

## Floating Through Normal

Angela closed her eyes, relishing the heat of the shower before she had to go out into the chilly February morning. She shook her head at the sound of her alarm, wishing she could stay in there forever.

Sighing, she turned off the water and reached for a towel.

As she bent over to wrap it around her strawberry-blonde hair, she froze, barely blinking. Her eyes stayed on the small dent on her breast. It was tiny. It could have been anything, and yet the universe came to a screeching halt because she knew it wasn't anything.

No, it was something.

As quickly as the thought came, she pushed it away. She wasn't ready for it to be real.

In fact, Angela kept pushing it away for an entire week. A week of going to work; a week of coming home to her fiancé, Paul; a week of going about life as normal as if her entire world wasn't about to change.

Except nothing was normal. The universe had stopped, and gravity went along with it. Yet, somehow, she was the only one affected. So she leaned on her many years at the job, letting autopilot take over while she floated away inside.

Until she couldn't float anymore. It was time. She took a deep breath and pushed herself forward. Finding Paul in the living room, she started to say what she hadn't told anyone yet.

But he knew immediately from the look on her face. Before she could get out a full sentence, he jumped into action, pulling his phone from his pocket. He held it in his palm and turned on the speakerphone. "Mom? It's Angela..."

She stood there silently. Listening. The sun shone in the window straight into her eyes, as if she were now standing in the spotlight for the world's worst show.

Paul, on the other hand, fidgeted on the sofa, using both of their phones so their parents were all on the line—bringing in reinforcements without asking.

Angela heard their attempts to soothe her. Twenty minutes of:  
"You don't know what it is."

“It could be anything.”

“Everything will be okay.”

She gave a small shake of her head. Everything was about to change, and it wasn't going to be okay. She knew it.

“I'll find a place to get a mammogram on Monday,” she offered in a desperate plea to get back to normal.

Apparently hearing what they wanted, the phone calls ended. For the rest of the weekend, Angela and Paul fell into their roles. It felt safer that way.

And then it was Monday morning. She called her gynecologist's office.

“I need to make an appointment.”

“Sure. Is this for your annual?” the person on the other line asked.

Angela hesitated. “No. I found a spot on my breast that needs to be looked at. I have a family history of breast cancer.”

“I understand. We can see you on Thursday.”

“That works. Thank you.”

Autopilot had taken her through the last week and a half; what's another few days?

Thursday arrived, and she found herself sitting on the exam chair—white paper beneath her, pink paper around her. Though the room was cold, she was sweating, and the table creaked with her shaking leg. A sharp knock pulled her from her thoughts.

“Hi, Angela. What brought you in today?”

She tried to speak, but her mouth refused to cooperate. She cleared her throat.

“I found something on my breast, and need to have it looked at.”

He nodded and moved toward her, using a gloved hand to examine the spot she pointed out. After a few moments, he pulled the gown back up and stepped back. “I'm sure it's nothing, but I think you should get a mammogram to be safe.”

Angela searched his face. That was what she wanted to hear. She wanted to believe him. Why then had gravity not kicked back in yet?

The doctor pulled out his prescription pad. She heard a short scribbling sound before he handed her the paper and walked out the door, tossing one last reassurance on his way out.

She turned toward her clothes, dressing methodically with shaking hands and regret that she'd come by herself. She felt so alone, but it was a weekday—everyone worked.

Back at home, she began researching facilities. Call after call after call.

“Our next appointment is in three weeks.”

“The soonest I can get you in is next month.”

“We don't have an opening for a few weeks.”

She called one more.

“Hi. I need to schedule a mammogram,” Angela said into the phone.

“Sure, no problem. How's two Wednesdays from now?” the scheduler offered.

“Is there anyway you can get me in sooner? This is not a routine screening,” she pushed back, voice faster and louder than she meant.

“Let me see what I can do.” After an eternity in five seconds, the scheduler said, “I can squeeze you in on Monday. Would that work for you?”

Angela let out a long exhale. “Yes. Thank you so much.”

“Of course. See you then.”

With that, she hung up the phone and closed her eyes. She'd done what she could. Now it was the universe's turn to take over.

Except the universe decided to make every minute feel like days and every day feel like eternities. When she lay in bed, she felt her body tense, and she woke up to her shoulders by her ears. She tried to let Paul be her distraction. They watched movies and joked and laughed. From the outside, she looked just as she always did.

The day finally arrived. She got into the car to drive the five minutes to the facility, but as soon as she sat down, her stomach turned. She quickly opened the door, feeling as if she were going to be sick. Only when she was sure it was a false alarm did she pull out of the driveway.

Angela walked through the glass doors of the building and checked in at the front desk. Or at least she assumed she did, because now she was standing uncomfortably at a machine, head twisted in an unnatural direction, cold and aching, with a part of her body being pressed tightly between two plates.

And she didn't remember how she got there.

"You can grab a seat," the tech said, gesturing to a chair in the corner—one that looked like every chair in every medical facility. It felt like it should look different. It should look imposing or comforting, or something.

But it was just a regular chair.

She had no idea how long she'd sat there. Eventually, two doctors walked through the door. Her eyes immediately went to the one with strawberry-blonde hair that matched her own. They sat on either side of her—in the same plain chairs—and took her hands.

The red-headed doctor, Dr. Friend, she'd come to learn, began speaking. "We saw something concerning on your images. We can't let you leave without a biopsy."

There went gravity again.

Why hadn't she asked anyone to come with her this time? Why did she have to be right? Why her? Why?

Her eyes teared as they moved her to the waiting room. This time she didn't notice the chairs; they were too blurred by the water in her eyes. Once she sat, her entire body began shaking. It took her several tries to get her phone out of her pocket, but she had to. She needed to say it out loud. She needed someone to tell her she wasn't overreacting. That it was okay to feel scared. Maybe they could tell her she hallucinated the entire thing.

"How are you?" Angela's mom asked through the phone.

Angela took a shaky breath. "Not good, Mom. I'm waiting on a biopsy. It took two doctors to tell me that I couldn't leave without one. It can't be good when they need two of them, right?"

Her parents said exactly what she expected them to say. The “I’m so sorry” mixed with “you’ve got this” and, of course, “everything will be okay.” But how could they know everything would be okay? She was sitting in a crowded waiting room crying hysterically, talking too loudly, and probably scaring the entire room.

Nothing was okay. And she told her parents as much when they told her she’d get through this. “I don’t want to get through this. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want this.”

Between sobs, she heard a nurse call her name.

“Why don’t you come with me?” the woman said, gesturing to the open door.

Angela stood and followed. She was shown to another exam room, only this one had more than just the chairs. This one had an exam table that looked sterile and cold, and when she noticed what was sitting on the tray next to it, she felt sterile and cold. On it was everything they’d need for the biopsy, including what appeared to be a foot-long needle with something on the end that she couldn’t make out but didn’t seem like something she’d want inside her.

She stood in the doorway, unmoving.

“You can have some privacy in here. Give you a chance to take a few breaths before the biopsy starts. It might help to put the phone away, too,” the nurse suggested.

Angela nodded. Without taking her eyes off the tray, she put the phone back to her ear. “Mom? Dad? I have to go.”

“Do you want us to come over?” her mom asked.

“No. The biopsy should be happening soon. I’ll call when I’m done.”

She hung up without registering their response. Now there was silence, and silence was not what she wanted. Silence gave her too much space to think and process the size of that needle.

*I don’t want to be here. Two weeks ago, I was fine. Two weeks ago, I’d never seen the faces of two doctors looking at me like that, she thought. Two weeks ago.*

She looked around. When did the biopsy start? When did she start crying? When did the nurse take her hand?

“It’s okay, Angela. You can squeeze my hand if you need to,” the nurse murmured.

And Angela squeezed. She squeezed harder than she'd ever squeezed a stranger's hand in her life.

And then it was over.

And the next day she went back to work.

And she continued to go to work for four more days. Each one harder than the last.

She knew the phone call was coming. She imagined where she'd be. What she'd say. How it would feel for the universe to start spinning again, only it would revolve around that moment in time.

Finally, the call came. She stepped into the conference room and sat at the head of the long table that filled the space.

"Hello?" Angela answered.

"Angela? This is Dr. Friend."

"Yes. Hi, Dr. Friend. I assume you're calling with the biopsy results?"

"I am, but before I do. Where would you like to be when I tell you the news?"

Angela laughed sardonically at that. It was the question she'd been wondering, now asked aloud by the person who held her fate in her hands.

"It depends on what you're going to say. If it's bad news, I think it would help to see your face."

"Then I think you should come by my office today."

And there it was. The universe started spinning again.

She called Paul. "Can you pick me up? I just got a call from Dr. Friend and need to go to the office. I don't think I can drive there on my own."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Sure enough, he pulled up to the front of the building exactly when he said he would. She got into the car and buckled her seatbelt.

“Angela?” Paul said, grabbing her attention.

“I’m okay. Let’s go.”

When they walked through the hospital doors, everything felt too bright under the fluorescent lighting. Following the signs to oncology, they walked down a corridor that went on and on. She wasn’t sure if she was grateful for the distance between her and the truth, or if she needed to start running to get it over with.

They finally arrived at the office and went inside. Her breath caught as she looked around. Cancer patients. She knew it was oncology, but somehow she hadn’t anticipated the patients. Was that what she was going to look like?

Before she could fully sit down, her name was called, and they were walking again. Past the nurse’s station, past the exam rooms. The exam rooms. She’d never wished to be brought to an exam room more in her life. But that’s not where they were going. They were shown to the doctor’s office where the doctor herself sat, her red hair pulled back into a ponytail and a warm but sad smile on her face.

Paul grabbed her hand as they did as they sank into two dark green chairs.

“Your biopsy results are in, and unfortunately, they showed that you have cancer.”

Dr. Friend kept talking, but Angela didn’t hear another word. She knew these were words she needed to learn, but she couldn’t get her brain to focus.

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted. “Can you say that again?”

The doctor started to repeat the information. She still didn’t hear anything. This time it was the sound of crying that drowned everything out. Her crying. She needed to stop. She needed to be strong. Dr. Friend had to tell her such bad news. She shouldn’t make it harder on her.

She took a deep breath and tried to stop, but couldn’t. “I’m so sorry for making a scene. I’m so sorry.”

She was sorry. And devastated. And scared. And floating again.

And certain that from now on her universe would never be the same.