

Fading:
My father's coming of age experiences as a result of
his mother's battle with cancer

It was autumn, 1984, and I was getting ready for my sophomore homecoming dance. My parents had been out for most of the day, attending a routine doctor's appointment for my mother.

"Hi David, we're home," My mother shouted, from the bottom of the staircase, "could you come down stairs for a moment?" I casually exited my room and trekked down the plush, harvest gold carpeted stairs.

With this scared and terrified look on her face, she sighed and said, "At the doctor's today I.. David, how about you sit down for this?" I took a seat at our formal dining room table and braced myself for the news. I knew that it must be something big, since she does not typically tell me to sit down.

She took a tremendous deep breath and tried again, "I have been diagnosed with breast cancer and it has metastasized to my bones." There was a brief moment of silence where I felt the color drain from my face. No words could express what I was feeling at that moment.

Shocked and scared, I finally blurted out something to the effect, "Are you going to be okay?"

With a hopeful sounding voice she reassuringly said, "I have the best doctor in the whole City of Pittsburgh. He is going to do all that he can."

It did not feel real at all. If someone told me it was just a nightmare and I was going to wake up, I would have believed them more. To my dismay, it was not a dream. It was almost funny how one sentence can change your whole world.

About a year before my mom was diagnosed, life was normal. We would play tennis together and she was a very active person. She meticulously cleaned the house and cooked every meal. She was very involved as a mother. Before I was able to drive, she would take me wherever I needed to go. She would take my friends and I all over Pittsburgh. I had an ordinary childhood, but it drastically changed after her diagnosis.

The cancer really took a toll on her, mentally and physically. A couple weeks after her diagnosis, I came home from school and saw her sitting down in one of the olive upholstered living room chairs.

She had this glum expression on her face, so I asked her, "Mom, how was your day?" Before she could respond, she started to cry.

I attempted to comfort her and asked, "What's wrong?"

She took a deep breath and said, "I'm just so mad at myself that my body can't do anything anymore. I'm in pain all the time." That was very hard for me to hear. At that moment, it hit me and I knew things really had changed.

My mom couldn't do everyday things for me anymore. I took her to radiation therapy (once I learned how to drive) and I sat with her. She felt very sick and was frustrated at herself. Over the course of those next two years, life was all about taking care and dealing with my mother's sickness. There were, occasionally, pockets of normalcy, which I was thankful for. She was so frustrated with her body, and she didn't like her physical appearance anymore. She looked undoubtedly different from how she normally had looked because the effects of the chemotherapy made her lose her hair and caused her face to swell up.

Her condition got progressively worse. She was a fighter, but this was a fight she couldn't win. The cancer had taken over and there was not much more the doctors could do, except make her as comfortable as possible. She was in pain constantly. When it was obvious the cancer was winning, the doctors warned my family that there was not going to be much time. We spent every waking moment with her. As a result of the strong medications and her illness, she began to forget who we were. Laying on her hospital bed she would fade in and out of this horrible state of confusion.

She would get flustered and nervously ask, "Excuse me sir, who might you be?"

Patiently and sadly, I kept telling her, "Mom it's me. I'm your son, David."

I didn't know if it really registered with her, but every time she would say, "Oh, that's right...David."

She died in April of 1986, surrounded by the people who loved her the most. The hardest part of my life was losing her, but after a lot of crying and thinking I realized that she was in a better place. A place without any pain.

My brother, sister, dad and I had to divide up everything that my mom did. I started to learn to do all my own laundry, clean the house and do errands that my mom would have done. It forced me to become much more independent before I went off to college, unlike most people my age.

My sister was getting married and all she wanted was for my mother to attend the wedding. She had moved her wedding date up by two months to May, in the hopes that my mother could be there. Unfortunately, she didn't make it, though. My older brother was finishing up his sophomore year in college and regretted time he missed with my mom, since he

was away at school. My dad was probably impacted the most because she was his wife, who he loved very much and he relied on her to do many things. It forced him to learn a lot, too. He never cooked before, or did many chores around the house. Together, my dad and I learned how to cook, clean and do the laundry for ourselves.

At the time, life seemed to be so unfair. No one should have to go through this much pain at such a young age. My mom was so active, so full of life... and she had a great laugh that just hearing it put you in a good mood. Her death changed the whole dynamics of our family. I was filled with anger that this happened, but I also realized that I needed to step up and help my father. It was a huge turning point for me. I changed from a young boy to a young man and became more responsible. It was not only dealing with my own grief, but trying to help my father since he lost the love of his life.

Although it was an extremely difficult time, I slowly saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The light was the day my dad dropped me off at Bucknell University. It had been a long day of orientation, tours, and unpacking; both of us were exhausted.

After my dad brought in the last overstuffed suitcase, he plopped down on my rock hard dorm room bed, he said, "Okay, David, this is the last of it."

In a tired voice I said, "Thanks, Dad. I think that I am supposed to meet in the dining hall in about a half hour. Do you want to stick around a little bit longer?" Many of the parents began to leave, but I didn't want him to have to go back to our empty house just yet.

He told me, "It's okay, I think I'm going to hit the road. I'm very tired and it would be nice to try and miss some of the route 80 traffic."

I blurted out, "Alright." We then walked to the parking lot.

We stood in an empty parking space outside Vedder Hall to say our last goodbyes.

He told me, “You're going to do great here. Your mother is looking after you from heaven. I know it!”

I said, “Thanks dad. Will you be okay?”

He reassured me with a, “Don’t worry son, I will be fine.” I had this heavy hearted feeling, when I said goodbye to him, but I was truly elated to start my new life at Bucknell. A life away from home created a barrier between me and the grief that I had been feeling. I hugged him one last time and walked back to my dorm. I was so thrilled about school, but troubled by letting my dad go home to an empty house. As I was about to re-enter the dorm building, I turned around and I could see him leaning on the car stealing one last look of me, waving goodbye. He had this somber, yet peaceful and proud look on his face. That’s when I knew everything was going to be okay.