

Cataract

by Tamar Love

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Candace is at the gate, leaning against the guardrail, wearing the green sweater I gave her for her birthday. Her hair is a little longer than it was at Christmas, and she's lost a few pounds and looks wonderful, as beautiful as always, even without makeup. She's smiling at me, her brown eyes soft and twinkling behind her glasses, and then her arms are around me, and I'm holding her against me, smelling her hair and her faint, flowery perfume. My breath catches and I blink back tears. It's only been five weeks since I've seen her, but it always seems so very long.

"So how was your flight?" she asks, taking my bags and starting down the walkway. "Did you like your seat?"

I don't fly often, nor do I like it very much, but we scheduled this visit weeks ago, long before I found the lump. I had thought, for a very brief moment, of canceling the trip, but I couldn't do it. I wanted to see her. To tell her in person. It would be a hard enough thing for her to hear; I didn't want to do it over the telephone. And besides, if she had known about the lump, if I'd told her about last Monday, when I found it, about how one day I was fine and then the next day, it was just there, this misshapen thing on the side of my breast, she would have canceled the trip and insisted I stay home. But she wouldn't have been content with that-she would have flown down and gone to the doctor with me, insisted on a specialist, a second opinion, a different diagnosis. And Candace, with her angry letter-writing and firmly expressed opinions, would have held out until she received one.

That's what I tell myself anyway. That I'm waiting to tell her in person. The truth is, I haven't told anyone, not even my husband.

On the plane, when the flight attendant had asked what beverage I'd like, I'd almost replied, the best one for folks with cancer. It would have been a test, you see, to see if I could maybe say the words in the context of a joke, but then I'd realized it

wasn't funny at all, it wasn't even a joke, and I'd choked back my laughter, or my tears, or whatever else would have come out, and replied instead, "Just orange juice, thanks."

I'd looked out my window at the clear blue of the sky and thought how funny it was that after all these years of visiting Candace, I was still afraid of flying. It's not a rational fear, really, because I know it's very unlikely anything would ever happen to me. It's much more likely that some business traveler, someone who flew every week, would be the one to crash. Not I, who never went anywhere, let alone somewhere in a plane. I had to laugh a little at that, at what it means, at how stupid I was being, still thinking, even after the proof I've had, that the laws of randomness do not apply to me.

Once we'd passed the water and were above land again, I looked down at the neat, brown squares of plotted land and thought to myself that it was the landing I feared the most, the possibility of brake failure or human error, the thought of the plane smashing into the tarmac, and how final that would be. Like an explosion-there wouldn't even be a chance of surviving. At least in a water landing, I would have a chance. And as I steeled myself for the inevitable thud of the landing, for the lurching rush as the pilot applied the brakes, I said to myself, they're taking my breast away next Tuesday.

I am always surprised at how ugly the Bay is. I am used to the Pacific Ocean as it appears in Southern California, at Laguna Beach, where my husband and I spend the occasional Sunday. My ocean is blue and deep and alive, not gray and sluggish, like the mass that stretches out beside us during the ride to Candace's apartment. I know it's the same water, but I can't help thinking how dead it seems, like someone has drained it of fish and seaweed and everything else that makes it alive inside. I wonder if Candace misses the ocean of her childhood.

As the freeway ends, spilling a river of cars into the middle of the city, Candace tells me she's doing much better. "I think I'm over him," she says, referring to that bastard who was supposed to have married her. "I hardly ever think about him at all, anymore." She sounds much braver than I think she feels. It had only been a few

months, after all, and their relationship had been quite serious; they'd lived together for over a year, and had planned on getting married the following year. And then one day he'd just left, with no warning-he'd said he was scared of having the rest of his life mapped out-and Candace had been destroyed, more by the suddenness of his decision than by anything else. She's always been so practical, such a planner, never dreaming that you could do everything right and still have it all go to hell.

"And it really helps having a car now," she was saying. "I don't feel so trapped all of the time. I can get out of the house and go wherever I want." She'd bought the car right before Thanksgiving, after receiving a raise from the bank. I'd been so proud of her-she was really doing well for herself. "I can go anywhere I want, any time I want to. It's great." She'd lived in this city for over four years without a car, something I couldn't imagine. She still takes the bus to work, because apparently it costs too much to park. I have never taken the bus. I wouldn't even begin to know how to do such a thing.

I suddenly feel every mile I've flown in my sore neck muscles and heavy eyes. I blink my eyes and they begin to water a little. I wonder how much harder it will be after the surgery, if the therapy will make me this tired all the time. Already I feel like my body is changing, decaying, betraying me. I wonder how much it will finally change before it is done with me altogether.

"So tonight we're going to stay in, right?" I ask, looking out the window at the houses flashing by, so close together, no room to breathe.

"Yeah," she says, looking over her right shoulder and changing lanes. "I thought we could stop by Blockbuster and get a couple of movies. That new Sean Connery movie is out on video, you know." She knows I don't like to do much my first night there.

"That sounds good," I say, "Are we getting takeout from Melisa's?"

"Of course," she says. "You have to have decent Chinese food while you're here. That crap back home is disgusting."

I smile; it's an old argument. She insists the Chinese food in Southern California is inedible. I don't remind her it was good enough for her when she was growing up.

A few hours later, we sit with full bellies and watch some terrible military thriller we'd settled on at the video store. They'd been out of the Sean Connery movie. Candace has pulled out the sofa bed and made it up for me, and we lie on it together, with Belle and Sassy, ringed around us. Belle has curled up beneath my arm, next to the lump, and it's all I can think about for the first half of the movie, as I fidget and squirm and try to move the lump away from her. But Belle is a cat, not a person. Even if she noticed the lump, she wouldn't have much to say about it. But nonetheless, I try to hold still. I don't want Candace to know that I am uncomfortable, or she will fuss and fiddle until she's satisfied I'm happy.

Candace turns on her side and tosses her head, spreading her hair out on the pillow like silk. I reach over and run my fingers through it; it's soft and fine, just like it was when she was a baby, with ringlets of red-gold hair curling over her forehead. She looks over at me and smiles. Her glasses are slightly askew.

"Are you letting your hair grow long again?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says, "it depends on what my hairdresser says." She is quiet for a moment, considering. "But I think so," she says, and turns her head back to watch the movie, settling her glasses against the bridge of her nose. I'm glad: she looked like a boy with her hair so short. Belle's deep purr lulls me, and I settle into the bed, feeling the weight of the day begin to slip away.

Later, after the movie is over, I get up to take my shower. The water is wonderfully hot, but it feels different than the water at home, harder, and the spray isn't as strong. When I'm done, I dry myself off and stand on the bathmat, steam swirling around my body, and I touch my left breast, gingerly, with the tip of my finger. It is the same size. The lump. At least it hasn't gotten any bigger. I have no thoughts to go along with that observation; there is no room in my life for what comes next. I wrap the towel around my body and write with my finger in the fogged-over mirror:

I have cancer.

It's strange: I can write the words, my finger lingering over the smooth curving backs of the "h," ending the "r" with a rich flourish. I can mouth the words, the inadequate vowels short and dull against my teeth. I can read the words, all three of

them, as flat and as brief as my life in that dim, steamy mirror. I trace them again and can feel them, the impossible two-dimensionality of them, slick on the mirror's surface. I can hear them and it seems I can taste and even smell them, but I cannot say them. Not aloud. And if I can't say the words, even to myself, if I can't stand to hear the echo against even my own heart, how can I tell my daughter?

The next day, Friday, we drive to Napa Valley for our annual trip to St. Helena, and to one of the several wineries scattered throughout the valley. I don't drink wine, but I do love the scenery in Napa, and even though I can't spend much, I love shopping in the little boutiques. We always stop at one winery, a different one every time, so Candace can taste some wine. I think she collects the little glasses they give her, the ones with the winery name on them, but I'm not sure. She might just throw them out when she gets home. She likes things to match.

"So where are we going this time?" I ask.

"I thought we'd have lunch first, at that cute little restaurant next to the Oakville Grocery, you know, that fancy grocery store with the cheese."

"Yes, where I got that fudge last time."

"Right," she says, "then we can go up the road to St. Helena for some shopping. On the way back, I thought we'd stop at Cakebread, this smallish little winery that's supposed to make great whites. You should like that, right?" She looks at me hopefully, knowing I don't really care.

"That sounds fine," I say, looking out the window at the low brown hillside.

The ride is beautiful. I think I've seen the vines in all their stages, by now: spring, when the first greening buds are beginning to show, summer, when the vines are lush and bountiful, early fall, my last visit, when the vines are heaviest and the air redolent with grapes, and now winter, when the vines are bare and brown, gnarled twigs, really, yet still beautiful in a strange, stark way. It's odd, really, that I should like this environment. It's so completely foreign to my life in Southern California. Something about the warm, dry air, maybe, or the casual, practiced way everyone seems to throw money around. At home, we clutch at it, hold it very tightly, for there isn't very much of it.

"Are you having fun?" she asks. She's tuned the radio to the oldies station, and "Sherry" is playing.

I smile, and say, "I'm having a wonderful time, just like always." Silence fills the car again, a warm, companionable silence. Candace is my best friend, I think, and I say, "I like the sunroof."

"Isn't it nice?" she says. "I'm so used to it now, I've almost forgotten what it was like to be in a car that doesn't have one." Her hair blows into her face and she shoves it behind her ear with one finger, practiced, impatient. She is already used to this long hair and its drawbacks.

It's then that I almost tell her. But she turns her head and looks at me, over the top of her sunglasses, and smiles, and says, "I love you, Mom."

And I realize then that I've been wrong. I had thought it would be best to tell Candace first, that as my closest friend, she would best help me through this trial. But now I understand that telling her will be hardest of all. In four days I am having a radical mastectomy, after which I may have to undergo radiation, or chemotherapy, after which I may lose the other breast, after which I may die. But I might also recover. I don't know that I can say the same for Candace. It will hurt her so much to watch me suffer. How can I cause her that much pain?

"I love you too, honey," I say, because I can't say anything else.

We spend the next day in the city, going to the Museum of Modern Art in the morning, eating lunch in the museum café, and going shopping in the afternoon. By the time it begins to get dark, I'm exhausted, but I don't say anything because we have evening plans. Candace has made reservations at some fancy French place, and has tickets to Phantom of the Opera-orchestra seats, she's assured me.

"You know," I say as we get ready to go out, "you don't have to spend all this money on me all the time." We are both crowded in her tiny bathroom, standing hip to hip, trying on different lipstick and giggling like high-school girls.

"I know," she says, "but I like to. Providing for you makes me happy." She rummages through my makeup bag and pulls out a lipstick. "Can I try this one?" Before I can say yes, she begins to apply it, saying, "Besides, I can afford it, can't I?" I look at her

then, in her black velvet skirt and her cream silk blouse, her over-priced furniture stuffed into this tiny little apartment for which she pays more than our monthly mortgage payment, and I wonder who taught her to live this way. And then I feel ashamed.

Candace's life is different from mine, as a child's should be from its mother's. She works hard, and has nothing to come home to but a cold house and two cats. Let her spend money on frivolous things-if it brings her comfort, I should have no problem with it. Although I do wonder occasionally how she has found the strength to lead this life of hers. Or maybe the word I'm looking for is courage. She's so alone here-the first time she had to hail a taxi, the first time she took the bus, or went to a new doctor, or did any of the other daily things I take for granted, was she scared? If I know her at all, she was, yet she never admitted it, never once called home for sympathy. Who taught her to be this strong?

On our last day together, we don't have time to do very much; my flight is at three o'clock. "Let's go to Golden Gate Park," Candace says after brunch, "I want to show you my favorite place to be alone."

We load my things into the car and drive up to Stowe Lake, where I have never been. It's just after noon, and the clouds are beginning to break up a little. Long shafts of sunlight hit the lake, illuminating the water in a particularly beautiful way. "It's lovely," I say, marveling that such a place could exist in the middle of a busy, urban city.

"I know," Candace says, "isn't it great? I started jogging here a few weeks ago. It's pretty crowded on the weekends, but during the week it's nice."

As we walk slowly around the lake, Candace points things out to me: ducks, geese, a row of turtles sunning themselves on a log. I don't see many flowers, but the plants are beautiful, thick and healthy and lush. She tells me about the blue heron she saw here the day before, that this species of bird is very rare in this part of the country, but that Golden Gate Park has a number of them. We cross a bridge to the small island in the middle of the lake. I can hear a rushing of water in the distance: a river, maybe, or a cataract.

"It's called Strawberry Hill," my daughter tells me, "the hippies used to come here in the sixties." She points to the top of the hill. "That's where I'm going to take you," she says, grinning. "You think you can make it?"

I look at the hill, at the distance from here to there, and I think no, I can't make it, and I'm suddenly so angry. I want to take Candace by the shoulders and shake her. I want to shout at her, demand to know why she can't see me, the way I can see her. But she can't see me, because I haven't shown her. So I bite my tongue, and tell her that I can do it. Telling her that is so much easier than telling her the truth.

As I follow Candace up the steep, unpaved path that winds around the hill, I become even more enraged. It isn't fair, I think, I'm too young to be feeling this old. I'm too young to begin thinking about dying. I'm too young to feel so alone inside. And every time I think the word young, I stab at the ground with my foot, harder, angrier, gaining purchase against the soft earth, taking bigger and longer steps, my breath coming deeper and harder, until I realize I've come to the top, and Candace is staring at me, and I think, so that is the secret of undertaking the world. You just get angry at it. And I begin to laugh, my breath short and shallow. If you are angry enough, you can survive anything.

Candace, who has never seen me exert myself this much, is staring at me as though I have lost my mind, and that is also funny, because in a way I have gained it. I tell her I'm fine, and I'm surprised to find that I mean it. I haven't felt this wonderful in years.

She leads me to the fountainhead of a manmade waterfall, the sound I'd been hearing since we crossed over to the island. Surrounded by an outcropping of flat rocks, the water sprang from an invisible source in the ground and tumbled down to the lake below. "This is it," she says, gesturing at the rocks, "my favorite place to come and sit and read. Isn't it nice? The cataract drowns out all the thoughts in my head so I can read in peace." I look at her, at the hope in her eyes, and the vulnerability that lies below, and then I look out at San Francisco, at the rows of colored houses visible over the tops of the trees that surround us. This is her city. Her home that she made for herself. It is beautiful, I think, but not as beautiful as my daughter, with her clear skin,

and her deep, brown eyes, her hair, long and flat against her neck, and her smile, strong and grateful and proud.

We stand for a few minutes more, listening to the splash of the waterfall, feeling the warm sun on our backs, then, almost in unison, we start forward again, the winding path much gentler as we walk downhill.

As we round the next tier, she shops suddenly. "Shit," she says.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Oh, I've been stupid." She gestures down the hill to a section of the path below us, at a stone bridge connecting the island we're on to the outer rim of the lake. "We're supposed to be on that path down there. I wanted to take you over that cute little Japanese bridge. I must have picked the wrong branch of that fork back there."

I walk to the edge of the road and look down the hill, which is covered with ivy and dotted with low trees. "It doesn't look that steep," I say, "and look." I point to a rough, narrow path through the ivy. "We could get to the bridge if we go down that path there."

I look back and see that my daughter is staring at me with admiration and disbelief. "You want to go commando down the side of the hill?" she asks.

"I can make it," I say, "can you?"

She laughs. "I didn't know you were so adventurous," she says, and she puts her arms around me and hugs me. Her body is warm and solid, alive, and I think, I made this.

She breaks away from me and walks to the edge of the path. "Let me go first," she says, "I don't want to slip and fall and take you down with me."

"Fine," I say, smiling, and I step close to her, take her hand and start down the path behind her. And it occurs to me, as my shoes sink into the soft earth, that I know where she's found the courage to live her life: I taught her. And as I take her hand and follow her down the path to the broken Japanese bridge, I know that when we reach the bottom of the hill, I will tell her.