Beyond Isolation

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June 13, 2022 By Laura Schmidt

In April, musician Jon Batiste, 35, who had just won four Grammys, revealed that he and his longtime partner, Suleika Jaouad, 33, had secretly married earlier in the year—just before her treatment for cancer recurrence.

Jaouad is the best-selling author of Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted, written after her diagnosis with acute myeloid leukemia in 2011 at age 22. She was declared cancer-free in 2014.

In November 2021, Jaouad learned her cancer had returned more aggressively. She and Batiste secretly tied the knot in February, the night before Jaouad's second bone marrow transplant, at an intimate ceremony where they used bread ties as wedding bands. Getting married, Batiste told CBS News, was "an act of defiance. The darkness will try to overtake you, but just turn on the light, focus on the light, hold on to the light."

With omicron surging in February, Batiste couldn't be with her in the hospital. "Utter isolation," is how she described her feelings. But every day, Batiste composed a lullaby and sent it to her electronically. Says Jaouad, "It felt like he was right there sleeping by my bedside."

On April 29, Jaouad wrote about what helps her through—and how it's not "positive" talk of silver linings—in her newsletter, The Isolation Journals (theisolationjournals.substack.com). "Embedded in these expressions is an impulse to fix the unfixable, to paper over discomfort, to hedge against mortality," she wrote. "Yet the constant positivity and empty platitudes did not erase my fear and anxiety. In my experience, the only antidote for the hard things is moving toward them, bearing witness to them and saying things as they really are."

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