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What Are the Odds?

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Author Bio

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What Are the Odds?

Kristyn Turner

Like almost every night, I headed toward my father's workshop in our basement, a realm my mother rarely entered. Against the solid, deep brown door, my eight-year-old hand offered a rather pathetic-sounding knock, like the sound raindrops make when they plop into a thick pile of mud. While the gesture of the knock was there, I never waited for my father's response, knowing that he expected my appearance after my brothers and I had finished cleaning up the assortment of dinner dishes he left behind on the floor above. The door had never quite fit the frame it rests in, so I always had to use a considerable amount of my body weight – what little force my miniscule muscles and tiny frame of my own had to offer – to open the door, tumbling over the threshold like a police officer busting in on a crime scene. Like every other night, my nose was immediately met with the stench of stale cigarettes and the rising aroma of one freshly lit. The smoke that was drifting off the tips of the recently-deceased embers embraced my nostrils, replacing the fresh, clean air that had filled my lungs on the floor above.

I did not need to be able to see through the cloudy smoke to know every inch of the room that was before me. To the left was a disheveled shelf, splattered with paintbrushes, wash pans, and rollers that held up the spare electrical wires and sunspot-colored wire nuts that were at some point carefully placed on top. Under the shelf, a pile of useless tools avalanched toward the center of the floor, barricaded by only a large plastic black case that I assume contained a powerful drill; I never had the desire to check. Standing idly by was the bright red gumball machine, filled to the brim with a polka-dotted rainbow that always felt out of place in the man's man atmosphere of my father's domain. To the right, the workbench stood strong, made of common wood and level two-by-fours, with a thick and muddled slab of some unidentifiable wood on top. Halfway down the bench, part of the cracked and splintering surface was gouged away to reveal the softest and silkiest wood I had ever felt, smoother than the piano keys on a polished Steinway. The wood also glowed a dimly bright yellow from the highlighter I used to color the spot where I had scratched the hard surface away. My seat, with a wicker top and torn cushion matching the burnt sienna crayon in my Crayola collection, sat vacant in front of my impromptu art project and next to the identical, though less wobbly, chair

that was my father's throne.

As my father effortlessly shuffled the blue Royal card deck, I klutzily climbed onto my seat: the squeaky old barstool. As I settled in, so did the cards. Four piles of six were positioned face down in a cockeyed square that took up the surface of the workbench, resting between the edge where my father and I sat and his hand-painted miniature mystical figurines against the wall. I remember being captivated by those tiny men when I was even younger, amazed the day my father gave me a woman warrior of my own to paint, allowing me to slash her outfit with blues and purples as she prepared to slay the dragon my father crafted. The magical creatures watched intently as I picked up my hand and my father his, and the game of high-low-jack began.

With only two physical players, a bystander would gaze curiously at the other two piles left untouched, with the faces of their cards still staring into the shadowy abyss that would be their view of the workbench. High-low-jack is a game of strategy and luck, and having a blind partner adds greatly to the luck element. Since my dad was the dealer, I had to call the first bet, and I hesitantly went with Diamonds for two. My father quickly countered with Spades for three, and with no spades in my hand, I was compelled to make the highest bet possible, four with Diamonds as trump. While my father had the upper hand of wisdom and years of card playing experience on his side, I seemed to always have the better partner on my side. I liked to believe it was because I named my partner while my father left his as unidentified as a backcountry road in the middle of Massachusetts. The score was currently 10-8 in his favor, leaving him with one point to win and me needing all four points available in this round. To my nonstrategic surprise and my father's dismay, with the final game point on the line, my partner flipped the Queen of Spades, followed by my father's partner throwing a four of Clubs. I collected the ten and, with it, the fourth and final point of the round, leaving the notepad in front of me with more bars than a jail cell, ten on my father's side and the victorious twelve on mine.

Each night, my father and I would play three or four games of high-low-jack, most of them ending the same as that round. Hours every night, I would be down in that basement with him, my partner and I kicking his butt, while he lit up another cigarette to calm his easily wavering nerves. Truth be told, my father is as good at losing as Mike Tyson is at not eating his opponent's ears. Depending on the season, one sports game or another would be on in the background, and touchdowns and homeruns would cause a pause in the game and a surge of celebrations, while interceptions and errors would lead to another flick of the lighter and sparkle of flames in the tip of those Marlboro Reds. Every night he had multiple excuses to

take another drag from the cigarette that dangled from his lips, and every night he lit up; I never once worried about the side effects laying their eggs for the future. Health class said smoking was bad, but nothing ever felt wrong about the time I spent with my dad in the basement. It was our playground and where our father-daughter bond really sprouted, out of the ashes and flames, into something pure and beautiful.

Unfortunately, my health teacher was not all wrong with the pamphlets she handed out to me in my third grade class. Two months ago, I was at Buffalo Wild Wings in Malvern, Pennsylvania, with my friend Matt. It was just about 8:30 p.m. when 'The Office' theme song sang from my pocket, lighting up my jeans like E.T.'s finger through a blanket fort. 'Parent's Cell' glowed across the screen and as soon as I answered, my father's voice came apprehensively across the sound waves. "Are you sitting down?" I immediately froze, feeling nothing but the beating of my own heart, pounding against the thoughts afraid to race across my mind. For a moment, I was lost in my simple response of "yes." I know my father, and I know it is not a good sign if that is how he chooses to start a conversation. In the silence, I could hear him trying to find the words to tell me what my thoughts couldn't quite put together. I knew something had to be wrong, but I couldn't imagine what. All three of my living grandparents have been fine. My older brother's lungs collapsed five years ago, but there haven't been any relapses since, and my younger brother's Crohn's disease hasn't been a great life-altering issue since he was diagnosed two years ago. My father had a heart attack a few months back, but if that were the issue, it would be my mother's voice on the other side of this conversation, not his.

When my dad's voice came back over the phone, he told me that my mom was in an ambulance being rushed to the hospital while he trailed behind in his charcoal, manual Mitsubishi. Unknown to me, my mother had had a bad cough for about a month, and on that night, it turned into a searing red cough, with blood spewing from her mouth. No one was home with my mom when this was happening, and she hasn't gone into detail about that day yet, so I still don't know exactly how much blood came gushing up with her hacking cough. At about two a.m. that night, my father called me from the hospital with what little information he had: my mom was resting comfortably and the blood had been at least temporarily stopped. With what little he knew, he still managed to keep some facts from me, not telling me until a week later that she was in the ICU and had been admitted in critical condition. That night, I was already concerned for my mother's life, and even now, I can only imagine how much more terrified I would have been if my father had trusted me to handle the truth.

For days, my father sat by her in the hospital, like a dog loyally guarding his post, playing liaison between the doctors and friends and

family members. When he would find time to call, his voice would sound lost in the distance as he muttered one wrong diagnosis or another, never remembering the twelve-letter scientific words that kept sailing into one ear and floating out the other on the hot air coming from the mouths cloaked in white jackets. I would get one story from him and another from my mom's friend, who he had just called minutes before me. Every time I would ask a question, hope for some clarification, frustration would cut across the phone lines. He didn't have the answers, he wasn't sure of the situation, he could only guess at the severity, and I felt guilty for making him recognize this. I was always the one he could talk to about anything, and now we failed at any attempt at a real conversation. While we both relied on each other for friendship and understanding, I never realized how much we both relied on my mother for support and stability. While he never admitted it, I could hear the fear and uncertainty in his voice, and I could feel the fear and uncertainty growing in me with the absence of my mother's voice.

A biopsy is when surgeons stick microscopic tools down my mother's throat to remove cells from the unidentified floating object in my mother's right lung. They saw it on an X-ray and looked closer during a CAT scan. According to my mother, the first two sounds that buzz in your ear are almost indifferent, barely intruding on the Beatles album playing through her MP3 player. The third sound during the final scan, however, is worse than sitting inside the siren on the fire truck, or holding the fire alarm they are responding to next to your ear. When the biopsy came back after the CAT scan, the results were inconclusive, and my father and I were left in the dark for another three days until they could schedule another biopsy.

Sometimes people are just unlucky, which was the new diagnosis after the second biopsy. As of 2004, lung cancer caused the most cancer-related deaths worldwide, 1.3 million. Out of those diagnosed with lung cancer, 85% of the patients developed cancer from years of smoking. Of the remaining 15%, a good portion is still caused from secondhand smoke. There is a rare genetic malfunction in some peoples' immune system, almost like an allergy, when mold or fungus cannot be properly handled and broken down by the lungs when it has been inhaled. This is so uncommon that it hasn't even been named yet, and the results suggested my mom had such a condition. Three out of the four new samples also came back inconclusive, but there was mold residue in the final sample. There was a slight relief in my father's voice when he explained this diagnosis to me. The solution was simple, a quick operation to remove the lump, and no more composting and gardening for my mother. After two days, however, my mom was one of the few people who are even more rarely unlucky.

Out of all forms of lung cancer, a carcinoid makes up 0.8% of the diagnoses, and that is what my mother had, a neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid that appeared to be four centimeters large in the middle lobe of her right lung. By this point, the artery that flowed into my mother's lung was cauterized to prevent any further bloody coughing episodes. The leak of the artery still hasn't been explained, but the doctors, in their vast wisdom, have guessed that the mass simply irritated the interior of her lung, which tore part of the artery. With the lump identified and an attempt at explaining the bleeding, my family and I were just left wondering what a neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid was and where that came from. If you break down the three-word mouthful, neuroendocrine cells receive messages from nerves and release hormones into the bloodstream. Neoplasm is a fancy word for tumor, and carcinoid is a redundant word that means a tumor made from neuroendocrine cells and provides a little bit of hope that the tumor is benign, since carcinoma tumors are the ones usually carrying the evil malignant nametag. The odds of my mother developing this rare form of lung cancer, the gathering of her neuroendocrine cells that is in no way related to exposure to cigarette smoke, are so minuscule I don't think I could make up a number to give you. It's the odds of you walking into a restaurant in China and finding your long lost twin brother at one table, and the puppy that ran away when you were three sitting at the table across from him. Add to that the probability of my mother getting lung cancer over me and my father: the two who sat surrounded by a Marlboro smokestack every night for almost 15 years.

I could hear the guilt in my father's voice when the tumor was confirmed, and it was paralleled by the amazement and astonishment in my hesitant questions that received wavering answers. My mother was finally diagnosed on August 6, 2011, with the neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid, and I went back to Massachusetts on August 8 to prepare for her surgery, which we thought would be on my brother's birthday, August 12. The odds of me being in the hospital for most of my week home was already pretty good with my mother going in for a consultation on the tenth, but to my surprise, I went to the hospital before I even got home since my dad was admitted the Saturday before because of a second heart attack scare. Like with my mother's condition when first admitted to the hospital, my father's current residence in the hospital was also kept from me. His smoking didn't cause my mom's lung cancer, but by mixing that pastime with drinking and sports rage, he suffered from a heart attack in May 2011. The stress of my mother's condition led to what he believed was another attack. My family finally caught a lucky break; it was just a case of an open esophagus flap that led to an extreme case of acid reflux and heartburn. After everything going on with my mom, I wasn't sure I could

handle my father being in the hospital as well. I already worked as hard as I could to be the glue that held my crippling family together, but one more wrong thing would probably have broken me past the point of repair. With so much already going on, getting the simple and easy diagnosis for my father was the smallest blessing we could have hoped for.

We got my dad out of the hospital in time for my mother's consultation, which gave us the news that her surgery was pushed back five days, meaning I wouldn't be at home to help out anymore. I left three days before the surgery; my father was restored enough to be my mother's crutch, as the fear was apparent more in her eyes than her voice, which was already weak from the tubes that had previously invaded her. As I packed up the car and drove away, I thought about the past week I had spent with my family, watching my mother through the rearview mirror waving with what little strength she had. All week she pretended to be strong, never acting like something was mutating and growing inside her, invading her body. It was as if I was home for a normal visit, with nothing wrong. The closest she ever came to a visible crumbling was the night my brother told her he was going to hang out with his friends instead of spending what could be our last night together as a family. It was only then that I saw how much she needed all of us to support her, just as much as my father and I unknowingly needed her to support us. It was only then that I knew she was afraid this invasive surgery could end her life. To remove the tumor, the doctors were planning on cracking open her chest and dissecting part of her lung. With her mother being a retired physical therapist, she knew how medical mistakes could cause permanent damage and end a life. In my family, we don't talk about emotions; we don't show fear. It is all considered weak. That one moment with my brother was the only glimpse my mother showed of breaking this cardinal law, the only moment in this entire experience that she showed me how terrifying this was for her, and for all of us.

The right lung is bigger than the left lung because of the position of the human heart. The right lung consists of an upper, middle, and lower lobe, while the left lung only has an upper and lower lobe. My mother's tumor was on the middle lobe, but the doctors were optimistic that they could maneuver around and remove the tumor with minimal removal of her actual lung. Surgery day came and went while I sat in my Gettysburg dorm room waiting for the call. It turned out the mass was much bigger than the surgeons anticipated, invading the entire middle lobe, as well as portions of the upper and lower lobe. It turned out they had to remove her entire right lung to ensure they got all parts of the tumor removed.

My father smoked cigarettes for almost three-quarters of his life, and in my efforts to spend as much time as possible with him, I second-

hand smoked for almost ninety percent of my life, and today, because of the luck of human genetics and the twisted fate of nature, my mom is walking around with one lung while my father and I can live fully-functional lives. We can both walk up and down stairs without exasperated breath, we can lift heavy objects without feeling faint, and neither of us had to drive down to North Carolina for two weeks to live with my grandmother, who was a medical assistant and physical therapist before she had grandchildren. According to the medical world, there isn't even an answer for the tempting question: what are the odds?