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Before I Go

Written by Colleen Oakley

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BEFORE I GO

Colleen Oakley

ALLEN&UNWIN

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one

THE KALE IS gone. I'm standing in front of the open refrigerator, allowing the cool air to escape around my bare thighs. I've pushed aside the stacks of Tupperware containing leftovers of dinners that we'll never eat. I've searched the crisper, even digging beneath the wilted celery (does anybody ever use an entire bag of celery before it goes rubbery?). There was some type of slime that had accrued on the bottom of the drawer. I added cleaning it out to my mental list of duties. I even pulled all the organic milk and juice cartons from the top shelf and looked behind them. No dice.

The kale is definitely gone.

Then I hear it. The high-pitched squeal of Queen Gertrude, our Abyssinian guinea pig, coming from the living room. And I know what's happened to my greens.

I feel anger bubble up inside of me like a bottle of Dr Pepper that's been rolling around the floorboard of a car—just waiting for the top to be taken off so it can burst free from its confined plastic.

It's just kale.

It's just kale.

It's just cancer.

My anger is supposedly grief wearing a disguise. That's what the

therapist said in the one session I agreed to attend four years ago when I had breast cancer.

Yes, *had*.

But now I think my anger is just anger at the possibility that I might have breast cancer again.

Yes, *again*.

Who gets cancer *twice* before they turn thirty? Isn't that like getting struck by lightning twice? Or buying two Mega Millions winning tickets in one lifetime? It's like winning the cancer lottery.

"Morning." Jack lumbers into the kitchen, yawning, in a rumpled T-shirt that says STAND BACK, I'M GOING TO TRY SCIENCE and his green scrub pants. He pulls a travel coffee mug from the cabinet above the sink and places it under the spout of our one-cup coffeemaker. He pops the plastic cylinder of breakfast blend into the machine and presses start. I inhale deeply. Even though I don't drink coffee anymore, I love smelling it.

"Jack," I say, having moved from my recon mission at the fridge over to the counter where the blender is set up. I pour a cup of frozen raspberries into the glass pitcher.

"Yeah, babe." He walks up behind me and plants a kiss firmly between where my ear and jawline meet. The *swack* reverberates in my eardrum.

"Benny!" he says, also directly in my ear, as our three-legged terrier mutt skitters into the room. Jack kneels on the ground beside me to greet him. "There'sagoodboy. How'dyousleep? Ibetyou'rehungry. YouhungryBennyboy?" Benny's tail whacks the mauve tile on our kitchen floor repeatedly as he accepts Jack's morning nuzzles and ear scratches.

Jack stands and heads to the pantry to scoop a portion of kibble for Benny's food dish.

"Did you feed Gertie the kale that was in the fridge?"

"Oh yeah," he shrugs. "We were out of cucumbers."

I stand there, staring at him as he grabs a banana from the fruit bowl on the counter and peels it. Benny is munching his breakfast contentedly.

Jack takes a bite of his banana, and finally noticing the weight of my gaze, looks at me. Then he looks at the blender. He lightly taps his forehead with his banana-free hand. "Aw, damn. I'm sorry, babe," he says. "I'll pick up some more on my way home from the clinic tonight."

I sigh and jab the blender's crush ice setting, making my morning smoothie, sans kale.

Deep breath.

It's just kale.

And there are children starving in Darfur. Or being murdered in their sleep. Is Darfur the genocide thing? I can't remember. Either way, bad things are happening to kids overseas, and here I am worried about a leafy vegetable.

And the possible come-back cancer.

But Jack doesn't know about the cancer because I haven't told him yet. I know, you're not supposed to keep secrets from your spouse, blah, blah, blah.

But there are plenty of things I don't tell Jack.

Like the fact that you can't just pick up organic kale at the Kroger down the street. The only grocer that sells it is more than eighty-five miles away, almost to Atlanta. And the farmer's market that I've been getting my organic kale from this season won't be open again until Monday. There is a small produce stand in Monroe that sometimes carries organic kale, but it's only open on Saturday. And today is Thursday.

Jack doesn't know any of this because he doesn't do the grocery shopping. He doesn't do the grocery shopping because the one time I sent him to the store for dishwasher detergent and a lemon, he came home with $125 of stuff we didn't need—like three pounds of rib-eye

steaks and a case of forty-two snack-size plastic cups of mandarin oranges.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "I'll get some next time I go. It's no big deal."

It's no big deal.

It's no big deal.

I pour my pink-but-should-be-green smoothie into a glass and walk over to the counter where I keep my to-do list. I pick up the pencil lying beside the pad of paper and write:

4 Clean out vegetable drawer.
5 Call Monroe to check on kale for Saturday.

Then I scan the other three things I need to accomplish today in between classes.

1 Make flash cards for gender studies exam.
2 Buy caulk for windows.
3 Work on thesis!

My thesis. For which I still don't have a topic. I'm in the second semester of my master's degree program in community counseling and I have chosen, researched, and then discarded roughly six different themes for my dissertation.

"Diorama!" Jack yells, jarring me out of my thoughts.

My eyes focus on him as I realize what he's just said. Relief washes over me, and I temporarily forget everything else that has been weighing on my mind—kale, cancer, thesis.

"*Yes!*" I reply.

He flashes his teeth at me, and I focus on his off-center upper bite. It's the very first thing I noticed about him, and I found the flaw devastatingly charming. That's how I knew I was in trouble. Because

when you don't like someone, you just think, "He's got some crooked teeth."

Still smiling, Jack gave me a slight nod of his head, obviously pleased with himself that he had remembered the word that had eluded us three nights ago when we had been flipping through the channels and landed on *Jurassic Park*.

"God, this is the best movie," he said.

"The best," I concurred.

"I loved it so much that I used it for my fifth-grade science project—"

"—analyzing whether it was actually possible to resurrect dinosaurs from the dead using mosquito DNA. And you won first place in the Branton County science fair," I finished for him, playfully rolling my eyes. "I've heard."

But my husband was not to be deterred from reliving his nerdy glory days. "The best part, though, was that thing I built with all the miniature dinosaur models. Dang, what are they called? God, I kept that forever. I wonder if my dad still has it."

"Terrariums?"

"No, those are with real plants and stuff. This was with the shoebox and you look in one end of it—"

"I know what you're talking about. I just can't remember, wait—cycloramas? No, those are circular."

"It's on the tip of my tongue . . ."

And on we went for another few minutes, both drawing blanks on the word.

Until now.

"Diorama," I repeat, smiling.

And it's not the liberation that comes with finally remembering a word that escaped recall that makes me grin. It's Jack. My husband, who blurts out words with absolutely no context in the middle of the

kitchen on a Thursday morning. And makes my heart fill with the wonderment and satisfaction of our connection. I suppose all couples feel this way at some point—that their bond is the most special, the strongest, the Greatest Love of All. Not all the time, just in those few-and-far-between moments where you look at the person you're with and think: Yes. It's you.

This is one of those moments. I feel warm.

"Why do you still drink those things?" Jack says, eyeing my homemade smoothie. He's now sitting on the countertop across from me, slurping a spoonful of milk-laden Froot Loops out of an entirely-too-big Tupperware bowl. Jack loves cereal. He could literally eat it for every meal. "You had cancer four years ago."

I want to give him my canned response when he questions my boring all-organic, antioxidant-packed, no-processed-anything diet: "And I don't want it again."

But today I can't say that.

Today I have to tell him the secret I've been holding inside for nearly twenty-four hours since I got off the phone with Dr. Saunders yesterday morning, because I physically haven't been able to say the words. They've been stuck in my throat like one of those annoying popcorn hulls that scratch your esophagus and make your eyes water.

I search the corners of my brain for the right way to say it.

The results of my biopsy are in. It doesn't look good.

So, my tumor marker numbers are up. Want to meet for lunch today?

You know how we had that party last February celebrating three years of me being cancer-free and the end of my every-six-months blood tests? Whoopsies!

But I decide to go with something simple: the hard, cold truth. Because no matter how much the doctor tried to lessen the blow with his "we just need to run some more tests," and "let's not panic until

we know what we're dealing with," I know that what he really means is one terrible, horrible, no good, very bad thing.

I clear my throat. "So, Dr. Saunders called yesterday."

My back is to him, but the room has gone silent and I know if I turn around and look, his spoon will be hanging halfway between his mouth and the bowl, as if he's eating cereal in a movie and someone paused it to answer the phone, or go to the bathroom.

"And?" he says.

I turn in time to see him lower his utensil into the still-half-full Tupperware. He's now in slow motion. Or maybe I am.

"It's back," I say at exactly the same time the Tupperware slips out of his grasp and a waterfall of milk and Froot Loops cascades down his leg and onto the floor.

"Shit," he says, leaping off the counter.

I grab the paper towels from the holder behind me and start rolling off sheets until I have a bouquet big enough to sop up the mess. Then I bend down and get to work.

"Let me," Jack says, kneeling beside me. I hand him a wad of paper.

We attack the puddle in silence—shooing Benny away as he tries to lap up the sugary milk—and I know that Jack is absorbing the information I've just given him. Soon he'll chide me for not telling him sooner. How could I sit on this for a full twenty-four hours? Then he'll ask me exactly what Dr. Saunders has said. Word for word. And I'll tell him, as if I'm relaying bits of neighborhood gossip.

He said.

And then I said.

And then he said.

But until then, Jack will absorb. Ponder. Digest. While we—side by side—do our best to clean up this big, ridiculous mess.



BEFORE JACK LEFT for the vet hospital, he pecked my cheek, squeezed my shoulder, and looked me directly in the eyes. "Daisy. It's going to be OK."

I nodded. "Don't forget your lunch," I said, handing him the brown paper sack that I had filled the night before with a tuna sandwich, granola bar, and baby carrots. Then I walked to the bathroom to get ready for my day as he left through the back door in the kitchen. The rickety screen creaked as it opened and shut behind him.

What he meant was: "You aren't going to die." But I know I'm not going to die. It's only been a year since my last clean blood work, and I can't even feel the tumor they found on the mammogram when I poke and prod my left breast, so I'm sure they've caught it early, just like the first time. And the tests they want to run tomorrow morning will just confirm that I have breast cancer. Again. But that doesn't mean everything will be OK.

I don't want to go through surgery again. Or chemo. Or radiation. And I don't want to have a year of my life taken away from me while I endure these treatments. I know I'm behaving like a petulant child—stamping my foot and clenching my fists, eyes squeezed tight against the world. I don't wanna! I don't wanna! I don't wanna! I know I should be grateful. As far as cancer goes, relatively, I've had it easy. Which is why I'm ashamed to even admit my greatest fear: I don't want to lose my hair again.

I know it's vain, and so very inconsequential, but I love my hair. And while I tried to be all "strong, bald woman" last time, it just honestly wasn't a good look on me. Some people can carry off bald. I am not one of them. My chocolate mane has just started grazing my shoulders again—it's not quite as thick or polished as it once was, but it's long. It's feminine. And I appreciate it more now after having lost it once. I sometimes catch myself petting it, nearly crooning like I do when I stroke Benny's wiry fur.

Good hair.

Nice hair.

Stay, hair.

I also adore my breasts, which is why I didn't let Dr. Saunders lop them off last time. A lot of women go for it. Just take them! Just to be safe! They're just breasts! But I was twenty-three, and didn't want to part with them. Why couldn't the cancer have been in my thighs or my never-quite-flat-enough stomach? I'd have happily given those up. But please, for the love of God, leave my perfect, C-cup, make-most-men-do-a-double-take perky tits.

It's not like I was making a bad medical decision. A big article in *Time* came out right after my diagnosis, touting the results of a large study in Houston that found women who opt for a preventative double mastectomy have about the same recurrence rates as women who don't. I never read *Time*. I saw the article on the way to my sociology of crime class while I was peering over the shoulder of the student seated next to me on the bus. It's an omen, I thought. And when I brought it up to Dr. Saunders, he agreed that while the study was preliminary, the findings seemed solid—the choice was up to me. Now, four years later, sitting here with cancer once again, the random sighting of a magazine article doesn't seem so much like fate as it does me just believing what I wanted to believe so I could do what I wanted to do. I should have let them take my breasts. I shouldn't have been so vain.

I finish brushing my teeth and take one last glance in the mirror.

My hair.

My perfect breasts.

I inhale. Exhale.

It's just cancer.



I LIKE THE still of the morning. I'm alone in the house but revel in the reminders that I'm not alone in the world. Jack is gone, but