

Conversation Pieces
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In Search of Lost Time

by
Karen Heuler





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She had been an idiot to hope for good news. Hildy realized this as the doctor's words droned on. When you were young, good news moved in big and little waves; that's what youth was. But she was forty-seven. Still long and lean, still striding hard. Still wearing tight tight pants and soft boots with kitten heels. She liked to lead with her legs; she liked the idea of them rounding corners before the rest of her did. She painted the heels of her boots red.

So, cancer. Hildy stared as the doctor patiently explained how the process worked. Of course there would be a process for it. She was fine with process.

Cancer of the Tempora—who had ever heard of that? Not quite an organ, part of the brain, exactly the spot where the body experienced time. So, basically, her little lapses, gaps, fugues—all of it a disease with time. It could kill her (well, something would, eventually) but in strange stages. Her body could be healthy except for this, but something might age so fast that it would stop working right, within a week or a year, hard to judge, unless she had treatment.

And so she had treatment. She was going to be a survivor.



When they hooked her up for chemo, though, she had an unexpected reaction. Sitting there, in the comfy large adjustable chair with the hinged flat armrests, she saw a change in the air around her. Mists enveloped people, vapors with colors. When they walked, the mists moved with them, like gauzy hajibs. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, then called the nurse.

“My eyes are fuzzy. I can’t get them clear,” she said, leaning forward slightly.

“Any nausea? Itching? Do you feel weak or dizzy?”

“No; nothing. But my eyesight—”

The nurse checked her line, tapped the chemo bag. “No one’s reported any side-effect like that before, but there’s always a first time. Is it getting worse?”

“No. Yes. I think I’m getting used to it. Never mind.” Hildy leaned back. She was a strong woman, not a wimp. And her eyesight actually wasn’t worse, just different. It wasn’t blurry, for instance; it was merely...deeper.

She kept looking at the empty chair next to her. She tried not to picture Noah’s face—the wide-open grin, the brown eyes with a humorous squint, the fuzzy hair he forced to be ruly. He liked the word *unruly*, and he liked to play with it. “I see,” he once said, “you’re being ruly today.” And he had turned his head, twisted it upside down. “Did you know we’re incapable of recognizing faces upside down? You could put your own head upside down and not be able to pick it out.”

“Why would I want to pick out my head upside down?” she had protested. She had enjoyed that kind of thing.



The drugs made her head feel full, but that mist, that aura, stayed faintly present. She felt thick and slow, so she stared at the tints that hung around the nurses and the patients. When visitors came, they brought their colors with them; no one was excluded.

She went home and lay down for a few days. After the nausea left, she went back to work teaching basic computer skills. It was an adult ed class run out of a high school. Some of the students were old and lonely; some were out of work and hoping to add to their resume. She saw thin mists around them, except for a young man who'd dropped out of college. His aura was thick; when she passed by him she tended to leave more space.

And then, vaguely—was it deliberate?—she put her hand in his aura, twisted it around, trying to make it look like a normal action. She cupped her hand in it, pulled the mist toward her. It felt heavy, a little oily, like lemon oil. It soothed the skin of her palm and gave her a sensation of youthful indifference, as if everything worked well without thinking.

She inhaled it.

The student, Joey, noticed something different and looked at her with raised eyebrows, but she moved on, breathing deeply.

She sat down at her desk, feeling her heart beat steadily, feeling her lungs moving without an ache. She felt a light skipping in her chest, a pleasant anticipation, as if anything could happen at any moment. Was this some sudden new side-effect of chemo? It didn't feel like it. But it was unexpected, and intoxicating.

She kept glancing at Joey as she went through the lesson for the day. The students dutifully bent their heads and followed along, creating a file structure on their computers. As she went around the class, checking their work, she leant over Joey and breathed in heavily. His neck turned red, and he looked up at her. “I get dizzy,” she apologized.

They knew about her illness; they loved her for it.

For the next class, she saved a take-out coffee cup and lid and pretended she needed the caffeine, that coffee worked somewhat like smelling salts. She made her way around the room, keeping her eye on Joey. She took the lid off the coffee, pretending to blow on it. He looked up at her quickly, smiled, his eyes looking kind, and when he turned back to his work, she made a quick pass over his head, lifted the cup to her face and took a gulp. Again that feeling, that inner sense that all was well, and it overwhelmed the knowledge that she had cancer, pushed it away like a tide so it was gone. In its own way, it was similar to the efforts at visualizing triumph over cancer, which the nurses had advised her to do. She found it hard to imagine cancer, in fact, and if indeed she did have cancer she was sure—body-sure—that it was weak and could be overcome. She wanted to run or flirt or laugh instead; that was the right thing to do. She was strong and supple, and she wanted a hamburger.

As a test, she continued down the row and swooped her cup in the thin mist near her oldest student and sniffed. Some of the exhilaration left and a greater sense of dutifulness hit her. And a worry about money, which was new.

She thought about this after class was over and after repeated sniffs at the coffee cup resulted in nothing but lightheadedness.

She asked Anne, the chemo nurse, if there was any advantage to hanging around young people when you had cancer. The nurse laughed. “Can’t stand them myself,” she said cheerfully (all the cancer nurses were cheerful). “You have to be half my age now to be considered young!” She shook her head and laughed.

Hildy could see that: Anne’s aura was almost as thin as her own.

She glanced down at her own hand, studying the differences in aura between it and the nurse’s hand. Anne didn’t notice, so Hildy’s question had raised no obvious concerns. Sometimes it was hard to know what to discuss, what to focus on. The country of cancer had its own borders, its own language, and surely its own laws. She had entered strange territory.

She knew she would be sick after chemo, no matter what medication they gave her for nausea. She’d told Anne that she’d gotten sick after the first round, and Anne suggested some Eastern medicine might counter the fatigue that followed the nausea. “Keep all roads open,” Anne said cheerfully as she handed her a business card for an acupuncturist. “You never know what will help.”

O tempora, O mores!, Hildy thought, as she hurried to get home before the vomiting started. Go to an acupuncturist for needles to change the effects of the needle the chemo nurse gave her! That was called irony, though it seemed like sarcasm.

Two days later, when her stomach settled, she went in search of the acupuncturist on the business card. She stalked Chinatown—down Mott Street, past Catherine Street—and stopped at a storefront on Wey Street. The store was some steps down, below street level, and the lettering was along the upper edge of the window. “Unusual medicines,” it said. “To heal and strengthen unusual things.”

Hildy was charmed by the words. She walked down the steps and opened the door to a small room with a deep rug and pillowy chairs. A man came out from one of two doors at the back. He nodded and walked over to a desk to the right, where he adjusted some papers and then motioned her to come forward and sit down. There was a chair off to the side of his desk, and she took it. He gazed at her mildly.

She waited for him to speak, and when he didn't, she finally said, “I see auras.”

“Many do,” he replied, nodding once. “Is this a problem for you?”

“Actually, it's physical. I don't just see them, I can take some of them.” She waited for his reaction.

He looked at her keenly, bit his lower lip for a moment, then clasped his hands together. “I've heard of this. It's a very rare gift. Now that you can see auras, it's possible for you to learn what they mean.”

She sighed and relaxed. “I thought they meant something. At first I was worried that it was a problem with my eyes.” She hesitated. “Or my mind.”

He had her fill out a card with her name and address and diagnosis, then silently motioned her to follow him to the next room. He turned on a tape of flute music

that sounded like water running down a mountainside—very nice.

“Just loosen your clothing so nothing constricts, and lie down on your back on the table.” She did so.

“Lie very still,” he said, his back turned to her as he sorted through his needles. “You have the ability to see things, so think of a place that’s soothing and harmonious.”

She thought of sleep, the only peaceful thing in her life. Though maybe she should worry that she wouldn’t wake? She never did worry; she loved sleep and all the relief it provided. He placed the needles quickly, a tiny touch and then a tap. She felt herself relax. She took off her scarf, and he tapped needles into her bald head. Slight tap, move on. Slight tap, move on. It never hurt.



After he had placed all the needles, he lowered the lights and left the room. The music became a little louder and then softer. At first she lay there listening for him, trying to figure out if he’d gone back to his chair behind the desk, if he’d gone out the door to the street, if there was another room where he stood, waiting for her session to end. What did it matter what he did? He could stand wherever he chose. She dozed off.

When he turned the lights on again, she felt calm and refreshed. She had to remind herself that there was still chemo in her veins, and chemo ahead, and that a few minutes of therapeutic ease weren’t a cure. She listened as he told her she would be free of nausea if she came to him before each treatment, that she would feel whole

and healthy, that the tumors would grow weak and be unable to fight back.

“I have a special relationship with cancer patients,” he said as she paid him. “I know I can help. I suffer myself from a violent temper—perhaps you noticed the small needle in my ear lobe? It keeps me calm. I only tell you this so you’ll know how I trust the needles absolutely. Would you like to schedule another appointment?”

She would wait and see how she felt. She was certainly relaxed; she had to admit that. That heavy feeling, that strange taste she had at the back of her throat—well, it was there but she didn’t feel obliged to think about it. She walked slowly to the subway, looking at people and their mists. Some auras floated like seaweed around people; others were more static. Maybe that meant nothing.

By the time she reached her apartment, she was starting to wobble a little. Her eyelids dragged; her mouth dragged; she took off her boots and crawled into bed. She wished, more than anything, to have Noah beside her. She wanted to have his hand on her head, stroking her forehead, telling her the exhaustion would pass, the bad feelings would pass.

In a few days, she felt strong again and wrapped her head in a scarf, penciled in some eyebrows, pulled on her boots, and went to the park.

It was a sunny day. The air was cool, but that just made it a pleasure to wear a sweater.

For the first time, she noticed that the dogs had colors around them, too. Little doggie auras. Draping them, like a bright second coat of fur.

What were those colors? What did it all mean? People usually had the same general array of tints, but then

she'd pass someone with a predominant color—salmon or spring green—and she'd wonder what the differences between people meant. She smiled at herself. They meant the differences between people! Whatever the reason, she felt buoyant. She studied the auras more closely and could see that the colors were held in place by a webbing of a translucent pearlish color. Like a mosaic. Colors, either large or small, held by strands of pearl. What were those strands? What were those colors?

She passed the dog runs and strolled into the swing area, the kiddie playgrounds with their benches surrounding the sandpile and the teeter-totter. She began to chat up the nannies, who were leaning over babies with almost white auras, and she took deep breaths because she assumed she would feel as good as she had when she sniffed Joey, but then the nannies began eying her.

No one knows this, but I know it, she thought. All these people have youth or health or something spraying out of them or trying to get in—however it works, it's information of some kind, and no one else sees it.

No one else could see what she could see.

She smiled fondly on all of them. She nodded at the nannies and looked with interest as their colored halos slopped back and forth just a twitch delayed. If nothing else, it was pretty. But it must be something else. In the midst of her ordeal, it was a gift she hadn't yet opened.

She spent the next few days with her multi-colored scarf wrapped around her head like a turban. She penciled in eyebrows with different colors on different days. She took large steps when she walked in her calf-high boots with the little red heels, so her legs would pivot out like a windmill.