

# She Re-remembered

## (A Story of Care)

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*On oublie trop souvent que les soignantes membres de la famille d'une cancéreuse luttent aussi contre le cancer. Leurs histoires, quoique reconnues au passage et présumées existantes dans le cadre de celles qui sont malades, sont reléguées en marge du discours et des discussions sur la maladie. Cette autobiographie est une de ces histoires, en fait, c'est l'histoire d'une soignante.*

In “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” Sara Ahmed writes, “When the exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence, then the violence that is exposed is not revealed” (584). To walk away from a man dying of cancer was and is not the “right” thing for a woman to do. Not for the man. Not for the children. Not for the self. The wife, Ahmed’s analysis suggests, has historically been situated as the perfect caregiver for she devotes herself entirely to the man’s wellbeing, no matter what his wellbeing might do to hers. Always smiling. Always happy. Always ready to take on more. Her duty is to care. However, it is the plastic smile, the distancing of self, and the consistent being “there” at his side that, in the words of Ahmed, allow the violence that is exposed to not be revealed. This is the less becoming story being shared here, for it tells of a woman who shatters the expected, by noticing the violence and naming it, dusting

herself off, and caring for someone else: Caring for her self.

She sat staring out the window as the train moved steadily forward through the dense fog. An aimless stare? Maybe to an outsider, but not to her. She remembered. She remembered like it was yesterday.

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*“It’s cancer isn’t it?”*

She has asked the doctor in the Emergency Room.

*“You’re testing for cancer, right?”*

She could hear him moaning in the background. His pain was more intense by the minute.

*“You’re checking for cancer aren’t you?”*

At first she was calm. Calm, and self-assured. She had read the stories, and she quickly rehearsed the lines: “We can beat this. We can beat this with a positive attitude...”

*“You’re testing for cancer, right?”*

Something inside her wanted to scream, but she was good. She was calm. She pushed it down and tucked the desire to scream away into a little compartment made especially for it. She was calm. And she remembered.

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She ran downstairs for a coffee and a plain tea biscuit. “Breakfast of champions,” she thought.

“No—breakfast for *this* champion.” She smiled. She had been there all night. How could she leave him? She brought her computer with her and whenever he dozed off, she got to work. She wanted him to know that she was there. He wasn’t fighting this alone. So she stayed.

He yelled and screamed.

She stayed.

He moaned and complained.

She stayed.

He refused the painkillers.

She stayed.

He refused to eat and drink.

She stayed.

He looked up and smiled.

She stayed.

She stayed, and she remembered.

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She walked into the resource library in the hospital and asked for books about AML. She grabbed everything she could find. DVDs, novels, pamphlets, autobiographies—she took it all. She was going to uncover the secrets of this “cancer” and beat it with knowledge. She was going to find out everything she could about it and destroy it. She was going to annihilate the cancer by unmasking every inch of it with the power of information. She would master its course, pre-empt its attack, and bring it to its knees. With knowledge. And DVDs. And novels. And pamphlets. And autobiographies.

Especially autobiographies. She remembered.

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*"He's just not himself. He's so angry."*

"You'd be angry too if you were going through what he's going through."

*"But he's not himself. He's giving up. He's giving into his anger."*

"He's just tired. You'd be tired too if you were going through what he's going through."

Nobody was listening, but she knew better. He was changing. Cancer was changing him and not like in the books she read. This was no happy story of overcoming and beating cancer and making their life better, and that meant cancer was winning even when he was in remission, didn't it?

*"You can't let it win,"* she used to tell him. *"You can't let it win. We have to keep fighting."*

"We? Who is 'we'? You're not fighting anything! I'm fighting cancer—what are you fighting? I'm fighting cancer!"

But wasn't she fighting too? Wasn't she on the team? Wasn't she fighting cancer?

She felt uncomfortable in her healthy skin...

Her hair had not fallen out. It grew longer. *(At least she believed it had when she had time to comb through it.)*

Her joints did not ache. *(Except from the fatigue. But it wasn't the same...)*

She didn't feel nauseous when she ate. *(Except when she had to argue with the insurance company, and fight with the doctors to help him get through this more comfortably, and rush home to face the kids and tell them that daddy was okay...)*

She didn't cry out in her sleep *(Except when she was haunted by the nightmares...)*

She felt uncomfortable in her healthy skin. And she remembered.

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"I'm scared."

*"I know,"* she replied. So was she,

but she said nothing.

She was the strong one. She was the healthy one and she had to remain strong. She looked at him and said, *"It's going to be okay."*

"I'm scared."

*"I know,"* she replied. So was she, but she said nothing.

She had to be strong for the kids. They needed her more now than ever. She looked them in the eyes and said, *"It's going to be okay."*

"I'm scared."

*"I know,"* she replied. So was she, but she said nothing.

She had to be strong for their friends. They didn't have the opportunity to visit as much as they'd like, and they needed her reassurance that everything would work out. They tried to find time to visit between work and time with their own families, and they worried that he might take that the wrong way. She looked them in the eyes and said, *"It's going to be okay."*

She would fight to keep her promises. She would fight to make sure they were reassured.

She was scared, and she said nothing, but she remembered.

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As her train moved through the dense fog she remembered that it was a story of care. Caring for her husband. Caring for the kids. Caring for the friends and family near and far. It was a story of care for everyone but herself. She had read somewhere that it was important for the caregiver to think of themselves—set some time aside to replenish their spirits and their strength. You were supposed to build in time to put yourself first, but how? The guilt was far-reaching.

Cancer had taken away her husband. He was no longer the man that she knew. He was alive and healing, but things were different now. The fear had turned to rage, and the rage was directed to the one that stayed. And so one day she had to make a choice. Continue to stay, or save herself. She had stayed, and stayed, until

she could not stay anymore.

Cancer had taken away her family. The kids were safely back on track—cancer had ruined their routine, but she managed to re-create a semblance of normalcy for the kids. Dance class, and play dates, and birthday parties, and martial arts. They had all begun again, but after each visit with daddy, they returned home with mom.

Cancer had taken away her spirit. She was going to fight it with knowledge, bring it to its knees. But it was she that was brought to her knees.

She rose slowly and decided to rid herself of the guilt.

She rose slowly and decided to hold her head up.

She rose slowly, but she rose up.

And as her world spun around her, she picked up the pieces and re-membered.

It was a story of care.

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## References

Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35 (3) (2010): 571-594.