

In the United States alone:

Over 200,000 women are diagnosed with new cases of breast cancer *every year*.

About 40,000 women die of breast cancer *every year*.

One in every eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime.

All of the author's profit from the sales of this book will go toward the effort to eliminate breast cancer. If you find it to be a worthwhile read, please share it with your friends and family. Copies of this book and video of the *Stand with Cathy* concert are available at:

www.standwithcathy.com

**Stand
with
Cathy**

**a young couple's
battle with cancer**

by

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Preface

“What do you have that you were not given?”

—Paul, to the Corinthians

Why am I writing this?

First and foremost, I’m following that fundamental human drive simply to tell my story. An experience is made more meaningful when it is shared with others; and I desperately want Cathy’s fight with cancer—*our* fight—to be as meaningful as it can be.

Moreover, I would like to think that I have more to offer here than just a good story. A lot of amazing things happened to us, and I think that anyone—whether they’ve dealt with cancer or not—will find these things inspiring. But especially if *you* are facing cancer, I hope that this account will bring you some encouragement.

I write also out of gratitude to the countless people who helped us through these difficult times. Our family, our church, our friends, my colleagues, and my students all came together and proved that life and humanity can be every bit as *beautiful* as they can be ugly—a truth I *badly* needed to be reminded of.

At my lowest points, I didn’t always receive their gifts with grace. But as I saw myself being loved when I least deserved it, I learned that the people who are most difficult to love are often the people who most

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desperately need to be loved; and the times when a particular person is in his most unlovable state are the times when he will benefit most from being loved.

I am grateful that although I was often unlovable during Cathy's fight with cancer, there were many who stubbornly loved me nonetheless. If you are one of those people, I thank you. This is largely *your* story, and it is a testimony to the power of community, the love of the church, and the grace of God. Despite all of my complaints, I cannot escape the conclusion that I am richly blessed.

Chapter 1

“It’s bad.”

In the spring of 2010, my wife Cathy and I thought we knew where our lives were heading. Less than a year before, we had moved to Houston from Beijing to start a new life together. I was working my third year as a high school math and physics teacher, and Cathy was preparing to go to nursing school.

In China, Cathy had worked as an HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) engineer; but that major had been chosen for her, and she wasn’t finding it very fulfilling. Since she was little, she had always wanted to work in medicine. Our move to Houston now seemed the perfect opportunity for her to get a fresh start.

Things looked good for us. We had some money we’d saved up in China, and with some help from my parents, we were planning to buy a house and, after a year or two, have kids. We weren’t as well off as my college friends who had taken jobs as engineers and computer programmers—this was a comparison that I had a bad habit of making—but we appeared to be set up for a happy life.

All of these plans began to evaporate on Saturday, March 20th. That was the day that Cathy first told me she’d found a lump in her breast. She had noticed it a few weeks before and thought, “I need to get

that checked,” but had then forgotten about it. It came to her attention again when two new lumps showed up under her arm. The lump in her breast was about the size of a grape; the ones under her arm were much smaller.

I was worried, but I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions. I’m a bit of a hypochondriac, and there had been many times that I’d panicked about something on my own body that later proved benign. The year before, I’d noticed a swelling of lymph nodes under my arm, and I’d been paranoid that I had lymphoma. It went away after a few days, though.

And just the previous weekend, there had been a scare with my heart. Ever since sixth grade, I’d had palpitations occasionally and was accustomed to my heart fluttering and my pulse skyrocketing for about a minute. But this time it was different. I woke up in the middle of the night with discomfort in my chest. My heart was fluttering slowly and irregularly in a way that made my pulse hard to detect. If it had lasted only a minute or so, I would have thought nothing of it. But it didn’t go away.

After about fifteen minutes, I woke Cathy. She put her ear to my chest and started to panic; to her, it sounded like my heart just wasn’t working. I called an ambulance.

When the paramedics arrived, they did a quick EKG and identified the condition as atrial fibrillation, which is generally not life-threatening (but something that certainly needs to be checked out). By the time we arrived at the hospital, my heartbeat had returned to normal. They did some further tests, and a few days later I got fully examined by a cardiologist.

My heart turned out to be fine, but a scare like that lingers in your mind, leaving your emotions raw; and now here we were just a week later, with Cathy showing me these frightening little lumps. She had been carrying them in her body as she stood over me, fearing for my life, while the paramedics were monitoring my heart. And now these lumps would cause *me* to fear for *her* life. But there was nothing to be done at the moment; it was Saturday night.

The next day we went to church as usual, and in the afternoon we

helped our friends Steve and Sunny move. They had two kids, which Cathy helped watch while I helped Steve and some other friends carry boxes to a moving truck he'd rented. Everyone knew about the events of the previous weekend and was fretting about my heart while I was moving boxes. But I could only think about Cathy.

Since Steve was a physician's assistant at MD Anderson Cancer Center, we told him about the lumps and asked him for advice. We learned from him that much of the tissue under your arms and on your sides is considered breast tissue and that any abnormalities there could be an indicator of breast cancer. Sunny recommended a doctor. Steve gave us his card and said to call him immediately if it turned out to be cancer.

Grasping for a harmless explanation, I said, "It could be an abscess." Steve thought for a second and said, "It *could* be." But he didn't seem very impressed by my attempt at a diagnosis, and I later realized that an abscess would likely be painful.

We consulted several other people we knew. If the universe were subject to popular opinion, Cathy's lumps would have turned out to be benign cysts. One person described to us how the doctors would deal with them if that turned out to be the case. The procedure sounded disgusting: they would insert a needle into the cysts and suck out the fluid.

That night, Cathy asked me what I thought, and I told her the truth: If there had been just one lump, I would have been pretty sure it was just a cyst; but the fact that new lumps were developing scared me. Still, we shouldn't worry until we'd had some tests done. I spent the rest of the evening looking up doctors online to give Cathy a list to choose from.

The next day, Cathy called the doctor that Sunny had recommended and learned that she wasn't taking any new patients. So instead, Cathy went to see a doctor on the list I'd given her, a woman I'll call Dr. Nakonji.

Dr. Nakonji examined Cathy, ordered some blood tests, and made an appointment for a mammogram and a biopsy on Thursday. "I'm sure it's nothing serious, but we'll check it out thoroughly just to be safe," she said. Cathy took comfort on hearing these words from a doctor.

That same day, after school, I confided to one of my colleagues

that my wife had found a lump in her breast. He cursed, and it was the most sincere curse I'd ever heard. He made no attempt to give me any hollow reassurances, and he offered no uninformed speculation—just shock and concern, and an attentive ear waiting for me to go on, which I did.

“It could be bad or it could be nothing,” I said. “We’re not going to worry until we know for sure that it’s something bad.” Just speaking those words helped me convince myself that I shouldn’t be worrying yet.

We just had to wait until Thursday for the biopsy. In the meantime, Cathy continued attending her classes while I went on teaching as usual.

On Thursday, my mother accompanied Cathy for the mammogram and biopsy. A mammogram is uncomfortable enough (I hear), but a needle biopsy is much worse. They used an elaborate contraption to stick a needle deep into the lump in her breast and again into one of the lumps under her arm. The experience left her feeling sore for the rest of the day. When I got home from school, neither of us felt like cooking, so we decided to go out for dinner.

Since moving to Houston, I had wanted to take Cathy to Benihana, a Japanese restaurant where food preparation is elevated to performance art; but the prices there had always deterred me. Now I was determined to take her there anyway. As it turned out, it was a good thing I did, because it ended up being our one lucky night in the midst of a highly unlucky week.

There were four other people at our table: a man who was taking his daughter out, and a couple of ladies who seemed to be going out for fun. We didn’t talk to them much, but we listened. The father said that he came to Benihana just about every week, and he knew the staff there. At the end of the meal, it came out that one of the ladies was celebrating her birthday. Upon hearing that, the father declared that he would pay for everyone at our table. We all protested, but he insisted, and we ended up with a free dinner.

That man’s act of kindness was a merciful balance to the rest of the day’s unpleasantness. He sounded like he was from New York—he had the accent and the flamboyance—and I remembered his name long

enough to search for him on Google when we got home. But I didn't find anything on him, and I don't remember his name now. I regard him as an unwitting angel who was put in our path. He had no idea of the fear that was on our hearts, or the discomfort Cathy was in; but he gave us one positive experience in a week that had already been bad enough and was about to get much worse.

When I got home from school on Friday afternoon, Cathy was standing in the kitchen, clearly distraught. She had just gotten a phone call from someone at the doctor's office and had almost received the news for which we'd been waiting. She recounted the conversation for me:

"We've made an appointment for you on Monday at 1:30 to get the test results," the lady at the doctor's office said. "You can bring your husband."

"Okay. But can you just tell me the results now?" Cathy asked.

"I can't give out test results over the phone," the lady said.

"Can you at least say whether it's good or bad?"

"It's bad."

So that was the news, or at least a powerful hint as to what the news would be. We still had to wait until Monday to hear it officially.

Suddenly Cathy was crying, and I was holding her. I felt numb.

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