

This is Cancer.

WORDS BY

Meghan Konkol

Candace. Phoebe. Claudia. Olivia. They're all staring up at me, smiling and confident. I peer down at them, bright under the fluorescent glow. What are they so cheery about? I can't stand looking at their gleaming white teeth and twinkling eyes, their pastel-colored cardigans. *You have no fucking clue, I think. My life has just blown up, and you think you can actually help me feel better? You have no idea who I am and what I'm going through. A grandma wig is not going to fix this.* I imagine tearing off Madeline's necklace and watching the pearls scatter across the cold hospital floor.

I continue flipping through the thin pages of the catalog, unconvinced. The little interest I had is dwindling, despite Cheryl's enthusiastic prompting. I know that she's trying to help, and she does care, even though this is part of her job. Though come to think of it, I'm not sure what exactly Cheryl's job is here at the cancer center, besides helping me find a wig. She's a friendly, chatty woman, probably in her 50s. Her hair is dyed red and choppy, significantly more contemporary than the styles modeled in the catalog. Her cheeriness is a mild distraction from the gloom of my reality. Even though we're at the hospital, I don't associate Cheryl with chemo and blood draws – which is more than I can say for just about everyone else here.

I know that Cheryl is trying to get me feeling excited about something, anything. Maybe she can pull me out of the dark hole of my diagnosis, however temporarily. She wants to help me find confidence in some future version of myself. She encourages me to find my new look now, before handfuls of long strawberry blonde hair start lingering on pillowcases and congregating at the bottom of the shower. Paging through the sea of sandy blonde pixies and grey bobs in the wig catalog, I know that I'm an outsider. *This isn't me. I don't belong here. This isn't supposed to be happening.*

I close the catalog and look over at Cheryl. She's scrawling on a Post-It, noting styles and colors for me to try. "How about Amelia in Glazed Strawberry?" she suggests, handing me the sticky note. "That would be so cute on you." The walls of her small workspace, a storage closet-type room, are outfitted with shelves. They're lined with wig stands, samples, and donated items from patients who no longer need them.

"I'll keep looking and think about it," I offer, sticking the Post-It to the front of the catalog. I know it's not what she was hoping to hear. Somehow I feel like I'm letting Cheryl down. Maybe I should just choose a wig and be done with it. Leaving the storage room, I thank

But I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not just like them - I am 32 years old. My life's just getting started. This is not okay.

Cheryl for her help and head over to my chair. The drugs are ready. They've been carefully measured and dispensed into their plastic bags adorned with large yellow warning labels. BIOHAZARD. CHEMOTHERAPY. TOXIC.

The thing is, I don't feel cute, and I don't want to perform a charade of Brave Cancer Fighter. Just a few days ago I had arrived at the infusion area in tears, pleading for something to make the room stop spinning. I was already fed up and feeling helpless after just one round of chemo, knocked down and barely able to stand. How was I supposed to do 15 more? In my barely-hanging-on state, trying to look cute - more specifically, trying to look like I don't have cancer - is not even remotely a priority.

So far, I've been trying to do this right. I've dutifully gone along with the wig browsing and manual reading. You get breast cancer, and then you get the breast cancer manual. Here's how to have breast cancer: You get your chemo, you feel sick, you get more medication. Your hair falls out. You start wearing a wig. You are tired. Your doctor monitors your bloodwork. You meet with surgeons. You decide what kind of breast implants you want. You have your mastectomy, you learn how to manage your drains. You get radiation, only a few minutes every day! You are more tired. Here are some stories of women who have been through it, just like you! They are fine.

But I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not just like them - I am 32 years old. My life's just getting started. This is not okay.

The cancer manual comes with an implicit message: Here's how to manage this privately. People outside of Cancer Land don't like to see or hear what cancer is really like. Don't show them your struggle. Don't talk about it. Be brave. Put on your wig and smile. Make people comfortable.

This is not okay.

I'm settled into my chemo chair for the multi-hour infusion process. A nurse wearing head-to-toe protective clothing comes by to flush the port in my chest with saline. She carefully connects my port access line to the bag hanging from the IV pole. I accept her offer of a heated blanket and snacks.

The packet of saline crackers and juice box sit on a plastic tray attached to the chair's armrest. I look down at the wig catalog again, the Post-It note stuck over the face of the cover model. *There is no one "right" way to have cancer*, I realize. This hits especially hard as I look around the infusion area and am reminded that I'm at least 20 years younger than everyone else here. *I have to do this my way*, I decide. *That's the only way I'm going to get through this.*

I'm determined to figure out exactly what it means for me as a thirtysomething - as an individual mourning my pre-cancer identity - to be going through breast cancer. It takes time, but piece by piece I learn to make this experience my own. I tuck the manual and catalog away, instead seeking out others my age to share our lived experiences. We don't want to be in hiding, and we don't want to play by any one rulebook. We bare our scars, fears, and secrets to one another. We hold hands and cry together. We post our realest of real stories on Instagram, showing the world what cancer really looks like. Within weeks we go from strangers to sisters. "Fuck cancer!"

we collectively scream.

I shave my head a few days before my third chemo appointment. It's January in Wisconsin and we're in the middle of a polar vortex. The city has shut down and the roads are empty, except for those whose life actually depends on leaving the house. I can feel the arctic wind blowing through every hole in my knit hat as I walk across the sprawling parking lot. Entering the hospital, I remove my hat and cross the lobby with my bald head bared for all to see. I carry my own bag of chemo supplies: a giant thermos with herbal tea, cans of Lacroix, jars of nuts and dried fruit. I wear a cozy shawl and brightly colored earrings. I look up YouTube videos on how to tie fun head wraps. Along with library books, this will keep me occupied in the chemo chair until my I pass out from my meds. Later, I'll post a picture celebrating another round of chemo down. I'm getting through this.

This is cancer. It's not comfortable and it's not cute. It's real. ♡