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## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LENS **KRISTEN MICHELLE FORBES**

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I read about my death on Facebook. For a nanosecond, the whirring refrigerator and ticking clock silenced. The hunger in my stomach subsided. The hot coffee making its way down my throat became tasteless. All that existed was a singular sentence that consisted of my name, followed by the words “passed away.” Those were the words staring back at me when looking at a complete stranger’s Facebook page.

That complete stranger, who happened to share my name, died of cervical cancer at the age of 23. That Kristen Forbes, through her death, has taught me so much about my life. And she certainly showed me how small this world really is and how cancer connects all of us.

My relationship with cancer began at infancy. My uncle Wes, 33, succumbed to melanoma when I was nine months old. My memories of him – or at least, the memories I’ve created from the photographs I’ve seen – are forever intertwined with sunshine, sunscreen and my mom’s worried pleas to wear a hat and sit in the shade.

“Here comes the Sunscreen Nazi,” my sister would warn as my mom would make her way across the concrete, kneeling by the poolside to inquire if we were wearing enough sunblock. She made it a mission to drive the message into our brains: Don’t protect yourself in the sun and the consequence could be death.

I didn’t listen to my mom about everything, but I usually heeded her advice on this one. When you’re a child, there are few things scarier than the prospect of death.

I always knew it was sad that I’d lost my uncle, that my cousin had lost his dad, that my mom had lost her brother. I’m not sure if I ever understood the true gravity of his death, though, until I was sitting at my grandma’s kitchen table some twenty years later. She’d been talking to me for hours – recounting old tales about being a nurse during the war, the crazy stunts her children pulled when they were little, the snowstorm that enveloped us in St. Louis the day after my grandpa’s funeral. She was speaking to me as an orphan and a widow, as a woman who’d witnessed countless war deaths and had grown old enough to see most of her friends pass away.

“Nothing compares,” she told me as tears began rolling down her cheeks, “to the pain

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of losing your child. Nothing.”

I sometimes catch myself hearing those words again, seeing her face – it’s the only time I can recall her crying – as I get ready in the morning, putting on the sunscreen I long ago made a point of wearing daily.

Nothing compares to the pain of losing your child. I’m sure it’s a statement Kirk and Brenda Forbes would agree with. I’m sure that losing their daughter at 23 was never a part of the master plan. I think it was partly for them and for all of the parents who know what my grandma was talking about that my own tears came. I was looking at pictures of Kristen’s last Christmas. She was sitting on a couch, surrounded by little kids, smiling a huge, beaming smile. The tears started and they just kept coming and coming. For what must have been ten minutes, I cried for this girl I never knew, this girl who shares my name. I cried for everyone who’s lost someone to cancer.

Then I remembered the last time I cried like that. It was the last day of my freshman year of college and I received the call I knew had been on its way for months. Byron had died.

Byron was my friend Anita’s dad. He was a surgeon and a bicyclist and an all-around health nut. He hiked, biked, backpacked, ordered salads and always took the stairs. He wasn’t a smoker or a drinker or a risk taker – he was just a kind man who was great at his job and loved his family very much.

Anita was in high school when her dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. Several years later, when it spread to his liver and lungs, she made the decision to leave school in Montana and come back home to be with him. In the beginning, it was a chance for them to bond, to right any silly childhood wrongs, to grow closer as the father and daughter who shared a passion for athletics and the outdoors. They planned trips together – went skiing, did long bike rides, got outside to enjoy the fresh Oregon air at every opportunity.

As the cancer took a firmer hold of his body, she shifted her role into that of a caretaker. With her mom, Kathy – a nurse – as her guide, Anita received a crash course in nursing and oncology. She watched as her dad’s strength diminished and when she sensed he was fighting through the pain for his family, she gave him quiet permission to let go when he needed to.

He died on May 3rd, 2001, at the age of 56. Anita was 21 and in his death, she said goodbye to the dream of being walked down the aisle or of sharing the adult moments of her life with her father. Throughout his illness and after his death, Anita exhibited a kind of strength that far surpassed her years and made me so incredibly proud to be her friend. And as if she was always born to do it, she now works as an oncology nurse in Boise, where her experience and compassion helps to ease the struggles of her patients and their families.

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At this point, I don't think there's a person among us who hasn't been touched by cancer in some way. When I ran in Portland's 2002 Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, I ran for my grandma on my dad's side and my aunt on my mom's side. Although they both won their battles against breast cancer, they still managed to shake me out of complacency.

I find myself thinking about the other Kristen Forbes often. On her Facebook page, in every picture, she's either smiling broadly or making a silly face. My favorite photo has always been the one where she's sitting in a car, flipping off the camera. That picture has taken on new meaning for me, since her death. I like to think it's cancer on the other side of that lens, cancer who's receiving that defiant flip-off.

My uncle Wes and my friends Byron and Kristen are no longer here to fight the battle. I can't help but think that in their deaths, they passed off some of the responsibility to those of us who are still here. It's up to us, now, to stand up to cancer in their honor – to give it the finger and to find its cure.

I know that Kristen would approve.

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