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Coping

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHULTZ

It was the first news I'd ever heard after being told to sit down. I wondered later if everybody remembers the first time that happens, like we remember the first meek kiss and the first spill off our bike.

It was winter and I was a junior in college. I'd just come into my room after a week of midterms, and the phone rang. My sister, Heidi. When she told me that I should sit, I didn't know what to think. Did something really good happen? I didn't think there was anything bad that she could possibly say.

She started retracing the previous few months: Remember when I came to visit and my ankle was hurting? We were dancing at that concert, and I had to kind of limp? She went on, and I knew then. I knew it was coming, and my mind raced forward. No way. Not her. I hadn't sat down when she told me to, but I sat down then.

The word malignant came through, rammed its onomatopoetic leer right into my face, choked me a little. But there was something behind it—the tone that carried it, her voice, imparting the word its due weight but not giving it anything more, as a policeman might announce a miscreant child over the phone to his parents: Ma'am, we've got a little problem. It brought me back, that tone. It was my sister, after all. She'd beat this thing. How did I know? That voice, the first hint of strength that I (and, I came to realize, she) never knew she had.

We went wig shopping when I was home at Thanksgiving. We talked about how strange it was for insurance to pay for a wig, in full, when they were so ornery about every other possible payment. We had fun in the store, trying on different styles—the platinum Zsa Zsa, the impossibly spherical Supremes, the bright red Annie, the Princess Lea. As Heidi decided which wig to get, I told her that she would never put it on. She held it up the way people hold wigs, raising it to eye level, twisting her wrist, her fingers spreading the nylon mesh inside. It'll be bandannas and maybe hats, but not this, I said.

When I came home for Christmas she was in the hospital, closing out the first round of chemotherapy. I slept on the couch next to Heidi's bed that night. As I walked around the floor I saw many patients. I made eye contact with many of them, and they had a strong look. There were a few, dispirited, but the others I couldn't believe. Every last look, a big heart behind it, so vibrant.

That's when it hit me. Everybody's always asking what he or she can do. Hair disappears, weight rises and falls, I.V. tubes plug in and pull out, nausea ebbs and boils. But there is still your sister or brother who expects you—wants you—not to

switch the mood to dire just because that's what people do. They throw that strong glance your way, and you know that all you must do is treat them as you have before. This underlying simplicity hit me and my chest swelled a little.

I swept a small swath of blonde hair off Heidi's pillow and put it inside the book on the couch where I'd slept. I understood, just a little, what my place in this was: to be myself, just as I'd always been with my sister. She would hold us together over the next two years, her assuring aspect as much of a constant as the wig that stayed in her closet.

Christopher Schultz's sister, Heidi Schultz Adams, is the founder and executive director of Planet Cancer (www.planetcancer.org).