Forgiving the Governor of South Carolina

by Heather Kirn Lanier

(Originally appeared in Fourth Genre, April 2011)

The waiting room of the Rosenfeld Cancer Center in Abington, Pennsylvania is my new home away from home, and I'm eager to prove it. When I step on the ridged, black rubber welcome mat and the sliding glass doors swoosh open, letting escape the smell of static electricity, an odor not unlike the vacuumed and vacuous stale spaces of PHL and LAX and SFO, I will not (as I did on Day One) acknowledge my desire to turn back, to hightail away from anything that says *Cancer* and run straight into the oak-lined, neatly mowed yards of the suburban homes across the street. Instead, I breeze through the first and then second set of sliding glass doors with a confident swagger, my mother moseying just behind me. Hello, puce- and azure-flecked carpet, and hello, gargantuan bean-shaped fish tank with the silver loaches and the swaying, plastic green fronds. Hello, twenty-four hour news channel with its unrelenting ticket of urgent headlines scrolling at the bottom of the flat screen TV. Hello, receptionist with the frosted highlights in her hair and the raspy voice that sounds, ironically, like a smoker's. I am the cheerleader of a cancer patient. In front of the receptionist's desk, I hug my mother and feel her ribs through the thin skin on her back. I watch her hip-swaddling walk as she heads through the forbidden sliding doors, the ones I can never pass through. Just beyond them, I see three black trapezoids that point inward. The two trapezoids on top are like the eyes of a stenciled skull. The single trapezoid on the bottom is like the gaping mouth of that same skull. *Caution: Radioactive*, the sign says.

I've been here before and I know what I'm doing. I'm not for instance (as I did on Day One) going to read the magazine that

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Lance Armstrong's leathery, grinning mug graces, the one called *Caring 4 Cancer*, which tells me all the side-effects my mother might feel during her twenty-eight days of radiation and chemo. (*Heavy arms and legs, mouth ulcers, metallic taste in mouth, thinning hair, severe burns, diarrhea…*) Despite that it boasts it's my "complimentary copy," I'm not even going to touch what happens to be the only reading material in the waiting room, a fact I well know because (have I said this already?) I've been here before. Instead, I've brought a novel. A Jewish teenage boy, a lover of escape artists and a studier of Houdini, has escaped from Nazi Prague and is now in the Big Apple, where he's in full pursuit of the American Dream. I will read this book because I have no need to do what I did on Day One, which was to examine every single image on the wall—a photo of a horse's arch-shaped butt under a barn, a photo of a tractor plowing through a golden field, a photo of a weathered turquoise door in what appeared to be a Latin American town. Back then, I wondered how any of these images might comfort someone who waited here. But now the door and the butt and the plow are the good-natured accompaniments, the happy ironic companions of my task, which I perform dutifully and without sentimentality, which is: waiting.

I wait. As an off-white, spaceship-like machine makes a ten-minute rotation around my mother's abdomen, sending radiation through her hips, her bladder, her uterus, her spine, and ultimately (or hopefully) a patch of flesh in her bowels, I am here to wait. And I'm getting really good at it.

So are, apparently, the citizens of South Carolina. They've been waiting for their governor to reappear for several days now. Like my Jewish protagonist who escaped Prague and like David Copperfield who once made the Statue of Liberty vanish right before New Yorkers' eyes, the governor of South Carolina has disappeared. Headlines have marveled for days—*Governor Gone Missing, Governor MIA*—but *abracadabra*, here he is, smack on the wall of the waiting room, his long tan face now framed by the giant flat-screen TV. I close my book. He's a healthy bronze color, far tanner

than any of the four people waiting with me today, and his eyes are like dark marbles around which three rings of wrinkles encircle. He puts his hands on the podium's sides and says he likes to cut to the chase, to tell it straight. I choose a chair that's closer so I can hear how the governor disappeared, and I now sit caddy-corner to a middle-aged woman. She also forewent *Caring 4 Cancer* and has been penciling numbers into boxes. That is, until the governor appeared. Where's he been? We're all eager to learn. The people of the Rosen Cancer Center look intently at the TV. Some of the governor's staffers have said he's been hiking the Appalachian Trail, which seems likely because now at the press conference he's pontificating on the joys of spontaneous travel, on his lifelong love of escaping to secluded nooks of forests, on his need to flee the chatter of politics and *just completely break*.

I knew and once loved a man who hiked the entire trail, from Georgia to Maine. And on Facebook just yesterday (something I check almost hourly now, while I live with my mother) an old neighbor wrote as his status update, *Just hiked a few miles of the Appalachian Trail*. I want to want to be here, in this waiting room, to wait dutifully through this tough handful of minutes in my mother's now upturned life. I want to want this role as supportive daughter of widowed cancer patient. But I envy the governor what I think is his trail hike. *Each day, we wake up and walk,* my ex-boyfriend once wrote during a stop on the trail. *And we never get tired of it, the walking*. I have been visiting this same hospital daily for the past several days and will visit it for several days to come. I sit and I sit. A thousand miles of woods, of uneven rock and dirt sound pretty good right now, and I imagine those miles spreading out before me, begging for the simple rhythm of one foot in front of the other.

But before I can envision this South Carolinian politician fleeing his governorship for the damp green smell of pine and the daily rolling and unrolling of his sleep mat, he's apologizing. He's sorry to his wife, he's sorry to his boys. He lists several people whom he says he *let down*. He's sorry to his staff, and then to the whole state

of South Carolina. He's also sorry to people he calls *Believers* and lastly, to any person *of faith* in America. It's this last apology that pleases me. I'm of faith; I'm in America. He's apologizing to me. He's apologizing, I decide, to every person in the Rosen Cancer Center's waiting room. *I'm sorry to hear about your mother,* people have said for weeks, and have probably said similar things to my waiting compatriots, but nobody, nobody has stood at a podium and wept, which the governor of South Carolina now does as he describes the escapade he calls his *sin*.

He's been in Argentina, he tells the flashing cameras. He's been loving a woman named Maria, who he says he's loved for months. I envision that Maria has brown locks as shiny as nail-gloss, as long as Mermaid's hair, and that around this lean, tall governor she wraps her arms and legs which are, if not as expansive as the Appalachian Trail, at least just as infinitely their own way out of his or any person's burden, and because I imagine these unfounded things about Maria, I think: Who wouldn't! Who wouldn't love Maria!

The doors slide open, the ones that separate the patients from those that wait for them. The radioactive skull of trapezoids stares vacantly ahead. But the person who exits the no-trespass zone is not my mother. It's a middle-aged man with white sneakers and white tube socks pulled over his nearly white shins. He's wearing cargo shorts, and in one of the lower pockets of his shorts is a royal blue vinyl pouch that I know contains a chemo drug named by a doctor who clearly had a wry sense of humor: FU-40, it's called. *Eff you too*, I thought when I first learned that my mother would receive it intravenously, released twenty-four seven into her bloodstream like that ticker tape of headline news is released into the waiting room.

The man walks to the woman caddy-corner to me and stands beside her chair without saying a word.

“I told you,” she says, her eyes still on the TV.

The man stuffs his hands in his pockets.

“He cheated on his wife,” the woman says, picking up her Sudoku book and sliding it into her pocket book.

The man grunts and halfway turns. “They're all crooks,” he says. The two walk out of the waiting room.

And maybe I should agree with him. But as the couple steps through the sliding glass doors, the ones that lead out to the parking lot where they'll retrieve their car and drive home again until this same time tomorrow, I watch the governor. Those rings around his marble-sized eyes are like the lines of bark encircling the knobs on trees, trees I imagine line the Appalachian Trail. And when, right there in the waiting room, the governor of South Carolina seeks the forgiveness of his creator, I feel the sympathetic pinch of skin between my eyes, and I feel my lips pull into my mouth, and though he is a Republican and I am a Democrat, I understand. I understand his unannounced escapade to Maria and her country of Argentina. I understand his need to flee. I understand because the book on my lap features the Jewish boy who had to escape Prague, and because David Copperfield had to make the Statue of Liberty vanish, and because when I once stumbled upon the statistics for my mother's life expectancy, I looked away, wishing they'd evaporate, and because the gargantuan bean-shaped fish-tank in the corner of the waiting room is not enough of an aquatic paradise for me to feel as though I'm not here, in this waiting room, which still smells like airport but does not promise, unlike an airport, to lead me somewhere, anywhere but here. And though he's a Republican and I am a Democrat, I forgive him. I forgive the governor of South Carolina.