

## A Bad Hair Day

About a week into diagnosis, listening to the sound of running water while Taylor was in the hospital shower, I silently sobbed. I knew it would be one of the last times, for a long time, she would feel the suds cascading down her long chestnut-brown hair. Gleaming and satiny, her hair was the kind I loved to run my hands through. I wondered if Taylor had yet connected the dots and realized it would soon fall out.

I shivered as I heard the clanking of the rusty faucet turning off, quickly wiped my tears, and thought about the person Taylor was inside. Was I the only one anxious about this? She was beautiful but never vain. I used to beg her to shop for clothes, but all she ever wanted to wear were the same pair of ugly, comfortable, elastic-waist pants in every color from the Gap. “Who cares what I look like, Mommy?” she would argue. Maybe Taylor would be okay with the dreaded words a mother never dares to think she will have to tell her daughter.

When my angel came out of the shower wrapped in two towels, one on her head and one on her body, I gestured for her to come cuddle on my lap. As I caressed her face, I gently explained, “Tales, within two weeks, you are going to lose your hair.” She didn’t say a word, tightened her grip around my shoulders, and breathed deeply, taking the air from my lungs directly into hers. A few tears silently slipped down her porcelain face, wetting my sleeve. She peacefully rested her head on my shoulder. The moment was so tender. We held each other for as long as I can remember, and although the circumstances were dire, it is those times that I cherish the most—the moments of sheer unconditional love shared between mother and child.

As her wet towel and soft tears dampened my shirt and shattered my heart, Taylor taught me the first of many life lessons. No one would wish cancer on his or her worst enemy, but there can be some good that comes out of it. If you let it, cancer slows life down just long enough to afford you opportunities to hold close the ones you love, breathe in their scent, feel their skin upon yours, and unwaveringly thank God for bringing them into your life. As long as we had each other, nothing else mattered.

In that moment, I was reminded of one of the kids’ favorite Dr. Seuss Christmas movies: “And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day.” Trapped within the four walls of a cold, dank, and alien hospital room, where fear tried its best to strangle me and

convert all my love to anger, instead my heart grew bigger. Cancer changed a lot, but it can't change that.

Two days before Taylor's sixth-grade graduation party, a party that I had been planning all year with the other PTA moms, clumps of her locks fell out. I panicked, as there was no missing this party. She had already missed her actual graduation ceremony because it was a chemo day. Her school principal, Dr. Kennedy, whose kindness and understanding is only matched by his intellect, had asked me with great compassion, "Can you reschedule chemo and let her attend graduation?" I had adamantly declined, explaining, "Postponing treatment would be impossible."

I wish I had known then what I know now, but it was all part of the learning curve. We quickly realized that a successful cancer journey is all about *living* life while in treatment. You can't put your entire life on hold and watch it pass before your eyes. The only way to get through treatment is to have fun whenever you possibly can. From that point forward, Taylor, Bob, and I fought the medical system and began doing things our way. Taylor was never again going to miss an important event.

Taylor, who like all adolescents wanted nothing more than to fit in, was overcome with worry. She wailed, "Mommy! Why can't I have my hair for another two days?" I had no answer as my stomach dropped and my heart sank. Taylor needed to wear a bandana for her graduation party.

I conveyed my concern to one of Taylor's close friend's mom. Without hesitation, she said, "Don't worry, Sue; we will make this okay for Taylor." On a moment's notice, she purchased bandanas for all the girls to wear so that Taylor would feel more comfortable at the party. The girls felt grown up, as they were about to enter junior high, and were ready to show it. But in support of Taylor, they ditched their flat irons and donned brightly colored bandanas. Taylor felt normal that night, a true blessing.

A few days later, Taylor asked with a rueful laugh, "Daddy, can you shave my head? It's so itchy." It is a moment I'll never forget; it played out in screaming color against a gray backdrop that had suddenly and unapologetically become our new world. Taylor had already cut her long, straight hair into short layers, a hairstyle any eleven-year-old would never consider. She did it for entertainment value, knowing she would soon be bald.

Bob and I were astounded and wildly humbled at how she could find humor in this situation. Just that week, Bob had come home, saying, "I bought the kit to shave my head, too." Taylor had laughed and said, "Great, Daddy, we will both be bald." We just didn't think it would be so soon.

As he shaved away his beautiful daughter's hair, Bob's soul was torn apart, piece-by-piece. The pain in his heart and the courage it took for him to run the electric razor and then the Gillette razor up and down with a steady hand was never betrayed by his smile. He fought with every ounce of his being to keep Taylor from being afraid. I trembled, unable to hold back my tears, but Taylor didn't shed one.

After Bob finished shaving her head, he bravely offered, without a hint of regret, "Okay, Tales; it's my turn!" Taylor surprised us both and adamantly said, "No, Daddy! I don't want you to do it." She would never tell us why she changed her mind.

Her sisters were downstairs and had no idea any of this was going on. It was a special day, Corey's ninth birthday. I am sure Taylor did not plan to shave her head on Corey's birthday, but to this day, it bothers me. After Tales was cleaned up, she ran down the stairs, struck a pose as if modeling for a fashion show, and boasted, "Look at me!" I peeked into the room through our glass French doors, watching their interactions. I imagine her sisters were terrified, but they didn't show a sign of it. They always had her back. Both girls hugged Taylor and laughed right alongside her, as if she had merely shared a funny joke. No words were spoken. As horrific as the situation was, the love shared between my three daughters was abounding.

Only later Ryan told me, "Mommy, I was so scared. Seeing Taylor bald made everything so much more real." Corey's recollection of seeing Taylor newly bald, on the other hand, speaks volumes. She doesn't recall any of it.

Years later we received a call from a mother with a newly diagnosed little girl. She asked, "What should I do?" Taylor quickly replied, "Tell her to dye her hair pink or a combination of all her favorite colors." She would later tell others, "If you are a boy, cut it into a Mohawk; try layers and new styles; get bangs. Be outrageous!" In retrospect, before shaving it off, we should have painted Taylor's hair blue, her favorite color.