

# PROLOGUE

*November 2012*

I was sitting in my car in an emptying parking lot outside my radiologist's office as the business day wound to an end in the unadorned northern New Jersey city of Hackensack, a place most people drive past on the way to somewhere else without taking notice. The town is primarily known for the excellent hospital, Hackensack University Medical Center, and the county courthouse. Neither place is somewhere you want to find yourself.

The contrasts were stark. Perhaps they would have even been comical if they had not come after the unambiguous verdict that announced itself so clearly in my latest bone scan. My ten-year battle with cancer was not yet over, as I had thought and hoped it would be.

The war would continue, it seemed. The remission I had hoped was a permanent victory had merely been a temporary truce. For a moment, I allowed myself to wander aimlessly, taking in the gravity of this news and allowing myself this brief moment to come to terms with what I

had just learned, to have this time alone to process it and be calm.

Hackensack, a gritty and energetic community, has its attractions, I suppose. But it has never been called a place of pastoral beauty and serenity. Yet as I sat in my car, I was strangely at peace and in awe of the beauty around me.

When I had seen the scans, I had known immediately what they meant. I got into my car, took a deep breath, and looked around. Nearby buildings were backlit by a calming orange glow as the sun set that November evening in 2012. The air was crisp, clean, and refreshing. The chatter from the McDonald's next door was actually amusing, and the cacophony of the traffic on Essex Street a block away was wonderful. I could hear birds chirping in trees that were shedding leaves in the fading light.

It was all nothing short of beautiful. As I sat there, I was overcome with a sense of tranquility. Hackensack, the traffic, the noise, the birds, the trees, and the setting sun—God's earth was beautiful. Hackensack was beautiful. I chuckled. Of all places to find beauty!

I would miss this, I thought. My life was coming to an end. For a moment, my heart sank a bit—but only briefly.

As the newly recognized beauty of Hackensack washed over me, I was surprised that even though I knew the cancer was back and the prognosis was grim, the only thing I felt was a rather peculiar sadness. I realized I might be coming to the end of my life, but I was also aware that I felt no panic, no anxiety, and no grief. It was a calm kind of sadness. I wasn't quite ready to surrender. "I shall fight," I thought, but I was also completely at peace with whatever

might happen in the future. I felt two wildly contrasting emotions, a strong will to fight for my life yet a willingness to surrender to my fate.

Then came what you would expect. “Now what am I going to do?”

As a physician, I knew what it all meant. After all, I had been fighting cancer at this point for years. In fact, at the beginning, I had to take extraordinary measures just to get the specialists to listen, to recognize the symptoms for what they were, and to treat them properly. That had been a struggle, but I had overcome their blinding arrogance and resistance and I had reached a point only five months before where I had been declared cancer-free after a long fight.

In January 2012, I’d begun to experience paralysis of the left vocal cord, perhaps a by-product of the years of treatment I had undergone for cancer of my parotid gland—the salivary gland. This vocal cord paralysis made it increasingly difficult for me to speak. I’d had a minor procedure, an injection into the vocal cord, in April, but the condition worsened to the point that in July doctors had recommended a more extensive surgery. That option came with a caveat: we will do it only if you are cancer-free. The implication, of course, was that there was no point in having the surgery if I was dying of cancer.

That July, I had a CT scan that showed no signs of cancer in my chest, abdomen, pelvis, or the surrounding bones. I was cancer-free and good to go.

I had the surgery at New York University Medical Center on October 19 and was home by October 23. The

pain started almost immediately, and I had wishfully attributed it to the uncomfortable hospital bed. But it continued, and as a physician, I knew that if it continued, there might be something wrong, though I didn't want to jump the gun.

I called a chiropractor friend and asked him to try to alleviate the pain, but being a realist, I told him he had two weeks. "If you can't fix it in two weeks," I said, "I'm afraid I might be in trouble." I have always had a good sense of my body, always felt in tune with what was going on, and when the pain persisted, I knew it was time for a bone scan, which is what led me to the parking lot in Hackensack.

The night before the bone scan, on November 15, 2012, I was sitting in my study at home in front of the computer, sharpening my knowledge of bone scans and learning how they could differentiate between cancer and, say, arthritis, which certainly would have been a more benign and acceptable outcome.

My wife of thirty-eight years, Fauzia, who had suffered as only the loved ones of cancer patients can—wanting to help in every way but finding herself utterly helpless—walked in and saw what I was looking at. She immediately began crying.

"Do you think you have cancer again?" she asked.

"No, I'm just trying to refresh my knowledge," I said rather pointlessly since she already knew. I was trying to spare her another day of pain and suffering, but after so many years together, she could read me like a book.

After the scan the next day, I had walked over to the radiologist and we looked together as he put it up on the screen.

Right away, I could see what he was seeing: several areas of cancer nodules in my spine, ribs, and pelvic area, five of them. He pointed them out. “Here and here and here and here.”

I nodded my head.

He put his arm around my shoulders as we sat in front of the screen.

“I am so sorry, Dr. Iqbal. I wish I could tell you something better.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m not sorry. I’m not even terribly upset. I expected this. It’s just another battle in this ongoing war. I just have to fight again.”

After I went to my car in the parking lot, startled at the newfound beauty of a fall evening in Hackensack, I immediately began planning my next move. Everyone in my family would be waiting for the news.

I didn’t want to call Fauzia at work, knowing how upset she would be. She would be home in an hour, and I would tell her then, I thought.

I called my son Sheeraz, a pediatrician. I knew he’d be wrapping up his office hours by then.

He picked up the phone, and his first words were, “What does it show?”

I will never forget the first penetrating silence after I told him, followed by his anguished voice. I could actually hear him slump down hard in a chair.

“Oh no. Oh God, no.”

“Sheeraz,” I said, “don’t be upset. This is nothing new. We have fought this before, and this is just another battle in the ongoing war; we’ll figure something out. I will be home soon.”

Next, I called my oncologist, Dr. Indu Sharma, who was just about to leave her office. I told her the news.

“This is bad news,” she said. “There is no standard treatment, as you already know, but we’ll try to figure something out. I’ll do a literature search over the weekend and get back to you.”

Next I called my office manager of twenty-five years, Pat, who was also a dear friend and always seemed to worry about me. I dialed her cell phone, and when she picked up, she was crying.

“I know! I know!” she said in between her sobs. “I was there when Sheeraz got the call. I just picked up my pocket-book and ran out crying.”

“There is nothing to cry about. I will be fine,” I said.

Sitting there, I decided not to call my other two children. Noreen worked in New York City, and I’d tell her the news when she got back to her apartment. My youngest son, Daniyal, was in Boston studying for law school finals, and I felt no need to distract him. “I can tell him when he’s home over Thanksgiving break,” I reasoned.

So I drove home, feeling numb.

When I got home, there was a pall over everything. Fauzia wanted to know, and I sat her down and told her. The news met with predicable results.

“Don’t worry; we’ll figure a way,” I said.

When I called Noreen, she immediately started to cry.

“There is nothing to cry about, my love,” I told her.

“But, Dad, we don’t want to lose you,” she said through sobs.

“I don’t want to lose myself,” I replied.

Then it struck me how dumb that phrase was, and I added, “Noreen, what I meant is I don’t want to die either. We will fight it and conquer it again.”

But no matter what I said, there was a deep, deep gloom over the household.

Sheeraz gave Fauzia something to help her sleep, but that night, no one slept in the Iqbal household.

Except me. I slept like a baby.