry mouth, I made a Herculean effort to swallow. I choked on the pill going down, and spit radioactive fluid all over the room.

The crystal from inside the capsule landed in my hand, and I tried to swallow it again, choked, and spit it back up. The taste in my mouth turned heavy and cold. I tried one more time, filled my mouth with as much water as it could hold, and it finally went down. I sat there for another five minutes waiting for the technician to come back, thinking through what I should say. There was water and spit all over the table in front of me, my sweatpants, the floor.

They gave me hospital issue pants and told me to change. My sweatpants– a favorite pair that I'd worn for extra protection against my nerves– were thrown in a radioactive waste bag and never seen again. They said we'd have to wait and see if I got enough of the radiation down for the treatment to be successful.

On the way home, the shock wore off and I cried. There was the embarrassment, of course, the shame of not being able to swallow a pill like some child, throwing up dangerous chemicals because I was incapable of something that apparently everyone else was fine with. Even greater was the fear that I would have to do it all again, the diet and the withheld medication and the giant pill that I just couldn't swallow. It felt like I would die if I had to do it again.

A week after taking the pill, I went back in for a full-body scan. Walking through the imaging wing of Northern Light, I saw the room where they'd given me the pill taped off, marked as radioactive.

"My name is Crystal Bell," I told the technician preparing my scan. She gave me a stern look.

"I know who you are," she said. "You're a legend around here." I'd only ever heard the word 'legend' used with a positive connotation, but her tone told me that wasn't the case. "We had to close down the lab because of you. And the bathroom across the hall, which all the women in this wing used everyday. Can't open them back up for a couple months."

I didn't know how to respond to her accusation, but I thought it over as they put me in the machine. What did this woman want from me? More shame? I'd already been sick with it for months.

A ton of gray machinery hung a few inches above my face and started to click. I considered first what would happen to me, if the machine fell. I'd die quickly, my mom watching from her chair in the corner. Then I considered the technician, angry about her bathroom. My suffering then, the suffering listed in my file– did that seem like recompense to her?

It took a few weeks for the results to come in the mail. That always seemed to bring good news, when they sent it in the mail. With bad news they liked to call.

As it turned out, I had gotten enough radiation down to kill off the remaining cells, and to look at the scan and see that the cancer hadn't metastasized beyond the lymph nodes in my throat. "Cancer-free," the letter read. I handed it to my mom.

There was no grand celebration. We didn't throw a party, or dance, or even eat a special meal for dinner. This, I suppose, was an attempt at normalcy.

Despite my remission, I still had one more treatment to do. With radioactive iodine therapy, it is customary in young patients to give a second dose, one year later. Smaller than the first, this dose allowed for a baseline scan of the body, checking for any remaining thyroid tissue or cancer recurrence. For a year, that second dose haunted me.

As a child, I hated doing the mile run. We ran it once a year, for our Presidential fitness challenge, and I kept a tally of the years I had left. The more the numbers dwindled, the more nervous I got for each run. By my 8th grade year, I contemplated making myself throw up to get out of it.

I'm not sure what frightened me so much about the mile, but I do know why that radioactive iodine pill scared me. Since my tumors, I couldn't swallow ibuprofen without crushing it into little bits. And unlike the mile run, calling in sick wouldn't mean an absence– it could be a matter of life or death.

During the first round of radioactive iodine therapy, I blamed the strict diet for making me feel ill. I lay in bed all day for weeks, unable to keep my eyes open or stay engaged in conversation. I let hours of TV play in the background while I retreated inside my mind. In a fit of desperation, I ate a piece of pepperoni and a few animal crackers, strongly craving the salt content. It seemed funny later, but at the time I worried that I had traded in my health for a few bites of snack food.

As it turned out, the withheld medication had been the problem. For my second round of treatment, I chose to get shots that would spike my thyroid activity levels on the days before taking the pill. I got to keep taking my medication for that month of the diet, and my energy levels stayed normal. I was certainly hungrier than usual, and craved every salty, cheesy food under the sun, but I didn't crash out.

Strange as it may seem, I hadn't seriously considered what my hypothyroidism meant up until this point. Headaches on days when I forgot to take my medication, that didn't seem too severe, but without it in the long-term I became sick. Too sick to function.

The shots didn't scare me as much as the pill. I'd gotten way too used to needles after dozens of times having my blood drawn. Not to mention, it seemed like so little a price to pay after my extreme fatigue during the last round.

When I showed up for my first shot, the woman at the desk asked my name. "Crystal Bell," she repeated, after I told her. "Oh, *Crystal Bell*."

The look in her eyes told me that she knew. They'd been talking about my incident, and my impending return. They'd thrown my name around like a warning.

The nurse who took my blood pressure knew me too. "We're hoping you do better this time," she said, and smiled encouragingly. The doctor who gave me my shots tried to be reassuring, saying this time it wouldn't be as bad. I wondered if these people had been here last year, or if the story had been passed down to newcomers.

When the time came for me to take the pill, they led me to a tiny room in a far-out corner of the wing. The same technician gave me the pill, but this time he watched carefully as I tried to swallow. They even provided a cup of applesauce, which had previously been prohibited.

A group of nurses waited down the hall, to see if I could swallow the pill. The technician left every couple minutes to report out to them, then returned to his attentive post in the doorway of my room.

It took twenty minutes– according to my mom's timer– but I got the pill down. The sense of relief I felt was indescribable. For over twelve months I had been dreading that moment, the repulsive metallic taste of the pill, the frustration of swallowing and finding it still stuck on my tongue. I had cursed my ineptitude, tried to practice swallowing with other medications only to feel them dissolve before I could work up the courage.

Many of the staff watched us walk out, but I didn't feel like such a terrible spectacle anymore. I had become a curiosity, and one they wouldn't have to worry about anymore. I laughed and smiled the whole way home.

Because of the smaller dose, my second isolation only lasted three days. On the third day, my mom took me in for a scan. There was a different woman running the machine, and she didn’t seem to know who I was. She didn’t mention a single thing about me contaminating the hospital.

Even the scan seemed shorter the second time. I knew it would be the last one, the last treatment of my journey, unless I had a recurrence.

My mom asked me where I wanted to eat lunch, and I said Olive Garden. It didn’t have anything to do with our previous family celebrations there. My graduation lunch didn’t even cross my mind.

What did cross my mind was a list of restaurants I had made during my isolation. Places I wanted to visit, once the diet and quarantine had been lifted. Olive Garden topped that list, and I reveled in the thought of eating there.

They sat the two of us at a small table by a wall of windows. The tables around us were emptied and filled in a never ending cycle of food and people. Birthday celebrators clustered around in excessively fancy outfits. Quiet business meetings ended in the signing of papers and the signing of cheques.

None of these people were experiencing what I was experiencing. We talked for a couple minutes about my scan, how it was the last one. I wondered if any of the staff or patrons were listening in, sharing in this. Did they understand what this meal meant to me?

I ordered enough food for five people, and only managed to eat half. The mozzarella sticks were first. With the breadsticks, I asked for a side of alfredo dipping sauce. The waitress asked us to say ‘when’ for the cheese sprinkled atop our salad, and I could’ve let her go on forever.

I got the five cheese ziti for there, and a fettuccine alfredo to go. For dessert I requested the chocolate lasagna. Layers of cream cheese connected blocks of rich, chocolatey cake. My mom asked for half, and I grudgingly let her have it.

With our food spread all around us, it looked like there should be a whole family at our table. I instinctively knew where they would sit, what they would order. My dad would take the spot closest to the window, the seat with the most room. He'd scooch his chair back and smooth his jacket down on the back of it. A plate of spaghetti and meatballs– and, "how much is it for extra meatballs?"– plus his own order of mozzarella sticks.

Clarice would sit next to me. Not because of me, but because that would keep her from being next to our mom and dad. Her phone would be face down on the table, and she'd be itching to grab it, but in this situation she'd resist. She'd troll the kids menu for inspiration, then settle on some bland 'create your own pasta' combination. Olive Garden had never been one of her favorites, and when she graduated high school she requested Kobe for her special lunch.

Jocelyn would take the remaining chair, regardless of where that left her. She wouldn't complain, even if it meant squeezing into the smallest space, or being far from Clarice and me. Undoubtedly she'd order the cheese ravioli, scrape off the sauce, and only eat half. When I inquired, she'd let me take a ravioli for myself.

Maybe there should have been more people. My grandparents, both those now dead and those still alive, my aunts and uncles, cousins, my friends from school and home. But most didn't know we were here, celebrating. Some didn't even know about my cancer.

But my sisters and my parents, that was enough. That meal could've been a reset, like mouthwash after throwing up. We would've played a couple rounds of cards, while waiting for the food. Talked about school and sports, Clarice's golf and Jocelyn's tennis, my applications for grad school. The thought of cancer would have dropped right out of my head the way it had already dropped out of everyone else's; the pain, the embarrassment, the scans and blood draws and hospital rooms, finally far away, like it had all happened to someone else.

But that was the problem. It hadn't happened to someone else, and it never seemed to stay far for long. The people in my life, even the ones who loved me the most, had moved on at 'cancer free,' but I couldn't. I still can't.

My cancer experience is most insidious in its persistence. I go to sleep with it and wake up with it– I'm reminded every morning when I take my thyroid medication, and every night when I put vitamin E oil on my scar. On my worst days it takes the place of my optimism, shades my future with threats of illness and recurrence. Even when I'm not alone in my experiences, I'm alone in my own mind.

At the end of the meal, my mom asked for a check. With our leftovers packed into a big paper bag, the two of us took a half dozen boxes home.

-Crystal, 2024

Oh no Crystal! I'm so sorry. Will keep you in my prayers. May I share this info with the team and the training staff? Are you planning on returning in the Fall?
Didn't realize this was your birthday. Happy Birthday!! I hope you can enjoy it, at least a little bit, under the circumstances.

Apr 15, 2020 11:45 am

~~Yes, you can share with the team and training staff. I am still planning on returning in the fall, and the recovery from the surgery will only be a few weeks, so I should be good to work out and stuff for most of the summer! Thank you for the birthday wishes! I'm hoping to make some positive memories to compensate for the bad news.~~

~~Apr 15, 2020 11:49 am~~

Did you know that I texted you first, before any of my friends? My dad must have told me to reach out to you first, before any of the girls, so you wouldn't hear it from them. Not like it mattered much, when you all were 2000 miles away and I never saw you again.
I really thought I would be returning in the fall. Shock and naivete, I guess. I think you knew I wouldn't be back. You were the most honest coach I ever had– sometimes to a fault– but I always appreciated that. I can feel your honest compassion here, and in the other messages you sent me after the cancer. You played along well, when I acted like I was going to bounce right back.

I told you I was trying to make good memories that day. I must've failed, because I don't remember any. All I have is my hands shaking as I typed out messages and made calls. The birthday wishes were insufferable. It felt like I was lying everytime I replied normally, like I was hiding something. I'm not even sure if we had cake.

Mar 21, 2024 6:04 pm

Omg… that's crazy. I'm so sorry Crystal. I love you sooo much if you need anything please let me know!

Apr 15, 2020 1:19 pm

There were a lot of things I needed, and I never let you know. I needed the silly messages you sent, about TV shows, work, your family. I needed time to process on the days it took me too long to respond. I needed to remember that people loved me, that I loved people, when things looked bleak.

For a long time I needed to distance myself from the world outside my house and the never ending halls of hospitals. It hurt too much to know that other people were living the same lives as before my diagnosis, thinking each day about their future and not about their death.

I wish I'd reached out after my treatment, when things started to get normal again. The kind of friend you are, I know you would've understood. But it felt too late then, for a lot of

things. Like in those months of illness and dissociation everyone had passed me by, and asking you to wait up for me…

I think of the friendship we’d still have if I never got cancer, and it breaks my heart.

Mar 21, 2024 6:38 pm

I’m so sorry! That’s the worst thing to find out on your birthday 😣 but it’s super treatable right??

Apr 15, 2020 1:21 pm

~~**Yeah, thankfully its very treatable. And yeah, I couldn’t believe the timing lol**~~

~~**My doctor says my chances of beating it are almost 100%, especially since I’m young. It’s still been quite a shock tho**~~

~~**Apr 15, 2020 1:25 pm**~~

I’m not sure if it’s the worst thing you can find out on your birthday, but it’s definitely the worst I’ve heard. I’ve tried for many years to brush it off with wry jokes, with lols and upside down smiley faces, but the ugliness won’t be deterred.

I told you once that my birthday was cursed. You didn’t believe me, even when I listed all of the historical tragedies (and tax day). Do you believe me now? Do you see why I stay

home each year, keeping my head down? Why I almost expect something horrific to happen to someone I love?

You were right, the cancer was very treatable. The almost 100% chance was a bit of an exaggeration, but it made us both feel better. My doctor even called it one of the “good cancers,” though that didn’t mean much to me on the day of my diagnosis.

You were always good about asking after my health, and it was great to know you cared. I think it hurt us, though, in the long run. Every time you text, asking how I am, I wonder what you want to know. For so long, people asking “how are you?” were really asking about the cancer, and you were one of them. Now, when you ask after me, I instinctively head in that direction. “I’m healthy” or “feeling really great.” It reminds me of that time when it felt like people only texted me to make sure I was still alive.

Mar 21, 2024 7:23 pm

I'm in grief over your diagnosis. I hope that the surgery goes well. I hope you don't mind, but I shared the news with the other faculty in our department so we can be in prayer.

Apr 23, 2020 10:19 am

I’ve thought of this message many times over the years. For a long time I struggled to figure out what about it bothered me so much.

I can still remember how it felt to read this in pre-op, waiting for the nurse to take me to the OR for my thyroidectomy. You'd sent a message about an application for a writing center position coming due, and I got mad. I didn't have time for applications, or future plans. I'd barely managed to finish my work for the semester. So I sent a message letting you know about my cancer, and how the application would have to wait. I hadn't planned to tell you, or any of the professors, about my illness.

I read your words and did my best to ignore them, but they've eaten at me. The grief was strange to read about, given that I was still in shock and had yet to experience any of my own.

But more than that, I've since realized how strongly I resent the idea of people talking about my cancer. The one thing I could control, who I told, getting ripped away was traumatic. I had no idea what was being said, being inferred, in these conversations about me.

I teach now too, and I had a student out last semester for about a month. I hadn't heard from him, or received any assignments, and it worried me. He returned one day with an apology and a stack of paper.

"These are my hospital discharge papers," he said. "I brought them in so you could verify where I was." The look in his eyes as he handed the forms over made me feel sick. I thought about you, getting that glimpse into my trauma and holding it open for others to see.

"I don't need to see them," I told the student. "And you don't need to tell me anything you're not comfortable with." The look of relief in his eyes was palpable. I would never even consider looking at those papers and then telling my colleagues about their contents.

In short, I do mind. I did then, and I still do now. But it's made me a better person, I think, more cautious with the privacy of others.

Mar 21, 2024 8:04 pm

I am so sorry to hear that. I have heard it is very treatable. I will be praying for you starting right now and if there is anything I can do for you, please do not think twice about it. May God heal, comfort and bless you. I have big plans for you so hurry up and get this done.

Apr 18, 2020 2:14 pm

When I first revisited this message a few months ago, it made me break down. At the time you first sent it, I wasn't in a position to truly process the words that you, or anyone else, was sending my way. But now, with all that I know about the changes in my life, it reads as tragic.

I called my mom, after reading this a few months ago. She let me cry for a while before asking what was wrong. I told her about this message, about the 'big plans' we were both expecting. "There's a whole other life," I told her, "that I'm supposed to be out there living. It feels like I stepped out of my life. Like I'm living the wrong one."

A lot of people, I suppose, feel that way. My mother reminded me about my aunt Linda, running off with her scumbag ex-husband instead of finishing college. I think back to the story you told us on the first day of class, about attempting suicide in your twenties and then ending up in law school.

When you first suggested law school for me, I was wary. I'd always imagined myself writing books or teaching literature. But God did the idea ever become so appealing. I didn't tell you, but I took the LSAT after undergrad, and my scores were good. I sat with the applications for a long while, before closing the tabs. I knew by then that I wouldn't be able to leave home anymore, not with my anxiety, and all of the law schools were too far away.

After reading this message, I saw another one that you sent me after I let you know I wouldn't be returning to school:

"Thank you so much for updating me. I completely understand about not wanting to be so far away from home. I am really happy about your improving. You have been in my prayers.

As you know I am a "cancer" survivor. I used to live my life in 3 months cycles & still do but I don't have the anxiety and apprehension of every 3 month visit. If you ever want to hear the full story I will be happy to share.

I am glad you are near or with your parents.

I will still miss you in class! I know you will be fine and that your future will be bright. I saw that and character in you."

This one made me cry too, but it also made me smile. I know that I needed to be home for the time of my cancer treatment, and for the time of healing after. I know that my life without the cancer would have been great, but maybe it still can be.

They had me on a monitoring system of three months for the longest time, bringing me in then for blood tests and physical exams. I know it wasn't like your three months, but the terror each time was like living with a ticking time bomb inside me. The further the appointments spread out, the more I can let that terror go.

You were right about me being fine. It's been ugly at times, painful at others, but I've survived.

Here's to hoping you're right about my future as well.

Mar 21, 2024 9:16 pm

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Crystal Bell was born in Bangor, Maine on April 15, 2000. She was raised in Holden, Maine, and graduated from John Bapst Memorial High School in 2018. She attended Husson University and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature in 2021. She enrolled in the English graduate program at the University of Maine in 2022, pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in creative writing. Crystal is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2024.