

Beautiful Words

My momma loved words. She had been an aspiring poet. For her birthday one year my daddy got her a huge leather-bound dictionary with just about every word you could think of. After the sun went down, she would light candles all around the living room and then her and I would sit cross-legged in the floor and pour over the dictionary, writing down words that we thought were beautiful. She could fill up a notebook in one night with words like *ethereal*, *petrichor*, *limerence*. She would string them together in ways that sounded lyrical. Sometimes, she would send her poems into writing contests, but she would never hear back from them.

I would pick out the coldest, ugliest words that I could find to write down. There was a lot of them. I didn't like them, but they made me feel like I could do anything. I scrawled out words like *nefarious*, *illicit*, and *obsolete*. I scratched them into the paper forcefully, until the pen almost went completely through the pages.

Five months after her birthday she found the knot on her breast. It was nickel-sized and hard when you pressed your fingers against it. The doctor told her it was stage four cancer. I ran from the hospital, my shoes slapping asphalt and my blood pounding in my ears. I ran all the way home and pulled her dictionary out from the bookshelf. I flipped through the C's until I found it. Cancer – Any evil condition or thing that spreads destructively. I got out my notebook and wrote it in big letters, so that it took up a whole page. Cancer. The ugliest word of all.

She got sicker and sicker, then. Her hair started to fall out and she lost all kinds of weight. She reminded me of a skeleton with the way her skin clung tight to her bones and her cheeks sunk in. She didn't write as much poetry because she spent most of her time sleeping or throwing up. My dad sat with her, asking her if she was okay, asking her what he could do, asking her not to leave him alone. I tried not

to listen to any of it. I read my notebook night after night, forcing myself to say the ugly words under my breath. I would bite the insides of my cheeks till they bled sometimes, but I would still have to say them all before I could go to sleep.

My dad couldn't bear to look at me. I was a walking-talking miniature version of her. We shared the same rust colored hair, although mine had always been thicker and curlier. We had the same sea-green eyes that tilted up at the corners. The same scattering of freckles across the bridge of our nose. I stood naked in my bedroom in front of my mirror. My breasts were small, just barely a B-cup. My nipples were pale pink and soft. Would I have the same cancer, too? I ran my fingers across them, feeling for lumps. They were smooth.

A month after she finally died, I decided to walk to the beach. It was mid-fall and the air outside was cool and crisp. It was at that time when the sun is going down, but it's not quite dark yet. The sky was a mix of colors, blue, orange, pink and dark purple. I stopped at the mailbox because it was full and letters were pushing the door open. I skimmed through it and found a tan envelope addressed to my mom. I plucked it out and left the rest.

The beach was only three miles from our house. I walked slowly, taking in deep breaths. I had felt suffocated for months around my dad. I couldn't figure out the right words to say to him. I wasn't as good with words as my mom had been.

There was a gas station on the way to the beach and I stopped there. I bought a big bottle of Coke and one of those snack apple pies with the thick, cold crust. I went up front to pay. The woman who worked there was old, with yellowing hair, and fat. She had on lipstick that was too bright. While she scanned my food I studied the cigarettes. I was only 17 and I had never smoked, but all of a sudden the urge to smoke one was overwhelming.

“Can I have a pack of, uh, Marlboros?” I asked her, my voice catching. I silently prayed that she wouldn’t ID me. Her eyes kept glancing up at a big clock on the wall and she barely looked at me. She tossed a box of twenty cigarettes up on the counter and I handed her the exact change.

I walked back outside with my heart racing and my cigarettes in my pocket. For the first time since my mom had died, I felt in control again. I walked a little faster this time. The sun was almost gone by then. It had slipped fast behind the horizon and I tried not to think about walking back home in the dark. I *had* to go to the beach. I had to do this one normal thing.

I made it there at almost the exact instance the sun disappeared completely. I reveled in the sea-salt smell of the air. I took my shoes off and walked barefoot in the sand over to where the tide broke against the beach. I sat down in the sand and drank half of my Coke in a few big gulps before pulling the tan envelope out of my pocket.

It was from one of the writing contests she had sent her poems into. The first thing the letter said was ‘*Congratulations!*’ in big, bold letters. I felt my heart drop. The five-year-old version of me was still inside, scratching at my chest, begging to come out. I wanted to scream and cry. I wanted my mommy.

I took a bite of the apple pie and read on down the letter. My mom had finally won writing competition. She was ‘full of potential’ and was going to have her poems published in a magazine, IF she contacted a Ms. Mary Webb within the next 14 days. I felt my hands start to shake and I folded the letter back up carefully.

The water came splashing in white, foamy waves. I opened up the pack of Marlboros and pulled one of the cigarettes out. It was white and longer than I had thought it would be. I put it between my lips and that was when I realized that I hadn’t bought a lighter. I had paid almost six dollars for a pack of cigarettes that I wouldn’t even be able to smoke.

I was about to toss the whole pack into the sea when a hand caught my wrist. I jumped back, startled.

“Hey, don’t throw those away!” A guy said. He was a nice-looking guy, too. He was tall, with a mess of black hair and eyes that were so blue I could see them clearly in the dark. He had a huge tattoo of an octopus on his arm.

I stuttered over words, not knowing what to say. He laughed lightly and sat down beside of me as if we’d been friends for years.