

The Martinez to Chico Night Train

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It was a simple train ticket stub. Amtrak, November 29, 1993. Martinez to Chico, reserved coach, one-way. And my name. I do not know why I kept it or how it managed to be in the box of photos, greeting cards and theater bills. But there it was and with it was a hospital admission slip from January 4, 1976. My grandmother's clear signature at the bottom.

January 4, 1976 was a Sunday. She must have gone to the emergency room on that Sunday. I do not remember that particular hospital visit. On the back there is a note dated January 8. In my grandmother's clear cursive script, it reads; "6 months repeat spleen scan—Dr. Wong." This piece of paper's presence in the box is even more confusing. In 1976, at age seventeen, I stood on the precipice of adulthood. My grandparent's home was a fleeting stop to sleep, eat and store my things. Freedom pummeled my back.

My grandmother spent five days in the hospital in 1976 and I do not remember it at all. It was a short stay really, considering. Her hospital visits started when I was three and ended in 1993. She had cancer. It's a scary word. Who am I kidding? "Scary" sounds like a word you use to describe a haunted house or ghost-story. Cancer is not scary. It is the living breathing equivalent of the boogeyman.

Whenever anyone reveals to me that they or their family member or friend has cancer, I tell them reassuringly. "My grandmother lived with cancer for over 30 years." It is a defense mechanism, a way to stop the conversation. A way to seem helpful and a way out. But being alive and living are not the same. Sometimes my grandmother lived. Sometimes I am certain, she wished for death and sometimes as a rebellious teen, I wished it too.

As far as I know, my grandmother never had cancer in her spleen. Her cancer started in one of her kidneys. She had it removed when I was three. I do not remember it, but I remember being told about it. Growing up in my grandparent's home, I called them Mom and Dad. Legally they were. They adopted me when I was two. I got in right under the wire. Had the cancer been found a year earlier, I might have called strangers Mom and Dad.

But there I was in a house of illness, living in a balloon of secrets kept by siblings and extended family for my own good. Helium is very tiny and its molecules are hard to contain. It leaks from a balloon slowly and dissipates into the air. Secrets leak into your soul like balls of lead. They weigh you down.

My second oldest sister was not good at secrets and her relationship with my birth mother was fraught with sibling rivalry. When I was four, she was twenty-two. Her oldest was born and a second child was on the way. She told me I was adopted. She left out the part about the oldest being my mother.

The repetitive cancer nightmares that peppered my youth were for the only mother I knew. When I was fifteen, we almost lost her. The second kidney had cancer and it had spread to her bladder and uterus. The surgery, lasted twelve hours. There were two teams of surgeons.

They removed everything they could and replaced it with a plastic bag and tube that she carried with her for eighteen years. After the surgery she was in intensive care for weeks, then rehab and then home. I was the youngest and the only one left. I became the housewife and cook. My grandfather, the nurse.

We had a kitchen on the back patio. My grandmother could not stand the smell of cooking. I leaned heavily on Betty Crocker. I learned how to grocery shop. I was as inventive as Betty would allow. When I wasn't on duty, I hung out with friends, smoked dope and cigarettes, dabbled in bennies and acid and went through boyfriends faster than bras. I was no angel.

My grandmother survived and she eventually took back her house. The January 1976 alarm was just a blip on the radar of decades of sirens.

In November of 1993, I got the call that my grandmother was dying. I bought a train ticket to Chico, where she was hospitalized. The train was dark and the seats were comfortable. I fell asleep. The train conductor woke me in Chico and with blinking eyes I stepped out of the train onto the brightly lit platform. My grandfather stood there with my sister.

“When?” I asked

“An hour ago,” my grandfather said.