

The Package

It never seemed like it would happen to me... just like winning the lottery or death from the hiccups, to me, it was incomprehensible. Movies, television programs, books, and magazine articles attempted to tell me its story. But just as fairy tales tell of the captain of the cheerleading squad and the quarterback of the football team and the princess and her prince, this story was distant and impossible in the perfect bubble that was my life. Then with a thunderous smack, this distant tale became reality, yet it lacked the flowing hills and purple castles. Suddenly my life that was known, school work, athletics, foods I loved, books I wanted to read, vacations I wanted to take, people I wanted to meet, and people I thought I knew, melted and dissolved into an area of my mind reserved for unimportant things. That needle that popped the bubble, the catalyst that started the downfall of what I believed in, and that package that dropped on my doorstep with a thud, was cancer.

My mother died of lung cancer approximately a year and a half ago. She was married for twenty-seven and a half years and had two daughters, ages twenty-one and sixteen. She worked at a local Recreation Department teaching dance and beginner sports classes to toddlers. She swam every day, raised a closed-knit family, and was my best friend. Although she may have had difficulty suppressing her vociferous points of view, she was hardworking, modest, funny, strong, kind, and understanding. These words are nothing compared to the love that I had and have for her. This essay though, is not about my mother and who she was or the love that I have for her, rather it is about the time that passed so quickly after that first weekend in December 2007.

I was a sophomore in high school, a fifteen year old still struggling with the realities of what was to come in the next few years. To all fifteen year olds, or frankly anyone at any age,

cancer was not something easily discussed or a topic to talk about with friends over lunch in the cafeteria. The word cancer presented so many unanswered questions yet at the same time, it was assigned words that had such definiteness: diagnosis, chemo, radiation, death. After we learned my mom had lung cancer, these words unwillingly became a part of my vocabulary, at least at home.

During the month and ten days of my mother's sickness, I became a fantastic actress. My life was wonderful on the outside and my face beamed a smile, but my heart was screaming on the inside. I wanted to yell at my friends who came out of tests crying because they received a bad grade or who were frustrated because the boy they liked wasn't noticing them. How could they not realize that these silly, petty occurrences meant absolutely nothing in the long run? How could they not realize that complaining about the fight they had while driving to school with their mom made me want to throw up? This anger partially had to do with the decision not to tell anyone in school. I didn't utter a word to even my closest friends because I was worried that they wouldn't know how to act. Although I was great at acting like a cheerful teenager, I was afraid that they wouldn't know how to treat me. Should they pretend like nothing was wrong, or feel sorry for me and eye me in the hallway, only seeing my sick mother and not me, the person who they always knew?

Although I am ashamed to say this, I was almost embarrassed to tell people she had cancer, like it was something that would be looked poorly upon. Living in a community such as Briarcliff Manor, lives weren't supposed to be this complicated. Everyone knew my mom. Although friendly and outgoing, she was not someone who liked attention. All she wanted were the people she loved surrounding her during a time when they were all that mattered. I

understand why Mom wanted to be remembered as healthy Carolyn, not weak and sick, Carolyn. Just as in school I wished to be known as Aly, not Aly with a mom who had cancer.

As it turned out, the latter eventually happened anyway. After my mom passed away, those unavoidable reactions became assimilated into my daily routine. Those looks of pity, those mumbled words spoken under the breath, and those uncomfortable moments when it was obvious that words escaped the mouth were all a part of my solemn struts through the halls of Briarcliff High School. I could have just as easily had twelve extra arms or been carrying a monkey on my back rather than simply being one of the many children affected by cancer.

I started to feel as if no one could ever understand or even attempt to comprehend the emotions that were pressing down upon my body, such as how nothing mattered. Only my sister, Julianne brought me comfort and meaning. She was a senior in college, and we were at completely different stages in our lives. On the verge of graduation, she was about to become a real adult in my eyes, while my eyes were just adjusting to the idea of what college was. As a role model and friend, she was my rock and my rescuer. Although she had a great support group of close and mature friends who she could talk to, she was all I had. This catastrophic event in our lives made us closer. We shared something that was unique to only us; only we knew our mother as mom. Although the catastrophic and horrendous disease cancer affects numerous people throughout the world, Julianne was the only person who knew my mother and me well enough to be there when others were too afraid. Julianne reminds me that my life still does matter.

In addition to this struggle to find meaning in my life, I have also wrestled with the bizarre passage of time. Some moments I feel like I'm moving at a million miles per hour, yet at others, I'm barely taking a step and my mouth moves in slow motion. Certain things around the

house, memories, or events in my life make these varied passages of time extremely evident. Catching a hint of her perfume or looking into her eyes in one of the numerous pictures throughout the living room slow things down. Yet when I think about how I'm almost done with my junior year in high school, I look back wondering "where did she go?" and "how did I make it without her?"

These questions also make me think about the future and the multitude of things that my mom will be absent for. Although a morbid thought, I can't help but consider all the girls and young women around the world who take for granted the role that their mothers play in these situations. These events include going shopping, driving a car for the first time, high school graduation, college graduation, going to my first real job, and even getting married and raising children. Although so many of these things are distant and far off, I struggle with the thought that I'll be alone. I won't have her advice, her wisdom, and her continuous knowledge of the right thing to do. I recently encountered a moment that truly exemplified these feelings. Although somewhat materialistic and objectionably obnoxious, I miss my mom most when I want to go shopping. Walking through the aisles and racks of new spring clothes and pretty colored shirts, I can't help but notice that every girl is at the store with her mom. Just like I so simply and unappreciatively did two years ago, these shoppers are having a "girl's day" like mom and I so frequently did.

Last weekend, I purchased a dress for prom. I considered this a "big" purchase, both because of its price and the event that I would be wearing it to. I never realized that for most of my life, I didn't purchase anything "big" without mom's approval. I also didn't realize that so many things in my life became clear and all right once I had that beaming smile of praise or head nod of support. Sitting in the dressing room, hemming and hawing wondering whether this was

“the right one” or not, I just craved her approval. Just like I desired her approval to tell me I’m doing okay, everything will work itself out, or that I did the right thing in any sort of situation, I needed to hear her voice telling me that I was beautiful. As time passes, this voice in my head gets softer, and I fear the day that it escapes me.

I would be surprised if I met someone who claimed that they were never affected by cancer in some way or somehow. Even within my close family, four women have been diagnosed with cancer: my maternal and paternal grandmothers, my aunt, and my mother. Cancer is like a package. It is mailed home with a patient and his family the day the diagnosis is confirmed. Some families are lucky enough to send that package far away never to be heard of again. Others know it is there, but choose to let it sit in the back of their closet wrapped up with extra packing tape and a bow to make it pretty, only to be taken out on certain occasions. Still others are graced with the gift of never receiving this package, but maybe see it lying around the houses of their neighbors. In my home, on the other hand, our package is so clear that it has become an addition to our furniture. It sits mid-living room and shakes every time I feel mom’s presence, or see a commercial about cancer treatment and hospital care, or watch a television program that shows a family around the bed of a dying loved one. I used to be afraid of this package and what it represented. I didn’t go near it, and I hid it when friends came over. Now, and even more so after writing this essay, I have begun to welcome it with open arms. I want to carry it around with me, teach and tell the world about the story of my package, and support those who are opening theirs for the first time.