**She Has Cancer**

By Jane D., Palatine, IL

She has cancer.

It’s weird to write that down. My mother has cancer. She found out last week but couldn’t bring herself to tell my brothers and me until today.

I knew it was bad news when my father called us down to our living room. I knew it was bad news when I saw the box of tissues conspicuously relocated to the coffee table. I knew it was bad news when my father prefaced his speech with “Your mother is going to be okay.” On Tuesday, I found out my mother has bone cancer.

On Wednesday, the phone calls began. Dozens of calls from relatives. Every time the phone rings, it’s someone spewing sugary words of encouragement, imploring my family to keep going, promising that everything will be all right.

My mother doesn’t answer the phone anymore. Ever since she told her sister, who told everyone, she pretends that the phone doesn’t exist, because that’s easier than pretending the cancer doesn’t exist.

My mother has cancer and she won’t pick up the phone to hear the feeble attempts at cheer and optimism from family members and friends who have resolved to be strong in our time of need. My mother has cancer, so I answer the phone for her and pretend that my relatives are right, everything is going to be all right.

She looks the same as last week, before I knew she was sick. The telltale signs of cancer that my doctor TV shows conditioned me for are missing. There are no sunken eyes, no frail body, and no bones poking out from under thin, crepe-like skin. There are no ghosts in this house, only five fully alive people. This cancer is never on TV – this part that consists only of sitting and waiting. My mother has cancer and I am waiting for something to look like it does on TV so I will know how to act. My mother has cancer and I am preparing the lines I have heard on “Grey’s Anatomy” and “House” because I don’t know what else to do.

I found out today that cancer has a smell. Since the rest of the world now knows about the cancer that has roosted in my mother’s body, flowers have been arriving endlessly. My mother has cancer and our neighbors think that a vase of tasteful calla lilies will somehow make it more bearable. Someone decided to put all of the flowers upstairs in the bedroom where my mother has taken up residence. I am afraid to go upstairs because the whole floor smells like calla lilies. Upstairs smells like cancer.

The air has changed in our house. Everyone holds their breath, tiptoes around. As if being quiet will make the cancer go away, as if it can hear every sound we make. My older brother has adopted the cancer vow of silence, like a monk praying for nirvana. He stands in my doorway at night while I lie in bed reading cancer-free books. He stares and stares until I invite him onto my bed and read to him. My older brother does not speak, but sits on the flowered comforter that seems too joyful for our now-cancerous lives. We listen earnestly to the gentle drone of the radio, allowing it to fill the space between us. No words can be formed from this diagnosis. My mother has cancer and my older brother is silent.

My younger brother does not understand. The word “cancer” deflects off his shield of innocence and he continues watching cartoons as if it were last week, before we knew. For him, my mother’s cancer means sugary cereals for dinner and as many cookies as he wants. Cancer means jumping on the bed and not brushing his teeth because no one can tell the child whose mother has cancer to do anything. My mother has cancer and my little brother thinks this is a vacation.

The normal activities of my family have been replaced by one common activity: eating. As the cancer that grows in my mother eats her alive, my family eats the endless procession of baked goods, casseroles, soups, sandwich trays, and other thoughtful items our neighbors have deemed appropriate for a family stricken by cancer, confusing our cancer-ridden silence for hunger. Someone took it upon themselves to create a schedule of meals to be delivered, and I suddenly feel like a first grader being doled out pre-made meals with stunning regularity and precision, except someone gave us meatloaf. My mother has cancer and no one else knows I don’t like meatloaf.

My mother has cancer, and the sun still rises. Cars filled with people still race past our house on their way to work in the morning and on their way home in the evening, like clockwork. The clock still has the audacity to tick and keep track of every moment that my mother has cancer. The world continues even though mine seems to have frozen over in this winter of cancer.