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The Waiting Room

BY CATHERINE K. KAPPAHN

A father and daughter spend 39 mornings in radiation oncology.

We brushed snow off the car and scraped ice off the windshield. I shivered and muttered, “It’s so cold.”

“It’s not so bad,” my dad laughed, giving me a little smile, his dimples appearing, his long face cheerful even at this early hour. He slipped his cane into the back seat. At 73, his balance wasn’t what it used to be.

Normally, my father never left his apartment until he had read the Denver Post and finished the crossword puzzle, but our 6:30 a.m. departure time was early even for him, though he was pleased about beating the morning rush hour. As we drove by the cemetery where my mom was buried, we both glanced out the window. In my mind, I could picture the gravestone where my father’s name was engraved beside hers. Eventually we turned east, toward the violet Colorado sunrise.

I remember the call. Right away I knew from the downturn of his voice as he said, “Oh, that’s too bad.” Afterward he sat down. “Katie, it’s bad news. It’s cancer.” I couldn’t speak; fear tore every word from my throat.



Catherine Kappahn in Colorado with her father, Dave. Photo by Nita Noveno.

Entering St. Joseph Hospital, I headed straight for the coffee cart. We said hello to the elderly nun, who sat at the volunteer station (an order of nuns live in the hospital). The radiation oncology unit was quiet; only a few lights were on. We sat together for a little while before my dad said, “Well, I’d better go,” like he did each morning. He handed me his wallet and headed back to the inner waiting room where patients changed and waited for their number to be called. I pulled out my journal and jotted down what treatment we were on, No. 19, and how many were left, 20. I noted how the radiation was affecting my father, fatigue and digestive troubles, and how for the first time in a while I was slowing down, and how all of this reminded me of taking care of my mother when she was dying of ovarian cancer 10 years ago.

I live in New York City with my husband and dog, but I am in Colorado with my father. I come often. It’s still my home. When I arrived this time, I was terrified that my dad wouldn’t make it, that I’d be left at 32 without a parent.

Pansy, a tiny white-haired woman, shuffled into the waiting room followed by her husband who wore a baseball cap and took rhythmic strides, keeping time with taps of his cane. She shook her finger at me and said, “You beat us today.” Usually I saw their shiny white pickup as I parked. Pansy got her radiation treatment right after my dad. She had colon cancer.

A wiry man with yellow-tinted glasses sat down—he was waiting for his wife to finish her treatment for breast cancer. He had told me weeks earlier that his hearing-aid batteries had worn out. Now he shouted over to me, “At least we’re not missing anything. You can’t golf in this weather!” His wife, thin and tired, came out. “I don’t want to go back out there in that cold,” she said. “I don’t blame you,” he said, as he patted her arm.

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A bright pink jacket flashed through the automatic glass doors. It was Rosalie and her husband, George. He wore large glasses and a blue plaid shirt, and his dark gray hair was slicked back from his receding hairline. Like my dad, he also had prostate cancer and was eight treatments ahead of us. “Hi, George,” I said, “You haven’t got many more treatments left.” He held a finger up to his lips. “Don’t let the nuns know,” he whispered. “I don’t want one of those graduation ceremonies.” George glanced back to make sure no one had heard and then headed back.

My first week in the waiting room, Rosalie sat across from me, reading her library book while I wrote in my journal. After five treatments, when my dad began having side effects, I finally got up the nerve to talk. Now, after she bought her cup of coffee, she strolled right over. We talked side effects and found humor somewhere between Imodium and Metamucil. She let me know what was coming. We talked about how stubborn men can be when you try to get them to eat things that are easier on their stomachs, like white rice and Cream of Wheat. Sometimes, it felt as if I were living two days in one, I admitted. “Right after breakfast, I go straight to bed.”

“I’m glad you said that,” she said, laughing. “I was feeling guilty that George and I always need to take a nap when we get home.” We reminded each other that we were lucky. This was usually the “good” cancer, the slow-growing one, the one that was highly treatable, the one that sometimes gave you a chance to die of something else before it got you.

“This isn’t like your mother’s cancer,” Rosalie reminded me as she peered through her glasses. Talking to Rosalie, I felt less afraid. She said talking to me made her realize she wasn’t alone. This reminded me of how, when my mom was dying, each change seemed less shocking when the hospice nurse explained what was happening. Still, when I found out my dad was about to undergo eight weeks of radiation treatment, it felt exactly the same as when I came home to take care of my mom at the end of her life. I kept trying to convince myself that this wasn’t the same.

One morning, Rosalie and I sat across from a couple in their late 50s. The man was at the hospital for a preliminary appointment. I could tell he was nervous because he wouldn't look up from his magazine. His wife, a gregarious woman in a floral skirt, told us that her husband was here for prostate cancer, and that more than two years ago she had breast cancer. "I'm an artist," she said. "Before my mastectomy, I drew an eye with lashes on my breast. I drew some tears falling, and I wrote 'I'll miss you.'" I pictured this woman standing in front of a bathroom mirror, carefully drawing on the soft skin of her breast, creating something out of a part of herself that was about to be taken away.

She grinned. "Before the surgery, when the doctors saw my breast, they couldn't stop laughing. They'd never seen anything like it!" Her husband chuckled, his eyes fastened to his magazine. Then she said softly, "When I woke up, the nurse told me they left a few lashes."

In hospital waiting rooms you find yourself talking about the weather and traffic, then suddenly you're talking about life and death, revealing intimate things to strangers. Somehow illness creates an instant community.

Once George finished his treatments and Rosalie stopped coming, I started going back to the inner waiting room with my dad. Most of the people there had breast or prostate cancer. Padded chairs lined the four walls. I sat beside women in hospital gowns and perfect wigs, men watching CNN and reading Time magazine. On the tables were chocolates, paper plates of cookies, a gurgling coffee machine and a blue fighting fish swimming around in a glass bowl.

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One morning, a Latina woman with short, feathered black hair, came in with her 27-year-old daughter. I had seen them in passing each morning. "It's my last day!" she announced to the room before heading back. She has breast cancer, her daughter told me. "They caught it early." I told her about my mom. Then she calmly told me that when she was 20, she found a lump. She pushed her fingers just below her ribs to show me the exact place. "They did tests and surgery. It turned out that I had advanced ovarian cancer."

"What? My God, you're so young," I said, not so calmly.

"I know. They had to do a hysterectomy and everything. I had six months of chemo." She sighed. I waited. "But I've been in remission for seven years. I was the first one in my family to have cancer." As her words sank in, I realized she would never be able to have children. Then I thought to myself, but she's alive, she survived the thing I'm most afraid of.

Two nuns bustled into the waiting room, announcing: "We have a graduation!" When the young woman's mother returned, they placed a bright white graduation cap on her head. They played a tape of "Pomp and Circumstance," hooked arms and marched her around the room while everyone clapped.

“I wish I had my camera,” the daughter exclaimed, beaming. Someone passed out photocopied lyrics and the nuns led us in song: “Every little cell in my body is happy/Every little cell in my body is well/I’m so glad, It’s so swell/Every little cell is happy and well.”

For a moment I felt like laughing, but then my eyes began to water. I stood up and slipped my hands in the back pockets of my jeans. The mother looked embarrassed and relieved and she reached out her arms to me. We embraced, and I whispered in her ear, “Congratulations. You made it.”

One Saturday morning, my dad told me he had a dream about my mother. “She was lying in bed and she wasn’t moving. There was this woman there, and she touched Mama’s arm, and I told her, ‘No, don’t. She’s dead.’ Then suddenly Mama opened her eyes.” He shook his head in amazement. “I told her, ‘Marijana, how can you be awake? You’ve been dead for 10 years!’ Then I told her how we went to Croatia and Venezuela. I told her that I could show her the photographs.” In the years after my mom’s death, my father took me to Croatia, where my mom was born, then to Venezuela, where they were married.

My father added, “I told her how I moved into this apartment. I showed her all the rooms and how I have the same pictures on the wall and sleep in the same bed that she and I slept in.” I had stumbled into one of those moments where, for an instant, the three of us were together again. I wondered if my mom appeared in my father’s dream to remind him that he wasn’t alone.

On our 39th morning, our final one in the hospital, my dad popped his head through the doorway after his treatment, and said, “Katie, I’m done. Let’s go.” The nuns hadn’t yet arrived, and we hightailed it out of there. Just before I left to return to New York, Rosalie made me a wooden angel with a shimmering silver bow for wings, long curly brown hair, and black painted eyelashes. “To watch over you,” she told me.

It’s been almost four years since my dad’s last treatment. He still keeps in touch with George and Rosalie, and they meet for breakfast once a month. One recent morning, the four of us slid into a booth at the Village Inn and scanned the large plastic menus. As I listened to them talk and laugh about some old radio show, I was reminded that the small moments in life, like breakfast with people you love, are sometimes the most exquisite.