Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights,
well intertied, braced in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery here we stand.

—Walt Whitman, from *Song of Myself*

TWELVE

Fierce Like an Oak Tree

(2023)

There were five bananas in the wicker fruit basket on the kitchen counter. I don't especially like bananas, but I do appreciate their texture over other fruits. Actually, my favorite thing about bananas is that they add order to my day. Unlike grapes, which are bought in bunches and typically not consumed all at once, I can grab a banana as I head out the door and tick a box. *Tick*. My daily fruit intake is done.

Of course, bananas must be eaten at just the right time. Like avocados, there's an invisible countdown clock to the perfect state of ripeness, and when the clock winds down to zero, ready or not, it's time to eat a banana. On Sundays, when I do my grocery shopping, I also enjoy the game of buying the appropriately-sized bunch for the planned week ahead. When the timer sounds and I can start pulling one each day, there's great satisfaction in knowing that I've expertly selected, and I'm not left hanging with more days that week than I have edible bananas. It's just something I hear in my head, but it's there, nonetheless. *Tick*.

There's nothing worse than a brown banana.

I am a corporate writer now. I'm no longer teaching because the language skills of college students who've grown up texting are beyond hope. Their interpersonal skills often seem non-existent as well, making the effort to guide them feel like an unachievable task. Most recently, I worked as a reporter, but I gradually became too jaded to continue—every assignment began to feel the same.

I'd love to be writing stories of my own.

Ironically, however, I've never been successful at telling my own story. For one thing, I get too plain with it. I can sit for hours writing and rewriting a story on the screen, only to delete my work out of frustration. More than anything, I know that there's nothing unique about me to tell. There are things more important than my percipience.

So it's a good fit for me to serve as senior editor for a global mission-focused organization. In this position, I can help amplify the voices of those whose narratives deserve to be heard, allowing me to engage with the complexities of storytelling from a different perspective. My role is to write speeches for our CEO and craft narratives used in videos and social media posts to engage volunteers, encourage corporate donors, and explain the scope of our work—which is to save the lives of people in impoverished nations by providing surgeries they wouldn't have access to otherwise.

I especially like that our work is tangible. It can be counted. A surgery performed. A life saved. *Tick.*

That Monday morning, when my sister-in-law calls, I am working from home and already in my first meeting.

Our department is spread around the globe, and most of my meetings are early to accommodate European and African time zones. I've grown accustomed to this schedule, and I like Teams meetings because I can turn on my avatar and always look shiny and polished.

In fact, 18 months ago, while I was going through chemotherapy, I had my avatar on for the duration of a long all-staff meeting because I was using my fingers to softly lift tufts of hair away from my scalp. I'd been fascinated by how easily a single handful had pulled away, so I just kept going. I made stacks on my desk—at times pressing the piles and watching them spring back. I moved a few wisps to other piles, just to keep them even, almost as if I were arranging pieces of a delicate puzzle, each strand a reminder of a moment I couldn't quite grasp.

While the Chief People Officer was wrapping up the extended call with encouragement to plan for the future by contributing as much as possible to the 401(k) plan and receive the full company match toward retirement, I was running my hands all over my scalp to ensure that I'd efficiently gotten it all. I'd been so proud of myself that, thanks to the avatar, I'd smiled the entire time. Texas Oncology had prepared me well that losing my hair would be part of the standard process, so it was expected. Smooth bald head. *Tick.*

I'm not making light of it though. Cancer is a bitch.

Anyway, it is Monday morning and, as I said, I am in a meeting, so I absent-mindedly click the left side button on my phone to decline the call, making a mental note to reach out to my sister-in-law later. I glance at the clock, thinking the meeting has drifted to topics that don't pertain to my current assignments.

Checking myself in the small inset screen layered above the other faces encapsulated there in perfect rows, equally spaced, I mute myself and turn on my avatar for a brief moment, thinking that I can walk to the kitchen to grab my banana. It's still a bit too early for my second cup of coffee. That's at 10 a.m.

I am just about to step away from my desk when the phone sounds again. Not a call this time, but a text.

CALL ME BACK IMMEDIATELY!!

I don't remember much of the morning after that.

My sister-in-law calmly tells me to pack a bag and travel back home from Texas, where I now live. Raym is in ICU. He'd had a serious heart attack in the wee hours of the morning. It is a "widowmaker," she explains. (She is a nurse, so she knows.)

Then, as I start to ask questions, there is a scuffle. I can tell she is suddenly surrounded by people.

There are muffled voices and . . .

"We just lost him," she says bluntly.

I don't know how she could've made the news hurt any less. Simple, honest, and direct is always best. I work with words. It's common advice I give to others.

But standing in my closet, holding my zebra print travel bag embroidered with *Missy* on the side that I'd jerked off the shelf only moments before, I howl a grief-wail that I've only heard one other time when I covered the funeral of the wife of a prominent lawyer in town.

Near the end of the refined service, the couple's prodigal son had walked in unexpectedly. He'd returned to say goodbye to his mother.

That father's heart ripped as it could not contain the agony. It was unimaginable for the son to finally return *then*. It was too late.

I'd periodically thought about that sound ever since, feeling like an imposter because I didn't think I could write convincingly about something I'd never felt myself. You have to know things before you have the right to say things.

When I realize I am making that very sound, I suddenly think I'm going to vomit.

My sister-in-law continues talking, carefully breaking down every detail of what happened to Raym that morning and what had been done for him . . . not because it matters, but because it reprieves.

I imagine her there in a frenzied hallway outside the ICU surrounded by the shock and chaos of our family's grief while I stand ridiculously in my oversized closet with its floor-to-ceiling racks of clothes meticulously arranged by season and then by color. The contrast feels absurd. Ever since I've begun writing, I've measured the character of those around me, obsessing over their every word and action, and her unwavering bravery in the situation impresses me, making me acutely aware of the strength I need to summon in myself.

“I’ll call you back,” I finally choke out, and hang up.

The phone immediately sounds again.

It is a text reminder of a doctor’s appointment at 2 p.m. At my checkup a few days before, just six months after I’d been given the all clear, my oncologist had frowned after finding something hard near the top of my man-made right breast.

“Probably just scar tissue,” he'd said, after squeezing and pressing from all angles. “Let’s schedule a sonogram and be sure.”

So I respond “Y” to confirm my appointment, all the while thinking how that autogenerated text is like rock salt being viciously scraped through an open wound. I mean, for goodness’ sake, *my dad just died and now my cancer might be back*?

Who could imagine a worse day?

“I can’t head out until this afternoon,” I text my sister-in-law and make myself focus on packing. I take a deep breath, trying to steady the whirlwind of thoughts swirling in my mind, and move to stand in front of the section of dark pants beneath the dark, dressy tops.

I need to regain a sense of order before it slips away again, and the arrangement of clothes in the closet calms me, offering a small measure of peace.

“It’s OK, honey,” she texts back. “Be careful on the road. We’ll see you tonight.”

I am a few minutes late for my appointment at Ross Breast Center because I'd spent time in the parking garage powdering my red nose again and again and pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth to try to regulate my breathing (a trick I'd found by googling "ways to stop crying").

I hurriedly step off the elevator at the sixth floor, open the heavy doors to the waiting room, and turn right to check in at the registration desk—only to run straight into Peggy Newburn from church, who is checking in as well.

We are the last two in a short line.

There's one thing I can tell you for sure about cancer. Everybody knows when you've got it.

So, with a concerned smile, Peggy gives me an extended hug.

"How *are* you?" she asks as she squeezes me, and I can't help but notice the frigid temperature of the room, making the sterile environment feel oppressive.

Her drawn-out tone triggers the interest of a pretty, 40-ish looking woman with long blonde hair sitting close by in the waiting room.

The woman looks up at us and then politely back to her magazine, but I can tell she is listening. Her body language makes me think she might be at the beginning of the process—the multitude of women with breast cancer is so vast that each test, treatment, or surgery is masterfully performed according to a schedule, a kind of grim ballet that unfolds in waiting rooms like this one.

"*Everything is fine*," I tell Peggy, using a tone that lets her know I've understood her true question. I am consciously speaking in a voice louder than my own to reassure the woman reading the magazine.

"I'm just here for a follow-up," I say, casually. "It's part of the plan."

It wasn't a lie. So far there had been five months of chemo and six surgeries, including a double mastectomy and, after a nasty staph infection, a hard-to-believe procedure where part of my shoulder muscle was slid under my arm without detaching blood vessels to create a new breast.

Then, there had been 33 rounds of radiation and 14 rounds of adjuvant chemo.

There had also been the small box stuck to my belly to deliver additional treatment at home, beeping insistently, when empty, with the same sound the garbage truck makes when it turns around in front of my house on Tuesdays and Fridays.

It had all been planned.

"Oh, I'm so glad," Peggy says. "You've shown such amazing strength and had the best attitude throughout all of this. You've just been an inspiration."

I look away modestly, not sure what to say and feeling awkward, knowing the blonde woman nearby is still listening.

We sit down to wait.

"How's your mama and them?" Peggy asks in the way Southern folks do. "Everyone OK?"

"I'm heading home this afternoon," I say. My cell phone is vibrating away, so I move my purse from my lap to the floor beside my feet.

I'm still chatting with Peggy about her daughter, who happens to share the same birthday as me, when I am called back by the nurse.

Prior to having a double mastectomy, I had biopsies on four different masses.

While two were simple needle aspirations and one was a sonogram-guided core needle aspiration—both very routine and quick procedures—the fourth was a barbaric stereotactic biopsy as the mass was difficult to pinpoint. After the procedure, I had to lie face down with my breast compressed in a sort of lateral mammography machine for an extended time to apply pressure and help stop some persistent bleeding at the biopsy site. The wound was small, but worrisome.

Dr. Leete, the kind radiologist who'd performed all of the biopsies, kept coming in and out of the room to check on me then, knowing it was painful.

While I squeezed my eyes tightly closed and took shallow breaths, he'd counted down the time, asking about my weekend plans and making silly jokes.

So, of course, he remembers me and is surprised to see me again.

"Back for more torture, are we?" he says, laughing as he walks over to study the sonogram images the radiology technician has just displayed on the screen.

"Nothing can hurt me now," I say. "I have no feeling from the inside of my elbow up through my armpit and across my chest. Take your best shot."

Dr. Leete is still grinning as he accepts the sonogram wand from the nurse and rolls it back and forth over the suspicious area himself.

"Sorry the gel is cold," he says.

"What gel?" I snark back, reminding him again that I can't feel anything, although I know from experience that he is making a sticky mess.

After a few more passes, he leans back in his chair. The nurse hands me a towel to wipe the gel, gently touching my wrist and lowering my arm from over my head.

"I don't want to put you through another needle biopsy, and I do want you to have an answer before you leave today," he finally says. "Let's work you into the line for mammography and see if we get confirmation that it's scar tissue from that. We'll go from there."

For the next forty minutes, I am in the secondary lobby where women await their turn for a mammogram wearing a one-size-fits-all pink cape. They put their belongings in a personal locker and are given a key on a stretchy bracelet. Also pink. I have loved the color pink since I was a little girl, but the lowest day of my life was being wheeled out of the hospital thirty pounds heavier with steroid weight, bald, and wearing a Velcro-front pink shirt over four long drain tubes that were stitched in near the top of my ribcage.

I remember having the ridiculous thought that I wasn't wearing any makeup.

After the first few knowing looks from those in the hallways, that damn pink shirt giving it away, I'd kept my eyes trained on the floor all the way to the car.

And my eyes are trained on the floor again in the waiting area. My phone had continued to buzz incessantly, so I'd foolishly peeked at some of the texts. They affect me like a warm hug, bringing my raw emotions to the surface.

When it is finally my turn, the technician positions and presses me into the awkward stance, struggling with the immobility of a firm gel implant beneath recently radiated, tight skin. Radiation makes skin contract unnaturally.

"I'm sorry," she says, as she tugs at me, using more strength to move me into the right position. "This is the most painful mammogram because the implant has to be forced out of the way."

"I'm so sorry," she keeps repeating, though I have been silent, and I realize she is saying this because tears are rolling down my cheeks.

Finally satisfied with my posture, she twists a knob that makes the clear plates tighten further, and she moves to her computer quickly, saying, "Hold your breath."

"Yes!" she smiles. "Got it! This one's good!" The plates immediately retract. Patting my shoulder reassuringly, she hands me a tissue.

"I know that was painful, but it's over now," she says.

She leaves the room and returns a few minutes later with a smiling Dr. Leete, and I'm able to make it to my brother's house in time for a late dinner.

Three days later, along with my husband and grown son (I am in my 50s now), I am in the second car of the funeral cortege, and the driver of the hearse slows to a crawl as we pass in front of Raym's house on the way to Campbell Creek Cemetery. I didn't know this was planned.

Staring at the back of that hearse with its oddly-curtained window as it inches along, the gesture of total respect stops time for me.

It is like a formal salute, a true final send-off for a revered general.

It had been a beautiful service, full of music—just the way Raym would've liked it. Lah spoke, walking through so many nostalgic memories that conveyed her special daughter-like relationship to Raym. Her stories made me laugh through my tears.

Tut and his wife were there too. They'd driven in from Mississippi, and their two college-age sons served as pallbearers.

After all the times Raym had driven us out to the cemetery in some antique car or another, usually after stopping at the Sharp Store for an orange push-up, we are now driving Raym there slowly following the gentle curves of Highway 8 that I know so well.

In those heartbreaking moments, as the tires of the hearse in front of me make gradual contact with the road in arcs that flatten and lay bare year after year with each turn, I suddenly realize what I am hearing. Like a spoked wheel clicking from a stuck leaf, there it is: *Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.*

I feel sure that Peggy Newburn told the other church ladies about how she'd run into me at Ross Breast Center, and that she was proud of me for being so well-adjusted after facing down cancer. She may, in fact, have said how impressed she was by my unwavering faith, painting me as a tower of resilience.

But if she only knew my secret!

Oh, how I have learned to manage life. I have it all counted, you see.

I believe in raising back up after whatever life throws my way, but most things raise up like an acorn, slowly pushing through the soil to become a seedling and then a sapling and eventually an oak. Most things don't raise up like Lazarus all in one go. While there is no doubt in my mind that Jesus can still pull off such feats, *even healing cancer and sparing grief*, I've always reminded myself that "there are people starving in the world" (and made other such comparisons of fates), and I've never had the audacity to ask Him.

From an early age, swinging barefoot from my tree in the front yard and seeing those crosses at the cemetery in perfect formation, repeating into infinity . . . to witnessing the trees creating a sanctuary over Little Eva Plantation with their perfect rows, equally spaced, I've counted my life as planned, with my only responsibility being to keep growing toward the light.

I'm thankful to Peggy for being proud of me, and I sure hope that Raym is looking down at me proud too now, but there is nothing extraordinary about me.

There is no story to tell.

Returning home, a reassuring wave washes over me as I walk into the kitchen to see that there are still five edible bananas in the wicker fruit basket.