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Between Me and the River

BY KATHY LATOUR

Carrie Host woke up from what was to have been a simple cyst removal on Halloween of 2003, expecting to head home to take part in the annual holiday with her three children. Instead, she heard the word “cancer” couched in “the good kind” language: carcinoid.

Host, a lover of poetry and art, equates her journey with one of her life’s powerful images: water. As we read the words of her diagnosis, the water rises, sucking her down into an uncontrollable darkness. Seductive, serene, and filled with hope one moment, Host’s river becomes raging and deadly the next—dragging her under, where she thrashes in the current and lands half drowned on the shore.

I was swept along with her images as she expresses the pain, relief, grief, joy, and hysteria of the experience. I held my breath with her when, after the doctor said it was the worst case he had ever seen, she was once again sucked under the water. I am with her as she lands in the middle of the river on an island of fear and loneliness, and cheer when she is rescued by the friends, doctors, nurses, and a mother’s compelling love for her children. Host earns highest praise for having captured the feelings of a mother with cancer. I was there in my own diagnosis, fighting thoughts that I might leave my child.

The power of motherhood rules all, from weighing the right place to tell her oldest children about her cancer to remembering to put on lipstick for family photos, so if she died, the kids could say, “Gosh, Mom looks so good. It’s hard to believe she was sick.” When Host learns that her cancer will likely come back and that there is no cure, she is back in the river, which this time has no banks and no edges, leaving her to decide once again whether to sink or swim.

Then, during a real trip to Bermuda, she stands on a dock with her husband and children when the wind whips the water. A dare from her daughter prompts Host to leap into the water, followed by her family, as together they leap into Host’s new life.