A Cancer Story

a dramatic comedy feature film

by Ellen T. Meiser

Uninterested in silver-linings or corny tropes, a 31-year-old woman documents her breast cancer treatment journey by focusing on the moments that matter to her— the shitty, the funny, and the lonely bits.

Synopsis

During a night of binging a Netflix zombie show, SARAH HAMMOND-CHANG, a vibrant 31-year-old in Anytown, California, finds a lump in her breast. What follows is a non-linear story about her journey through treatment and the experiences *she* finds important.

The story begins near the *maybe(?)*-end of Sarah's active cancer treatment: daily radiation therapy, antibody infusions, and regular checkups with her oncologist. Sarah's calmness at these appointments lies in stark contrast to her shock when she is first diagnosed and the rage she feels towards her disobedient body. It's through emotions that we get a peek into life during chemotherapy, which she shows us is analogous to the ancient Chinese torture method, "Death by 1,000 Cuts."

It's tough. Any cancer story is. But Sarah's is softened by the people around her: TY, her husband, her MOM, and LULU, a fellow patient who quickly becomes her, "Boob Guru." Also helping her regain a bit of lightness are solo evening dancing sessions in the bathroom to Mexican big band music and dirty rap, and a recognition of the small lessons she's learned: how to swallow a gag-inducing amount of pills; her ability to handle pain; the joy of nose picking; how steroids feel like meth; and how much she's loved.

With the help of a plastic surgeon, Sarah chooses her future breasts, tipping off a rumination over her relationship with her body and femininity. The irony of a "lady cancer" draining the "lady-ness" of its victims— turning them bald, boobless, bloated, infertile, dry, and unattractive—is not lost on Sarah. But Lulu helps Sarah navigate this irony, and they grow closer over frank discussions about spirituality and superstition in the face of mortality.

The film culminates with a clinical view of Sarah's double mastectomy. When she wakes up, she has a hard time recognizing herself through the surgical aftermath. A call to Lulu, though, eases her mind about her new "Franken-tits."

The movie closes with the whirr of machines at Sarah's last radiation. Does Sarah survive or are her ashes sprinkled somewhere? We don't know. And most importantly, she doesn't want us to know. That's not the point of this story. After all, as she explains, "this is a tale about the trek of cancer. It's not 'The Fellowship' or 'The Return of the King' from *Lord of the Rings*. Nope. This is 'The Two Towers.'" And, as the screen fades to black, the trek continues.

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