

The Bikini

by Lori La Bey

It had been weeks since the sun had been out. There was a softness, a joy, a simplicity that embraced everyone on this gorgeous sun filled day. You could see it people smiles, and in their sparkling eyes. You could hear it in their chatter, feel it in the breeze, and in the calmness in your own heart. Oh yah, there was an undeniable change in the air and the sun was the spark! Nature's beauty was coming on strong and this was going to be a blessed day. Even my Mother in the end stages of Alzheimer's disease appeared to sense it.

As I walked into her room, I could see her shadow through the drawn curtain. It looked like she was taking a nap. The light sound of her snore confirmed it. As I rounded the cloth divider, I saw my Mother basking in the sun. The curtains were drawn back on the large picture window allowing the sunlight to warm her soul. She looked peaceful and calm. Her breathing was shallow but steady. Her eyes were closed. There was a molded smile on her face. "Good," I thought to myself. "No fear, No worry, No pain." I spoke to God and thanked him for the peaceful state Mom was in. I too smiled and breathed a sigh of relief.

As I looked down from my Mother's sweet smile, I saw her top hiked up just below her breasts, and her elastic pants, now, way too big due to her weight loss, were just below her belly button. Mom's full round tummy was exposed to the warmth of the sun. "Hey Mom," I said, "Do I need to pull out that bikini for you?" My Mom's eyes twitched before she slowly opened them and she giggled like a small child and said, "Oh no Lori, I don't think I should be wearing a bikini." Then, she giggled some more, closed her eyes, and fell back to sleep. I smiled to myself at her peacefulness, her playfulness, and I was totally amazed she said my name. What a gift my visit at that moment was. She said my name. She knew who I was. I had not heard her call be by name, well I don't even remember when the last time was. My eyes swelled with tears and my heart started beating faster.

I decided to sit on her bed beside her and just rub her tummy. As I did, crocodile tears poured down my face as my right hand gently rubbed her belly; back and forth, back and forth. Wow, I thought. I knew Mom had been losing weight. Her desire for food was minimal. She could no longer feed herself. Food was peer aid. I knew she was only eating 25 to 50 percent of her food. I could see the weight falling off her when I came to visit, and staff would inform me of her weight loss at each conference. But today, today was very different. Here as I sat on her bed rubbing her naked belly, I saw what appeared to be a huge hernia. A hernia you could not see before. It looked to be half the size of a melon.

Prior to this moment, it was just weight loss. Today it was so much more. The eighty-pound weight loss, the hernia, the bagginess of her clothes all said to me, "Mom isn't going to be around much longer." This disease is nibbling not only at her mind, her soul, but now her physical body. Alzheimer's disease was winning the battle. I knew this all along, but today it just felt so permanent, so emanate.

You see, my Mother has been in the Nursing Home since 2001. She was formal diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in the mid 90's but had memory problems since the mid 80's. You would think I would have a grip on all this by now. But no, I just sat and balled my eyes out, as my heart felt like it had been dropped kicked one more time. How many times have I

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said goodbye to yet another piece, another phase of my Mother's life? My life? How many times have I said goodbye to a part of this wonderful woman I love with all my heart? How many more times are left?

The overwhelming sense of loss, the phases this disease has taken bit by bit, hold excruciating pain for me. I continued to weep and rub her belly as I pray for guidance, for peace, for reckoning within my own soul. No amount of time is enough time to deal with the loss of a loved one. Not even if you have years to prepare like I have had. And then with no warning God spoke to me so clearly, "Lori, you have one more connection, one more great story to tell, one more wonderful memory of your Mother. For that be grateful. Today it was the bikini story. Tomorrow is an opportunity for another story. Just embrace the moments. Write them down and share what you have learned. Find the gift wrapped inside the pain. Learn the lessons of the pain Lori. Learn the lessons." My body trembled and tears poured down my face like a faucet. My shirt was soaked, my eyes were so puffy I could barely see, but my heart was once again full of hope.

As I left that day two things hit me. One, Alzheimer's disease kills individuals' multiple times on multiple levels. You can look at it as painful and one loss upon another; or you can look at it like a cat with nine lives. Each life being different from the last, but each offering much love and comfort. Love is so simple, uncomplicated, and lives within each of us. The lesson is to learn to love on many levels.

Second, a friend of mine once told me she was jealous of the great relationship I have with my Mother. When I looked at her baffled and asked what she meant she said, "My Mother is healthy. She lives out of state and is doing well and for that I am grateful, but I have to admit, I don't have the beautiful stories and memories of her like you have with your Mom. Funny isn't it? I'm just not as connected to my Mother as you are to yours, and illness did that for you. Alzheimer's disease allowed that. It created that gift for you."

So, each day since the bikini incident, I try my best to look forward and embrace each tiny moment with her with love. To thank God for all the gifts in my life, even those that cause me great pain and discomfort. I know each is a memory, each is a piece of her, each is a piece of me that cannot be taken from us. How I choose to look at the world, how I choose to live my life; will determine the memories I create not only for myself but others in my life.

Each day I try hard to look for the opportunities within the obstacles before me. I try to stay calm, peaceful, still; yet alert looking for the clues to remove the pain, the fear, the discomfort for both of us. My goal is to strengthen my ability to do this so I can move forward.

Some days I admit, the chaos wins out. I crumble and cry. I lay broken as the cookie crumbles a bit more, and then another moment passes. Another day arrives, and I feel the warmth of the sun and I am thankful for the nine lives that live within each of us.