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Just Give Me Back My *Oprah*
and No One Gets Hurt

It is near 2 p.m. on yet another 100-plus-degree day, the radio announcer saying something about the heat index being 112 when my 17-year-old son, loading the groceries, sees that I bought a new issue of *Oprah*. “Why did you buy this, Mom, when you already subscribe?”

“Because I was in the middle of reading it, and it disappeared. I spent over two hours looking for it yesterday.” I’m pretty pissed myself that all my searches haven’t surfaced the magazine, half-read, with the best parts saved like homemade ice cream with wild blueberries on it.

He freezes, sits down in the passenger seat beside me, and confesses. “I hid it.”

“You what?”

“I didn’t like all the ads so I hid it behind that tall set of shelves in your bedroom.”

The only piece of furniture in the whole room that I didn’t move to unearth the lost *Oprah*. This doesn’t seem like reason for a 46-year-old woman, mother of three in good marriage with a great job, to lose it. But I do. I struggle with all my might to not scream every curse word my mind has ever recorded, and to not collapse into inconsolable weeping.

For the last two years, I’ve been suffering with some kind of mysterious illness that basically manifests as low-grade flu-like symptoms for over half the time. My doctor, acupuncturist, oncologist, psychic, energy healer, massager therapist, and allergist

have ruled out infection, allergy, auto-immune disease, cancer recurrence, lyme's disease and West Nile virus. Still, I keep getting sick despite my "stellar" blood work that shows a profitable immune system working speedily and well, and despite trying barley grass, tiny needles stuck in my wrists, antibiotics, prayers to all manner of the gods (and goddesses, anti-fungals, ample rest, high quality ice cream, a month without grains or dairy, and various herbs and vitamins.

"You're just too stressed out," my friends say, "I mean, with your life, how could you not be?"

My life doesn't seem that much more stressful than most of my friends caught between kids leaving home or parents leaving life. What they're referring to is my ample bout of breast cancer – now four year's old – that led me through six months of chemotherapy, and three big surgeries that washed over me like tidal waves, taking with them my cervix, ovaries, uterus, breasts, and bundle of lymph nodes, not to mention streaks of sensation across certain parts of my body. During the same years of and since, my father died of pancreatic cancer, my mother got breast cancer a second time, and then, to add insult to injury, colon cancer, and my sister had a prophylactic hysterectomy and double mastectomy. My husband's parents have had more than their share of visiting the emergency and surgery room too, including – just in the last year – my mother-in-law's surgeries to replace both knees, and my father-in-law's heart valve replacement.

Add to this a stressful but thrilling job teaching in a small, experimental, radical college; a freelance career writing things that get published, and other things that get amply rejected after Heruculian efforts; and scores of writing workshops and talks I give to various communities to help foot the bills.

Okay, so I have slowed down: following what I call “the Boston Epiphany,” where I was stranded in a luxury hotel in Boston under renovation for a conference I was too sick to attend much of, I realized I had to change my life to get better. I quit most of my workshops and talks, many volunteer obligations, and other conferences I was to present at in the nearby future.

Weeks later, lounging in my hammock during my “hammock therapy” sessions with the trees (good listeners for sure), I started to assess my over-functioning capacities in my friendships, and one by one, gave up trying to save all the people I know just because I happen to know exactly what they all need to do to fix their lives. Instead, I realized I needed to fix my life, and I didn’t know how.

I still don’t know how, but I suspect it has something to do with pulling away from the demands of family and friends, community and teaching, and locking myself in my bedroom when I’m ill. I suspect it has something to do with reading a magazine slowly while drinking a lot of ice water, resting when needed, starting to do yoga again, and writing in my journal. And my suspicions have led me to fantasy about emerging from the cocoon of my life refreshed and capable, clear-headed and well.

But what’s a girl to do when the phone rings at the wrong time, and the magazine disappears?

This weekend, which I dedicated – with a fever propelling me – to hide away in my room, was punctuated by too many interruptions. First my husband, driving around with our three kids and two Japanese girls we’re hosting for 10 days who speak very little English, calls me repeatedly from the store. What is he supposed to bring to the picnic

with the Japanese girls? What time is it, and where is it again? What time does Daniel get picked up?

I'm lifting my chair with one hand and looking for *Oprah*. I answer him curtly.

Then his mother calls at 8 p.m. and tell me that my father-in-law has been acting a bit strange, making comments about picking up his daughter – now 50 – at the pool because he thinks she's still 11. "How long has he been acting this way?" She tells me since he got back from the store. "When was that?" She says an hour or two ago.

It turns out to be six hours ago, and in her struggle to keep her own fear down, she went into a state of auto-pilot denial, not contacting us or anyone else for help, thinking he would sleep it off.

My head hurts, I'm having hot flashes despite the estrogen I just started, and I'm congested. Also, my dinner – a lovely smoked salmon sandwich and fruit plate I carefully prepared for myself while planning to veg out in front of a movie – is ready. I leave my food and head over to her house.

It turns out my mother-in-law has lied about how many hours have passed, and my father-in-law thinks it's 1993. He doesn't know his age, who the president is (although he guesses it's "Stupid") or the names of my children. He's pliable as flowers ready to put in a vase, and I help him sit up and start to get dressed. He keeps falling asleep in the middle of each sentence, two-second naps. I explain that my husband will be taking him to the hospital as soon he gets from the Japanese picnic.

My mother-in-law is near tears and feeling helpful. My father-in-law is standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, faithfully combing his hair although he doesn't understand why we're going to the hospital. I watch him try so hard, combing the thin,

gray strands down, and then back overhead, falling asleep between glances into the mirror.

Fast forward to six hours later when my husband returns to our bedroom near 2 a.m. He's exhausted. I'm exhausted. His dad is in the hospital overnight, the Japanese girls are in my daughter's room getting ready for bed, my daughter is in the living room, too wide awake to sleep, my sons are getting ready for bed in their room.

Then it's the next morning, and Ken's mother is waking us up early to say she just spoke to "Daddy," and he's still confused as to why he's at the hospital. We try to go back to sleep but the sun is coming in the windows, and the a.c. has frozen up again, exhausted as we are by the heat.

Later on this day, today, I tell Ken that I need my day in the bedroom to recover. Please, please, please, and he agrees. He will take all the kids into town, plus his mother to visit his father. I feel better already.

But of course it doesn't work: his mother went back to sleep and hasn't gotten up, so he has to go over there and get her up. Then she needs at least an hour to shower and dress. The Japanese girls are awake and dressed, sitting with their large "Hello Kitty" bags on their laps, waiting on the couch for pizza. I give in, say I'll take them in.

Half-way down the driveway, Ken calls: the boys want to go too.

So I haul five kids into a loud pizza parlor where the guy at the ovens delights in screaming out the names of the people whose pizza is ready. Each scream makes the Japanese girls and me jump, but I'm just relieved they figured out how to order Canadian Bacon as a topping.

With pizza done, I drop off the boys at the library, and then the girls at the museum, and wait for Ken. He will arrive with his mother, and we will switch cars because he can't possibly haul all the kids in her car (only in our van). But when they arrive, his mother is almost in tears about the pain in her knee and says she could hardly get into this car, and Ken says the boys just called, and they want to go back home.

Plan B is that I find them in a bookstore, which takes way too friggin' long, and then take them to get all the food for dinner tonight – Ken, before he knew his dad was ill, invited a whole family of Japanese people over to eat with us and some friends who come regularly.

And it is here in the parking lot on this hot afternoon that I find out the fate of my *Oprah*.