

The Worst Thing Ever?

By Juliana Sheff

The doctor with the eagle-printed surgeons cap turned to my family and with sincerity said, “I’m sorry, but it turns out the tumor is worse than we expected – it’s malignant.”

It all happened so fast. I was still filtering the first few words out of the doctor’s mouth – sorry, tumor, and worse. What does malignant mean? Is that good or bad? Is my grandma going to be okay? The questions flooded my head forming an irritating pressure on my temples.

Just a few months ago she was driving into New York City to meet my mother and I for lunch at Josephina’s before we dashed off to the ballet. Yes, she was 80 years old, but that did not diminish her energetic spunk, independence, optimism, and goofy sense of humor (she seriously should have had her own sitcom).

It all began a month earlier when we started to notice her memory slipping. She would forget what day it was, miss appointments, and as it got worse she began to forget the places she had gone during the same day. The first thing that came to mind was Alzheimer’s. After a battery of tests with ominous names such as biopsy, MRI and CAT scan came the unexpected diagnosis – brain cancer. Aggressive and inoperable, that was how the doctor defined the tumor.

After the shattering news from the doctor with the peculiar cap, my mother and I went in to see my grandma. I stood at the foot of her hospital bed in awe. Her makeup that she diligently applied even for a trip to the pharmacy, her gold rings and jewel-toned

necklaces were all gone. In their place was worn, wrinkled skin and blood-crusted hair. This was the first time she looked small and helpless to me. My mother gently rubbed my grandma's arm to let her know through all the painkillers that we were there. She slowly opened her eyes and went to grab the bedside rail in an attempt to sit up. As soon as she saw me she reached her weak arms out to hug me and smiled only to expose her rosy gums. I wrapped my arms around her frail body as she mumbled in my ear, "I wove woo." Tears filled the corners of my eyes and a ball lodged in my throat as I struggled to hold in my wails. We waved goodbye, ducked our heads, and walked back toward the waiting room.

Through the heavy steel doors, florescent lights and white corridors my mother and I walked in silence. "It's just not fair," I whispered. My mother tried to console me, "I know sweetie, I know." But it was too late. I could not hold in my frustration, bewilderment, and misery any longer. I broke down in tears, wails, and cries of "WHY?" Why did she have to get her life pulled out from underneath her? Why did she have to die now? Why MY grandma? My arms pounded furiously on my mother's back, as my head shook left to right and my eyes squeezed tight. I tried to convince myself this was a dream. I always thought this would never happen to her, no not my grandma. My knees went weak as I fell into my mother's arms. She sheltered my shivering body with her weathered hands and combed my hair with her fingers as she hushed, "It's going to be okay." My mind was racing: *she won't see me graduate high school, there won't be any more plays or ballets together, no more butt cheek pinches. I will never be able to hug her again and smell her flowery perfume, no more grandma ... she is going to die.* It just wasn't fair. My one and only grandma can't be taken away from me. What did I do to

deserve this? I loved her and I needed her in my life. I didn't want her to go, at least not yet.

We didn't really give up hope because my grandma was the type of person who never gave up she always persevered. Whenever anything went wrong she would always whip out her favorite saying, "This should be the worst thing that ever happens." Nothing was too hard for her to deal with. Because of her philosophy I knew she would fight and stay strong even though the tumor raged with a fatal force. Some cancer patients go through a rollercoaster of being really ill or close to death and then healing and living for many years or more, while others are not as lucky. The doctors said my grandma had six weeks to live. Her health went downhill fast. Her memory faded quicker and quicker, her personality and energy began to vanish, and her ability to hold a conversation evaporated. My sweet innocent grandma was disappearing before my eyes, and there was nothing that I could do. It was a shock to all when my grandma died only six days later.

Family and friends gathered at the funeral home on Long Island. A rabbi stood before us speaking about my grandma, the independent woman who got joy out of teaching music to little kids, who would do anything and everything to better the life of her children, and whose world revolved around her grandchildren. We were her legacy and living memories the rabbi preached. He spoke about the Jews and their fight for survival, comparing it to my grandma's life as a single divorced mom with no money and two kids. She did not have elaborate things to offer such as dolls or the latest action figure, only her love, which was bountiful. I knew she loved me from the labored hours she spent over the kitchen stove creating my favorite dish of chicken soup and matzo balls, her reassuring smile that greeted me as I ran to her in my tutu after one of my many

dance recitals, and the sweaters and scarves she knitted especially for me. During her final days we sat on her wrap-around white couch in complete silence as she stroked my bare feet with her wrinkled fingers and salmon painted nails. It was the smallest gesture, but a significant moment because it was then that I felt closer to my grandma than I had ever felt before.

Was having cancer the worst thing that ever happened to my grandma? I truly don't know, but it was one of the last things that happened to her. What I do know is that having her as my grandma was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

####