

Knotted Happiness

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In eighth grade, I walked down the halls of my middle school, desperate for answers, my heart pounding in my chest. Like a five hundred-piece puzzle, I wanted to fit each shape together until I knew the end result for certain.

Today, I stand beside my mother in our small bathroom; her: staring hard at herself in the mirror as if she was making the biggest decision of her life, and me: smiling as she tousled her hair, frustrated by the mess.

'It's getting so long,' she says sighing, 'I need to get it cut again, don't you think?' I shrug, not understanding how she could possibly think her hair was in need of a trim when it just barely swept past the bottom of her ears.

'I mean at least you have hair,' I joke, causing her to let out a chuckle. Seeing her worry about the littlest of things like the length of her hair made my heart flutter in my chest just as it had in eighth grade, only now it filled us both with happiness.

My father, sister, and I sat in the living room, all silently in our own worlds, each working on our own tasks. The back door opened abruptly as my mom trudged in, disrupting the quiet environment. She looked exhausted: shoulders slumped forward and the wrinkles on her forehead more prominent. Not a word needed to be said to know that her day had stretched by like a rubber band that never snapped. This is when I first found out what was wrong. When the time came where she finally spoke, it was only confirmation. After weeks of tests, pain, and worry, it all came down to a simple diagnosis. Yet, that one conclusion hung above our heads. It was a one hundred pound cement block that swung from a line of twine only half a centimeter thick.

I rushed downstairs the moment I was excused from the dinner table. Before closing the door and locking it behind me, waterfalls already ran down my cheeks. I sobbed one of those silent sobs. The kind where your stomach hurts because you've clenched so hard in order to not make a sound, and where you feel you could sleep for days because your eyes are so heavy. I asked myself how could someone so amazing and unworthy of this fate be put down this path. I felt for her. I was her... at least for that moment where we were both hurting.

Weeks passed and things turned almost normal again. The block still hung above our heads, yet we learned how to walk delicately along the string every time it was about to snap. But some days the string felt thinner. My mother would come home from work, just like she did every day.

She would set her bags down and strip off her coat. But instead of coming to greet my sister and me, she would walk straight to her room.

'What is Mama doing in there?' I asked my sister. No answer was given. I waited a couple more minutes. Then I heard the quiet ragged breaths.

'Maya why hasn't she come out yet? Can we go see her?' I tried to ask again.

'No, leave her alone, Alina.' I listened some more until the sound became clearer. My mother thought we could not hear her. She thought she could do what I had done that day in the bathroom. Tears pricked at my eyes. I knew what she was going through because she hid it from us. My mother was trying to be strong for us. It was as if my heart had shattered into a million pieces in one second. To be strong for my sister and I meant to bear all the pain for herself. And yet somehow, some way, I had grasped onto a morsel of it.

'Ta da!' My mom grins as she flips her newly cut locks. I giggle.

'Very cute! Your hair looks so fluffy.' She runs her fingers through the fine grey strands. My mother laughs so easily now. Only a simple compliment and her love pours out. Moments like these are so precious. They are the times when I see how much my mom is a part of me. This evil consumed her body and slithered into mine as well. Her happiness is mine and her sadness is as equal. Today, Sabina Wagner is a three-year breast cancer survivor. My mother is a fighter and a role model; she is the person I look up to the most and fall back on. My joy and grief are reliant on her actions. One diagnosis, one loss of normality, and one heartbreak was what it took to bring me to this realization... and for that, I am grateful.