

## *The Things that are to Come*

For about three seconds there will be a heaviness in the air that will press against my shoulders. Three ticks of the analog clock before the life I had will cease forever. My three seconds will sound like the slight hum and flicker of the yellowed fluorescent lights above us, the doctor carefully closing the door behind him as he clears his throat in a polite yet authoritative way. It will also make the noise of the nurse's worn Keds scuffling across the linoleum floor and her pen scratching across the page, quietly. It will smell like latex gloves and rubbing alcohol, a scent that tries to murder all scents. It will look like the doctor scratching the end of his nose, the nurse pushing her long bangs behind her ears. It will taste like the stale Happy Meal fries I shared with Lucas at noon, the salty preservatives will still be sitting on my wisdom teeth. And it will feel like pressure...pressure, like gravity has a vendetta against us and soon it will be time to pay. So many senses will fill those three seconds, and all will be in tune with my body at that moment.

The poison will not have reached my ears yet, but I will already feel the effects. Somehow, I will see the dripping venom on the dipped arrow before it reached my lobes. The doctor will open his mouth, and the arrow will be released.

I will feel the first sting of searing pain with the words, "We ran the tests, and we found something troublesome." I will experience the first gasp of agonizing breath be released from my lungs with the sentence, "The white blood cell count was very high." Then the tremble of my bones come from the venom attacking my heart, "Acute Leukemia."

I will steal a glance at Lucas who will be playing on the floor in the corner with his three wooden cars. He will stare back at me with his light blue eyes behind his black, oversized frames and then turn his attention back to the cars. His nonchalant look will tell me that he has no clue what is being discussed. Good. But as much as I want to, I won't be able to keep it hidden from him forever.

Today is supposed to be just a normal checkup. Lucas is starting kindergarten next week and needed his physical and booster shot. Perhaps I shouldn't mention the purple bumps on the side of his neck to the doctor. He never complained that they hurt. But he did complain about his "bones hurting." He started eating less and sweating more at night. These past two weeks he started to have slight fevers every now and then. I thought it was the flu. The worst trauma that is supposed to happen today is perhaps a few tears and screams over the shot and maybe a flu diagnosis. A normal, expected, mundane checkup. It should end with a sticker and the promise of a Sesame Street episode. What blessings of normal, expected, and mundane activities suddenly become once they disappear.

The doctor will say to come back Thursday for more tests to see what treatment to use. He will be worried that it is spreading fast and furiously, and the sooner we start the remission process the better. At least Lucas will be able to attend his first day of school, the doctor granted him that. But he won't even give him a sticker.

Driving home, I will feel like a sinking dumbbell, like the sun patches through the leaves in the trees above us is the last sunlight I will ever see. At a red light I will tilt my head toward the sunroof and felt the warm light spill across my face, taking in this last, precious light. At the next red light, I will inhale deeply, the Agent Orange of silence will rob me of the oxygen I once knew. I will fight off the toxins by turning on the CD player where the Disney mix CD idly sits. The lyrics to "Hakuna Matata," will pour out from the small speakers. I will watch Lucas smile from the rearview mirror, and I will feign one back at him. No worries, the song explained. The

tune will inflict my heart with hatred. I will switch it to the next song, “A Whole New World.” Nope, not today. Next, “Circle of Life.” Not a chance. Finally, I will settle on “You Got a Friend in Me,” from Toy Story. That’ll do. Lucas will not ask questions or whine, just silently stare out the window, as always.

In the reticence of the drive home my mind will go a future place, the place of what will soon be. I will soon know these things that are to come:

Tonight’s dinner. Robert will enter the front door while Lucas runs ecstatically into his arms. I will be cursing the lasagna that decided to burn on the edges. Lucas will help Robert set the table while I pour the ice water. We will sit, say a blessing, and Robert will ask how the appointment went.

“Fine,” I will lie, but he will notice the real truth sitting inside my eyes. He will give me that “Okay, we need to talk soon,” gaze in response, our telepathy relaying between our corneas throughout the hushed meal.

“It was just supposed to be a regular checkup!” he will yell later that night, wrathfully overturning the kitchen chair he sat in just hours before. Hot tears will stream down my burning cheeks. Lucas will wake up, worried and scared about why he thought we were fighting. He will come downstairs. We will have to tell him.

The shutter of my Nikon will open and close at least a hundred times that Monday, capturing his first day of school. He will wear his new Spiderman backpack upon his shoulders and a Phillies shirt that Robert gifted him. I will memorize the way his red freckles peak from below his glasses, the small gap in between his front baby teeth, and his cute, blond cowlick in front of his forehead. His father will lead him to the bus, the driver motioning him that it is ok to leave now when Robert overstays his welcome at the doors.

Robert and I will say nothing as we head back to the house. We will both take the day off work to see Lucas off and to peer over his medical test results in secret. The cancer moving through our son’s body will be traveling wild and viciously. We will have to start treatment the next day. At least he had one day at school, and we will thank the Good Lord when it’s a good one.

The next few months I will become very acquainted with my new residency inside the Children’s Hospital halls. I will memorize the gaps between the linoleum tiles, how many steps it took from the fifth floor elevator to Lucas’s new room (forty-eight, if I don’t drag my feet on the bad days.) Lucas will never reveal to us if he tolerates his new room, absent of its Spiderman poster, his Finding Nemo sheets, his stuffed beagle Max and the Hot Wheels track mountain in the corner. It will all be traded in for lifeless, colorless sheets, a nurses’ chart on the wall, an IV machine in place of the Hot Wheels Mountain and tubes and cords to comfort him. We will come to our senses to eventually bring Max and still read to him his favorite books. How could we have a bedtime routine without including the Bernstein Bears?

Robert will hold me in his arms one night as we reminisce how our story with Lucas began: the months before of appointments, paperwork, classes and parenting books, all in preparation for April 10. The sun rose like any other day, but it glowed differently for us that day. We scrambled to the hospital in excitement and nervousness, and we both fell in love at first sight with him. A 19-year-old was cradling our son in her arms. He was quiet, perfect. Always and still. She smiled at us and handed him into Robert’s arms first, tears hazing all of our eyes. Robert and I will be tearing up again.

The second remission attempt will go well enough to take Lucas to church one last time. He will be baptized on Christmas. He will belt out the “GLO----OOO---OOO---OOORIA!” part

in “Angels We Have Heard on High” so loud half the congregation will burst out in a fit of laughs. We will go greatly overboard on buying many expensive gifts that he may never use wrapped in the most elaborate wrapping paper Hallmark could supply. But his favorite gift? It will be a stripped, knit cap his great-grandmother will make for him to keep his bald head immune from the cold. I will cry again.

Then it will happen. On the same day. The news from the doctors will go from bad to horrendous, and he will ask Robert about Heaven. “Of course Great Grandpa will be there,” Robert will say. Of course his disease is much too fast to cure. “Of course God and the angels will be there.” Of course his illness has to be a terrorizing killing machine, turning his own blood and bones against him. “Of course you won’t go there yet! You will win this!” Of course Daddy is probably lying. Of course of course of course....!

I will grow tired knowing that my son is being cooed to sleep by the whispers of nurses at their stations and the beeps of machines. So I will begin to sing to him lullabies again instead, every night. I will still be in my hiatus from work to be with him for every moment, no longer worrying about the money I will lose from my lack of presence there. We will throw in all the money we have, take out a third mortgage on the house and sell our second car for his recovery that will never come. We will begin to care nothing more of money.

I will make sure that he says his prayers at night and give me a good night kiss. No, two. I will need extra to get me by a little longer. I will need something more to hold onto, so I will hold onto his extra kiss.

The day before he will be crying and throwing fits of rage at his pain. I will beg the doctors to increase his dosage of pain killers but even so his frustration will not seem to end, because it will no longer pain of the bones; it will be pain of the soul, because he won’t want to leave yet. I will constantly plead with God for a miracle.

Robert will try to calm him and I will wait outside the room on a bench, praying and weeping to God so fervently to have me take the disease instead. I will go to the support group that night again. There will be another woman whose son has the same condition. She will announce that his remission went very well and he should soon be completely cured. Her son will go home soon. The other parents will congratulate her. I will hate her. I will hate her so much.

The next day I will put in an order for a red and blue casket and flowers- Spiderman’s colors. The coffin will be so small. After I hang up the phone I will yell that there should never be a reason to make caskets so small. The nurses will strip off his sheets and clean the room for a new sick child, probably a luckier one. Robert will stumble through tears in his words of the eulogy and I will have to shake a hundred people’s germ-infested hands as they say how sorry they are. I won’t want to touch them. I won’t want to hear them. I will just want to curl up next to his coffin and sleep, holding his still, cold hand in my slumber one last time, pretending that this nightmare will end, and his little hand will be warm again, and he will say “Mommy?” once more to me.

The only person I will want to see that day will show up, against all my preconceived notions that she will not. Robert will mumble that it was a mistake to call her, to let her know, that I did a silly thing contacting her and inviting her to the funeral. But seeing Lucas’s blonde hair and light red freckles in her face will be a strange comfort to me. She will choke out an “I’m so sorry,” to us and we will embrace, our warm tears of both of his mothers falling together in the same plot of snowy dirt.

Robert and I will drive through the February sleet from the cemetery in silence. It will cross my mind that today is Valentine's Day. That will be my only thought that day and for many days later void of my son.

Three weeks later I will go back to work. It will be a mistake. I will only be there for a week before my coworker Garrett triggers my temper. I will be standing at the fridge at break, still unsure if I really want to eat or not, while he pours himself a cup of coffee.

"You know, it's truly a terrible thing what happened to your son, and I am really sorry again," he will say. "But at least he wasn't really your own... I mean you can always adopt another one..."

His insensitivity towards my fragility and my dead son will turn the blood coursing through my veins into sheer wrath. I will tear him to shreds for treating my son like a disposable life. I will yell about how he thinks that just because Lucas did not come into this world from my own womb that he meant less to us than a child who had, and how dare he downplay my grief as unjustified and think that my son could ever be replaced by another?

These things and more I will scream mercilessly to him, his green eyes will be wide in panic and he will back up into his office chair, stumbling over it and spilling Folger's all over the front of his button-up, baby blue shirt. Our coworkers will stare silently at us in the office, their eyebrows judging me from my otherwise inappropriate and uncharacteristic outburst.

My boss will quietly dismiss me to go home and take some more time off until I feel ready. But I will decide that I will never feel ready. Robert and I will be on the heels of bankruptcy from Lucas's illness and funeral costs, but I would think what is another mountain of useless debt to us anymore, anyways?

My family will cause the burn in my heart to flame harder by their absence. They will only say scripted phrases and clever excuses. They will not know how to handle this new, injured animal that I will become. Instead of trying to hold me in their arms and heal me, they will keep what they feel is a healthy distance away, treating me like I am a carrier pigeon for the next terrible epidemic.

The story of my life will then be broken up into two parts: The Before and The After. There will always be an empty chair, an added silence, another Christmas without him. Lucas's departure from this planet will bring a ravine between myself and the family I once tried to defend and forgive before. It will bring a lifelong friendship with my former coworker Wendy, who was once an acquaintance but will show to be the greatest friend I will have at my most painful, vulnerable state. The agony of living without our son will drive a wedge between my husband and I from not being able to communicate our shared pain. We will separate for three months before realizing how insane we are to think that we can carry on our lives without him and each other, too.

Days will slowly *-slowly-* turn into months. There will still be reminders, all of the time. The empty swings on the playground, a Dr. Seuss rhyme without an echo, little shoes absent of feet.

My anger will swell and subside like waves upon a shore. Robert and I will be in the congregation the day the pastor announces the news that Ida Winchell has fully recovered from her cancer and is back at home with her family. He will go on and on about the power of prayer, the congregation will clap and clap in congratulations to the saved life. Ida will defeat death at 65 for a second chance, Lucas couldn't even bargain for six. I will argue that we begged God just as much to save Lucas as her family and friends did for her. I will question God on why he will spare her but not my son, and what we did wrong.

I will go into a nearby gas station to pay for fuel and a pack of spearmint gum when a flyer will catch my eye. It will have a picture of a smiling, little girl connected to tubes and wires, a look I will become all too familiar with. It will advertise a benefit for her behalf, with beer and live music from a local band, corn-hole competitions and a silent auction to raise money for her treatment and defraying the medical cost for the family. I will think about how a benefit could have helped us keep the house and avoid paying for all the chemotherapy treatments done in vain, and try not to be bitter about it.

I will learn to live my life as it was before- before I had to remind myself to keep Hostess cakes in the house because they were his favorite treats. We will no longer need to budget Pull-Ups into the grocery bill to save him from a wet, embarrassing morning from forgetting to head to the bathroom at 3 AM. I will not have to call out into the house for him to pick up an abandoned Lego after one crushes the skin of my bare foot. Simple yet treasured discussions like why he liked soccer more than basketball (the net was lower, he would say) or why he thinks that Jesus looks like Robert's father (the brown beard), will only be heard on replay in memories. We will only hear his hilarious impressions of Elvis in old iPhone videos and see his freckled dimples in photographs.

The years will go by and Robert and I will find a way somehow to smile again, ching-chinging wine glasses across a candlelit table at our favorite Italian restaurants. Only once will we discuss adopting once more, and then never bring it up again. After infertility and a child lost to a disease, we will sorrowfully accept that maybe we are never meant to be parents. We will try telling ourselves that maybe Lucas was our one chance to have the light of a child in our lives, and perhaps him leaving us so soon just makes him even more precious.

Today will mark the last day of Lucas's life before his descent into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But I will no longer think about the things that are to come. Rather, I will stop spontaneously at a park on the way home and carry him in my arms to the playground, tickling his armpits and smelling the strawberry shampoo that is still lingering in his hair from this morning. I will watch how the golden light of the sun floods his handsome cheeks and put a Band-Aid and a kiss on a new blister, a common price to pay for swinging on the monkey bars. I will remember the name of the little girl he befriends and plays tag with- Michelle. I will teach him how to play tether ball and he will teach me how to play Don't-Step-On-The-Woodchips-Because-They-Are-Hot-Lava.

I will take a quick minute to step back and watch him play with Michelle and her mother will remark, "What a sweet, cute little man you have!" I will thank her but my smile will be broken from hearing Lucas's cries. He will slip on a climbing bar and skin his hands and knees. I will scoop him up in my arms once more and pet his hair, telling him the exact same thing I will tell him the very last time we speak. But today we are at the park, and the sun is shining warm upon us instead of the fluorescent, greened lights. The birds are chirping instead of the last few beeps from the heart monitor machine. But he will be crying the same, and my words will be the same, and in just the same way it will be just the two of us together.

I will hold him close in my arms, never wanting to loosen my grip and whisper, "Its ok baby, Mommy's here. Mommy loves you and is always here. It's going to be ok, Mommy loves you."

Mommy loves you.

