

Different Ways to Hurt

When I find out you've been diagnosed with breast cancer, I am seven months committed to an undiagnosed eating disorder. Emaciation is evident now. At this point, my body is eating my organs, burning tissue for fuel. I am already cold like a body on a morgue slab, cause of death: starvation. No long-sleeve shirt touches the coldness, not even winter coats, hats, or gloves. I shiver all the time as if I'm afraid of something.

I'm collected in the passenger seat of my brother's Pontiac Sunfire, a car my parents bought off the side of the road in front of a pizza parlor run by Mexican immigrants. Mom and I are heading home, stuck in a long line of cars full of my fellow students. It is January, and I can see the cheerful pom-pom outline of a hat in the car ahead of us. We inch up slowly, making our way up the small slant of hill right before the stop sign. Mom puts her blinker on, about to make a left turn.

"How was drama?" Mom asks. We've just pulled out from the Marlboro High School parking lot. There's a light line of salt across my forehead from sweating during the opening dance number of *Godspell*. The salt crunches when I raise my eyebrows, trying to lift my eyelids up. I might fall asleep right in the car.

"It was good," I say.

"That's good," Mom says. We settle back into a silence that is half-relief, half-awkward. Our conversations these days are succinct, punchy. I can't remember when we became this way. We used to make each other laugh and when we did, our noses would crinkle in the same pattern. Now, we keep conversations quick, as if we're worried we might say the wrong thing to each other and make our conversation explode like a steam-able vegetable bag. She is avoiding the

inevitable outlines of my bones, and I am trying to appear normal, like I haven't changed at all even though the color has run out of my voice.

We're winding down the curves of Marlboro, almost centering ourselves in the middle of the road. These are back country roads, where you can make a turn and see the yellow eyes of a coyote beading in front of your headlights. No lines separating the two sides of the road, just deep ditches full of sharp rock. All it takes is a poorly placed tire to send us headfirst into the ground. It's that easy, that close.

"Listen, I know you're tired, but I have to tell you something," Mom says.

I think I know what's coming. Mom mentions my eating from time to time. She asks if I'll eat, and I say I will; at the time I promise, I really mean it. Yes, I'll eat dinner tonight. Whatever you cook, I'll eat, and I won't complain. And for a night, I'll have some meat and four squares of red potatoe with my salad. My parents and I will feel like that's the end of it, a neat close to my mental illness.

After dinner, I'll feel hungry, the kind of hunger that brings nausea and headaches. Despite the fact that I don't eat, I rarely feel hunger. My body is in survival mode and doesn't bother me with feelings associated with starvation. But when I eat, my body comes alive. My stomach grumbles, hunger hits the back of my throat, I feel staggering waves of nausea. My heartbeat is fast like I'm running, but if I press my fingers against my neck, the heartbeat is normal—46 beats per minute.

"What is it?" I ask. I prepare myself a list of foods I've eaten today: apple for breakfast, yogurt for lunch, serving size of pretzels as snack. 280 calories, and no fat. That's a lot, Mom, I'll say. You just don't know about proper nutrition.

“Aunt Gigi has breast cancer,” Mom says.

I feel something—dull panic—prick my heart, but mostly, I’m just collapsing, deflating against the cold car door. Head against window, icicles bleeding through the glass onto my scalp. And yet, fear and worry aren’t something I feel. Probably because I don’t believe it is possible to lose you—you, who’s love is fierce and almost stifling, your grip so tight it sometimes feels overwhelming. You are close to me, have been since the moment of my birth. You hold all of us close to you, always making the effort to extend to hope of hospitality, grab us by our wrists and drag you close to us, into a cornucopia-like world where food is love and you are a fertility goddess, filling us until our seams split. And we’re close in other ways, cosmically, because there was a time over these cold months when you pulled me aside at one of our salt-laden Friday night dinners and told me you had a dream I was crying alone in my bedroom. “Are you okay?” you asked.

I am thirteen, and you still seem invincible to me.

“Is Aunt Gigi going to be okay?” I ask. “When did you find out? This morning?”

“No, Pop and I have known for a while,” Mom says. “Aunt Gigi asked us not to tell you guys.”

‘You guys’ as in me and my brothers. Me, Victor and Nicolas used to be close. Mom used to call us molecules because we had a habit of colliding into each other in grocery store aisles, unable to keep apart. Now, our relationship has changed. I’ve changed—I’m unable to entertain our silliness the way I used to, unable to smile through a brotherly dig. Yesterday on the way to school, Victor, my older brother, called me Skeletor, and I thought I was going to open the door and roll into the traffic of 9W.

“Why didn’t she want us to know?” I ask.

“She didn’t want to worry you,” Mom says.

“Did she have surgery?”

We’re close to home now, stopped at the stop sign right before the house where Mrs. Papoulli watched me and Nic in the mornings when we were in elementary school. I saw her a couple weeks ago in the lobby of the high school, waiting to pick up her son, Robert. I waved on my way to the bus. She looked but didn’t recognize me.

“Yes, she had surgery a couple weeks ago. The doctors think they got all the infected tissue.”

“Oh,” I say. When I hear that you’ve already had surgery, I think you’re cured. I have no idea about cancerous cells moving in the bloodstream to different parts of the body, the small nooks that can be infected and missed despite the x-rays, MRIs, scanning, and prodding. Even if all the cancerous tissue is removed, breast cancer has a tendency to spread to the bones, liver, or lungs.

I don’t know how far the cancer has advanced, from what stage you’re suffering, if you felt the lump or if it was caught by ultrasonogram, or in which breast the cells collected into a ball of white, pink when taken out and laid on hospital paper towel. And I don’t ask. I don’t think to ask because I think I know everything.

“How’s Pop feeling?” I ask.

“He’s okay. We’re relieved she’s going to be all right,” Mom says.

I always forget that you're my father's older sister. You're sandwiched in the middle of Aunt Ria and Pop, a middle child just like me. You have those memories of Pop brand new in the world, because you are six years older than him. What was he like? I want to ask. What was he like before he looked across the table one night at dinner and said to Mom, "We've failed as parents," then looked at my empty plate. I looked away, dead into my reflection.

"It must be hard for him," I say. "Aunt Gigi could die." And I wonder, suddenly, what it would be like for my brothers to lose me. What would be like if I lost them?

Lingering on that thought, I sense the divide between us. Sometimes it feels like my brothers are so far away from me, from understanding what's happening to me, that I can't relate to them at all. Isn't that the problem with the living and dead? A failure to communicate. But with these strange, in-between phases of sickness, there is hurt. And underneath the hurt and those succinct conversations is the pressing subtext that says, Get better or get worse.

I feel like I should go.

"Aunt Gigi still has treatment to make sure the cancer doesn't come back," Mom says.

"Is it chemo?" I ask.

"Radiation," says Mom.

"That makes your hair fall out, right?"

Mom nods.

I think of your bleached-blond hair, and the gaps baldness would leave on your scalp. The image does something to me that the conversation hasn't. I understand, at least for a second, what you're up against. What you're battling is erratic and destructive. It's both a hidden and

visible disease, visible only by diagnostic imagining or slice-by-slice surgery. What cuts did they leave on your body, I wonder. I—we—could lose you.

When was the last time I saw you? It was Christmas day, a holiday you don't normally celebrate with us, but you wanted to be with us this year for some reason. I was sitting at the island, looking at Pop cutting the duck, thinking of how many calories I already had in my body (much more than 280), and wondering if I could stomach duck. You came over, and rubbed my back. You said, "Hey, Gabbers." I gave you a hug, and you took the chance to run your hand down my back. You said to Mom, "My god, I can feel her spine."

I know, I've seen my spine too, when I arch my shoulders into my chest and bend down, fingers touching knees. I can count them if I look in the mirror, thirty-three bulbous bones. My ribs are prominent too, even the ones floating low on my torso. Shrinking organs in my stomach create a soft swell, a bulge that no amount of cardio will get rid of.

As gruesome as it is, there is something grounding about seeing skeletal structure. Giving figure to the scaffolding that keeps the body standing is humbling. It reminds me that there is always something underneath the skin, something strong and sturdy, something that will be left behind when this thin canvas of life is finished, at least for a little while. I don't mind seeing my skeleton. It's the grayness in my skin I don't like. I don't like that my nails don't grow anymore, and I hate that the scab on my elbow from three weeks ago is still as large and rough as it was when the blood first scabbed over.

"My hair has been falling out too," I say. I don't know why I say it, but I do. It is the smallest part of a confession, the tip of this iceberg that chills me. I don't know why I say it, and I don't know, at that moment in the car, why I'm not eating. In time, I will learn that eating

disorders stem from feeling like life has gone out of control, like cells over-multiplying; it is not vanity, like so many people think, although sometimes we grow to like the way we look so hollow, outside matching inside.

When I start getting better and life is once against cranked high to full sound and color, I will know that I was depressed, not in the way depression is portrayed in commercials with a frowny face on a paper plate puppet, but in the way that makes people reckless, ready to jerk the wheel of a car into a ditch. A slow suicide maybe, is what I was trying to accomplish without eating because the idea of fading away, passing away in my sleep, appealed to me like a size extra small shirt.

“You need to eat,” Mom says. She might say more, so I’m quiet, waiting and listening to see if she will. She doesn’t.

We pull into the driveway of our house. We moved to Marlboro before I started kindergarten. I was upset to leave Peekskill because I didn’t understand what it meant when I heard people were being murdered in public parks. There, in the half-dark of the car, I have a sudden urge to know what I was like as a child, though I’ve heard all the stories from everyone’s mouths. I want an origin story, to know if it was a slow descent or if there’s a specific calendar date where I did something different that made me spiral. If I could trace the sadness back to one singular day, I might be able to avoid doing that thing again. Maybe then I’d be safe. I think about asking Mom if she knows how to fix me. She’s part of the person who made me, after all.

But I’m tired. I woke up at four this morning to work out because I get home at eight in the evening from Drama. I spent the half hour before class walking around the halls with a fifteen-pound backpack, and I tried to pay attention in all my classes. The yogurt I ate for lunch

wasn't enough, and then I had gym today. I walked on the Stair Master, felt the cartilage in my knees break down.

I'm so fucking tired.

"We ate dinner already, but I can make you something," Mom says.

"No, I'm all right."

Silence, and then, "Gabi, you need to eat."

Did you feel like eating after your cancer diagnosis? I'm wondering because sometimes after bad news, I don't really feel like eating. All the food I swallow afterwards tastes the way food does when you have a cold, all spoiled. I'm sure you felt like you wanted to give up. But you didn't. You went through with radiation, and one night at dinner years later, Pop raises his glass and says, "Five years cancer free!" An announcement that leads to champagne being poured and you smiling wide, the tips of your canines pressing gently on your bottom lip.

Your unbreakable image is your fault. I never sensed weakness in you. Or maybe I did once, when you looked at me and said, "When I was younger, all I would have for lunch is coffee with sugar and milk. Wasn't that stupid?"

I'm not thinking of these things now, in the cold shell of the Pontiac Sunfire with Mom staring at me. I'm not thinking of anything, believe it or not. My energy is being spent elsewhere, without my knowledge. It's being spent keeping my heart pumping, a rhythm that feels weak when I press hand against neck, right on the jugular vein.

Mom and I will have a cathartic moment in Pop's Spyder Convertible in February, after Mrs. Rantanella makes us do a project on Jewish Holocaust victims. When I sit in the auditorium

seats and see gentrified and tortured people, how the Germans starved them down to conscious corpses, I will understand what I have done to my body, the way I have tortured myself with irrational ideals. No amount of mirror-gazing snapped me into focus the way those photos did when they were projected on the auditorium screen. I sank down low in my chair, but I still felt like everyone was staring at me: a nightmare come to life. That night, I will break down in the car, crying into the hair sprayed nest of Mom's hair, and tell her I weigh one-hundred pounds. Mom will rub my back, snagging her fingers on the knots of my spine. We will sit together, and I'll tell her that I have to relearn how to eat, something that comes naturally to everyone except people with *anorexia nervosa*.

But for now, we are a month away from the cathartic moment. Pop, Victor, and Nicolas are inside the house watching television. I plan on going up to my room immediately, to avoid the possibility of conversation turning sour. You are down the road actually, a move you made soon after we built our house in Marlboro. You wanted to be closer to us, to watch us grow up and grow old. You are probably in your house watching television too, thinking about the ache in the delicate tissue of your breast, feeling like something has been taken away from you, because it has.

"Can I make you something?" Mom asks.

I shake my head. This is not the cathartic moment.

"No," I say. "I'm too upset to eat." A half-lie.