

THE DAY OUR TREE DIED

WORDS BY

Meghan McCallum

The day our tree died I finally acknowledged that something was wrong. Like, really wrong. Like, I-want-a-divorce-and-I-need-to-start-doing-something-about-it-type wrong. It was a sick joke – the tree had known our marriage was over before I could say it out loud.

We had planted our tree together during our marriage ceremony not even three years prior. We stood in a field facing the river. The park's arboretum flanked the field where a cream city brick warehouse once stood. We had walked the trails here countless times. For a time we'd lived only steps away in a warehouse-turned-apartment. After a freak spring snow one year, we'd taken to the field in snowshoes, tracking zig-zagging prints in the blanket of white over the grasses. Our lives stretched out ahead of us, weaving together, full of plans and possibilities.

Lining the field in neat rows of white chairs, our wedding guests watched us pick up our shovels. Our task was mostly for show. The hole had been pre-dug, our tree waiting with its thirsty roots ready to be dropped in. In went the tree, and we scattered a few

shovelfuls of dirt on its roots. This tree was a resilient species, a forester friend had told us. It would stand up well through Wisconsin's bitter cold winters, and after some time it would eventually offer a brilliant fall display. We could continue our walks here, admiring how far it had come since our wedding day.

Or so we'd been told.

As we were dropping roots into the earth that day, two tumors were growing deep in my right breast tissue. And unlike the tree, they were growing quickly. A couple of weeks prior, I had gotten an early-morning phone call from my doctor – the kind of call that you know you need to pick up. But it wasn't the bad news I'd been dreading. "Your biopsy came back clear, just like we thought," she said. "It's not cancer. They're benign fibroadenomas. Come back for a follow-up in six months." A quick dismissal, carrying the message: You're too young to have breast cancer. Go on, get married, and live your life.

But as we settled into married life, I knew something wasn't right. The masses in my breast were getting noticeably larger from

one week to the next. My back and shoulder pain couldn't be relieved by Tylenol or heat patches. I could no longer sleep on my stomach as I had for my entire adult life. Whatever was in there, I wanted it out. And something was telling me it was cancer.

Newly wed – and newly added to my spouse's insurance plan – I found a surgeon who was willing to operate on me. Like all the others, he'd assured me that it was not cancer, but he hoped that removing them would alleviate my near-constant pain. In the days leading up to the surgical biopsy, I called him with panic looming. "What if it actually is cancer?" I asked him for what felt like the hundredth time. "It's not cancer," he told me yet again. "I'll see you at your surgery."

"Your pathology results came back. It's breast cancer," he told me on another phone call just a few days later.

It was winter solstice now. Was our tree already dying, before it had a chance to flourish? And what did this all mean for our marriage? Our future was suddenly murky and uncertain.

The ensuing months of chemotherapy, surgeries, and radiation held us back from our plans and possibilities. We didn't commit to anything too far ahead, just in case. This time was no longer about enjoying each other. It was full-on survival mode. He did what he knew how to do and took me to surgeon consultations, encouraged me to sleep through the worst of the post-chemo days, helped me shave my head when the hair started falling out, and squeezed the liquid from the four surgical drains dangling from my pink mastectomy bra.

He was there. He helped me get through treatment. But what about us? The we had started to fade away from the day I received that phone call. And once I was finished with active treatment, he was eager to put it all in the past. I was cancer-free, and we could go back to being the same people and living the same lives as before. He thought.

But treatment had given me a lot of time to think. What life did I truly want, and why would I ever withhold that from myself? What was important to me now? How could I protect the precious time and energy that I was lucky to have with this second shot at life? I emerged as a new me: a person fiercely committed to a path of truly knowing herself, truly loving herself. And as the months went on, it became clear that I was on that path alone without a partner by my side. I would take on survivorship as a solo expedition.

In the meantime, our tree had started showing obvious signs of distress. There was no indication of healthy growth. It wasn't thriving the way it was supposed to. Arriving home one day after a walk in the arboretum, he broke the news we both knew was coming. "Well, our tree officially died."

And that was the beginning of the end. I no longer identify as that person planting the tree in our wedding photos. I am not her, and I don't want to be. And although our tree is no more, I hope that one day something else might grow in its place. ♡



Image by Alexey Demidov