

The Cards You're Dealt

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The Cards You're Dealt

Megan Whitvam

I. Unexpected

“I’m so sorry, kids. I forgot to tell you she would have her bandana on.”

My Grandma has cancer. She has cancer, and I am afraid she is going to die now. Today we went to see her and Papa at their house, and Grandma was wearing a bandana. All her hair is gone. Daddy forgot to tell my brother, my sister, and I that Grandma Barbara is bald now and she was going to have a bandana on. It was pink. I tried not to stare but I kept staring. It was on accident. I just don’t understand. Her hair is all gone.

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I was eight years old.

II. And All God’s People Say

I stand up from the pews of the church and plod along the aisle, clutching my journal and staring at the floor. God, yesterday I was reading over my poem in my freshman biology class. I told myself last night I cannot cry, but I didn’t wear makeup just in case. My dress is light pink and lacy. I hate wearing black to funerals.

I can’t stop shaking. The church’s emotions are in my hands. That’s what Papa told me. If I cry up here, they will all cry. I cannot let them see me break.

I find the courage to look up. I see familiar faces. They all just irritate me. Each face has a look of pity as they stare up here. Some have wadded up tissues in their hands, and others have streams of tears racing down their red, blotchy cheeks. But these faces with their worn down eyes find me and they pity me. I don't want this pity. Do they pity me because I am a child who lost her grandmother? Do they express pity towards me even though it is actually for the community as a whole, losing its long-time benefactor? Do they pity me because they can sense, as I do, that a cancerous future lies ahead of me?

I place my journal on the podium and open it but my fingers fumble and I lose the page. Once I find it after what feels like minutes, I run my sweaty palms on my sides, I look at Papa in the front row, and read my simple, childish, freshman-in-high school quality piece:

Words cannot describe her

I could breathe compassion, feel compassion, see compassion

This made her

She was built on it—strong,

Gentle still—her touch, her voice, her heart

Now guiding us with it from above

Still covering us in blankets

Lost from the community she provided

Asking nothing in return

The difference she made—large and strong as the bricks in her home,

In her heart

With every word spoken, hug embraced, smile, and laugh

She was rich with happiness

Sitting on the porch, beaming at the lake—

All put to shame compared to her,

Her compassion

She loved to love, to joke, cook, decorate, and play

Heaven welcomes my angel

Grandma Barbara—forever engraved in my heart

And her words

“This is not the end, but the beginning.”

I looked into Papa’s eyes before stepping down from the podium. His tired eyes were full of tears. Perhaps it was because I went up and spoke at her funeral, or perhaps it was simply because he lost the love of his life: his high school sweetheart, his angel.

III. The Game of Life

Papa tells me stories about Grandma a lot. He tells many about the games they used to play. Grandma was big into puzzles and card games. I loved doing the puzzles – connecting the final

piece was always so satisfying, even though it was sad to have it be over. There's nothing left to do but pack it away in a box when its time is up.

But Grandma was a champion when it came to cards. They were her favorite games. All her friends thought she must have cheated, but she couldn't have. You are dealt certain cards and that cannot be controlled. It is luck, or lack of luck sometimes. She didn't always win, but still made the best of what she was dealt.

IV. Surrendering

Stage four Pancreatic Cancer. My Great-Aunt Nancy, Grandma Barbara's sister, finally decided to take treatment. After months of contemplating death, she decided to fight. It was November of 2016.

Once you tell people you have cancer, people usually ask "How advanced?" or "What stage?" When the answer is "Stage four," the normal response is to say: "Oh no, I'm so sorry."

God, I'm so sorry. Might as well say: "Hey, I heard you were dying. That sucks."

Stage four Pancreatic. Damn, it sucks.

V. Celebration

My mom's mom was dying. I just turned five years old. We brought a cake with us when we went to see her when she was in the rehabilitation center to celebrate my birthday. She was dying. But happy birthday.

VI.

Cancer: uncontrolled cell growth. That is the simple definition. That is what it is, but that is also not what it is. It is much more. It spreads and infects everyone around you.

Cancer: my grandma, your grandma, grandpa, father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, friend, lover, neighbor, teacher.

Cancer: the dark circles and designer bags under your eyes from exhaustion despite the excessive amount of sleep.

Cancer: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, marijuana, shots, finger pricks, pills.

Cancer: the aches and pains and dissatisfaction from food.

Cancer: loss of hair and dignity.

Cancer: depression.

Cancer: death.

Cancer:

VII. Perspective and Persistence

Grandma made it look pretty. She would get chemo or radiation in the morning then go to the Soup Kitchen in the afternoon to volunteer without any of the patrons realizing what she was going through. She served at the Soup Kitchen in our beaten down neighboring city for 30 years. Grandma worked out with a personal trainer every week because she felt fat even though the drugs made her lose weight. She kicked ass every time we played cards. She bought cute wigs and came to all my sporting events. She truly mastered the Art of Having Cancer. With seven years of practice, of course she made it look pretty. She looked good; it was just a matter of perspective. One could either see her cancer or see her beauty.

I watched her die for seven damn years. I saw the darkness seep under her eyes. I remember how often she went to her room to take naps. I noticed how our Sunday night family dinners occurred less often. I knew how often Papa took her to the Mayo Clinic. I saw her barely touch the food on her plate, but tell us all she was “okay.” Bullshit. Grandma pretended to be okay for seven years. She was beautiful, but damn it, she was dying. Now that she is gone, I can only hope that when I’m dying, I make it look as pretty as she did.

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It was Ovarian Cancer. Stage three. Aggressive. It was up in the air how long she would live, perhaps a few months, realistically speaking. But she lived for seven more years. She didn’t beat cancer, but she beat the odds. Seven years and two remissions. I thought she beat cancer two damn times. Then it came back. It kept coming back, and after a while I knew it would never go away. She broke my heart. For as long as I could remember Grandma had cancer. She was made of cancer, and that was just how things were. I didn’t think much of it. It just kept coming back.

VIII. On Living

Grandma Barbara was not into gambling. But had her life been a game of Poker, and our world a casino, she would have gone all-in every moment she could. Despite her cards, she laid it all on the table. And she had a great Poker face. She wanted to live and experience and gain so much from our wonderful world. So when she had the chance, she would go all-in. She would win in Euchre and Monopoly and Skip-Bo, but she couldn’t always win. You can’t control the deck, and sometimes it is unlucky.

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I don't know what it's like to be the one who lives. I hope I never have to wake up and look at my wedding ring, knowing my love is packed away like an old shoebox full of memories, like a puzzle stored away.

Papa and Grandma Barbara are high school sweethearts. They have been with each other almost their whole lives, and they lived abundant lives. The summer before their senior year of high school, Papa and Grandma Barbara were on a double date with my Great-Aunt Nancy and her boyfriend. While driving, they were hit by a drunk driver. All the impact went to where Grandma Barbara sat. Papa visited her at the hospital every single day even though she lay there, rigid, and in a coma for over 20 days. Grandma Barbara broke her pelvis, both legs, several ribs, and punctured a lung. Papa sat by her side every single day. She should have died, but I would like to believe that love brought her back. She still had more to do in this life.

Because Papa was a big shot at work, they had to move around and travel all the time. They moved their family to California, New Jersey, Michigan, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and North Carolina. After Papa became a CEO, he and Grandma Barbara got to travel all the time.

She always made a point to spend time learning the native language of the country they visited. Instead of sitting in some fancy hotel room until her husband returned from conferences, she ventured out to markets and to sightsee. She practiced her language skills and always tried to meet new people. On one occasion when they traveled to China, Grandma Barbara even sang karaoke with the Vice Mayor of Beijing. She desired to live.

She desired not only to live, but to constantly live as a servant to others, helping those in need in any way she could. Grandma Barbara knew what it was to be close to death, but she also knew the richness of life. She experienced life in any way she could, and Papa was there with her every step of the way.

IX. On Dying

Papa lost weight. We tried to get him to eat, but when fear and sadness take over the mind, you just can't eat. Just as he did his senior year of high school, he sat at Grandma Barbara's bedside for a month. But this time, he watched his high school sweetheart die.

I remember walking into their kitchen on one of those days. Papa asked us what song should be played at her funeral, and showed us pictures of her gravestone, all while Grandma Barbara lay awake in their bedroom down the hall. I noticed how slim Papa was. I noticed how little he smiled anymore. I noticed his bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep and constant tears. I noticed the way he looked at Grandma Barbara, the way he clutched her hands. I saw everything. I saw the love between them and the fire inside of him from the anger of losing his angel, but acceptance that neither of them would be in pain anymore. The cancer was killing them both.

X. Amen

The night before she died I ran at my track meet. I ran so well that night. I ran for her. I wanted to tell her about it the next day.

The night before she died provided an incredible sunset. It was a flower of pink and orange and yellow surrounded by a deep darkness. It was beautiful. I ran to get my phone and took a picture of it. I wanted to show her the next day.

The night before she died I decided to curl my hair the next morning. I set out a cute shirt and my curling iron. I started drawing her a picture with bible verses decorating the edges. It was just something to cheer her up. I wanted to show her my curly hair and give her the drawing the next day.

The next day she never woke up. She lay in bed with her mouth open and her breathing heavy. The next day I showed up at her house in my cute top and my curly hair, ready for a nice talk. The next day was the last day.

The day after she died, my dad told me they brought in her favorite pastors because that is what they do when people die. They said a prayer over her body. That's what he told me. My Grandma died. I don't know who shed a tear or what prayer they said or who held her hand as she left us or if anyone said "amen." I don't know anything. And she doesn't know that I curled my hair and drew her a picture and ran well at my track meet. The darkness just took over. It took my flower, my angel.

XI. Genes

I carry cancerous genes. My family has a past of cancer, and there is nothing to do about that. Mom's dad died when she was 18 years old. Lung Cancer. Her mom died when she was 36 years old. Ovarian Cancer. I was only five when I saw the way Death tears a person apart; the way It tore my mom apart. Grandma Barbara, my dad's mom, died when she was 71 years old in 2014. Ovarian Cancer.

Maybe I will get cancer, and maybe I won't. I probably will. But I have to make the best out of my situation. I have to make it look "pretty." No matter what I am doing, no matter what circumstance or position I find myself in – make the best out of it. I cannot control what cards I'm dealt, and I cannot release the poison in my veins.

XII. Wake Up in the Morning

The night Grandma Barbara died, I was doing homework in bed, waiting for my sister to come back from her junior prom. Dad came into my room and looked at me, and I knew. He really didn't have to say anything, but he did anyway.

“Megan, sweetie. Your Grandma passed away tonight.”

“Okay. What time did it happen?”

“9:34 PM.”

“Okay.”

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

No. My grandma died tonight. She was unconscious all day, and I had my drawing and sunset photograph for her, something to make her smile amidst the pain. She was my biggest role model. I have cried for days and weeks straight. All I wanted was for her to see me graduate, go to college, get married. But she's dead. “Yeah, I'm okay.”

I finished my homework and turned off my light. I lie there, numb, in a nightmare I could not wake up from because she would not wake up. I could not cry anymore.

XIII. I Love You, Baby Blanket

Grandma has been dying for seven years. Ovarian Cancer claimed her body for itself. Her body deteriorated slowly. Her bright eyes have dimmed. Her clothes were once filled, but now hang loosely on her limbs.

For one month Grandma has been on her deathbed, quite literally. I sit in her home and next to her bed every day, right after school until I go home at night. Sometimes I lie down next to her and hold her close, I hold Grandma Barbara like a toddler holding her baby blanket.

But baby blankets become worn out and raggedy. At some point we must say goodbye.

There is a picture of us during those days: I am lying next to her in bed, she has on a light pink long sleeve shirt, but her head is bare. She grabbed my hand and rested it on my leg. Her smile is as good as it can be. I won't say it's a beautiful smile. It's a tired smile. Her hands. God, I still remember her hands when that picture was taken. I looked down at them and noticed the yellow tinge, and the way they felt—like someone just lathered them up with lotion and stretched the skin too far.

When she had to use the restroom, someone had to carry her. I have never seen someone so damn helpless. I saw her being carried one day: she was curled up in a ball with her head bobbing around like a doll.

So seven years comes down to this. She made it look pretty before, but she is dying. She has always been dying, but this is Death. Death wages war, and it is armed. It is cold. It is gross. It is the IVs in her arm. It is the thick saliva stuck on her lips and the blood in her gums. It is her head nodding as she falls asleep in the middle of our conversation and it's lolling from side to side as she naps, and naps, and naps. I guess you need to rest up before you die. It is saying I love you and Goodbye every day before coming home and crying every night at the thought of a world without her. It is a constant battle.

And Death wins. Every damn time.