

WILL IT COME BACK? WILL IT KILL ME?

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Many cancer survivors are haunted by fears their disease will return.

THERE IS A COMMON STORY we think of when we think of cancer.

Our friend or neighbor, family member or co-worker, is diagnosed and then treated. Perhaps there is surgery and recovery. But after the oncologist's timeline is complete, our patient is done. Healed. Cancer-free. Good as new. Back to his or her old home and job and life.

Except, for many, this story is a lie. Once they have been diagnosed with cancer, nothing is the same.

Not their body. It bears the scars of their treatment. The side effects of chemotherapy, radiation and ongoing medication can continue for years. Even their hair, when it grows back, is often not their own.

Not their mind. Most cancer patients will never again be as fearless as they once were. They can be riddled by guilt — for surviving, for not living each day to its fullest. Their cognitive functions can be diminished for the long term.

Not even their everyday routines. Because after staring death in the face. After a year of hospital visits. After associating every room and road with the worst of memories, change has a powerful allure. People move. People think hard about what matters to them. People craft new lives to match the new people this disease has molded them into.

There's a drum beat that plays, too, in the background of a survivor's consciousness. It's louder for some. Louder at

certain times of day or days of the year for others. It thumps the unanswerable question that can cause stress, depression, anxiety.

What if my cancer returns?

According to the American Cancer Society, 1 in 3 Americans will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetimes. One in eight women will develop breast cancer — among the most common of cancers. Of those, some 30 percent will see their cancer recur.

Maria Garcia is one of those statistics. She's 33 and has been cancer free for three years. **Decca Knight** is another. She was diagnosed 10 years ago but has suffered from a long list of complications and side effects since then. **Lee Hunsaker** fears her cancer has returned if she feels an unexplained ache or shortness of breath. **Sandee McGlaun** completed her treatment at the end of 2017. Then last January, she started all over again. Her cancer did return.

All of them are breast cancer survivors. All of them are living lives shaped by their survival. All of them hear the drum beat.

These are **THEIR** stories.

STAYING STRONG FOR HER KIDS

MARIA GARCIA grew up in Mexico City and moved to the Roanoke area 14 years ago, when she was 19 years old.

She landed a series of jobs over the years — working at a Mexican store in Vinton, then Rancho Viejo on I-81, finally at SynCom Electronics Corporation. She met a man, settled in Roanoke County, had a son and a daughter. She decorated her tidy home with family photos and inspirational quotes and crafts she fashioned herself.

A pain in her breast took her to a doctor's appointment at the end of 2015. It was followed by a mammogram, then an ultrasound, then a biopsy and then the doctor saying the words neither one of them could believe. "This is cancer."

Garcia thought this was a death sentence, that she, a mother of a 5-year-old and 1-year old, just 29 herself, would not survive the year. But her doctors prescribed chemotherapy, surgery, radiation.

With no family history of cancer, with a small support network in Roanoke, with a limited command of English — she went to her first chemotherapy appointment alone.

By her third round, her hair was gone. Her boyfriend shaved his in solidarity. Her mother cared for her babies when she was too tired to get out of bed.

For another five months, she went in for radiation every single weekday. By the end, she'd lost her breast, her ovaries, her hopes of having more children — and her trust that life would move forward in the orderly way she had always expected.

Every day, she takes a pill to prevent her cancer from coming back. Every six months, she sees her doctor for

bloodwork and an exam. Her followup appointments make her — and her children — feel afraid.

"This is not easy for my son," she says, her lush, dark curls cascading to her shoulders. "He says: 'Mommy, what happens to me if you go, if you die?'"

"I tell him: 'Well, you need to stay strong and you need to be good and you'll live without your Mommy.'" Tears well up in Garcia's eyes.

Her children are everything to her.

Garcia thinks often of what she would do if her cancer returned. It would likely have metastasized, meaning it would show up in a different place than her breasts — her bones, maybe. It would be harder to treat, perhaps impossible to cure.

"I think I won't fight," she says. "This time I would stay home with my kids. I would use my time to stay strong for my kids, my boyfriend and for my family."

Because if the cancer didn't kill her, she considers, another year in the chemo room, the hospital, the recovery bed — months away from her children — just might.



THE NEW NORMAL

DECCA KNIGHT was 32 when a routine exam revealed a lump in her left breast.

Like Garcia, she had no family history, no logical explanation for why she was battling this disease thirty years younger than most. (The median age for breast cancer is 62, according to the Susan G. Komen organization.) She also had a one-year-old at home.

But Knight was a counselor by training. She knew all about trauma and self-care and how her mental state could help or hinder her physical healing.



For her, the most unsettling aspect was how she looked different from everyone else in the waiting room. "I felt so out of place," she remembers.

So she formed a support group, Young Cancer Chicks of Southwest Virginia, for those younger than 45, diagnosed with breast cancer.

These women became a lifeline for Knight, sharing their realities (toddlers and tamoxifen) their dashed dreams (advanced degrees forfeited, careers rerouted), their victories (a good week at work, dinner on the table) and defeats (a new cancer diagnosis, the death of a friend).

They taught Knight that she wanted to immerse herself in the cancer community — to understand this new land she was living in and help others navigate it.

After a brutal year and a half of treatment, she began volunteering for breast cancer nonprofit Susan G. Komen Virginia Blue Ridge. Today, she is board president. She's also a RISE Advocate, a volunteer selected by the Young Survival Coalition to be a patient perspective, advising scientists and researchers nationwide.

Knight cannot move on from her cancer because she has surrounded herself with it. But also because she continues to suffer from health issues that may or may not be related to her treatment.

"A lot of us live with a lot of pain, a lot of discomfort every day," she says of cancer survivors.

She's had heart issues, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome and, most recently, spinal fusion surgery to correct three degenerative vertebrae.

"At points I couldn't walk. I had to be in a wheelchair," says Knight, 42.

But perhaps the most disturbing post-cancer reality has been the changes to her mind — the difficulty recalling dates and facts, her inability to retain information like she once could.

"My brain just works really differently," she says. "You're not who you used to be."

Knight had made her peace. And then, in 2017 her father was diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer, though he never smoked. Knight found herself back at the oncologist's, back in the chemo room, waiting for test results again.

That triggered all the fear and anxiety she had tucked away.

"It's like reliving the whole experience," she says.

SAVED BY STORIES

If Knight leaned in to her diagnosis, **LEE HUNSAKER** ran in the opposite direction.

She was 38, living in Austin, Texas, with a new husband, a 19-month-old baby boy and a successful career in movie costume design.

But after her cancer diagnosis, after months of chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, after being too overwhelmed and afraid to show up as wife and mother, everything about her old life felt too connected to the cancer.

"I started associating all of the roads with the road to the doctor. My bedroom reminded me of being so nauseous I couldn't sit up," Hunsaker remembers. "I felt like I had to get out of there. Immediately. Using whatever means possible."

So she fled. To her hometown. To the beauty of the mountains.

She arrived in Roanoke in 2011 with no idea what she wanted to do with the life she had fought so hard to keep.

It was storytelling that saved her.

Hunsaker had been invited to be keynote speaker at a breast cancer event in Austin before she left. She found that sharing her truth became an important part of her healing.

"It gave me some power back, to have a voice," she says.

She led a few workshops with cancer survivors where she asked them to write love letters to their bodies and then read their work aloud.

Nurturing those women encouraged Hunsaker to start a live storytelling event she called Hoot And Holler: Our Stories. Out Loud. The concept was to reach out to everyone and encourage them to speak their story.

She held the first at Sweet Donkey Coffee House in October 2016. Three years later, monthly Hoot And Holler shows regularly sell out the Grandin Theatre and 5 Points Music Sanctuary.



Hunsaker has also been working with nonprofits like United Way of Roanoke Valley, coaching those who've received services from the organization to tell what it means to them.

Hunsaker has been reborn as a story midwife.

"It's been a crooked path to get here. But this feels exactly right," she says of the work she's doing now. "And I never dreamed that I could have that feeling."

Yet not even her success, or her 10 cancer-free years, have completely erased the worry that her cancer might return. Whenever she sees her scars, it takes her back.

"They're like Frankenstein scars," she says. "It's just such a physical reminder. There's always a little bit of a distrust there, you know? My body turned on me."

ROUND 2

SANDEE MCGLAUN had finished treatment for her Stage 3 breast cancer at the end of 2017.

She'd returned to work as English professor and director of the Writing Center at Roanoke College. She'd renamed the blog she'd kept during her year of chemo, surgery, radiation; it was now: Still Life, Beyond Cancer. She was looking forward to tending her marriage, a little over two years old.

She knew her chances of recurrence were low — for her, just five percent.

So when she felt a knot in a lymph node basin, she convinced herself it couldn't be cancer.

But it was. By January 2019 she began an awful, familiar routine: nausea, exhaustion, pain, uncertainty. The loss of another year to waiting rooms and hospitals and hours crashed on the sofa.



And yet, McGlaun felt relieved. Her cancer had not spread beyond her lymph nodes. It was still treatable. She could fight and expect to win. Again.

The irony is that McGlaun's second diagnosis didn't make her feel more fragile than her first.

"The minute you're diagnosed, the fear that takes root — and that you can't ever quite get rid of — is that somehow, this is going to be the thing that ends your life."

But returning to treatment made that fear palpable again. McGlaun broke down this spring, getting a numbing shot in preparation for a chemotherapy infusion.

"All of a sudden, it was like that released all the pent-up anxiety about being in treatment again. There was this storm of tears," she remembers. "I think that's what happens. You go along, you're able to stay in the present, and then something will trigger it."

This time, McGlaun, 49, continued to work — both at Roanoke College and as an artist-in-residence at Carilion Clinic. There, for eight hours a week when she can manage it, her job involves conversing and creating with patients and their families. It can be heavy. But McGlaun feels she's in the right place — to offer empathy and to keep perspective.

"I'm very much aware now that so many more people than most of us realize are going through something," she says in her quiet, calming voice. "I hope it makes me kinder, more patient."

McGlaun's treatment is wrapping up. What will follow are tests. And waiting. And more treatment if the cancer did not respond to this regimen.

She says, for her, the only way forward is acceptance.

"I was a first-time bride at 45 years old, and I was diagnosed.... I was kind of living in a chick lit novel. And it was almost as if I turned the page. And suddenly, I'm in a dystopian sci-fi novel. And there's people in white coats everywhere. There's big machines, and there's unpronounceable chemicals. And you want to flip that page back. But you can't. This is now your story," she explains.

"There's not much I can control except my attitude towards that," she says. "If my life is going to be shorter than I wanted it to be ... I don't want to spend more of it angry and sad. I want to keep creating, to find some spot of beauty or laughter in each day I have." ☆