



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

Through Good Times and Bad

When Mona was an infant, she choked and monetarily stopped breathing. I was changing her diaper at the time. Miraculously, I had the wherewithal to remain calm, hold her tiny, ten-day-old chest in the palm of my hand, tilt her head down, and then tap and rub her back – firmly but gently. A wad of phlegm shot from her mouth onto a towel, and she started crying.

Our doctor examined her. Her choking was a fluke, but he said that she had reflux. After this, Jack and I took turns holding her through the nights so that she wasn't lying flat.

I would take the first shift, sitting in an easy chair, supporting Mona upright against my chest, pillows propped around me to keep her from falling while I dozed. Jack would wake me about 3:00 a.m. He'd take the next shift, and I'd go to bed. We continued this ritual until she was about six-months-old. We also placed a wedge under her, on her changing table, so that her head was elevated.

Okay, maybe we went a bit too far. But we were first-time, over-protective, irrational parents. And I admit that when I first held Mona in my arms – all eight pounds of her, wrapped in a pink crocheted blanket – the reptilian portion of my brain went into overdrive. All I wanted to do was protect her. She was safe when she was in my arms – her tiny body against my heart. A circle of gentle armor sprang from the tips of my fingers, permeated the underside of my arm, across my chest and down the underside of my other arm, back to my fingertips. Nothing could harm her.

Of course, my illusion of always being able to protect Mona has eroded during the past eleven years. Colds and fevers; a febrile seizure when she was two; needles, x-rays and sonograms; racist, sexist and heterosexist remarks; and insensitive comments or questions about her “real parents” have reminded me that, for the most part, all I can do is be there for her. But I can't make the hurts go away for good. Two months ago, I was brutally reminded of this fact.

Jack had called me from our family doctor's office. A mole that he had had removed a week earlier was diagnosed as a melanoma. Amid our feelings of shock and grief was our desire to protect Mona from having a parent with cancer. But we no more could protect her than we could protect each other. Regardless, we decided not to tell her anything until we had more information.

Reports from further examinations and tests were mixed. It was a high-risk melanoma, but Jack's Pet-scan and sentinel-node biopsies were clear. Jack's oncologist recommended interferon treatments – IV's for a month, five-times-a-week, followed by shots, three-times-a-week for the rest of the year.

Upon hearing the doctor's recommendation and learning that interferon could have significant side effects, we decided it was time to tell friends and family, beginning with Mona. I knew that Jack dreaded this, so I told Mona before Jack came home from work.

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"Remember, Honey, when Daddy had that mole removed from his shoulder? Well, Dr. Larry said it was a melanoma. That's a type of skin cancer."

Before I could say anything else she yelled, "No!" started crying and ran into her bedroom.

No knight in shining armor this time; I simply picked up my book and continued reading. I couldn't make this go away. Cancer had a way of humbling me, reminding me that my will to protect was – at least in part – so much arrogance and folly.

In a few minutes, Mona returned, and we talked about what was good and hopeful. I told her that when I was in third grade, my mother – Mona's ninety-six-year-old grandmother, who was sitting downstairs in our living room reading – had cancer.

I also told her that not all cancers are the same and that the doctor said that Daddy's is curable and that further tests had shown no sign of the cancer spreading. Mona asked questions, and I answered what I could.

Jack has begun his interferon treatments. There are side effects, but he's doing quite well, and so is Mona. The three of us have grown a lot over the past eleven years, and we've taken a bit of a quantum leap in the past two months.

I occasionally lapse into wishing that I could stand in for at least half of Jack's treatments, or wanting to wrap Jack and Mona in my arms, and whisk them back to a time before our family doctor gave Jack this news, but I know that I can't. Nevertheless, we still do wrap ourselves in each other's arms. And even if it takes us no further than the moment, it's wonderful medicine.