

Lamentations

By Diana Cejas

I am not a pretty crier. It didn't matter much before. To say that I was stoic was an understatement. I could count the times that I'd cried on one hand. Number every individual tear. I broke my wrist when I was six years old: wailed until my grandmother wrapped my arm in a towel, folded me within her embrace, and carried me off to an urgent care. I was bullied when I was twelve: I was too shy and two inches too tall for my jeans. I read too much. I took the "white people math class." I hid in the bathroom at lunchtime, sniffing behind the stall. I argued with my mother at sixteen, my father at twenty. I loved a boy at twenty-three. He did not love me back. I cried. It never lasted very long. Tears came on suddenly but, like a shower of rain, quickly dissipated. I'd move along hurriedly afterwards.

I'm not quite sure what it was. Maybe the cancer. Maybe the stroke. Maybe breaking down, then building up again. But I am softer now.

It was too cold in the examination room. Artificial frigidity was the result of maintenance's attempts to make up for the heat outside. I sat on a vinyl chair, waited for my surgeon to return, and tried to rub the chill out of my skin. Fluorescent lights hummed softly above me. My stitches itched. My leg shook. My stomach roiled. I had cancer. A fresh diagnosis to match the wound on my neck. My surgeon told me that we needed to talk, said that the results were in, told me that I had cancer, and then excused himself. I sat on the chair beneath a vent in the ceiling. Stale air ruffled my hair. It didn't occur to me to cry.

Things move quickly when you are diagnosed with cancer. There is imaging and there is bloodwork and there are too many doctors to see. The tumor had grown slowly. As it had spread, as I started and then finished medical school, I developed the kind of denial that only doctors seem to have about their bodies. This coupled with a series of misdiagnoses had lulled me to complacency. Eventually I wasn't able to ignore it anymore. I saw my primary doctor, had an honest conversation with her, and then the world started to turn more rapidly. CT scan, then angiogram, then surgery, then diagnosis. It was a cyclone and I stood at its center. It was easy to get lost inside of it.

I made it through my first three oncology appointments and two sets of labs. I didn't sleep much. A second surgery was planned. I screamed into my pillow at night. I was silent after my first PET scan. I ate too much some days. I ate nothing some days. My grandmother asked how I was doing. I lied. I said that I was fine. The words stumbled past the scar on my neck, tripped over the lump in my throat. I didn't cry.

I had a stroke sometime after the second surgery and before a third. My memories surrounding the event are a mess: hallucinations and reality all smeared together. I was still on the ventilator when I first woke up with a tube in my throat, a restraint on my wrist, IVs in my arms, and a line in my chest. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move my left arm or leg. I could hear and understand. I woke up and my mother smiled at me. Saliva slid out of my mouth. A tear seeped out of my eye. I closed my eyes again, hoped that my mother wouldn't see.

The first trickle of tears soon turned into a steady stream. I cried each time something was removed from me: the endotracheal tube, the central line, the Foley catheter. I cried when my sister left. I cried when visitors came. I tried not to let them see. It is impossible to hide behind a hospital gown. It was worst when things were quiet. I was moved from intensive care to the neurological service when I stabilized. The nurses checked less frequently. My alarms were all turned off. I sat up at night. I moved my left leg, which had quickly recovered, under my covers. I tried to move my left arm, swollen and limp and numb, to no avail. I sat in the dark, alone, drooling, weeping, until exhaustion pulled me into sleep.

I left the hospital eight days after I'd checked in: cancer free but with new scars and impairments. Despite that, I was incredibly happy to be home. I settled into a routine of rest and rehabilitation. As weeks passed, my arm improved a bit. I could speak without losing my breath. Swallow without choking. My wound began to mend itself.

I was watching television the first time it happened. At some point during my convalescence the tears had stopped coming. I had gotten used to the scar that crisscrossed my neck, to my impaired hand, to my crooked little smile. I could talk about the cancer without instantly flashing back to intensive care. I tired very easily though so when I wasn't working, at a follow up appointment, or in rehab, I spent much of my time watching television.

It was a Target commercial. Specifically, it was the one with home movies of teenagers opening their college acceptance letters. They cheered and screamed and their families rejoiced as bubbly music played in the background. My eyes began to well up less than thirty seconds in. I was bawling by the time the logo appeared. I was extremely confused at first. Embarrassed though I was alone. I blamed the tears on my drowsiness but then it happened again. Another commercial. Three different songs. A toddler kissed his mother at the grocery store. I cried in the aisle next to them. I worried that something was wrong. I asked my neurologist, my oncologist, my therapist. They all assured me that I was fine. I tried to rationalize the crying. I'd had reasons for it before. I don't know if it's possible to get through illness without crying. I was almost healthy. I was mostly happy but still the tears had returned.

I didn't cry about my illness the way I had before. In truth, I didn't cry about anything the way I had before. I felt different. I felt everything with a depth that I hadn't before. It was strange and very uncomfortable for a while. I used to look down on people like that. Like me. I'd wonder why they couldn't just stop crying, why they had to make a scene. How anything could move anyone in such a way. How they could cry with abandon and without shame.

I'm not quite sure what it was. Maybe profound grief. Maybe recovery. Immodesty was thrust upon me alongside of my diagnoses. I had cancer. I was not ashamed of that. I had a stroke. I was not ashamed of that either. Awful things happened and my body was different as a result. Somehow, my heart was too.

Now, if I am happy then I will cry. If I am sad then I will cry. If I am angry. If I am affected. It is all the same. Anything can get me started. Movies, music, memories. Forgetting, then remembering where I have been. My entire heart comes out. There are tears and my face crumples. There is drool. My nose runs. It isn't pretty.

I wasn't sure what would happen to me when I was first diagnosed. I didn't know what kind of life I'd have. But it is softer now.

I sing in the car and I cry. I smile at my friends' children. They are used to my watery eyes. I hug my grandmother. I kiss my mother. I go to weddings and graduations. I weep openly. Freely.

Diana Cejas is pediatric neurologist. She grew up on a farm in rural North Carolina but left the area in pursuit of a medical education. She learned more than she bargained for when, during her residency, she was diagnosed with a rare cancer and then had a stroke. One thing that kept her afloat throughout illness, recovery, and residency was storytelling. She has published essays on her own patient experience in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* and *Neurology*. Her opinion pieces, creative non-fiction, and micro fiction can be found in various literary magazines and blogs. She recently completed training and returned to North Carolina to practice, to write, and to grow.