

## Name Your Poison

“Slight prick,” the nurse said as she slid the needle into the woman’s upturned left arm. The needle was about an inch and three-quarters long and was silver colored. It looked benign; not as if it could carry a poison into her raised vein.

The poison was Paclitaxel, a drug used to treat breast cancer. Its name was printed on the four pages of cancer treatment information that she carried home inside a blue paper folder the week before. The folder had lain on her bedside table, unopened, for almost two days. Inside were six sheets with information on the process of chemotherapy treatment for cancer. Along with them, was a printed list of appointments for the process: twelve in all. Three months worth.

When she took the blue folder from inside her tote bag, she wondered why it didn’t have a screaming, screwed-up face on the cover; one that was animated and vocal, like the printed photographs in newspapers in the Harry Potter movies. Paper and print were without emotion until you started to read. She wanted to hear the words: “Deal with it, You Stupid S- - -! You have cancer!”

The nurse in the infusion suite wore bright pink scrubs. Magenta or cerise, the same color as the flowers that were delivered from her daughter and son-in-law the day before she left for the first treatment. The thick brown viny-covered cushions

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on the chair in the treatment room looked comfortable enough for the almost two hour infusion treatment. When she checked in earlier for her appointment, she noticed three other patients were already waiting to be ushered to their own brown, vinyl-covered chair. The two women, both in their 60s, blended together into an anonymous portrait of a cancer patient: comfortable, fleece pants, close-fitting cap, large bag for a warm blanket. The lone man, his face turned towards his cell phone, a brown baseball cap with a Padres team logo, was determined to draw every bit of information that he could get from the willing device. Cold comfort that.

A cooling wash flowed into her lower arm. A saline flush, then the “poison” treatment. She knew that the treatment was a poison because it was a deadly killer. It’s assignment: kill cancer cells. She wondered how many other poisons she had willingly invited into her body’s boudoir over the years. Tobacco, of course; the sweet, pungent stuffing inside the white paper bullet of each Pall Mall. She smoked them when she was in college, the bright red wrapper on the pack made her feel discriminating. After all, wasn’t there a motto in Latin on the wrapper: *In hoc signo vinces*? She thought it had something to do with the emperor Constantine and his vision of the cross, but the magazine ads for Pall Mall Cigarettes rather smugly translated the motto as “Wherever particular people congregate.” It’s better to waffle a bit on language when selling a poison, she thought.

And there seemed to be poison everywhere. Even as she ordered a decaf latte from the coffee cart in front of the medical building there were posted signs warning that cancer-

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causing chemicals might be lurking nearby. Something smug about that, right? A disease that demands notoriety yet can be hidden inside the most innocent-looking presentations.

The comforting packages began arrive the day after her second weekly cancer treatment. The familiar logo on the box — a smiling arrow: her late husband said it was a penis — seemed to be the signature of a friend. Her call had been heard: recognize me, love me, reward me. Pressing the Order button on the MacBook screen had become her secret pleasure. A warm spot in the middle of her chest glowed with delight as she pictured the arrival of her prizes: a pink jade roller to make her skin come alive; compression sox to ease the aching in her calves; twenty-four colored gel pens and six art pads with that good English paper to use while she sat in the brown vinyl chair and doodled away the metastasized cells.

Her *late* husband. Words could be poison too. *Late*: an adjective of toxic proportions. Every morning she stroked the blue terrycloth bathrobe that hung from a hook in their bathroom. His bathroom, really; the one he could reach easily while getting from their bed and using his aluminum walker. She could barely inhale his scent now, six months past that ungracious August. His compact body had been only a collection of failing organs inside a sack of bruised and mottled skin. Even when he made the sounds of metal footprints moving towards their breakfast table, she pictured a trail of breath and energy following him like a heavy, gray reptilian tail.

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When he sat at the round table in their sunny breakfast room, his head began to droop, as if holding it upright was too much to ask. She straightened her back and put one hand on his fragile shoulder.

“Do you want coffee?” she asked.

His throat gurgled and he coughed and spit into a grey wastebasket before answering.

“No. Let me take my pills first.”

She carried a small glass of filtered water to the table and laid it next to the yellow plastic pill organizer. He had written “Morning” on it in heavy black marker.

Every morning she imagined the plastic organizer as one of those mercy ships that sail to scenes of international disasters to bring medics and supplies to suffering citizens.

Each compartment in the plastic holder held at least two, sometimes, three pills.

His fingers were stiff and thickened by decades of handling tools and reaching into carburetors or recalcitrant washing machines. If there was any kind of broken possession that she owned that he hadn't taken in his hands and made whole again, she couldn't recall. It was just the sole possession of his damaged heart that he could not mend. For months after he died she squeezed the yellow plastic box in her hands and wept.

“I'm local,” said Jason. “Went to Ridgecrest High School, just over the hills there.”

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He was a tall, friendly nurse who breezed into the chemo suite in powder blue scrubs. There was an enamel pin of a Star Wars character on his white badge. He held the clear plastic bag of the Paclitaxel for her to check. Her name and birthdate were there on the label. Personalized poison. As good as one of those fussy, monogrammed Martha Stewart dog collars.

“You’re going to lose your hair,” he said as he pushed a slim valve to start the flow of solution through thin plastic tubes. “Have you noticed any coming out?”

Notice was not exactly the word. She could not avoid the mist of white hairs that scrawled graffiti on her black sleeveless top. A hurried visit to YouTube to search for Hair Loss During Cancer Treatment brought some solutions, all of them involving how to remove the remaining hair in order to enter the fashion world of Chemo Caps and monofilament wigs.

“The Cancer Society has a booklet with wigs, “ Jason said as he flicked a finger on the infusion monitor. “Do you want me to bring you one?”

She glanced down at her tube-decorated arm as it lay across a small pillow. Eight infusions so far through the bright blue IV port. It sent poison right to the well-defined tumor, taking her hair and a few flakes of skin off her fingertips as it went.

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“I’ll take the booklet with me, Jason,” she said. A single white hair drifted down onto her outstretched arm. She thought of it as a messenger from the Wig Fairy.

Two days later, she sent a text to her daughter:

“I’m going to comb out what’s left of my hair,” she typed on the cellphone screen.

“It’s really coming out now. I watched a video. I’ll send you the link.” She liked these little notes on the cellphone. No chance to catch a hint of anxiety or to over-explain. Just the facts, m’am.

But two days turned into” just one more day to watch the video again.” And the video watching evolved into turning the pages on the Cancer Society wig booklet, each healthy, young model smiling tentatively. Only a few of the wigs were streaked with grey or “frosted” or “salt and pepper.” But there were many colorful Cancer Caps to ponder, their colors popping off the page in bright, exotic patterns. And all could be ordered online. Another chance to press the Order button on her computer screen. Another chance to feel that there was a reward out there just for her.

By the time that she has almost memorized the Hair Loss During Cancer Treatment video, her daughter sent a text asking if she should make a trip to be with her for the “Hair Today/Gone Tomorrow” transition. No, she had texted back. It was going to go smoothly. Just a combing through of wet, shampoo-lathered hair followed by a hair dryer then a once over with a big fat lint roller. Would she face a real cue ball in the mirror as she stepped from the shower? No matter how many forthright and sturdy

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women had come forth in print and on films following their hair loss from chemo, it was oh, so different to be the Portrait of a Poison.

It pulled her scalp when she ran the fine-toothed comb through her remaining hair. A tangle of dark hairs fell from the comb and scribbled their message on the white tile shower seat. When she looked in the mirror, her head was a strange landscape of pale open vistas enveloped by a fog of light grey hair. She touched the top of her head and let the newness begin to speak its language of loss.

She used an aqua-colored hand dryer that still worked after 40 years to blow dry her remaining hair. Then she called Lindelle, her hairdresser, who said she could see her that morning.

Lindelle was tall and animated. She usually wore flowing caftans and she crammed her shop in Ocean Beach with colorful vases of shells and every kind of trailing green plant that she could get her hands on.

“Oh, you look great,” she said. “Still have enough hair for a ‘do’ “

“If you use the clippers, use a #2. And don’t cut it any shorter than a quarter inch,” the woman said.

“Oh, I’m a hairdresser, “ Lindelle proclaimed. “I’ll let you keep about four inches. Then we’ll have some fun.”

The buzz of the clipper next to her ear was like a foraging animal that she couldn’t quite tame. Lindelle circled her head with the electric device with fierce concentration. Her drawn-on eyebrows were squeezed into a steady line and her mouth was pursed with determination.

“There!” Lindelle announced. “Not bad, if I do say so.”

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The hair that she had left was a froth of grey surrounding her head. It was not a lot, but it was hair. Hard to tell from a forward view if those bare patches were just a memory or if they were still prominent gaps. She had her favorite baseball cap with her. The one with “Hawaii Volcanoes National Park” embroidered in red letters. And that morning, one of those packages with the smile/penis arrived with two Chemo Caps in becoming colors.

She walked away from the pleasant salon with a sense of making sense of this Cancer Thing. The poison was good. It was shrinking the goddamsonofabitch tumor in her breast. But it was also killing the follicles that her ancient hair loved so much. And it was digging its way into her fingertips, finding ways to split the skin, numb her thumb and lift nails from their comfortable beds. And if she let it, it would poison her thoughts: about life, death, recovery, the future. That was the real damage from poison.

Its ability to be both benign and toxic. Like those cigarettes she used to bum from her classmates: smooth, white, attractive: black, tar, poison. She'd say “thank you” to her next poison infusion, even if the last few hairs on her head gave out. Make friends with your poison, she thought. Let the hair fall where it may. Curse your peeling fingers.

Smile when the needle finds a vein. Order a wig when you can. Hair is just something that comes and goes.



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