

Denial and Beyond

Category: Coming Undone

written by Christina Weltz | May 4, 2023

When Alma first felt a lump in her right breast, she assumed it was a meaningless skin lesion. But it grew, ultimately taking over the breast. Then her skin blistered, thickened, and turned red. Alma knew it was breast cancer—she'd looked up online images of advanced disease but abruptly closed the web pages. She told herself that "cancer doesn't happen to me." Though in her 40s, she was her father's "mini-me," adored and indulged.

Alma secluded herself in her apartment. She was months behind in rent. She was a chef but stopped working. Having always been healthy, she had no medical insurance, which justified not seeking help: "I assumed no doctor would see me."

In time, Alma was certain her cancer had metastasized. She decided to sell everything, leave New York, and move to South America. She had relatives there, and the weather was warm. That was where she'd die.

Instead, she told a friend about her breast, and the friend brought her to our center. A biopsy confirmed the cancer, but imaging showed no metastasis; chemotherapy was started, since the tumor was inoperable at that point. I met Alma during her chemotherapy, to plan her subsequent surgery. On reviewing her original PET scan, I was astonished. Her breast glared like a blinding light. Cancer erupted into her skin. Yellow flowed and orange streaked through her underlying pectoral muscle, and cancer-filled axillary lymph nodes resembled multiple small suns.

But Alma was far more than just a patient. From the beginning, she joined all the center's activities—yoga, Pilates, nutrition, arts, group support. Everyone liked her. One evening, passing through a yoga class, I navigated around Alma's mat and whispered, "I think you spend more time here than I do."

Alma did well on all the treatments—chemotherapy, mastectomy, radiation, and hormonal therapy.

There was a scare four years post-treatment, when I felt a mass in her neck that was worrisome for recurrence. Alma couldn't sleep, fearing "we were back at the beginning." She had just learned of the death of a woman in her breast cancer support group. But she came for imaging as instructed, and we were both immensely relieved by the benign results.

Now, eight years later, Alma is fine. She no longer spends much time at the breast center, nor does she need to. She knows that the cancer could recur, but she lives a full life. The woman who had come undone had acknowledged and treated her cancer and become whole again.

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