

RUN

A Memoir of Hope

by

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1 Diagnosis

I lost myself. I didn't know exactly when, but over time I morphed into a clump of human organs dashing from one calendar item to the next—spinning the clock on its side, finding a way to multi-task everything, including my relationship. I hadn't noticed I'd slipped out of my skin until my world completely unraveled, forcing me to pay attention.

I lived in Southern California, inland. We'd recently relocated from Denver to my home state, moving a step closer to my dream of oceanfront living, but not quite there yet. How I wished I were there now. Crashing melodic waves, stunning sunsets, a peaceful beach—visions that evaporate in the rush of daily life.

At forty-six, I'd chosen career over motherhood. The niece, a nephew, and grandnieces I doted on would surely create enough ancestral lineage for generations to come. I chose women over men. I liked men. I liked women. I didn't like labels. I lived quietly with my partner, Liv, not denying our lifestyle, but not waving a rainbow flag either.

I came from an Italian bloodline of over-shouting Californians, where loud equaled love. I grew up youngest with my artist brother and drama-queen sister. Like a mama bear, Mom would do anything for her children, while my often-absent father provided a quiet strength. Later, my parents married other people. After fifteen years of living elsewhere, I returned home permanently, just in time to settle into a new house and discover I had cancer.

“Roni,” Liv said. “Hon, are you gonna just stand there?”

I dawdled, leaning on the exam table, twisting the folded-up paper gown in my hands, silently protesting the need for another look at my breasts. Two days before, I lay on the same

exam table, wore a similar gown, and experienced the umpteenth touch from a doctor, a stranger. What could have changed in two days?

I squeezed the gown into a ball. “I don’t understand why I need to put this thing on again.”

Liv grunted. She sat in the corner peering into her phone, acting busy so she wouldn’t have to watch me undress. It wasn’t as if she’d never seen my chest before or any other part of me during the previous eight years, but considering her history, I supposed seeing my naked vulnerability in the context of this exam scared her.

Finally, I flattened the paper vest on the table. Removed my shirt. An instant chill hit me as I dropped my bra on the chair. I sat on the edge of the table, wearing the crumpled flimsy paper garment.

I’d recently endured initial cancer screening in the no-nonsense medical facilities near our home in Rancho Cucamonga, a city mentioned once in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, located seventy miles from Barstow, where Liv was the most recent owner/operator of three McDonald’s restaurants. She’d purchased one of the busiest McDonald’s locations in the world. Liv wasn’t prepared for the neglected condition of the restaurants and the sheer volume of summer traffic as Las Vegas-bound Californians zipped through for Happy Meals on their way to higher hopes. Ultimately, Liv survived that difficult transition. She was the reason we were in Santa Monica. Liv found Dr. Chen, a specialist in breast cancer surgery.

After the bare-bones waiting rooms near our home, I luxuriated in the carpeted floors, cushioned chairs, and tastefully decorated walls at St. John Hopkins. We’d driven sixty miles to meet with Dr. Chen, a trek we’d repeated several times in the last few weeks.

A rap on the door jolted me as Dr. Chen entered, greeted us, and within seconds conducted an exam.

“Have you experienced swelling?” she asked.

“Maybe, from the biopsy.”

“I want to order a PET/CT scan. Your MRI shows the tumor’s larger than we suspected.”

Liv’s head popped up. “Can she get that done right away?” Of course Liv wanted to rush; we’d been dallying around medical tests for three weeks, doing nothing about the cancer.

“I’ll walk you through my admin area,” Dr. Chen said. “My team will set you up.”

I dressed and followed Liv and Dr. Chen, wondering if our internet diagnosis was wrong. After plowing through pages of breast cancer information, Liv and I staged my cancer at stage II, a self-diagnosis. My mind stayed there as I handed my insurance card to a woman on Dr. Chen’s staff.

“I don’t need that again,” she said with a smile. “Just your schedule.”

“As soon as possible,” Liv interrupted. “We’ll go anywhere. Let’s get it done.”

My work calendar last month had notations for trips to Chicago, Seattle, and Phoenix. Only a few weeks ago, I phoned my boss, Dave, and shared the largest understatement of my life. “I found a lump. It’s probably nothing. Going to miss a few hours to see a doctor.”

I agreed with Liv. We needed to get this thing done. I took the first available appointment.

Four days after the PET scan, Liv and I sat in the same exam room. I’d ripped the paper gown and didn’t have a backup vest. When Dr. Chen tapped her standard warning of entry, I held the paper vest together and said, “Come in.”

Within seconds she got right to it. “I’ve been reviewing the PET scan results. There’s a spot on your sternum. Your cancer has already spread. We’re looking at stage IV.”

I’d never had cancer before, but I knew that wasn’t good news.

Liv shrank farther into the chair. Her lips puckered together like a cord pulled tight around a bag. Her eyes focused on her phone. I stared at her, willing her to look at me.

When she didn’t budge, I said, “Liv, are you okay?”

She finally lifted her chin. My stomach plunged to my feet as I witnessed my living fear reflected in her eyes, stamped in pink splotches on that beautiful pale face that I loved.

“I’m okay. I’m recording everything.” But I knew my partner. She didn’t speak her truth. Nothing about this moment was okay.

My feet hung over the table like heavy anvils. I wanted to melt into the floor, float along the brown wiggly lines embedded in the tile squares beneath me and disappear into Mother Earth forever.

The ripped paper gown exposed my purple-and-blue biopsied breasts. “Take them both.” After three weeks and four days of medical tests and bad news, I surrendered. I’d been hell-bent on keeping my breasts and returning to my life, quick and clean. But now, I wanted them off and the cancer gone.

Dr. Chen’s white teeth sparkled against her bright-red lips. “We can’t. We have to treat your body first.”

“Cut them off,” I repeated. At my age, I didn’t need my breasts. I’d never have a baby.

“You need an oncologist,” she said. “Chemotherapy.”

I thought about the many deaths Liv had experienced in her life: her mother, brother, grandfather, first boyfriend, first girlfriend, second girlfriend, and a few others who had been

close to her. I didn't want to join her list of people who'd died. Names that often floated from her lips as a constant part of her story.

"I know we thought it wasn't in your lymph nodes, but it is." Dr. Chen's smile widened as if she was sharing magnificent news. "The tumor is seven centimeters."

My God, I didn't get sick, not ever. I ran three miles last week. I worked out. Cancer doesn't happen to healthy people. *This isn't my story. This isn't me. This isn't happening.*

"I've got patients who manage their cancer. Some for over twenty years." I didn't understand why she said that. It must have shown on my face because she added, "We can't cut out your bone."

"But it wasn't in my bone."

Liv remained planted in the corner, hunched over her phone. "We'll find you the best oncologist."

Dr. Chen used long medical words to describe why the bone scan hadn't recognized cancer in my sternum, but the PET scan did. I tried to listen, but my mind rested stubbornly on her phone call last week. "Your bone scan came out *perfect*." Her words, not mine.

I stared at her red lips spewing syllables. She stopped when she recognized she'd lost me. "It's best described as . . . kind of like a bone-eating type of cancer."

"It's eating my bone?"

"You know the spot on your chest that's sore?" Dr. Chen said. "Cancer in the bone hurts."

"I have bone cancer?"

Dr. Chen's false smile disappeared. Her eyes warmed. "No, no. Breast cancer has spread to your bone. It's metastasized. That's why we have to treat your body first."

The pain in my sternum felt like a deep bruise. It had freaked me out. I'd mentioned it to Dr. Chen more than once. I hadn't noticed it until all the sore spots from not working out fell away and the constant throbbing continued, front and center.

"I'd like to do a biopsy on your sternum," Dr. Chen said.

Three weeks of doctors ordering 'one more test.' I lost count of how many. Both breasts looked beaten from multiple biopsies. My armpit hurt from a wire run deep inside in search of cancerous lymph nodes. I drank weird concoctions, got shot with radioactive drugs dispensed through a metal container nobody would touch, spent time in spinning tubes, wore headphones for one test, ate protein for another, and with each pushing, cutting, prodding, squeezing event, it felt as if rebelling cancer cells were taking over.

"I'll schedule the biopsy on your sternum," Dr. Chen said.

"*No.*"

Silence filled the room. I realized I'd spoken. I was the one in that tiny space who said no. Not Liv. Not Dr. Chen.

"Is the treatment the same?" I asked.

Several seconds ticked away. Dr. Chen didn't say a word.

"Is it the same treatment without the biopsy?" I asked again.

She finally responded, "Well, yeah, but—"

"*No.*"

She tilted her head as if she'd never heard *no* before.

"No more biopsies. No more tests." It came out of me with such strength I wondered who'd taken over my vocal chords.

Liv feverishly typed on her phone. The pruned look on her face disappeared. “Like I said, we’ll find you the best oncologist.”

Oh my God, Liv had my back. I loved her.

Dr. Chen sighed. “I want to make absolutely certain.”

“Did my sternum light up on the scan?” I’d learned that cancer showed up on a PET/CT scan like a Christmas tree.

Dr. Chen made a slight gesture of yes, conceding that it had.

There would be no physical exam today. No need. I took off the ripped paper gown and began dressing, in front of Dr. Chen, in front of Liv, in front of the world. Cancer had spread to my chest and lymph nodes before I’d even seen a doctor. That landed on me, totally my fault.

But I wasn’t ready to die, not this way. I had too much left to do. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d played my guitars. I loved to play. I hadn’t even tried to write my novel, not since Denver.

Liv’s death list weighed heavily on my soul. I couldn’t look at her, but I needed a hug. I needed to not have cancer growing in my body. I needed to jump out of my skin. I needed to figure this shit out.

I floated slowly through Dr. Chen’s waiting room in a zombie state, out the door and through the main walkway of the Hopkins’ facility with Liv trailing behind.

We approached the elevator and stood three feet apart. I didn’t cry. Liv didn’t cry. We stared straight ahead at the metal doors. I feared if I opened my mouth, the thread that held me together would snap.