

A New Life

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He was not as I remembered him. I did not recognize my old friend as I stepped off the plane in the desert city of Palm Springs, California. During the ten hour trip, I had worried that the shock of seeing his diseased torn body would show on my face, and I was concerned about the embarrassment that this would cause both of us. Twenty years is an incredibly vast amount of time to maintain a long distance friendship, and I had imagined that the last few years had not been kind to my friend.

Rob, his partner Craig, and I had become friends during my career in the cosmetic industry; however, we lost contact in 1988 when they moved away to pursue other ventures, just as my career was blossoming. A few years ago, through a mutual friend, I obtained Craig's email address, and we began to correspond and catch up on our lives, mostly through brief Christmas notes.

We became closer and began to email daily in June of 2006 when Rob was diagnosed with Stage 4 T-cell Lymphoma. His symptoms started with a minor rash, and after countless tests spanning several precious and wasted months, he received his diagnosis. Then followed visits to an army of specialists, pain medication, and brutal chemo treatments, after which he courageously chose to have a stem cell transplant at the City of Hope Hospital in Los Angeles. (Rob underwent the exact procedure which Lance Armstrong, his hero, had undergone at the same hospital a few years before). During this stressful period of time, Craig kept a step by step journal of the grueling process and kept his friends posted with copious emails.

I had not yet experienced the devastation of this hideous disease, so the medical procedures were fascinating to me, and I almost felt as if I were going through the procedures with them, long distance. I was not able to give my support physically, but did offer my encouragement through letters, emails, and phone calls. Miraculously, the transplant was successful, and approximately a year after the procedure, I was thrilled to finally be able to fly across the country to visit with them and give Rob a long and very much overdue hug.

I had not seen any recent photos of them, or them of me, and so as I walked into the small Palm Springs airline terminal and gazed through the crowd of waiting greeters (I knew they would be there waiting for me), I did not recognize anyone. I was walking into a huge bright and sunny glass wall, and all I could really see were sunspots and bodies huddled in the shadows like little raisonnettes. Then suddenly someone strutted toward me with a wicked laugh and frantically waving arms; there was no doubt that was crazy Craig. Upon first glance, Craig had not changed much; I noticed that he had had some cosmetic surgery and freshly bleached hair along with his million dollar smile. Rob remained in the shadows, in the background, and tentatively came up for his hug. I tried not to show my shock; if I had met him on the street, I would have never recognized him. The trauma of the disease had drawn the natural age lines in his face into deep crevices, just as the desert sun ravages and fractures the soil. He looked smaller and hunched over; I was immediately aware that both age and the cancer had stolen away his beautiful physique. But, as I looked into his eyes, I saw that his vibrant

spirit was shining brightly, like a dazzling star that had just been born, and through the hug, I could recognize his soul, patient and strong.

There was a mysterious aura about him, though, that I did not quite recognize, and as we visited throughout the week, I found out why. As a result of the stem cell transplant, he has not only a new blood type, but also a completely different DNA; he took on the DNA of his stem cell donor. He explained that he had to wait a year after the procedure and then was able to contact his donor, which he did. His donor is a thirty-something male husband and father who lives in Texas, with red hair (Rob's hair took on a reddish cast when it came back in). His emotional makeup is also completely different than it was prior to the transplant.

Prior to the cancer, he would never shed a tear. He did not cry during any of the painful treatments (he didn't even cry when his mother died a few years prior). However, Craig said that now he cries at the drop of a hat. He gets emotional during movies and television shows; he sheds tears when happy or sad; he cried when I left. I didn't point out that it could be a result of his medications, or the traumatic experience, but who knows? His taste in food has also changed in that he now loves spicy (Tex Mex) food, which he did not like before.

When he initially contacted his Texan donor, he received a letter back containing pictures which his children had drawn. His son had drawn a picture of a frog prince, a beautifully executed bright green frog wearing a shiny crown. They had no way of knowing that Rob loves frogs and has collected frogs for years. Some things just are not to be understood.

Needless to say, I had a fabulous visit, and learned that golden friendships are just too valuable to let shrivel and die. Fortunately, we readily picked up where we left off, as if moments, rather than years had passed, and as the saying goes, we were able to "retrace the footprints left in our hearts."