

SHORT STORY IN ITS ENTIRETY: BASEMENT CAKE BY MARTHA COATS

My in-laws moved-in with us during the second week of September. A new school year and tears had just begun. And I was actively mourning the end of summer and the beginning of an autumn that, at best, wouldn't be a good time.

Maury, my father-in-law, has cancer again.

Eight years ago cancer festered in Maury's throat. They moved-in then, as they have now, so Maury could receive treatment at Boston's Dana Farber Cancer Institute. That cancer was stubborn and held on with a kung-fu grip for six months while Maury suffered a cure that nearly killed him. A medical version of shock and awe.

Eight years ago my kids were very young; two and four years old. That posed unique challenges and I found myself saying the most bizarre things to them.

"No, Papa's teeth don't live in his mouth anymore. They live in a glass now."

"The man in the photo is Papa. Yes, he was bigger then."

"Why don't you play LEGOs while Papa naps in the hallway."

The cancer was gone for eight years. And every year we'd celebrate with a little champagne and an extra thank you to God before sitting to dinner. At some point I stopped worrying that cancer could strike twice.

Days before my in-laws moved-in I celebrated my 45th birthday. Every year my Mother lovingly bakes my favorite cake. I refer to it as "the cake" since every other cake wishes it could taste this good. Two layers of moist chocolate cake that, I promise, sigh when

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sliced. She covers the cake with a cooked vanilla frosting that lays thick and soft. It's very hard not to rest my face right in it.

Before leaving my parent's house my Mother placed the remaining cake on a platter and insisted I take it home. Happy birthday to me! When I got home I knew the platter wouldn't fit in our bulging kitchen refrigerator so I tucked it into the basement refrigerator and forgot all about it.

Its uncomfortable to tell people my in-laws have moved in. It opens up a conversation that's depressing and difficult to end. Everyone wants to be positive. Everyone likes to say this time will be different, less intense, less destructive, the kids are older, the cancer hasn't metastasized, it's not going to be as bad.

On Monday Maury developed a raging infection. It slipped into his blood and kept hidden in his body, quiet like a secret, until 10:00pm on Tuesday night.

If you have never heard the sound of an adult body dropping to the floor, imagine someone on a step ladder dropping a 180 pound bag of sand. Apart from the noise the house shakes and small items rattle as your brain tries to decide what happened.

At 10:08pm I found myself standing in my nightgown at the end of our driveway flagging-down the emergency crew who'd been called to action. I watched, feeling useless, as Maury was lifted out of our house, strapped in a gurney chair, unconscious, frail and as small as a baby bird. My mother-in-law bumped around, struggling to remember her shoes and purse. My husband couldn't decide if he should waste time changing clothes or leave for the hospital wearing pajamas.

I watched lights flash down our street until they were out of sight.

At 10:33pm I remembered the cake.

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Sitting on the cold basement floor, the cake platter in my lap, I sliced off miniature pieces of cake and fed myself until nothing was left. I remembered all the positive things people said, how this time it was going to be better. I wished that were possible. But I know better. Because cancer—good cancer, bad cancer, small cancer, large cancer — it's all a tsunami. It's swift and pounds with massive force that sweeps away everyone in its path. All you can do is suffer the storm and pray that when it passes everyone is left standing.