

FIRST PERSON

CITY OF BROTHLY LOVE

Soon after relocating with her family, *Caroline Wright* got a shocking brain cancer diagnosis. That was all it took for neighbors and strangers to become friends—and show up bearing jar after jar of soup.



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HE SPLITTING HEADACHES started after an eventful summer. I'd moved across the country to Seattle with my husband, 3-year-old, and newborn. We'd begun renovating a dilapidated 1906 home we spent all our savings on. I was writing a cookbook that sent me to Spain, which required me to pump 100 bottles of breast milk before leaving my two sons with my parents. Then, that fall, when I was back with my family in my (still under-construction) home, the headaches intensified along with the Pacific Northwest darkness. As I explained the sheer chaos of my life to my new doctor, she became convinced my symptoms were stress related. It was my offhand description—they felt like bad sinus headaches behind my right eye—that caused her to pause and order an MRI. But I was 32 and in good health, so we both believed the scan to be routine.

So routine, in fact, that I drove myself to the MRI appointment a few weeks later, missing the turn into the parking lot three times despite using GPS on my phone. And I was alone again when my doctor called a few hours later to inform me that the scan had revealed a brain tumor the size of a clementine in my frontal lobe. All the bouts of extreme spaciness I'd been feeling, including when I missed the turn to the MRI and when I lay in the machine itself, had actually been countless silent seizures.

The following week, I had brain surgery to remove the tumor. A week after that, I learned it was a glioblastoma, an aggressive brain tumor my doctors hadn't prepared me for because they thought I was too young to worry about it. I was given a year to live.

Being infirm, bedridden, and pitied was as hard to accept as the diagnosis itself. My two young sons retreated from the sight of my swollen, shorn scalp studded with staples. It was in that moment, while I lay in bed and listened to them play on the other side of my closed bedroom door, that I decided if I only had a year to live, I would do it as myself, as their mom, and not as a patient.



Recovering at home after surgery, Caroline snuggled with her sons, Henry and Theodore. Opposite: Caroline, husband Garth, and the boys recently delivered jars of soup.

I began waking up each day and devoting my life to two narratives: I would die, but I would also live.

I arrested my life as I knew it. As I asked my body to endure the inhuman experience of three months of targeted radiation followed by a year of extremely toxic chemo, I swapped every habit for a softer version. I stripped inflammatory food from my diet, stopped worrying about my career, and sought quiet in all corners of my life. I started practicing yoga, the gentle kind in a class of old ladies, and began to think about sleep and water and breath as fuel. My energy became precious, another child to care for. On my page on CaringBridge (a journaling site for sharing health updates with loved ones), I wrote constantly—to preserve my love and thoughts for my sons in case I died, but also, simply, because I still could. I wrote from the part of myself that cancer couldn't touch. My words, though written for my sons' sake, connected me to so many people I'd met throughout my life, and many I hadn't yet.

My family had only lived in our house for about six months before my diagnosis, but even so, support appeared around us as though we'd lived there for years. One neighbor stopped by to babysit while I was at an appointment, and I returned to find a spotless home and my boys happily playing with toys her sons had outgrown. A mom I'd met twice insisted

COURTESY OF ADAIR RUTLEDGE

on whisking away my toddler son every Wednesday, bringing our family dinner with each pickup. After I casually mentioned craving homemade soup on CaringBridge, jars appeared on my doorstep three times daily for months, each jar accompanied by a deeply personal note from the stranger who'd left it. Allowing people to witness my struggle made them a part of my life. In fact, I was only able to focus on myself the way I did because a community formed around me to handle the rest.

My relentless search for hope, combined with my belief in the collective power of small changes and kindnesses, made me stronger. I followed the path offered by my doctors, of course, but I also developed a real faith in my instincts, and in my body's innate ability to survive and heal. I kept

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an open mind and explored alternative therapies, doing my own trials with CBD, for example, after reading a study linking it to success with glioblastoma. I joked I would have eaten monkey scat if a study suggested that doing so might give me more time with my kids. I grew leaner, more clear-headed, and healthier than I'd ever been in my life. My blood work improved. My doctors were surprised—as much by my attitude as my progress in treatment. Oddly, it was while I was allegedly dying of brain cancer that I became healthier than ever.

On the anniversary of my diagnosis, the one my surgeon warned I wouldn't see, I made a cake and invited all the helpers, my beloved new friends, to celebrate my “rebirthday” and our connection. Around that time, my doctors started talking about survival, and people began calling me “miracle” more than “patient.” Then the prescriptions stopped, and there I was, free to live again as if it had all been a dream.

But I was, and remain, forever changed. Just after that anniversary, I started to make soup every week for those friends who had cooked for me, to feed their families and heal them in ways they didn't know they needed, in the form of a soup club. That club eventually restored to me all my strength, as well as my connection to cooking, which had been a lifelong cornerstone of my identity. The flourishing of my career followed: Like the rest of my life, it is fuller now than it has ever been. I've had clear scans for four years. I am still dropping off jars of soup on my friends' porches during the rainy months of Seattle winter, and I share homemade cake with them at my annual “rebirthday” party. Cancer taught me that living connected to others—accepting help as a form of love and loving in return—is nothing less than the definition of being truly alive. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Caroline Wright's cookbook, *Soup Club*, comes out this fall. Her favorite soup is tomato and quinoa. Find her at carolinewrightbooks.com.



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