

## The Giant that Would Transform the World

As I pulled the elastic from my hair, a clump of red frizz remained. “Thank you, chemo,” I said into the mirror.

I never thought I’d get cancer. I ate healthy, exercised, had an active job. Yet I stood in old lady sweat-wicking, cat’s meow jammies, cancer hair in my hand, five prescription bottles on the sink. I rubbed my tired eyes. My jawline sagged and I hated the ridges in my neck. Could be worse at sixty-three.

I collapsed on my bed as Molly jumped up and licked my nose. Niagara Falls let loose. I wasn’t afraid. The pain was intense, but my end was nigh. I cried for things unfinished. Challenges unmet. For my daughter Ava, and my grand babies. For my dog, who watched me with her curious, David Bowie eyes.

I wiped my tears, honked my nose, flicked off the light and tucked under my family quilt. Heavy eyelids beckoned sleep as I caressed the blended strands of Molly’s hair, until I found my fingers suddenly wrapped in dad’s silver mane. We danced amongst twinkling stars, where galaxies spun like records. If I put a needle on one, I’d play, “Have I told you lately?” We laughed when dad’s voice croaked as he sang. I cried when we embraced. “I’ll be with you soon.”

Dad put his hands on my shoulders, stood back and shook his head.

“I don’t understand.”

He rubbed my belly, where cancer festered. Then he pushed. Hard.

I fell away from his laughter, echoing throughout the vastness of the universe, until he became a distant star.

Ruffly green leaves of tree branches slowed my descent. Held there, silver veins shone through its bark, gnarly as an ancient wise woman. An owl threesixtied its head to hoot, as if ordering my release. I dropped, past squirrels and birds feeding hatchlings in nests. The trunk, higher than the CN Tower, pumped white-hot spirals of light out its limbs.

A raven with the wingspan of a baseball field breezed by, stealing a tuft of my red hair in its claw. *Jerk can have it.*

I flushed with fear as the ground swallowed me whole. Tree roots wrapped my legs and slithered around my arms, tugging me into the earth. I felt a sense of brownness that tasted of mushrooms with a potent side of compost. Critters witnessed my burial.

Then I was released from the muck, splashing into icy water. The pain of cold stabbed everywhere. The tips of the roots beneath the great tree coiled above like DNA strands.

A green Aurora danced the sky like a ribbon in unseen winds when something nipped one ankle, then the other. A massive turtle gripped my foot in her mouth, while smaller turtles and a beaver with a rat's tail all worked in unison to tug me deeper. (My daughter later assured me the beaver was a muskrat.) I furiously shook, yanked and twisted. I couldn't break free.

Overhead, the Aurora-streaked sky was blurred by the immensity of the water between us. The streaming ribbon gave way to the burning sun.

I recalled my mother once saying, “Red Sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailor take warning.” *Take warning* reverberated within.

The turtle opened her jaw. When the others followed suit, I desperately I swam up.

Silhouetted by the crimson sky, a giant lifted a long spear over its head and stepped into the water. God to the rescue? The sky lit the spear on fire before the giant slammed it into the glacial drink. It flew towards me, boiling the surrounding water. I couldn't escape. It planted into my stomach. Electricity surged through my body, burning my veins.

Finally I surfaced. My blood streaming in the water, I thought my vision went spotty as people descended from the enormous beast and scrambled in all directions.

I blinked, disbelieving my eyes. It was dark. My legs were cold, my feet numb. People floated down from the sky. People of the giant? I heard trickling water before I realized I stood in a creek. Emergency sirens interrupted birdsong. Lights flashed. A blanket was wrapped around my shoulders as I was led to an ambulance in nothing but my cat's meow nightgown.

I woke in the bustling hallway of the hospital on a bed, a guard in black standing at my feet.

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The woman's hair was pulled so tight the veins in her forehead protruded. They pulsed every time I said, “I don't know.”

“How do you think you got to Elmvale?” she asked.

“I don't know.”

“Who do you think took you there?”

“I don’t know.”

The doctor smirked while she checked my blood pressure as the woman tapped on her orange tablet, louder with every “I don’t know.”

Every patient had their own interrogator in a grey suit with weird orange tablets and quiffed-back hair.

Every ounce of rationality told me to keep quiet. Talking it out would have helped recall my experience, but I knew this woman would twist it into something monstrous. I hoped the other patients said nothing.

“Mom!” Ava rushed in and hugged me. “I’ve been looking for you for hours.” My daughter looked me over as my woman in grey huffed.

“You look, OK.”

“I am.” I felt so grateful she was there.

“A ton of people in the lobby are waiting for answers.” She glanced at my interrogator and the doctor beside her, seemingly making notes on her clipboard. “What happened? I got a call saying you were hypothermic in a swamp all the way in Elmvale. A huge crowd outside is talking about some lady who saw angels?” She placed my knapsack on the floor by my bed.

“They can’t be here, Mrs. Aria,” my inquisitor said. “We must complete recording the experience, untainted.”

“Loosen your girdle, dear.”

The woman stood abruptly, leaving the chair to Ava, who pulled it away, sat, and held my hand. Brazen girl.

“They’re saying people are healing, Mom.”

“We’re testing everyone thoroughly,” the doctor said as she crossed the room.

“They took enough blood to feed a gaggle of vampires. Did a CAT Scan too.”

“Are you a specialist?” Ava asked the uptight woman.

“She’s not a doctor. She’s studying strange phenomena, as far as I can tell.”

Ava looked at her quizzically, then at the other patients sharing the room.

“They found you thirty kilometres from home at four in the morning,” Ava said.

“How?”

My grey braced for an answer.

“I don’t know,” I smiled.

“Do you know?” Ava asked the woman in the constricting suit.

She didn’t answer.

“Do you even have hypothermia?” Ava asked.

“Had a chill...”

“Tests will confirm if her cancer is shrinking soon,” the doctor said. “Wouldn’t have checked if we weren’t directed by these suits.” She looked sideways at the man in grey beside her elderly patient.

“Wild. Well, no reason to take up a bed if you’re healthy.” Ava, who seemingly shared my instinct, took clothes and my phone out of the knapsack and handed them over.

I ripped off the tape and pulled the port out of my arm as I stood, my hospital gown open in the back. It took concerted effort to keep my hiney hidden as I yanked up yoga pants.

Guards appeared at our door, followed by an over-confident man in another shiny grey suit.

“Hello, Experiencers. I am jubilant you’re thriving after your harrowing incident. There was a ruckus at the exits. It seems the world is excited over your mysterious transportation to Ground Zero, and the surrounding implications.”

“One lucky woman got away before we were corralled here,” the old guy said. “The one who saw angels, for chrissake. I didn’t see no angels.”

I shook my head so slightly, worried he wouldn’t notice. By his own minimal nod and severe expression, I felt he did.

“I don’t know how I got there either,” I added as I yanked my hand-knit sweater over the hospital gown. “No idea. Time to get home. Gotta let my dog out.”

“You must be deposed,” the silver suited bossman said. “We’re securing a plan of egress and arranging security for each of you.”

“Security for home?” I didn’t like that.

“People out there have freaky end times protest signs, “ Ava said. “One guy’s says “Probe This” with a drawing of his middle finger. Socials are ballistic. Stay at my place, Mom.”

When I swiped my cell, my feed filled with angel lady articles. I skimmed to read about her vision of cherubs circling a great tree with DNA strands. Then it stopped loading.

“Your mother will remain, to ensure she has care and protection.” As Bossman waved his hand, a guard took Ava by her arm. “They’ll rest, for now.”

“She needs to be home with her family,” Ava said as the guard hauled her back.

“Don’t worry, Mom! We’ll get you home,” Ava shouted from the hall.

My own child was physically removed.

“This is unacceptable.” The doctor lowered her voice. “These safety issues remain outside. If you block my health care workers, you and your weird orange computers will be evicted.”

“You don’t have the authority.” Bossman’s cheeks went pink.

“Watch me.” The doctor tapped her phone. “My patients can’t answer your questions any better than a drunk could due to lack of sleep.”

The grey suits followed their leader out, single file.

“Hang tight Experiencers,” the doc marched between the guards. “You cannot bar staff.”

“I didn’t see angels,” a child’s voice came, concealed by a curtain. “I saw Supergirl and Monster Heroes.”

“Shhhh,” the old guy said. “Rest now, kiddo.”

“But...”

“You’ll be OK. We won’t be here much longer,” I said hopefully as I sat on the side of my bed.

We couldn’t tell the grey suits anything. Our experience needed to be shared with everyone, not a chosen few. Not misconstrued. Not politicized. Definitely not twisted to fit anyone’s agenda.

We remained quiet, afraid to speak. The poor kid was probably terrified without her parents.

How were we supposed to tell our stories with guards at our doors and these men in black masquerading so brilliantly in grey?

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The sky was dark and my roommates slept. Texts wouldn't send. No email. No news. Nothing. The greys didn't want us getting info, and more importantly, they didn't want us sending any out.

The nurses said people were ready to do battle over this mystery. Not surprising. People haven't agreed to disagree for years. My own brother was a flat earther. Don't get me started on Covid vaccines. Why wouldn't they jump to conclusions with the conviction of someone with a masters degree of the unknown?

"Alright, Mrs. Aria." The doctor burst past the guards and kicked the wheel lock on my bed. "Your MRI is set."

"My MRI?"

She offered a stark look, tucked my phone and knapsack under the blanket and pushed my bed out the door.

She said nothing until we were alone in the elevator,

"You're getting outta here." Sweat beaded her brow.

"You're helping me escape?" I felt exhilarated. "Has anyone else got out?"

"Not yet." She gulped. "Mrs. Aria, your cancer is gone."

The elevator doors opened. As we passed through the halls, guards in black vests with guns in holsters paced.

"Guns?" I whispered.

"You're not surprised? You're healed." She weaved us through a maze of halls.



“Maybe I don’t believe it yet, or it’s short term,” I said. I wrote a Will and bought a burial plot. I’d mentally prepared for my last flight home.

“We’re here.” She waited for two strolling guards to leave the vicinity. “Come,” she whispered when they were out of sight.

I jumped off the bed as she used her keycard to open a door.

“Will you lose your job?”

“Probably.”

We entered a busy locker room that led to an unlocked door. It opened to fresh air and the dark of night.

“Good luck,” she said as the door slammed.

I was difficult to believe it had been less than twenty-four hours.

“Mom!” Ava said in hushed tones, waving her hands.

I raced towards her until a big man grabbed my shoulder.

“ID,” he ordered.

“What? On whose authority?” My mind raced. I *had* just exited a staff door. “For all I know, you’re a protester faking a uniform.”

“Just picking Mom up from another long shift, sir.” My daughter ran to my side. “A week of doubles, and this craziness.”

The man sized her up.

“You don’t want to get on her bad side,” Ava added.

“Pass.” He let us go.

We couldn't have gotten into Ava's truck faster. We belted in and exited the parking lot. Idling at the red light, protestors in the rear view mirror bounced signs, their chanting indiscernible.

"I have a meeting set with a friend who works in TV." She drove by flashing police cars blocking an entrance to hospital parking.

"I can't tell them. I have to share this in traditional ways."

"What the hell, Mom? You don't need to make this any more difficult."

"I'm compelled to share this story as it was intended by the giver." *How was I going to make her understand?* "You know I hate crowds."

I did need a crowd.

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I stood in the tall grass behind the Elmvale water kiosk, between county road 27 and the artesian flow I'd been rescued from days ago, feeling overwhelmed. Ava's grade eight students surrounded me while I orated from the bank.

I wondered if they saw the surreal overlay emerge the moment I spoke. The sensations of the experience enfolded me - fear, freezing, mucky wet, mesmerized, burning.

One student returned me to my teens, in black work boots, a wild hippy skirt, braids throughout her hair, with an ear tunnel she'd regret in ten years. I'm sure I had the same nose ring. "Your generation ruined the planet. Why should any of us listen to you?"

"It took all the generations, one to the next to land us in this mess," Ava answered. "But we learn from it."

“We need to become that giant.” She stood tall. “Act together with such focus and discipline nothing can stop us.”

My eyes filled with joy and hope and melancholy too.

Guards flanked the water dispensary, checking ID. A long line waited to fill their jugs. One elderly couple was turned away. Not local. Did they think the water would heal them?

This sacred place always seems under siege by megacorps prepared to poison it. These guards, not unlike those at the hospital, were their momentary answer. Good thing someone always came along to protect it.

As Ava’s class walked to their bus along the busy road, strands of all colours swirled above each young soul, intertwining as they planned. I witnessed the birth of the giant that would transform the world.