Denial

On the first day of summer, my mom would rush me outside to play. She disappeared in the house for what seemed like hours. When she finally immersed, she carried an oversized towel and a boom box that played Michael Bolton at ear splitting levels.

Despite the years of chemotherapy, she looked just as she always had. She wore a shade of hot pink lipstick that matched her hot pink bikini, and four-inch hot pink heels. She would promenade all over the front yard looking for the perfect place to sun. When she found a suitable patch of grass, my mother would shake out her towel, wafting the perfume of Hawaiian Tropic and Sun-In through the neighborhood.

That June was sunny but was by no means warm but my mother was convinced it was only cold because our tree-lined yard was too shady. She raced inside in an angry blur, re-emerging minutes later with a Cheshire cat grin. She fired up her chain saw and headed toward the trunk of the tree.

She deftly dug her heels into the embankment to leverage herself against the slope. The blade of the saw ripped into the pine’s ten-foot diameter causing the tree to crack loudly over the sound of the buzzing chain saw. It began to teeter on its trunk, as if it were weighing its options as where to land. It chose the middle of the road, making it impassible to our neighbors and for our father whose car was turning the corner and pulling onto the street just as the tree impacted with the pavement.

Anger

My mother was obsessed with buying junk from the second hand store. We hated it but it made her feel like she was providing for her family, despite her sickness.

Our closet doors were bursting at the hinges with “treasures.” When the items began to choke off the hallways my dad took action. Frantically, he seized armfuls of the junk and piled them on my mom’s side of the bed, forcing her hand.
After an entire week devoted to purging our house of clutter, one item remained: an orange and brown loveseat circa 1972. When my mom arrived at the Goodwill with that sofa, she glowed with the triumph of an alcoholic about to receive her 90-day sober chip.

At the Goodwill the clerk told us that he could not accept the couch. It was missing cushions. My mom attempted to explain, between curse words and wild gesticulations, that the cushions had already been dropped off but the clerk was not receptive.

Just then a wave of calm came over my mom. She slowly got back in the car and buckled her seat belt before tearing off in the van, spaying gravel at the clerk who sat in stunned silence.

My mom drove around the block and stopped abruptly in the alleyway behind the store. Wordlessly, she jumped from the car and flung open the back doors. Returning to the driver’s seat she spoke quickly, in an authoritative voice, “Get ready to push!” She revved the engine, pushing her open toed purple pumps to the floor.

“NOW!”

She slammed on the gas and I shoved the couch with all of my weight. The sofa went flying out of the back of the van. It landed, in a puddle, in the alley, behind the Goodwill. We drove home in silence, except for the occasional whine of the back doors swinging.

Depression

I dragged Mom to Ocean Shores for my tenth birthday. In the days leading up to my birthday, my mom discovered that her cancer had returned.

We made the two-hour trip to the ocean in silence. When we arrived at the hotel, she went straight to bed. I stayed awake all night thinking if I could only find the right thing to say, I could fix my mother.

On the morning of my birthday it was near freezing and incredibly windy but I managed to get us to the beach. Mom was wearing a black fur coat that brushed the tops of her slippers as she walked. She stood and watched me collect shells in the cold when all of the sudden, a wave broke on the shore, knocking her over and enveloping her in water. She screamed and flailed in the water as the weight of her fur dragged her under.

The wave receded as quickly as it came in; leaving her scrambling on the sand screaming, “HELP! I’m drowning!” over and over. She was too scared to realize, or too prideful to admit that she was safe. Her screams did not let up until I pulled her away from the shore. Once safe, her screams transformed into “HELP! Hypothermia!”

That night my mother was an exuberant and renewed version of herself. I spent the rest of my birthday cheerfully witnessing her recount her brush with death as she received drink after drink from a rapt audience at the hotel bar.
Acceptance

Unable to speak and using very small gestures, my mom managed to choose a hospital chic outfit: a white knee length fur coat and a hot pink sequined evening bag. She wouldn’t let my dad put her in a wheelchair to take her to the door; instead she chose to wait from the bedroom for the firemen. When they lifted my mom from the bed, their biceps swelled and I understood the wisdom in her decision.

She was 58 when the ambulance took her to Good Samaritan Hospital. This time there were no more specialists. She knew she had tumors in her breast and brain. When she started finding small lumps all over her neck, her bones, her eye, she stopped receiving treatments.

At the hospital my mom signed up to donate her body to science in a never-ending attempt to be the center of attention. We sat by her side all week on the fifth floor of Good Samaritan Hospital. We held her hands and told our favorite mom stories until we realized that she was gone.

After her passing, my dad mindlessly dug in her pink sequined evening bag, what he pulled out was a bottle of nail polish. She hadn’t been able to paint her nails in years but my mom made sure to slip in a bottle of “Ravish Me Rose” before she left the house. My dad held the nail polish in his hand, just looking at it. Without words he opened up the bottle and painted her nails. We passed the bottle between us, taking turns painting her toes. My brother played Michael Bolton at ear-splitting levels. We knew that the med students at the University of Washington would probably remove all this nail polish, but it wasn’t up to us. It would be just another way my mom got attention, maybe from a hot young doctor.