

Palpate: To Examine By Touch

By Carley Bergey

The memory of his neck between my hands weighs on them like invisible gloves. I feel his gravity when I reach out to touch a new neck. My fingers tiptoe along landmarks I have memorized as a speech-language pathologist: mandible, suprahyoid musculature, hyoid bone, thyrohyoid space, thyroid cartilage. My hands mirror each other as they travel down the same path they set upon with every one of my voice patients. Speech-language pathologists like me, who specialize in voice disorders, touch necks all the time as part of a diagnostic workup. It's like a handshake, the start of working with a voice. I feel for mobility in the muscles that surround the larynx to consider where a patient might hold tension, for example.

The neck in my memory is different: it belongs to my father.

I sat beside him on a houseboat that he was steering down the main channel of Lake Powell. This journey down the widest part of the canyon was always the first step in our family vacation. I learned about his cancer diagnosis a couple weeks before. He called me at work and told me not to panic. He joked and called it throat lumpage. "Let's just cut it open, pour tequila in and take care of it at Powell," he said.

We all set out like normal on the yearly trip, the cancer riding along bobbing in the background of my mind until I was seasick with questions and fear. His skin stuck to the vinyl captain's bench and to my leg next to him. We didn't talk. The smell of gasoline, cool air, and eggs cooking in the little kitchenette lingered between us as we looked at the water. The coolers on the front of the houseboat were stocked. Beer, mostly: Dad's beer and the 'frou frou' beer we hauled in from Colorado because my sister and our husbands and I refused to drink only Miller Light for the entire week. When we were kids, we came to Lake Powell almost every year with Dad. The coolers were stocked with pop and juice then. I used to sneak wine coolers until I was dizzy in the sun. Now the morning light was bouncing off the waves we made as we chugged along, my father's eyes squinting as he steered.

He had a hundred smile lines that unfolded around his eyes and a big nose that he had always made fun of, signing cards "Your big-nosed Dad." I'm thinking of taking up the same tag line as our resemblance, and my nose, grows. He had thin grey eyebrows, no hair on top, and unkempt curls that spilled out onto his neck when he waited too long for a haircut. I wanted to be closer. I put my arm around him and let my hands find his neck. My daughter hands made of a map of my dad's neck. I still feel my fingers run across the prickles of his stubble, a beard that he would shave off again the next day. In my memory, each bump registers. Each ridge rises and falls with his breath. My hands move in the sandy shallows in the ocean of him, the grains of sand between my fingers telling me his story. I read the braille of all he ever said.

My fingertips go from soft tissue that gives way to the edge of an unmoving knot of skin and resistance. It feels like he swallowed a rock. Just coming to the edge of it, I know if I let my fingers continue, they will move away from him. I will touch the beginning, the first step down some windy staircase I can't see the bottom of.

I palpate. I explore. I define the boundaries of this foreigner, outlining the perimeter of his cancer. I suppress a swallow.

He is about to say something to me. Something important. I can feel his throat tighten in my hands, I feel him hold his breath instead of exhaling until finally he says, "This may get me. But everything will be okay." Those would be words I repeat to myself for years after his voice goes quiet.

I wonder why cancer sometimes manifests as a thing we can feel with our hands. I am constantly amazed at the fierce beauty of what lies beneath the skin-- the heart, the lungs, or in this case, this crazy thing called the voice box. The place we first say aloud who it is we are and the thing we keep saying: I am alive and I have a voice. Even when cancer or tension or reflux or fear tangles with our breath when we say it. For me, it is always his voice in my hands when I reach out and start work again each day.

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