

Mixed Girl, Trauma Oncologist

Chapter 1

2011—High Sierra Reunion

On the final shake, a large bone-bit sank at our toes and two trout shot out from hiding to inspect it, but after a few unsatisfactory nibbles, darted away. I guess they didn't like the taste of my father. Rubbing a drop of sweat from her brow, my daughter handed me the empty vase and asked to explore the granite flows around the natural pool. I scanned the gentle, but also slippery slope of opposite shore then answered,

“Of course, just be careful.”

Watching her wade off towards the shallows, I bent down and splashed some icy water on my face before turning to my niece on the beach. Her fists were on her hips and a long sleek ponytail hung over one shoulder. Like a pacific island matriarch dolling out the catch of the day, she shouted

“Who's next?”

I considered the options from the row of matching vases and the lone black box still waiting on the hot pebbles.

“Joji! I guess...” I yelled back.

As the container with my middle brother traveled towards me, my mind drifted back thirteen years to the day my parents arrived at my front gate for a rare visit back to Berkeley. On that day, the old cowbell that signaled ordinary comings and goings tolled the end of my happy life as a housewife, and ushered in my new life as a trans-generational trauma oncologist. Because you see, the soul sickness in my family had just woken up from remission.

Through my father's lineage, poverty, bigotry, misogyny, child abuse, and an astounding capacity for denial had been passed down. My poor white-trash mother's side carried a similar disease, one that when combined with a graduate school education and liberal guilt, compelled her to marry a Black man and adopt some of my siblings straight out of third world orphanages.

After years of research, I managed to concoct an immunization for myself and as a result had enjoying a decade of peace. But my parents' visit would kick off a deadly a chain reaction, making it clear that a radical and permanent cure was required...if I was to survive.

1998—Reawakening of the “Uh Oh”

Cooper, my two-year old little boy was up from his nap, and as I put the finishing touches on a batch of soup, he rifled around in the cupboards behind me. After wrestling out package of Costo paper cups and dragging it into the living room, Cooper undertook his latest engineering project. I turned down the heat on my stove and ran some soapy water over the stack of dishes in the sink. Wiping my hands on my apron, I peeked around the kitchen corner. Working at his little chest-height with a quarter of the cups scattered nearby on the floor, he was stacking ever-

narrowing rows into a carefully balanced pyramid, but in order to reach the top he would need something to stand on, so I fetched a stool from the kitchen and was stepping back into the room when Cooper's head swiveled away. The bell on our tall front gate was clanging the arrival of visitors. As my eager son tugged open the front door and flew out, a gust of air knocked down his work.

My mother bustled up the long path first, bellowing out her grandson's name and bracing herself as he launched his little body into her fleshy arms. Her thin, grey shoulder length hair fell across his curls, as she swayed on her Velcro-ed sensible-shoes until he wiggled free. Adjusting the glasses on her beak-like nose, she lumbered towards the house. My Dad was gently closing the gate as I descended the porch steps to greet him. Veering around my mother, I headed into his open embrace. As my arms wrapped tightly around his waist, my forehead conked against his sternum. Though I'd been able to circle my Dad's body since he had begun eating healthier, they now overlapped behind his back: something was wrong.

I pulled away and looked down at his belt, cinched to the last hole to keep his pants on. Not noticing the concerned look I gave him, Dad bent down and gathered up his grandson next. Once we went inside and the fawning subsided, Cooper began resurrecting his project while I served my parent big bowls of tomato and zucchini soup, which I had made from my morning's garden harvest. My old Birkenstocks were silent on the large Mexican pavers that covered the kitchen floor. I had been fortunate to inherit Dad's smooth skin and athletic build, and not my

mother's propensity towards fat. This morning I had pulled my hair back from my forehead with an extra large tortoise shell barrette, and even after years of drugging, drinking -- over exertions of every kind -- only faint lines brushed my face. I sat down next to my Dad, and I savored the fresh flavors melded together in my shallow ceramic bowl, aiming for a torn up basil leaf as I dipped in for my next spoonful.

Sunlight from the big windows in the kitchen warmed the room. The components of a vegan dinner lined my blue tiled counters. As my mother droned on, I glanced over making a quick survey: short grained organic brown rice filled a glass canister, white beans soaked in a glazed bowl, a pile of rinsed garden greens, garlic bulbs nestled in a wooden dish, and racks of spices, with cumin, smoked paprika, and dried oregano in the largest jars. Everything healthy, ready, simple, peaceful, and organized. I liked it that way (needed it that way) and I had earned it. Life as a stay-at-home mom was predictable. There were no surprises, nothing that I couldn't anticipate and prepare for. I was no longer a *bad* person that did *bad* things, and to whom *bad* things happened. I had eradicated the possibility of the "Uh Oh" feeling from my life.

My mother finished off her portion and headed into the living room to praise Cooper's efforts. I saw islands of green zucchini, emerging from my Dad's bowl as he carefully spooned up just the red tomato soup from around the chunks. In the quiet between his careful sips, I broached the subject of his weight loss. He brushed it off and said that he'd had the flu, and had also been experiencing heartburn. He planned to go see the doctor and hoped that he didn't have

an ulcer. Then he went on to describe the flatbed train car that their motor-home had been lashed onto as it slowly wandered through Mexico. My parents, who had once been radical, social justice, envelope-pushers were now retired vacationers who wore silly hats and bored people with photographs of themselves standing in front of *things*: ship railings, park signs, buses with foreign writing stenciled on them, immense tree trunks, swimming pools, etc.

I listened to the story, nodding and making appropriately impressed sounds as Dad spun the tale, but in reality I was distracted by the unwelcome feeling in my gut. I was only half aware that he had finished his story, and was sitting quietly giving me a quizzical look. At the sound of Cooper calling, I refocused as I stood up. Dad's thin coffee-colored skin was stretched so tightly over his bald skull that I could see the outline of the interlocking curved plates. I looked down, light-headed as a flash of insight rocked my stomach: I *knew*. We would wait for word back from the doctors, but I knew he was dying... "Uh Oh!"

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