

## *One*

### **Opening Moments**

Pasta and veal for Thanksgiving? Certainly not usual for me. But in Sicily, the meal tasted heavenly as we toasted to abundance that day.

The voyage to celebrate Pops' 80th birthday began a couple weeks earlier, flying to Rome and driving our way south. His parents were born in Sicily, and the pilgrimage to visit their birth towns was new for my husband, Richard, and me. For Pops it was a return to family roots, and to taste again some special stops he had shared with my mother just a few years ago before she died. The city of Agrigento was one of her favorites, he told us, sitting among the parade of ruins awash in autumn sun. I could feel her there, and I knew why she loved it. For a few hours, I walked paths so old that I started to imagine my feet in Greek sandals. And I realized I was imprinting the earth too, in my own way, by taking up the walk.

Our last week took us outside Catania, a citrus farm where visitors lucky enough to find the place can rent outbuilding rooms. It felt like home. Only better. Simple, natural, unhurried, unlocked. The cloth on the kitchen table was clean but faded, much like one in my

## STONES AT THE CROSSING

grandmother's kitchen decades ago. In the center of the table, a large wooden bowl held some of the early crop of oranges freshly picked for us, along with a couple apples and one pomegranate, locally grown. *This is going to be just fine*, I knew, as I drew up my list for the grocery, next hill town over, at the foot of Etna.

One afternoon, the only one not napping, I sat myself in that kitchen, and picked up the pomegranate and a small paring knife. I recalled from my childhood how painstaking a process it is to get through the tough outer skin to the bitter inner membranes protecting the rich red insides. It was always worth the wait. I also recalled that as good-for-you as it was, this fruit burst forth and stained whatever it touched. That called for readying--an apron, newspaper to spread, and plenty of patience.

I opened out the top half of the door at the end of the table. My view through that window, a straight screenless shot to thick rows of orange trees, just out of reach. Every now and then a whiff of blossom made its way to my nostrils. Squinting hard, I could see the volcano's white summit yielding plumes of light smoke. It was a picture. Still life. And I was honored to be present in its midst.

Carefully I peeled in silence, with no hurried edge, no racing thought, no to-do list clamoring for a checkmark. While on the plane, I had read a story about someone asking the Dalai Lama to name his favorite of the many numinous moments he experienced. "Ah, this moment," he was reported to have answered. I got it now. At this table, with this pomegranate in hand. I vowed then and there to give myself more of these moments and to notice them with the relaxed awareness and focused ease I knew right here. Chunk by chunk, bit by bit, the arils were freed

## OPENING MOMENTS

into my bowl, and my hand color testified to the labor. Time seemed to extend itself, protecting this space from interruption. When finished, I paused to savor. The mound of fruit would be shared, covering removed, freed.

When it came time for dessert that night, what would seem like an ordinary seasonal treat tasted unusually sweet to me. An extraordinary afternoon communion.



### Pomegranate Moment Redux

Six weeks after returning home from Sicily, I felt the lump in my left breast. I was talking on the phone with my cousin, right hand tucked under my left armpit. My right palm moved just so and rolled atop a mass. Surely I pulled a muscle when exercising. Surely I would have felt something when I last examined myself. Surely distracted, I tried to focus on the conversation at hand--an update on

her mother's cancer prognosis, her mother who shared my birthday and who had been like a second mother to me.

It took two days and a cancellation to get in for a late Friday afternoon mammogram and ultrasound. "I'll back you up with an appointment with a surgeon on Monday, just in case you need a biopsy," my gynecologist offered. Heart pumping hard, I drove home, and entered the endurance test of waiting. For the most part, the C-word stayed back of mind. I felt perfectly healthy. I exercised, ate well, slept. I had complained to my husband of being more tired than usual the past few months, but we both chalked it up to weekly travel, intense engagements with clients, working extra hard to clear the plate for the Sicily trip, the toll of jet lag, holiday rush. Just the weekend before I had cheered my niece who was performing in New York and walked her legs off on her first visit to the city. Tired was well-deserved.

Monday afternoon came way too slowly and way too fast. Richard stayed in the waiting room when I was called. Shortly after the nurse took my vitals, the surgeon walked in carrying my ultrasound pictures. I could tell by the look on his face that this wasn't going to be good. He immediately asked if my husband were with me, and Richard was summoned. "I'm so sorry to put you through this," I whispered to him.

I can't tell you much about what the surgeon said before he prepared me for the punch biopsy. All I heard was 'probable cancer'; he would have a better sense after the procedure. I don't know how many painful punches later, I sat up and tried to breathe in whatever normal breath I could free. An MRI was scheduled; I got dressed. I had to ask the nurse to write down the instructions for how to

care for the biopsied breast. All words had washed through the sieve my brain became.

That night was one of the longest of my life, everything surreal. Tears stuck deep inside, until like a volcano they erupted and flowed and flowed and flowed. After what seemed like hours of alternating between wanting to be held and wanting to be left alone, I emerged from my home office and walked into the kitchen. The most normal thing I could do was to prepare dinner. This was a life rhythm that was familiar, a treat at least on the weekends when I was home to cook. I picked up my favorite paring knife and the bag of fresh okra I bought at the farmer's market just two days before.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, all senses on full alert: the rhythmic movement of the knife in my hand; pausing to watch an egret patiently stalking outside the kitchen window. In the silence, I could hear each segment of okra lightly plop into the nest of seasoned cornmeal in my bowl. And then I stopped. Cutting the okra brought back the vivid image of peeling the pomegranate. *Ah, this moment*, I remembered. A simple mindful act then and now served as food for my soul. I found in that moment a new hope: I could focus on the moment I was in, and enjoy that, and that would be enough. It was the life I had, still with me in it. Later that night I honestly had the thought: *Whatever time I have left, I will pay full attention.*

I won't tell you the week was easy. The confirmation of breast cancer cannot do anything but change everything. But I will say that when invited in, memories of peaceful moments and words that once moved me created oases of calm.

**Present with My Lens**

The weekend after my cancer diagnosis, Richard and I walked through Brookgreen Gardens, a several-thousand-acre feast of sculpture and nature three miles north of where we live. We chose to visit this place of magnificent beauty to distract ourselves from the ever-present but unvoiced questions about how much time we had left together. That weekend the National Sculpture Society Award winners were exhibited in two indoor galleries. From here, the exhibit would travel to New York.

I opened one glass gallery door and stopped in my tracks. To my immediate right stood a bronze female nude, my height, with her right hand on her left breast, thumb exactly at the spot where my tumor was. I struggled to breathe as I took in the power of this piece and the enormity of the coincidence. We moved slowly from sculpture to sculpture.

The subjects called to me: "I Am." "Waiting." "Expectations." "Grief." "Journey." "One Moment in a Waking Life."

Such true and intimate revelations the sculptors created! The timing of this exhibit, as though it were here just for me, as though these were companions of sorts, astounded me. Surreal. Heart-wrenching. Perfect. Whatever fragments of denial I had been harboring about the path before me vanished; these pieces testified that what lay ahead would be no ordinary piece of work.

I didn't take any photographs that afternoon, but a few days later I returned to pay my respects with my lens. I studied the pieces from different angles, capturing shadow and light. In visits over the next several weeks,

I faced each sculpture, shared a language that did not need words. I showed up and noticed: a familiar tilt of torso, a new line in a forehead, the weight of hunched shoulders, a hint of knowing smile. My experience was mapped in these forms; my photographs bore witness. The exhibit closed the day before my surgery.



*"I AM." Sculptor: Ted Flicker*

I decided to use these photographs to start a journal without words. These images, and those to follow, would do the speaking, as they had done in the galleries.

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The presence of the sculptures fortified me. The sculptors truly knew the territory. These figures in bronze and stone, too, held a story. Experience became memorialized in something tangible, lasting, shared, that claimed, in effect, “I was standing where you are, walking this same path, and here is my learning.”

With my cancer diagnosis, I lost my bearings. I forgot what in me I could count on. I lost confidence in my body. I blamed myself for neglect. I feared for what else I would lose. There could be a lot of new work to do and I worried: *Am I up for this?*

Now, my turn to decide whether and how to navigate this passage. I would keep my eyes open across the landscape to find what other markers might give light to the way.

## *Two* **It Starts Here, Now**

Just after my diagnosis, the head of an ecumenical quilt ministry at my church surprised me with a visit. She held in her arms a small quilt the women had made, each square knotted in the middle, and with each knot, a collective prayer for healing. The makers signed the back; some wrote personal messages.

I felt honored, but declined the gift, “Thank you for thinking I would need this, but I am ok; save this for someone who really needs it.” I honestly believed what I said. I expected to have my lump removed, and to soon recover and return to normal life. Somehow seeing myself as qualifying for a quilt signaled a seriousness I was not ready for.

I was persuaded to at least hold onto it through my surgery. I took the quilt from her, mainly to not disappoint or seem ungrateful for the effort. So for a few weeks my cats nestled with me on it. I meditated with it covering my lap. I slept under it.

After surgery, learning that the cancer spread to lymph nodes, I knew I was in for a larger ordeal. Grateful for that quilt, I wrapped it around me instead of my denial.