

Hair

I didn't tell you earlier, because I didn't want you to worry.

You can't imagine how it will feel to hear this, until you're hearing it. Even afterwards, you can't remember exactly how it felt.

The doctor called today, the test came back positive.

You hope this is a good thing, you know it isn't.

I have cancer.

This. You draw a breath and are surprised to find that you don't choke, air still infiltrates your lungs, oxygen still dissolves into your body. Then, you think of her hair.

Everyone is obsessed with the hair, it's like the baldness is what might kill. It's the second question they ask: *has she started losing her hair yet?* My mother's hair was black, curly, impossibly thick, and when I was little I would stand at the doorframe of the bathroom and watch her brush it, watch her looking at her reflection in the mirror as she tamed the wilderness with dry shampoo and leave-in conditioner.

When I heard this, I imagined my mother, no hair, tubes in her arms and up her nose, and I saw my mother before me, thick black hair cascading down the front of her red sweater. I saw images of womanly strength, Penelope, weaving and weaving, before I started to cry.

Historically, us Japanese women prize grace and dignity above all, the maintenance of a pristine, composed exterior. My grandmother lives alone in an isolated villa, deep in the mountains of Hakone, but she washes her hair religiously. Every three days, she rinses

it in the sink, pours out the contents of many small glass bottles, combs them in, and blow dries it straight. I once observed the entire procedure, which was more like a ceremony, and it took three hours. My grandmother is seventy-four, and I swear, she doesn't have a single grey hair on her head.

On a sunny March day, her phone rang, with my mother bearing heavy news (*tumor, left breast, not terminal, thank God, mastectomy, chemotherapy, granddaughter*) on the other end of the line. My mother scheduled her surgery, and my grandmother booked a flight from Narita to New York. She flew into Laganardia Airport a few weeks later, bearing warm sympathy and a familiar, grandmotherly smell, and we assembled her a makeshift bedroom in the corner of our living room, a bamboo screen around a blow-up mattress.

There wasn't much she could do except cook for us, but she did this well. She made tempura, boiled rice, soba noodles, filled the house with warm smells of tradition. The three of us sat in front of the TV at dinnertime, in heavy silence, eyes glued to the news, although my grandmother didn't understand a word of English. The surgery that removed my mother's breast also took her appetite, so she left her plate full, egg rolls untouched. I listened to Brian Williams tell me stories of the day's destructions as I did the dishes, let the water soak the leftover pieces of rice, let the white flecks wash down the drain.

My mother had no hair, but I've never seen her bald. When her hair started falling out, it was all at once, like a waterfall, thick, curled strands scattered across the bathroom floor. She bought colorful scarves, deep blue, purple, and never left her bedroom without putting one on. She bought a wig, too, and she jokingly told me it was the kind of hair she

always wanted when she was younger: black, straight, like a real Asian woman. I thought she looked unnatural with the wig on, even frightening, but I never told her this. I told her the scarves were beautiful, the colors reminded me of summers in Japan, of the light smell of *kinmosukei* flowers.

I learned the rhythm of her disease. Every three weeks, she took the train to the hospital to have poison infused in her veins. For an afternoon, the steroids propped her up, she was almost herself, and then the medicines worked their way through her body, weighed down her limbs, tied her to the bed, stole away her sleep. There were gradual tests of strength, walking to the park, going out for dinner, the grocery store, advancing in difficulty until the next treatment knocked her back into fragility. *At least I'm not dead*, was something she said often, with a short, bitter laugh. At least it's not terminal.

Unsarcastically, I thanked God for this, too.

I bought books about cancer, dog-eared them, scribbled in the margins of the ones I couldn't understand. I scoured the internet for potential causes, alternative treatments, statistics. My mother thought this was pointless: *she thinks that if she can understand it, she can control it*. I became very familiar with the green, carpeted floor of Barnes and Noble.

I learned that cancer is a problem of cell communication: a mutation blocks a cell's ability to know when to stop growing, that cell replicates itself, the tumor grows. I learned that it is also a problem of money: the bills for surgery and medication pile up, a single mother's salary stretches thin. It is a problem of beauty, of femininity, of pride: the hair falls to the bathroom floor in a waterfall, the skin grows thin, the nails turn blue. I learned that there is hardly anything pink about it.

The summer grew hotter, darker. My grandmother cooked, my mother tried to sleep, I read, we all watched the news. I sat on the edge of her white bed as my mother grew weak, then stronger, then weaker again. I prayed for the summer to end.

On the day of her last treatment, I accompanied my mother to the hospital. My grandmother had flown back to the mountains of Japan, so we were alone. It was the last chemotherapy that the doctors had deemed necessary, adequate to eradicate the remaining cells with a potential for destruction, but it didn't seem like an occasion to celebrate. She put on her wig and we rode the subway in silence.

I sat on a chair next to her bed and watched the doctors mill about around her and adjust the clear liquid that dripped through a needle into her arm, just as I had imagined when I first heard the news. The nurses smiled at me with sad eyes. For lunch, I went outside and bought sushi from the grocery store, but when I lifted one to my mouth with those cheap wooden chopsticks, I couldn't swallow it. The hospital smell gave the avocados a medical flavor, like hand sanitizer, like cancer. While my mother's eyes were closed, I threw the remaining pieces in the trash.

Every morning for the past five years, I have straightened my hair in the bathroom mirror. The strands are lighter than my mother's and wavier than my grandmother's, diluted with my mostly absent father's Irish blood. Now, stretching down past the small of my back, my hair is the longest it's ever been. Every morning, I look at my new body in the mirror: the twin bombs developing, that might someday, if my cells stop living in harmony,

if the genes twist themselves in the wrong way, explode to destroy me. Every morning, steam rises from my flat iron as I tackle the wilderness, destroying my hair into my personal image of beauty.

It was October when the leaves started falling out all at once, the long summer breathing its last sighs. It had been seven months since the heavy news, seven months of poison in her veins, of steroids in her blood, of that ugly hospital smell, and one month since the last treatment. I stood on a rickety ladder, helping my mother lift cardboard boxes full of sweaters from the cabinets above our heads.

My mother was stronger now, but still ten pounds thinner, one breast lighter, several years older. Her laugh was hollow, calcified: *I never thought I'd be so happy to put away my summer clothes.* We neatly folded the tank tops, cutoff jeans, and put them in the boxes, and then we unfolded the sweaters and scarves, shook off the dust, hung them up on their wooden hangers.

When we were done, my mother told me to touch the top of her head. She took off her scarf, light blue with turquoise stitching, and let it fall to the floor. I ran my hand over her scalp. The short, dark hairs felt soft, like a sheep sheared for summer, like a newborn.