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From *Are You a Survivor?*

Lily-Ray wasn't there the day they ushered the former Miss America into the Chemo Chamber to let us try on her tiara. Glenda, my number one nurse, introduced her, and she stood there in the door all blooming and toothsome. We stared. Someone clapped a couple of times and gave up on it before the motion could dislodge his or her I.V. The former Miss America, we were told, was committed to the battle against cancer. She had targeted breast cancer, and to signify this she was wearing a pink ribbon pin a few discreet inches above and to the right of her right nipple, precisely, I noticed with amusement, where my tumor had been. If I could loop my blurry pink scar in a pretty oval, it, too, could be made into a pin. Not all of us being treated that day in the Chemo Chamber had breasts, however, and those of us who did have breasts did not necessarily have tumor-laden ones like mine. Ovary, uterus, pancreas, testicle, throat, liver, lung, brain, cancer isn't fussy. But it was Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and the air glowed pink with a general awareness of breast cancer. Somewhere, someone – breasts intact, doubtless – had decided that pink was the color that one turned, or turned to, or yearned for, when one was aware of breast cancer. And that same someone had decided, before that, that the breast is more attractive than the uterus or the ovary, though those organs may actually be closer to pink in hue.

The former Miss America smiled and called us yawl and invited us to try on her tiara. She told us not to be shah. We held still. Her hair and her eyelashes and her tits asserted themselves in the room as she walked carefully around in her glass slippers and her fine yellow dress, introducing herself. After the initial breathless horror, patients on the other side of the room seemed to be receiving her with great joy and gratitude and a few smarmy tears. What was I going to do when she got to me? I couldn't kick or smack her or otherwise try to injure her physically. I would end up swiping at the air with my unencumbered arm, and she would suppress a smile and call Glenda, who would call the hospital psychologist, with whom she threatened me regularly. I could spit at her, but the spit would probably fail to fly, and would dribble down my chin, and she would loom in, smiling beatifically, and wipe it off on a corner of the blanket, and everyone would murmur appreciatively. And just being surly wasn't enough. She would be expecting surly.

Lily-Ray would have known what to do. I stared at the mauve curtain beside me that usually separated us, me and Lily-Ray.

I had started in on Lily-Ray the day of my first treatment. I was standing with Nurse Glenda at the foot of what was to be my own mauve infusion recliner. Reclining in the recliner next to it was a tall bony guy wearing blue jeans and dirty running shoes and a white tee-shirt and a Red Sox baseball cap, hooked up to an I.V., his head tilted so as to make eye-to-screen contact with the small white television beckoning to him from the ceiling. I watched his face. He had promise. He looked hateful and elemental, not plump with self-affirmations and nutritional supplements.

“What's your name?” I asked him when I was settled in and Glenda had gone to get some blood or poison or acid or something.

He was watching baseball. Winter baseball. He didn't answer. I gave up. I stared at the spot where the I.V. entered my vein until Glenda returned. The first drug in my cocktail was bright red like lipstick on an old whore. Glenda spent the first twenty minutes at my side pumping it slowly into my I.V. If I felt a burning on my skin close to the I.V., she told me

brightly, I should let her know, because the medicine burns the skin. Then she hooked me up with the clear medicine that dripped into me on its own.

“Everything okay?” she asked me. Her pink scrubs had hundreds of little pink accented cartoon bears all over them.

“Look at all the bears,” I said, pointing at a few. “Yes, I’m all set with this, so you can take it away now and I’ll have a look at the dessert menu.”

“Another hour,” said Glenda, and she was a pink electron, spinning off into other orbits.

“Yeah, fuck you,” I said. “Fucking fuck bitch fuck.”

The baseball volume went down.

“You want a name?” said the guy. “I’ll give you a name.”

“I don’t really fucking care right now,” I said. “Mr. Fucking No-Name.”

I laughed. It was a hard laugh to hold onto.

“Lily,” I said. “Your name is Lily.”

I started laughing again. The baseball volume went up again. I laughed until I could hardly breathe. Glenda threatened to call in the hospital psychologist, and that made me laugh more. I told her I was just laughing and why didn’t anyone want me to laugh ever, and she threatened again. She put some Ativan in my I.V. I waited for it to soften things, to sand down the edges, but it just slowly backed me not quite far enough away from the scene.

Lily-Ray disappeared during the fracas, leaving the baseball station on.

“What happened to him,” I said gently as Glenda unhooked me and walked beside me past his chair. “Did he die?” I laughed a couple of laughs, soft heavy laughs that stayed where they were dropped.

I drove myself home in the breakdown lane, occasionally pawing at my hair, clawing it back out of my face, feeling the broken ends, how soft it was, yanking at it to feel the pain where it held to my scalp. It would start to fall precisely two weeks after my first treatment, I had been told.

A half a day after two weeks had passed I ran my fingers through my hair and my hand came back with blond strands trapped between the fingers, as though I had tried to climb my own head.

My friend Flo shaved my head for me when bald patches began to appear. We balded me in her kitchen, by candle-light.

“Look,” she said after running the shaver from the center of my forehead and turning right, curving down to stop behind my left ear. “I made a road!”

Afterwards we stood together in the unlit bathroom, taking in my new image. I could hear our separate breathing rhythms. Flo petted her own thick curly hair, as though it needed comfort.

I took to wearing a gray scarf with delicate curling designs on it.

“Lily, do you have any hair under that ball cap?” I called during my second treatment, pulling on his curtain.

“Shut up. No, I don’t. Shut up. I’m listening to this.”

“Baseball,” I said. “It’s December. There is no baseball in December. You know it, and I know it.”

“This is the ‘51 National League pennant,” he said.

“Wow, that’s one long pennant,” I said.

I touched my right breast with my right hand, touched it right where the tumor had grown and where a scar was healing in the shape of a frown.

The tumor would have killed me. That was the thing.

“Listen, Lily,” I called. “You’re watching games that were played fifty years ago. The games are dead. The players are dead. The coaches are dead. The fans? Guess what? Dead. Look around you. We’re not dead. I’m not dead.”

“No, we’re just almost dead.”

“Hah!” I said. I let my head fall back on the back of the chair. I lifted my head up again.

“Come on, Lily, open your curtain. I’m lonely.”

“Shut,” he said, “up.”

“Open your curtain. Open it.”

Glenda appeared at my side.

“Hi,” I said.

“Ray doesn’t want his curtain open,” she said.

I smiled.

“Ray,” I said. “Why, Lily-Ray.”

Glenda moved on. There was a moment of relative silence – one of the dead players had hit a home run, and the dead fans were cheering, and the dead broadcasters were emoting – and then Lily-Ray spoke.

“Nurse,” he called. “Open my curtain please.”

Glenda came over and opened the curtain, and there was Lily-Ray. He didn’t turn to me, and his mouth was set in a neutral position that looked hard to maintain. I smiled. I closed my eyes.