At fifty-eight, Lavon Floyd found herself sitting in the best hospital in Fairfax County, Virginia with a lump in her breast about three quarters of a cenimeter. The mother of three girls had found herself a recent empty nester, with her youngest Cecelia, my mother, having recently flown the coop all the way to Alabama for college. Lavon, or Nana as my baby brother, cousins, and I lovingly refer to her as, was beginning this new stage of her life with a scare. According to her mammogram and her doctor, she had breast cancer.

“People whispered about [it]. That was the thing, they whispered about cancer.” Nana didn’t have many interactions with cancer in her youth. Her father had prostate cancer, which he was cured of. There was plenty diabetes in her family line, a frequent visitor in many black lineages. However, cancer wasn’t as discussed as high blood pressure and diabetes. She joked of a old wives tale she grew up hearing, that you couldn’t get cancer if you had diabetes. Nana knew that was nothing but fiction as she struggled with both.

She traces her tumor back to her treatment for menopause. Years before her mammogram and its unearthing, she teetered on the edge constantly as insomnia and sweating plagued her. Her doctor prescribed estrogen to offer some relief. This treatment came with a warning from her physician: too much time on estrogen may be linked to breast cancer. It is now seen as a “catalyst for cancer growth” due to the division it stimulates in the cells, which can cause dangerous mutations (Pesheva, 2023). So years after this forewarning, Lavon sat in the hospital with the tiniest lump in her breast.

“It was so small that only the finest mammogram machine could…” she trailed off onto a different tangent. Her comment relayed the importance of tests, doctors, and preventative measures for your health. If she had been at another doctor at another time, the diagnosis could have been worse.

Breast cancer varies from patient to patient and it does not discriminate. Nevertheless, “black women are 41% more likely to die” from the disease than white women (Saenz, 2022). There is also a link between diabetes, which disproportionately affects black and brown communities, and a higher risk for developing cancer (Blackburn, 2017; Northwestern Medicine, 2022). Historically, black communities don’t have the resources for preventative health measures (Lea, 2023). This includes breast cancer, which typically needs a mammogram to detect it. Tests like these can be expensive if you don’t have health insurance. Nana could recall how many women only started getting mammograms when they entered their fifties, and by then it could be stage four. She noted that was the scariest thing about the disease, “with cancer you can be alright walking around and still be dying.”

Her attitude about her diagnosis was reliant on the competency of her surgeon. “The books and the pamphlets and the things that I got were not conducive to black women. So I had to rely on my doctor for most of what I was told.” For her early stage breast cancer they just had to remove the lump. It is a disease that progresses to stage four, but it is not necessarily a death sentence. Breast cancer is no longer whispered about.

“Now you have a choice.” With mammograms and genetic testing on the forefront and radiation, chemotherapy, and a mastectomy available as treatments for this disease that largely affects women, there are options if it is caught early enough (American Cancer Society). A mastectomy is often seen as the extreme remedy for advanced cases. “It’s a scary thing because the [breasts are] very personal things with women.” They are the sign in the hellish halls of middle school that we are now considered women. They attract both negative and positive attention from our lovers and those who wish they were. They are the vessels by which we feed our children. They are at the center of our being, and getting rid of them can bring about fear. In a world filled with choice, there are options for the women who are forced to choose the extreme, like reconstructive surgery.

After the treatment and you are found clear of breast cancer, you go into remission. Nana describes her relationship with mammograms as tension filled after her bout with cancer. For the first five years its a biannual waiting game, where mammograms and their impending results make you sweat. “As long as you’ve had it once, you don’t dare miss a mammogram.” She still sweats even though its been twenty odd years.

Nana recalled that you often wouldn’t hear that someone had cancer until they died from it. “I think its gotten better now,” she remarks about the stigma and awareness surrounding the disease. Donations are given and fundraisers are held to close the socioeconomic gap in the deaths from cancer. My Nana and her three daughters began the tradition in our family of walking in breast cancer awareness marathons.

“Every year you see more and more women; it gets bigger and bigger. And that’s because alot of the women have friends who have number one died with it. And the other thing is that they want to participate, to do something for their friends who didn’t get through the loop.”

Now the tradition has passed down the line, along with the awareness. My cousin Leana, I, and our mothers walked in the Donna Half Marathon last year. Nana missed out on the race this time due to a leg injury, but she recalls how, “It was fun for all of us.” It was my first time participating, but we make it an event in my family. There are snacks and candy and excitement on the early morning of the marathon. Touching images of sisterhood grace the beaches in Jacksonville, Florida as women remember their illnesses and those of their mothers, sisters, and friends. Participants wear costumes and jam out to music until we all cross over that finish line, hoping that our contributions saved someone’s life.

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