

This essay was originally published in [The Smile Never Fades](#) with photos by [Bill Bastas](#). Proceeds from the book benefit Austin's breast cancer organizations. Used with permission.

Your doctor won't tell you, "You have cancer." Instead she'll leave you out of the sentence altogether. "It's cancer," she'll say. It. The impersonal pronoun. But It isn't the name on your pathology report. It doesn't feel the pain when pieces of your body are removed. It doesn't need a hat. As soon as you leave your doctor's office or hang up the phone, It loses half Its letters. "I have cancer," you learn to say. You practice putting yourself in the cancer sentence—on the phone, in your e-mails, at the church picnic and the Christmas party, and to your hairstylist.

People respond in one of three ways. They express their sorrow and promise to pray for you. They tell you every cancer story they've ever heard. Or they respond like my hairstylist and yap fruitless wisdom. "You never know when you're going to die. You could die in a car wreck tomorrow."

I knew that better than she did. She didn't know that during my last haircut, I had practiced telling another stylist, "My sister just died in a car accident." I had learned a lot in six weeks. By the time I learned to say "I have cancer," I wasn't afraid of death—or life.

In the four months since my diagnosis, my life has consisted of four surgeries, four rounds of chemo and one blood transfusion. I plan my schedule around doctors' appointments and hospital stays. I pick my clothes according to their access to the vein in my elbow and the catheter near my collar bone. I prepare my meals according to what my church has brought me and which taste buds are functioning. Cancer has invaded every part of my life.

So how can I smile? I can smile because It is not my God. When Moses found God in the burning bush, he asked God what His name was. God answered, "I AM."

My God is the Great I AM, and He loves me. When I wrote my first I-have-cancer e-mail, I didn't ask my friends and family to pray for my healing. I didn't ask them to pray about It at all. I asked them to pray that I would know God loves me. Test results, body parts, dreams and comforts fade away. His love does not. So that's what I asked them to pray for. He has answered their prayers.

For the last six months, He's been proving to me, "I AM compassionate. And I AM your provider." Only weeks before I went to the doctor, I moved from a small town with limited medical resources to Austin, TX, the city where Lance Armstrong beat cancer. I found the perfect housing situation and what has turned out to be the perfect chemo roommate—on Craigslist. My mom says, "I can't believe you went online and found Marissa. That's a miracle." I agree. While I moved in with Marissa and looked for a job, my former employer accidentally paid the premium on the cancer insurance policy I hadn't planned to keep. I was so excited when I found out, that I took my little lumps to the doctor I found on Citysearch.

Dr. Chalasani is another miracle. Most doctors don't worry about lumps on a woman my age. But I knew God didn't accidentally work miracles. He had given me cancer insurance for a

reason. Dr. Chalasani ordered the ultrasound and the subsequent biopsy. Then she had to call me with the results.

My parents flew in from Alabama for the lumpectomy. My mom slept on an air mattress in my bedroom for a month while I recovered from the lumpectomy and lymph node biopsy and then the re-excision shortly afterwards. She went home for a week before she and my dad returned for the double mastectomy. And she came again when I had to have my port-a-catheter replaced due to a blood clot. She comes every time I have chemo. Her clothes and toiletries and hairdryer stay in my closet. I use her hairdryer on my wig.

When my mom's not here, the people of the Austin Stone Community Church take care of me. The night before my biopsy, I visited their small group that meets near my apartment. Two nights later, one of the women brought me lasagna. That was the night Dr. Chalasani told me, "It's cancer." The next day two of the other women met me at my surgeon's office. Since then they've brought me rotisserie chicken, spaghetti, sirloin, Rudy's BBQ, Brick Oven pasta dishes, a Z' Tejas gift card, chemo-friendly groceries, surgery-friendly hugs and prayers. They've helped pay my parents' travel expenses. They've cleaned my apartment. And they're about to throw me a hat shower.

How can I not smile? God has shown me He loves me through my family, my church, my medical team, my friends here in Austin and around the world, Craigslist, Citysearch and payroll errors. So I'm still smiling. I laugh, too. Like when I lie in a borrowed bed, surrounded by borrowed furniture in a borrowed room that I found on Craigslist, and I wonder how God will pay the bills when my sister's life insurance money runs out. Eventually I see the irony of my doubt. That's when God smiles and says, "Remember? I AM."