
NON-FICTION | FALL 2019

Like a God Chained to a Colossal Rock

By Laurie Kutchins

What is it like? Someone asked me curious as to how I was doing with finding out I had one of the hardest cancers to treat, to survive.

I didn't answer him at the time, or if I did I just said something like '*it sucks.*' But I knew exactly what it was like.

It's like falling into a river. The Snake River in Wyoming, in June, to be exact. It's like being shoved from behind into a stretch of snowmelt whitewater where the river rushes the Hoback, its first serious canyon. That's the sensation that kept coming to me that June I was being diagnosed with a stage four mucosal melanoma. It was a rare and wily nodule that presented itself earlier that spring under the vulva, in the inner skin of my vaginal lip. When I had it looked at by the head nurse of my local clinic she told me it was nothing. 'Normal vaginal aging,' she said as she closed the door on me so I could get dressed and leave.

That spring, the snow kept falling in the already snow-packed mountains. By May the snow began its slow meltdown as the western sun warmed and lengthened, and the winter-melt gushed into all the creeks that would roil their screaming tributaries into the Snake. By June the river would become the whitewater power of the summer. Dangerous and life threatening. That's the simile, the likeness that came to mind. That's what it was like.

One blind curve, one thrust from behind. Healthy and unprepared I'd fallen into a river of cancer. While my nine-year-old daughter played at friends' houses, I was losing full days to oncology waiting rooms, hygienic handshakes, procedures, more procedures, elevators, cafeterias with bland foods, and parking garages. Doctors that frowned even when they tried not to. Doctors that would not say the words cancer or tumor or palliative care. Doctors that would not look me in the eye after examining my pelvic region. Even when I got home from the clinic and called my daughter back to the house it was all I could think about. Nobody seemed to be in charge, and no one could tell me when I'd be done.

Only one month in, I longed to have my normal life back. Pre-oncology. The abrupt ways our lives change – in addition to the diagnosis and the prognosis – we have to recover from the violence of that much change too. We're hurled across some invisible line between healthy and ill, normal and cancerous, thriving and threatened, between the drifting along and the drowning. I wanted nothing more than to re-cross that line and get back to the illusion of safety and health on the other side.

But cancer changes everything. In one moment your world shifts and splits apart, and you don't cross back. From now on and for the duration you will check the little "yes" box on any form asking if you've ever had cancer. In my case it was not just a basal cell carcinoma, but crazy, malignant, advanced melanoma. I know firsthand my own cells are

capable of lethal productivity, of formless madness. I know what it's like to feel like you're drowning in the Snake River in June.

My daughter Ava, with a child's intuition, could sense I was submerged in that deadly river, even as I tried to stay calm, upbeat, and even as I tried to protect her from my fear. One night as I tucked her into bed she looked up at me and asked. "Are you dying?" She'd been watching me closely. She'd been breathing my fear like secondhand smoke. She knew there was a giant stomping through our house in the form of my invisible malignant cells.

Silent, I stood over her. Boogie her new koala from the zoo lay by her head. She cuddled her little stuffed elephant and bear, pals she'd slept with since she was a baby and they felt like members of our family. Our ritual was to tuck all of them into bed with a sweet dreams kiss to each. *Are you dying?* I didn't know what to say.

She saw my hesitance and asked again, and in another way. "Could you die from cancer?"

As a mother I've always thought if the child can articulate the weight of the question, then they can also carry some of the answer, if there is one.

"I don't want to die from it," I heard myself saying. "I'm going to do everything in my power to live."

I stopped. Should I say more? Should I answer her questions? "But yes, this cancer could kill me," I said, my throat garbled as if underwater. "It is that serious."

I hated having to tell her the truth. But it seemed the only thing to do. Part of my mothering was to prepare my kids for all the possibilities. Now I found myself protecting and preparing them at the same time.

I tried to reassure her. She already saw how scared I was. "It's ok to be scared," I said. "I'm also very strong. Being scared is part of being strong too."

Not long after, Ava became very afraid of waking to a thief in the house. We had to reassure her at every bedtime. We'd locked all the doors. We lived in a safe neighborhood. Over that summer she developed another fear – that in the middle of the night she would awaken to the house on fire. We checked all the fire alarms to convince her not to worry. She found a new word, too. Colossal. A store-bought muffin was colossal. A spider crawling up her wall, colossal.

In this time, I wanted any book in my hands that gave me hope. I placed them on my nightstand, in my bathroom. I carried these books around with me in my purse. I read them in waiting rooms. One appointment led to another and another just as books do. It was like homeopathy to carry hopeful books into such dreadful appointments. The book I carried the most, beside my journal, was Bernie Siegel's *Love, Medicine and Miracles*. I'd already read it years before because of my father. He came to Siegel's books after his colon cancer had metastasized to his liver. One spring he drove from Casper to Cheyenne through a snowstorm to hear Bernie Siegel speak, and to have him sign the book. Now it was my book.

The doctors kept probing my liver when I was on the examination table. Now that I knew where my liver was, I was touching it too, trying to make my hands like the doctors' hands. I wanted to be what Bernie Siegel calls an exceptional patient.

The liver is an exceptional organ, blood-fat and full of regenerative power. It grows back like a night crawler cut in half, or a lizard that's lost a leg. In Greek mythology, the god Prometheus is chained to a rock as punishment for giving us mortals the use of fire. Each day a raptor pecks out the god's liver and each night the divine liver regenerates.

The human, mortal liver withstands so much abuse from liquor and fatty foods – our pecking raptors. Capable of so much regeneration and healing, our resilient liver is also where most cancers spread. Poor liver, the bloodiest organ of them all. Like qua-zillions of microscopic vampires, tumor cells are programmed to attack the blood of the beautiful liver.

My dad's liver grew back quickly after he'd had the metastatic parts removed in surgery. He was still healing when his next scan showed the colon cancer had now moved into his lungs too. They were nodules, small but deadly shadows where the breath moves. Spirit – spirare – means to breathe. That's when I believe light moved into his spirit, not just into and around in his physical body. That's also when he bought his copy of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*.

Dad internalized Siegel like classical music, like good scotch. He wanted to be nothing less than an exceptional patient. Bernie described these patients as people who met the worst prognosis with the best attitudes. He wrote of how such patients sometimes beat their own odds. How he'd seen spontaneous remissions for unknown reasons and lengths of time, how on occasion his patients walked out of his office with tumors hovering like black balloons in their bodies and came back months or years later with only little health problems like gall stones or hernia. My dad loved these stories. And now I would too, because they carried lifelines of hope and survival.

In our medical culture cancer quickly drowns our power to think we can survive and heal. In a waiting room where a TV blared a relationship gossip show, I copied a Bernie passage into my journal: "Healing is a creative act, calling for all the hard work and dedication needed for other forms of creativity. . . People who survive are not just lucky. They have worked hard to achieve their healing and we have much to learn from them. However, this is not to condemn or blame those who don't recover. We are talking about possibilities versus probabilities, not success or failure." Bernie was one wise doctor.

Following one of my appointments after the oncologist had done yet another pelvic exam and pressed hard upon my lymph nodes and my liver, I came home in a panic. When I touched my side as the oncologist had done, I could feel my liver. Swollen as the river in early summer, closer to my touch than I'd ever noticed. I now felt motherly toward my liver. I wished my hands could protect it from the beaks of predatory birds. But the raptors were within me in the form of cancerous cells. How do I protect myself from that kind of raptor? I felt my powerlessness once again. My power over, and within, my own body felt like a god chained to a rock inside me.

I called my father-in-law, a retired gastroenterologist. He knows the liver well. "I can feel my liver and it's engorged and near the surface," I cried into the phone. "It feels colossal!" I used Ava's word. Translate this to: I'm living in terror melanoma is spreading to my liver as we speak.

My father-in-law spoke in his calm detached medical voice. He tried to reassure me metastasis wouldn't happen that fast. There was no need for alarm. Maybe my liver was tender because so many doctors had been squeezing it. But I already knew otherwise.

Melanoma moves and spreads fast as a river in June carrying a winter of snowmelt in its channels. Translate this to: Maybe my liver was also scared and trying to fly out of my body.

Part of healing, I've learned, involves paying homage to those places that have been our touchstones, our similes and metaphors. The Snake River is lit from within the day I venture into the Hoback Canyon. It's autumn. It's been seven years since I was diagnosed with the malignant melanoma in my birth canal, my own canyon of the feminine. I've been very lucky and have beaten the odds. I have no idea how I survived. But I also think I internalized all I could of Bernie Siegel: *people who survive are not just lucky. They have worked hard to achieve their healing.* The way I walk through every season has changed.

The long-leafed cottonwoods, the aspens, the sumac and mountain ash rooted into the steep V of the canyon walls, the Snake River -- everything is a shimmer the day I decide to visit the river's Lunch Counter Rapids. Long before my diagnosis, a teenager drowned there. It has always haunted me, and it's a story I've carried ever since. This boy had stood too close, in the wrong place at the wrong time of year when the river is roiling white with the melt out of nine months of snow. Another boy, a classmate, had pushed him in from behind. It was a jealous and aggressive gesture, a thoughtless, fatal shove. Weeks later the drowned boy's body was recovered many miles downriver in a stretch known as the South Fork.

I drive the Hoback road, the river on my left, thinking about both boys. Jealous perpetrator and hapless victim -- their story is now strangely interwoven in my body. As I near the Lunch Counter I'm down inside it. This is a canyon that swallows the autumn light, and this is a river that swallows the canyon.

In October the Snake is easier to come to terms with than in June when the teen was shoved. But still it's the Snake. It can be deadly any time of the year. I walk cautiously down the steep sagebrush path. I'm wearing my black cowboy boots, aware of their worn-slick soles, and aware of the river's indifference. I've never come here before. I want to stand where they stood. I want to see the river up close, to feel with my own hands its yield and strength.

I'm reminded of my crossing the street to visit my oncologist's lab at the Mayo Clinic, to see melanoma under his microscope. I need to see the deadly Lunch Counter for what it is. Today the river is no metaphor or simile, but all river, relentless in its power. An aggressive Snake one has to come to terms with. I've come here as a pilgrim comes to pay homage.

In geologic time water has done opposing, contrapuntal things here. It has both roughened and smoothed the limestone counters that give the rapids its name. In a former life, the river was air. In a former life, the rock was water. Cycles of atmospheric pressure, snow and rain, pacific-pushed into these mountains, then pacific bound.

The boys' story is ancient and timeless too: a triangle of energy, desire for the same girl, jealousy. Even in October I can see the rapids are a current stronger than a human body. The river rumbles like a pack of teens let loose down the canyon. It's a long stretch of young hunger and green roil. I'm sad to think those high school kids stood so close to the rock-shelf embankment. On the same limestone I watch the gray-green riffles, the shadows

formed by current and canyon, the wide terraces of clay stone submitting to water. Where I stand would be all whitewater in June.

A river's voice is always loudest where it's frothing, white and wild. Its secrets carve their course over time. The Snake will drown any voice asking and praying to keep your head above water, to survive. You alone do not save yourself if pushed from behind. Even if you plunge because you choose to, you alone do not save yourself from this river.

Laurie Kutchins has three published books of poetry including *The Night Path*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in poetry and received the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award from BOA Editions. Her poetry and essays have appeared in numerous periodicals including *The New Yorker*, *The Georgia Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Orion*. The essay appearing in *Intima* is excerpted from a completed memoir "Let the Dark River Pass," currently seeking a publisher. She teaches creative writing at James Madison University.

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