

## TRANSFORMATION: ADILAKSHMI M.

‘Life is a continuous journey of transformation’—Sukant Ratnakar

On a chilly November morning, a steaming mug of green tea in hand, I walk around in the parks of my colony. I marvel at the sweet scent of damp, lush green grass and feel its prickle massage the soles of my bare feet. Just outside the gate, the first school bus of the day snorts dutifully to a halt as blood-red Cat’s Tail flowers nod in greeting. Panicked parents hurry toward the mammoth yellow god, pulling along their panting children by the hand, afraid to be late on yet another occasion. Sparrows overhead pause their frolicking to twitter as if in amusement of such a mundane existence.

Surely, this day is too beautiful for a story such as mine: a dark, sorrowful story of disease and the struggle to overcome it. It is a story I do not like to tell.

It all began in 2006. My husband and I were leading eventful, active, terrifically busy lives in Riyadh. Every morning we gulped down breakfast, had the customary cup of coffee and then, it was off to work for both of us. I remember flying down smooth roads in a taxi, glancing nervously at my watch every two minutes. As I saw it, the life my husband and I shared was happy, content and remarkable. After all, there were so many in this world less fortunate than us, who coveted jobs like ours and apartments like ours. We were the very definition of success.

Only years later did it occur to me, horrifyingly, that the streets of Riyadh, of every city on earth, were packed with taxis just like mine, all with some version of me sitting in their backseats. And every *me* was on her way to work at a job *exactly* like mine.

I was but one among billions of clones all over the planet.

In reality, I was living my life in a fog. I did not then have the heightened awareness of the world that I do today. I did not taste my breakfast or smell the coffee. I did not know the names of the trees by the side of the road. I did not acknowledge the stunning beauty of glamorous buildings, solemn and stately, that kissed the sky. Years and years were passing me by in a blur, like the scenery from a taxi window. Life's miracles were staring me in the face, and all I could do was stare back, unconcerned.

Then, in 2006, a catalyst came along and changed it all. This catalyst, my malicious and malignant saviour, made its appearance in the form of a Sertoli-Leydig Cell tumour, a tumour of the ovary.

Engulfed as I was in the daze that was my life, I barely even noticed the symptoms at first. Then, like a newborn babe that stubbornly refused to be ignored, my tumour began to clamour for attention. I was filled with dread one day at work when I visited the bathroom to discover I was bleeding profusely.

In 2008, I boarded a flight to India for further investigation into this matter, which, as yet, remained unresolved. Once in Hyderabad, I arranged an appointment with an old acquaintance, a gynaecologist named Dr G. Shailaja, who later referred me to Dr Narasaiah for the execution of a laparoscopic surgery to remove my uterus. It was, however, Dr Shailaja, who made the life-saving decision to remove my apparently healthy ovaries along with my uterus. Later on, when the biopsy was conducted, these ovaries were found to contain a tumour.

Post the surgery, I was referred to Dr Vijay Anand Reddy of Apollo Cancer Hospital. This was the first hospital in India—the only hospital, back then—to house such advanced medical technologies for the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. Beginning with a PET scan, I underwent a string of tests to determine how far I was affected. The test reports were examined

and analysed by Apollo's team of doctors, headed by Dr Vijay Anand Reddy himself.

To my dismay, they came to the conclusion that I would require three cycles of chemotherapy. This latest bombshell rendered me fearful and anxious. Chemotherapy, the infamously horrific cure for my infamously horrific disease, is a known havoc-wrecker.

I will never forget those agonizing three cycles, each more brutal and merciless than its predecessor. My weight began to plummet, and my hair began to fall. Every night, I ticked off yet another day of agony on my calendar. I longed for it all to end, but time seemed to be slowing down, dragging its feet exasperatingly.

My family stayed by my side through the entire ordeal, my son extending his vacation to India so that he could be by my side until my therapy was done. But my greatest assurance during this time came from my team of doctors and their constant updates regarding my condition. I surrendered myself to them. Dr Vijay Anand Reddy took charge of my case personally. His calm, authoritative nature and confidence gave me courage.

Still, I had never known that such anguish was possible, and in all honesty, I never expected to walk out of the experience alive. Yet, miracle of miracles, at the end of the three cycles, when the doctors conducted another PET scan, they found that I had indeed won my battle against cancer. At long last, I was free.

My visit to Apollo Hospital did not give me my life back. It gave me a new life, a richer one, for I emerged from the hospital's halls a changed person. I have said that my story is the story of disease and the struggle to overcome it. The disease I spoke of was not cancer. It was my lifestyle, what the poet Matthew Arnold referred to as 'this strange disease of modern life with its sick hurry, its divided aims'.

The woman you see before you this morning, her bare feet on the soft, damp earth, is not the woman who flew about in taxis, the woman who sleepwalked through life without living a single day of it.

What didn't kill me made me stronger. After I recovered from the malaise I had been through, I began to appreciate the life I had almost lost. I

began to go for walks. I learned to do yoga and then, to meditate. The former made my body powerful and the latter, my mind. I achieved a deep stillness that, during the tumultuous days of my youth, I had never known possible.

Most importantly, my eyes opened. For the first time, I began to truly see the world and appreciate it as I never had before. And when I did, I gained a deep insight into my life and everything that had been wrong with it.

Someday, dear reader, you too may find yourself in the grip of bodily illness. If you do, I sincerely hope that the miracles of modern medicine may cure you, just as they did me. What you must know is that any cure is temporary; it only postpones the inevitable. The earth beneath your feet beckons, and you will only be able to resist its call for so long. It will win in the end, just as it always has. One day, the ground will open up and swallow you whole, obliterating your body, your thoughts, your history, your future, your connections, your attachments, and the person you think you are will cease to be.

Accept this fact. Embrace it with all your being, and it will give you the calm, the patience and the strength to endure whatever may come and to live this life to the fullest until that inevitable day arrives.

<b>Patient Name</b>	Ms Adilakshmi M.
<b>Age/Sex</b>	54 years/Female
<b>Diagnosis</b>	Sertoli-Leydig cell tumour of the ovary
<b>Treatment Commenced On</b>	22-01-2008
<b>Treatment Ended On</b>	16-06-2008

#### Dr VAR's Take

More often than not, women are too busy taking care of the family to pay attention to their health. Cancer of the ovaries occurs usually after the age of thirty-five years. The symptoms of ovarian cancer are not specific. It usually presents with vague discomfort in the abdomen, bloating sensation, distension of the abdomen and, rarely, pain. As

the symptoms are non-specific, most of the time the patients present in late stages. It is treated with surgery followed by chemotherapy. If the abdominal distension is too large, then chemotherapy is to be planned first. Chemotherapy reduces the tumour burden and the fluid in the abdomen, thus making the surgery easier.

Ms Adilakshmi was shattered when I informed her that she needed chemotherapy. She was more concerned about losing her beautiful hair! It is true that most of the patients lose hair while on chemotherapy, but it is also certain that it grows back!

She got back all her hair and now visits us with great confidence and always has a smile on her face.

LIFE, TEACHER, ENCOURAGEMENT:  
AJANTA SIRCAR

‘Life itself is your teacher, and you are in a constant  
state of learning’—Bruce Lee

As a professor of English at VIT University, Vellore, I lead a quiet, academic life on a beautiful and serene campus, disconnected from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. My lifestyle here has always been healthy, because it is devoid of exposure to all the smoke and dust of the city. I live among green trees and chirping birds.

As a part of my job, I visit the library every day and read extensively. Apart from my own subject, I have read a substantial number of books on philosophy, books that contain endless discussions on matters such as life, human fragility, mortality, impermanence, the passage of time and death.

None of my studying, however, could alleviate the sheer terror I felt when, two years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. We academics are so comfortably ensconced in our theories, our texts and our words that the practical, material world can seem like another planet to us. Thus, when reality hit me like a slap in the face, I was left reeling. I simply could not handle it. I packed my bags and went to Hyderabad, where my family is based.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind. The shock of the diagnosis was just sinking in, and my family and I were racked with worry; which hospital, which doctor and which form of treatment should we choose? This dilemma threatened to overwhelm us. We contacted our friends and relatives everywhere to ask them for recommendations. We made dozens of appointments and in a mere two weeks, met virtually every oncologist in the city. To our dismay, we found that each one had his own particular interpretation of my reports and his own opinions about how to proceed with my treatment. Cancer is a complicated disease. The more oncologists we saw and the more opinions we heard, the more confused we grew.

It was during this tumultuous time, when I was rushing from hospital to hospital, that I first met Dr Vijay Anand Reddy. He had been recommended by an acquaintance of ours, who was himself a doctor at Apollo Hospital. In that first meeting, I was touched by Dr Reddy's kindness and encouragement. This was a quality I had not found in many of the other doctors I had recently met.

Unfortunately, however, the sheer number of options we had, had left us in such a confused state that we made the wrong decision. We chose another doctor. I underwent a modified radical mastectomy, in which the affected breast, the lymph nodes under the arm and the lining over the pectoralis major, the large chest muscle, were all removed.

Thus, the second time I met Dr Vijay Anand Reddy, my surgery had already been performed elsewhere. My biopsy report was grim to say the least and the chances of my recovery, apparently uncertain. During this dark and desperate time, all I could remember was that among the sea of doctors, there had been one kind face with an encouraging smile that had given me hope. I decided to go back to Dr Reddy. I had absolutely no idea whether this was the right choice or not, but by this point, I had little to lose. I took a leap of faith.

Today, I can safely say that going back to Dr Reddy was the best decision I ever made in my entire life.

Dr Vijay Anand Reddy was compassionate towards me. There were plenty of patients in his waiting room, yet, he gave me as much time as I needed. So many of the other doctors I had seen were in a tearing hurry to get me

out of their office so that the next patient could enter. I never experienced any of this with Dr Reddy. He was kind. He took the time to answer my questions and to assure me that I would be all right. I instinctively felt that I had made the right decision, and from then on, there was no looking back.

Over the next six months, Apollo Cancer Hospital gradually became a place of hope for me, and Dr Reddy's entire team became my mentors and friends.

First, I underwent six cycles of adjuvant chemotherapy, staging an all-out attack against the cancer. This was the most trying part of the therapy as it affected my healthy cells as well, but between cycles, my body got the respite it needed for the normal cells to heal.

Next, I was scheduled for RapidArc® radiotherapy, which turned out to be relatively comfortable with almost no side effects at all, followed by hormone therapy, which works by restricting the growth of malignant cells by cutting off the hormones that they thrive on.

I am afraid I was not the best of patients during all of this. I am not a naturally trusting person, especially when it comes to matters of life and death. I had never completely got over the initial shock of my diagnosis and the fright and confusion that followed. But at some point during the therapy, I began to trust Dr Reddy implicitly, perhaps because although he was kind and compassionate, he never once gave me false hope. He was always firm and kept reminding me that I would have to be strong and fight.

Today, I can proudly say that I have fought and won.

My journey since then has been extraordinary. I have now had two fantastic years back at the university and am looking forward to so many exciting things. The beauty that had abandoned my life has finally returned.

Every once in a while, a friend, a colleague or a distant relative comes up to me to ask about cancer. Sometimes, they are simply curious to know my experience. In other instances, their needs are more pressing, and they want advice for themselves or, perhaps, for a family member who might have cancer.

Whenever this happens, an image of Dr Reddy smiling encouragingly always flashes through my mind.

I think that this is what the best teachers do. They hold your hand through the most difficult times and give you the courage to face adversity. They touch your life, deeply and unforgettably. When the time comes for taking credit, they convince you that you did it all by yourself.

<b>Patient Name</b>	Ms Ajanta Sircar
<b>Age/Sex</b>	47 years/Female
<b>Diagnosis</b>	Breast cancer
<b>Treatment Commenced On</b>	10-09-2011
<b>Treatment Ended On</b>	01-03-2012

### Dr VAR's Take

When she first met me, she was like a child! Sweet, innocent, confused and dazed! She could not digest the fact that she had cancer. She went around getting many opinions, understandably.

It is a fact that you end up getting different opinions from different doctors in oncology. It is always better to take opinion from a 'tumour board' wherein you will get unbiased, scientific and proper advice from a team of doctors. There will not be any individual bias when a case is discussed with a group of doctors.

She had the option to conserve her breast. She feared the cancer would re-appear in the same breast. She had opted for removal of the complete breast. Chances of recurrence or cure are the same whether you remove complete breast or part of the breast. However, you need to undergo radiotherapy to the breast in case you opt for preservation of the breast. You may still need radiotherapy even after removing the complete breast, if the tumour size is large or if the tumour has spread to the lymph glands. Radiotherapy to the breast is an absolutely painless procedure with hardly any side effects.

## HOPE: AKSHITA CHELIME

H.O.P.E: Hold On, Pain Ends

I am the daughter of a farmer, and my parents and I lead a simple life. I have always been a very active, energetic girl who is accustomed to working a lot on a daily basis and helping my parents with chores. Sitting still frustrates me; I grow bored, and I fidget. Cancer is the worst thing that could possibly happen to someone like me.

It all started with a sharp pain in my right leg. I went to a nearby hospital; they said it was a minor issue, gave me a few painkillers and advised me to rest. Yet, despite their medicine, the problem not only persisted but grew even worse. Before long, my leg was swollen and was now excruciatingly painful.

I went to the nearest town, Kamareddy, where many tests were conducted and no specific problem could be identified. It was all very puzzling; there seemed to be absolutely nothing wrong with me, yet, I was in so much pain that I could barely walk.

After the Dussehra holidays that year, I travelled to Hyderabad to go to Nivedita Hospital, where still more tests were conducted. After this, the doctors of the hospital referred me to Apollo Hospital, Jubilee Hills, where we met Dr Vijay Anand Reddy, the director of the hospital's oncology department.

The day we found out for certain that I had cancer was the worst day of my life. My parents were shocked and devastated. I cried a lot. Though we were simple people who knew next to nothing about medicine, even we knew how serious an illness cancer is. We knew that it was a killer disease, and we knew how hard the treatment was going to be.

Luckily for us, Dr Reddy was very reassuring and gave us courage. He helped us come out of our depression by telling us that many people do survive the disease and go on to lead normal lives. He said my cancer was fully treatable. Because of this kind doctor, we began to hope against hope that I would recover.

Dr Reddy explained my disease to us. Cell division, he said, is what keeps us alive, both individually and as a species. But when cells become abnormal as a result of mutation, they begin to divide unstopably. That is what cancer is. In many cases, the cells even spread throughout the patient's body.

My cancer, Dr Reddy explained, was Osteosarcoma, or cancer of the bone. My cells had formed a tumour in the bone of my leg. Yet, my condition could be treated and I could be cured. First, I would be given neo-adjuvant chemotherapy to shrink the tumour. This would be followed by surgery in my leg to remove the tumour altogether, and finally, I would be given another round of chemotherapy in the end, to kill any microscopic cells that remained in the body after surgery.

Only one problem remained; cancer treatment is expensive and my father, being a farmer, could not afford it. Dr Reddy told us not to worry about this; he would make sure my hospital bill was affordable. In this way, he was immensely supportive and kind toward us, and we will be indebted to him forever.

The treatment was very hard. The side effects of the chemotherapy began after the first two to three days. Luckily, Dr Reddy had told me what to expect and he had also told me that the side effects would get better once the treatment stopped. This knowledge was what helped me bear the treatment. Also, the staff at Apollo was very kind to me.

The surgery was successful. But the chemotherapy that came after that was, even more painful. I lost my hair, became very weak, and my nails

blackened. My skin became as sensitive as that of a newborn baby. I vomited continually, and my platelet count dropped.

Dr Reddy had already told me why these things happened: the chemotherapy drugs that attacked the cancer attacked the healthy cells as well: the ones that, like malignant cells, divided rapidly. My family was very worried about me during all of this, and they supported me every moment of the day. *It will get better*, I kept telling myself. *Just hold on; it'll be over soon.*

And then one day, it finally was!

My cancer has been in full remission for the past two years. My hair has grown back, I am healthy, and thanks to the physiotherapy I received post the treatment, I can now walk properly.

Dr Reddy was right; there are patients who fight cancer and go on to lead normal lives. I am proud to be one of them. Today, I am so healthy that I can hardly believe I ever had the disease at all. I sometimes find myself wondering if I ever really did have cancer, or whether it was all just a bad dream.

I am so happy right now. Of course it is unfortunate that I suffered from such a dreadful disease at a young age but my experience has taught me so many things. It taught me that any problem can be solved. Above all, it taught me the art of hope.

I thank all my doctors, my family members and the staff at Apollo. These are the people who helped me every step of the way. I am alive because of them.

<b>Patient Name</b>	Ms Akshita Chelime
<b>Age/Sex</b>	24 years/Female
<b>Diagnosis</b>	Osteosarcoma tibia
<b>Treatment Commenced On</b>	19-10-2011
<b>Treatment Ended On</b>	29-02-2012

### Dr VAR's Take

Unfortunately, bone sarcomas are seen in the adolescent age group. It usually presents as pain or swelling in the long bones of the legs or arms. When there is a persistent pain in the bones for more than two weeks, it has to be investigated. A simple X-ray is sufficient to see if there is any abnormality. We need to do a biopsy if there is any abnormality seen in the X-ray.

Osteosarcoma of the bone is a rapidly growing bone tumour. Two decades ago, the treatment for it was amputation! Currently, it is a highly curable cancer. Not only are we able to cure the cancer, we are also able to preserve the limb.

The patient has to go through intense chemotherapy for three cycles, followed by a limb preserving surgery, wherein the affected bone is removed and replaced by an implant. Subsequent to the surgery, three cycles of chemotherapy have to be given.

Akshita is a brave girl. She had a tough time going through chemotherapy. She was, in fact, consoling her parents and urging them not to worry! Chemotherapy for sarcomas is quite toxic. However, children tolerate it quite well and recover fast. It is very important to go through chemotherapy, which prevents tumour recurrence and spread to other parts of the body.