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March

Essay One: Memoir

Surviving Throat Cancer

It was a sunny afternoon when my friend Janet and I walked into Dr. Brown's office for what we termed as a routine check-up. Janet had been complaining of a pain in her left ear, a sore throat and she was having difficulty in swallowing food. The doctor was going to give her a dose of antibiotics and she was going to be okay in no time, that is what we thought, unknown to us, it was going to be the beginning of a nightmare.

Dr. Brown carried out a series of tests on Janet, and he sent us to another doctor to confirm his suspicions, we were not alarmed until Dr. Brown called us back into his office and broke the news to us, you could have knocked us off with a light feather. We had left home in the morning for a routine check and a sore throat, and now Janet was staring at cancer in the face? This was a lot to take in, not only for Janet and me but also for her family. Dr. Brown referred her to a cancer center within the city. I drove there feeling like the weight of the world on our shoulders, and her whole family had gathered at the clinic waiting for us. We found the doctor who we had been referred to, Dr. Christine, she ushered us into a room and wheeled Janet away to carry out a series of tests.

For five hours, we sat in the waiting bay all tensed up. Janet's mother held onto her Bible tightly as she paced from one corner of the room to the other; she occasionally looked up and mouthed the words, "God, please let my daughter be okay." At some point, she knelt, her head buried in her hands and prayed loudly, all the eyes in the room were on her, we watched her as

she prayed and cried for a miracle to happen to Janet. Janet's father, a tall, lean man in his mid-fifties sat in the corner arms crossed, a somber look on his face, he did not speak to anyone and only responded with a nod whenever he was asked a question. Several coffees later, the doctor emerged from one of the rooms, we all gathered around her as she explained to us what was going on, Janet had stage one throat cancer, and there were a few treatment options to choose from. Dr. Christine explained the options Janet had; she told us that surgery was an option but not a viable one because the tumor was at the base of the tongue near the voice box. If they carried out the operation, then it would mean that they would have to remove the voice box, this would mean Janet could not speak or swallow. The doctor recommended radiation for six days a week for eight weeks.

We were allowed a few minutes to be with Janet before her treatment started. She was in her room at the far end of the hall, there were several machines in the room but not connected to her, a needle stuck out from her arm where a drip had been administered. Her mother took her hands in hers and prayed slowly for her for a few minutes, her father sat on the bed next to her unable to say anything, her siblings surrounded her cracking small jokes to make her feel better, I stood at the back of the room, unable to look her in the eyes. I felt my eyes well with tears, the doctors, about six of them appeared at the door and we were asked to step out so that they could start with the treatment. Janet looked up at me, and our eyes met briefly, she called out to me and requested the doctors that I stay with her. This was hard for me, being in the hospital was already making me sick., having to watch them prick her with more needles and do all that was definitely going to cause me even more suffering, but I could not say no to her, she needed me and I was going to be there for her.

Janet's first treatment was an Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT); this is an advanced treatment method that targeted the tumor while not damaging the other healthy tissues. The next course of treatment was cisplatin in three sessions, this is a chemotherapy medication, this is the cornerstone of treatment for throat cancer, and the essence of this drug is to stop the cells from growing. Over the next couple of weeks, Janet received her treatment at the cancer center. The side effects were severe; she was very nauseous and complained of her mouth tasting like metal. After the third week, she couldn't swallow and was fed using tubes, and then she had a severe sore throat, we thought that was the last of it when her skin started to break around the treatment area. She couldn't speak, her voice was gone, but the one thing that gave me hope was the fact that she had a significant will to survive and tell the story. Although her hair fell, it wasn't that bad, and she didn't have to shave it off. By the end of the ninth week, she was declared cancer free. Her cancer opened my eyes especially to the things that we take for granted, like good health, I have since learned to appreciate everything that happens around me, and I have also learned to take better care of myself.

My friends' condition opened my eyes to so many things, most importantly being that we take so much for granted. Good health for example, not many people even take good care of themselves until they get sick and then they realize they could have been helped had they taken care of themselves or even went for regular check-ups. Some people take being alive and healthy for granted but it shouldn't be like that because some people are weighed down by diseases. People should take care of themselves and get regular check-ups. Being healthy is the best gift one can have. We should all try to eat healthy, drinking enough water and exercising often. Take care of your body and your body will thank you.

