Reflection on Kristen Iversen’s “Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats”

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Shifting in the auditorium-style seats on our first day of orientation, I remember experiencing a wealth of emotions. Many were expected: nervousness, excitement, and acceptance. The shock, disgust, and immense curiosity of what I was about to learn are what came as a total surprise to me. I remember, as author Kristen Iversen’s face lit up the screen, she began to describe her investigative journey into the wrongdoings at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Facility, as well as their horrible consequences. Iversen has also spelled out thousands of atrocities committed at the Rocky Flats facility in the pages of her book *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*.

Not even those living down the road from this toxic facility knew what went on within its walls, much less the rest of the country. Bringing this extremely controversial and intriguing topic to light is what made Kristen Iversen a whistleblower in my eyes.

I could not have read this book at a more perfect time. Whistleblower Edward Snowden’s name had just recently been making headlines for leaking classified information on the National Security Administration (NSA). For as much as one news analyst or politician believed Snowden was right for having revealed this information, there was always another to staunchly oppose their view. Needless to say, heavy debate ensued. This is identical to the way the Rocky Flats controversy played out.

Much like the NSA members, workers at Rocky Flats were sworn to secrecy regarding the true nature of the plant, and any whistleblowers would be “dealt with severely and completely.”
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Some people, like Jacque Brever, Jon Lipsky, Peter Nordberg, and Jim Stone, followed their morals and spread the word about the leaky plutonium drums, lethal sediment in local ponds, and general widespread pollution and negligence. For most other workers, the high wages and government threats seemed to balance out the ethical urge to protect the thousands in the factory’s “nuclear shadow.”

Apparently twelve dollars an hour is the approximate cost of thousands of deformed livestock, brain tumors, cancerous lymph nodes, immune deficiencies, infertility, and damaged DNA in future generations.

A more personal event made all of the secrecy at the plant even more disgusting to me. Late January of this year, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Not even the doctors expected the biopsy to come back positive; the diagnosis came as a complete shock to our whole family. Tears welled in my eyes every time I choked out the word “cancer” to my close friends, not even because of my extreme heartache, but because of their reactions.

In the first instant, their smiles would fade and their eyes, while blankly staring, clearly read something to the effect of “she’s not going to make it” regardless of how benign it really was. Just that one word, cancer, instills such panic and hopelessness in one’s spirit. In the next instant they would usually gain composure, the corners of their lips would be forced down as a sign of pity, and the look in their eyes would be cloaked by a sense of urgency to find the right comforting words.

Unfortunately, my mom’s journey was uphill from there. What was supposed to be a small tumor, easily managed by surgery and radiation, escalated when the surgeon discovered the cancer had spread to her lymph node. This meant the cancer would have an easy ride to any of the vital organs in the body and would become terminal in (quite literally) a heartbeat. This also meant months of chemotherapy. Knowing toxic chemicals were coursing through her veins as she lay in bed with her blonde wig on the nightstand, that was one of most heart-wrenching experiences of my life.

That experience was something lived by not only me, but by every single member of my family and by every single one of our close friends. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. Unfortunately, the number of times a tragic diagnosis like my mother’s happened near Rocky Flats increased substantially with the growth of the plutonium-laden factory.
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Cancer rates were proven to be significantly higher in areas surrounding the factory, particularly downwind from production. That’s an increase in cancer patients, an increase in anxious daughters awaiting results, an increase in tears, an increase in pity, an increase in heart-wrench. Unfortunately, not every cancer patient in Rocky Flats was as lucky as my mom. Iversen wrote it wasn’t uncommon for her neighbors or other locals to lose to long battles with cancer.

According to whistleblower Dr. Carl Johnson’s report, “In the five years after Rocky Flats was built, leukemia deaths in children rose substantially. By 1962…[they] were twice the national average.”. No one should have to endure the pain, grief, and loss tied to cancer, and measures must be taken to prevent it at any cost.

“At any cost,” has always been my stance. Rocky Flats and much of that surrounding community, however, didn’t share my view. Iversen reported that the Rocky Flats management requested the tall grasses surrounding the plant be mowed. This seemingly innocuous act stirred up plutonium-laden dirt and sent it whirring into the lungs of hundreds of locals downwind. So why mow? Why take the risk when other safer maintenance methods had been recommended? Is a hard battle with cancer like my mother’s really worth it for easier lawn maintenance? Is that really the price the government isn’t willing to pay for the health and safety of its citizens? Something Iversen and I both agree on is “Governments aren’t supposed to poison their own people.” Not at any cost.

The government isn’t the only party at fault either. According to Iversen, property owners downwind of the factory had been presented with data regarding the dangers of plutonium in the area. Rather than taking action, calling for change, or even leaving the contaminated areas; locals chose to deny the facts in fear of falling property values. So many people trading off the health and safety of others for profits, like a simple business transaction, is what angered me most in this book. The property owners and government officials alike seemed most concerned with concealing the truth at any cost.

More than once I strangled my pen as I tried to squeeze my rage into the margins of the book. More than once I stared at the pages of the book, not reading, but trying to take in the fragility of human life, especially when in the repulsive hands of greed. A stockpile of nuclear weapons supposedly keeps us safe from other countries harming us, when in reality our nuclear facilities and government negligence are committing “random murder” on our own people.
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How many lives have to be destroyed before the consequences outweigh the benefits in the government’s eyes?

Works Cited


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