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## THE MARTINEZ FAMILY **KRISTEN MICHELLE FORBES**

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The beautiful baby boy they decided to call Alec was already in Vananh's womb when she and Stephen got married. They would later refer to him as their miracle child; his conception had reunited the couple after a five-year separation. In a new, custom-built home in a quiet suburb of Portland, Stephen and Vananh quickly settled into their life as a newlywed couple, parents to a wonderful, healthy boy. Looking around, they couldn't help but feel blessed.

Then Vananh began having symptoms. Her weight dropped rapidly and she found herself with no appetite for food. Bouts with diarrhea would last for two to three weeks at a time. She had sharp abdominal pains. For a woman who had never needed a doctor for anything – not even a cavity, or a tonsil removed, or a wisdom tooth extracted – these new symptoms were strange and off-putting.

When she visited her internist, he suggested she might have irritable bowel syndrome or food poisoning, neither of which explained the intense pain she'd sometimes experience when she picked up her son. She thought maybe she had a pulled muscle or hernia.

Completely fatigued, Vananh started sleeping all the time. The exhaustion was so overwhelming; she simply could not stay awake. People would ask if she thought her symptoms were associated with a particular time of the month, but Vananh was on a birth control that caused her to not have any periods. She could not explain or understand her symptoms.

One Sunday, Vananh lay down in intense exhaustion and pressed her hand against her right side. That's when she felt it: a hard lump. She went to the doctor the next morning, and an Ultrasound was ordered. The face on the technologist administering the Ultrasound gave it away, but the doctor wouldn't confirm anything just yet, saying simply that they'd found a polycystic mass. An MRI was ordered and then Vananh was escorted to a private room, where she was delivered the news.

This 38-year-old woman, never sick a day in her life, had Stage IIIC ovarian cancer. Surgery was scheduled immediately. Her tumor, nearly 12 centimeters long, had been pressing against her kidneys. In the six-hour surgery, doctors removed everything:

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uterus, Fallopian tubes, ovaries – everything.

Six rounds of two types of chemotherapy via IV that lasted five to six hours per session, once every three weeks, followed. During these treatments, Vananh became so weak, she had to have a blood transfusion. After losing all her female organs in the surgery, she then lost everything else that made her feel like a woman: her hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes.

She had held off on chemotherapy until after Alec's second birthday, in May of 2008. She finished her treatments in August and went back to work as a pharmaceutical representative one week later. The normalcy of work soothed her, as did returning to her role as a full-time mom. When recovering from surgery and during treatments, Vananh had only been able to watch Alec at night; she slept during the day. Being able to take care of Alec again comforted her, but the Martinez family was soon dealt another blow.

On November 15, 2008, Alec was diagnosed with ependymoma. A cruel math equation ravished the family of three: one healthy family member, two cancers. After a tough battle that included multiple surgeries and an extended stay at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, their miracle baby Alec passed away on July 22, 2009.

It's hard to make sense of things, of life, when your three-year-old child dies. But for Stephen and Vananh, their mission is clear. They will tell the story of Vananh and Alec, a mother and son with cancer, and they will keep telling it and keep telling it until someday, somehow, someone finds a cure.

Until that day arrives, Vananh stresses the importance of advocating for your own health. When you don't feel well, talk to your doctor and ask questions about your symptoms. If the answers don't appease you, find a new doctor and ask more questions. Be proactive in your diet and exercise regime. Know the risk factors. Know your family history.

Ovarian cancer is known as a silent killer because its symptoms are so quiet, but Vananh encourages everyone to pay attention. The abdominal pain, the diarrhea, the fatigue, the weight loss: Vananh says that in hindsight, she would have pushed harder to get her doctor to take these symptoms seriously.

As Stephen and Vananh figure out their new lives in a post-Alec world, as they navigate Vananh's continuing battle, they say one thing is clear: We need to find a cure. We need to see an end to cancer.

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