

An Early Goodbye

SHORT STORY

Angel Huang, Grade 8, School Unavailable, Houston, TX.
Yan Hou, *Educator*; Harris County Department of Education,
Affiliate. Gold Medal, **New York Life Award**

The dodgeballs came at me in all directions. I was running around frantically trying to find myself a haven in a corner of the gym.

Smack!

A dodgeball slammed me so hard in the back that I saw little white stars dancing in front of my eyes. I stumbled forward a bit and heard people whisper, “She’s faking it!” A surge of dizziness cast upon me. My legs suddenly gave in, and I collapsed like a withering primrose. The real dread was when I slowly pushed myself up. Hummingbirds buzzed in my ears, I felt the dizziness multiplied ten times, and fog clogged my vision. I crumbled onto the gym floor once again. I then knew what fainting felt like. It was dreadful.

A brain tumor, apparently. I had been feeling weird ever since the morning when the first snow fell. It was the dizziness that bothered me. Or the fact that my mother told me I was just “under the weather.” That wasn’t true. Surprisingly, never in my one decade and five years had I gotten sick during winter. Everything was fine that day until I fainted. Mom drove to my school the minute the office staff called her, and because Dad was picking Austin up from his piano class, he wasn’t there with Mom. It had been relieving to wake up in that hospital bed, to smell the antiseptic wipes and escape the darkness I’d been trapped in while in the state of unconsciousness. Oh.. how soft those snow-white sheets were. They must’ve paid a fortune for those things. Creamy soft blankets were my only comfort when I was informed of the tragedy by a nurse.

I didn’t even know *what* a brain tumor was. I was

the smartest in my class, so how did I even get brain cancer? Did I use my brain too much? Did I stay in the sun too much?

Why me?

I repeated that question as the nurses rolled in and out all sorts of machines. I didn’t know. I really didn’t know. My mother explained brain cancer to me, but she was sobbing and weeping for me to understand what she was saying. She had to leave because the doctors had to run all sorts of other tests on me with big scary-looking machines.

As I lay on the hospital bed half awake, my thoughts wandered to the weekly science articles from school. “Most brain tumors are treated by surgery,” it said. Was I going to have surgery? My hands were trembling as I contemplated the thought of my head being cut open. But a sudden cr-creak stopped my thoughts. Despite being tired, my head shot toward the direction of the doorway. A middle-aged lady walked in with her mouth stretched into a wide smile and a transparent cap over her brunette locks.

“Good afternoon, darling, I’m Dr. Maya,” the lady chirped as her southern accent diverted my attention away from the rows of meticulously placed surgical knives that were just pushed past my room by a nurse. “You must be the one and only Faith Laurence,” She smiled at me.

“Yes,” I muttered meekly, trying to rub off the pencil mark that was on my thumb.

“Don’t worry, darling, those aren’t for you,” Dr. Maya chuckled as her eyes found their way to where I was staring.

“Am I not having surgery?” I sat up with a sudden dose of dizziness filling my head and slowly crawled back under the blanket.

“No, sweetie, unfortunately, your tumor is inoperable.” She sighed with a kind of sad smile like her puppy died, “The tumor doesn’t have a clear border so it’s hard to perform surgery without harming your healthy brain tissues.” She mustered a smile again. “But that’s alright because we have other options for you and your parents to consider.” As if on cue, I saw a glimpse of my mom’s blue jacket as she and Dad appeared at the doorway. For a moment, everything was going to be alright. I felt a wave of relief. Perhaps the doctors got it wrong, and I actually didn’t have a brain tumor. That’s right! Everyone makes mistakes, even professionals like doctors, right? Because now that Dad was here, he would fix all of it.

“Mom! Dad!” I cried, feeling like my world was coming together.

“Oh! Sweetheart!” My mother cried tears of joy and squeezed the air out of me.

When she finally let go, my dad embraced me in a stronger squeeze: “My little girl—oh” He stopped hugging me when I started to bawl like a baby. “Don’t worry sweetheart we’ll get through this together.”

I saw Dad’s eyes were a bit red. Was he crying? Why was he crying? Dad never cried in his life. He was going to fix all of this, wasn’t he?

“Dad, I’m going to be okay, right?”

“Yes, sweetpea, you’re going to be okay.” Tears were streaming down his face now as he managed a little smile at me and sat down by my bed.

“I’m not going to die, right?” I asked with fearful apprehension.

“No, you’re not,” Dad whispered in my ears as I smelled his minty breath.

“But—how are they going to take away my tumor?”

“I don’t know sweetie. I don’t know,” Dad choked out. He was silently crying right now. “But—all I know—” He took a deep breath and looked at me, “All I know is that you are brave. You are strong, and after whatever treatment, you’re coming home, Faith. You are coming home.”

Dad continued on about how brave I was and how God would save his little child while Mom and Dr. Maya were talking about my potential treatments. So, my tumor was real. It really was real. Unfortunately, I knew it before I even heard Mom and Dr. Maya. I knew it when I lied to myself, and when I asked Dad about my tumor. They were talking about some chemotreatment? I really was going to die, and at that moment I started laughing. Hysterically. Dad looked at me with a worried and confused expression. I giggled even harder. Dr. Maya and Mom rushed over to me.

“Are you okay sweetie?” I heard Mom’s anxiously muffled voice.

“She’s just under stress.” Dr. Maya’s southern accent responded. “I’ll give her something to calm her down.” And after that was a blur. I heard some “blahs” and mumblings that I can’t make out. My eyelids were dropping, and I was getting extremely somnolent. So, before I knew it, sleep fell upon me.

When I woke up, it was morning. The hospital curtains were open and I saw Mom lying on another bed beside mine. Her back was turned to me so I didn’t know whether she was awake or not.

“Mom,” I whispered carefully scooching to the other side of the bed where I was close to her.

“Oh—sweetie,” Mom turned around and sat up, “You’re awake!”

“Where is Dad?”

“He’s at work. How are you feeling, Faith?”

“My head hurts. Did you stay here all night? Wait—did I sleep through the night? What did Dr. Maya give me? What happened to me?” I stopped, looked at Mom, and took a deep breath. My headache was starting to hurt really bad.

Mom then explained to me that after I fell asleep, she decided to temporarily take a break from her job and stay here at the hospital with me, and so Dad could go to work.

“Austin will come and see you after school today. He was worried about you all afternoon yesterday.” Mom continued, “And—” She was interrupted when we heard the door creak.

“Oh, sorry!” Dr. Maya apologized. “I was just looking to see if you guys woke up. Are you free right now?” I nodded, my headache too bad to respond.

“Well, yesterday, I talked with your parents about your treatment, and—well, today I’ll tell you..”

Chemotherapy. That was the word. What was that? I didn’t know. Listening to Dr. Maya and Mom explain it was just like listening to a science lecture all over again. All I could understand was that my chemotherapy treatment would last for about five months. It might not work for my tumor, but according to Dr. Maya, “Trying is always better than not trying.” Every week, I was to have a chemotherapy session which would vary in time from each session. Then the experts would see if my tumor was gone or if chemotherapy didn’t work at all. Perhaps, the only positive thing about this chemotherapy was that I got to stay home for the time being.

Austin came to see me that afternoon. My ten-year-old brother was not much of a crier, but he cried today. And full-on bawling too. I realized things that I’d never known before until I got my tumor. So, Dad cries, and Austin too. What else does the universe have in mind?

My parents were on a roller coaster for the next few days, running up and down the hospital elevators, getting me food, clothes, or anything to attempt to make me feel more comfortable. The chemotherapy sessions were not painful at all. It’s simply a little tube injecting liquids into my arm. There was something in that liquid that made me so sleepy after each of my sessions that I spent most of my days in deep slumber. I’ve never felt this tired in all my life. It was sleep for me all day and every day.

I knew cancer could cause hair loss, but Dr. Maya and Mom never told me that chemotherapy treatment was the thing that caused it. I started losing hair after two weeks of chemotherapy. I cried. Tears fell when I saw the big lumps of my ink-black hair on the pillow when I woke up one morning. I knew how stupid and utterly ridiculous I was to be crying about my hair while my own life was on the line. But I was sad because my hair was just one more reminder of how possible it was for me to die.

After months, chemotherapy didn’t work. The tumor was growing.

Eventually, I didn’t go to the hospital anymore. Perhaps, it was because of the fact that I couldn’t feel anything. Physically and emotionally too. It was like someone turned off the big switch to all my senses. The tumor stretched down my spine. I was spending most of my time sleeping; however, sleeping felt like I had no control over myself. Weeks passed. Months passed. Friends came to bring me flowers. Pastors came to pray for me. It was always that one verse from the Bible: “He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake”. Everyone used that line in their prayers. I was sleeping, but I could hear them. The distant mumblings. The crying and bawling of my mother and father. I could hear that too. Austin played the piano. It was a beautiful melody. But all of that didn’t mean that much to me, after all, I was at home waiting for my final breath.

Sleeping was peaceful. It was quiet compared to all the tormenting treatments I've had in the past nine months. Sometimes I could hear a thump thump in my ear like the sound vibrating from my mother's footsteps. Oh—but I realized that was just my heartbeat. From time to time I heard a sound that resembled a pot sizzling. I smelled lilies from the time we went to Hawaii. Other times, I felt gentle breezes slightly sweeping up my bed sheets. One time, while hearing the thump thump beat of my heart, the sizzle sizzle of the pot, smelling lilies from the fields, and feeling the gentle zephyr lifting my white sheets, my slumber went on forever.

When I died, I thought back to when I was first admitted to the hospital. I was a scared girl afraid of her own death. However, now that I've experienced it, maybe I wasn't really afraid of death itself. Maybe it was the idea of death that terrified me. But I know why now. It was like this, oh, after I died. No words could explain why. I just know why. Every single question that I've had in this lifetime was answered, including my own death.

But that summer was a tragedy for my family. My mother sobbed until there were no tears left to cry. My father's heart ached whenever he looked at my pictures on the refrigerator. Austin— he— well, Austin grieved, laughed, played piano, and mostly cried. It was sorrowful for my family. It has been like this for the past two years.

Part of my mother's shattered heart can never be mended again.

My father's now-tired countenance will never have that lively appearance again.

Austin could never play the same tune he played with me all those years ago when we still lived in our big house with the swings.

I watched them from paradise, and I saw that, besides the fact that I was gone, nothing really changed. Emotionally yes—maybe. But the everyday

tasks, that was the same. My family still continued about their days. Even though my mother was lamenting, she still made her delectable noodle broth for the family. My dad still worked to pay for Austin's expensive school. Austin studied, played at recess, and did homework. In some ways, my family got over my death. They got over my death for me. They were living life for me.

So now, as I sprint across the rolling hills and jump in the lily fields of heaven, I rejoice to see their lives unfold. I believe humanity has the power to get over anything if they try—even the death of a child or sibling.

That's what life is about. ■