

Cough

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2019 July 15;191:E794-5. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.190314

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It was in my throat. A little lump, barely there. Something almost said, the tiny thought that when stretched could consume the world in its spinning, its pull in every direction. I was solid. I was firm. I was told to not move in my mindfulness class, to sit in my chair, to inhale that lump of breath, to remember to feel my feet there on the ground. Even in stillness, I was to remain sturdy like my dad was when, just yesterday, he was informed that he likely has thyroid cancer.

It was in his throat. A little lump, barely there. Nothing to worry about, he said, while coughing.

I asked about the specifics. He wasn't sure. I asked for exact words. He couldn't remember them.

In the absence of detail, I tried to recall all I knew. I was deep in my medical texts reading what I could about papillary versus aplastic versus follicular versus him. Him. Him Him. What was his subtype? When was his biopsy scheduled? What could he see? How did he not know?

Him. The one who knew everything, including why the sky wept blue. Him. The man who would remind me that breathing is the first part of doing anything. Him. The man who told me on a sun-soaked day with peaches in my belly and the smell of summer everywhere that this is what it was to be: to nurture stillness against the maddening movement around.

A life, son, is to be able to see yourself as unmovable even when you will be gone.

My medical class is stuck in the meditation. I am in the millions of places in the conversation from the day prior. Okay, and what of the ultrasound, dad, they did an ultrasound, yes? *I do not know what that is.* Okay, and a CT? *A what?* A CT. *I do*



not know. What imaging did they do, dad? *They looked at me and said it does not look good.*

Some days, my friends tell me that I have the face of my father. It is a curious cut. Stubble gives way to grins and laughs. Jokes make easy passage through his mouth. Much of his Polish-accented language is thick with a life that has seen everything: war and peace, hunger and satiety, love and loss. His eyes are heavy teal. A rich black from the kind of night that seems endless falls on his head. He is happy.

I am sad, he tells me before this first mindfulness class. *I am afraid.*

Here in this whole-person curriculum that is meant to create resilience and wellness and hope, I am scared too. My leg is restless. I did not sleep well. I cannot stop its rattling. The meat is loud, the bone angry. My second leg joins the miserable chorus. Will my whole body soon follow? Will I shake continuously? Will I become a tremor, a total twitch building and building until all I am is the broken, breaking Earth awaiting its next natural disaster?

“Clear your thoughts.” The medical professor says, “Think only of this moment.”

I am brought again to this class, to this chair, to my trembling feet in their shoes that kiss the floor. I try to focus on nothing, which on any other day, I might note as a paradox. But here in the light that is too strong, with the heater moaning a complaint, I am unable to find much of anything. There is no peace. I am in pieces. I am torn apart as my father is from the inside.

But a tiny thought, just at the end of the exercise, seeds itself. Peaches fill my nostrils again. A giving sky generously graces the land once more. There is my dad, with a throat full of food and life, speaking that sentence again louder than the entire universe: *a life, son, is to be able to see yourself as unmovable even when you will be gone.*

He is not gone yet. Neither am I. I am here. He is here. We are together, even if we are miles, lives away. We are moving toward that thing, that terrible, tiny

thing — a little lump, barely there — one breath after one breath after one powerful, lasting breath at a time.

I call him again after the class. His voice is the greatest sound in the world. It is the only sound.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

The author's father has given his consent for this story to be told.