

When Cancer Comes Again

By Jeannie Nugent

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To this day, the sound of semi-trucks — shifting, braking and squealing — instantly puts a heavy stone at the bottom of my heart. Our sensory memories are often the most powerful. And it's those negative ones that are the hardest to suppress.

For me, the trucks transport me to a time when I was curled in a defensive ball in my make-shift sleeping bag, with my sisters lying nearby on the carpeted floor of a family friend's living room. My hysteria had subsided to a dull ache and waterless, hickuping tears. I was cursing and desperately missing my mother at the same time.

How could she leave me, I would ask angrily. Then the trucks would invade my senses. Lonely trucks traveling an empty road. I would listen to the whine of the turning tires and think of my mother with arms outstretched towards the tear-drenched child begging her to stay. I saw my father wrap his arms around her and half drag, half coax her out of our sight.

My mother's cancer marred our childhood. Stuck in the middle of countless climbed trees, imaginary concerts atop an abandoned spool, secret excursions to the riverbank, and homemade playhouses were agonizing stretches of abandonment, disabling heartbreak, and adult responsibility.

It seemed that as soon as we joyously celebrated her disproving the doctors' six-month sentence, the cancer would return. The fight would start all over again.

We watched my mother, so strong, so independent, don a mask of determination and fight like hell. We watched depression and the chemo turn her into a zombie, only to see her rise again with a renewed purpose. We helped her care for the baby she refused to abort even after doctors promised it would bring certain death.

Time after time, she was triumphant. She defied odds at a time when cancer treatment was archaic at best.

Somehow, my sisters and I all reached adulthood with my mother still there as our foundation. I thought we were scott free. Surely with our own lives, our own foundations built, we would be cushioned when the inevitable happened to our mother.

I wasn't prepared for the gut-punch reaction when my mother was diagnosed almost two months ago with breast cancer — a disease that had claimed my grandmother only a year earlier. Our worlds were turned upside down. I tried to suppress it, to be strong. I tried to laugh, to act like it was just the natural progression of life. I cursed myself every time I broke down. This wasn't natural. This wasn't the fighting, determined spirit my mother had instilled in me. I was ashamed.

Then I broke down. My emotions ran the gamut from sadness to anger, from hysteria to withdrawal and delusion. This wasn't fair. It was supposed to be easier now. That was the childhood bargain I had made with myself.

Life has a way of compensating. In my darkest hour, I discovered friends who refused to let me fall, but allowed me to fall apart if I needed it; sisters who lifted me from the trenches and accepted nothing less than soldiering through the pain; a daughter whose quiet determination mirrored my mother's and revealed my own reserve of strength; and a mother who had every right to cover her head and hide, but showed us — once again — **that the best defense is to keep your eyes wide open.**

This is her fight, her body, her choice. And she's not taking it lying down. Even as doctors demand her quiet obedience and daughters beg her to reconsider, she fiercely owns her decision to deny the debilitating treatments. She offers comfort in the form of tomes of research for her point of view, but makes it known that the only opinion that has sway is her own. Her body, her fight, her way.

Did I expect anything less?

Today, as I lay awake and hear the whirring of the trucks, the sadness they once summoned, evokes another memory: my mother returning, full of strength, catching locusts by our pine tree fort, showing us that life was worth fighting for.

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