Sick

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Aphra Murray is a senior Chemistry major. She took one creative writing class the spring of her junior year and found a creative outlet not available to her in science classes. Next year she will be attending graduate school to pursue her love of chemistry.

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It took moving an ocean away from my family and my home for me to begin to feel the need to reconnect with my mother. One of the most soul-nourishing activities to do, tucked up under my bedcovers or walking through Gettysburg at nighttime, is to listen to a recording I have of her singing to the *Wizard of Oz*’s “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” She’s horrible at singing. Objectively awful. But interspersed between her off-tune screeching is one of my favourite things to listen to: hysterical laughter with her best friend. I can picture the moment: she’s wiping tears off her cheeks and desperately trying to catch her breath to get the last words of the recording out, “Please don’t put this on YouTube!”

My mum told us that she was sick on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of July. I know that it was a Sunday because the whole family was sitting outside eating lunch together. I know it was July because it was a beautiful day, such a beautiful day, and I could feel the sun through the vine leaves above me on our pergola.

We ate lunch together every weekend, but Sunday was a special day. Growing up in Italy meant that food was what the day revolved around, and I was taught from an early age that lunch was the most important meal of the day. A Sunday lunch consisted of piles of vinegar-soaked cherry tomatoes folded together with hunks of mozzarella, slabs of bread drizzled in olive oil, and thick, sizzling sausages straight off the grill. My dad was always in charge of the grill. I would sit at the table and watch him battle spitting oil from the meat, all the while with a cigarette in his hand. My dad always had a cigarette in his hand, making sure to hold it high above his head when he was around my sister and me in a futile attempt to keep the smoke from creeping into our young lungs. Smoke that was the same colour as his aging hair, although he tried to convince everyone that he met that it was still brown.

My sister, Blanca, was just seven years old, wearing a neon bikini and piling food onto her plate. I remember because I complained to both my mum and my dad that she was being greedy—“Save some for me!” was my cry. Her bleach blonde curly locks hung damp around her shoulders; we had just ended an immense morning of chasing each other around the garden with buckets of water and the hose. Being the older sister, I had used my considerable size advantage to ensure that I stayed relatively dry.

In line with Italian family traditions, it was well past two o’clock before we sat down together in our usual seats. Without fail, for every meal, I sat opposite my mum. I can’t remember a meal from my childhood that didn’t include her bouncing brown curls, her infectious smile, and her reluctance to take a second helping because she was “on a diet.” This Sunday lunch in the middle of July was no different, and I remember catching her eyes and smiling really big before my dad skewered two sausages onto my plate and I was distracted by the dance that was plating food. After a chorus of *buon appetito*, we all dug in. It was a hot July day, but we were sheltered from the unforgiving Italian sun by grape vines, draped lazily over the wooden beams of the pergola that my dad and uncle had built years ago. Even with bloated stomachs at the end of the meal, not one of
us could resist reaching across to a bunch of dark purple grapes and popping a handful into our mouths.

It was in this post-lunch stupor, as Blanca and I were squabbling about whose turn it was to wash the dishes, that my dad stood up, poured himself and my mum another glass of wine, and asked my sister and I to sit up properly. I remember feeling the food sink to the bottom of my stomach, now an unpalatable rock. One look at both my parents’ expressions, and I knew that something was going on. My sister was still apparently oblivious as to what was happening.

“I’m sick,” said my mum, somehow managing to keep her smile on her face, as she squeezed my dad’s hand for support. “I’m going to get sick like Auntie Pat.” I remember thinking about the past six months and my mum’s best friend, Auntie Pat. I thought back about hushed conversations, conversations that as a child I certainly wasn’t allowed to be a part of. And of visiting her in a darkened room where she wore a brightly colored scarf wrapped around her head. I remember that she hadn’t been teaching in school for the past six months and that people got quiet whenever I asked about where she was. But, I reasoned to myself, it can’t be that bad. My mum explained to us that she was going to be losing her hair, that she was going to have to be in and out of hospital, and that she was going to be staying home from work, all the while dancing around the word which I would come to fear: cancer. My mother had developed late-stage breast cancer, the fault of the BRCA II gene, and six years and one month later it took her from us.

But at nine years old, I was totally immune to the idea of cancer and what it meant for her to become sick. My reality of her sickness came in bursts. There was hair loss and staying at home. For my sister and me, that meant joking about different types of comical clown wigs that my mother would try on before finally settling on one that our oblivious neighbour decided was nicer than her old hair. For my mum, it meant pottering around the house, catching up with old friends, and plotting for the moment when she could pounce at us from behind a corner, using the few greying hairs clinging to her scalp to her advantage. I have never fully been able to understand how she remained so unselfish and cheerful during this time, but she made sure to keep my sister and me young, something that I will always be grateful for.

And the Sunday meals continued. Those meals were where we celebrated her remission, clinking glasses filled with bubbling prosecco. We ate the same cherry tomatoes soaked in olive oil and vinegar, and my dad still cursed under his breath when he was burned with fiery globules of fat from the spitting sausages. Blanca and I had the same arguments about who was eating the most food and who got the last sausage on the plate. And as we grew older together under those drooping grape vines, it seemed for a moment like the world had resettled. Blanca’s once bleach blonde hair had now developed into a dirtier shade and, much like her tempestuous personality, frizzed stubbornly upon her head. I, in my foolish youth, had opted for a short bowl cut. And my mother’s had grown back out into her familiar bouncing brown curls. She even ventured beyond her usual locks.

I remember one evening, after our cherry tomatoes and sausages, when the wind was cooling down just enough to bring a shiver, that my mum announced that she was going to dye her hair. We lived in a tiny village, twenty
minutes from the nearest hairdresser, so it was no surprise to us when she pulled a carton of Do It Yourself dye from underneath the table. What ensued is one of my favourite memories of my family. While my dad pulled on the flimsy plastic gloves, I sat on the toilet seat and read out instructions: “Pour this, add that, squeeze the bottle.” Blanca was perched on the tiny windowsill, knees tucked underneath her chin, and my mum was crouched over the bathtub, hair dripping. We laughed and joked our way through forty minutes of waiting for the dye to set until it was time to wash it out. The result was a colour that was matched only by the same cherry tomatoes we had consumed earlier. My mother’s beautiful curls had been transformed into the garish looks of childhood icon Ronald McDonald. She bravely laughed through three work days of her new hair before eventually giving in and traipsing into a hairdresser where a woman, suppressing her own laughter, carefully stripped my mum’s hair back to her normal brown.

It was on a Sunday in early spring, too early and cold to sit outside for a meal but nice enough to gather all together out there to read one afternoon, that Blanca and I were told that my mum was no longer in remission. That was the same night we were told we were moving to the Netherlands. I was eleven years old, and I remember looking up at the pergola and the now-naked vines and breathing in the cool Italian air. We all tried desperately to keep a sense of normalcy over the next few months. We went to the beach on Saturdays, had lunch on Sundays, and went to school during the week. But my mum’s frequent visits to the hospital were a constant reminder that she was sick and only getting sicker.

We went on holiday to Lefkada, Greece that summer, a final hurrah before we began our life in the cold North. We didn’t have our pergola, but we made do by sitting around in the sunshine eating bowls of fresh fruit and taking dips in the pool. What the books don’t tell you about cancer is that weight fluctuations are to be expected. At this time, in part due to the chemo and in part due to the carbohydrate-heavy Greek food, my mother was overweight. She was conscious of it but not so careful to the point that it would detract her from joining us in our feast of said Greek food. On the third day of our holiday, my dad announced that it had been his lifelong dream to drive a motorboat, a lifelong dream coincidentally triggered by an advertisement in a pamphlet the day before. So we all packed our bags for the day and drove down to Nidri where, to my father’s delight, we rented a little motorboat and set off in search of adventure. My mum took a backseat that day, and I remember watching her trailing her hand in the crystal blue water of Greece. We quickly learned that riding in a motorboat was not as sexy as that pamphlet said it would be. Docking for the first time, my dad jetted into a quiet harbor of a sleepy island, misjudged the distance from the moorings, and noisily crashed the boat. We departed quickly, after reassuring locals that we were capable of staying afloat, and never showed our faces there again.

Later that afternoon, in the privacy of waters off of an uninhabited island, we anchored our little vessel and spent two hours snorkeling and snacking on packed goodies. My mum was the last to get in the water, and one of the last to get out, but not for lack of trying. The tiny ladder supplied by the boat was enough to support the nimble legs of Blanca and myself; even my father could
unceremoniously clamber onto the boat. But my embarrassed, pleasantly plump mum could not begin to bend her legs into the contortion required to get on. In a moment she liked to pretend never happened, my dad stood on the boat, bracing his legs in a wide stance, holding onto my mum’s hands. I was ordered back to the waters where I was instructed to use my arms and what little upper body strength I had to push my mum’s arse on the count of three. In an act of pure comedy, Blanca, who had been sitting on the side of the boat and watching in amusement, picked up our family camera and captured several unflattering pictures of this moment. Needless to say I thank her to this day for those instincts. They provide a necessary dose of comic relief to the rest of us while we pore through family photo albums all these years later.

About a year after driving from Rome to Maastricht, the Netherlands, my mum had to start using a wheelchair. It was at this point that I noticed the biggest change in her demeanor—she started not to care. There’s something truly magical watching your mother, who for her whole life remained composed and polite, transform into a comedic hero before your eyes. She was shameless about using her wheelchair to get Blanca and I first onto the rides at Disneyland when we visited, even when she herself wasn’t coming along. She talked at the top of her voice about passersby and laughed loud and long. One of my fondest memories of this time was during the winter of our second year in Maastricht, the coldest winter that any of us had ever experienced. The Dutch, despite being citizens of one of the smallest countries in Europe, are a resilient folk and exhibit an odd behavior during the winter: sitting outside in the freezing cold for meals. My family, coming from the lavish warmth of northern Rome and the oasis of our vine-covered pergola, was bewildered by this behavior. But nobody was more confused and outraged by this behavior than my now-unfiltered mother. One weekend, my mum and I had decided to venture into town and do some shopping before settling inside one of the café’s lining the main square. Shivering and footsore, I pushed my mum around a corner onto the square and past rows and rows of Dutchmen and women huddled around electric heaters and blankets. I paused, scanning the menu of a café, when I heard my mother scoff, then break into full laughter and say at the top of her voice, “They’re all fucking mental!” I froze, mortified at what my mother had just said and what nearby patrons of the cafés had definitely heard given their hand-to-mouth expressions. In blind panic, I gestured to her wheelchair, wordlessly begging for the internationally-understood sympathy and forgiveness for someone disabled.

One day I will have to tell my half-brothers about how my mother isn’t here anymore, that their mother is not my mother. But I’ll tell them this story. I’ll tell them of how I never thought of my mother as being sick. Technically, she was sick for almost half the time I had with her. But she was always just my mum, my crazy, beautiful mum, who just so happened to be sick.