

Monica Larcom  
mklarcom@email.arizona.edu  
monicalarc.journoportolio.com  
520-975-6975

## Hot and Sour Soup

“You’re not getting the hot and sour soup, mom?” I asked, noticing the absence of the dark brown soup that had so often graced our table. My parents and I were eating dinner at a Chinese restaurant that we’d been to many times, and the hot and sour soup had been a staple throughout my mom’s cancer treatment.

It’s been almost two years since my mother finished with her radiation. I hear stories of cancer survivors, but I strangely don’t feel solidarity with them. Their recounts seem so different from my own family’s, a little too dramatic, like a play, a blistering tale of pain and triumph. I don’t remember my mom’s cancer that way. I honestly don’t know how hard it is to go through cancer, because it was my mom who had it. But I could see how hard it was, how the chemo siphoned the energy out of my mom as fast as she accrued it, how her nerves were ten times more sensitive—anything approaching coarse in texture was painful, and everything tasted different. Like metal or rust, or nothing at all.

“No, I’m not having it today,” my mom replied, slipping her fork into the vegetable-and-nut dish she’d ordered. I didn’t say anything, eating my lo mein.

The hot and sour soup was why we went to this Chinese restaurant whenever my mom could during her chemo cycles. It had spices that were strong enough to taste and even enjoy. I tried it once, and I found it to be repulsive; but my mother relished the bitter salty taste and biting hotness that came at the end of each spoonful as it slithered down your throat. For her it was a welcome reprieve from the unpredictable tastes of our meals, and for me it was a relief to see my mom enjoying something.

There's a lot I can't remember from those months of chemo. Some things have grown hazy with time; other things I try to forget. I do remember the doctors and nurses talking with my parents, bolstering their courage. They talked about the effects of chemo, about how her immune system would be incredibly impaired. I avoided giving her hugs when I got sick, and I always washed my hands after getting home from school.

I remember her losing her hair.

That was a quiet morning, with my mom still feeling good enough to make breakfast, but already looking sallow because of the chemo simultaneously saving and killing her.

She left the table early, and after my dad went to work I padded silently to my mom's room. She was cleaning up the tufts of hair that had fallen in the drain of the shower.

"Oh, hi, I'm just—you know—" She shrugged, pointing needlessly, running her hand over her head and releasing yet another swath of hair from the follicles. Tears overwhelmed her eyes. Words were obsolete, invalid, so I just hugged her, my eyes and heart crying, wondering why in the world this had to happen to my mom.

"I don't want to sound silly, but it's hard, you know? It's hard for somebody to lose their hair, I think especially for a woman," my mom snuffled after a few moments.

"Mom, that's not silly, that's normal. Losing your hair... that's devastating," I said, the word feeling small and brittle in my mouth compared to the mass of pain that had no coherence, no sense.

My mom went to great lengths to have matching outfits, buying hats and bandanas to accommodate her wardrobe. She tried wigs, but they felt foreign and out of place, so she bought hats and scarves instead. One of her most-used hats was a red, blinged-out fishing hat that had sequins sewn on the outside. I don't remember people staring at my mom much, but maybe that's

because *I* was the one doing the staring. Mom looked so foreign without her hair. In time I got used to it, but I don't think she ever did. I don't remember her exiting her bedroom without a bandana or hat more than once in all the months of baldness.

People were always nice to her, sometimes in a phony, "I'm-uncomfortable-with-the-lack-of-hair-and-is-cancer-catching?" kind of way. But the waitress at the Chinese restaurant was genuine. She was the one who recommended the hot and sour soup to my mom. She would stop by our table when business was slow and chat with us. I was sad when I learned she was moving to the Midwest.

"What's it like there in Missouri?" I asked, marveling that this woman, whose name has faded from my memory, was not put off by my mom's lack of hair.

"It's *humid* in the summer. And *hot*," she lamented. "It'll be ninety-five degrees and one-hundred percent humidity outside. But it's beautiful, so green. And when nighttime comes, the lightning bugs come out in droves. I used to catch them in jars as a kid, and I still do with my own kids."

The image of the waitress catching fireflies lodged in my head. I could see her in the fading light with two children, laughing and shrieking as the fireflies buzzed over the wet grass, the heat as slow in leaving the earth as the sun sliding over the horizon. This scene, candy-coated by my own imagination stuck with me. It was so idyllic, so surreal, an image that contrasted harshly with the medicines and hats and chemo IV drips of life. I wanted to believe that life like that still existed.

Thanksgiving was the half-way point through chemotherapy. Mom got a few weeks off from treatment, which meant that she was eating better and sleeping less, and was more cheerful and wanting to plan and cook and have people over.

“Maybe we’ll just have Ben and Ariana over, and the Martins,” she said, resigning herself to the fact that there would not be a dinner party of twenty. I nodded slowly, silently thinking that even this group could be too many.

“That sounds good. And mom—we’ll do the cooking.” I did my best impression of her own motherly, no-nonsense voice.

“Well, I guess you can do most of it, but I will be helping.” She assented reluctantly.

If Thanksgiving was at the end of a long, arduous paragraph, then Christmas was a section closed with a cluster of asterisks, promising not the end of the cancer chapter, but the end of a cringe-worthy scene.

My mom got done with chemo three weeks before Christmas. The tests said the prognosis was good. It’s incredible the change visible in a cancer patient after three weeks without chemo. Mom’s skin color wasn’t yellow, and looked healthier—and her hair started to grow back a thick silver.

Radiation was next. Radiation five days a week. By that time I was in college full-time. I felt guilty, leaving her at home most days to go to class, but my guilt was assuaged by the realization that my mom was truly getting better. I kept holding my breath, waiting for the news that comes near the end of those sappy “terminal illness” movies: “We’re sorry, but the cancer has come back...” But we never got that news.

After Mom was through with radiation, life slowly turned back to normal; a new normal. I attempted not to dwell on the past, and my mom didn’t talk about the cancer either. She doesn’t have pink paraphernalia littered around the house, and she gave me a weird look when I bought the Susan G. Komen version of Home and Garden’s cookbook. I always wonder why my mom distances herself from these typical post-cancer things. Sometimes it feels like she just wants to

forget about the whole thing, which I can understand; but we can't forget. Despite the absence of conversation about her cancer, its effects are still very much alive.

There are doctor's appointments, check-ups, mammograms, speculations about double mastectomies. There are bandanas in my closet that she wore, that I saved from getting tossed with the rest of my mom's 'hat gear'. I know I'll never use them for anything, but they're there to remind me. There were the results of the BRCA II test—positive for my mom and my aunt, and the unknown results for me and the rest of my family.

I looked up from the lo mein; my plate was almost empty.

"Has she heard back from the doctor yet?" I asked, steering the conversation to my aunt. An MRI the week before had shown a lump; we were still waiting for the biopsy to be done.

"No, she hasn't," Mom replied, frowning softly. "She doesn't have the biopsy till next week." I kept my gaze down on my plate; I didn't want my mom to read my expression. The perpetual tenseness between my shoulders was back. *If my aunt has cancer...* I thought of my cousin, fifteen years old. He'd be facing his mom's illness two years younger than I did.

I looked up at my mom. There was light streaming into the restaurant through tall windows, light that threw the room into various degrees of chiaroscuro.

The light highlighted my mom's hair— shiny, silvery grey, as thick as my Dad's hair is thin. It's beautiful, and I thought of how my mom dyed her hair before the chemo took it away. The natural silver was far better than her previous color of choice.

"You know, I think I miss the chemo. There were so many people praying for me at the time, and it's incredible the difference that makes." I stared at my mom with more than a bit of incredulity. I laughed nervously.

“You don’t actually *miss* chemo, do you mom? I mean, I’m sure everyone praying for you was great, but...” I trailed off, waiting for her to clarify.

“Well no, of course I don’t miss the chemo,” she chuckled a bit, “but you can tell when a lot of people are praying for you. I miss that.”

I contemplated what she said as I piled up the contents of my plate into a mound. It was true. The overwhelming presence of God, through friends and family—it was more apparent as time passed. I was angry at God for a time, naturally—who isn’t when something like this hits? Even if I were an atheist I would want someone to blame for my mom’s cancer. But when prognosis after prognosis came back positive, when our church family made a schedule to provide huge meals every week, meals that made three with my mom’s meager appetite—I got the distinct sense that God was not the angry one in the storm clouds, loading us down with sickness and despair, but walking with us, helping us through the heavy months. Most people’s journey with cancer doesn’t turn into a string of best-case scenarios. Maybe that’s the real reason I don’t identify with most cancer stories.

I’m still waiting to hear the results of my aunt’s biopsy. The muscles in my back are knotted—they will stay that way, chances are, for a while. But when I look at my mom’s hair, I feel a surge of hope. I look at her hair, and realize that even though cancer is not a chapter in our lives that has closed, there are glimmering points to our dark tales. The end of this chapter in my family’s life will still be written— but the ink is not in black. It’s in silver.