

The Drifting Woman.
By: Kaleigh Coleman

-

I don't have the right to talk about what it's like to have cancer, how hard it was to watch others struggle, and how bad I feel for people who go through it so unwillingly. I've never had cancer. And I think about it a lot. I think about the fact that I'm not fighting for life. I think about how I don't have to wonder if I might have to say my goodbyes today.

What I do think about is how my aunt, my best friend, never got to say her goodbyes. My aunt Tony, AKA, "TiTi" was the sun in my life. She made me happy, she kept me happy. She practically raised me.

She's been by my side since the day she passed away, April 18th, 2019. 10 days before her birthday. I remember the day my mother brought me to her apartment in Indiana to tell me the news every human dreads. "TiTi has stage 4 breast cancer. We're gonna come by to help take care of her." That was around a year before she died. She had just been diagnosed, and when my mom and dad heard the words "Stage 4," they knew what was bound to happen.

I didn't realize it though. Out of everyone, why would it be me and my family that had been affected? Those are just stories you see on the internet. My aunt is different. I was 9 years old. Naive, gullible, and immature.

I didn't believe that I could be affected by something so horrible. I didn't want to believe it. It was unfair. My TiTi was nice and caring. She gave all the kids on the block popsicles when the summer heat rained down on us. She watched movies with me all day until our bodies forced us to move.

My TiTi would beat this. My TiTi was different.

My family spent the next few months of her battle making sure she was happy, fed, and taken care of. The longer her battle was, the worse she got. I still didn't believe it though. My older sister agreed with me. She suggested TiTi, me, her, and my mother all get matching breast cancer awareness ribbon tattoos. We enjoyed the moment, but deep down I could feel the dread of the future.

Her body, mood, and personality slowly deteriorated. It was frightening to watch it all unfold. She became super skinny, and she was always tired. She wasn't the TiTi I knew and loved.

My aunt had later become too sick to live on her own. She needed to be bed-bound. Hosparus Health moved my aunt into my home. She took over the living room, and we made it her own. At the time, I never knew what Hosparus was, or what they do.

When I asked or spoke about it, my parents or the attending staff at my home just told me they were there to help us out, and that was all. I was now 10 years old at this point. Strangers I had never met before from my TiTi's past had started showing up to my house to have long and meaningful conversations. I always thought they wanted to only say hello and give her words of encouragement to help guide her through the scary journey, but as I look back on the memories I have of these months, I realize why all the strangers would fill our home.

Some strangers cried, some smiled. Some brought food and gifts, others brought important memories that will forever pace through my mind when I think of her. These strangers helped bring joy to my TiTi's final weeks, and I will forever be grateful to them, and other strangers that do the same for people going through these hard times.

Around the end of March - beginning of April, my TiTi went mute and became immobile. She no longer spoke of how cute my hair looked that day, no longer shared her favorite songs and things she liked to do, and she no longer had the chance to say goodbye. My aunt Tony never said goodbye. She couldn't move to turn on her favorite t.v. shows, she couldn't move to bring her hair out of her eyes, and she couldn't move to turn the page of our favorite book.

There would be times where I would just talk to her, internally praying she would say something back, but that prayer was never answered. She could only look at me. The thought that TiTi was saying her reply in her head, and not aloud settled in my mind. This kept and keeps me happy. It gives me safe reassurance.

There's nothing much that we could do. The fact that my aunt would get better shattered in my head like a mirror. There was zero hope. I knew this when we had to stop going to school. My parents wanted us to be at home when my aunt died. At this point, I gave up on trying to talk to her. I could only blankly stare and wonder. At any time, I felt the hot tears start to stream down my cheeks, I would run and hide from her. She needed to know I was being strong for her. I didn't want her to feel pity for me.

Thursday, April 18th, 2019. I had just finished eating dinner. Every night after eating, I would ask myself if this would be the last time, I eat dinner with my aunt. I was too scared to be with her alone anymore because if she saw me cry, she might get sad. My 2 best friends had asked if I wanted to play basketball with them. I asked my mom if she thought it was a good idea for me to leave. She told me it would be okay. I finally said sure.

I and my twin brothers set off to their backyard. The sun had already started to set. I tossed the ball around with my neighbors, dreading the thought that I wouldn't properly say goodbye. What calmed me down was the low-low chance of it happening. I took a breath and continued to play.

Around 20-40 minutes later, my mother yelled for me and my brothers to come inside. The sun wasn't even down, and my mom usually lets us come inside on our own. I knew what this call had meant. I forced a smile and waved my friends goodbye.

My brothers and I walked back to our home slowly. They gave me a look, but no words. I know what their faces said. I smiled for them bravely and reassured them that it was probably just time for us to start getting ready for bed. I forced myself to believe the unconvincing lie. My brothers seemed to force themselves as well.

Normally, I and my brothers raced to the house, running down the road to see who was the fastest, but this time, we could only watch our feet hit the ground as we walked. I felt as if the slower I walked, the later the news would come. But I wanted my brothers to believe the lie I was shoving down our throats, and I needed to prove it right for myself.

We reached the front porch where my mom was waiting for the 3 of us. She told us to sit down on the love seat that was neatly placed in the corner. She sighed and began speaking. "So," She started. "TiTi passed away a couple of minutes ago. We want you guys to tell her goodbye."

One of my brothers looked at me, I had guessed he was mad that I tried to convince them of something so opposite of what my mother just said. I was mad at myself too. Not for the lie, I conceived, but for leaving my aunt alone in the quiet, and practically empty house. My parents sat by her side, sure. But I promised her and myself that I would be there for her, like she was for me.

I sat there quietly. Both of my brothers' eyes were slowly filling with tears, though it was still silent. The only thing that could be heard were the birds chirping in the distance, and my friends' loud, yet silent yells as they played across the street, unknowing of the un-forgetful pain I was feeling. My mom opened her mouth to speak again.

"We had noticed her breathing getting slower, and we held her hand and sat with her until she died." She had frowned. I couldn't cry. No matter how much I wanted to. No matter how much I wanted to scream, I couldn't. I just had one question.

Why didn't my mom tell me? I had convinced myself she knew how much I needed to be there for her, but she can't read my mind in the ways I wish she could.

My mom brought us into the house and showed us to the living room where my aunt had taken her last breath, and the room where she didn't say her last goodbye. My whole family cried together. I finally had to accept the fact that cancer affects everyone, and anyone.

I knew what it felt like now. To watch someone you love slowly fade from what you thought was a tight grip, into the air like nothing. I now know what happens to people every day, isn't just some story on the internet, but it's real life.

What I thought would never happen to me, did. There's nothing I can do about the past, telling my aunt's story will allow her to continue to live on in our spirits.

For Tony Leigh Coleman, the woman who guided me through early childhood.