Big Infinity: A Cancer Journey

Christy L. Lorio Mrs.
University of New Orleans, clorio@uno.edu

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Big Infinity: A Cancer Journey

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Christy Lorio

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The essay “Big Infinities, Little Infinities” is dedicated to: Bougie, Cubby, Fritz, MJ, Renegade, Rizzo, Slice & Dice, Splits, Stitches, Tigris, Triple Threat, Wobbles, and all the staff and volunteers that made my week in Colorado so special.

And many thanks to Barren Magazine for publishing “Deliver These to Ricky” in their January 2019 edition.
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Abstract

This thesis delves into life as a colorectal cancer patient and the issues that came with my diagnosis, including the connection formed with the narrator and her father, who died of the same disease. Themes include body acceptance, relationships between mother/daughter and siblings, the importance of physical fitness and the narrator physically challenging herself, fashion as a form of healing and identity.

Key words: cancer, self-identity
Deliver These To Ricky

In June 2018 I made a discovery that I shared something with my dad. These letters serve as a way to explore and connect our shared experience. Chris and Christin are my siblings. Pam is my mom.

Hey Dad,

Do you remember the time you gave yourself your own stitches? You were out on the property on Shady Park Lane before you and Mom started building the house. Did the street even have a name yet? It was just an overgrown acre of land, thick with trees wrapped in cat claw vines. I remember the ditch would fill up with crawfish after a hard rain and rabbits would hide out from the alligators that inevitably crept into the next door neighbor’s pond. You were clearing the property, cutting down some of the thorny trees. You were out there alone and you gashed your hand. Or was it a leg? I don’t remember but you gave yourself your own stitches because you didn’t want to sit and wait at the emergency room for hours. Mom was horrified — I think we all were— but I think she was secretly proud and maybe even a little jealous of your grit. I know I was.

I didn’t live in the house on Shady Park Lane for long. What, a few months? I remember that tiny Fat City apartment you helped me move into. It’s the last time you helped me move. I turned 21 in that apartment. You called me at midnight to wish me a happy birthday. This feels like a very long time ago yet not long ago at all.

I live in the city now, as in New Orleans proper. Cat claw takes over the fence during the summer months and encroaches on the sweet olive tree in the front yard. When we still rented the house, our landlady told us that her mother’s ashes are buried under that tree. That’s kind of
weird, right? I’m not sure if that’s true but I don’t see why it wouldn’t be. I thought you would get a kick of that. I haven’t tried to dig up Pat’s mom so the mystery remains. Anyway, the olive tree is still there and so is the banana tree. We bought the house about a year after we moved back to New Orleans— we hadn’t lived in it since we evacuated for Hurricane Katrina. The banana tree is so massive that the dogs disappear in its thick stalks. We call it the jungle now. The leaves fade to tan right around Mardi Gras each year, but the tree comes back stronger, taller, and greener as the years pass.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

My fourteenth wedding anniversary is this month. Thomas and I had just started dating when you got sick. I wish you could have met him. He came with me to the hospital sometimes. Did you know that? He would wait for me in the lobby while I visited with you. I never told Mom and Maw Maw that. When it was all over, I remember Mom and Maw Maw asked me why he didn’t go to the funeral. Can you imagine meeting your girlfriend’s family for the first time at her father’s funeral? They acted like it would have been the most natural thing, but I wasn’t having any of it. Thomas would have gone if I asked him though. He’s just that type of guy. I mean, he stuck by me through your death and through Maw Maw Tut Tut’s death a year and a half later. And now, seventeen years after we first started dating, we’re dealing with colon cancer again. This time it’s mine and not yours. Did you see this coming? I didn’t. Remind me to tell you how I found out.
Hi Dad,
I felt pretty good today so I went to the museum by myself, the one in City Park. The last time I went to the park was November of last year for the Fall Crescent City Classic. I ran my second ever 5K race and placed in the top ten percent of females for my age group. Not shabby for being 37 years old and having just started running a few months prior. And I beat Thomas by several minutes. When he finished I asked him what took him so long.

Anyway, I’m getting ahead of myself. Two weeks ago things started to feel real. There is no denying that I have cancer now. I had two surgeries in one week— one to place the chemo port in my chest and an intense radiation treatment to my brain. I forgot to tell you that I also had brain surgery in July to remove a cancerous brain tumor. I need to catch you up on so much. Mom came to the house to bring me to surgery to have my port put in. I was in the bathroom fixing my hair in the bathroom mirror when a wave of grief engulfed me. I thought about how the days of fixing my hair will soon be over. I knew that losing my hair was a possibility, but I remembered that you didn’t lose yours. Last year I cut my hair short for the first time since you were alive. Then I decided to dye it blonde for the first time ever. It sounds silly and vain but— stay with me— I think when we make deliberate changes in our outward appearance it can have an impact on us internally. I felt like I could do anything after I dyed my hair. I also felt that way when I started running. If I can do this, what else am I capable of?
I am capable of surviving cancer. That’s what I am capable of. I could die from this, just like you did. I promise you I won’t.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

So this is what happened. June 2018, I was in Cork, Ireland. I was supposed to be there for almost seven weeks for a little bit of work for my school’s study abroad program and a little of vacation with Thomas. I was in the country for two days. It was a Saturday. I bought a ticket to see a play, then walked around the city centre killing time before the show started, or at least that was the plan. I was in front of the English Market. It’s kind of like a farmer’s market that sells produce, meat, seafood and sundries. I was going to check out a vintage clothing store, then grab a bite to eat. I was about to walk in when I felt my mouth start to twitch. It did not frighten me. My first thought was “Oh, this is an odd, new sensation.”

Turns out, I had a seizure.

The seizure was caused by a cancerous brain tumor. I spent a week in the hospital while the doctors ran tests on me. The only reason I found out about the colon cancer (the brain tumor was secondary) was because I mentioned that you died from colon cancer. The doctor told me he was “99% sure” that my test results would come back negative, so when he told me I had three tumors in my butt I completely broke down. I could handle the brain stuff because it felt like an anomaly. But colon cancer? It was my worst nightmare come to life. I thought about how much we went through when you died and I didn’t want to put the family through that again.
Anyway, I flew home to take care of the cancer. I didn’t want to get stuck in Ireland. I thought I might die in Ireland and never see anyone I love again. I can’t say I’m doing better, but I am comforted in knowing that I have support here and the healthcare is so much more advanced. I will survive this, but there are times when I don’t feel as if I am living.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

I got my hair cut this weekend. The doctor told me it will take another two weeks for my hair to start falling out. I don’t want to see strands of hair clogging the bathtub drain. I don’t want to wake up to clumps of hair on my pillow. My hairdresser cut it slightly longer than a buzzcut. We left the top long, to where it falls just to eye-length, and dyed it purple. Might as well have fun with it while I still have it.

I was scared to lose my hair, but I am not anymore. Cutting my hair gave me a sense of control. I was (and still am) petrified of chemo. Every time I leave the house I feel a pang of fear that someone or something could hurt me. I’ve never felt that way before. Where is this fear coming from? My body does not feel like it is mine anymore. This feeling first started in the Irish hospital. Every day someone was drawing my blood, taking my vitals, running me through an MRI tube, poking and prodding me. When I had the brain tumor removed it was the first surgery in my life. Go big or go home, right?

I have this body that’s mostly okay, but there is something wrong with it. I feel mostly okay when I’m in between chemo treatments. I feel fine, but I need to be fixed; otherwise I will
die. Did you feel like that? Did you feel like your body was mostly okay or did you feel betrayed by it? Did you feel broken? There is so much I’m just now realizing that I don’t know about you and your struggle because I was too afraid to ask. Mentally, I was barely hanging on when you were fighting your own colon cancer while running a business and raising a family on a lower middle-class income. I was 21, a full-time college student working a full-time job and dealing with a full-time sick dad. Chris would soon move out of the house and Christin was barely in high school. I can’t fathom how you felt, knowing that you were leaving behind a wife and three kids. Yet you held on. You held on long enough until someone told you that I had arrived at the hospital. “Christy’s here?” you asked. And then you were gone. But I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there for you at that moment. I was at Thomas’ house, the same one we own now.

Right now, I am your daughter but I am not you. The doctor said they can cure me. Cure — such a bold word. I want to believe it, but I know better than to cling to that word because I thought you would pull through, but you didn’t. It was nothing you did wrong. It was nothing you did or did not do. I want you to know that. None of it was your fault. Why am I telling you this? Maybe it’s because I am telling myself this as well. None of this is my fault.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

Some days I feel almost normal. I can’t get too accustomed to a return to normalcy. I can’t linger in the idea of returning to normal. My speech is still off after the brain surgery. I’m seeing a speech therapist, but I’m not sure if I will ever sound like my old self again. I was complaining to Christin about how much effort it takes just to talk. Having a sister who’s a speech therapist
has helped me grasp what’s going on with my brain. I expressed to her how I want to sound like
my old self again but realize that I might not ever get back to that again.

“At least you’re alive,” she said. She’s right.

Nothing about my life is going to be normal for the rest of this year. Hell, maybe even longer than that. I couldn’t return to a pre-Ireland life even if I tried. My body is healing from my surgeries. My skin is clearing up. I developed acne on my neck and shoulders right after brain surgery. My head incision is healed and the hair is growing back—just in time for it to fall out. I have bags under my eyes for the first time in my life. I know that sounds vain. I know that things could be much, much worse. I try to remind myself that others have it a lot worse than me but I also have to tell myself that it’s okay to acknowledge that cancer really fucking sucks.

Mom has been dropping F bombs lately. I remember when we were kids that was one of the only curse words that was totally off-limits. She’s been slinging them around like she’s making up for lost time. It’s refreshing to see her loosen up a little.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

My back hurts from sitting and lying down for so long. I’m not used to having to rest this much. I haven’t been to the gym in almost two months and the neurosurgeon instructed me to wait another month before I start to lift weights again. I want to take back my body and I don’t want to waste away.

I started reading a book about decluttering and cleaning (haha, that is so Pam Lorio of me) and it made me realize the value in keeping the house as clean as possible. Mom and
Christin both told me the story about when you had surgery to remove the tumors and you were on the riding lawn mower two weeks after surgery. Mom cursed you out and told you to get off the damn thing. She said you told her, “What? I’m just sitting down.” Mom told Christin, “God, Christy is Dad all over again.” The doctor fuzzed at me for riding my bike so soon after surgery. Chris and I rode our bikes to Hansen’s to get snoballs. It was too hot for a 30 minute walk and I can’t drive right now. What were we supposed to do? My neurosurgeon gave me major stink eye when I told him that. He asked if I was wearing a helmet. (I was.) The look on his face said “I just fixed your damn head.” I got fuzzed at again by my oncologist a week later. She warned me about potholes and reckless drivers. Mom fuzzed at Chris so we both got fuzzed at, just like when we were kids. I guess some things never change.

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,

I will say this— one of the good things about the hospital is having your meals come to you. Did you like the break of having to figure out what to do about lunch every day? I guess I’ve never given much thought to what you did for lunch on a day-to-day basis before you were sick. Did Mom pack you a lunch for work? Did you stop by the po-boy shop in the neighborhood, the same one that my high school gym teacher let us sneak out to while we were walking for exercise? Or did Maw Maw cook for you at her house? I bet you stopped by Maw Maw’s for rice and gravy a few times a week. There is so much that I don’t know or can’t recall about your daily habits.
I cringe with regret thinking about how I should have visited you more in the hospital. I think you know how hard it was for me to see you like that, my strong dad wasting away, so frail, so defeated by this thing inside your body that you couldn’t see or touch. And now I have it. I have your disease.

Even after all these years, and especially after my own diagnosis, I can’t even think about the end of your life without getting upset. I still can’t read a book or watch a movie with a strong father-daughter dynamic, or a parent who gets cancer or dies of a terminal illness. We went to a friend’s wedding a few years ago and I had to walk away during the father-daughter dance. It was at the gardens at City Park. I walked to the edge and allowed myself to ugly cry and be inconsolable.

And now, I feel this closeness to you that I’ve felt before but I’m just realizing I barely scratched the surface of. I thought we were close. We were, but now I feel like a detective trying to piece together who you actually were versus who I remember you to be. Maybe the memories should be enough to sustain me. Maybe I shouldn’t dig too much into the past. What would you want? What do I need?

Love, Christy

***

Hey Dad,
Remember that time when we were kids and Mom went out of town one weekend for a teacher’s convention? You let us stay up well past our bedtime and watch a Planet of the Apes marathon with you. That was so much fun. We all thought we were getting away with something. It was one of those moments I realized you were fun loving, not bound by the rules of life you abided
by, able to create your own sets of moral codes and not limited to what you were taught in so many years of Catholic school. You were a little bit of a rebel—my own rebellious streak comes from you. Always pushing the boundaries ever so slightly, always trying to figure out how to buck the system without getting into too much trouble or causing an uproar.

Maybe it was the music you listened to growing up, like Joe Cocker, Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin. They symbolized freedom and rebellion and youth. But you also listened to traditional Cajun music—always in the truck, on the way to church, dropping me off at school, our weekly visits to the grandparents on Friday, Saturday and Sundays. The Cajun music was a nod to our Cajun heritage. To Maw Maw Tut Tut growing up on a house boat, to Paw Paw C.L.’s family, who have been in Louisiana since before the Louisiana Purchase. To the pirogue rides, the frog hunting, the rabbits you raised for sustenance in the backyard (I still can’t believe Mom let you get away with that), to the duck hunting, the deer hunting, the swamp. These things run in our veins, sustaining us and carrying us through hurricanes, oil spills, termite swarms, armadillos tearing up the backyard and the dog getting blamed for it. And yes, colon cancer. Father-daughter colon cancer. The same cancer that plagues a disproportionate number of Cajuns in Louisiana. Some heritage, right?

Love, Christy

***

Dear Dad,

You used to tell me “Expect the worst and you won’t be disappointed.” I have my second round of chemo tomorrow. I am expecting the worst. I’m expecting to be nauseated and weak. You also
told me, “There’s always going to be someone worse than you and better than you.” when I barely got beat out for State Honor Band. Now I’m taking that same advice and reminding myself that there are people much, much worse off than me right now. Still, it’s easier to say that than believe it. The day of my first chemo appointment I cried when I woke up, I cried on the way there and I cried in the waiting room. The anticipation and having the needle put into my port was worse than the chemo itself. The skin over my port is still sore and healing from the surgery. It feels like I have a quarter-sized board game piece lodged in my chest. When all of this is done I am going to steal the line you used to tell people when they asked how you were feeling.

“Any better and I couldn’t stand it.”

Love,

Your daughter
The news of my dad’s death didn’t come as a shock. Instead, it was like a slow acceptance of the truth, an infiltration of reality. He was dead. A lifeless, cancer-ridden body at 48 years old. A corpse. Yet he was still my dad.

In that moment, when the news came, I remember I just wanted to have sex with my boyfriend, the kind that knocks the wind out of you. So I did. I desperately needed to connect to someone both on a physical and emotional level. Grief would consume my life for years afterwards; this was my last chance to feel normal for a long time.

I knew this day would come, but I didn’t want to allow myself to accept it. Denial meant this wasn’t real, that this wasn’t really happening. Denial meant there was hope. Dad had been fighting his illness for months; my family clung to the doctor’s last ditch efforts — the surgeries that didn’t improve anything — as if they were life preservers.

The news came on June 7, 2001, years before cell phones were as ubiquitous as they are now. I had a pager, a leftover from the previous decade; it was entirely useless unless you had a quarter for a nearby pay phone. I was asleep at my boyfriend’s house when the translucent blue case started to glow and vibrate. It was my mom, then my grandma, then an unknown number. I ignored it, because I knew what those flashing numbers really meant. I didn’t want to hear the truth of what was happening. An hour went by, and I heard a soft rap on the bedroom door.
“Christy, are you dressed?” It was Thomas’ roommate. “Your brother just called. Open the door.” I made my future husband answer. “Her dad just passed away,” I heard the roommate whisper to Thomas.

It took me several minutes to realize what he said. It was like when you cut yourself deeply with a large kitchen knife. The blood doesn’t start to fill the gash instantly. Instead the pain comes only moments later when your brain catches up to the physical. I couldn’t cry at first, shocked by those words. It was over. He was gone. A few minutes later, the tears burst, like a faucet with a broken handle. I couldn’t be consoled. I cried until my eyes burned. I knew that the moment I left the bedroom I would step out of that door as a different person. I never wanted to leave. I wanted to avoid the inevitable for as long as I could. So I had sex instead.
A Mile To Go

Small, loose rocks sprayed out from under my heels with each calf burning step. Tufts of weatherworn plants broke off in our hands with the faintest tug, which made gaining purchase on the steep slope impossible. Campers below us started to resemble small dogs, then ants, as we gained altitude. Then, they were gone. We were en route to Bonsai, a tricky off-trail Grand Canyon hike that only idiots or advanced hikers attempt. What was I doing hiking in the dead of summer through the desert? Couldn’t I just injure myself now, get rescued by a ruggedly handsome park ranger, and get it over with? No, you need to push through the pain to get to the fun part. No pain, no reward.

“I need to rest. I’m dizzy,” I told my brother Chris and our friend Tony. I felt like I was going to throw up the banana and coffee I had for breakfast. It was only ten in the morning yet the rust colored rocks were already hot to the touch. Why was I doing a desert hike in the dead of summer during the hottest part of the day? We checked the Phantom Ranch Campground thermometer before our ascent — 90 degrees Fahrenheit, but temperatures would most likely exceed 100 that day. Again, couldn’t I just injure myself now, get rescued by a ruggedly handsome park ranger, and get it over with?

We had at least three more hours to go. I was doing one of the hardest hikes I had ever done up until that point, questioning why I chose to push myself like this when I could have been sitting in the creek with a cold beer instead. Then I thought about my dad, and his year long
battle with cancer and the endless treatments, the uncertainty of whether he would live or die and what that must have been like for him. My temporary, voluntary discomfort was infinitesimally compared to that. I got up and pushed on.

Chris and Tony were Ranchers, employees of Phantom Ranch, a small compound at the bottom of the Grand Canyon comprised of cabins, a canteen, and a campground for weary adventurers. The only way to get to Phantom Ranch is to hike, ride a mule, or a Colorado River raft expedition. I’ve always used my own two feet and my brother did the same. We were close, both in age and otherwise, me being two years older. We had worked together, waiting tables for a few years. Where I went Chris would soon follow. We made a good team and knew how to work in tandem, just as we were now.

“Maybe you should eat,” Tony said.

“You need a break already? We just got started,” Chris added.

I balanced my butt on a jagged rock as I tried to catch my breath in a patch of shade created by a slight overhang. Tony asked me if I brought snacks. I had a bag of trail mix, two protein bars and a gallon of water in my backpack.

“You need quick-release carbs, not just protein,” Tony said.

“The longer we sit here, the hotter it’s going to get,” Chris said. “I made sandwiches for lunch. Do you want yours now?”

“No, I’ll need it later. I’ll just power through the beginning. Let’s go.”

***

The Grand Canyon has 400 miles of trails that twist and turn, drop and ascend via everything from switchbacks—steep zigzags carved into canyon walls—to long, exposed trails
with sparse cloud coverage. The Grand Canyon is an average of ten miles across from the South Rim to the North Rim. Each side is 7,000 and 8,000 feet above sea level, respectively. I could spend my entire life exploring the 277 miles that the Colorado River carved out from Lee’s Ferry to the Grand Wash Cliffs and still not experience the Canyon in its entirety. There are a billion years worth of geology lessons from the top of the Canyon to the bottom: Redwall Limestone, Bright Angel Shale, Kaibab Limestone, Coconino Sandstone, and Zoroaster Granite are all there.

Each day hordes of tourists get out of air conditioned cars, enjoy the leisurely train ride from Williams, Arizona to the National Park, or pile out of tour buses. In 2016 alone 5,969,811 travelers from Europe, Asia, Central America, and the United States stepped foot on the Grand Canyon’s South Rim. Most tourists stand on the rim for a few minutes, snap a few pictures, then head to the next point of interest; less than one percent of those nearly six million tourists make it down to Phantom Ranch; of that minute amount, even fewer venture off the National Park Service’s established trails. ¹ I always wanted to be part of that minute amount.

When we were kids, our family went to the Grand Canyon twice on summer vacation and stayed just long enough to stand on the rim and hike down a quarter of a mile before turning around and trudging back up. The desert landscape was a sharp contrast to the Louisiana swamps and bayous we grew up in. New Orleans is eight feet below sea level, but here on the South Rim we were so high up that, if we hiked to the bottom, we would be next to slabs of rock nearly as old as the Earth itself. After those trips, Chris and I fantasized about becoming park rangers when we grew up. Hiking to the bottom seemed about as likely as becoming an astronaut and

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¹ National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics Report
going to the moon, at least at the time, which made hiking to Phantom Ranch all the more appealing to us, including our dad.

***

We started our ascent at Phantom Ranch Campground, located next to Phantom Creek. We hiked away from the cool, cottonwood tree-lined creek to the alien terrain of Utah Flats. But first we had to scramble our way up to Piano Alley, named for boulders ranging in size from baby grands to toy pianos. From Piano Alley we would reach the Flats, then we would navigate Bonsai, a narrow ledge with sharp drop offs on either side. One misstep could send a person plummeting into the abyss; search and rescue teams might never recover the body. Once we completed the Bonsai, we would hop over more boulders and climb short rock walls to get to Phantom Canyon, a boulder-strewn slot canyon that would spit us out into Phantom Creek and take us back to Phantom Ranch, my home for the next two nights. I had been to Phantom Ranch several times before, each time doing short, moderate day hikes. There was the steep yet quick Sun Kiva, the relatively flat hike to Ribbon Falls and the ARZ (Alternate Route to Zoroaster). But I had yet to attempt the legendary Bonsai.

I learned about the Bonsai five years before hiking it. The year after our dad died, I hiked to Phantom Ranch. Right after the chemo stopped working and before the unsuccessful surgeries, Dad told us he wanted to hike to Phantom Ranch. He didn’t get the chance, so I did it for him a year after his death. Mom wanted Dad to wait until summer (she was a school teacher) so she could travel with him. He waited, but the only thing he saw that summer was a hospital room.

On that inaugural trip I hung out with experienced hikers and Ranchers as we socialized next to the fireplace. We did shots of the citrus vodka I brought with me, a gift for the Ranchers
for letting us stay in the bunkhouse with them. They sat around telling stories of off-trail hikes, which, to my novice hiker ears, sounded like impossible feats. Getting to the bottom of the Canyon was strenuous enough; going off-trail seemed like an impossible feat, like hiking to the moon. “Once you’ve done a Bonsai, that’s when you can say yes, I’ve hiked the Grand Canyon,” one of the more experienced hikers said. That was it. I wanted to do a Bonsai. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it but, more importantly, I wanted to take Dad on that hike with me.

The next morning I could barely make it out of the Canyon. Hungover, wearing inadequate shoes, a cheap pair of sneakers I picked up at Payless, not even able to carry my own backpack, I slogged up and out, one foot at a time, the merciless desert sun hitting the back of my uncovered neck. I knew heat, but this was a different heat than the humidity I grew up with, thick as syrup, the Louisiana air coating your lungs. The arid dryness of the Canyon left me parched, sweat evaporating from my skin as soon as the beads collected in the creases of my armpits. I had so much to learn on that inaugural trip. So much that I went back the next year and worked at the canyon for an entire summer, endless day hikes and conditioning myself for another hike to the bottom, this time it was difficult but not impossible. I was prepared. I was ready. The canyon had beat me into submission and I didn’t make the same mistakes that I made the first time.

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One of the rewards for the heart-pumping start of the route is Piano Alley. The massive rock slide forms mini crevasses that require hopping from boulder to boulder. It’s fun, if you’re into
that sort of thing, and it makes the time go by faster and serves as a distraction from the oppressive heat. Chris, Tony, and I shimmied our way to the top of the heap. I didn’t know how long ago the boulders tumbled down, but I tried not to think about the possibility of these stone masses moving. They could crush me instantly or worse, trap me underneath a rock pile just long enough to starve to death. Both scenarios were extremely unlikely yet not impossible.

Once the Alley narrows to the width of an elevator shaft you know you’re getting close to Utah Flats. Given my five foot one stature, Chris and Tony— both eight inches taller than I am— assisted with getting me up the last ledge. Tony went first, pulling his body up and over. Then I went, using Chris’ bent thigh as a step ladder as I latched on to Tony’s outreached hand.

After navigating the exposed rocky terrain of Piano Alley, we walked a quarter mile to a natural rock formation— a partially covered, open air temple. It was the one cool, shady respite on an otherwise exposed vast area. Tony found a tucked away stash of water bottles and a six-pack of Budweisers left behind by a fellow Rancher. Chris unpacked the ham and cheese sandwiches while Tony and I wiped a thin layer of red dust off the beer cans with our sweaty t-shirts. We savored the lukewarm suds as if we were quaffing champagne. After we ate, I slathered more sunscreen on my pink skin and tucked the remaining three beers back into their hiding spot for the next set of hikers.

The Flats are ochre and all exposed, which feels like walking on the surface of Mars. From this vantage point the Colorado River looks as wide as a two lane highway instead of its average ten lane width. To our left, Clear Creek Trail switchbacks carved pencil-thin zigzags up Zoroaster Temple. I stared down at the Colorado River. From this vantage point, details of the river drop out as the view goes from intimate to a grand and sweeping landscape. Five years ago, I buried one of Dad’s golf tees into the soft river bank. I wondered if it was still there.
“Look at that view,” Chris said, breaking the silence.

“It’s indescribable, really.” I said.

“I still can’t believe I’m lucky enough to live here.”

“I still can’t believe I’m lucky enough to visit.”

Aside from our voices, the only sound was the wind. The absence of noise made my ears ache as we paused to take in the view.

Peek inside a crevasse and you might see sun-bleached deer bones, picked clean by ravens, coyotes and time. Though the terrain was flat, walking across the Flats wasn’t easy. Barrel cactus spines pierced the toes of our boots if our eyes weren’t plastered to the ground. “ Fucking cactus,” became a slogan. The heat pounded our backs, making me feel sluggish. To make matters worse, Tony overshot the route, which meant backtracking and extending our walk several hundred feet. Finally, though, we found our way to Bonsai.

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Warning signs are posted all over the Canyon instructing visitors not to overexert themselves while hiking, especially in the dead of summer. But how do you know your limits in such seemingly limitless terrain? Between January 2006 and September 2016, one hundred and thirty people died at the Canyon. Many of those deaths were due to cardiac arrest, falling off the edge and missteps on the trails. ² From the rim, the Canyon looks like a painting. The mind gets overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the place and compresses the landscape to a flat, easier to comprehend visual. But hike down a little bit, even just a half-mile, and the Canyon reveals itself

2 https://www.outsideonline.com/2161406/10-most-deadly-national-parks
as a living, breathing entity, one that would have swallowed Dad whole had he attempted to hike it in the few last months of his life. Maybe he wouldn’t have made it to the bottom, or maybe he would have been stubborn like me and pushed his body to the limit to reach his goal. After all, this was a man who once gave himself his own stitches after cutting his hand (or was it a leg?) with an ax while chopping down trees on our property.

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The Bonsai gets its name from hikers running down Keyhole, a slope so steep there are only two ways to get down: run and yell “Bonsai” until you get to the bottom or wimp out and slide down on your butt. Either way, a pull of whisky from a flask helps get it done. The views of the Canyon near Bonsai are spectacular—instead of the red rocks on the Flats, the landscape changes to subtle, verdant slopes offset by rusty buttes in the distance. We stopped to take in the view while Tony whipped out his stainless steel flask and assessed the route. There, we would run down the razor thin path until we got to the bottom of the hill. Tony went first, running the entire way. Chris was next, then it was my turn. I tried to feign bravery by standing but my knees buckled when I looked down at the sharp drop on either side of me.

“Come on, you can do it,” Tony yelled.

“Okay, I’m coming,” I said. This was the hardest part of the hike, and I was trying my best to play it cool. Inside, I was freaking out.

*Where is that hot park ranger? Now would be a fine time for him to just randomly rappel down from the sky via helicopter and save my ass.*

I put one boot in front the other and crouched down to stabilize myself.
Yeah no. Hell no.

I plopped down on my butt and scooted like an infant discovering its feet for the first time.

“Just run and get it over with,” Chris yelled at me. I wanted to run like the boys, who were much more seasoned hikers than I was.

“Nah, I’m good.”

I’m not sure if I chose the safer option, but I was just glad to complete the task without ripping my pants or worse, tumbling into the abyss. I Bonsai-d like a baby and I was just fine with that. Besides, we weren’t done with the hike.

The creek lay just ahead, but we still had twenty minutes of scrambling to get there.

I propelled my body over the umpteenth rock wall, my left foot supported by a foothold the width of a deck of cards, when I heard the faintest rush of water. We continued stretching and compressing our bodies, inching our bodies over rocks like caterpillars. After hiking for three hours, we instinctually tapped handholds a few times to make sure the rocks didn’t give way underneath the weight of our fingers.

“Just remember, three points of contact at all times,” Chris said. I was trying to to navigate the particularly tricky path, and my five foot one inch frame wasn’t quite long enough to comfortably propel myself upwards. Using all parts of my body, I would press a thigh against rock, utilizing my strongest muscles to advance.

“You’re really good at this.”
“Thanks, I guess my height sometimes has its advantages. I can easily cram myself into small spaces.”

Any compliment from Chris also felt a compliment from my dad. Growing up, I always wanted to do the same activities that Dad and Chris did and we often did them together; he taught us how to water ski, we went fishing, and we both played baseball and softball (albeit badly).

We were about to drop into Phantom Canyon, the slot canyon that would take us back to the Ranch. These types of side canyons act as funnels during flash floods, taking everything in their path from animals, boulders, cactus and unassuming hikers. It’s best to avoid hiking in slot canyons during monsoon season, which we were smack in the middle of. We took a moment to change out of our hiking boots and into our sandals and then wade through the creek, alternating picking rocks out of our shoes and taking nips of whisky. The water varied in depths from ankle to chest deep as it careened through the canyon.

We came upon a natural rock slide, which dipped down into a four-foot pool below. For a moment Chris and I relived childhood: the carefree moments we shared long before dad got sick, long before Hurricane Katrina pushed us out of our homes, long before we both ended up living in Arizona. When we were teenagers we used to water ski every summer. Dad taught and the whole family was damn good on a set of skis. Chris and I would wait for the boat to pull us up and out of the water, skis strapped to our feet, hands gripping the foam handlebar attached to a rope. We would cross under each other’s ropes and lean hard in the opposite direction in order to cross the wake, that V-shaped wedge of waves the boat spits out. We would cut across, into the smooth water and try to get parallel with the boat. We often did, which got a thumbs up from
Dad and a look of terror from Mom. Then, we’d cut back across hard and fast, crossing under each other’s ropes again while trying to get as much air as possible. When we grew tired of this dance we would release the handlebar from our grip and glide for as long as we could, until the momentum was gone. We’d gently sink into the water and wait for Dad to turn around the boat to collect us.

We slid down that rock slide over and over again; the cool creek water invigorated us and gave us a renewed sense of energy. Tony watched as Chris went down the slide again, then frantically emerged from the water.

“Shit, shit, SHIT.” He popped out the water and started beating his shorts with the back of his hand.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Tony asked.

“The rocks are covered in larvae. Or maybe it’s frog eggs.” Chris said. He furiously removed clear slime balls the size of peas from his backside. I cracked up laughing, then quickly realized my bum was covered with them too and worse, I was standing atop the slide and had to go through the muck one more time to get down. Meanwhile, thunder rumbled in the distance and the blue sky turned milky white. “Shit,” Chris said. “We need to hurry there’s no way of telling when the creek will flash flood. We’ll be fine, I thought to myself while also thinking of Dad, even though we had over a mile left to go. A slight summer breeze rustled the sun-baked detritus and algae shimmered on the water, just like the green duckweed in the swamp that we paddled over time and time again in our dad’s boat back home in Louisiana.

Three times a week I have to walk past three bars, two coffeeshops, one corner store and over fourteen restaurants on the twelve minute walk to my neighborhood gym. It’s no wonder losing weight is hard work. High calorie, high fat, sugar laden foods are the most accessible choices while healthy food— truly healthy food, not just marketed as such— is the exception, not the norm. On the opposite end of the spectrum is clean eating, which is just as extreme as living on junk food. Anyone with an Instagram account sees açai berry smoothies and greenchiaspirulinabonebroth drinks clogging their feeds. The thought of strictly adhering to a raw, dairy-free, grain-free diet sends me running to a bag of potato chips, and I don’t even like chips. Eating an overly restrictive diet isn’t sustainable and can also trigger eating disorders. There’s got to be a middle ground, right? It’s called being sensible, but American culture doesn’t celebrate sensible choices. We love extremes. We watch hot-dog eating competitions and cheer on Biggest Loser contestants as they desperately try to lose weight. Women blessed with good genes and lithe bodies litter everything from fashion magazines to yogurt ads. In contrast, women with impossible curves, “skinny thicc” women like the Kardashians are acceptable so long as their curves are in the right places. If you have a stomach or unshapely arms then forget
it. It’s no wonder it’s so hard to make the right choice for our bodies when we’re sent such mixed signals. Have a thin body or have a thick, perfectly toned body, but you can’t be anywhere in the middle.

A *New York Times* article I read about losing weight in the anti-dieting age resulted in my delving into the heated debate of whether losing weight is feminist. I wondered if you can be body positive while trying to change your own body. For every essay that gives an emphatic yes, there is another that gives an emphatic no. Our society-at-large still thinks thin is in, and we should say to hell with that. But we also have to live in this society; it’s near impossible to keep the blinders on. In our oversharing culture, a gym selfie could be perceived as #fitspiration fodder. But if you don’t share that you’re working your ass off to change your body, you could be accused of pretending like this shit is easy. It doesn’t matter what size you are, you’re still going to not be happy if you can’t accept your body for what it is. I’ve decided that I can still change my body and be a modern, feminist woman. I am making choices to appease me, not someone else. A woman in (healthy) control of herself is a powerful one. Besides, it’s my body and I’m the only one that has to live in it.

I only cared about whether weight loss is feminist after I had already lost fifteen pounds and started to feel better about my body. Because that’s another thing women do— we aren’t satisfied with just accomplishing one thing, we have to make sure that our accomplishment is done in a way that others deem appropriate. These are things that littered my brain before I found out I had cancer.

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I was at my lowest point when my weight hit an all-time high. I was 36 years old, earning the lowest wage I made in a decade. At this point in my life I was three years away from my cancer diagnosis. I had no symptoms and my only concern was how I would break out of waitressing and get a “grown up job.” I had just graduated with two bachelors degrees and secured a year-long fellowship with the largest local newspaper in town managing the online events calendar and writing home & garden and arts & entertainment features. After years of bouncing from waitress to retail manager to waitress once again, my full-time working writer dream was coming true. I already had some success as a freelancer, so why not? That success was the impetus for going back to school, and securing this temporary job felt like a step in the right direction. I needed the experience and connections, and I hoped my fellowship would turn into a more lucrative, permanent position. In the meantime, I kept the weekend waitressing gig I had while in school, which meant I worked six to seven days a week. I worked for the paper Monday thru Friday. I was doing it! I was a full-time writer. But I made more money waiting tables in two or three shifts than I did working 40 hours a week at my “professional job,” which turned out to be a total mind fuck.

My husband assured me that it is tough to switch careers and reminded me I was starting from the bottom, so I tried to tell myself that every time I walked into the newsroom. I was surrounded by people the same age as me, if not younger, who were real reporters. I convinced myself that everyone was judging me for being a paid intern at my age. In hindsight I don’t think anyone thought much about my job title. Still, it was depressing to be a grown ass woman making such little money. Relying on my husband financially felt like a step backwards.

So I ate.
I ate my feelings away.

I hit the newsroom’s bottomless candy jar, full of bite-sized treats, multiple times a day—the equivalent of a full-size candy bar a day. If there were doughnuts, which there frequently were, I would grab one then go back for another later. When I wasn’t in the newsroom, I worked from home. I set my own schedule. At first the flexibility was appealing; I had never worked from home in this capacity before. At first it was great to have autonomy and control of my schedule but I started to feel lonely. If I couldn’t find clothes that fit, which happened with increasing frequency, it set a negative tone for the rest of the day. I would lie in bed until noon in my dark bedroom, filled with existential dread about how I wasn’t a real reporter and how silly I felt some days, at my age, working a job meant for people 10-15 years younger than me. My life lacked structure in all facets and my goals felt unattainable. I can’t help but wonder if that period in my life contributed to my cancer. My oncologist assured me that, given my family history, my cancer was “a time bomb waiting to go off.” Still, I wonder if I hadn’t let myself go if I could have avoided The Big C.

I quickly gained even more weight when I quit my waitressing gig. Waitressing kept me upright and running around a dining room for six hour shifts. It was the only exercise I got. While the extra money was nice, my husband and I could afford for me to not mentally and physically drain myself. So I quit, and that was when my body really started to degrade. I fell into a depression, wondering what was next for me. With my fellowship as my sole source of income I had more time to think about how few lucrative media jobs were out there. My back ached from lying in bed for too long. My soft mid-section got even softer. My muscles atrophied.

That November I broke down and bought pants that were two sizes larger so I could stop beating myself up about not having clothes that fit. When those got tight, I switched to flowy
tunics and leggings. I tried to accept my body for what it was, taking inspiration from women like Tess Holiday and Nicolette Mason, popular plus-sized models and bloggers in the fat-acceptance and body-positivity movements. They were beacons of positivity that exuded self-confidence despite what society has to say about their plus-size figures. But I wasn’t plus-size. My BMI put me one point into the “overweight” range. You can either be big (within reason, and you better be curvy in all the right places) or you can be thin. I was neither of those and I was miserable.

When my year-long fellowship came to an end I stayed on as a freelance writer; a permanent position wasn’t available and I couldn’t find meaningful work with another company. That same month I was assigned to write a story about a woman that lost 76 pounds on Weight Watchers. She got to meet Oprah and star in a Weight Watchers commercial as a result. Because yes, when women lose weight it is newsworthy. I went into the interview with preconceived ideas that Weight Watchers was outdated, it was for women that wanted to lose weight to fit the mold of what society says we should look like. But my interviewee proved me wrong. We talked about her struggles taking caring of herself. She was a lovely person, a full-time working mom taking care of her sick mother and niece when her husband lost his job. "I didn't care what I was doing to myself because I was the last person I was worried about.” Her words resonated with me. I wasn’t concerned about my body because I was consumed with my career instability. Meanwhile, my body was making me miserable and exacerbating my declining mental health. I felt like I had zero control over anything. As the interview went on, I decided to check out Weight Watchers for myself when I got home. "If you're not healthy for yourself then you can't be there for other people," she said in the interview.
I started Weight Watchers in March, two weeks after Mardi Gras, opting to do an online only version of the program. It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t impossible. At first I chose to just familiarize myself with the program—exercising could come later. My interviewee mentioned she treated the program like a job, and that’s what I did. I took it seriously, logging all my food every day. Instead of counting calories, assigned food points based on fat, protein, calories and sugar. The program is designed to encourage you to eat fresh fruits and vegetables but unlike in clean eating, paleo diets, or other overly restrictive lifestyles, you can eat whatever you want. A slice of pizza? Sure. An occasional cheeseburger? Why not? The catch is you have to hold yourself accountable. I got a certain amount of points to “spend” each day, like balancing a bank account except it’s food.

I started with diet modification and the exercise followed. I inched my way towards running and strength training, working my way up from ten, to twenty-five, then thirty-pound dumbbells. After just eight months I had more energy and was the most physically fit that I had ever been in my life. I went to the gym three times a week. I didn’t get winded walking up a flight of stairs. I dropped five inches from my waist. I few months later I was able to carry a collective forty-pounds of dog food, cat food, and kitty litter. My physical fitness was not only boosting my confidence but saving me time lugging groceries from the car to the front door.

I was mentally better. Getting dressed in the morning no longer triggered an all-day funk. Still, I wasn’t perfect. I found myself continuing to push myself and comparing myself to others. If a woman who could bounce quarters off her ass walked into the gym, I suddenly felt like a slob. But the thought would pass. Those feelings of inferiority wouldn’t consume me, and I was able to recognize that level of self scrutiny and comparison wasn’t healthy. It didn’t matter what
size I was. If I don’t accept that version of myself as being perfectly fine, then what was the point?

Now that I established healthier eating habits, I learned that I was consuming double and sometimes triple of what I should have been eating. I ate before meeting friends at a bar in order to resist having cheese fries for dinner. Instead of having two glasses of wine a night, I learned how to be satisfied with an occasional glass. Even though I still felt like I didn’t have control over my career quite yet, at least I felt in control of my health.

I was never quite sure what gave me the motivation to suddenly get fit. It had come in a wave of desperation, yes, but I suspected something bigger was driving my decision but I wasn’t sure what that bigger thing was quite yet. I wanted to slide into my forties in the epitome of health. I set a goal to win a 5K race for my age division by the time I turned 50. In hindsight, the hard work I put into my body and improving my mental state was prep work for cancer. It was as if, unknowingly, I was preparing to fight for my life. I was getting ready to undergo the battery of tests and treatments that would threaten to break down my body.

Prior to my cancer diagnosis, I was sweating small details that no one would pay much mind to. I had a glute imbalance (read: one butt cheek was bigger than the other), which bothered me. Once I noticed it I started trying to correct it by lifting more weight and isolating the smaller glutei to even out both sides. Looking back, I was pushed myself so hard to see how far I could go, see how much I could achieve instead of just enjoying the process. I enjoyed running and lifting weights but I was so goal oriented that I sometimes couldn’t see the amount of progress that I made.

Many cancer patients feel betrayed by their bodies when they get sick. I don’t know if I felt betrayed but there was a sense of disconnect between how I felt and my reality. Throughout
treatment I maintained that I was a healthy person who just happened to have cancer, which best reflected my approach to treatment. My oncologist told me, given my family history, that cancer was “a time bomb” waiting to go off—no amount of diet or exercise modification would have changed my outcome. Still, I couldn’t help but look at it and wonder how in the hell this happened, especially when I was at the peak shape of my life.

I looked back at a picture I took the previous summer, arms flexed, posed. Muscles bulging, muscles I never knew I had. Now I couldn’t lift more than twenty pounds, the port in my chest not being able to take the strain of any more weight than that.
Bras are worn by the majority of women in the U.S., yet an astounding eighty percent of us wear the wrong size. There are a few reasons for that. Fluctuation in weight, hormones, menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and aging all play a part in why breasts wax and wane. And, just like clothing, bra sizes can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer and style to style, making the bra buying experience that much more daunting. There are demi bras, full coverage bras, backless bras, T-shirt bras, minimizing bras, pushup bras. There are even bras that aren’t bras at all—think a cross between a gel chicken cutlet and a pasty and you get the idea.

Up until about two years ago I had worn the same size bra since eighth grade. That’s nearly twenty-five years of consistently purchasing the same damn bra over and over again. When the elastic started to stretch out, leaving me in need of a little more support, I would just buy another bra, always on the cheap, and not have to think about whether or not the thing would fit, which provided a sense of stability. My bras didn’t require maintenance, unlike the hand-me-down Delta ’88 Oldsmobile my parents gave me after high school. My bras held me up when I needed it the most, unlike a string of questionable love interests in my early 20s. And, for the most part, my bras enhanced my looks, unlike a slew of unfortunate hairstyles I experimented with. I could walk into a store and know which bras would fit, which gave me the sense that I had my shit together.

About once every ten years, just to make sure I was still wearing the correct size, I would stroll into a lingerie store and ask for a fitting. When the salesperson confirmed what I already knew, I would puff my chest out, proud that I was in the twenty percent of women who know the
size they’re supposed to be wearing. Then I would hit the clearance rack, find a selection of over the shoulder boulder holders in the size I walked in wearing, and I would strut out of the store feeling like a bosom boss.

I felt self assured about my size until I started to gain a noticeable amount of weight over a two-year period thanks, in equal parts to too much pizza and beer and falling into a depression from a dead end job as a features writer at my local newspaper. My metabolism started reminding me that I was smack dab in the middle of my 30s and, to make matters worse, I was confined to a desk for the first time. The most physical activity I had was walking to the bottomless candy bowl to fish out a fun size chocolate or six. Having just graduated college at 35, I was working as a paid intern, a position created after the paper laid off permanent staff. Morale wasn’t good and part of me felt guilty even taking the position in the first place, and a big part of me felt humiliated that here I was, 35 years old, working a position meant for someone who was just old enough to legally drink. I tried to convince myself that “everyone has to start somewhere” as I transitioned from years spent waiting tables and working a retail job to covering the home & garden section.

I gained weight and my boobs started swelling up. My cups ran over, so I loosened my bra straps to accommodate my now overripe cantaloupes. When I wasn’t in the office I worked from home, sometimes lying in bed until noon, too depressed to even step outside to get the mail. Things slowly got better for me though. I applied for grad school and got in. I stopped treating my body like a dumpster and started to make healthier choices. I dusted off my gym membership and started exercising regularly. I transitioned into freelance work and began waiting tables again for the umpteenth time, which proved to be a healthy balance of using my degree and a more physically demanding job. I slowly lost the weight and plus some, fitting into
a clothing size I hadn’t worn since high school. Everything shrank, including my breasts, which went from small melons to ripe apples, the fruit bobbing around in a barrel instead of sitting in there nice and snug. I told myself that my bras were probably just stretched out, or maybe I needed to go down a band size, not taking into account that the circumference of my ribs didn’t change. My boobs left me befuddled, like I had just got out of a long term relationship. Wait, now I have to date again? I needed the Tinder equivalent for bras. It was time to get fitted again.

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Every few years I get the idea in my head that splurging on luxurious underpinnings would be the most decadent, self-indulgent thing I could do. I never actually go through with the purchase, but now that I desperately needed to get refitted I was ready to swipe right on an opulent bra. I went to a posh lingerie boutique near my house that offered complimentary fittings. As a person with breasts, I assumed this qualified me to become a customer there so I threw on a dress, swiped some lipstick over my usually bare lips, and drove the two and half miles from my house to the store.

The window mannequins were styled to lure in a certain type of woman and that woman was definitely not me. Decked out in garter belts and feather boas, these inanimate ladies were sumptuous, a fantasy of feminine sexuality with lacy bits worth more than my used Honda covering their plastic nether-regions. *The woman who buys lingerie like that holds herself in high regard and is in control of her life, I thought. I can be that woman. I am worth all this delicate lace and I might even be worth the matching frilly knickers.* I pushed open the heavily polished wooden door and was transported into a bougie bosom wonderland. This wasn’t the
clearance rack cleavage I was accustomed to and, quite frankly, I was pretty overwhelmed. It was a weekday and I was the only customer in the store. I had every intent of being fitted that afternoon, but I was way out of my league and being the sole shopper exacerbated that feeling.

The shop girl peered from up behind a computer screen, perched behind a mahogany fortress of a cash wrap. She greeted me, not bothering to get up. “Hi. Let me know if you need anything.”

I imagined a conversation with her would go like this:

“Excuse me, I need to get fitted for a bra. Can you measure me?” I would say as she stared at my chest.

Then she would say, “Let me get this straight. You really want me to stop taking this “Which ‘Game of Thrones’ Character Are You?” quiz to get intimate with your nipples?”

And then I would say, “Well, yes.”

So instead of all that I replied, “Thanks. I’m just browsing.”

I wandered the racks in silence, my fingertips grazing bras that cost more than a bottle of real champagne, not the cheap bubbly I picked up at the grocery store. The bras were like works of art. There were velvet pieces with exquisite pin-tucking at the cups, the kinds of details that would delight its wearer underneath a business casual dress or underneath nothing at all. These bras were for women who drove nice cars and had jobs with expense accounts. These were bras that would impress men who drove nice cars and had jobs with expense accounts, yet these women didn’t need to impress anyone but themselves. They were in complete power over their sexuality and chose to mask their sexiness or wear it full-throttle. Or maybe they just appreciated beautiful things.
I strolled past the marabou feathers, the corsets, and the satin sets and would occasionally stop and feign interest in a piece, discreetly searching for a price tag. Even if I wanted to take the plunge on fanciful undergarments, these pieces weren’t for me. I’m pragmatic to a fault. Fancy lace looks like lumpy oatmeal under a t-shirt. Delicate fabrics can’t be thrown in the washing machine. Give me good ol’ cotton, hold the bows. I couldn’t be this woman. It wasn’t in me, even if I tried. Once I came to my senses I hightailed it out the door. The shop girl didn’t even bother to tell me goodbye.

A few weeks later I went back to the bastion of cheap, ill-fitting bras— the lingerie section at Target, determined to figure out what size I now was on my own. I must be a smaller band size, I told myself. I had worn the same cup size since high school, and it was a pretty good cup size. Not big enough to require a tourniquet when running, but big enough to be a size that women request when getting implants. Target’s lingerie section consisted of racks of flimsy bras in an assortment of colors, sizes, and styles, each one squashed to the next on plastic hangars with a color coded size marker. I picked out a leopard print bra in one band size smaller than anything I had at home. I was okay with going down a band size. No one brags about their band size and besides, at least it was cheap. I chucked my purchase in my red shopping cart along with my two-ply toilet paper, kitty litter, and pancake mix and headed for the checkout line.

Instead of subjecting myself to the garish fluorescent lighting and stale diaper smells of the Target dressing room, I opted to buy the bra and try it on in the comfort of my own home. It was cute and the price was right. It didn’t quite fit but that didn’t deter me from trying to make it fit, which reminded me of a conversation I overheard at a clothing store I worked out at a few years ago. A customer wanted to try a shirt on but wasn’t sure it would fit over her ample breasts when another customer jumped in.
“Baby, does it have stretch?” customer A asked about the shirt.

“A little, but not enough.”

“Well, you can make it fit! Titties move.”

She was right. Titties do move. I jammed the girls into the too tight bra and chalked up the fit to my being used to wearing stretched out, saggy bras. The plastic clasp shattered the second I snapped it in place. *That’s what I get for buying a cheap bra,* I told myself. I didn’t even entertain the notion that I bought the wrong size. I decided an $11 refund wasn’t worth the gas money or the twenty-minute drive back to the store. I chucked the bra in the trash but there I was, back in Target a few weeks later to buy another garbage bra, this time in fuchsia in the same size, this time with an adjustable back clasp. After I picked up the groceries and stocked away my new towels, I pulled and prodded and rearranged my lady mounds to coax them into the band of my new bra.

I wore the bra for a few months while I was settling into a new job. I regressed on the career front but I was, dare I say it, happier. I started freelancing and went back to waiting tables to cover the difference while I waited to start graduate school a few months later. I felt liberated and finally excited for the possibilities and fresh start that grad school promised. My nipples, on the other hand, breathed sweet relief every night after being squashed down like nubby little pencil erasers, springing back to life as soon as I released them from their fuchsia vice-grip.

Wearing an ill-fitting bra is akin to learning how to suffer through a tooth ache to avoid getting dental work. You tell yourself that it isn’t all that bad. Suffering makes you humble. Enduring pain makes you stronger, right? I had pains in my breasts and red marks on my back, like someone had taken a cat o’ nine tails to my skin. Imagine going through your day in self imposed chronic pain, knowing that as soon as you get home you can stop being
uncomfortable simply by removing your titty torture device. It was time to admit it to myself—these new bras were not working out.

I was determined as ever to figure out my size, so I gave yet another fancy bra store a shot. This time, I was a woman on a mammary mission—get measured or else. I had been to this particular store once years before, when I sprung for a $30 bra, which was the most I had ever spent on one. I still remembered how great of a shopping experience I had, so I decided to try my luck again. This store was different from the opulent, Dita Von Teese-might-live-here vibe of the frou frou boutique. This store was upscale yet scaled back. The sales floor was bright and the bras hung from waterfall racks, beckoning shoppers to behold their superior support capabilities. Women with expensive haircuts and designer handbags large enough to park their luxury cars in were casually shopping. If anyone knew what her bra size is, it was one of these women. The sales woman immediately approached me, woman to woman, on the sales floor.

“Can I help you with anything?”

I stood out a little. I was the only person in the store with visible tattoos and I was sporting a backpack since I pulled up on my bike instead of driving. Hey, I didn’t want to feed the meter a lousy two dollars to park my car on the street.

“Yes, I recently lost some weight and my bras don’t fit me anymore. I need to get remeasured.”

“Alright. Come with me.” She led me to the dressing room while asking me questions about what size I was currently wearing.

“Well, I’ve been a 34C since high school, but since I lost weight I bought 32Cs. They’re too tight though.”
She nodded and took my measurements, reaching for me as if she was about to embrace me in a bear hug. Instead, she instructed me to lift up my arms as she passed the tape measure under them. First she measured my band size, the area right below my breasts and above my ribcage. Then, she took the measuring tape and hovered it above my nipples. I could see her doing mental math as I awaited my fate.

“34 B.”

I gave her a nonchalant response as I processed that number and letter combo.

“Okay, cool.”

Thirty. *Okay, fine.*

Four. *Alright.*

**B. Oh my god, this can’t be happening.**

There was nothing cool about this but I went along with her.

“Are you looking for any bras in particular?” She asked.

“Yes, an everyday bra, no lace or frills. Something I can wear underneath a t-shirt. I don’t wear push ups but I do want something lightly lined.” I might not have known my size anymore but I did know what I did and didn’t like. I didn’t want to be coerced into expensive French lace.

As we walked over to the wall o’ bras I wanted her to commiserate with me, to tell me it’s okay, that I was the same woman I’ve always been. But the saleswoman was there to sell me a bra, not play therapist and hear me whine about my tiny titty travails. She plucked a nude colored option from the wall.

“Let’s start with this,” she said as she handed it to me. I walked back to the dressing room, still mentally processing my new size.

Thirty. *It’s just a number.*
Four. *Who cares, they’re still proportionate to my body.*

B. *Rest in peace, C cups. You are gone yet not forgotten.*

I balked at the $65 price tag, but when I put the bra on in the dressing room there was no way I was leaving the store without it. How can you go back to driving a used Honda after test driving a brand new Mercedes? The material was soft and supple with the right amount of give. The band hugged and supported, gently contouring to my body instead of pinching it. The underwire gave a subtle lift. This bra was the equivalent of running a little mascara over your eyelashes in the morning before heading out the door. I instantly felt like a perkier, better version of myself.

“Well, how does it fit?” the sales woman asked from the other side of the curtain. I opened the fitting room curtain and showed her. She eyed me up and ran her index finger under the band, then had me turn around to see how it fit in the back.

“It’s a perfect fit,” she said.

“Yes. Yes it is. I’ll take it.”

I slid my debit card across the sales counter and walked out of the store with a longer stride and a straighter back than when I first walked in. Finally, sweet relief. I could have bought an entire bra wardrobe at Target for that price but this, this was an investment. *I AM worth it,* I told myself. Now I had to ditch my old, busted ass bras. I had to start fresh.

That night, I poured myself a glass of wine (okay, more like half a bottle), cracked open my laptop and hit those good ol’ online clearance sales. I even allowed myself to indulge in two new sports bras and a medium-fancy, no frills matching set. When the damage was done I had spent more on bras in one sitting than I had spent in the entire last year alone but I was worth it.
I sent all of my old, ill-fitting bras that were still in good condition to the thrift store. The ones that were too faded, sweat stained or had dagger-like underwires poking out went straight into the trash, just like the too small broken leopard print one. Getting rid of them was cathartic. I felt lighter, more confident and looked forward to wearing a new one each day instead of dreading which inadequate contraption I would strap to my chest. There was the black deep-V bra with mesh insets, the one with striking gold hardware, a mustard yellow bralette for the days I didn’t feel like wearing an actual bra, and my new sports bras that kept my jugs locked and loaded at the gym.

No one will be requesting my cup size at their plastic surgeon’s office any time soon, but there are perks to having a smaller, perkier set. I can run and not have my boobs slap me in the face. The girls have stopped feeling like overinflated basketballs once a month. And there are visible perks as well. I don’t get the dreaded button down shirt gap— the chest button clinging for dear life like a pebble caught between two boulders. I can go braless in certain clothes and not feel like everything is on display. And honestly, no one cared which size bra I was wearing but me.
Letters to Friends and Family

June 19, 2018

I’m on steroids to keep the swelling in my brain down, which prevents me from having another seizure. I’m starting to feel like my body is not my own thanks to the endless poking and prodding. I’ve had more blood work done in the past few days than I’ve had in my entire lifetime. So far I’ve had three CT scans and two MRIs. I get blood drawn several times a day, I get steroids twice a day, pills (they call them tablets in Ireland) for all sorts of things, and my vitals are checked so many times that I’ve lost count. I’m mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted. The dye they run through my veins for tests depletes me and it hurts when they pump it through my stint. At least I ate today; the good thing about having to fast for tests is that I finally had an appetite for the first time since I was admitted to the hospital. I was so happy to eat dry ass chicken nuggets with no sauce for dinner tonight. I also took a nap; today was the first time I got more than a sliver of sleep.

Let’s cut to the chase. The doctor thinks it’s most likely a brain tumor, which means brain surgery is in my very near future. How I went from walking eight miles a day in Cork last weekend to needing brain surgery now is incomprehensible. I had zero symptoms and was completely blindsided by this, but could you imagine if I had a seizure while driving to work back home? The good news is that if it is a tumor it’s small, isolated and would be relatively easy to remove. Did you know they can just scoop tumors out like ice cream? Did you know that "jelly and ice cream" in Ireland means jello served with ice cream? Yeah, wtf.
June 21, 2018

Hi.
I don't know if it's because I am tired of being in the hospital, if it's the steroids, or if it's just, I dunno, dealing with tumors and facing my own mortality, but the women in my room are growing increasingly insufferable to me. Someone was listening to music on her phone last night around 2 a.m. and I couldn't fall asleep. I can't wait to get out of the hospital. Another one needs breathing treatments and the nurses are in and out of the room all night. I am so tired of the lack of privacy. Even sharing details about my body to y'all feels invasive. The doctor has seen my mental health decrease and he agrees that I need to get out of here. When my friend came to visit we walked over a bridge and sat by the river. It felt odd to be out in the world, like I didn't belong there, like I'm not a person anymore. Still, that visit did me good. I was glad we went on a little walk, even if it left me winded. And out of pure spite and pettiness, damn it I will get better. I need to get better because I still need to kick Thomas' ass in another 5k run.

June 26, 2018

I am starting chemo on August 7. Here is what I know so far:
• I will get a port. A port is basically a tube inserted in the chest (pure sexiness) so the nurses can administer the chemotherapy drugs without collapsing my veins. The port situation frightens me. My dad had a port. This is getting too real.

• I am getting this port the day before my gamma radiation surgery, which will zap any remaining cancer cells that brain surgery didn’t scoop out.

• I will have to wear a chemo pump three days a week. This will require me to go to the hospital every other Monday and get hooked up to a chemo drip for two hours. I will carry my pump in a glorified fanny pack and have it removed on Wednesdays. I will only have to wear the fanny pack to campus on Tuesdays. If a hipster undergrad compliments me on my fanny pack I might literally and figuratively lose my shit on them.

• I will lose my hair.

• I am fucking petrified of chemotherapy.

June 28, 2018

Hi,

Let's start with the good. I'm back home in New Orleans. Thomas’s and my last two days in Ireland were downright lovely. We caught the bus to the beach and a stranger in the most perfect green Mini Cooper with tweed seats offered us a ride to Crosshaven, a fishing village we were trying to get to. There was even a picnic basket in the back seat! It felt like a moment plucked right out of a movie. I took a lot of photos with my Canon that day; I’m looking forward to going through those photos soon.
Our flight back home was good. The health insurance company hooked us up with preferred seating, which is a step below first class. We had a full, actual cooked meal in lieu of glorified Lean Cuisine and got snacks on snacks on snacks. It felt civilized, like we were real adults or something. Being back in New Orleans is surreal. Last night I walked into the house and I felt like I was stepping into someone else's home, into someone else's life that isn't mine. I felt like I was in a dream state, not sure if things were real or fake. (The lack of sleep didn't help.)

Love,

Christy
My Mother’s Coat

The coat hung in my mother’s closet for years. She finally gave it to me one day, not because she thought I needed warmth but because she was downsizing and didn’t want to hold on to the relic. It was camel colored, with a wide, unmistakable 1970s collar, leather-covered brown buttons and oversized exterior pockets with faux flaps. The goldenrod lining started to deteriorate underneath the armpits but the coat was otherwise intact. It was perfect until I almost got robbed.

I was walking to work at a brisk pace while wearing my mother’s coat when he tried to steal my purse. I hated my waitressing job and I was deeply mourning the loss of my dad. I never took the time off work to properly mourn his death; dealing with customers on a daily basis provided no respite. I had to always be on; diners don’t care about your daily life, they just want their filet mignon and scotch on the rocks served in a timely manner.

It was broad daylight on a street I had walked countless times. My hands were shoved deep into my wool pockets and my small thrift store purse dangled off my wrist. I was often in a bad mood when I walked to work and I was always in attack mode.

“Help,” I screamed, over and over again. I looked over his shoulder, searching for anyone who could come to my aid. There was no one, so I screamed louder and fought harder. I made eye contact with him, as if to force him to consider that I was human, just like him.

“Bitch,” he said.

He finally let go.

The whole incident cost me about sixty seconds of my time. I was frightened, but I was also angry. He didn’t get my purse, but he did rip the pocket clean off my mother’s coat.
I didn’t tell my mother about the incident until almost 15 years later. At the time, I didn’t want to hear “I told you so.” I didn’t want her to ask why I was walking alone in the French Quarter. I did it every day out of necessity and stubbornness. Why should I be required to not walk alone? The guys did it all the time. I wasn’t going to let fear rule my life; I wasn’t going to allow fear to hold me back in life, but I didn’t mention the incident to her out of fear of what she might say. Besides, she didn’t want the coat anymore and once she got rid of things she pushed them out her house and out of her mind.

I had the coat repaired immediately after the incident, but not because I thought my mother would find out. I truly enjoyed wearing it and I needed something stylish and warm. “This is a beautiful coat. It’s so well made,” the seamstress told me as she inspected the damage.

“I know. It was my mother’s.”

“You don’t see work of this quality anymore,” she said.

The sturdy leather buttons started falling off not long after I had the pocket repaired. I replaced them with inexpensive plastic ones, the only thing I could afford on my meager waitress income. I sewed them on myself, forcing the needle through layers of wool and backing, far too thick for my flimsy needle. Eventually the plastic buttons popped off as well, then the other pocket ripped from age. Oh well, I thought. The coat didn’t fit anymore anyway but I didn’t have the heart to get rid of it. I stored it in the closet for years, until one day it fit again.

When I pulled it back out, I forgot that it still had the original matching scarf. The tailoring was superb but the wool wasn’t as sumptuous as I remembered it. The fabric was stiff, maybe from age. Or maybe it was always just a stiff coat; it was scratchy, clearly a coat you would find at a good ol’ suburban department store. But I planned on having it repaired now that I could fit into it again. What made it so special, aside from belonging to my mother, was that
even though it was once a common department store find, the passing of time made the coat a unique vintage find.

Just this year, I finally got the courage to ask my mother if she remembered the last time she wore the coat. I told her I still had it. She seemed surprised but also not sentimental about it at all.

“Did I ever tell you about the time someone tried to rob me while I was wearing it?”

“Christy— no!”

“Well, I fought him and won.” I explained how he ripped the coat and I had it repaired. I told her how I had replaced all the buttons but they fell off, and how I planned on replacing them again and getting the coat repaired once more.

“It’s probably not even worth the cost,” she said.

She was right, but I still wanted to have it fixed. I wanted to be able to wear it that winter.

“Do you remember the last time you wore it?”

She vaguely recalled wearing it in high school but she couldn’t picture it in her head. She did remember another coat, one Dad bought for her shortly after they got married. I remembered it as well. It was floor length pigskin with a plush faux fur collar, the type of thing that looked more luxurious than it actually was. It was very 1970s as well, and as the trends changed she grew tired of that coat taking up closet space so she got rid of it as well.

But she did not remember when she wore my coat.
Well-Healed

What a strange power there is in clothing. — Isaac Bashevis Singer

June 2018— My socks and sneakers made me feel human again. They were marbled blue socks with two pink stripes at the top, which matched my pale pink sneakers. I spent that weekend in a non-profit Irish hospital without basic provisions; the facility did not provide toiletries for its patients. I wasn’t planning on packing a tooth brush and toothpaste, let alone a spare set of socks, when I left student housing that Saturday to grab a bite to eat and take in a play. I was in Ireland for two days, fulfilling my job duties by helping coordinate my college’s study abroad program in Ireland. I arrived a few days prior to the start of the program and, when the program ended a month later, my husband was supposed to fly out to meet me so we could enjoy a nine-day tour of the country that I meticulously planned. We were to start in Cork, my home base for the summer, then drive to Killarney National Park for some hiking, then make our way to west to Galway, and to sleep on the beaches of Inis Mor, an island just off the mainland. Then, we would head back east across the country to Dublin, sleep on another beach just outside the city, then catch a flight back home to New Orleans.

My plans were foiled when I landed in the emergency room that Saturday afternoon thanks to a seizure, the first one I had in my life. I wasn’t planning on that, and I certainly wasn’t planning on finding out a few days later that not only did I have a malignant brain tumor, which caused the seizure, but I also had colorectal cancer. So when my boss dropped off some soap,
shampoo and a fresh set of socks after I went two days without a proper shower, a sliver of humanity was restored to me.

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Aside from running shoes, my Adidas Samoas were the first sneakers I purchased in decades. I was shopping for comfortable shoes for my upcoming Ireland trip when I spotted the pristine, pale pink suede Adidas at a secondhand clothing store. I had been to Ireland once before in 2015 and remembered that most of the shoes I brought caused me great pain. There was a pair of muted gold oxfords that were perfectly fine until I hit the five-mile mark. I brought a pair of boots that pinched my toes and a pair of silver Birkenstock sandals, whose cork footbed rubbed the soles of my feet like sandpaper after multiple treks across the city. The shoes that were comfortable back home were no match for the streets of Cork.

I ran into a friend as I was debating whether to buy the sneakers. "What do you think? Can I pull these off? I'm not sure if they go with anything in my wardrobe besides jeans. I'm not that type of woman," I said.

"I think you can be that type of woman," my friend assured me.

She was right. I had another summer of exploration ahead of me — endless possibilities. So I purchased the sneakers on the premise that small outward changes can either spur or reflect internal ones. Little did I know that my life would soon change for reasons other than a shoe choice.

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Before I left for Ireland I took meticulous care of my pale pink sneakers. I gave them a good cleaning, sprayed them down with suede protectant and bought a small shoe brush and a special eraser to eliminate scuff marks. I put so much care into keeping my sneakers pristine, to the point that while I was going through my seizure that Saturday, standing in the busy city centre in broad daylight with drool dangling from my mouth, fully conscious yet unable to speak, much less shout for help, I was careful not to spit up on my shoes. I didn't want to have to clean them afterwards or worse, ruin them. In hindsight, my sneakers should have been the last thing on my mind, but sometimes we can’t help where our mind goes. I’ve always taken pride in my appearance, making a choice each day on how to present myself. I wasn’t prepared for the fact that I was about to make very few choices for myself in the upcoming days, which would set the tone for the next twelve months.

***

I paced the hallway of Mercy University Hospital in my sneakers, peering out the large windows that overlooked the River Lee. I spent hours on the phone, pacing up and down that hallway, on the phone with friends and family back home, explaining what I had been through and what might happen to me. My outcome changed day-to-day as I was bombarded with a litany of medical tests, sometimes multiple in a single day. Everyone back home clung to morsels of news that I had for them and questioned when I forgot to tell family member A the results of a test but told family member B. It was exhausting.
I paced the halls so much that I noticed the tide rise and fall. A wooden structure, black as the river that contained it, disappeared and reappeared throughout the day. Was it the remnants of a boat? A funeral pyre? An illegal trash dump? I watched it as I paced the halls on the phone. One day I clocked eight hours of phone time, which was just as tiring as the tests the doctors were running on me: multiple MRIs, CT scans, a colonoscopy, and a slew of blood samples and blood pressure checks three times a day. My body wasn’t my own. I was poked and prodded all day, every day. One sunless morning I was woken up for bloodwork. Face down, my head buried in my pillow, I thrust an arm out of my sheets to whoever was asking for a vein. I groaned as I felt the tourniquet constricting my veins and made an audible gasp when the needle went in. Then, I went back to sleep until breakfast was served.

I was prescribed steroids to keep my brain from swelling, thus avoiding another seizure. The steroids made my heart race and exacerbated my emotional highs and lows. Walking at a slow to moderate pace was enough to spike my heart rate to peak levels. Prior to all this, I was running three times a week and lifting weights; I was the healthiest I had ever been in all my life. I had total control over my body, or at least it felt like it at the time. Prior to my diagnosis, I would have to run a nine-minute mile in order to get my heart rate up; now just walking left me winded and I hadn’t even started any treatments aside from the steroids. There was a match playing out inside my body and I was at a 0-2 loss.

***
I was wearing my pale pink sneakers when the doctors delivered the news—colorectal cancer. I already knew I had a brain tumor, but the colorectal cancer came as a shock. The doctor told me he was “99 percent sure” that my colonoscopy results would come back clean. In fact, the only reason I had the test was because I disclosed that my dad died from colon cancer seventeen years before.

I was inconsolable after I received the news, surrounded by the five other women patients I shared a room with and my team of doctors. The only privacy I could get was drawing the curtains around my bed or heading to the chapel, which I did. I’m not religious but I needed a place where I could be alone. After a few people exited the chapel, I allowed myself to wail. The grief came not from the rock bottom of my gut but somewhere much, much deeper than that. Seventeen years of fear rushed out of my mouth and reverberated inside those chapel walls. It was the mental equivalent of throwing your guts up after the world’s worst hangover. Just when you think you’re done, you move on to the bile that signals you’re officially empty inside.

***

Thomas booked an emergency flight to come to Ireland, thankfully paid for by my travel abroad insurance. He arrived at the hospital on a Saturday—a week from when I was admitted. My team of doctors sent my charts to a hospital back in the States and booked appointments with a neurosurgeon, a colorectal surgeon, and an oncologist for Thursday, the day after I was to get home. Grateful for a few days out of the hospital, I pounded the pavement in my pale pink sneakers, showing Thomas the city, making sure to point out the spot where the seizure occurred. I playfully recreated how it went down, including the walk I took around the block to find a place with WiFi so I could research hospitals on my cell phone. Even when I was at my lowest, I
still did the most that I could. He was half horrified yet not surprised that I got up and walked to save myself instead of reaching out to a stranger on the street for assistance.

***

I had brain surgery nine days after I got back to New Orleans. For the first time in my life, I truly started to realize what living in the world with a disability must feel like. I saw a life that I didn’t expect after the anesthesia wore off. I could barely eke out words after surgery, relaying on pen and paper instead to convey more complex sentences. I couldn’t wash my hair until my scalp incision healed and worse, I couldn’t even walk down the stairs at home without someone keeping a watchful eye. But gradually I came around, little by little. It was a big day when I could walk to the corner store and back without assistance. And it was scary.

What if I fell? What if I had another seizure? I was suddenly a much different person than I was in Ireland, walking seven miles a day, exploring the city by myself. Having a seizure in Ireland was harrowing, but it also provided a distance from what was happening to me. Now, back at home, it was setting in that this was my new life, the new woman I was becoming. I felt like I was now the bottom seed, scrambling to catch up to a faceless competitor.

I started to associate the clothes I wore in the hospital with illness. The leggings I brought to work out in became my hospital staple. They were comfortable and decent enough so I could wear them around and maintain a sense of tact and dignity, unlike the nightshirt that I brought to sleep in with slits up my upper thighs. I never intended on wearing it outside of my student apartment, let alone in a public setting. An Irish nurse, sensing my discomfort with the amount of skin I was showing, asked me if I wanted a blanket to cover up with.
I could have sent those clothes into the ether on a homemade funeral pyre, donated them to the thrift store, or reclaim them as my own. I chose the latter. And yes, I ended up wearing the sneakers again, stealthily dodging mud and always checking the weather before wearing them from the house. Some days I covered my head, freshly bald from chemotherapy but some days I opted to leave the house bald, with a laser focus of walking from point A to point B without making eye contact with curious bystanders. I made a point to avoid figuring out if people were staring at me or not. Most people seemed not to notice, or at least pretended not to. On a recent bald day I wore my Adidas Samoas with a matching pale pink V-neck t-shirt, a denim pencil skirt and oversized lucite gold glitter earrings. I felt put together and in control. I felt human again.

***

July 2019— I made it. It was surreal being back in Cork. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to go back. I was grabbing a coffee and a breakfast burrito at the convenience store next to student housing and one of my debit cards was declined. I had other forms of payment so I didn't panic, but it was obviously an issue that needed to be resolved. I explained to the cashier that I was in town for a month. "That [the declined card] could really be a nightmare," the cashier said.

“Yes, it could,” I said. Meanwhile, I thought to myself, “If only you knew the nightmare I had last summer.”

I walked past the place where I had my seizure. I knew that I would have to eventually because it's a central part in town and I would be walking past there every week. I was with my
boss, showing students around the city centre, and I wasn't sure how I would react. I knew that we would cross by the spot and felt my anxiety build, trying to ignore it but also trying to be aware of what was happening to me in order to process it better and have a better grasp of my reaction. It wasn’t the first time that I had to walk past the spot. I showed Thomas where I had my seizure when he came the year before to bust me out of the hospital, going so far as to recreate the scene. Maybe the incident was so fresh that I wanted to share it with him, so fresh that I hadn't registered it as a traumatic experience since I was still processing it. I had yet to gain both literal and figurative distance from it. At the prospect of seeing the spot for the first time in a year, I felt a tightness rise up through my gut, like I was seeing an ex or a friend I had a falling out with. I dreaded the encounter but knew I had to face it. So I did it. I pushed myself to walk past the spot by myself for the first time where I had my seizure. I knew I would have to do it eventually. I sat in my bedroom and deliberated on what to do. I decided it would be best just go get it over with. As I walked, I could feel the tension building. I tried breathing, taking slow breaths. I didn’t want to lose it. I didn’t want to break. I thought about how much better off I was than last year, how much stronger I am for all that I’ve been through. There was nothing to fear; my doctors gave me the go ahead to return to Cork, I said to myself. I am in good health. I am transitioning into survivorship and reclaiming my life.

As I approached the intersection I felt my anxiety going up. According to the heart monitor on my FitBit my pulse got up to 190, so to say passing that bench was potentially heart attack- inducing wouldn’t be a stretch. Up to that point I contemplated what would be the best tactic to take. Would I pause and reflect or would I blow past it, just trying to do the damn thing? Well, I did it. I powered through, which is my usual way to cope with things. Just power through it.
I wore my brown Doc Marten’s. I brought them on the trip last year, and I decided to bring them again. I made a conscious decision not to bring my pink Adidas. It just didn’t seem like a good idea to bring them. They got their use, I was bringing myself back to the place where so much trauma occurred, and I wanted to minimize recreating the event. Intellectually I knew there was no way that would happen, but emotionally I knew I felt a different way. These boots, are comfortable yet sturdy. I do very little to maintain them whereas the pale pink sneakers need constant maintenance to keep them pristine. They sat on a shelf in New Orleans, still pink with traces of dirt. The boots look better with some scuffing, a story. Scuffed but still intact, the soles surprisingly unworn despite the amount of walking I did in them. They’re sturdy enough to carry me through winter, they’re sturdy enough to carry me through.
A New Normal

You’re watching a video of a woman on your phone. Her voice is upbeat as she talks about the dumb thing her cat did. She speaks in an effortless manner, the way people speak when they feel comfortable with their audience, when they’re with friends telling a funny story. You recognize the woman. She is familiar yet distant, like someone you know but haven’t connected with in years. And yet, you know her intimately, her motivations. You know that she ate yogurt with fruit for breakfast, that she’s never seen nor read *Harry Potter*. You know where she went to high school. But something is off. She’s not the same person she used to be. The voice, though familiar, isn’t the same. There is an ease of speaking that you don’t remember; she isn’t slurring her words or stumbling on vowel sounds. Her speech seems effortless and without struggle.

The woman is you before brain surgery.

***

I saw it coming by the look on the student’s face. He couldn’t quite place my mysterious accent, which prompted an insatiable curiosity.

“Are you from Ireland?”

It was a valid question. He was in my office in the International Education building, where I worked as a graduate assistant for my university’s study abroad program in Ireland.

“No, I’m not. I’m from New Orleans, born and raised.”
The look on his face grew even more quizzical. I was trying to avoid making this student uncomfortable, but he was digging himself into a hole.

“Well, you sound like you’re Irish. You know, with the accent and everything.”

_Ah yes, here comes a teaching moment._

“Actually, I just had brain surgery this summer to remove a cancerous tumor. That’s why I talk like this.”

The student became visibly uncomfortable; he stumbled over his words as he tried to eke out an apology.

“I…I…I’m sorry.”

I was not offended, but amused by the interaction. I had just been diagnosed with stage IV rectal cancer two months before. My health situation was still so fresh, a new thing for me to learn how to navigate.

“It’s okay,” I said.

I felt bad for the kid.

The scene keeps happening over and over again. Someone not familiar with a Southern accent will say something like “I love your Southern accent,” then I’ll have to say “It’s my brain surgery accent.” Then they’ll try to backpeddle and say something else. It’s okay. I wouldn’t know how to react if the situation was reversed.

Up until brain surgery, I never had to think about the mechanics of speaking. Like most people, I took for granted the ease with which words came to me. Speaking was an everyday activity, as natural as breathing. Until it wasn’t. I never gave much thought to my voice being something that identified me or tied me to a place until I went to Ireland for the first time. No matter how much I tried to blend in with the locals by not wearing anything attention grabbing,
the second I opened my mouth America fell out, even when I used their words and phrases like asking for takeaway at a restaurant instead of placing a “to go” order or saying “grand” instead of good or great. The first time I went to Ireland I was talking to a student worker in university housing about the weather.

“It looks like it’s going to break cloud soon,” she said.

What a lovely way to phrase that, I thought to myself. My initial reaction was to say something like, “It looks like it’s about to dump out there.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from New Orleans” is something I heard a lot when I was a waitress in a fine dining restaurant in the French Quarter—the majority of patrons were tourists who expected a caricature of New Orleans culture. To their dismay, I sounded like I could be from Anywhere, U.S.A.. When I started dating Thomas, my then Yankee boyfriend who had just moved to New Orleans, there were little phrases that would tip him off. I said things like “Come see” instead of “Come here,” pronunciations like AM-bew-lance instead of ambulance (however the hell you pronounce it), Claw-Set instead of Clah-Set, and IN-sure-ance instead of En-sure-ance. But I never felt like my speech was remarkable; I never thought about my voice defining me.

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Right after I woke up from brain surgery I found myself laughing uncontrollably. I tried to spell my name because if I could do it then I knew would be all right, just like I did when I was going through the seizure that tipped me off to my cancer in the first place. The letters came slow and
not without effort but I was able to manage. If I wanted to say a word it was easier to spell out the letters than say the word itself.

C-H-R-I-S-T-Y.

I did it! So I tried spelling another name.

R-I-C-K-Y.

The nurses heard me laughing and mumbling to myself.

“She’s awake.”

I immediately asked for a pen and paper. It was easier to communicate via writing, especially if I had to utter more than a few words. Besides, I was being pumped full of fluids and had to ask for a bed pan to pee into.

“My dad is here,” I said to the nurse, fumbling over my words.

“Is he in the waiting room?”

“No, he’s dead. But he’s here.”

The nurse must have thought I was delusional from the anesthesia but I felt it. I felt electricity hovering over me as I woke up from the twilight of sedation; it was as if the air was weighted, lightly bearing down on me but in a pleasant, comforting way.

I had no cognitive issues, no problems finding the words I wanted to use. I was fully articulate when I wrote things down, just a bit foggy. I had a headache on the left side of my head from where the tumor was removed. The throbbing subsided hour by hour thanks to time and pain medication. My tongue, however, felt like a brick in my mouth. I slurred my words, not unlike my mom’s cousin who had Ataxia³, who had recently passed away. I thought about her a

³ Ataxia is a disease that affects motor skills.
lot, and how frustrating it must have been for her to have the ability to form thoughts in her head while going through the slow deterioration of her motor skills, unable to verbalize the words bouncing around inside her brain.

While in ICU I slipped off into sleep again, then woke up in my hospital room. I immediately tried to crack jokes when I woke up but I still couldn’t speak in coherent sentences so I took to writing again to communicate.

I commented to my mom on how hot one of the attending doctors was. *Priorities—hot doctor,* I wrote. No joke, he was exceedingly hot. Just ask Mom.

The doctor told me it could take weeks to get my speech back and yet I spent just one night in the hospital. However, that quick visit was long enough for a nurse to forget to change my bed pan and backup pee pad backup in a timely manner, which made me feel like a puppy being house trained. When my mom came to get me the next morning I wrote:

“That was such an ordeal. *The other nurse put this pee pad in the bed pan and it caught all the pee but it got all over my back and they had to clean me up so these two nurses gave me like this pee stick [an external catheter] that just sucks it away so I don’t have to deal with that again.*”

Still, things could have been worse. At least I was able to walk up and down stairs and down the hallway with the physical therapists with no problem.

“Wow, you’re strong,” the therapist said as I attempted to walk down the stairs. I playfully flexed an arm, showing off the guns I had worked so hard to achieve. Even after brain surgery, I didn’t feel sick. I was a healthy person going through some medical inconveniences, at least that is how I saw myself.

The hot doctor came in once more to check on me before I was released.
“How are you feeling?” He asked.

*Can write perfectly normal. Words come out just fine, like thought processes, but hard to talk.* I wrote back.

“Wow. It’s amazing what the brain can do after surgery,” he said.

When I got home I started laughing uncontrollably again, for no reason. I was in bed, trying to rest while Mom was sitting at my desk researching speech therapists.

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re supposed to be resting.”

I couldn’t help it. I didn’t even know what I was laughing at but it made sense; the way I deal with fucked up situations is to laugh about them. It’s like the deepest recesses of my mind were unloading all this trauma, only in the form of giggling hysterically. In a morbid way, this shit was pretty funny. Who flies back home from a foreign country and has brain surgery the following week? I had to laugh at the situation because I was done crying about it. I was glad that at least I was making progress in my medical treatment.

Just before my brain surgery in New Orleans, I was in the hospital in Ireland for a week after my seizure. One of the five women I shared a room with told me that my American accent reminded her of her grandchildren.

“Aye, you sound just like my grandchildren. My son immigrated to the States.”

“Where does your son live?”

“New Jersey.”

I don’t want to sound like I’m from New Jersey; I want to sound like I’m from New Orleans. I stood out in the Irish hospital; I was the youngest person in that room, by decades, and
the only American. I was also the only person who received a cancer diagnosis in that room. I wailed when I first received the news that I had rectal cancer; the brain tumor was disconcerting enough, but it felt like an anomaly. The only reason I had a colonoscopy in the hospital was because I disclosed my family history. In that moment I felt like a statistic. I felt like my dad’s disease.

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Now, I just want my old voice back. It’s not even the timbre of my voice that I miss, I long for the time when it wasn’t taxing to talk, when I didn’t have to think about how to form words before I say them. When I listen to my voice in a video, I sound flat and monotone as opposed to the sing song version of my previous self. When I speak, it still feels dramatic, especially when I’ve been talking too much or if I’m tired. It takes great effort for the words to come out. So, I speak slower. I have to concentrate on articulating certain vowel sounds or combinations of letters. And yet. I don't want to mourn something that I will never get back. Instead, I want to move forward and become comfortable with my new normal.

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I went back to Ireland the summer after my second year of grad school. I inserted myself back in the place where, for the first time, I couldn’t say my own name. It was the first and (I hope) last time I experienced that sensation. I wondered if the Irish would peg me as being American or if my new manner of speaking would throw them off. I went back to Ireland as an American, but I was not the same. The Irish were exceedingly polite, just like the first time I was there. No one seemed to notice that I slurred my speech or that I didn’t sound like my old self. Maybe I didn’t
sound as bad as I thought I did. Still, getting the words out remains a challenge, no matter what I sound like.

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During my surgery consultation, when the neurosurgeon first told me my speech would be affected, I assumed the speech problem would be a temporary thing, something that I could easily get over, then go back to my normal voice. I’m grateful that surgery only affected my voice; I could have awakened with no use of my arms or have lost the ability to walk. Perhaps I downplayed the risks, perhaps I put great faith into my Harvard-trained doctor. My voice wasn’t what I was concerned about at the time—getting the brain tumor out was. I envisioned the craniomity\(^4\) would go like this: I’d wake up and just like magic I would have the cancer out of my head. I would go about my life until I started chemotherapy for my ass tumor. But that wasn’t the case. Far from it. I wonder if I had known that if my voice could be permanently altered if that would have made things better or worse. Brain surgery didn’t scare me but the cancer did.

When you gain a speech impediment, it makes it harder to convey emotion. I did speech therapy for a few weeks after surgery.

“Look at it this way. You haven’t had to think about how to speak since you first learned as a baby,” my therapist said.

I found comfort in her explanation. We practiced saying silly tongue twister sentences with hard to pronounce vowel combinations, such as the word “owl.” The point of therapy was to make me functional, not perfect. My voice was a newborn giraffe walking for the first time. I thought a lot about people who have to speak a language that isn’t their native tongue and how

\(^4\) brain surgery
navigating the world must be that much more difficult for them, as they try to articulate the sounds. It’s frustrating to explain how frustrating this all is. It’s little things that add up, like the stress of having to take a phone call and wondering if the other person can understand me. I have non-voice annoyances as well, such as neuropathy\(^5\) pain in my feet from chemotherapy, which adds to these tiny frustrations. It’s a dull grinding away, or a mosquito that just won’t leave me alone; a silent thing I have to deal with that isn’t worth complaining about.

\(^5\) Nerve damage from the chemotherapy
So Much Shit

If I want to be polite, I tell people that I had an ileostomy bag. If I’m trying to be funny or crass, I tell them I pooped out of my stomach for nine weeks. The general public doesn’t know what an ostomy bag is (there are different kinds) and, prior to having one, I wasn’t really sure either but now I have an intimate, first-person knowledge of it after having my rectum and a cancerous tumor removed. An ostomy is necessary when a person has to expel waste out of a surgically made opening other than the plumbing they were born with. Many people with Crohn’s disease or post-colorectal surgery cancer patients, like me, need them temporarily or permanently. I needed an ileostomy, which connects to the small intestine. The bag collects the waste. It’s a shitty situation.

My surgeon told me I wouldn’t need a permanent ileostomy bag, which was great news. I insisted on going to my initial surgery consultation alone. At that point I had been through brain surgery, what would a little butt tumor removal be? My surgeon was just going to go in and remove it and I’d wake up and be back to normalish, right?

I was so, so wrong.

The bag was something necessary for me to let my insides heal after I had my rectum removed and rebuilt out of part of my small intestines. The five hour surgery was without incident and went as smoothly as these things can go. I woke up with excruciating pain in my shoulders, a result of being pumped full of air to give the surgeons more room to work around my internal organs. The gas that settled in my shoulders was even more painful than my abdominal incisions.
During my pre-surgery consultation the ostomy nurse explained what an ileostomy bag and a stoma was. I wasn’t sure what a stoma was, even while my nurse held the little plastic stoma model in her hands. I was half overwhelmed, half in denial. I didn’t realize I would need a temporary bag prior to this consultation. I thought the hard part—the brain surgery and twelve rounds of chemo, were over. The nurse measured me for my bag. She had me sit and bend, evaluating the natural folds of my stomach in order to decide what the best placement would be—underneath my belly button and slightly to the right. Prior to this, the only time I had someone analyze the curvature of my body like this was for a tattoo, the design complementing a shoulder blade or the generous blank canvas that a thigh provides. Having a body part removed was disconcerting enough, much less rerouting an internal organ to the outside of your body. But I didn’t realize the full extent of it until I got home. The nurses showed me the plastic model of a stoma, which looked like a pink plastic plug. I thought getting an actual plug, a tidy little opening in my stomach. Then I went home, googled “stoma” and realized a piece of intestines would be sitting out of my body.

*Wait, what?*

The bag almost looked like a whoopee cushion. It’s the color of a bandaid and hangs off the body, collecting waste. After I got the ileostomy I made jokes when Thomas and I walked the dogs. I pointed out that it would be much easier to just grab one of our dog’s poop bags and secure it with a rubber band over my stoma. He asked me if I had poop bags for our walk. “Yes, but what about for the dogs?” would be my response. My sister also just had a baby, which requires so much to just get out the door. Diapers? Check. Baby wipes? Check. Extra bottles? Check. I felt like we had this weird parallel with her baby and my bag. I had to bring an ostomy kit with me everywhere I went. A spare bag, wipes, scissors to custom fit the bag, etc…
March 2019— You don’t realize how much you use abdominal muscles until you have your abdominal wall sliced into. Standing up just to walk down the hall and back right after surgery felt like an impossible task, not just from the physical pain but from the juxtaposition of my life. The week before I went rollerskating; this week I was barely able to put one socked foot in front the other to stare at the river out the gastrointestinal ward window. I could see joggers and cyclists whizzing down the levee, which made me feel trapped inside my body, trapped inside this hospital.

One of the stipulations of my leaving the hospital was learning how to empty and change my bag. It was upsetting seeing an internal organ hanging out of my body. It took two days for me to muster the courage to look at it. The nurses emptied my bag out for me, which made me feel stripped of my humility. My shoulders and abdomen still ached from surgery, and I felt fragile and vulnerable while I watched them empty the contents of the bag out, wipe fecal matter off the opening, then pressing the velcro tabs back in place. I felt bad that they had to literally handle my shit. Two nurses came in to help me care for my stoma. I closed my eyes and winced as I looked at it for the first time. The small, pink nub of my stuck out small intestine looked like a round, quivering tentacle, spewing out fecal matter like an alien which I had no control over. I felt equal parts detachment, horror, and curiosity. I was able to temporarily detach myself from the situation and see this as an interesting insight into the human body until a wave of pain would force me back to the reality at hand. I could do this the easy way— even though there was nothing easy about it— and accept this burden, or do it the hard way and resist it. I had to come to accept what was happening to me if I was going to get through those next nine weeks.
I found a small online community of other people, almost exclusively women, who took to Instagram to connect to others going through similar situations. Some of them were unbelievably upbeat. I found their attitudes inspiring sometimes, but mostly they just really pissed me off. They gave their stomas cutesy names like Meatball and Bob. Look, I get it. They were choosing their attitude, choosing to see the silver lining on the ostomy cloud, but when my bag leaked fecal matter in public, or I woke up to shit soaked sheets at two a.m. I couldn’t do anything but break down and cry. Instagram captions included, “Thank God for this life saving bag!” And “I love my bag.” It was a little too much. I wanted to shake these women sometimes and ask why they were lying to themselves. Quite frankly, having the bag sucked. Who really wants this damn thing? There was nothing cutesy about it. I found #Freethestoma, a hashtag that got started after the suicide of an eleven-year-old ostomate who broke down after having been bullied for his bag. Fellow ostomates showed up online, their pink nubs out for the world to see, unencumbered by the bags that catch their output. I didn’t want to go as far as they did, displaying their new buttholes to the world, but I also didn’t shy away from talking about what I was going through, both in person and online.

I joked about my shitty situation, but I didn’t show my new poop portal to anyone except my medical team. I didn’t want my husband to see my stoma. Hell, I didn’t want to see my stoma. Most ostomates have opaque bags but, since I was just using hospital sample bags, mine were clear. I wore a modified belly band to hide the bag and so I wouldn’t have to feel warm fecal matter pressing against my stomach.

Emptying the bag in public was an exercise in patience and stress management. One of the first times I had to empty the bag in public ended in utter humiliation. I was at a restaurant with my husband and made the grave mistake of trying a new tactic to empty the bag. “Just sit on
the toilet like normal and empty it in between your legs,” the ostomy nurse instructed when I was still in the hospital. Prior to this moment, I had a different approach: stand facing the toilet, squat down, and dump it out. I must have been feeling adventurous to try to change up my tactic and was horrified when I released the plastic velcro tabs, unrolled the plastic opening, and missed the toilet completely. Shit spewed onto my underwear and the biker shorts I had on underneath my dress. I was horrified. I tried not to panic and to see the upside in the situation. At least I was wearing a dress, so going commando was an option. At least I didn’t have to walk out of the restaurant in shit-stained shorts? I tossed my underwear and shorts in the tampon receptacle in the stall and walked out to the dining room, visibly shaken by the experience. I started to cry, apologizing to my husband for ruining the upbeat mood we were in just a few minutes earlier.

“Sorry I ruined our dinner.”

“You didn’t ruin anything.”

I didn’t want to leave a shitty surprise for the poor waitstaff at the end of the night, so I asked for two plastic bags, went back into the bathroom, fished the offending articles of clothing out of the trash, brought them home, and washed them about six times.

Emptying my bag in public wasn’t the only inconvenience when dining out. You don’t realize how unaware you are of chewing your food until you have to start paying attention.

“Most people don’t chew their food well enough,” my ostomy nurse explained, hence why you get a laundry list of foods you can’t eat when you have a stoma, and yet “People with permanent ostomies eat whatever they want,” she explained. People with permanent ostomies get used to chewing their food well, whereas newbies aren’t as in tune with their eating habits. The trick is pulverizing almonds, machinating the food into a paste so you don’t give yourself a blockage later. It’s one more thing most healthy adults have the luxury of not having to think about.
Having to slowly chew, chew, and chew some more wasn’t all bad; how many of us wolf down our food in a rush, or mindlessly snack in front of a computer screen? Taking the extra time to chew helped me savor my food and be a more mindful eater.

Certain foods produced foul smells, which were fortunately not detectable when the bag was closed and tucked away. Gas producing foods weren’t off limits but they resulted in the bag inflating like a balloon, I had to “burp” my bag frequently, otherwise I risked it exploding under the pressure. If I had a beer (or anything else gas producing) too close to bedtime I would wake up with a bulge; it looked like I was smuggling a water balloon in my pants. I heard horror stories of bags bursting under the pressure, but fortunately that was one disaster that I managed to bypass. I could have reduced the risk of an exploding bag even more by abstaining from beer but damn it, I deserved a drink.

I had grown used to having some dietary restrictions after chemo, such as not eating undercooked meat and fish due to risk of infection; goodbye sushi, sayonara medium rare steak. Buffets were off limits during chemo (not the worst thing tbh) but as soon as I finished treatment I was enjoying eating whatever the hell I wanted; now I had to consider even more dietary changes. Seeds, sausage casings, nuts, and fibrous vegetables were all off-limits.

I had been eating sushi at my campus’s coffeeshop one day when I realized my rolls were coated in sesame seeds. Would I combust? No, but I pooped sesame seeds out of my stoma and it was gross and strangely fascinating to watch—a peek inside the human digestive system, not unlike dissecting owl pellets in middle school science class.

Throughout the process I became more attuned to my body. What I ate in the morning would come down the pipeline eight to twelve hours later. It was an anatomy lesson and an
exercise in humility; when things with the bag went awry, which they frequently did, it was inconvenient and messy at best, totally humiliating at worst. I tried to handle it with as much grace as I could muster but there were times when I sat in the bathroom and cried after a leak so bad that it warranted a shower at three a.m.

I had to remind myself that I am an intelligent, well-rounded human being with two college degrees and a third in progress. I made it through multiple surgeries, chemo, and radiation. There were lots of people worse off than I was. This was only temporary, a blip on my cancer timeline. At least I didn’t have cancer anymore, right? No, fuck that. This sucks. *Everything about this sucks.* I didn’t want to hear “At least you’re alive,” from my own internal dialogue or anyone else. I didn’t want to deal with part of my intestines pushing shit into a plastic bag. I didn’t realize how lucky I had been to use my own plumbing before. Cancer teaches you how to take nothing for granted.

I read *The Wounded Storyteller* by Arthur Frank, a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at The University of Calgary. I wanted to gain perspective on my cancer experience. Frank explains that society allows contingency for the infant body; it’s expected that infants have little to no control over bodily functions such as burping, spitting and defecating. Yet “when adult bodies lose control, they are expected to attempt to regain it if possible, and if not then at least to conceal the loss as effectively as possible.” Frank goes on to note that stigma “is embarrassing, not just for the stigmatized person but for those who are confronted with the stigma and have to react to it.” So let me get this straight; not only do I have to worry about embarrassing myself but I’m also supposed to avoid making other people feel uncomfortable? Screw that, I’m the one with ass cancer.
May 2019— When I woke up from my ileostomy reversal surgery I was in minimal pain. The surgery hooked my small intestines back up and my surgeon sewed up the layers of my abdominal wall to close the hole where the stoma once was. I was uncomfortable but not horrendously so like the surgery that removed my tumor and my rectum. A gauze pad and medical tape covered the hole my stoma once occupied, which looked like a relaxed cat butt that would heal and scar over in the next few weeks to form a purple scar below my navel, the only indication of what was once there. I thought about getting a tattoo over the area to cover the scar but I chose to see it as a source of pride. Besides, there is a divot where the hole was, imperceptible to anyone but me. It doesn’t bother me and it could have been much worse; I could have been gutted up and down like a fish.

The blessing and curse of reversal surgery is that it’s invisible. No one is going to know that you’re still healing, that you’re still hurting. No one is going to know that every time you have to poop it feels like you are collecting rocks inside your rear end. The healing process varies wildly from person to person and, to be honest, there are a lot of humiliating moments that can come with it so there’s a real want for that invisibility, to minimize embarrassment. Sometimes it would take (and still does) multiple trips to the bathroom to finish making #2. I quickly realized that I wouldn’t have to worry about shitting myself in public (thank god) but I was often in crippling pain, even months after surgery.

Just three weeks after my rectum takedown, my husband broke his elbow after a bad accident while riding our Vespa. It was a nasty break. “I think he left a piece of bone on the road,” the surgeon told me after Thomas’s second surgery. I was still adjusting to my ileostomy
bag when Thomas was getting nerve blocks and walking around in a sling for several weeks.

When we were out in public together I noticed the way people reacted to him. Some people ignored him, others asked what happened out of sympathy. The thing with cancer is this: people don’t react to you because they don’t want to be rude, which is a good thing. The only visible indicator that I had cancer is when my hair fell out. When my hair started growing back but I was still dealing with cancer, I was invisible. Now that my hair was back, I could walk around in public and no one would know that I had my rectum removed and my new stomach butthole was pooping uncontrollably as I exchanged casual banter with the grocery store cashier. I couldn’t express that maybe I also wanted a little sympathy sometimes without coming across as oversharing. No one knew I had to wear the damn bag. Unlike a cast, there was no visible evidence of what I had endured. I was happy the bag was discreet yet I also felt as if I was harboring a secret.

I was at my brother-in-law’s 50th birthday party. I was just three weeks post-surgery and my body was still healing. I was in a lot of pain, still figuring out the cocktail of pain pills, stool softeners and laxatives to take. I was in so much pain after my body digested that morning’s breakfast. Sharp, shooting sensations coursed through my new plumbing. I tried to mask the pain I was feeling and carry on conversations with other guests like normal. I thought I would have to leave the party early, but the pain eventually subsided; I only felt comfortable telling a handful of people what I was going through in that moment. Later on, as the evening was winding down, I joined a friend in the living room. She was talking to some friends and the topic shifted to the nuances of New Orleans accents and pronunciations. I was trying to express how I default to
pronouncing certain words a certain way since I’m from the West Bank, a suburb of New Orleans. At least that’s what I was trying to say before she interrupted and told her friends that I had brain surgery. Their mouths dropped.

“But that’s okay, she’s fine now.”

“I don’t have cancer now but no, I’m not fine,” I said and quickly changed the subject.

I could have slapped her. I make light of my brain and butt cancer all the time. I couldn’t tell if she was going for shock value, trying to be funny, or looking for an ice breaker but it wasn’t her story to tell. I went from being just another party guest enjoying myself to being singled out for having cancer. And, just two hours before then, I was not fine. I was in serious pain but I didn’t want to talk about it. In that moment I just wanted to be another guest at the party.

A few weeks after that party, Thomas and I went to Mississippi with the dogs one weekend for a much needed quick getaway. I had taken a new laxative and took too much of it, to the point where I had to go to the bathroom no less than six times during lunch one afternoon. I just hoped that our waitress didn’t notice. It was embarrassing and I was frustrated that I was souring our lunch with my bathroom trips. I didn’t want my husband worrying about me but I was also in pain.

**July 2019**— I posted a picture of myself, pulling my shirt up and my skirt was down just enough for the scar where my ileostomy once was to be visible. I did it to show others that this had been my reality, the only visible proof that I had an ostomy bag, as well as to do my part in destigmatizing having one. A friend of mine, who reached out to me in private as she was going through her own bout of butt cancer, emailed me.
“Seeing your post today flaunting your scar = goals. You’re awesome. I’m desperately looking forward to those days!”

I hardly felt like I was flaunting the scar, more just presenting it for public consumption. It wasn’t a close up shot, either. It was full body, as if to say this scar does not define me. I am still me.

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I had a dream where a woman was making people take laxatives as a form or torture and to make sure they weren’t working as a drug mule. In the dream I felt scared but also partially immune. I had been through cancer. What could possibly be scarier than that? I suppose this meant that my suffering has given me some kind of upper hand in life, like I’m better equipped to handle physical and mental anguish now that I’ve been through this. Nothing could be more torturous than all that I had been through.

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I’m in New Orleans, back at the doctor’s office waiting for the doctor to come in and snake my pipes with the sigmoid scope. I have to have a sigmoidoscopy once every three months for the next two years. The sigmoid is a specific part of the colon. The doctor wants to look up my butt, much like a colonoscopy, but it doesn’t go up as far and I don’t get knocked out for it.

I bought an art print off Etsy that reminds me of my new normal. It’s a woman with her pants at her ankles, bare ass in the air with an audience of physicians, nurses, photographers, etc… and text that says, “Rectal Cancer Be Like.” It’s funny because it’s accurate; I’ve had more cameras up my butt than most porn stars.
As I continue waiting for the doctor to come in, I glance at a poster of the human gastrointestinal tract. I stare at it hard every time I come in, trying to remember the names of body parts that most people forget after high school biology. I previously thought the Wall of Jejunum was a key geographical component in *Game of Thrones*. Didn’t the White Walkers destroy it in the final season? I imagine cancer cells invading my body not unlike the White Walkers breaching the wall in order to take over the North. They’re trying to take down everything in their way, breaking through the wall of my rectum, sailing wooden ships through my lymph nodes to land in my brain and now my lungs. Maybe (spoiler alert) after nearly everyone dies in the final episode, I’ll be able to start anew as well. In the meantime, chemo sends out its own armies yet again to attack these shit heads that spread to my lungs. After all I had been through the cancer popped back up again just as I was adjusting to my new normal. At least I got my poop proclivities down; I got a bidet attachment for my toilet, I went to pelvic floor therapy sessions to strengthen my muscles down there, and I started taking fiber supplements at the recommendation of my doctor, which have all helped with a problem that Amazon reviewer Gorn so eloquently described in his description of fiber pills:

> We're not talking about diarrhea here. Diarrhea is nasty stuff  but at least it's easy to clean.  What we're talking about is more like pushing toothpaste through a straw or squeezing tar out of a baloon [sic].The real problem, if I have not yet been sufficiently graphic, is that cleanup is a nightmare.

All of this has been a nightmare, but at least my problems are manageable. I don’t have to worry about shitting on myself, which was one of my greatest fears after my ileostomy reversal. There was a video circulating on Twitter of a man caught on surveillance cameras shitting on himself in a shopping mall. The quality of the video obscures the man’s face but there is no
mistaking what happens; one man wearing white shorts walks past a luggage display and has explosive diarrhea, soiling his pants and smearing the floor. As soon as he exits the frame another man rides up the elevator, doesn’t see the feces and slips and falls, knocking over the luggage. The footage of this man is out there for eternity, for future love interests or bosses to find. I’ll admit that part of me laughed, but I also couldn’t help but feel sorry for both parties involved. It’s one of those videos that is equal parts hilarious and disgusting; we watch content on our phones in pure disgust, shaming both parties by firing off tweets and Facebook messages. When I saw it my immediate reaction was “Thank god that wasn’t me” followed by anger at the people that shamed this man online. Give him a little grace. Give me a little grace.
This Precious Thing

*A woman who changes her hair is about to change her life.* — Coco Chanel

2018

AUGUST— My hair started to fall out strand by strand instead of in the large, dramatic clumps that I imagined it would. It began to thin at an imperceptible rate, despite my treating doomed follicles with the utmost care. I delicately combed my hair, making sure I wasn’t yanking too hard, as if I were preserving a fragile object. At first, I didn’t notice the bald patch on the side of my head. Freshly dyed purple strands covered the precise location where I had radiation treatment and brain surgery just a few weeks earlier to remove a malignant brain tumor, a cancer that started in my rectum and spread to my brain. My oncologist told me my hair would fall out two to four weeks after my first chemotherapy treatment. I was hoping for the latter. When I noticed the bald patch I was blindsided, just as I was when I heard those words for the first time, the words I did not expect to hear at thirty-eight years old: “You have cancer.” I could no longer deny it. Yes, I am a cancer patient, yes I am losing my hair. Yes, I have lost control of my body. But did I ever have control to begin with?
MAY— I was made aware of the fraught relationship women have with their own hair as early as kindergarten. The annual spring fair was that day. The entire kindergarten class practiced a hula dance to perform on stage. The boys wore Hawaiian shirts and the girls wore grass skirts. I wanted a fake flower in my hair like the rest of the girls, a wish that my mother obliged. We decided on styling my hair down, with one side scraped back behind my ear to highlight the plastic flower. “Ow,” I yelped when my mother pulled my hair tight, accidentally scraping my scalp with a bobby pin.

“Get used to it. We all have to suffer for beauty.”

My mother was enthusiastic about enrolling me and my brother and in a variety of extracurricular activities, so when I decided to try ballet she was eager to take me to lessons every Saturday morning for three years despite the fact that I didn’t have a graceful bone in my body. Still, the Saturday mornings spent pulling my hair into the requisite bun were worth it; at the end of each season the entire ballet school performed in the annual recital. I learned how we had to beat our hair into submission as I was taught how to frame my arms just so and squat down into a plie. For the annual performance, my mother would create a bun similar to the one I wore at each practice but, for the recital, she would shellac it with a generous amount of hairspray. My hair dared not budge.
AUGUST— I wasn’t in control of my body or my emotions. I wasn’t prepared for the devastation of losing my hair. I was getting ready to go back to the cancer center for my second round of chemo. I couldn’t drive so my mother offered to take me. She was downstairs, talking with my husband while I finished getting ready in the upstairs bathroom. As I fixed my hair in the mirror, I noticed how much the purple dye had faded within a few weeks. It was like the chemo was pushing back, rejecting any attempt to make me feel a little better about the situation. I gently tousled my natural curls, trying to coax them out with gel. I flipped my hair over and that’s when I saw it; a bald patch had formed on the left side of my head, right where I had radiation. I knew hair loss was inevitable but I thought I might get lucky and make it to the four-week marker. My gut reaction was to let out a wail, a guttural cry that came from the pit of my stomach. My mother rushed up the stairs to see what was the matter, to comfort me. Just like that, my hair was gone.

2015

For most of my twenties and thirties I had long, wavy locks that cascaded down my back. I loved having long hair, having grown it out many times in my life. I was about to graduate from college at the age of thirty-five, with two bachelor’s degrees, after taking what I refer to as a gap decade before finishing the Damn Thing. I was ready for a change, so I went to my hairdresser and asked her to lop my hair off, right above my shoulders. I felt free. The dead weight I was carrying around— the embarrassment of being a college drop out, the excuses I made for my prior poor academic performance (two deaths in the family, partying, indifference), fell to the
floor, was swept up, and discarded. I felt lighter, ready to embrace the newfound confidence I had after all those years. I felt like a new me. I felt like myself.

I stuck with the same haircut for two years until I went back to school a second time. Two years later I decided to pursue a masters of fine arts in creative writing— something I didn’t know I was capable of until that last semester of undergrad when I cut my hair. After almost three years of being back in school, I felt like I was just getting warmed up, so going back while I still had momentum made sense.

During my first semester of grad school I hacked off even more hair. This time, I opted for an asymmetrical style— cropped on the sides, long on the top; another physical transformation to reflect inner change. I had recently lost 30 pounds by eating healthier and working out. I felt hot. Hell, I even looked hot. I was a 37-year-old woman open to exploring herself in ways I couldn’t have conceived of before. The following spring semester I went blonde, another first for me. I felt transformed again and proud for allowing myself to change. It wasn’t an outlandish hairstyle, but my hair was radically different and edgier than my previous cuts. I babied my tresses, buying special purple shampoo to even out the brassiness from the bleach. I straightened it when I wanted a sleek, polished look and let my natural curls go wild when I wanted to. I had control. I had control over my life.

2018

JULY — The brain surgery wasn’t as terrifying as I thought it would be. I went to sleep, woke up, and the tumor had been removed. Just like that I was cancer free, at least in my brain. The incision was small, a tidy row of eight metal staples keeping my scalp from peeling back. A
nearly imperceptible sliver of hair was removed, which I easily concealed with head scarves and by flopping my asymmetrical haircut over the gash in my skull.

As neat and tidy as eradicating the brain cancer was, colorectal cancer treatment was a drawn out, torturous affair. Every two weeks for seven months I would sit at the cancer center for nearly five hours. First for bloodwork, then a consultation with my oncologist, then the chemo treatment, which consisted of an I.V. drip administered with a cocktail of steroids and anti-nausea medicine. I was then sent home with another type of chemo, the appropriately named 5FU, attached to a pump hooked up to a needle in my chest that dripped for 46 hours.

1993

In eighth grade all the cool girls decided it was hip to shave the backs of their heads, just above the nape of the neck in an undercut. I desperately wanted to be cool as well, but my mother just wouldn’t have it. So I took matters into my own hands. I had just been allowed to shave my armpits, but legs were still off-limits. My mother deemed smooth legs as something too adult, too mature for an eighth grader, but armpit hair was dirty and unsightly so it had to go. I took that razor and attempted to shave the back of my head, without the assistance of a mirror. I figured that I could cover up my cool new ‘do by simply wearing my long hair down when I was home. At school, I would scrape my hair into a messy bun, which was also cool at this time, and show off my freshly shorn look. My plan worked for a few weeks, until my mother noticed my hair looked thinner in the back. Outraged by her discovery, she took me to a hairdresser to even out the mess I had created on the back of my head, which was exactly what I wanted in the first place. To this day I don’t regret this haircut. It was stupid, yes, but it was also harmless.
2018

AUGUST— Not all types of chemo cause hair loss, which gave me an initial false sense of hope. My dad, who died of colon cancer when I was enrolled in college in my early 20s, did not lose his hair. Worrying about losing my hair when I was worried about losing my life made me feel vain at first. It’s just hair, it will grow back. Intellectually, I knew that this was true. Emotionally it was one of the hardest things to deal with.

I felt my humanity flaking away as strands covered everything— my pillow, the tub, my hats. A friend, a breast cancer survivor, offered to shave my head for me. We left it short, a gamine Audrey Hepburn look albeit with a prominent bald patch. It didn’t last for long. The short, spiky strands felt like daggers in my eyes when I rolled over them on my pillow, which looked like a barber shop floor every morning. At that point, getting rid of the rest of the offending hair was less traumatic; it gave me a sense of control over a small part of my struggle; it gave me a sense of humanity. I borrowed my brother’s clippers and attacked the remaining offenders like I was using a weed wacker. My husband offered to shave the back for me when he noticed how uneven my handiwork was, evening out the errant strands I missed at the nape of my neck.

I initially wore a scarf to cover my bald head, partially to protect my now sensitive scalp from the sun then and the cold a few months later, but also partially because I didn’t want to look like a cancer patient. I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me. I didn’t want to be stared at. I just wanted to feel like me. So I covered my head until I worked up the courage to just walk around bald. That, in itself, provided a sense of liberation. I was proud of my bald head and what
it symbolized. I was proud to be carrying a full course load and a part-time job while undergoing the most traumatic, devastating experience in my life. I’m not the type to wear an awareness ribbon or a “Fuck cancer” t-shirt. This was my way of saying FU to my diagnosis.

1993

During my freshman year of high school, I noticed the smart, pretty girls wore large grosgrain bows perched atop their ponytails, customized with puffy paint in school colors with I.H.S. Class of 1998 and sometimes their initials. I found the look rather juvenile. What kind of teenager wears bows like a little girl, I thought. But nonetheless, somehow I convinced myself that a perky ponytail with a crisp grosgrain bow was a key to academic and social success. In a way I wasn’t wrong—the in crowd favored preppy looks to my 1990s grunge music vibes, a music movement and its accompanying aesthetic that originated in the cool climate of the Pacific Northwest, far away from my swampy, humidity-soaked Southeastern Louisiana home. My uniform of combat boots and flannel shirts tied around with my waist stood out on our monthly dress down days, the once-a-month opportunity to wear our regular clothes to school instead of our uniforms. I couldn’t compete with the pretty, smart girls so I went in the opposite direction.

During our annual tri-school mass, an affair that brought the other all-girl Catholic school and the all-boy Catholic school together under one roof, I decided to tease the shit out of my hair a la Gilda Radner. The mass was the event of the year in which the school administration was adamant that we strictly follow the school’s “formal” dress code. This meant everyone had to wear the requisite pleated skirt, ironed white button down and our scratchy navy polyester vest.
No logoed school sweatshirts, no special sweaters. We were drilled to be on our best behavior as we were representing our school to the highest degree.

My hair looked absolutely ridiculous, and that was exactly the point. It was an under-the-radar act of rebellion; it caught attention but technically I wasn’t doing anything against the rules so the teachers and nuns just had to grin and let it slide.

2018

OCTOBER— I shaved my head again that October. I was halfway through chemo, so it felt counter intuitive but my hair was growing back unevenly, like a patchy lawn: a pop of grass here, barren soil there. I wanted my hair to grow back evenly so I shaved the early growers to allow the rest of my hair to catch up. By January, I had full coverage, to the point that I looked less cancer patient, more Sinéad O’Connor. It looked like my haircut might be intentional.

I tried not to concern myself too much with other people’s opinions. On campus I sometimes noticed students start to stare, then quickly divert their gaze once we locked eyes. Were people really staring at me or was I being hypersensitive? There was no way to tell, unless a person actively tried to engage me in conversation. I was grabbing a coffee before class in the library coffee shop when a student worker initiated me in conversation as she was ringing me up.

“I like your shaved head,” she said. I offered up a quick yet polite thank you and placed my order.

“I want to shave my head.”

Oh lord, here we go.

“Something something something, blah blah blah.”
She just won’t quit, will she?

“I wish I had alopecia so I could be bald.”

I was still getting used to handling situations like this. Who wishes for an affliction like alopecia, one which strips its sufferer of all their hair? It’s one thing to make a choice about your haircut, it’s another to have baldness imposed upon you.

“I have cancer,” I blurted. My tone remained as polite as I could muster but I was raging inside. It was an awkward way to end an awkward conversation, but she finally shut up long enough for me to scurry back to my table with my coffee in peace. The newness of my situation was still fresh but I was already growing tired of these comments. The barista seemed unaffected by my response. I hoped that we would both learn something from our brief encounter.

In December I took up rollerskating for fun and exercise. I was strong enough to do it and it brought some much needed joy in my life. Thursday nights are adult skate night at the local roller rink. There was a 20-something woman there one night with a freshly shaved buzzcut and clear, acrylic eyeglasses, similar to mine. We made eye contact a few times, two women with a similar aesthetic. I wondered if her haircut was for fashion or from cancer. I wondered if she wondered the same about me.

2005

PRE-KATRINA— I couldn’t get away with much. When you’re pouring hundred dollar bottles of wine for diners, it’s generally frowned upon to show up to work with lavender hair. Now that might not necessarily be the case, but things were different fifteen years ago. Unnatural hair colors would elicit an eyebrow raise among the moneyed diners of New Orleans. So I did what I
could do to fly under the radar, barely bumping against what would be acceptable. My long sleeve uniform shirt covered up my tattoo, which made me feel like I was covering up my personality to make myself more palatable to guests. I bleached the lower portion of my hair blonde, a contrast to my natural brown. It was hideous, in hindsight, but it made me feel cool and sent a subtle FU to the stuffy diners (or at least I thought it did at the time.)

Two days after I quit that job, I pierced my nostril (professionally, of course. I was a grown up after all) and attempted to dye my thick, blunt bangs blue (not professionally, because I was broke as hell.) My DIY hairdo looked less my desired pool blue, more dirty dishwater. I dyed the rest of my natural brown hair a shoe polish black. Again, not a great choice but I had fun exploring this new, radically different look; I was trying on a new persona. Someone uninhibited, wanting to stand out but also fit in with the crowd I was hanging out with at the time, no matter if the look suited me or not.

2019

JANUARY— Once I grew accustomed to my new look I decided not having hair isn’t all that bad; there are a few perks. Chemo attacks all fast growing cells, which means I not only had a bald head but my armpits and legs were taken on a flashback to my pre-pubescent self. As excited as I was to start shaving my legs as a teen, I was ecstatic not to have to do it as frequently now as an adult. Having little to no hair on my head shaved time off my morning routine — no more blow drying and styling. I never have hat hair and I can wear the stickiest lip gloss and not have to worry about wisps of hair adhering themselves to my shiny lips. My hair was slowly
growing back in while I underwent chemo. My look was less Britney Spears break down circa 2007, more Mia Farrow circa 1996.

FEBRUARY— I had to wear a face mask for three weeks— thanks to going neutropenic— a few weeks after my last chemo session. It was the first time I had to mask up during my entire treatment and I was so sick of looking sick. Nothing says cancer patient more than short hair and a face mask. I decided to get a haircut, which was completely unnecessary but it helped me gain a small sense of control over my appearance.

I decided to go to a barber, something I had never done before; I was seeking something new, something different as I was trying to embrace this change and uncertainty. Nothing in my life felt like a guarantee; my hair ceased being this precious thing and yet I deliberated on even having a razor thin portion of it removed. It felt counterproductive to cut it when I was trying to let it grow but I also wanted to exert control, to not feel as if I was just a participant to my body. I needed to put my own touch on my hair, even if that meant getting a nearly imperceptible snip here and a buzz there. I sat in the barber chair, the only woman in the shop besides my barber. It was silent except for the low buzz of clippers and mumbled conversations. I felt out of place but not unwelcome; I wanted to exert my right to be in that space (besides being a paying customer) full of men, most seemingly on their lunch break, polished dress shoes firmly planted on footrests as the barbers slid razors down bare necks.

The cut took longer than I thought it would, which surprised me since I had very little to cut. I expressed that I wanted a line on the side of my head, something fleeting yet fun. I didn’t want something outlandish, like lines on a pressed panini but I wanted something different from my norm. If my hair was going to slowly grow back I might as well have fun with it. When the
barber was finished she spun me around to look at my new cut. I felt indifferent about it. The line—more like a horizontal candy cane—was fine, but my new look was more masculine than I liked. I didn’t feel the need to express myself as ultra feminine, but I also wanted to feel like myself. I uploaded the picture to social media, which evoked responses ranging from “Fuck yeah” to “Cute.”

I wonder what it will be like when I have a full head of hair again. Many cancer patients report that their hair grows back curly and, in rare instances, a different color. My hair is coming back in the same brown, albeit slightly darker. I wonder if I’ll keep my hair close cropped or let it grow out and never cut it again, hanging on to each strand as if my life depended on it.

1993

My cousin asked me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding. I was a freshman in high school; it was a time when I had dreams of lush aristocracy that contrasted with my lower middle-class upbringing. I was enthralled with Anne Rice’s Interview With A Vampire and 90’s mall fashions provided access to cheap velvet, which was the closest I would get to the frilly, bourgeois aesthetic of Lestat, Rice’s undead protagonist. So when my cousin asked me to stand in her wedding, I was thrilled to wear an emerald green taffeta dress and have my hair professionally styled in an updo with delicate tendrils of hair framing my face. I didn’t particularly care about the wedding so much as the opportunity to get dressed up. There were scant reasons to do otherwise, my life consisting of going to band practice in the scorching sun or daydreaming about getting swept away by some vampire hanging out in the swamp behind our house, after falling madly in love with me after becoming intoxicated by my rusty version of Handel’s Sonatas on flute.
On the morning of the wedding, my hair stylist sculpted my hair into submission, creating the soft, face framing waves and those tendrils of hair I so desired. A cloud of hairspray settled into my tresses, locking in like tree sap. My hair looked soft but was hard to the touch, ensuring that my stylist’s handiwork would remain intact from the opening notes of “Canon in D” to the cutting of the cake. My hair made it through the wedding and then some; my hair didn’t budge, even the next day. I threw my favorite flannel shirt and jeans on and went to Wal-Mart with my mom; my hair was all dressed up with nowhere to go.

2019

JUNE— I was in Whole Foods, grabbing a few groceries before heading back home after work. I was a barely a month out from my final surgery, feeling fresh and right with myself. I was sliding back into normalcy, rediscovering a life I had and figuring out the life that was now mine, a life post-cancer but not without worry. A life of regular CT scans and MRIs, constant bloodwork and doctors sending tiny cameras up my colon to peek inside. Sickness was barely behind me as I walked past the cut flowers and fresh squeezed juices when I saw myself in another woman, an all too familiar moment. My life was a video tape and someone paused the footage and hit rewind. The woman had on a medical mask and a close crop of tight curls stretched over her scalp. Then I noticed the fanny pack kept close to her body, perhaps a chemo pump just like I had endured that past winter, the IV hooked up to a needle piercing through the skin in her chest, slowly delivering toxic chemicals through a port, which would rely on her heart to disperse the chemo throughout her body. Or maybe she just liked the ease of a fanny pack, a bag small enough to to stash the essentials: her wallet, keys, phone, breath mints, maybe a pair of
sunglasses. I saw her in a flash but I was looking at myself, or at least a version of myself from the recent past. I nearly started to ugly cry right there next to the organic grapes. Was she sick? Was she scared? I would never know. I held back tears, my own hair still short with unruly curls, a result of chemo attacking my cells. I pushed my cart past the frozen fruit, past pink deli meats protected by thin plastic sleeves, while trying to compose myself long enough to get to the parking lot, throw my groceries into the backseat, and unleash a year’s worth of sorrow.

2019

NOVEMBER—Damn it. I had to shave it all off again. My hair was just long enough to look less cotton balls attached to my scalp, more soft ringlets, when it started to fall out a second time. The cancer had spread to my lungs this time, which was confirmed by a needle biopsy. Just like before, my hair started to fall out two weeks after my initial chemo treatment. I felt more prepared this time. I was less concerned about losing this precious thing, more worried that this recurrence could signal the start of chemo for life if the tumor didn’t respond to treatment as well as last time. This could be the last recurrence; I know the odds are against me; only fifteen percent of stage IV colorectal patients live to see the five-year mark. Still, I hope. Like those four letters—H-O-P-E—will be enough to wish this away (well that and modern medicine). I don’t know if this is the end or the beginning of the end; what if this turns out to be incurable? What if I’m on chemo for the rest of my life? What if I’m worrying too much and this is the end and I start fresh yet again when this is over?

2005

94
POST-KATRINA — We were on our way back to Arizona when I read the letter my mom gave me. I dyed my hair right before the storm and she hadn’t seen it before we evacuated. We landed in Phoenix in September after living in hotels and a friend’s parents’s house for three weeks. It was November, and we had the U-Haul loaded with all of our belongings that we left behind in New Orleans when we fled in the middle of the night to beat the storm. Our rental home was spared, but our neighborhood was not. With so much uncertainty back home, we decided to stay in Arizona, where we ended up living for three and a half years.

My mom isn’t good with confrontation, that’s why she wrote the letter. She gave me the letter before we left New Orleans and I waited to open the letter on the road. She told me I was a garbage human for dyeing my hair blue, or at least that’s the way she made me feel. She said I was superficial and told me I was a disappointment; she didn’t raise me to be a person who would do something so garish with their appearance. I thought I was having fun; she thought I was being immature. I hoped that by my moving across the country after Hurricane Katrina would soften her. The levees couldn’t hold back floodwaters and they certainly couldn’t hold back my mother’s opinion of me.

I didn’t regret dyeing my hair. I was tired of being judged and didn’t want to succumb to her. I was twenty-five years old and a grown ass married woman, perfectly capable of making decisions for myself. I can’t recall if I wrote her back but I can recall that I didn’t speak to her for a long time after that.

2019
DECEMBER— I shaved my head again. The hair loss isn’t as dramatic this time and I’m not sure if it’s my perception or if I’m prepared. The strands started to fall out strand by strand, barely perceptible, like the first time I went through this. After two weeks, it came out in fistfuls, clogging the bathtub drain and leaving its mark on my collar, the back of the sofa, and the seat of my car. My hair was everywhere. I handed a clump to my husband as if I was proving to myself that this is real. Two people offered to shave it for me but I insisted that I could do it myself. I borrowed my brother’s clippers again and my husband offered to clean up the back for me, the part of myself that I couldn’t see.

Just like last time, most of my body hair fell out. My armpits remained smooth and my pubic hair was sparse. Hey, at least I’ll save money on razors. I tried to find the silver lining to make light of the situation and make it more bearable. I haven’t had to buy shampoo in well over a year and I canceled my razor subscription service. Who know when, if ever, I’ll need razors again.

2019

DECEMBER— The only time I chose to wear wigs was during costume parties and Mardi Gras. Living in New Orleans provides a myriad of opportunities to don a costume, so I associated wigs with celebratory affairs, not chemo. My decision not to wear a wig throughout chemo was also pragmatic; wigs are hot, trapping heat in their netted scalps and plastic strands and they tend to slide.

The first time I wore a wig during treatment was to a winter costume party the previous December. My husband and I wore matching blonde bobs under matching white top hats
adorned with sequins and sprigs of snow covered greenery to match our all white suit jackets. We looked fabulous and clearly stood out as some of the best dressed people at the party while I enjoyed blending in, masquerading as a healthy person for the first time. This time, however, I decided to try out a blonde wig for daily use. A friend mentioned she got a free wig from the American Cancer Society, so I said what the hell and gave it a go. It was fun but I did feel self conscious in it. Were people clocking me for wearing a wig? Did anyone even notice? I still wore it, adopting a playful attitude about my faux follicles. I felt like I was trying on a new identity, albeit temporarily. And I could always take it off and go back to being me.

**A Future Date**

I imagine stepping out of the shower and reaching for a towel to gently squeeze the water out of my saturated locks. I’ll run my fingers through my hair, carefully loosening the knots with my slightly numb fingertips, a permanent side effect of the chemotherapy I needed a long time ago. The numbness is faint but it is still there. Instead of the neuropathy debilitating me like it did at the tail end of my first bout with cancer— making me drop bottles and sending daggers up my legs, across my feet and down my arms and through my fingertips— it’s now a faint reminder of all I have been through. This hair isn’t a guarantee. I’m not sure how long I will have it. What if the cancer comes back? For now, I preserve this precious thing that I have.
Pushing The Threshold

The news of my grandmother’s death came as a shock. Just two days before I talked to her on the phone. We cracked each other up despite trading stories about our health; she was suffering through a somewhat recent chronic illness but was still able to exercise and take visits from friends. And Maw Maw was never one to turn down an opportunity to tell a joke, the dirtier the better.

Mom called that morning. Grandma suffered a heart attack in the middle of the night at the hospital. Emergency room visits weren’t uncommon; she was eighty-four, but we never worried about a fatal incident.

After missing so many days for my own medical ailments, I decided to go to work. *I’ll see her in the hospital when I get off.* Instead, I left work an hour after I stepped through the door of the office. Maw Maw went downhill so fast that I barely had time to process what happened. It was a flash of texts and phone calls between mom, my aunt and uncle, and my Paw Paw. They were there at the hospital, hanging on to her every movement, her every breath until there were no more. I felt a firm hand pushing my head underwater and not letting go. Just like that, she slipped away from us. The whole thing lasted no more than fifteen minutes, not even long enough for me to make it to drive to the hospital to tell her goodbye.
Once I composed myself I drove home and decided to go for a run. I tucked my ostomy bag into a special belly band I wore to keep the glorified poop bag off my skin, slipped my running shorts on over that, and stretched my legs before. I had to run. There was no other option but to get my anger out, to expel the rage from within. This wasn’t fair, life wasn’t fair; I just couldn’t believe it. How much more tragedy could I take in such a short amount of time? How much more tragedy could my family take?

It was April; the temperature was pleasantly warm, not yet insufferable as New Orleans’ summers so often are. I pushed past my threshold, running as fast as I could. I dug my heels into the soft earth. I left a little piece of each trauma, dug it into the ground. My heart pumped, my arms fell in sync with my legs, as Run the Jewels drowned out the noise of passing cars.

Fuck the world, don’t ask me for shit...

I dreamt we owned the world but I’ve woken up and it don’t exist

How could this be happening right now? I was fresh off two traumas: my own surgery to remove my rectal tumor and my husband’s Vespa accident, one that required two surgeries and multiple plates and screws to jimmy his elbow back in place. Either one of these incidents would have been a major life event but there was no time to mourn one loss or another; emotions got jumbled up into one, one incident overlapping into the next. I was completely overwhelmed yet the string of occurrences somehow made it easier, it made them surreal, gave them a quality of OMG WTF, took it to absurdity.

Cardiac arrested, I’m so invested

I’m self-invented/ That’s no illusion/ There’s no confusion

You see the future. You fear the future
I’ve seen the truth and I’m so deluded

I took a shower — the hot water kept the slow burn of my lungs lingering in a pleasant way as the thin residue of sweat and oil washed away — scrubbing myself presentable to go to my grandparents’s house, preparing myself for the onslaught of emotions that only come in intimate moments like a death, when humans come together to mourn a life lived, a love lost. I was ready. I had taken care of myself.
Big Infinities, Little Infinities

I attempted to balance the weight of my entire body on my big toe. My fingertips were jammed in the handhold of a rock as I pushed up everything inside of me — a year’s worth of cancer treatments — to the side as I fought the pull of gravity.

“Look down at your feet. Make sure you get a good survey of all the footholds. There’s a nice one to your left.” That was Fish, one of the guides from the Colorado Mountain School that was hired to teach thirteen of us cancer patients and survivors how to rock climb for the week. I summoned everything in me to move my body up the vertical rock, step by step, wedging my fingers and toes into crevices the width of a razor blade. It felt dangerous to us even though we were on the bunny slopes of rock climbing; our ropes and harnesses kept us safe, which I reminded myself over and over again. *Put your trust in this equipment even if you don’t trust yourself yet.* At just over 7,500 feet above sea level, the air in Estes Park, Colorado was noticeably thinner than back home in New Orleans, where the air is heavy and laden with humidity and the city slumps at a precarious two feet below sea level. My breathing in Colorado was labored, my lungs searching for every oxygen molecule that they could. Four months later, I would find out that my cancer had returned and spread into my lungs. But in that moment, I was blissfully naive, thinking that cancer was a thing of the past. My only thoughts in that moment were finishing the route.
I learned about this rock climbing trip in one of the private Facebook groups I joined shortly after I received my cancer diagnosis. A free rock climbing trip? Sounds too good to be true. I was skeptical, but I did my research on First Descents, the nonprofit that was putting on these cancer camps. I had done plenty of scrambling, hopping over boulders, off-trail hikes in Arizona, but rock climbing was daunting. I didn’t know a belay device from a carbinger; climbing didn’t seem like the type of activity you just casually start to do one day. It wasn’t like hiking, where you can just lace up your boots, grab a backpack, and go. There was equipment to buy: ropes, special shoes, helmets, harnesses, chalk bags, and all sorts of other contraptions to keep you safe. I couldn’t pass up this opportunity. In what was the most challenging year of my life, I wanted to challenge myself even more, albeit on my own terms. I hounded my oncologist to fill out the mountain of medical release forms so I could get the application in on time. Almost as soon as I was back in New Orleans from Ireland, I was on a plane to the Denver airport for a week of falling and making new friends (both were inevitable) with twelve other young people impacted by cancer.

Climbing is also not a solo activity, at least for beginners. You have to put faith into other climbers assisting you up the crag. I was excited to get to learn how to climb but I was nervous, naturally, not quite sure what to expect when I landed at the Denver airport. I was put at ease when I found my other “FDers” at the airport. Our guide, Rut-Ro, picked up four of us at the airport to shuttle us to Estes Park. On the hour and a half ride, we quickly learned that campers are given nicknames for the week. It’s a longstanding tradition designed to help us shed our old, cancer-ridden lives, and to help us focus on the fun of rock climbing while challenging ourselves both physically and mentally. I was assigned “Tatts,” an obvious choice given my ample number of tattoos. I like to think (hope) that my tattoos are the least interesting thing about me, but I have
never fielded so many questions about them in such a rapid fire manner as I did at FD. They were an easy conversation starter, which would progress into trading stories with my fellow campers about diagnoses, surgeries, and a life where the norm is constant poking and prodding by doctors and nurses. Other campers took names such as Slice & Dice (a chef), Wobbles (a pharmacist with vertigo), Splits (a professional pole dancer), and Cubbie (a Chicago Cubs fan).

We quickly settled into the pleasant routine of waking up to breakfast waiting for us (cooked by a professional chef), then piled into the vans to go out for our daily climb. Once we got back to Overlook Ranch, our home for the week, we would have a few hours to ourselves before dinner and the nightly camp fire.

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Those first days on the rocks were more mentally than physically challenging. We were not only learning how to climb, but how to belay each other, which requires putting faith into your partner and that they will catch you if you fall. Initially, I was nervous about climbing but belaying was even more frightening. How could someone entrust me to assist them on their climb when we were all just getting to know each other? I quickly realized that belaying, the smooth motion of pulling the rope up, out, and down to create tension for the climber, was a lot more fun than I thought it would be. Even with my diminutive 5’1” frame, I could slowly lower my partner on descent as long as I stayed present in the moment.

Before we started our third day of climbing, Fritz and Cubby, both social workers out in the real world, led the group in a mindfulness exercise, explaining how our bodies harbor PTSD and we internalize that trauma and our bodies hold it. The day before, I had a rough one on the
crag. I was going for my fourth climb of the day on a particularly tough section. Maybe it was the “chemo brain” or maybe it was just exhaustion, but chatter from my fellow climbers down below proved distracting and I just couldn’t physically move my body on a horizontal spot, then switch gears and shimmy across a vertical ledge. So I quit. Rut-Ro had stressed that this week would be “challenge by choice” and, up until that point, I didn’t entertain the idea of quitting. But I just couldn’t get across that ledge, so I allowed myself to honor what my body was trying to tell me.

Fritz and Cubby lead us through a series of yoga poses and a pep talk before attacking the crag that day. I wasn’t the only one who had struggled on the crag the day before. “There are big infinities and little infinities in life,” Fritz said. “When we have cancer, we have to come to grips with the big infinities, such as our health.” The little infinities, such as mild annoyances of life, aren’t so important. And yet they are. They’re important to others who haven’t had to deal with cancer, especially so young in life. Fritz explained it further in a later conversation:

“It’s based on the two mathematical types of infinities— all the fractions between zero and one and then all the numbers ever inclusive of those fractions. Both infinite, both important, but one is still larger. And it’s a helpful way to see both problems and people — it’s not that moving or job stuff or whatever isn’t hard or important, but it’s a little infinity. Cancer, loss, these are big infinities.”

I went hard on the rock that day. After that pep talk I felt reinvigorated. I was so focused on challenging myself that I needed that reminder to go easy on myself sometimes. After a year of cancer treatments, being a graduate student and graduate assistant, I had no time for chill. Oh, the things we tell ourselves to get through the hard times. You remind yourself that the pain is
temporary, that if you complete this you’ll feel so accomplished afterwards. I used to tell myself that a lot when I hiked in the Grand Canyon, especially on difficult off-trail hikes with my brother. However, there is no challenge by choice in cancer.

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By mid-week we earned a rest day, so we piled into the vans and drove through Rocky Mountain National Park. We stopped off at a waterfall, then snaked up the mountain, getting out at various look out points to admire the view. On our way to Heart Attack Hill, construction work caused a prolonged stop as the two-way road carved into the mountain trickled into one-way construction as workers directed motorists. The backdrop of mountains felt unreal, like we were on a movie set. Alpine lakes added dimension to the snow-capped peaks and rugged terrain. Elk grazed so close to the van we could practically reach out and touch them. Coming from New Orleans, where the highest point is Monkey Hill, a manmade mound at the zoo, the scenery took my breath away just as much as the high altitude did.

At one point, traffic came to a grinding halt, the mountains making me imagine Julie Andrews singing tunes in “The Sound of Music.” Instead of Broadway tunes, George Michael’s “Freedom” started playing in the van at that exact moment. With time to kill, Rut-Ro encouraged us to get out of the van and run around the FD van behind us. We were giddy with adrenaline, not unlike high school kids on a field trip.

Freedom! (I won’t let you down)
Freedom! (I will not give you up)
Freedom! (Have some faith in the sound)
You’ve gotta give for what you take (It's the one good thing that I've got)
We stopped for a photo op with the mountains and stood in a line for a picture, backs turned to the camera like we were posing for a music video; we started dancing with this impossibly grand pastoral setting as our backdrop. The moment felt as pure as the air. It was a scene straight out of a movie, a line of cancer survivors dancing on this winding road with Rocky Mountain National Park as a backdrop.

*Freedom! (I won’t let you down)*
*Freedom! (So please don’t give me up)*
*Freedom! (’Cause I would really, really love to stick around)*
*You’ve gotta give for what you take*

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I teetered on the edge. Afraid to climb down, I initially thought I would just go over the lip easy because we had practice this before and I have no troubles rappelling. However, the moment you decide to step off the edge of a cliff — backwards, no less— is when the fear begins. We had just finished a super fun scramble to the top of a large rock formation. This last climb of the week was unlike the other climbs we did. A lot of the pitches reminded me of the scrambles I did with my brother at the Grand Canyon, albeit without rope. I was reliving those moments as I climbed over the rocks. Now, looking down, I couldn’t see where I was going to place my foot. I had to put complete trust in Meatball, my mountain guide, and the equipment that was designed to not let me down, figuratively speaking. I prepped myself by sitting into a 90° angle, pressing my butt down as in a sitting position. I shuffled down, one foot at a time until I got the hang of it. That initial drop was the worst part. Afterwards, I felt pure joy, much like on a carnival ride; I did not want the moment to end. I didn’t want to go back down on the ground to reality. I just
wanted to keep climbing down farther and farther. Couldn’t I just hang on that wall and enjoy the views forever?

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There were little FD traditions built into the week, including a rock ceremony. On the way to a climb one morning, we stopped off at a creek near the road and were instructed to find two rocks—one smooth, one jagged. Sharpies were handed out and we were tasked with writing all the things we liked about ourselves on the smooth rock and all the things we didn’t like on the imperfect rock. Then, after reflecting on these choices, we were to throw the jagged rock back into the creek so that our imperfect self could emerge smooth, our imperfections washed away over time. But I had no interest in keeping the “perfect” rock. I reversed the order, finding the nooks and crannies of the imperfect choice more visually interesting. The flaws gave my rock personality. Another First Descents tradition involved a ceremony with a kiddie pool filled with water. We were each given a floating candle to honor the people who couldn’t make it on this trip either due to illness or death. It was a serious moment, each of us holding a candle under the wide, star-filled sky with coyotes howling in the distance. It was peaceful and quiet until Renegade, one of the other campers, let out a fart so loud that it silenced even the crickets. We couldn’t stifle our giggles, even as we were trying to honor our loved ones. I managed to pull it together long enough to place my floating candle in the kiddie pool and dedicate it to my dad.

At the last campfire, Rut Ro warned us of feeling the “First Descents hangover” of going back into the real world, interacting with people who just didn’t get it. At camp we didn’t have to explain ourselves to anyone. Cancer is such a dramatic word but post-treatment brings more subtle nuances, which aren’t as sexy. It’s our equivalent of complaining about small infinities
with the caveat that it stems from a big infinity, a mosquito in your ear that never goes away. We
didn’t have to explain the dull aches, the neuropathy in our fingers and toes from chemo, or the
ways treatment left us feeling like eighty-year-old women. We didn’t have to explain what NED
stands for (No Evidence of Disease) or what it’s like to worry that you won’t live to see your
niece grow up.

I started to feel the FD hangover as soon as I got dropped off at the airport the next day.
Trying to find a healthy meal was difficult and greasy slices of pizza and overcooked burgers
weren’t appealing after a week of eating plant-based, home cooked meals. There was also an
ease to being surrounded by other people who just got it. In that group I was the norm, not the
exception. Everyone wanted to learn how to rock climb, or at least challenge themselves to try
something new and scary. I was also about to slip back into my regular life for the first time
since I left for Ireland in late June, back to my reality of countless medical tests and doctor
appointments. That October, I would find out the lung nodules that popped up on my June PET
scan had nearly doubled in size. A needle biopsy a few weeks later would confirm that my
cancer was back after four months of celebrating NED status and enjoying what I thought was a
cancer free summer. The day I found out my cancer returned, my sister found out that her best
friend’s brother-in-law was killed in a car accident. Same. Damn. Day. Part of me thought “Oh
wow, you just never know when you’re going to go” and part of me thought well, at least he
didn’t suffer. He died in an instant, not even knowing what happened to him. When I die, it will
most likely be a slow, painful death. But I didn’t have much time to think about that. For now, I
would focus on starting chemotherapy for the second time, throwing all those small infinities out
with my hair yet again.
Dear Hazel,

Is it selfish of me to want to see you grow up? Is it selfish of me to want to live long enough to know you as a child, then, as a teenager and I hope, then, as a young adult? Is it selfish of me to want to die after I get to know you, when you’re old enough to understand loss? Maybe, but that doesn’t stop me from desperately wanting to live so I can watch you grow up instead of just living on through stories.

I remember going to my first funeral. I can’t recall how old I was or who it was for but my mom and dad took me because they thought it would help ease me into going to those types of things. I’m not sure if it helped but I remember when my grandpa died. I was a freshman in high school. He was a heavy smoker and got lung cancer which spread to his brain; that was the second funeral I remember. The only other funeral that stands out after that was for my dad.

Nothing prepared me for that.

According to statistics from The American Cancer Society, there is only a fifteen percent chance I will live for another five years. That puts us at ages forty-two and four, respectively. There is a good chance I won’t live long enough to tell you embarrassing stories about your mom. I joke about you getting pissed off at your parents and coming to live with Aunt Christy
during high school summer break and you sneaking out to the bar but joke’s on you, I’m already at the bar when you arrive. That would put me at fifty-seven and you at eighteen years old. It’s impossible to tell what you’ll be like when you start to talk, much less what you’ll be like when you read this. You already get angry when you don’t get what you want. *Me too, girl. Me too.*

I know there will be times when people ask how you are doing. Maybe you will be sad, thinking about your Aunt Christy who passed away. Or maybe I’ll be sitting right there with you, ordering you a frozen daiquiri (don’t tell your mom). Either way, I hope you can answer them by stealing a line from Paw Paw Ricky: “Any better and I couldn’t stand it.”

Love,

Your aunt
Works Consulted


Vita

Christy Lorio obtained two Bachelor's degrees in English and Film & Theater from The University of New Orleans in 2015. She joined the University of New Orleans creative writing program to obtain a Master of Fine Arts in 2017. Christy is a New Orleans area native and, upon completion of her MFA in creative writing, will be returning to UNO to pursue a second MFA in photography for the Fall 2020 semester.