

Diagnosis

Category: Loss

written by Irene Sherlock | November 12, 2025

After the bone marrow biopsy, but before all results are in, when you have some strength and an appetite, I make your favorites—turkeyburgers, coleslaw, baked beans. You stand in the doorway, eyes on me, just as you did when you were a child, waiting for whatever I'd create. *Abracadabra*, I'd say, presenting buttered French toast or a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies. You ate the cookies and cried for your addict parents who'd left you with me, who'd left a wound I couldn't soothe.

I was the aunt who tried to replace them. But you were loyal and followed in your family's tradition of depression and addiction. So many psych wards. So many rehabs, like your parents. Now, your white and red blood cell counts are low. I've tried to be your oxygen. I'm old now, foolish enough to think I can still be your breath.

While I fry the burgers, you wonder about telephone booths in New York. "What happened to them?" you ask, as if we'd been discussing that subject all along. You want answers to so many questions now that you're dying. Why couldn't your parents stay sober? Why does your son never return your calls? I remember reading somewhere about four old-school, glass phone booths preserved on the Upper West Side, on West End Avenue. Or maybe I imagine that, as I slide the burger onto your plate and spoon steaming baked beans next to a pile of coleslaw.

"Mmmm," you say and smile at me, the way you did when you were seven, the year you came to live with me. Back then, you were happy—sometimes. When I married the man you still call uncle, we'd play Trivial Pursuit with you at our dining room table. I'd put out iced tea and salted nuts. You liked reading the cards, asking the questions. One of us would answer, you'd pause, looking back and forth between us, the card in your hand. You were innocent then and we were naïve, thinking our love would be enough. "Is that your final answer?" you'd ask.

I'll remind you of this time when we're near the end of your life. And maybe, somehow, before you die, we can find the one working phone booth that still exists in New York. Together we'll call your parents, now in another life; your son in Utah; and anyone else you'd like to reach. *Abracadabra*—everyone will answer.

Irene Sherlock
Southbury, Connecticut