



Letters to Sam

Anita Cherry

LETTERS TO SAM

By

Anita Cherry

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Cover Art by Anita Cherry

Dedicated to my husband Scott, our daughter Samantha,
and Rabbi Jeffrey R. Astrachan

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PART ONE

Under Construction

Once again, I was taken apart
and I needed to put myself back together.
Once again, I am “under construction.”

Once again, at 55, I am vulnerable and exposed
after yet another surgery,
this time for a recurrence of thyroid cancer.

I thought it would be easier the second time,
or the third,
or the fourth,
but each lonely scary sad experience
forces me to rely on my gut
as I try to deny uncertainty.

The first, the ovarian cancer and hysterectomy at 27,
sent a shock to the core of who I was,
or could hope to be.

I didn't know how to continue,
or why,
or if it was even worth trying.

I felt cut off from life
and painfully isolated from other women.
There was little to propel me forward
and I struggled to find the way.

Five years passed before your arrival changed my life.

Seeing you that first day instantly lifted the invisible coat of grief that was
pulling me down.

The gaping emotional wound was closing.

I had new direction and purpose,
and was able to open myself to the world again.

Windows

For the next 21 years I tried to keep the windows wide open.

Less fearful of losing balance.

Willing to take chances.

Realizing I could be hurt...

but maybe allowing something amazing to happen.

I preferred to live as though I was standing on the tip of a pointed rock,
arms outstretched, perfectly balanced,
thrilled that it is today, and that I am me!

Facing cancer once more in my 40's
and now again in my 50's,
my balance was upset.

This time the need to be proud of my performance was stronger than ever.

But the need to be silly and to laugh
and to make others laugh despite a fearful situation was also there.

I hope I succeeded.

I will write more "Dear Sam" letters to see where these words lead.

Cilantro or Coriander

But first, a lighter glimpse of the writer.

I am happy when I think of your dad as he discovers
small intimate things about me,
much as one watches a child's "firsts."

That I, for example, have no desire at all for chocolate.

That I would always choose plain vanilla ice cream,
no matter how many exotic tempting options.

That I would just die to be an "extra" in a movie,
preferably set in Paris.

That I can't sing worth a damn.

That I can't remember the punch line of even one joke.

That I'm fully content as long as I am clean,
my hair looks good,
and my teeth are brushed and flossed.

That I can't stand fresh cilantro.

(Though there's a clear genetic explanation only for the last quirk.)

Me

Now from the writer herself.

I have learned to love the fool in me.

This is who I am.

I talk too much.

I feel too much.

I started with no patience, and now I have "some."

I become emotionally involved too easily.

And often get hurt.

But sometimes I succeed, and I am thrilled.

Sometimes the wonderful feeling even lasts awhile!

Just a thought...

Who could blame me for trying to walk on the edge of a butter knife?

The surface is smooth.

There are no sharp edges.

I can even see my reflection in the blade if I lean over far enough.

This tempts me to take another walk...and who knows?

Husband

What about your dad?

I didn't have to learn to love the fool in my husband.

He does not talk too much.

He does not take wild chances.

He is not lacking in patience or self-control.

He does not make too many promises.

But I have seen him cry.

In his careful and thoughtful way.

In his measured life he is not loud.

But in his humanity he is bold.

Syracuse 1981

Taking flight after the first surgery and staying airborne
developed into a succession of frantic creative endeavors.

Looking back to 1981 some were riskier than others.

Within the first 24 hours of my diagnosis
and with my new status as a barren woman
I wanted to adopt.

This possibility was denied me for five years.

I decided to go back to school to learn to teach art to children.
I forged ahead, bought supplies, and worked first from my bed,
and then from the kitchen table.

We lived in Syracuse for six more months before moving to Baltimore
and once there I searched for a school.

Drawing and painting were escapes that allowed me to stay connected
or "on the pencil line."

The artist looks for a place where no one has been.
Many moments were spent on top of the pointed rock.

I ran, I cried, I moved, too afraid to stop.

You see, I was building the basement of my soul.

This is why I kept in motion.

The first and second floors seemed so far away.

Bridge

In Baltimore, after another surgery,
I was on my way to the land of the well again.

There is a bridge between the land of the sick and the well
but it is not easy to spot.
Eventually I did and I started to cross, but I got stuck.

We moved to Pennsylvania when your dad started his medical practice.
Leaving Baltimore was easy.
Our house was sad.

There was a constant tension running through my body.
Attempting to hide this from others was probably not possible.
Staying airborne is work and my propellers were noisy.

Jogging early every morning muffled the whirling
but after two hours my brain was coated,
and I needed this balm.

In York I worked at shedding my skin like a growing snake.

I did not know that the skin would stick
and that I would soon hit the wall of my emotional strength.

Living in a compact city neighborhood
and faced with the daily sight of mothers with their young children
caused me to stare openly.

Experiencing the perfume of their physical closeness
taunted me painfully
and yet I couldn't look away.

Art

Yesterday I sat on the cold steel beam all day;
I was patiently waiting for some levity, and it came.

I took chances in York.

I left our safe cozy house and neighborhood,
looked for work, and searched for a horse,
a life-long dream.

This new-old Anita, never really knowing for sure what I was doing.

Careening from one emotional place to another
I gleefully embraced the new
as I jumped up and down on my pointed rock.

The job was as an art teacher for young children in a quiet private school.
I wanted to be able to teach them to see for themselves,
not what others saw.

I loved them.

When a lesson plan didn't work as expected
I quickly abandoned it and came up with another

and everyone was happy.

I decided to sketch them while they were busy at work themselves.

In time these drawings became the focus of my first exhibit at the local college (yours!).

The equine story was less successful.

I could never get the stubborn animal from the paddock and I desperately needed a replacement.

I eventually rode my next (and less frustrating) horse through the cornfields on warm summer evenings and the new and vintage Anitas meshed.

Mute

It was time for “you” to be in my life
and in this pursuit I became strangely quiet.

Sitting in a small plain church with other childless couples longing to adopt
I was asked to speak about myself and I was struck mute.

To expose myself emotionally
after I had been overexposed physically
was impossible.

There must be other roads to lead to you. But where were they?

I was working on the first floor of my soul; there were no visible signs.

But somehow you were already growing under my heart,
and no sonogram could detect you.

You were private.

Too special to share with the medical technicians.

My need for you was overwhelming.
There was relentless pulling by the mysterious life forces.

Tiny Fingers

While I was waiting for you I displayed new artwork in another exhibit
and I ran wild with my second,
and more relaxed,
and more mature, horse.

One amazing day you came to us.

Your tiny fingers gripped the back of our shirt collars
and lifted us up.

With your other hand
you quickly peeled away the shell
that had unknowingly hardened around our hearts.

Grew Tall

Your dad worried about what life would be
if he had missed meeting you.

He was then, and still remains, delighted by your presence.

I just grew tall, certain that it was immediately noticeable to others.

Nothing in my life compared to being with you.

Becoming a family together was transforming.

I followed your silent prompts, and waited eagerly for you to talk.

Giving you what you needed and delivering you openly to the world was scary.

It seemed that other mothers had a plan for this job, but I didn't.

I was looking for you.

I did not want to cover you up with me.

I did not want to think for you.

You must have known.

As I watched you grow

I knew instinctively when to let you go.

The need for you to try on the clothes of your own world was strong

and I saw that.

Try them on you did.

And you wore them carefully.

You and I were different.

You would never have chosen to wear that
watermelon bathing suit while still in a diaper!

Softer

Oh, yes I am not without crazy shenanigans that provide
frightening glimpses of the child or the teenager I thought I left behind.

You have lived with me
as I plowed through three reconstructions.

I fear I have made you cringe and shudder,
and then hold both arms out should I fall.

My stubbornness to return to strength
by my own rules
was probably annoying.
But for me there was no other way.

This latest cancer is different.
The new me is thinking carefully.
Imagine that!

But I feel softer, and less afraid.

The turbulence of life comes and goes.
These waves have weight.
Taking flight without burdens was a younger carefree me.

Taking flight with ballast should keep the wild careening at bay.

You don't need to see your mother recklessly
bumping through the days ahead.

Molting in reverse?

Forgiveness Sandwich

Today I am sitting on top of a construction site.

The sky is clear blue, and the steel beam does not feel cold.

I brought a lunch pail with me today.

I am eating a forgiveness sandwich.

It is sweet.

So glad to sit down on the job.

PART TWO

Filament

It is winter now and I am thinking back to a warm August day.

The wind tossed my green garden chair around.

It had been set close to the house at the foot of the lower level flower bed
and it landed above the upper bank.

I walked up and settled into it in its new spot
and looked around.

This view forced me to see everything differently
and I was excited by the discovery.

By September I was even more daring and moved the chair higher
and sat amongst the trees I had planted a few years before.
Surrounded and protected, I felt cozy.

When I close my eyes in the sun
a seahorse-shaped filament appears in my right eye.
It floats from below, drifts upwards, then disappears.

This has been so since childhood,
and when he's there in the bright sunlight I am reassured.

Damned Ivy

My garden watches me grow.

Three years ago on your high school graduation

I wanted the grounds to look beautiful.

The three full English ivy beds that wrapped around the front of the house
and circled across the back were not attractive in any sense.

They were planted to be maintenance-free; they were anything but.

They somehow died back and shriveled and crisped up each winter,
no matter how mild the weather.

Dad and I fought about them without fail every spring.

He would spot minuscule green shoots
and begged me to give them one more chance!

Yes, they were alive.

But they were wretched
and ugly for too many months each year.

Yet he stubbornly believed in them.

For ten years, yes a decade,
he trusted them to become the thriving always-green plants
they were meant to be.

They were offered every chance to prove themselves.

They suffered the winters,
began to come back in spring, and by summer were attacked by
raging legions of thorny weeds with unimaginably tough roots and by
mysterious diseases that stumped the university professors.

Enough!

This was my chance to eliminate these
hateful disappointing plants from my life!

For days the silent workers toiled and sweated
to destroy what was once cherished, and now loathed.

I watched them from inside the house.

Sometimes with glee.
Sometimes with horror.
Sometimes with tears.

I had become emotionally attached to these
yellowed pock-marked itchy expanses.

They were mine but they were a painful ugly failure and had to go.

New Beginning

The sight of the now empty beds brought relief.

I looked at the sterile freshly-mulched expanses over and over.

Their cleanliness was remarkably calming to the spirit.

They looked (though they were certainly not) virginal.

I did not want them to be despoiled again.

Dad and I sat on the back porch and lovingly admired them once more.

They cleanly wrapped themselves around us.

We did not dare to devise any further planting schemes.

We did not know that the sight of emptiness would provide such pleasure.

There was so much deeply-hidden disease
the ground had to stay unplanted for two full years.

I had other areas to work on as we waited.

And as I worked these smaller beds
and looked at the now seemingly-barren mulch
their taunting potential filled me with joy.

I felt lucky to be given another chance.

They would become my new blank canvas.

But I did not yet dream of their future.

I needed to linger in this freshness,

this anticipation,

this new beginning,

for a while longer.

Wild and Free

The first year after the ivy was removed passed easily,
but the next revealed my famous impatience.

Eventually the earth recovered from the harsh but necessary chemotherapy
and could again support new growth.

But I had no plan.
A plan would have quickly crushed my excitement.

Following directions?
Mercy, I would have had to stop and think!

I was too stuffed with nervous energy for that.

I happily found delicate and vulnerable pansies,
flowers that took me back to wonderful springtime childhood memories.

Overwhelmed by the emotion, I could not plant them fast enough.
Overwhelmed by the emotion, I could not be delayed by measuring.

I needed to be wild and free,
and haphazardly scattered them.
I guess they would have to find their destiny on their own!

And once they located their spots I dug and watered.

It took all day.

I loved the idea, but hated the outcome.

It reminded me of the sensation after an art student's first 30-second sketch.

Pleased, but only for a moment.

Impatience

It is embarrassing to admit how I gardened then.

I hurriedly planted one day and pulled everything up the next.

Sometimes I was gentle with this, sometimes not.

The dry clay filled with stones required a pick and water to break it up.

Caked with mud and with a sharp weapon in hand I was frightening.

Covered in sweat and dirt
and nearly unrecognizable
you and dad rolled your eyes.

My appearance annoyed.

I did not care.

I peeled off my sticky clothes before entering the house.

I loved this.

I loved the escape.

No Comment

You see, I do not garden in lady-like fashion, or like Martha.

I need to go my own way.

I rebel and may seem wildly out of control to others.

But in my mind I am not.

One day the former landscaper stopped by
to see how I was doing without him.

He slowly surveyed my work,
and did not utter a single word.

I read his mind and told him
I did not want my garden to look like anyone else's.

He smiled sheepishly and said,
"Don't worry, there's no chance of that happening."

So be it.

Pat...the Bunny

The garden has hidden functions.

For example:

I never felt comfortable keeping your beautiful black lop-eared rabbit caged, and as she grew to full-size the guilt increased.

One bright warm day I had enough and took her outside to see the world (and my plants).

"Pat" (the bunny) did not quickly escape as you and dad had assured me she would.

She carefully chewed the grass and tasted the tender flowers.

She seemed to be content as she wandered back toward her cage for water and safety.

However, gaining confidence, she gradually moved further from the house and slowly worked her way toward the furthest edge of the property.

At which point she didn't turn back.

She disappeared to live her life.

PART THREE

The Sparkling Rabbi

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

I am in my hospital room recalling the sensation of
sitting atop the whirling helicopter blades

wondering where the exits are.

Hmm..the window is looking very desirable...

Thud, thud, thud, again.

Into my room walks a man I have not seen before.

I catch myself staring at him; his eyes and his smile fill his face.

He sparkles.

Thud, thud, thud, once more.

He reaches for my hand to introduce himself.

He says he is our new rabbi.

I am looking for the switch to stop the whirling blades.

My rabbi was looking for me!

His Shoulders

I briefly stop whirling to speak to my rabbi.

I cannot not escape the helicopter blade yet.

It is cold and I am still shivering from the anesthesia.

I am quickly preparing to leave, but my work is not yet done.

Can you not see that you caught me in hurried flight, rabbi?

The sight of our brand new rabbi causes me to worry about him.

Do you really know what your chosen work can do to you?

Do you take time to care for yourself?

Do you exercise, eat and sleep well, spend enough time with your family?

Do you know that you will not be able to please everyone (anyone?).

The problems spread out ahead of you are unending.

Can you do this and not lose your spirit?

Rabbi. Please...

I do not want to see your shoulders stoop,

and the sparkle leave your eyes and your kind smile fade.

Rabbi...can you do all of this?

The Connections

When I came home from the hospital I set out for a run,
but with no planned course in mind.

The surprise visit from the rabbi remained in my head, and was disorienting.

I had not received a visit from one during any other hospital stay.

The paperwork before surgery asks for your religious affiliation
and whether you want anyone notified that you are there.

I stubbornly left this part blank before, and so I did this time.
I stubbornly need to be able to manage these things without leaning on
anyone.

In fact, if the rabbi wants to find me he will simply know where I am!
Let him use his connections to find me without asking!

And so he did.

Again and Again

To make sense of this once more...

The pained voices from my heart block out all other sounds.

I wonder if I can get up again.

I wonder if I can be me again.

I permit myself to seek help in becoming my authentic self.

Falling Apart

When I was finally able to drive again
I happened by the Temple and stopped in.

I sat in the peaceful empty sanctuary
but I was unable to handle my grief.
I was falling apart.

I stumbled over to the Rabbi's office and asked his
kind secretary if he might speak with me.

We sat across a large empty desk
reminding me of my husband's first day in practice.

The Rabbi was still in the honeymoon period of his new job
and I was in the honeymoon phase of my new recovery.
When this brief time is over I must confront the job of
what to do with the problem of being me.

Rather than choose what's comfortable or easy
I prefer to follow my rough instincts and take the difficult path.
This can be chaotic,
for I never know for sure where I'm headed.
But this is how I discover myself,
and will find my new self.

Two Strikes

What I discovered in my brief encounter with the rabbi will stay with me

Just to write the words "my rabbi" was new and felt special.

But sitting and sharing with him made me worry.

He is new to the area;
what if he's not happy and decides to leave? What will I do then?

He said he didn't know anyone exactly like me.

I asked if he knew anyone just a little like me, and he shook his head.

Two strikes.

Then he asked if I would be here with him and I slowly nodded.

Alas, my rabbi and I will be new together.

Following his lead,

this cancer traveler now believes even more deeply in others.

PART FOUR

The Clothesline

Books on cancer are abundant, and countless stories with detailed descriptions of the medical procedures line the shelves.

Strange that I can never bring myself to read them; I don't know why.

People sometimes (always?) share these stories to believe the tale themselves, but believing is elusive.

The process can lead to a quiet or loud, submissive or angry, telling, or may sometimes become a painful rant.

I am thankful that my own path evolved to assure me that whatever comes next will not require this.

We each have our own style.

I see people take their cancer and hang it on a clothesline behind their house.
I see them remove these cancer-clothes from the line,
carefully fold them,
bring them back into their house,
and wear them.

We want to wear our own clothes.

Mystery

What to do about the minute, tedious, steps of emotional comeback?

What to do about the exquisite,
heightened awareness of all that makes no sense?

The feeling of being a bulb of a flower
below the surface of the warming soil?
The need to be forced back into life?
The knowing that you will be forced back?

What about the pain and effort of flowering again?

What about the mystery of not knowing
the shape
and color
and fragrance
of that new flower?

If someone told me I would experience softness
looking at the world after cancer surgery
I would ask, "For how long?"

When my doctors looked into my eyes, and then quickly looked away...

Eye to Eye

It takes time to have and to be a friend, and there are costs.

I have known my surgeon for fifteen years,
and when I made an appointment to see him
I instinctively knew already that my thyroid cancer had returned.

Sitting across from him in the exam room
I longed for reassurance otherwise, but he was quiet.

I begged with flailing limbs, but it was not to come.
I pleaded in a wavering voice.
Still he could not reassure me.

He looked into my eyes as he spoke and then his eyes averted to the right.
I followed his gaze, inclined my body slightly, and said, "I'm losing you..."
I looked up at him, eye to eye once more.

He spoke, but this time his eyes avoided mine to the left.
My body responded as it, too, curved to the left
while I repeated my plea, "I'm losing you..."

He looked at me and ordered tests.

I calmly reached for my phone to call you and dad,
knowing that I could once again shoulder this
as long as you two were spared.

Navigation

There are rare situations where I have been able to fully trust
in the ability of another to guide me through a frightening dark place.

I feel fortunate to have received this gift of trust more than once.

There are things that are quietly known.

I think of my surgeon as having selflessly granted me this.
I count on his performance to navigate the dangers,
and I gift him in return.

Once his task is completed I rise from my hospital bed
and spring back to life within 12 hours.

He counts on me to do this, you see, as my part of the dance.

I'm a Blonde

Thud, thud, thud, thud....

I can feel myself again sitting on top of the whirling helicopter blade.

I can stay aloft even as they put me to sleep.

The noise in my head during surgery is simply me keeping up with everyone.

I can see myself leaving the hospital without any get-well flowers
because I leave before they arrive.

You see, I can do this because I'm special,
I'm a true blonde.

The Compass

The strength of the chief came into my life unexpectedly.
In the days when I was soul-less he came to me and inhabited my body.

His presence was known in my new ability to stand upright again.

No, I was not taller.

Just able to view more than the pavement immediately below.

He took me by the hand
and we moved away from the curb together.

The chief never left.
His move was permanent.

What he gave me was a hidden but unwavering compass
that travels with me.

This compass comes equipped with an alarm that only I can hear,
for I am now the chief.

Luggage

The burden of awareness and emotional sensitivity
the cancer traveler develops
can be stuffed into a defined compartment.

But this luggage must be hand-carried and dragged
at all times and to all places.

Its weight and its content may change but it is always there.

This unexpected partner must be dealt with again and again.

The Chief

Who is the chief?

I sat on my hospital bed looking and listening to the people in the room.

Suddenly I stopped looking.

I stopped listening.

In that instant I took control.

I was 27 years old.

I released myself from the those around me,
listened to my inner voice,
and became the chief.

My husband did not know he would be living with a chief.

He did not know he would sometimes have to stand by helplessly
and watch me go through the rituals.

Patience

Life is always moving forward, and we followed, together and separately.

I could cover the scars and try to ignore the damage inside.

But he could not feel my emotions or know where I was.

He was a young doctor and I was part of his life only at the end of the day.

His patients came first then, as now.

I needed more time with him then, as I do today.

I wait for this man that is my reason for living.

I wait for this man who is kind, and listens.

I wait for this man who gives to all who need him.

I wait for him as he holds just one more hand at the end of a long day.

I wait for what is left of him to carry me to another day.

It would be easier if his presence didn't instantly lift me.

I wait patiently (or is it patient-ly?).

Too Cold

I am climbing up onto the construction site today.

It is cloudy, windy, and very cold.

I'm at the top now, sitting on my steel beam.

As I look down I see a tiny perfume bottle that must have fallen from my luggage.

My mother gave it to me 25 years ago when I was in the hospital.

The fragrance was "Joy" and it was her favorite.

I cherished it, having received so little from her.

It was never opened.

It was unchanged, stuck in time, a reminder.

Something in me must have repelled her.

It was sad not to be able to please her.

It was sad I could not be close to her.

It has been sad to lose her when she is still alive.

Many Floors

I have not moved from the construction site because it's clear now.

I can see a good distance.

Even to my mother's house!

I believe I can vaguely make her out,

but she has been away from my life for so long that I'm not sure it's her.

I can see my own home too.

I am looking at the house that I built.

Why does it have have so many floors?

The initial plans only showed a basement and a simple two-story structure.

What happened over the years?

The house now has many more levels.

But the foundation is quite strong and the internal structures are solid.

I will not have to rebuild my soul again.

Red Umbrella

I'm glad I brought something to eat.

There is a package of oblong crackers in my pocket.

Each is stamped with a few words.

The first one I remove from the package reads:

YOU ARE PHYSICALLY HEALED.

Mmm...these taste good.

The second reads:

LOOK THROUGH EACH OF THE WINDOWS OF YOUR HOUSE.
THE VIEW CHANGES.

The next is stuck to a fourth, making a double:

YOU CAN STILL TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF..
AND CAN CONTINUE TO HELP THOSE THAT NEED YOU.

I am enjoying these tasty crackers, but I am not finished,
there is one more and it has my name on it:

ANITA, IF ANY OF THE FLOORS OF THE HOUSE GIVE WAY
THERE IS A LARGE RED UMBRELLA BY THE DOOR.
OPEN IT AND HOLD TIGHT.
FLOAT TO SAFETY,
AND DEVISE A NEW PLAN ON THE WAY DOWN.

PART FIVE

O

To be seen as whole, despite events that strive to diminish me,
is the only treatment I know from dad.

His unwavering belief in me, and his welcome patience come naturally.

He never practices this, and he never lets me see him sweat.

The "O" in "LOVE" seems to represent the unknown but necessary "Other."

Why is this?

There is no reasonable answer.

Secret

The other day a women stopped me in a local store.

She does not know me but she has "heard" a little about me over the years from her friends.

She wanted to ask me a few questions.

After what I've been through, she wanted to know how I could "still believe."

I smiled, and didn't answer.

She does not need to know my secret.

My constant.

My husband.

Nakedness

When I met your father my life began again.

I just wanted to be with him,
and when he was away
I wished I could slip into his pocket.

Our strong desire to be together continued
despite the unforeseen interfering events.

The emotional nakedness exposed by the cold bright light
of the surgical lamp was not pretty,
didn't warm us like the sun, and caused pain.

Pain may test a relationship
but there is no "work" involved in overcoming that
If you truly like each other.

Carefree

We were full of hope and felt free in the early days of our marriage.

We quickly decided to spoil each other,
because, we justified, who else would?

It was simply the two of us.

We followed the path of your dad's medical training
and we moved a few times.

But I was alone more than I wanted to be.

Waiting for him to arrive home was a lonely task.
And when the door to our apartment opened my mood instantly lifted.

We basked in this innocent routine for five happy carefree years.

The Cavernous Hole

The ovarian cancer and the sudden infertility found me
on a sunless cold Syracuse day.

I awoke in the hospital bed and looked into my husband's eyes.

His look was unfamiliar and dark.

I felt as if I was submerged deep under water
and I couldn't breathe.

We were never to be the same again.

It was a struggle to rejoin him,
and I didn't know how to start.

But I crawled out of my black cavernous hole to be with him.

The magnetic pull was still there.

Showing Beauty

I could not fully comprehend what I had lost.

And it is still too much for me to take in more than two decades later.

I lost so much, and so quickly, that life seemed to have no meaning.

But I was able to keep going, keep living.

This must be the gift, life itself.

I have relived that terrible day and felt the sharp pains many times since.

But life asserts itself, and can still show me beauty.

Desire

It was impossible for me to be sure what my husband felt that day in 1981.
But it seemed that he only wanted me to come back.

I did not want myself, how could he desire me?

I was grief-stricken and empty, and repeatedly pushed him away.
Could I go on without him too?
Could I lose everything and still survive?

But the more I pushed the more he held tight.

I sought help through formal support groups,
Yet there were none for me, I was too young.

I had to become my own role model.

Off Key

I felt cheated but covered this up
and I guided this young man
while fighting to become a stronger young women.

I led, to show him that we could still be shiny and new.

I tried to devise dances to keep us going (despite a total of four left feet).

I tried to sing (though often off-key, while forgetting the words).

As an older woman now I still lead him
with the lightness and joy that cancer can not destroy.

So that one day, if needed, he will know how to continue.

Without me.

A Student

There will come a time when I will stop writing these "Dear Sam" letters,
but not yet.

I have grieved that I have had to go again
as a faithful cancer traveler,
and that I will always be one.

But I will not be fulfilled and content in my own good health
when there are still so many behind me
who have not yet made it to the land of the well.

How can I be of use to them?

I search for whatever task awaits me; perhaps how to care better.

I know that by helping others I stare down my own fears.

However, this cancer traveler is also a student.
And by trying to write to you with glaring honesty
I may discover another way to come back.

Travel

This cancer traveler has learned that this trip
has much in common with travel from any airport.

Family or friends can carry your bags, or ask you to carry theirs.
Both types of voyagers rely on strangers to take them where they need to go.
Both must adhere to a set schedule.

Timing is critical and is obsessed about.
The unexpected parts of each journey
are eagerly shared with others later.

What went terribly wrong.
What annoyances interfered.
What was pleasantly surprising.
What was perfect.

And, eventually,
how the trip seems easier
and more elegant
the longer ago it was taken.

But in the end only the successful and happy events are recalled with ease;
the painful parts are gladly forgotten.

No More Calls

I have been let down by some of my friends and it has hurt.

How do they process what I'm experiencing?

One with whom there were nearly daily talks stopped calling.

One still spoke on the phone, but couldn't visit.

The silent rejection was embarrassing.

Luckily, I have a limited supply of such "friends" so the stings were few.

(Otherwise these letters might go on and on.)

No Pity

Could it be that people think I don't need them,
because of how I choose to cope?

When friends and family call I am unfailingly chipper.

I don't cry.

I quickly let them know that I continue
to pound the treadmill daily, with, for example,
sutures and drains still in place.

I push to resume my daily routine too soon for my doctor's liking,
and too soon for my weakened body.

I guess I seem not to be in need of their emotional support.

Do I push them away?
Do I make it too easy for them?

I work so that no one sees me to be changed.

I won't allow cancer to leave its stain on me, even for a minute.

I don't want anyone to feel the need to offer pity.

PART SIX

A Couple

When your cousins were quite little their (your) grandparents frequently offered them "a couple" (of pretzels) as a snack.

Over time "couple" became their word for pretzell!

Only years later, and with some embarrassment, was this misconception recognized.

Twists of baked dough covered with salt are pretzels;
two people are a couple.

Your dad and I remain a couple.

Because we refused to quit.

Observation

After 21 years the mystery of the long journey that is parenting has become clearer to me.

A mother is rarely lucky enough to be
at the right time and place emotionally
when her baby is placed in her loving arms.

Parents are incomplete works.

The staging may be set; a home, a room for the baby, a crib, a box of diapers.

But the actors are new to their craft.

Until now it has been exclusively about them.

Things often appeared to be black and white and it was easier to see the goal.

From here on there is another life.

As babies and children mysteriously unfold they
teach their parents about the many shades of gray.

Can I expect you to see these subtle gradations already
when it has taken years of watching you
grow into womanhood to learn to see them myself?

The Last...For Now

This will be the last letter of this series.

We are on our way home from a brief trip to paradise.

When we checked in the friendly greeter
innocently snapped plastic ID bands around our wrists.
We could not wander through the beautiful resort without them,
and I felt like crying.

I could not cope with the confining sensation
of another hospital-type name tag,
and I wanted to rip it off.

But the Lance Armstrong-yellow band
had to be worn to stay and enjoy what they had to offer.

So I left it on, and embraced it, as required,
and we had a carefree wonderful few days.

When it was time to leave the bands had to be snipped off and returned;
they were no longer valid.

I was saddened and shocked, but only for a moment.

You see, I realized then that there was no need to look back.

I had made order in my life...again.

(P.S. And then I got dengue fever...and so it goes.)

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