A Testament of a Cancer Fighter

Curatorial note in progress …
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I.

A significant aspect of the healing process, in my perspective, involves not only desiring recovery but also aligning one's actions with that desire. It's essential to have faith in the chosen treatment and to actively contribute to its effectiveness through the strength of one's will.

I was bracing myself for that abrupt surge of pain, as everyone had cautioned me. It reminded me of the first time I experimented with alcohol, it happened to be homemade cherry wine. I excitedly took the glass I was handed. Retreating to the attic, I sipped it down, anticipating the onset of drunkenness. Yet, much to my surprise, nothing of the sort occurred. It was a familiar outcome, much like this time.

"Chemo is an ordeal, an absolute hell," they all warned me. Oddly enough, my experience seemed divergent. It was almost as if I was in a different dimension. My mood remained quite upbeat despite the circumstances. Friends and family paid their visits, bearing my favorite snacks. The nurses exhibited remarkable warmth, and I genuinely had moments of enjoyment. Yet, as anticipated, the inevitable arrived—the ordeal, the hellish phase. Soon after my release from the hospital, a brutal three days engulfed me. My body ached, I trembled uncontrollably, fever gripped me, and waves of heat surged through my body, accompanied by ceaseless nausea. Eating, sleeping, functioning—everything seemed beyond my grasp.

Post the second round of chemo, the evidence of its effects became visible: my hair began to thin and fall. While losing the hair on my head was not a concern, having intentionally shaved it earlier, losing my eyebrows and eyelashes felt like a novel experience. I was like an extraterrestrial being, akin to what one would see in a science fiction film. At that point, reality hit me full force. I realized I could effortlessly fit the role of an ailing character with cancer in a movie. However, my existence was no cinematic spectacle; I was embodying this role in real-time.

Nonetheless, there existed one glaring divergence—there was no playwright, no director to script my ending. The oncologist's diagnosis reverberated within me: stage 4 stomach cancer, which had metastasized to my small intestine and pelvis. In simpler words, the prognosis was grim, exceptionally dire. Yet, the concept of surrendering to death was alien to me.

I found myself cocooned by optimism and positivity. Encounters with survivors, with living miracles, became my reality. These interactions solidified my resolve to transform into a miracle myself.

And so, I stand before you today, a living testament to the extraordinary. Death did not claim me, at least not then. Yet, it's important to acknowledge that even miracles have their limitations. Timing is crucial, and now, right now, is the opportune moment to bestow upon me the title of a miracle.

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II.

I was leaping for joy, not in the literal sense, as an angiocath was attached to my right hand, but the sheer elation compelled me to emit sounds of happiness. This moment unfolded during my fourth round of chemotherapy, following my second endoscopy. The initial endoscopy had transpired four months prior when I received the disheartening diagnosis of stomach cancer. However, this time around, a glimmer of hope emerged. The doctor conveyed that the cancerous tumor was shrinking, and they proposed a complete gastrectomy after concluding my chemotherapy. This was the first time that surgery was presented as a viable option.

Each time I inquired about the possibility of surgery with my oncologist, his response was characterized by an air of condescension, peering over his spectacles and repeating the assertion that I wasn't a suitable candidate for surgical intervention. Yet, finally, after four months of uncertainty, I was met with uplifting news: my treatment was proving effective. The jubilation I felt was in stark contrast to the tentative expressions on the faces of my roommate and her family. Though they smiled, doubt lingered in their eyes regarding the notion of a full gastrectomy as good news.

Upon completing my chemotherapy regimen, my oncologist introduced me to a surgeon. This surgeon, a tall, distinguished middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, dismissed surgery as a solution for my ailment. He candidly warned me not to return lamenting a recurrence of cancer after undergoing complex surgery. With an almost casual air, he then inquired if I still wished to proceed with the surgical option.

In an astonishing turn of events, just four days later, he executed a remarkably successful surgery, removing not only my entire stomach but also one-third of my liver and my gallbladder. Upon meeting him the day after the procedure, I couldn't resist playfully addressing him as an "old man," a sentiment rooted in the irony of him previously stating that I was on the brink of death.

The journey of recovery that followed was protracted and far from pleasant. Troublesome issues arose, such as frequent food sticking in my throat, leading to distressing bouts of vomiting. The presence of a tube connected to my stomach for excess fluid presented its own set of challenges, and concerns about potential infections surrounding the 18-centimeter stitches were ever-present. Alongside these struggles were recurrent abdominal pains, stemming from the consumption of too much food when it was actually less than a full small bowl. But despite it all, I emerged from the ordeal as a superhero.

Ironically, my long-held aspiration of becoming a superhero was only partially fulfilled by those responsible for assigning superpowers.

I had envisioned wielding mind-control abilities, the power of invisibility, or perhaps boundless intelligence. Instead, I found myself embodying a superhero who had relinquished several vital organs, yet retained the ability to lead a simple life.

From my newfound perspective as a superhero addressing ordinary individuals, I've learned the importance of specificity when formulating wishes. Even individuals occupying esteemed positions can't always be trusted to interpret desires accurately.

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III.

Acceptance serves as the initial stride in the complex journey of healing, demanding a formidable mental strength. The mere mention of the word 'cancer' can cast a shroud of fear so potent that it seems capable of shattering one's spirit entirely. The excruciating agony coupled with the exhaustive treatment regimen further intensifies the ordeal.

During my second round of chemotherapy, destiny introduced me to Zahra, a 21-year-old whose life had been marred by a five-year period of neglecting regular check-ups, culminating in a recurrence of cancer. Witnessing her battle was heart-wrenching – the medley of nausea and tears as the medication coursed through her veins. Her mother, in a desperate attempt to infuse cheer, faced the brunt of her daughter's anguish. Gradually, I initiated a conversation with Zahra, aiming to divert her attention from the suffering. Through sharing anecdotes from years past, I managed to elicit both smiles and laughter, a stark departure from her earlier tears. As she opened up to me, her deep-seated anger and sense of betrayal became evident. "Everyone else seems to revel in joy, while I'm left grappling with outrage at the sound of their laughter," she confided.

Her plight struck a chord within me – a vibrant young soul unjustly thrust into the clutches of illness. Like any other individual her age, she deserved a youth adorned with happiness and exuberance. Yet, this encounter reinforced my determination not to succumb to bitterness. The enigma that endlessly circles our thoughts – 'why me?' – holds no answer and merely plunges us into a labyrinth of darkness. After all, who truly deserves affliction? The resounding answer is no one.

During subsequent sessions, fate introduced me to an 81-year-old neighbor, grappling with stage 1 breast cancer. She posed a poignant question while pacing the room, "At my age, when every cell is on the brink of decline, how could cancer find a foothold?" Curiously, she joined a group of friends who had come to visit me, engaging in our shared tales of humor. Observing my buoyant spirit, despite facing an advanced stage of cancer, kindled a spark of hope within her. As she bid her farewell, she made an earnest request – for me to promise that we would share the same treatment room during our synchronized chemotherapy sessions. The irony of my situation was not lost on me – deriving a certain semblance of enjoyment from a process so fraught with pain, panic, and tears. Yet, amidst the shared camaraderie, sympathy, and laughter, these moments wove themselves into the intricate tapestry of my journey.

In closing, the path to healing is not merely a series of medical interventions, but a voyage of resilience, companionship, and finding solace within the shared human experience of pain and triumph.

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IV.

In life, some ailments defy the conventional notion of healing. They're not like the common cold, where you're sick one day and miraculously better the next. No, these diseases linger, inscribing their mark on our very being, long after the physical symptoms subside. They're not merely memories of the past; they're ongoing companions on our journey. These conditions, with their relentless grip, transform us into new people, though not always in the direction of betterment.
I encountered such a trial when I was 24 - diabetes. A condition without a straightforward cure, it forced me into two years of education about my body's intricacies and the nuanced dance of diet and exercise that it demanded. These lessons weren't easy, but they illuminated how swiftly life can pivot, altering everything in the blink of an eye. Diabetes became my teacher in the art of appreciating the present moment, a relentless reminder of my body's needs.
Yet, a more formidable adversary awaited: cancer. A prognostication of only two years to live was delivered, and for a time, learning seemed irrelevant. Yet, the unpredictable nature of existence prevailed and hope is the last rope to grasp. I cared deeply, for it's my life after all, caring to the extent of the moon's orbit and back. But the sad truth is that caring, though vital, couldn't fundamentally alter the outcome. All I could do was learn to coexist with it, just as I had with diabetes. Once again, the importance of living in the moment took center stage. But, alas, there were no enthusiastic narrators in the wings, ready to announce, "And she aced the 'Living in the Moment exam! Let's swiftly proceed to the next chapter."

When I was a teenager we used to ask this question: "What would you do if you knew your days were numbered?" Now, I am living this question, although it doesn't lead to an upheaval of everything. I'd prioritize people over trivial matters, relegating money and other ephemeral concerns to the background. Mortality possesses the power to liberate us from life's superficialities. Yet, even with newfound clarity, one can't merely declare, "From this day forth, I shall enjoy life and travel all over the world!" Reality intervenes; finances are still essential, and passports bear the same limitations. While desires to travel may be unaltered, logistical constraints persist.
The complexities deepen. Declaring a life of idle leisure isn't a panacea; thoughts of mortality are not the best companions. What emerges from this introspection is simply living and enjoying each second in a realistic way. And in this quest for life amid adversity, I've unearthed a lesson: the familiar can be a balm for the aching soul. Thus, I persist within the confines of my cozy abode, alongside my husband. The rhythm of my routine remains intact - work, responsibilities, studies, and even the occasional grumbling about the readings and writings that punctuate my days. I've even adopted the unconventional habit of playing my "cancer/2 years of living" card whenever opportunity knocks – hey, why not milk it for all its worth? After all, it's an ace up my sleeve, a reminder that even while on a path with an unknown destination, I'm unwaveringly savoring the journey. In the grand finale, I'm dancing with mortality, twirling through life's intricate choreography, and finding joy amidst the poignant melodies.

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V.

I am an atheist, but my circle of friends encompasses a beautiful tapestry of faiths. Growing up in Iran, I was introduced to the world of Islam, and living in a diverse city like Kathmandu further enriched my life with Hindu and Buddhist friendships. I count among my friends those who follow Christianity, some who find solace in the embrace of nature, and many whose beliefs remain a mystery to me. Personally, I place my faith in the potential of humanity. I don't fixate on where individuals draw their strength from because it wears different names for different people – God, spirituality, or something else entirely. That's why I've been open to receiving support from friends throughout my journey, from the time of my diagnosis up until now.

Now, my life feels like a flickering light, with my doctor indicating I may have only two years once that red light stops blinking. Every ominous test result, each persistent physical ache, or any new symptom demands an immense reserve of mental fortitude to keep my focus away from that ominous red light and the countdown of my remaining time. But there's always the glimmer of hope that this light might transform into a radiant white, not through medical intervention, but through the extraordinary examples and miracles wrought by humanity.

Perhaps, in some metaphysical realm, the deities are vying for influence over my fate, each striving to be the one who will rescue me, and pressing the elusive white button.

There are days when I feel bolstered by the support around me, providing me with the strength to battle on, to change that blinking light into a hopeful white glow. Yet, there are also those days when it seems impossible. My world can resemble the jubilant ending of a Cinderella movie or the eerie darkness of a Hitchcock thriller. The life of a stage 4 cancer survivor is marked by an ongoing struggle against the ceaseless dread of hearing those dreaded words, "It's back."

And this is the very essence of my endeavor, my project: to be the helping hand during those dark days, to be the shoe that fits Cinderella, to be the light that reveals there's nothing lurking under the bed.

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VI.

For 39 years, I lived a life untouched by the shadow of cancer. To those under 30, this might seem like a long stretch, perhaps even an entire lifetime. However, if you find yourself on the same side of the age spectrum as I do, or even beyond, you understand that 39 years can evaporate in the blink of an eye. It's a fleeting moment in the grand tapestry of existence, a mere heartbeat in the symphony of life. During those years, I never really had the time to truly live, to pursue the things that truly mattered. It's astonishing how this realization dawned upon me when I faced the specter of death.

The initial reaction is often anger, a natural response to the injustice of it all. Who should bear the brunt of this anger? Some might direct it at a higher power, a God they may or may not believe in. As for me, I had long chosen not to put my faith in deities, and it felt both too late and somewhat absurd to suddenly turn to the divine in a fit of rage. Then there are the healthy ones, especially those who have had the privilege of growing old without the constant threat of illness. Should I resent them? The answer, upon deeper contemplation, is no. I couldn't bring myself to think in such a way.

In a strange way, it felt like I had been preparing for this moment all along, even though it took me by shock. I had always harbored a romantic notion of a short life, like my aunt who departed this world at the age of 56. I was almost convinced that it would be my destiny to die at the same age or at least by my mid-50s and which means 16 years from now. Yet somehow, the math had been miscalculated, and I found myself facing a reality I had not quite prepared for.

But amidst the swirl of emotions, there's one idea that nags at me, an idea that I'm not sure I truly believed in until now. It's the notion that, in a way, we are constantly training ourselves for the inevitable events that will unfold in our lives. Does this mean I believe in a fixed destiny written in the stars for each individual? No, not at all. Instead, I see life as a series of choices, each one opening up a new path in our future, each path providing us with unique training for the challenges that lie ahead.

Consider my own journey: living with diabetes, losing my mother, embarking on solo travels, immigrating to a foreign land, getting married, and delving into the realms of art and writing. Each of these experiences paved the way for me to confront stage 4 cancer. And the journey doesn't end here; it continues until my final breath. Every decision I make, such as organizing this exhibition, maintaining a positive outlook, and striving to inspire others in similar situations, all serves as preparation for the ultimate encounter with my mortality.

In this perspective, life becomes a continuous process of training, a way to build resilience and adaptability in the face of the unknown. While I cannot change the path I've walked so far, I can decide how to navigate the path that remains, armed with the lessons and experiences that have brought me to this moment.