

She was a sliver of herself. Weak. Thin. Pale. Her eyes were closed. She nodded off in a leather recliner, a quilt around her toothpick legs, an IV bag dripping so slowly I could see the droplets of chemo drugs roll through the lines like opal marbles. She was quiet, vulnerable. Not the feisty disciplinarian who once kicked me out of the house when I got my nose pierced, dyed my hair blue, drank before it was legal and got a tattoo on my back. In my teens and 20s, we were at war. We shouted at each other. I cursed her. She slapped me for backtalking. She broke wooden spoons hitting me. She beat my sister so hard once I could see the spoon-shaped welt on her thigh. Too many times, I ran from the house, never wanting to return. I was 17 years old, and I knew only one thing: I hated my mother.

In defiance, I had taken my own path, funded my own community college education and started a career in marketing. I had full-time job at 25, traveled the country for trade shows and conferences, and squeezed in classes to work toward a bachelor's degree. I was admitted as a transfer student to UCLA but I didn't have the money to quit work to go full-time. I showed my mother the letter. "We can't afford this, Kelly," my mother told me, rolling her eyes. "Besides, you'll probably drop out. You never finish anything." Few things have run as deep as knowing that my mother didn't believe in me.

I instead started at California State University at Long Beach, taking classes part-time while working full-time. The pressure led me to begin abusing drugs and alcohol. I went to rehab at age 34 and resided in a sober-living house, where I looked forward to the Mother's Day when my parents would visit me. I had been clean and sober for 30 days. My father, the gentle-souled man who snuck me gifts, cards and encouraging notes when my mother wasn't looking, gave me a hug. My mother wouldn't lift her eyes to see mine. I tried my best to smile and be strong. I had lost everything, been stripped of everything. I was ashamed and embarrassed. I told my father about how I wanted to rebuild my life. My mother said nothing, until she was about to leave. "Do you remember when I went to the doctor a few weeks ago for tests?" she asked. I nodded. "Well, I have breast cancer and will start treatment in three weeks."

Then she left.

Left me with all these questions.

Left me with worry.

A week later, I called her to tell her that I will be there to help her with her treatment. She thanked me and gave me a schedule of the appointments to which she needed to be driven. We visited the oncologist together, and I took notes in a spiral notebook. I asked questions while my mother sat still, without emotion, seeming letting the words "Stage 4" echo and bounce between her bones. She was too shocked to speak, so I asked the questions. The doctor said my mother would need chemotherapy to shrink the large mass in her left breast, nestled behind her heart and lung, trapped by the back of her rib cage. Here I was telling her, "We'll be okay."

We faced her cancer together. I took time off work to go to doctor's visits with her. I moved back home to take her to chemotherapy and help her with the nausea that twisted her body in knots for days. I held back her shoulders when she vomited. I dabbed soft, moist tissues around her lips and neck to tidy her. (She would have been embarrassed to be unkempt.) I made her soup and cleaned it up when she spilled it all over herself. I covered her with blankets and quilts when she had chills. I slept beside her and held her hand as she shivered. Sometimes, I heard her weep in her sleep. But she never admitted it.

Being her caregiver helped me feel responsible for someone other than myself. Her battle with cancer led me to stay sober. It led me to be efficient with my time. I was the only person she had. No friends came by. My sister, living 600 miles north in Sacramento, called occasionally but never came to visit. There were sleepless nights and wretched days when I couldn't leave her to go to work or class. I asked for extensions in some courses, but I couldn't manage work, school and my mother's cancer. I again put my bachelor's on hold. This time it was so I could be a good daughter.

Sixty days after Mother's Day, my mother came to see me at the car dealership where I had gotten a marketing job. She wore a wig. She brought her puppy, Winnie. I was on a break, standing outside in the sun when she approached. "I need to talk to you," she said. "Sit down."

Silence.

"Dad passed away," she told me.

I thought she was talking about my grandfather, so I told her I was sorry.

"No, it's not grandpa. It's your dad," she said.

I got up and wanted to run, escape. I didn't know what to do with the surge of wild emotions. My mother grabbed me by the arm. "Come back here," she said, jerking me back into my seat.

I fell into her arms and wept. Despite all the arguments we had, all the nasty words we traded, all the anger and disappointment and pain, I sunk into her embrace. I still remember how hot my tears were as they rolled down my cheeks and dripped onto the shoulder of her white sweater. I heard her voice break as she told me, "I need you."

Weakened by cancer, she was ravaged by the disease for two years. She was dependent on me. She was grateful to me, the once-rebellious daughter whom she threw out of the house, whom she cursed, was the only one there for her.

And for the first time, I felt I had a mother.

Cancer changed us. It showed me that I found the greatest rewards in helping others. It taught me how to be resilient and value what's truly important in life. Each September, my mother and I walk the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in Orange County, California. I helped her put on her beads last year to celebrate her 10 years of remission. She is recovering. So is our relationship.

At the most recent walk, I told her that I was starting school again, this time at Arizona State University. I'll be majoring in Sociology and Community Advocacy and Social Policy. "Good," she said. "You have a good heart and know how to take care of people."

It was the warmest thing my mother ever said to me.