

A Journalist Embedded in Cancerland

WORDS BY

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When you work in Washington, time runs on steroids, and dare you miss a dose. So, between the inconvenient lime-sized lump I felt in my breast to the biopsy I drove myself to, I had no time to waste in wondering if it was really cancer.

I did, however, think about it on a Friday in mid-July of 2016. After wrapping up a productive conversation on the ABC show, *Government Matters*, I nervously rambled to a former colleague on the panel with me about this strange lump thing I had discovered and how everything was fine.

God's earth does that even mean? I kept repeating it out loud as if somehow reciting the words would stir an a-ha! moment in my now stunned brain. Instead, there were no moments.

I was utterly, entirely, desperately lost.

My life came to a standing halt. Nothing this random doctor I had never met—who unceremoniously delivered me the “you have cancer” news—made sense. All I could get out of him was that it was an aggressive type of cancer and that I needed to see an oncologist as soon as possible.

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It's just going to be a nuisance when I have to get this cyst removed, is what I conveniently said to my editor that day, but that I needed to take the afternoon to go get my pathology report. He sounded worried and concerned. I pretended it was all going to be okay. With no family history of breast cancer, and late 20's youth on my side, I would just have to take a few days off to get this annoying thing removed, and life goes on.

That Friday afternoon hit me like a lightning bolt.

Poorly differentiated ductal carcinoma with medullary features, multiple fragments.... what on

I had been working in Washington, D.C., covering Congress from Capitol Hill. I had to hustle every single day, but I always gazed into the historic, beautifully painted ceilings of the United States Senate and thought, how lucky am I to cover news from here. I was 29-years-old, had covered the conflict in Pakistan, embedded with the U.S. military and traveled all over eastern Afghanistan, worked in local news in Washington (you'd be surprised how nerve-wracking covering the birth of a baby panda is!), and covered politics from the nation's capital. Yet, nothing had prepared me for cancer.

What did finally prepare me for acceptance of this cancer was when I looked at myself one day in the bathroom mirror after spending almost six hours vomiting following awful chemotherapy treatment. I saw a steroid-induced swollen face, hardly any eyebrows left, a bald-headed woman I did not recognize. I felt hideous, more disgusted with myself than the toxic red drug flowing through my veins. A moment of tears was followed by a flashback to when I interviewed a woman in Lahore, Pakistan, a victim of an acid attack. She was working at a salon at that time, making other women look and feel beautiful. Her face was badly damaged from the violent incident, but when I wanted to take a photo of her, she posed gracefully next to the salon sign and asked me to make sure I got a pretty picture of her on her good side. I was absolutely in awe of her. Even after encountering such unfair brutality, she saw herself as the most beautiful woman in the room. I felt selfish when I thought of her that day. Cancer was unjust, taking away so much of me bit by bit, even almost five years later, constantly reminding me of the remnants it has left behind. My body will never be the same, but my hair grew back, my eyelashes though severely less dramatic, did grow back, my eyebrows came back, and my face shaped back into what it used to be. I still feel selfish for feeling pity for myself when there was this woman I had met years ago who was a symbol of survival, courage, and pride. So many women go through so much worse every day yet come out on the other side with tremendous amounts of courage and strength. I suppose I held onto that inspiration throughout the rest of my treatment and did come out on the other side of cancer (luckily) with more courage and strength than I initially ever thought I had.

An integral part of uncovering my own resilience was recognizing the cast of characters, family, friends, and co-workers who rallied to get me through diagnosis and treatment. There were people who I expected, like my family, my friends who were incredibly busy but took days off work to help me, left young kids with grandparents just to take me to chemo, called me from thousands of miles away checking in on me, friends who prayed for me for months on end and the ones who had known me for decades, making me laugh throughout the painful journey.

Then there were the unexpected friends I made.

A woman sitting across from me alongside her daughter in the oncology waiting area showed off her new t-shirt her Police department got her. I am pretty sure there was profanity on that shirt, and I thought, gosh! That is such a relief because really...fuck cancer. It sucks. We started to chat. She had already lost her best friend to cancer, and now she was fighting the same disease she saw wreak havoc in her loved one's life. Yet, she never let the illness destroy her spirit and what a fighting spirit it was. I can't imagine going long without speaking to her now.

My job was another place I never expected such compassion from. I thought I was just another easily replaceable journalist in Washington. Instead, people I did not even know at my former publication reached out to me. My editor worked tirelessly on fine-tuning my stories until I could barely make sense of my own words because he knew how much my finished work meant to me.

This cast of characters strengthened me daily and created a safe space for me to grow into this new person, because nothing changes you like cancer. Still, there were those tiny moments I hold onto, like the innocence of my little nephew, who was too young to understand what my rapid physical transformation meant. All he knew was that I was the same person. And sometimes, when you are going through so much physical pain and emotion at the same time, you need assurances; someone not entirely defined by the illness is not forgotten.



Images by Aisha