

Can we get to the part where you tell me I have cancer so we can do something about it? Please?

Yeah.

But I have to back up.

I was 38. Which makes this 10 years ago. Which means I've won, although maybe you can hear the quotes around that word. Because that 5 year Survivor's model? The one that we all hear about over and over. That model is predicated on being 70 when you're diagnosed. Not 38.

So f*ck.

So the part that feels like winning is the part about getting to still be here. Swinging at another day. Doing stuff. Being comfortable with scars.

But I have to back up.

I was 38. He felt it first, actually. We were rolling around on that bed and he felt it. And stopped. And looked at me. And then I stopped. And I felt it. And I looked at him. This was in April of that year.

And so calls to the doctor - *"Hi, this is Karen Merritt, I have a lump in my breast that I'd like to have looked at."* And the receptionist - in a response so smooth I immediately understand she says this to someone every day: "lumps can be many things (*uh huh*) and you shouldn't worry (*um...okay...?*). We can get you in next week (*nod*). It's probably nothing serious."

it's probably nothing serious.

Can we get to the part where you tell me I have cancer so we can do something about it? Please?

And the next part is unexciting. Spectacularly frightening, but unexciting. Because the thing about breast cancer - if you're lucky - is that it's a slow moving train. So April, and then May, and then June, and that endless hurry up and wait and test and retest and drive to Boston for a second opinion and read and think and reread and rethink, and then everything that happens next about scheduling for surgery. And then everything after that that is *treatment*. And it's all spectacularly unexciting. And f*ckin' frightening. Because 38. Because somewhere in there you've realized that in all of the studies that the doctor's are using to figure out the best way to treat you, *there's almost nobody in the studies who looks like you.*

Welcome to the 2nd standard deviation. The outer 5%. Out there on that tail. And when that truth really sinks its way home - that this is happening to *you, now* - that thing that's unexciting but frightening starts screaming in your head. That thing gets loud.

And that bit where they tell you about time standing still when you hear the word *cancer*? That bit doesn't happen. Time ticks over. You put down your phone. You - if you're me - are in grad school and the next thing happening is Partial Differential Equations (with Sergey, who is sexy in a Russian Mathematician sort of way and so who kinda makes your nerdy Tuesday sing). You put down your phone and you walk to class and you start to play that game in your head:

if I can think about [] for the next hour, I'll be okay.

And it starts out being about [*math*], but ends up eventually being about [*all the things that are wonderful that aren't cancer*].

Which ends up making it feel kinda easy, you know? And so you roll on through. Because what else are you going to do?

And later, when your normal settles into its new place - when it's shifted from the old baseline to this new one - it's possible to start spending most days feeling lucky. That I'm still here. That there's still stuff I get to swing at. That after surgeries and radiation and 5 years of medication and all those hours and days and weeks and months of careful PT, that my biggest physical reminder of having had cancer now are these scars.

and the thing about scars is this: *they don't come meet you. you go meet them.*

and yeah, slowly slowly you do.

And f*ck it, you know?

you go meet them
then you get to be a lucky thing.
then you get to keep on living.