

Five Days

The sun hangs lazily in the December sky, its pale, yellow heat trying to break through the clouds. I sit on my usual bench and watch a group of young nurses filter in from the parking lot. Their matching white tennis shoes hit the pavement in purposeful, synchronized strides, and the easy, bubbly lilt of conversation and laughter pierces through the wind like a familiar melody. The tallest of the group has her chocolate hair slicked back in a tight high pony, and she mindlessly devours a protein bar between beats of chatter. I feel a pang deep in my stomach, maybe jealousy or hunger — it's difficult to tell. For her, it's just another day of work. She is surrounded by decay and heartache and death, but here she is, laughing and eating and talking, fishing around for something in her backpack, seemingly indifferent to the pain that surrounds her.

It has been five days since my mom almost died. Five days since I received the phone call from my dad. Five days since I drove five hours in a blind panic as she was rushed into a five-hour emergency surgery. Five days since the doctors gave my dad the look that doctors tend to give loved ones when a patient is going to die. She had a 30 percent chance of pulling through, they said. The surgery was long and complicated and difficult. She was septic, and they drained over five liters of infected fluid from her cancer wrought body.

No one prepares you for the way it feels when a parent gets sick. No one prepares you for that terrifying moment when you think you've lost them forever. No one prepares you for the anger you feel and how the anger is often misplaced, directed at loved ones who are undeserving. No one prepares you for the guilt you feel or how every stupid argument suddenly seems impossibly pointless. No one prepares you for

how hopelessly weak and frail they look lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to foreign machinery, the life drained from their face, their body rendered useless.

I realize that I have been sitting out here for quite a while, and my fingers are starting to go numb. I make the familiar trip through the sliding glass doors to the lobby, up the elevator to the second floor, and down the hall to my mom's room. I am grateful that she's no longer in ICU, because every time I stepped foot in that waiting room, I was surrounded by people just like me. Being there filled me with dread and anxiety and uncertainty. At least here, the doors are closed, and there is no communal area of suffering.

My dad is sitting in his usual chair next to my mom's bed, holding her hand in his as the monitors beep steadily around them. She groggily turns her head to me and offers a weak smile. "Hi baby," she whispers, her words thickened by morphine. Her face is swollen, and what's left of her hair is falling out in clumps, her pillow covered in dark brown hairs. I am still not used to seeing her like this, with tubes and drains coming out of places they shouldn't. Nevertheless, I am slowly starting to see her again, the woman who raised me, who loves me. A little color has returned to her cheeks, and her hands are warm with life. She asks me if I have eaten, and the question makes me want to laugh and cry. Even in this state, she is still my mom, and she still wants to make sure I've eaten. "Not yet, but I will," I reply. She nods sleepily, and her eyelids flutter open and closed, halfway between sleep and hazy wake. The moment has passed, but for the first time in five days, I feel cautiously hopeful.