

**M I D L I F E  
C A N C E R**



**A MEMOIR**

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AND  
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## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

*One*



## WHISPERINGS

I was a needy nine-year-old girl always trying to get attention. It seemed everyone was older, because in my family, they were. As the youngest child of eight, I rarely had a say in matters.

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

Specifically, I never got to change the channel on the television. But thankfully, the sit-coms my sisters and brothers watched during the 1970s: *Happy Days*, and *All in the Family*, kept me entertained. Plus, Archie, the dad on *All in the Family*, reminded me of Dad, so even when Dad was traveling, I felt like he was in the room with me, for better or for worse. I rarely saw the ends of those shows, and one of my older

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

siblings would carry me to bed. But I felt grown up on those nights.

I was a babyish nine-year-old too—I still needed Momma. If I wanted to find her, I knew where to look. Our kitchen was the hub of life—messy, warm, and filled with piles of sneakers and dirty socks in every corner. Momma mostly peeled potatoes nonstop. Not a handful either, but an entire ten-pound bag. Every week she

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

baked meatloaf and huge casseroles, “enough to feed an army,” she would often say.

Despite my childish ways, I yearned to be older, learned how to adult in other ways. Eavesdropping on Momma’s phone conversations was one of my favorite pastimes.

One day I went looking for her in the kitchen. Momma wasn’t cooking, she was talking on the phone with her

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

best friend, Bonnie. I had blabbered about the last phone call I overheard, namely, Dad taking a job in Saudi Arabia, and I got in trouble, so I pretended to watch Bob Barker on the Price is Right. I turned the volume down on the television so I could hear the conversation from the family room. I scooted my body as close as I could to the edge of the chair near the kitchen. It didn't matter that I could only hear

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

Momma's side of the conversation. I was hungry to learn everything possible.

Apparently, Paul, Bonnie's husband, had something wrong with him. Something was growing in his head.

Momma sniffled through tears, "Oh, Bonnie, it will be alright."

I peeked around the corner, craning my neck. Momma clutched the canary yellow phone and twisted the

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

already tangled cord around her fingers.

Yet her voice was soothing like when I

scraped my knee badly a few months the

Christmas before, and she said in her

soft, soothing voice, “We’ll figure how

to make it better.” That day in the

kitchen, I could tell she was upset, like

when she and Dad argued. Before she

hung up, she murmured a few prayers.

I wasn’t sure what to make of her

hushed, tearful words. Momma



## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

normally laughed, except when she was crying. But not to others outside of the family. Usually, the tears came after a talk with Dad, which hurt my ears and gave me a bellyache. I slid off the chair and hovered in the doorway, trying to decide what to do. Momma sat in the chair by the phone, wiping her tears.

I rushed over, jumped into her lap, and said, “It’s okay, Momma. We’ll make it better.”

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

After that call, I knew to keep my mouth shut. I knew her weepy tones were not meant for schoolyard sharing. This was the first time I heard the word cancer. I didn't know what that word meant, but I knew it wasn't right by the sound of her voice. That adult voice. I didn't like anything about that day. I learned the phrase "make it better," would carry me for the rest of my life.

Decades later when the word

## MIDLIFE CANCER CRISIS

cancer would resurface like a ferocious,  
raging storm, I leaned in hard and held  
that phrase tight.