

In That Moment

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January 2008. I was sitting at the dining room table, staring at my pitiful attempt at a DNA model. As usual, procrastination had gotten the better of me, and I had resorted to cramming a month's worth of work into a single weekend. The double helix that I had suspended from a marionette stand looked nowhere close to the figure I had found in my freshman biology book. Meanwhile, my sister was sitting catty-cornered to me, whizzing her way through her seventh-grade math homework.

"Girls, your mom and I need to talk to you," my dad said, bringing me from my unproductive daze. His voice had that ominous "family meeting" tone which usually signified that one, or both, of us were in serious trouble. Here we go, I thought, buckling down for a four hour long lecture on whatever it was that we had done wrong this time and why it's wrong and that we must swear to never do it again so long as we live. I twisted around in my chair to see both of my parents standing in the frame of the wide entry into the dining room. *Of course they would choose now of all times to have a talk, because what was quite possibly the biggest assignment of the year, was due tomorrow.*

My parents didn't seem to take notice of my plight. My mom moved around the table to sit across from my sister. I slowly straightened myself in my chair, following her path the way plants follow the sun. My mom folded her arms on the table in front of her like some kind of protective barrier. My dad stood behind her with a supportive hand on her shoulder.

Something was wrong. I felt it in my gut. This wasn't the normal protocol. What was going on? Fear and a restricting sense of anxiety began to well up inside me. I stole a glance at my sister. She looked equally perplexed.

It was a long time before my mom broke the silence. "As you two know, I had a routine doctor's visit last week." She stopped. My sister and I waited apprehensively. "I..." Her voice cracked. "I..." Tears began to brim in her eyes.

I froze. I didn't know what to do. Mom wasn't supposed to cry. She never cried. All at once, every deadly disease I knew of rushed into my head and began to swirl around in a dizzying whirlwind. Whispers in the back of my head suggested that my mom had one of these diseases. I told them they were wrong, though something inside me told me that they were right. I pushed them aside. That wasn't going to happen. Not to us.

My dad picked up on his cue, as if he were once again an actor in the theater, and took over the tale. "In June your mom went to the regular doctor for her annual checkup. The doctor performed a mammogram.



Everything came back clear. But, when she went to the gynecologist last week, they decided to do another mammogram. They found a tumor roughly the size of a tennis ball. Your mom has been diagnosed with stage-four breast cancer. Because of how fast the tumor grew, the particular type of breast cancer your mom has is classified as an aggressive form.”

I zoned out as my dad went on about what that meant. The worst possible scenario played out in my head. What if mom died? Even entertaining that thought terrified me. I couldn't begin to fathom not having her around anymore. I was a high school freshman. I knew very well that breast cancer was a leading killer of women. Especially when it was severe. Like mom's. But surely I wouldn't be robbed of my mother. It was too early in life to even be considering not having her around. How would our family continue without her?

When I finally tuned back in, my dad was giving us the brief version of what the plan of action would be as we worked through the next few months. E-mails would be sent to all of our teachers and our principals, alerting them to the situation. He said it would be up to us, however, to tell our friends, should we choose to. He went on about how, on the days that mom was going to have her chemotherapy, and later radiation, treatments, it would be arranged for a neighbor or family friend to take us home. He told us that they were having house keys made for us.

“This also means that you will both have to pick up some of the slack around the house to keep it in order. All three of us will,” my dad told us.

My sister and I nodded that we understood, but really we were both just trying to take it all in. I wondered if she felt the same way I did. Like this was a nightmare from which we could not force ourselves to wake, no matter how desperately we wished for it. This whole thing simply couldn't be happening.

After what felt like an hour of sitting in silence, my parents left the table. Nobody had the energy, or the courage, to speak lest we break down. Besides, the dogs were begging to be taken out once more before bedtime. My sister left to get a shower, and probably to mull over all that had been said. I was left alone at the table; alone with the failed DNA model that was due tomorrow. Funny how only a few hours before, I had been fretting over pieces of wood and plastic. But, in that moment, it looked utterly insignificant. After all, what were a couple of sticks and strips of blue plastic, when life hung in the balance?

