

The Elegance and Cruelty of Cancer Cells

The conference was held in a new building of the hospital system—a modern space with high ceilings, tall glass windows, and the faint smell of new paint still settling into the walls. Everything gleamed a little, as if the building itself were taking a quiet, steady breath. It was sleek in a way that felt unmistakably Iowa: clean, modest, thoughtful. Inside the conference room, the lights dimmed just enough for the slides to glow clearly on the screen, and basic science data filled the air—transcription factor dysregulation, chromatin remodeling, pathogenesis pathway sarcoma models.

And then, without warning, I was fifteen years younger.

I wasn't "Dr. Jennings" in that moment. I was just Brooke, the younger sister sitting cross-legged at the foot of a hospital bed, watching a pole drip clear liquid into tubing, into a port, into the body of someone I loved more fiercely than anything. I was back in that suspended world where everything smelled like antiseptic wipes and time was divided into scans, admissions, good weeks, bad weeks.

I learned medicine backwards.

Before I ever knew what COPD stood for—or why it mattered—I knew the name *Ewing Sarcoma*. Before I learned the difference between a type I and type II NSTEMI, I knew which chemotherapy made my brother too nauseated to speak. When most kids were memorizing their history textbook, I was learning words like **oncology**, **metastasis**, **VAC/IE**. I couldn't have listed the bones of the hand, but I could have told you the survival statistics that were quoted for metastatic disease.

It wasn't a disease then; it was my brother's *reality*.

A threat.

A language.

A storm to weather.

And as a teenager sitting in exam rooms, reading information beyond my years, the science felt incomprehensible—not because it was complicated, but because it was mercilessly personal. Everything was filtered through fear.

But now, years later, sitting in that sleek new conference room, the fear had been replaced with something else: awe. Awe not just at the medicine, but at the **biology** itself—the elegance and cruelty woven together at the level of a single cell.

When the morning session broke, I stepped out into the hallway. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the corridor, framing an expanse of Iowa cornfields stretching into soft gold and green. The rows were so neat they echoed the diagrams we had been studying inside. There was something grounding in that juxtaposition: high-level sarcoma biology unfolding in a building surrounded by the oldest, simplest landscape I knew.

Back inside, the presenter continued: EWS-FLI1-driven transcriptional addiction, vulnerabilities, therapeutic stress responses. He spoke with the calm cadence of someone who has spent a lifetime tracing malignancy back to its molecular origins. Around me, attendings and scientists nodded, sitting patiently with questions on the tip of their tongue.

I gripped my pen—not to write, but to steady myself. Something inside me was trembling, expanding. A surreal recognition that my life had intersected with these pathways long before I knew what a cell cycle was. That I had lived inside this pathology before I ever studied it.

For a moment, the past and present folded over one another so cleanly I could feel the click. I thought of my brother's oncologist—the way he held the whole universe of his care in his hands, the authority and gentleness in his voice. And here I was, sitting among people like him. Becoming one of them.

There's a particular electricity that fills you when your history and your vocation meet in the same room. It doesn't feel like fate. It feels like recognition—like realizing you've been walking toward a place long before you knew its name.

People debated mechanisms, model limitations, which dependencies might become druggable in the next decade. Papers rustled. Voices softened, sharpened, softened again.

And I realized that I wasn't in that room simply because I chose oncology. I was there because oncology had chosen me the moment Ewing Sarcoma entered my family's vocabulary. I didn't pursue this field despite my history; I pursued it because of it. Because of the awe I felt watching science evolve. Because I knew, intimately, what these discoveries would mean to families sitting in hospital rooms just like we once did.

The conference ended. Chairs scraped back. People gathered their bags. I stood for one extra moment in the bright, new hallway, watching the cornfields sway beyond the glass, letting the strangeness settle into something steadier.

Fifteen years ago, Ewing Sarcoma was the scariest word I knew.

Today, it is part of the science I study, the care I aspire to give, the reason I am here.

And that, I realized, is its own kind of healing.