

Beneath the Surface Casen Whitehead

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The door creaks open.

A nurse slips into the room with a whisper, “Good morning...”

The sound of crickets permeates the air as time lingers on. My dad is close by, his hand lightly touching my blanket, a silent, yet comforting, reminder that he’s here.

“Good morning,” the nurse mutters.

I am still floating in dreamland, no worries in the world. Nothing can hurt me here.

Eventually, she musters the resolve to shake me awake. “Sorry to disturb, but it’s time to take your medication!”

I ignore her initially, staying connected to the deepest parts of my mind. Waking up would force me to face the harsh reality that had been awaiting.

Even though I appreciated my nurse’s company, I never liked this wretched space. It’s comparable to a prison. You’re locked up, patrolled by every caretaker in the building, can’t leave your room without permission, and put on a strict diet. At least in prison I wouldn’t be strapped to intertwining IV lines and monitors mimicking a straitjacket.

After some time, I come to my senses and arise from my slumber. Instantly, I’m reminded of my shackles, wishing my tethered central line was a strapped seatbelt instead, protecting me in my family’s van as it drives up the mountains toward a summer getaway. Sadly, my only summer getaway was an all-expense paid trip to isolation: population one.

“What time is it?” I ask groggily, as I continuously rub my blurred eyes.

“It’s about six in the morning...” the nurse whispers. “...I’m going to take your vitals.”

With my arms crossed, I roll my eyes. Unfortunately, this is a hospital, and the employees have protocols to follow—no matter how much backlash they receive from their patients. The nurses will always win; so, like the obedient patient I am, I take my medication while she takes my vitals.

After five minutes, she hastily cleans her station, vying to evade the silence as quickly as possible.

“Sorry again for waking you. You can go back to bed and get some sleep,” the nurse says softly as she scurries out.

Once I hear the door quietly close, I glare at my dad and retreat to bed.

...

In this state, visions of a nearby timeline haunt my soul. Before my diagnosis, I was a curious and independent teenager, prone to making mistakes and full of questions. Tragically, those freedoms were stripped one by one, cancer consuming every aspect of my identity. Whenever I close my eyes, I hold those memories near, praying that someday they will become reality again. I never thought I would crave normalcy, but during this pivotal moment, I long to be a “nobody” more than anyone understands.

These memories taunt me, grappling with the harsh truth that this reality may cease to exist. They shine golden, assuming the shape of pointed stars glowing in the distance imitating an arch, floating amidst a dark galaxy. As I take strides closer, I feel my nimble hands reaching out to touch these souvenirs, the warmth of each star expanding. I’m within arm’s reach of connecting with my distant past, extending closer and closer to these celestial bodies, my fingertips toasty from the stars’ radiance, with only a few inches left before-

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

...

My eyes snap open like a firecracker. The brash buzzing of my alarm instantly wakes me from the warmth of the past. Wearily, I rotate my body to not disturb the medical malware that remains dormant and peek at my phone. In bright white lettering, I notice the time of 12:00 pm in the center, alerting my brain that it’s time to encounter the obstacles that had been awaiting me.

This was my fourth tenure in the hospital, and I was almost done with my twenty-four-hour drip chemotherapy. Sadly, monotonous procedures became my “new normal,” strengthening the pervasive dissociation in my mind. I needed to escape for my own sanity.

Those close in my life thought I was unphased going through six months of treatment. *I always knew how to play to the cameras.* I didn’t want anyone to think I was struggling, as I was continually being pitied for being “the kid with cancer.” I didn’t want any more forgiveness or prayer. I just wanted to be cured.

Another nurse hastily swings the door open and enters the room. “A phlebotomist will be in here shortly to get vitals.”

Like everything else they told me, I shrug my shoulders and my lips remain sealed. *Did I want some random man strolling into my perpetual cage?* No. *Did I have a choice?* No. My volition dissipated the second I was admitted. It was all a part of the lengthy and tedious process I “had” to have faith in.

Eventually, three knocks on the wooden door disturb my meditation. The phlebotomist ambles into the room. “Here to get some samples,” he says stiffly. No personality, no humor, just here strictly for business.

Knowing from previous painful experiences that my veins didn’t cooperate, I realized this was going to be no different. The phlebotomist grabs his kit and preps his utensils, each item more intimidating than the last. I stare into his vacant eyes, silently begging for only one small prick from the butterfly needle. My dad paces, his face tight with worry, hoping this procedure would be problem-free. The phlebotomist reaches for the sterile needle and jabs it into my arm... zero luck. He wiggles the needle around, hoping to latch onto any vein he could find. The pain, unbearable, feels as if a swarm of tiny drills are boring into the same spot on my arm, relentless and sharp. But the physical pain is nothing compared to the weight of seven months of surgeries, chemotherapy, and spinal taps, all of it lingering just beneath the surface of my skin.

After two minutes, the worker realizes that he needs to replace the defective instrument, so he quickly draws it out of my skin and prepares for the second insertion. I sit there—frozen—not uttering a single word. Finally, on the third attempt, he successfully pierces my narrow vein and extracts a pint of blood, reinforcing the fatigue I had already been impacted by from chemotherapy. Once he collected enough blood, he packed up his supplies and immediately rushed for the door. During that entire procedure, the room was so flushed with silence that the rhythmic beeping of the monitors spoke more than him. While overlooking my strife, his impartial behavior produced another mental crack in the fragile wall holding back waves of exhaustion and despair.

When he vacates the room, I’m left to spiral...

Why couldn’t he find a vein? Why did he swirl the needle around in my arm? Why didn’t he just remove the needle sooner? Why didn’t he ask me how I felt? He didn’t even give me a break to collect my thoughts. Does he realize what I’m here for? Does he realize the pain and trauma I have experienced thus far? Does anyone realize why I am here? Why me? Why did this have to happen to m—

I break. ...
...

My heart shatters into a million pieces, as if someone swung a baseball bat at a glass mirror. I roll over to gaze at my dad, my eyes overflowing...

That young, innocent boy had hit his limit after bottling everything up for months.

My dad moves swiftly in my direction and gives me the biggest hug, swaddling me in his warmth. Wrapped in his arms, I start sobbing...

... and we cry together. ...

about | author

WHITEHEAD

Casen Whitehead is a first-year Master of Public Health student in health policy at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. He received his undergraduate degrees in environmental health sciences (Bachelor of Science in Public Health) and psychology (Bachelor of Science) from the UNC-Chapel Hill. He has also conducted statistical research on the intersections of race and gender in COVID-19 outcomes, including infection, hospitalization, and death rates among North Carolina residents. His academic interests include mental and behavioral health services, harm reduction strategies, HIV/AIDS among LGBTQ+ populations, and health equity among marginalized communities.

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