

A Slip of the Scalpel

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MY MOTHER WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE OF CANCER. At least that was the assumption I was under. It seemed that doctors were always digging holes into her body with their sharp, silver scalpels, and then sewing her up with harsh, black sutures.

I was ten when the cutting began. I remember sitting in the kitchen at suppertime, hands tucked under my bottom, fretting on the day she disappeared, not knowing where she went or why or if she would be coming back. It was unsettling not having her there, the room seemed unbalanced and half-empty even with the rest of us – me, my nine siblings and my father – crammed around the table.

My mother had only wanted four children but ended up with ten, double-cursed it seemed: Catholic and fertile. Debbie was the first born and fifteen at the time she disappeared. Peter, the baby was three.

I remember Debbie making grilled Velveeta cheese sandwiches that night, cutting them into triangles and passing them around. She didn't hover above us in that familiar way that my mother did and she kept stealing glances at my father, as though she were waiting for him to say something. I had noticed a lot of whispering between them earlier which deepened my worry. There were times that I thought I might suffocate on the secrets in that house.

We learned about my mother's whereabouts in bits and pieces. She was in the hospital but not to have a baby this time. Her doctor had found a tumor in a gland in her neck and believed it might be cancer - Hodgkin's disease to be specific. The gland needed to be removed.

She'll be home in three days, my father assured us.

But when three days passed and my mother was still gone, I waited expectantly for more information, more clues about what was happening with her, and why there was a delay. There was tension in the air around the table – different than the usual tension. This one was quieter, and felt less threatening because my father shared it rather than caused it. Finally, he spoke about what had happened, about how there had been an ‘accident’ in the operating room. His face was pale and his voice uncharacteristically soft. He looked at us, actually *looked* at each one of us as he relayed the story.

“The doctor’s scalpel slipped and sliced too deep, cutting into your mother’s jugular vein. She almost bled to death on the operating table.”

The news came as a gut-punch and with it fear. Fear that my mother was going to die. Fear that it would then be just us and my father. I had never considered my mother’s mortality before, and I waited for reassurance that she was *not* going to die, that she was going to return home. That comfort came not from him but from my sister.

“Don’t worry,” Debbie jumped in, responding to all of our worried faces. “She’s going to be okay.”

“We’ll say an additional prayer for her,” my father added.

Later, in bed I wondered what would become of us if my mother died and we were left completely to my father. Would he be capable of expressing grief? Would he soften at her loss or would it enrage him as so many things, big and small, did?

As it turned out the tumor in the gland was benign. The cancer scare was just that; a scare. But the results of the slipped scalpel were not just a scare but very real. When my mother finally came home, she was pale and had a thick, white gauze bandage around her neck. She

looked fragile and older, and every time she turned her head it was with a slow, deliberate motion that caused her to wince. She wasn't allowed to bend over or lift anything heavy because of the deep incision that would take weeks to heal.

Debbie stopped doing her outside chores as she took over the cooking, cleaning and caring for my little brothers. Years later, she told me that she had worried that if mom died she would be trapped on the farm raising the rest of us and never have the chance to go to college.

We lived in harmony as a family for a while after mom's scare, me and my siblings lined up at the arm of the chair that she spent a lot of time in during her recovery, asking how she was doing, did she need anything? My father didn't make any demands on her as she moved slowly around the house, nor did he raise his voice, his fist, or any other weapon to us. We ate a lot of sandwiches for supper during that time as Debbie took the helm of running the household.

It seems wrong to say that one of my few good childhood memories was when my mother had a cancer scare and barely escaped death. And selfish to think about how good those weeks afterward were for me. While she withstood the daily pain of her slow recovery, I did not suffer one blow from my father. I've often wondered what I would do if I were allowed to go back in time and change the course of that event. Would I prevent that scalpel from slipping and save my mother from all the pain she had to endure as a result of the doctor's mistake? Or would I let it happen, welcoming the reprieve from my father's attacks at my mother's expense? These questions haunt me still.