

In an instant

Maya Armstrong

The author is a member of the Class of 2018 at The Ohio State University College of Medicine. This essay won third place in the 2015 Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Competition.

You were with her today at the oncologist's office. She already had a lump removed and found out that she's positive for BRCA2. In an instant, her life was changed, and soon she had a full hysterectomy. Her uterus is gone. Her ovaries are gone. The surgery was done using a robot. The incisions were minor. Those wounds will heal. Harder to say about the rest of her, which is why I'm glad that you were there.

For most of the visit, you didn't seem engaged. I couldn't tell whether you were bored or stunned or just had your mind on other things. You probably wished that you were anywhere else in the world but there. I can't say that I blame you. But then there was the moment when you joked (sort of) about her mood swings. She had brought them up—playfully enough to partially mask her anxiety—and you gave her a look that said, “Don't blame your mood swings on the cancer.” But somehow in that look, there was also a tenderness...an understanding that nobody's perfect, and we're all just doing the best that we can.

But the part that really got me (the part that almost made me cry) came a little later. She was talking about her younger, wilder years. You smiled at that. Maybe you knew her then. Maybe you didn't, but I could tell that you could picture it—and you approved. But that wasn't it either.

She might be getting a double mastectomy. She won't find out for another month or so when she goes to see the surgeon. Another surgery. Another defining part of her female anatomy potentially being sliced away. And she was talking about the reconstruction as if it were already a done deal—and that she wanted to show her scars proudly—maybe not as proudly as she had once flashed her bodacious ta-tas, but she could still be sexy after all...Right?

That was when you did it. The look was so spontaneous, so tender and sincere. In an instant, it gave you away—told the secret of your love for her feisty spirit and of your fear that that very feistiness might be extinguished before your eyes.

I don't know if she saw the look, but I hope she did. And I hope that you are able to tell her...even when she's being emotional or bossy or stressed out beyond belief... that you love her fire—and that you'll tend it for her... keep the embers glowing even on days when she can't remember what it was like to be so carefree and full of life. I hope it doesn't come to that. I hope that the two of you spend the rest of your days laughing in cancer's face and celebrating your victory. But most likely there will be days (there usually are) when fear and uncertainty will get the best of her—and it may come out in some pretty ugly ways. When that happens, just take her in your arms and look into her eyes and tell her that she's got really gorgeous tits...but that they do not compare to the beauty that she has added to your life.

About Maya Armstrong

My circuitous route to medical school took me through graduate studies in the tropics; a cancer research laboratory in Boston; teaching in impoverished colonias in Mexico; and experiments in creativity in the Nevada desert. I've been a volunteer coordinator, a writer/editor, and even a massage therapist—all of which have, in their many strange and wonderful ways, led me to medical school at The Ohio State University, where I am in my second year.

