

## “Beautiful”

I have told this story time and time again. To my classmates, after the principal came in to all of the classrooms and told them why I wasn't in school that day. To my English teachers, whenever there was an essay about my hero or an event that changed my life. To the other kids at Gilda's Club and Treehouse who had all gone through similar things, though our stories were slightly different. And even though this isn't the first time telling this story, saying these words, it hasn't gotten any easier.

It all started in fall of 2002, when my dad pulled me out of Club Fit tennis lessons with tears on his face and no explanations. We got home, where my mom lay curled up on the couch, looking weaker than I had ever seen her, and they told me what had happened: my mom had cancer. It wouldn't be until later that I would realize it was Stage IV cancer, of unknown origin, and that all of the doctors had given her six months to live, if we were lucky. But in that living room, on the day where my world turned upside down, it was treated like a battle that we would have to fight, with my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade self barely understanding. I was old enough to have heard of cancer and that it was bad, but I was nowhere near the age where I could clearly understand the risks and what would happen along the way. All I knew was that my life would be changed forever.

When my mom was healthy, back at our old house, I have so many memories of us doing things that the cancer would take away. We played sports, constantly going out to the front yard and playing catch. My mom loved gardening and I would help her, passing her tools, maybe planting a seed or two. After the cancer took over, these activities were modified. Playing baseball was now watching a game on the TV. Gardening wasn't an option; now, we bonded watching Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, which managed to even make us feel lucky. I still

have a journal that my mom, brother, and I would write in, full of thoughts and random anecdotes. Unlike before the cancer, where you would always find her outdoors, the big bed upstairs was her haven now, too weak from chemotherapy to move around the house. My mom's beautiful thick hair was replaced by wigs and, after she found those to be uncomfortable, bandanas.

Luckily, the cancer didn't change everything. My mom still kept her spirit, her life, her inner vitality, all the while showing strength that I didn't know she had. Rather than wallowing in self-pity, my mom constantly reminded me how lucky we were to have a loving family, a great community that cooked us meals a few times a week because my mom couldn't, a helpful nanny, the support of Gilda's Club, and to still have her. To chronicle our time together, a videographer was hired to take videos of my family. Watching those videos now, my mom always has a smile on her face, laughing at something silly my brother did or shaking her head when I tried to butt in and be in the video. Every now and then, though, the topic would turn serious, like to her relationship with my dad and us kids or to what she would want if she died, and she would begin to tear up, making me cry right along with her. Even though she tried to be positive, there were still moments where we would just cry together or talk about our emotions and the pain. But, these were few and far between and I do have so many happy memories in the midst of this pain of the time we got to share.

One such memory is the vacation we took to Club Med in Florida. We were not the kind of family that went on resort-style vacations, but we were trying to cherish every moment with my mom. A picture from this trip that will be with me forever is of my mom, my two brothers, and I on the Club Med platform when we had just arrived, wearing matching colorful bandanas because of my mom and dancing like we didn't have a care in the world. On that vacation, we

were able to forget all of the worries that the cancer had brought, along with the luxury of free all-you-can-eat nachos. Even more special, my dad and my mom took a special vacation to Italy, where her family was from, one winter, just the two of them. Like she did a lot these days, a journal was kept of the vacation. At the end of the journal, my mom wrote, "Arrivederci Rome and Sicily... 'Til we see each other again." Sadly, this would not be the case.

On January 1, 2005, after a 28-month battle with cancer, my mother Andrea Lynn passed away. In the months leading up to her death, she had looked like she was getting better. She was able to walk around the house, she told us the pain had lessened, and some of her hair had grown back. That year, in fourth grade, I had let myself hope that maybe the cancer would go away soon. I still felt like this when my mom went to the hospital for a routine checkup. A few days after Christmas, after my mom had gotten checked into the hospital, I was shaken awake in the middle of the night and put into a car with my aunt, who was taking me and my still-sleeping brother to the hospital. I was so confused and scared as we sped through the night. When we reached the hospital, my dad took me into the chapel and delivered the news.

My mom had started bleeding internally and had a 95% chance of dying. I broke down and just cried. I remember looking at the clock while attempting to calm down and realizing that hours had passed with me sobbing on the bench; still, I continued crying. The only time I smiled was when my Papa (my mom's dad) told me that Derek Jeter had gotten traded to the Boston Red Sox, before telling me he was joking and trying to comfort me. I don't know how he managed to be so brave in the face of personal tragedy for him as well. After time had passed, my dad asked me if I wanted to see my mom one last time. I walked into the hospital room and saw my mom with tubes everywhere, hooked up to a beeping machine. She couldn't talk and was communicating by writing with a pencil on a piece of paper on a clipboard. I don't exactly

remember how this final discussion went. All I remember was her telling me that she loved me very much and would be with me forever. My mom's final words to me, causing me to tear up now as I write this, were "I have to go to the bathroom", scribbled almost illegibly because someone had to help her with this normally simple task. I then left the room, with this image and these words seared in my mind. My brother, who had slept through the whole thing, and I went back home, where we worried for two days about what would happen.

The only reprieve in this sadness was when I went to my cousins' house for New Year's Eve. I watched Napoleon Dynamite, my first PG-13 movie, and stayed up to watch the ball drop in Times Square. It felt like a completely normal party, except for the calls that punctuated the entire evening saying that my mom was still alive. The next morning, I got up and my Aunt Melissa told me tearily that I had to go home. By the time I got to my house, I knew and was not surprised when my dad delivered the inevitable news in the living room: my mom had died at 1:17, taken off of an artificial respirator around an hour after I had gone to sleep. I didn't go to school the first few days and the next weeks were full of condolences, cards, and the wake and funeral. When I went back to school, everyone in my grade had been alerted by the principal and I was met with a flurry of "I'm so sorry"s and "Feel better"s, which did not make me feel any better. The wake was full of people and it was nice to hear how many people my mom had touched. A cop later told my dad that he had never seen so many cars in front of the funeral home. At the funeral, I read a Bible passage and tried so hard not to cry.

Over time, though, my life slowly began to maintain a semblance of normalcy, except for the rare emotional moments. In fifth grade, with an English teacher heavy on poetry, I must have sounded like the most depressed kid in the world, with every poem being about death and sadness. I also had Treehouse meetings once a week with other kids whose parents had died,

which were full of fun ways to cope. My dad began dating again, following my mom's wishes in the videos, and he married a great woman named Melissa, with two twin daughters, and I am lucky to have them in my family. Still, the cancer had such a huge impact on my life and it never was the same after my mom's diagnosis and later, her death.

The cancer clearly had its negative effects. It made my mom weaker, caused her a great deal of pain, and eventually took her away from me. But, my mom and her experience taught me lessons of courage, hope, and faith that I will carry with me forever. Although there are moments when I think about how awful my life is, she taught me that there is always something to be happy about. Plus, we should do everything we can to help those less fortunate. I can only imagine what life must be like for those who have cancer themselves, especially those who are fighting it alone. Although it is rare that I become emotional about my mom's cancer and her death, there are moments like writing this essay or visiting the cemetery where it begins to overwhelm me and I realize how much sadness the cancer caused and continues to cause. I sincerely hope that I am the only person entering this contest, not so I can win first prize, but so no one else will have had to go through this pain. Cancer, though, touches millions of people around the world and is life changing to everyone around someone who is diagnosed with it. I am one of the lucky ones and my mother's attitude and spirit is the reason why. George Washington once said, "My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. All I am I owe to my mother." When she was sick and when she was healthy, in good times and bad, she was beautiful inside and out and she made me who I am. I love you Mom.