

A Teen's Journey



by Eesha Chona

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Finding Out	4
Pre-Surgery	6
Surgery	8
Post-Surgery	10
Day of Pathology	12
Friends	14
Family	16
Lifestyle Changes	18
Future worries	20
Current Celebrations	22
Thank You	24

This story is dedicated to my mother. Without her, I would not be the person I am today.

I created this book to help teenagers everywhere going through this journey. It is a tough journey, and if this book helps you, then it has done its job. Some parts of this book have been adapted from my online blog: A Teen's Journey with Her Mother.

The point of this book is to provide some insight into some feelings teenagers have when they experience one of their parents diagnosed with cancer. Obviously, this is not every type of feeling or reaction every teen will have, and that is completely okay. Everyone is unique and experiences different emotions as a result of different situations. But this is merely one resource out of the many out there in the world.

Disclaimer: While this book is vital in providing support, the information provided is not a substitute for medical professional help, nor is it advice. It is used only as a helpful tool in further understanding medical knowledge and diagnoses. Our readers should consult a physician for any health condition. For further questions, you are encouraged to speak to a qualified professional or speak to a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor.

Thank you! I hope this book helps you and meets your needs.

Love,
Eesha

Finding Out

I found out about my mother's breast cancer on December 22nd, 2012. I remember my brother and I were fighting over which movie we would watch since we were on winter break. Suddenly, my father said that he and my mother needed to speak with us. We went to their bedroom, and I saw my mother lifelessly staring out the window. My father began speaking, and hesitated for a bit. "Guys, you know..., Mama and I have been to a few doctors, and it seems that she has tested positive for breast cancer." I immediately shut out everything else he was saying and stopped hearing. I looked over to my mother, but she did not make any eye contact with me.

I ran to my bathroom, and let it out. I cried. I just celebrated my 15th birthday, but I may not have my mother for my 16th. My brother was going to graduate high school in May, but would my mother be there? Would we even be celebrating? What does this mean? Is she going to die in the next few months, or is she going to get treatment? Does that mean she will lose her hair and feel sick all the time? Will she be living in the hospital? What's going on? How far along is the cancer, and has it spread? Is it treatable? How am I even going to go to school every day if I know my mother is sick? What is going to happen?

I felt lost, confused, anxious, and angry. I was angry that this happened to my mother and my family. Why us? What did we ever do? And then I realized that I didn't even notice my own mother was sick. How could I not notice she was hurting? Was I really that self-involved? Then I hoped for one second that maybe they mixed up the tests. Maybe it wasn't my mother's test result, maybe it was another one. But, I immediately realized that would just be way too naïve to think. So, I went back to why us. And then I started feeling anxious that my mother hasn't done anything to fight it that I know of. She hasn't gotten surgery or chemo or radiation therapy. Why aren't we fighting this? If we wait for too long, then it will end up spreading even more, right? I felt confused. What is cancer? What does that mean? I knew what my 8th grade biology teacher told me, but I didn't understand anything else. In what ways would this change our lives?

I went back to the room after two solid hours, promising myself I would not cry. I was not the one with cancer, and I had to be strong for my mother. She had to know that at least one of us would be strong for her, and one of us would be there for her to cry to when she needed. I know she has been trying to be strong because she found out in November and told us a month later, but now she doesn't have to pretend. I will be there for her, and that is something I promised myself that day.

Pre-Surgery

I went back to school in January hoping that I could pretend that everything was normal. But activities that were once fun seemed pointless, and conversations I once had with friends seemed like a waste of time. I no longer wanted to plan spirit events for the freshman class or gossip during lunch. So, I found my new home at school: the library, and along with my sanctuary, I found new friends.

I started having conversations with new people I didn't talk to since middle school, and these conversations didn't seem pointless. Moreover, even though these girls hadn't known me since middle school, they could tell something was going on because I wasn't my usual bubbly self. This made me wonder: why didn't my "best friends" who I hung out with every day not notice, but these "friendly" strangers did?

Eventually, I started sitting at these girls' lunch table instead of with my old friends, and made a nice transition to a friendly group where I felt like I was somebody who was valued, who was actually known. These girls became my lifelines, and little did I know that they went through similar experiences with their loved ones. I turned to them for support because they were a judgement-free, non-gossip group who just wanted to make sure I was okay. That was something I needed. A group who cared about me, but was not

part of my family. I needed people to support me who weren't going through what I was going through at the time. But, I also needed people who still understood my situation, and luckily that was them.

I spoke to them about my fear of my mom's surgery and what comes next. They just listened. And with this support, I suddenly felt even more confident to face this crisis head on. I also was able to mask my worries when I was with my mother. I made sure she did not have to worry about my being upset, because I wanted her to know that she could come to me and confide in me if need be.

But, had I not had my group of friends who I confided in, I don't know how helpful of a daughter I would have been to my mother, and, even more so, how I would've lasted at school.

Surgery

It was the day. Surgery. And I was going to school.

My parents both thought it was a good idea for me to not be at home worrying today, and that my friends could distract me from my worries. But they were wrong. How could anyone distract me from worrying and being anxious when my mother's life was literally in someone else's hands?

Every single hour of that surgery I was worried. I texted my dad constantly throughout the school day for updates. I texted my brother constantly throughout the school day to check in and had him checking in on me. As soon as I got home, it still wasn't even over. There were still 6 hours left.

As soon as I got the call that the surgery was over and there was only one minor complication, I let out a minor sigh of relief. But then came another waiting game: waiting for my mother to wake up. I was up that entire night, and refused to go to school the next day.

My mother refused to let us come see her or be in the hospital while she was having surgery, so I just had to rely on my father or grandmother to text me when she woke up.

The next day she did, and that was when I let out a huge sigh of relief.

I just thought: this could be it! They could have gotten all of the cancer, and it could have not spread either, and she could be done. This could be behind us, right? I just kept asking to come visit her, even though I knew the answer would be no. All I wanted to do was see my mother again. I understand that may be odd since I see her every day, and I just saw her the day before her surgery, but after this huge event, I needed to. I craved to feel her embrace, to hear her laughing, to see her smile. I guess that would just have to wait until she's discharged.

At least surgery was finally over, and our fight against cancer had started, potentially beating the cancer indefinitely.

Post-Surgery

My mother came back home, but she did not look like my mother. She had bags under her eyes, she looked emaciated, exhausted, and in excruciating pain. She couldn't walk straight, and had to use a walker and was hunched in a sideways C shape. She couldn't do much – she couldn't sit at the dinner table, or on the couch, or cook with me. She mainly had to lay in bed or on a special chair with lots of pillows.

Every day, I would wait to go home to see her rather than sit in my sixth period Japanese class. I would get picked up by my grandmother or father because my mother couldn't drive, I would rush inside my house, make some tea and a plate of snacks, and I would sit in my mother's room next to her on the bed talking to her. I would tell her about my day, and we would watch an episode of our favorite TV show, Scandal. I would then subsequently comb her hair and braid it. After that, I would play some music for her, and then go rush through my homework so I could spend more time with her later in the evening.

During dinner, I would sometimes ask to sit with her in the room as I didn't like the idea of her eating alone. We would then talk some more, and I would just be so grateful that my mother was still with me and I had moments like these that I

could happily take and spend time with her.

Meanwhile, the entire time I also kept thinking: I hope the surgeons got it all. What if it spread?

Two weeks. In two weeks we would know what the pathology report would say. In the surgery they took some lymph nodes to see if the cancer spread, and if it did, then my mother would need chemotherapy. It takes time to get the report back, so everyone was still holding their breath even though the surgery went well.

I just valued the time I was given, and tried to not ruin that time by worrying about those results. All I wanted was more time, and I would take as much as I could. So I just spent all my time with my mother.

Day of Pathology

The day had finally come. The day that would be an entire game changer of what the future of my family would be like. Would we go on happy as can be that my mother beat the cancer, or would we have to continue to fight because the cancer had spread and the prognosis looks bad?

I stayed home from school that day. I could not have gone through another day acting like everything was okay, when all I wanted to do was scream at the world and hide behind my mother because I was scared. Only, I couldn't do that at home either because I knew my mother was terrified also. I had to be strong for her.

My parents went to the doctor's appointment to find out the results, and of course it took over three hours while they were there. In the meantime, I spent time with my grandmother. We watched movies and TV shows – anything that would keep our minds off the current situation.

Eventually, we just started talking. I started asking my grandma personal questions about what would happen if my mother's cancer hadn't gone away. She would answer as openly as possible. I felt better after talking to my grandma

because someone finally spent time and answered my questions. I was a 15 year old girl, no doctor would answer my questions, they would only answer my parents' and grandmother's questions. I also didn't want to ask my parents questions because that's all they've been hearing outside of the house at these doctor's appointments, so I didn't want to make them talk about cancer all the time in the house too – it was their sanctuary from it.

Finally, the phone rang. I didn't know if I wanted to answer – once I answer this, my whole life could change, my whole family's life could change.

My father was on the line, and he simply told me: let's go out to eat and celebrate tonight. I finally took a deep breath, not knowing I had been holding it in all this time.

My mother beat cancer. That's the best news I've heard in my entire life.

Friends

Before my mother's cancer diagnosis, I envisioned my high school life straight out of "High School Musical." I would take pictures for yearbook, run for class president, and be captain of the soccer team. Her diagnosis changed everything.

Initially, I mourned the loss of my dream high school life, but my new life introduced me to people I never would have been friends with otherwise. After not continuing in student council, yearbook, or soccer, I met people I hadn't spoken with since middle school through volunteering, debate, and lacrosse. I also focused on my community and developing it further.

I became a "granddaughter" to Joan, an ovarian cancer survivor, and a "daughter" to Rina, the head of Bay Area Cancer Connections – a nonprofit organization I became extensively involved with.

My old friends I used to gossip with during lunch and go shopping with on weekends became mere acquaintances. We didn't have much in common anymore because while they all still did those same activities, I found more meaning out of going to Bay Area Cancer Connections events like

their movie nights or support groups.

When I look back, I feel sad that I couldn't develop those friendships further, but at the same time I also smile because my new relationships made me into the person I am today, and my world did not end by changing friend groups and activities. It made me happier and more at peace. It made me feel more at home when my actual home felt like it was crashing down.

Many teenagers try to hide their feelings from their friends, which is perfectly alright if that is what you prefer in your journey. However, it is not the end of the world being open to those who you know will personally care for you. I would have had a completely different journey had I not opened up to my new friends who understood and supported me along the way.

Family

My family represents many different ways people cope with cancer – all of which are completely healthy ways of coping with a life-changing illness.

My mother faced the crisis head-on. She was lost at first, but with the proper support from my father and grandmother, she found stable footing to remain strong. She researched different doctors, met with many, and found the right one for her. She discussed different treatments and types of surgery, and with all the knowledge made an informed decision. Four years after being deemed cancer free, she still keeps up with research to make sure she is doing the right things in terms of her lifestyle to ensure continual health. Once in a while, she does blame herself for the diagnosis based on her previous lifestyle choices, which is definitely not true and she cannot know that with 100% certainty. But, this type of reaction is common. She also now tends to feel more lonely as someone who had cancer and beat it, but still is adapting her lifestyle to ensure it does not come back.

My father faced the crisis in trying to support my mother as much as he could. He went to all the doctor appointments with her, attended extra support group meetings, and tried

ensuring that she had access to everything possible that would help her cope with the cancer. Those resources ranged from yoga to a nutritionist. My father told me that he felt a combination of fear, distress, and sadness. He feared the result and end-game of this cancer, and was overwhelmed with all of the options and possible outcomes. At the same time, he was also sad that this happened to my mother and to our family.

My brother at first came to terms with the cancer as soon as my father told him, and felt angry. He was angry that this happened to our family and my mother, and angry that there was no possible way of knowing earlier and preventing this from happening. But during the treatment he told me he fell into denial. He tried ignoring the situation at home, and spending time with his friends to keep away from the cancer as much as possible.

I felt shock and disbelief when I was first informed about my mother's cancer. I was shocked because I didn't believe that this would ever actually happen. But, I also was in disbelief. I thought that the tests may have been switched, or some other scenario. Once the treatment started, I also faced the cancer head on and did my research through community resources, trying to support my mother in any way possible.

Lifestyle Changes

I thought that once the cancer was gone, that was it. We could get back to our normal lifestyles. I was wrong.

My mother was told that she should stay away from dairy, red meat, and alcohol. She was also told that due to the medicine she was taking, she couldn't have soy or lima beans. We didn't realize how everything basically has one of these ingredients, so we began making a lot of our own food. This change actually helped the whole family become healthier and eat clean.

She was also told to be more active, so she began yoga and going to exercise. I took it upon myself to ensure that she went to exercise or at least was active on a daily basis. This was the best thing I could have ever done because I got to spend at least 30 minutes a day just with her walking in our neighborhood, or going to exercise, or going to a yoga class together.

Besides those two major changes, my mother also could not go back to work full-time. As a result, she started having time to self-explore. She rediscovered her love for photography and cooking, and we had more time we could spend with her.

But, she was told that she should not be in stressful environments, so her not working full-time as an ER doctor was a good decision.

Problematically, the medicines she took actually have many side-effects, one of which makes my mother feel out of it and lost. As a result, she generally must be with a family member all the time. She also easily gets confused, so we must explain different things in an easy, understandable matter.

Overall, a large argument against cancer treatment is that the doctors focus on beating the cancer but don't give enough attention to what comes next, and that is the quality of life of the patient after treatment. Because of these changes, my mother sometimes does feel anger towards even finding the cancer, as it was benign, because she had a better quality of life before.

I, however, am glad we caught it. Obviously, I am not the patient who must make these changes in my life in order to ensure that the cancer does not back, but I am witness to them. It is definitely hard for my mother to make these changes, but with proper support that I try to provide, it definitely helps her remember her restrictions and ensures that she follows them.

Future Worries

Statistics are sometimes the worst.

The doctors told us statistics of the likelihood of her cancer coming back even though she beat it currently, and if she makes it cancer-free for five years then the chance decreases, and 10 years it decreases even more.

If, however, the cancer comes back, the doctor told us the chances of my mother actually beating it were very low. These statistics were giving context as to why she needs to take a certain medication every day for 10 years. This medication has very scary side effects of blood-clots, loss of memory, and others. My mother actually had a tough reaction to the medication for the first two months, but after some time adapted to the side effects. With this medication, the chance of a cancer recurrence decreases compared to not taking the medication.

These statistics, give me reason to worry every single day. Whenever my mother is not well, or feels some pain in the area where her tumor was, I find myself at a loss for words and holding my breath.

However, these statistics also motivate me, I think, to en-

sure that my mother is okay and following all directions and making use of every resource possible. They motivate me to ensure that she goes to her doctor appointments every three months for check-ups. They motivate me to remember that she fought cancer at one point through surgery and her body is fighting cancer every single day trying to make sure it does not come back, and she needs support for that.

Yes, statistics are the worst. But they can give us an idea of what may happen in the future, and help us understand how to minimize the chances of that future happening.

Current Celebrations

Sometimes we forget that my mother fought cancer a few years ago. We forget how scared we all felt that she may not be us the following year. We take for granted that she beat the cancer and that it was luckily benign. But that is worth celebrating.

Every day, I am grateful for the following things:

- My mother beating cancer
- The tumor being benign
- No recurrence yet
- The current medication and healthcare system that has done the research to minimize bad outcomes as much as possible
- Time

I celebrate that my mother beat her cancer. I am thankful that she did not have to endure further therapy through chemo or radiation. I am thankful that she has not had a recurrence. I celebrate that the medical system provided us with the research of the medication that she is currently taking that is actively ensuring that the cancer has the least possible chance of coming back.

Most importantly though, I celebrate the time that I now get to have with my mother. When my mother was first diagnosed, my immediate reaction was why us. But through treatment, I just kept thinking that I wish I had more time with her since I was only 15. Four years later, as a 19 year old, I am thankful every day that I get to hear her voice on the other side of the phone, that she is at the airport when I come home from college, that she is the one I get to spend time with when I come back home.

I don't know if the cancer is going to come back, and I don't know if it isn't. I do know that whatever happens, my mother will fight as much as she can, and my family will support her in the process. I am beyond thankful, blessed, and grateful that my mother beat the first fight against cancer. This time has given us a chance to heal after the cancer and has given us a chance to really be grateful for life and the time we have on this earth. Cancer is definitely not a blessing, but it can be seen in a positive manner after fighting it, and we tried as much as possible to make the best out of a drastic situation.

Thank You

Thank you so much for picking up this book and reading it. I hope that this book helped in some way – whether that was providing insight, information, or a just a chance to heal or feel heard. Many teenagers are forgotten in the process of cancer when their loved one is diagnosed, but they are equally affected psychologically.

Cancer can be a traumatizing time, but with the proper support systems in place, you will survive this and you will help your loved one fight this.

I hope this book illustrated how there are different ways to cope, and how cancer affects different parts of your life.

Thank you for listening to my story.

Love,
Eesha