

“Eat More Hamburgers” and Other Tips Before You Die

My mom said these three words out loud just three weeks before she died. We had spent so much time crying that there was a long awkward stare and nothingness before we eventually laughed so hard that I needed to place her oxygen mask back on. Humor had been put away a long time ago along with my mom's dolls, favorite books, treasured albums and her memories of the faces she wanted to see and touch one more time. Laughing is not however how this story or this moment started. Laughing at anything had not happened much in two years.

2 years, 17 trips to chemo, 3 osteo compression fractures, 1 remission, 10 frantic ambulance rides to the ER, and too many goodbyes that included the words, “If this is the last time, I see you.....”

It started with a phone call about a possible UTI and lack of appetite. Then like an old VCR tape that just keeps unwinding and unspooling until it becomes such a big fucking tangled mess that you can never restore it, there was, “Your mother has terminal ovarian cancer.”

At this late point however, where you are meeting social workers and chaplains my mom was constantly coming to these intersections of things she was never going to do again. Some were obvious like run a 5K, go back to Texas, dance a cumbia, (although we tried). On this day my mom wanted a hamburger from our favorite local joint. A milkshake and a burger. I would cut them down a bit so that she could engage in the joy that is a burger and a milkshake, but she couldn't remember wanting it. She couldn't taste it and could not keep it down. In recent days I had placed my baby shoes in her ancient soft hands, turned the pages of photos of her grandchildren, gently washed and brushed what little hair she had left and helped her pick out the clothes she wanted to be wearing when the mortuary picked her up. I can tell you that none of

these moments ambushed us like this one. “I can never eat a hamburger again” she started to cry. I don’t know if my heart has ever been more broken. We sobbed the way you do when you have no time to prepare or practice for a moment. Our faces changed into heavy deformed beings that resembled the awful creatures in the stories she would tell me as a child. The ones where some monster or evil would bring bad fortune or destruction to a village. Leaving them all asking “why?” Depending on the story there was never a real concrete answer to that question. At least not one I ever believed in.

It was here that she stopped, took my hand, looked directly at me and said, “Eat more hamburgers.”

My mom would spend much of the next three weeks in a coma, while I would hit the button on a morphine device as directed by hospice and eventually as many times as hospice would allow to keep ahead of her painful moans. “She can’t feel this where she is at now” some would tell me, some were angles and somehow, I am not sure I quite believe it all the same.

My mom was supposed to leave this life by her own accord, on a day she chose, with end-of-life medication. Maybe on a day when she could still taste that hamburger and milkshake. But somehow in the chaos of kindness and coordinating, and managing resources we were not given the complete story. We were told “yes, we will help you” but that excluded many plot points. It left out meeting the representative that would have explained the two evaluations prior to obtaining the medication, and how if my mom was seeing two little girls jumping rope in our hallway that she probably wouldn’t qualify. It boiled down to a religious conflict of interest. My mom loved a good poem or mystery but this version of “tell it slant” did not serve her well.

She would go on to see others along with the little girls, friends from childhood, old boy friends, her mother. She should have encountered these spirits on the other side, not here where her death took much longer and much more pain than she had planned. I know that, if at all possible, I will choose the day I leave this earth. Not soon hopefully but I know that I have all of the story now at the price of my mother's pain. I know I will take her advice and eat more hamburgers. I also know it will never be enough.