

Summer Haircuts

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In the first weeks of the pandemic, my 10 year old and I explored the empty city. We hopped on our bikes ...and cruised through stoplights in the abandoned financial district. We walked in the Path, which looked so much like a creepy dystopia that we both got the jitters and raced up an escalator for the light of day. We sat at the foot of the CN Tower, which normally would be crawling with tourists...and gazed at the vacant plaza.

I hoped, then, that this would be just a small moment that would end soon as life, and health, pulsed back onto our streets. We didn't know, back then, how long this would all go on.

One day we ended up somehow in the Beaches. The wind whipped sand against our faces as we trudged towards the empty shoreline. The volleyball nets were unstrung. A massive blue lifeguard stand loomed empty like a forgotten fortress, frozen in time. I'd always thought it would be so beautiful to have the beach to ourselves. But on this day when I finally got my wish, it was disorienting. I wanted everything back: the crowds, the noise, the Soft Serv truck, the lines for the change room. A life without fear and loss. A future I could understand.

And yet, despite the desolation at Woodbine Beach, we didn't want to go home either. So we stood on the shores and skipped rocks for hours, wondering where our city had gone.

My friend said: *"It is important for children to have a schedule in these uncertain times."* (She's a therapist.) So I began to schedule our lives by the hour, around Zoom classes and calls, and carefully curated Netflix binge-watch sessions. We made Big Changes in our lives, like taking showers and getting dressed before noon.

"It's important for children to process this experience," my friend said. She told me to get him a journal.

"I don't want to write about things that suck," he said.

I tried to respond. "Sometimes it helps to write about things that suck," I told him.

"Not for me," he said.

"Well, what do you want to do instead?" I asked.

He got a skateboard. In the evenings, we'd walk to the vacant parking lot where the 2 neighbour kids skateboarded and they'd race across the empty spaces together. They became a socially-distanced squad. Us parents would sit two meters apart and chat...but truth be told, I

wasn't listening. I couldn't tell you one word those people said to me? (Do you remember any conversations you had in April and May?) My mind was in another zone, gazing at the horizon for the speeding shadows of our children taking flight on the gusts of an early summer. *What would the summer bring?*

A big box arrived from Amazon. This was our kit for the next few months. Books, educational books, masks and a haircutting kit. These were all part of a plan to start doing things for ourselves, to learn and school on our own. DIY. I got everything set up on the patio...a chair, smock, scissors and trimmers and I was about to call the guys outside for their summer haircuts when the phone rang.

It was the oncologist. "You need surgery and then chemo," she said quickly. I heard what sounded like a dog barking in the background at her house. "Are you sure?" I asked. I rushed into the bathroom where it was quiet. I put her on speakerphone as she began to describe the therapy schedule.

I needed to take notes...but there was no paper and pen on the floor of my bathroom. Roger burst in with a notebook. The call felt like it was over before it started. We sat in shock, in our pajamas together, pondering the next chapter of our lives as a family.

I was lucky: a lot of breast cancer testing in Ontario had been postponed in March and April, but by May my GP was able to get me in to get my symptom checked out. The biopsy came back quick too. I was in a prime position with a surgery date and a good chance of getting the care I needed.

But there was a lot missing, too. Getting cancer care during a pandemic in Toronto means crossing your fingers for an appointment date and learn not to expect much else. Talk to a breast cancer patient and they'll tell you about learning to give themselves injections at home and post-op care normally done in a clinic or by a home health nurse. You're on your own now for a lot of it. And we're all uncertain about how to stay safe from the coronavirus with compromised immune systems...and fearful about how our future treatments will be managed during the pandemic.

And the most important conversations--like the call I'd just gotten--are happening in the middle of chaos, over the phone.

I knew after my diagnosis that I needed to set up a care plan. Self-care is crucial for cancer patients to stay well during treatment, right?

But the self-care tips I found on cancer websites now read like a weird archive of a dead language:

"Get a friend to come over to your house and wash your dishes." Nope.

“Attend our evening support groups at the hospital.” Nope.

“Ask grandparents or other relatives to watch your children while you rest.” Triple nope.

That odd sensation of isolation was in some ways familiar, though? It would be familiar to any of us who’d already been living under pandemic conditions in the city. Nobody had been in our house for months. And we hadn’t really been anywhere, either. “Learn to isolate”. But we were already there.

On the day before my first surgery, the nurse phoned to give my pre-op instructions. I was paying the Pizza Nova guy when she called, so half our conversation happened in the elevator while I balanced my phone and a hot pizza box. After reading out a list of how to prepare at home, the nurse paused.

“There’s one more thing. When you go into the surgery, they will be wearing a lot of PPE, protective equipment. Don’t be surprised. They will be in yellow gowns with face shields and masks. It’s going to be cold in there because we can’t safely run the heaters in the OR. The surgeon will walk you into OR and you’ll be sedated there.”

The next day during pre-op, I desperately wanted someone to hold my hand. But no family was allowed, due to pandemic restrictions and no one in the clinic wanting to touch a hand to another hand. I ended up with two fists, clenched together in my lap. A nurse quietly inserted a wire to mark the tumour. Then another nurse came to walk me down the hall for a radioactive tracer injection. Halfway there, I had to stop. “I’m lightheaded.” She pursed her lips. “Can you make it, or...” I sat on a folding chair in the hall, my head between my knees. “I’ll try to find a wheelchair,” she sighed, and disappeared.

In the injection room, a new nurse appeared, holding a metal tray with a giant syringe.

“I’m going to give you an injection. I want you to know this injection will hurt. You can do whatever you need to do. You can yell, you can swear, you can pound your fist. It’s ok,” she said in a reassuring voice.

Time stopped. Suddenly, I was crying.

“It’s okay,” she said. “This is all a lot to take. Do you want me to give you some space? You can take as much time as you want.”

That moment was a rare gift and I took it. Then I walked to the OR, ready. There was the surgery team, covered in PPE and ready to go.

“Take deep breaths and count with me,” said the anaesthesiologist, pacing behind me. A nurse held out my arms: “We’re putting on ‘seatbelts,’” she said as black cords curled around my wrists. “Another deep breath!” called the anaesthesiologist from a mile across the room. The

OR disappeared in a cloud of white.

When I awoke, I was alone in a room. Or wait...there was another person there with me, a nurse. With no family allowed in hospitals, it was just me and her. Her main job, it seemed, was to get me out of there as quickly as possible with as little contact as possible. I was poured into a wheelchair and someone wheeled me out to the sidewalk. It was rush hour. Taxis honked. Sunlight flashed off the skyscrapers. I shielded my eyes. A man was running towards me, talking quickly. It was Roger. "I got a cab," he pointed. "Can we wheel her there?"

After surgery, I had a recovery break before chemo would start. We made the most of it. Ontario was at Stage 2 then and some saint at City Hall had agreed to open the City pools, with social distancing. We rode our bikes to Sunnyside almost every day, lining up ahead of time and filling out the City's contact tracing forms with the lifeguards before diving into the fresh, cool water. We made friends, even 2 meters apart, and felt *normal*, all together, in this hot, strange summer.

My family began to isolate two weeks prior to my chemo and will continue until my chemo is over. Since Covid has a two week asymptomatic stage, it's not enough to follow the old cancer guidelines of staying away from people who are sniffing or have cold symptoms. My husband or son could pass coronavirus to me with no symptoms at all. They have to live like they have a compromised immune system, too—and not just for me, but for everyone else receiving chemo in the same chemo lab as me, some with more severely compromised immune systems. So as Ontario moved towards Stage 3, my family backtracked to Stage 1.

The guys walked me to my first chemo infusion. As they waved from the sidewalk, I turned to face a woman covered in a yellow paper robe with a thermometer, face shield and clipboard. *Did I have a cough, runny nose or fever? Vomiting or nausea? Had I traveled in the last 14 days? Had I been exposed to anyone who had been diagnosed with Covid?*

"Use the hand sanitizer," she said, as I entered the building.

"Thank you."

In the chemo waiting room, there was a sign that read:

**Due to the Covid-19 outbreak
we are no longer supplying coffee, tea and cookies at this
time.
Thank you for your understanding.**

No cookies? *Is this for real?* Also, there was no place to sit. Half of the chairs had been marked DO NOT SIT for social distancing. Chairs had also been placed in the hallway, but they were full. I stood in the hall, then sat on the floor while waiting through the hours-long routine of *bloodwork-consultation-chemo infusion*. Stretchers passed by in the hallway and I'd quickly

move my feet, clattering my fingers on my laptop, trying to lose myself in work. I wanted to blot out the whole waiting area, especially the TV on the wall blaring CTV coverage of our Premier's latest press conference. "We're doing great," he said.

I'd looked around at the other patients, people like me and think: *We're not. We're really not doing great at all.*

Back at home, new packages were arriving—my out-of-town friends had mailed headwraps to cover up my hair loss from the chemo drugs. Some were simple pull-ons, others were more complex inventions that I could fold differently for various looks. While Bax did his online classes, I sat on the patio wrapping headscarves into new curves and twists that I'd found online, wondering what look I could pull off.

One afternoon, Bax came out and saw me sitting with a wrap across my lap, my nearly-bald head uncovered.

"Do I look weird?" I asked him.

"No, you just kind of look like Dad."

Ha ha.

I don't know how I expected that a life unravelling could be pretty. Life during the pandemic isn't pretty or ordered or normal at all. Sometimes the days disappear in sleep; the nights are restless. We are all dealing with stark, sheer grief... not just over this pandemic, but the rise of authoritarianism across our southern border. Nothing is the way it should be, nor even *where* it should be. The Raptors are in a bubble at Disneyland. The Blue Jays are in Buffalo, for God's sake. Numbers drop, numbers rise, schools open, some schools close, epidemiologists announce the obvious, our government ignores it, everybody around us tries.

And then last week, our neighbourhood association announced they would be ending the nightly Cheer for health care workers. This wasn't the happy ending we'd all hoped for back in April. They weren't stopping because we'd reached an end...but because the Cheer is a reminder there is no end (as yet) in sight.

While downtown Toronto surges back to life, each day I'm more and more tired. The chemo is taking its toll. I go in for my treatments with the AC drug—patients call it the "Red Devil". It's a bright red liquid given in a ridiculously large syringe by a method they call "the push." Each push has brought me closer to the hope of a longer life, but at the same time, it propels me further into a world of stillness, of slowness. Waiting. I'm anxious for the end of the chemo and ready for so much more of 2020 to just end. I'm waiting for new beginnings, too.

Today I can feel autumn in the air. I fall asleep on the chaise with a half-played game of Othello in front of me. I awake to a buzzing sound. I look over to see Roger in a kitchen chair and Bax

carefully cutting his dad's hair with the clippers that arrived in that smiley-face box back in May. He's DIY'ing it and it looks really good!

I don't know how to describe this moment as I'm watching. There's something beautiful there... but beauty is hard to capture in words, isn't it? It flutters through like a monarch in September, headed to the Island to drink nectar before a long flight elsewhere. You can capture beauty in your mind's eye, but that's it. Then, it flies.

In some ways, pain is easier to chronicle. You can yell, you can swear, you can pound your fist. It's okay. We've all been through our own pain in these times, both public and private. And although we can't really capture any of it in words, nonetheless we try--because we need to remember.