The Sun and All Her Scars

It is September of 2017 and we are sitting at a café next to the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. The sun feels like it's turned its whole face towards us, bathing us in light.

My mother is drinking wine–something she rarely does at home–and adjusting her sunglasses. She's trying to read the menu and I'm laughing at the awful Italian accent she's putting on–for my benefit more than anything. My mother is the type of person who will gladly embarrass herself if it means other people will laugh. It's one of the best things about her, among the endless list. That's the way she's always been–someone who shines as bright as the sun.

I ordered pasta, obviously, because we're in Italy, and I take a moment to appreciate just how fantastic the carbonara is. When people travel and talk about food, I always assume that there's a mirage that overcomes them: food in another country isn't better, you just have vacation goggles on. The perfectly-al-dente noodles swirl around my mouth and I take back everything I've ever said about cuisine and goggles and lying. I stand completely corrected.

My mom makes a joke about Italy having a "pizza" her heart and I laugh more at her than the pun. We've both made it a big deal not to talk about why we're here. For the first time in my life, I am out of the United States, and for the first time in my mother's, she is too. We're on vacation, sort of like our very own *Eat, Pray, Love* moment. We're celebrating something huge–the most important thing in my life. In my family's life.

My mom is cancer free.

For the past year and a half, we have all been filled with this unbearable uncertainty. This anxious dread that things might not get better, or that treatment would cause more harm than good. There were so many rounds of radiation and major surgeries. I find myself returning to moments, like visions that transport me to the past: the stark white walls of the hospital waiting

room and the smell of antiseptic. A nurse in bright scrubs asking if I wanted any coffee while I tried to study for a biology test during one of her treatments.

Perhaps the most important moment of all: the day that she told me.

One day when I was sixteen years old, I came home from soccer practice to find her sitting on our couch, perfectly still. I don't know how long she had been there, her head in her hands, waiting. For who–I'm not sure exactly. It could have been anyone walking through the door at 5:30 on a Thursday afternoon. My dad would hopefully be getting home from work soon, and my brother would be finishing up his own extracurriculars. Yet, it was me who arrived first. The moment my foot crossed the threshold I could feel it in the air.

Something was wrong.

This was almost six years ago, but I remember almost every detail, down to what was on the T.V. when I paused at the threshold, my backpack still hanging from my shoulder, ready to be discarded in its usual place of rest by the front door. In psychology, they call this a "flashbulb memory"–it's your body's way of taking an important or particularly emotional moment and ingraining it in your mind in its most vivid form. A memory you'll never be able to forget, no matter how hard you try.

I remember the sinking feeling in my stomach and hundreds of "worst-case-scenarios" that flashed through my mind. My dad in a car accident. My brother, injured from one of the many dangerous stunts he liked to pull in his free time. My grandparents, still young for their title, but incredibly fragile. *Who died?* I wanted to blurt out. Instead, I felt frozen, holding my breath in attempts to ease the panic that had already settled like a heavy coat over me.

"Mom?" I finally asked, still hanging in limbo by the front door. Immediately her hands dropped from her face, falling soundlessly into her lap.

“Hi, honey. Can you come here?”

I remember how tired she sounded, her voice hoarse from crying.

“What’s wrong?” I couldn’t hide the anxiety that clawed its way out of my throat and into my speech, betraying the fear that had made a home in me from the second I arrived.

When she invited me over to sit by her, I remember turning first to face the T.V. in an attempt to give myself a moment to regain my composure. Staring back at me was an anchor for the local news channel, giving some update on an eastern storm that we *might* feel the impact of. It may as well have been static, or some other language. I didn’t hear a thing.

My mom was telling me that the doctor had called while she was at the grocery store. She wanted me to know, first, that “everything is going to be alright.” When someone says that everything is going to be okay, or not to panic, prepare yourself for some of the worst news you’ve ever heard.

She had stage two breast cancer.

A couple of weeks ago, she had gone in for a routine check up, which ended in a biopsy on what they thought to just be a benign tumor; the sample was meant to be a precautionary measure–routine for someone her age. A “just in case.”

“Most of the time it’s nothing,” the nurse had told her. “But we have to make sure anyway.”

I remember all of the blood rushing to my ears and feeling like I had swallowed gravel. Even as a kid, I could always tell when the tears were coming because of the lump that formed in my throat. It was always the first tell-tale sign, more than liquid in my eyes. Maybe it was my defense mechanism for holding in a sob.

Her words washed over me, full of reassurances that they caught it early. That she was going to be okay. To this day, I've never told her what went through my mind in the first few minutes of sitting on that couch.

When you're given the hypothetical situation that your mother could die, your brain does this strange thing where it conjures up images of what life would be like without her. Would she be at my graduation? My wedding? Would she ever meet my kids? Here was this vibrant, warm, wonderful human being who seemed to light up every room she walked into; who could fix my problems with the brush of her hand. My mother knew me better than anyone in the world–could read my mind with just a look–and she could be taken away from me. It felt like sitting next to a ghost; this version of my mother looked like someone had washed all of the color out of her. I felt sick to my stomach.

Life without her would be unimaginable. Bleak. Colorless.

She asked if I was okay, and I couldn't figure out how to respond. It was like someone had frozen me in place. In the game of fight or flight, it turns out I choose freeze. I remember thinking to myself *Say something. Anything. Nod your head. Reach for her hand. Whatever you do, don't cry, please.*

At practice I had scraped my right knee on the turf, removing the top layer of skin where my sock ended and the rest of my leg appeared. When I sat down, the skin had stretched and little beads of blood had formed, not quite spilling over, but letting me know the wound had reopened. Of all the things in that moment, this small scrape seemed insignificant. Something I knew would heal, despite the pain of it.

I wished I could say the same about the sixteen year old girl, still stuck on the couch after all of these years. If ever there were a moment in my life where I separated from my old self, or

took on a new form, or every cell in my body was changed by a single event, it would be that one. There are invisible wounds in all of us, some as small as a scraped knee, and some as big as surgery scars. For me, the wound of my mothers disease is like a bruise. There are times when I forget that it's there: six years later and it sometimes feels like this horrible, awful thing happened to someone else. Some other mother with some other daughter, somewhere else.

But, sometimes I run into things. Without thinking, memories will surface, pressingg on the bruise, bringing more blood to the surface. A year and a half of my life felt like limbo, or purgatory. That liminal space between dream and reality where you see and observe the events unfolding around you–the world keeps spinning, life keeps going–but you can't quite understand it all. Part of you is absent, consumed by worry and fear. While most teenagers were concerned about prom or parties–homecoming and football games–I was coming and going from a quiet home. My dad was working two jobs to keep us afloat and my mom was sleeping off another round of treatment. Another surgery. Another mass that they found.

After she broke the news, and told me that she would have to begin treatment, my mother and I sat on the couch for what felt like hours. In reality, I had only beat my father home by thirty minutes, but it may as well have been a lifetime. I asked a lot of questions, trying to bring myself back down to earth. When had she gone in? They called today? Do we need a second opinion?

What do we do next?

As it turns out, to fight cancer is to fight the rest of your body, too. My mom lost 28 pounds and there were days when she didn't leave her room. Food lost a lot of its joy, since nausea was inevitable and also a side effect of war. Still, she persisted. Four major surgeries and 48 rounds of radiation later, my mother was alive. She was skinny and scarred, but she was alive and warm: she didn't lose her brightness for a second.

When we got the call with good news, that same gravelly feeling struck my throat but this time I didn't fight the tears. I let this new mixture of sadness and joy overcome me and leak like rivers from my eyes. Life without mom was unimaginable, and thankfully, my future with her was saved from imminent danger.

A few months later, as we all tried to return to a life without hospitals and doctors visits, my mom knocked on my bedroom door.

"I'm in the mood for pasta," she said, resting her hip against my doorway.

"Okay," I said, looking up from my laptop. "Did you want me to go pick it up? Maybe Fratellos?"

She smiled then, one with all of her dazzling teeth. The sun, personified.

"Well, what do you think about Italy this time of the year? I've heard they make pretty good spaghetti."

And so, I found myself in Florence, feeling the sun shining on us in a café—the brightest person in the world, staring right back at me.