



SUBJECT: A LOVE LETTER



I try to recall the afternoon of 22nd August 2022. Was it sunny, windy, cloudy, chilly? Or perhaps all of the above – as one never really knows with Bangalore's weather.

But those details elude me now. All I remember is pain, discomfort and lack of mobility from a surgically removed toenail and a heavily bandaged foot. But a deep unsettling undercurrent of uncertainty and anxiety prevailed as I dialled the hospital.

Ring ring... ring ring...

Hello, [Redacted] Hospital, how may I help you?

Umm... Hi, I was wondering if my biopsy report was out and if you could email it to me? I'm currently injured and unable to visit the hospital to collect the envelope.

Refresh...refresh...

Reports from [Redacted] Hospital...

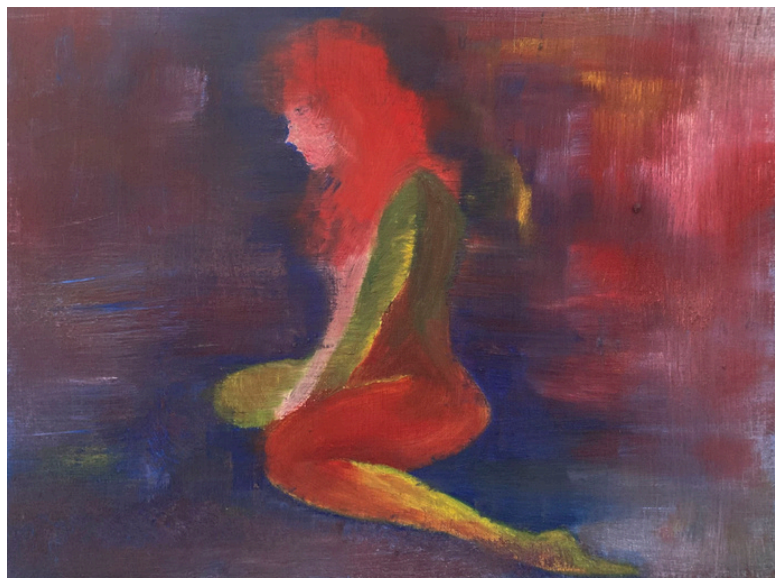
"Dear SH,  
Greetings. Thank you for choosing us for your healthcare needs. PFA your lab reports."

Click...scroll...scroll...

Impression: Papillary Carcinoma of Thyroid (Category VI Bethesda classification)

Open Tab. Google Category VI Bethesda

Definitively Malignant



Defeat by Emilia Favuzzi

Check fingernails – blue. Check feet – blue, cold, and damp. Check pulse – racing heartbeat. Panic attack confirmed. Stumble to the washroom. Open door. Slump onto the floor. Cry for 20 minutes.

Look at self in the mirror – red, watery eyes and a swollen, snotty and runny nose. Whisper through trembling lips – *Oh, sweetheart*



Through the mirror by Nina Berlinger

Dad, have you had lunch yet?

No, why?

Nothing, just let me know once you're done.

A pause.

Done. What do you need?

It's malignant. Can you apply for leave and take me to the hospital? I'll need someone to push the wheelchair.

Though I sent messages, almost everyone responded with urgency – a call. Concerned voices asked questions they didn't know how to phrase.

At 24, I faced the unimaginable – a diagnosis of stage II thyroid cancer. The treatment left me without an integral organ and reliant on not less than five different pills just to function. Cancer at any age is devastating but it feels especially cruel in youth. I lived the trope of old people juggling pills and waiting for life to end. Except I was young and watching my peers traveling, partying, falling in love, working days and nights, earning well, pursuing higher education at prestigious places abroad – in short, fully experiencing their youth.

Some days, I found myself wishing for the cancer to return – to end the misery of this half-life. For a while, I even clung to my atheism and nihilism with a rebellious zeal – *bad things happen to everybody all the time so move on* – but this provides little comfort. Added to the mix was the inability to financially support myself, being a constant financial drain on family, not achieving milestones, not being able to function optimally, being burdened with my own shattered hopes and aspirations and that of family.

So, I slept. I slept to forget, to pause life, to escape the relentless storm that raged in my mind and body.



Something wonderful happens when I sleep – I dream. In my dreams, I'm free, unburdened and limitless. Through lucid dreams, I embark on extraordinary adventures, from riding the waves of a boundless ocean to traversing the stars in a multidimensional space odyssey. Even my dreams of the everyday come with delightful twists with subtle shifts that feel like magic.



On my rewatch of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, I resonated deeply with the dark bagel which is the manifestation of despair, depression and *welchsmerz*. But as I witnessed Evelyn's kaleidoscope of possibilities, I had an epiphany: what if my dreams were more than dreams? What if they were windows into alternate versions of my life? Countless Sunidhi-s living countless lives doing everything this version of me couldn't.

And then, a thought struck me – *a bargain*. What if, in this timeline, this version of me carries the weight of cancer to ensure the other Sunidhi-s live without it? What if cancer isn't a universal, unchangeable canon event across realities but a trade-off that ensures joy, freedom and health for versions of me that I'll never meet?

This thought transformed the way I see myself. To cradle such a heavy burden only for other Sunidhi-s. And what if all of these different versions of myself were in fact, gaining new skills and all of us were able to tap into it intuitively – as we often find powers within us ever so mysteriously. When a different version of me desperately needs to love herself, the skill is present just underneath some layers. And what if the ability, that I feel like I had developed in this version, was in the works by an infinite number of my versions previously and that I had merely tapped into. Had I just stumbled upon a primordial, timeless, cosmic form of self-love?

This World Cancer Day (Feb 4th) and Valentine's Day (Feb 14th), as I celebrate self-love, I remind myself that loving myself isn't just about the parts that are easy to love. It's about finding beauty in the small victories – getting out of bed on hard days, pushing yourself a little extra some days, or listening to your body and mind and prioritising rest. I'm learning to give myself – not the idealised, flawless love we often associate with romance but the messy, resilient love that embraces my flaws and battles. It's a love that forgives my bad days and celebrates my courage. It's about embracing every scar, every pill, every struggle. It's about practicing kindness in my own thoughts – caressing every step and every stumble with the words – *my love*.

In my dreams, there are worlds where I run unencumbered, where I leap into the unknown with boundless energy. But here, in this reality, I'm learning to love the version of me who keeps going despite it all.

This is for the Sunidhi who fights, survives and dares to hope. And also, for the countless with battles invisible to themselves and others.

*Breathe in; breathe out; repeat.*

With Love,  
**Sunidhi Hegde**