

Almost Normal

Category: Stories

written by Dianne Apter | July 15, 2022



His steps are wobbly. Our children hold their father's hands to steady him as they move through the sand toward the ocean. I remain far back on the shore, shading my eyes to make out the three of them as they stand in the shallow water.

I am thinking that he looks like a ten-year-old child from this distance. My sight turns blurry, a combination of sun, sand and sorrow.

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As we sat in the hospital waiting room that day in September 1984, I had clutched my friend's arm until my fingers were numb. The news when it came was bad. The surgeon had delivered this speech before. He was gentle, and he moved to the upbeat as he delivered his report.

"We'll assign the best oncologist; there are new treatments."

He offered hope, and then his work was done.

Steve and I had been married sixteen years and had two girls, aged thirteen and ten. One day at a time, we kept life going around us. We rode the ups and downs. We adapted as we had to. We worked. We shopped. We ate. We traveled. The minutiae of living pushed us on. And, perhaps a wrong decision, we never used the "C" word in front of the kids.

"Daddy's sick," we euphemistically claimed. *Daddy will get better* was the implied message.

Now it was August 1985. Steve had insisted on this annual family trip to Sand Hill Cove, in Rhode Island.

"We need the break. We have to do this. For the kids. For us. For me. We'll see my whole family. We'll celebrate your birthday. It'll be good for all of us." His face tightens. "I don't care what the doctor says. I can do this trip. I *need* this trip."

"I'm not so sure. It's not too late to cancel," I had tentatively suggested.

I knew he was dying. I may have known how close we were to the end, though denial was my best friend. Question after question bubbled up inside: *Can he endure the six-hour car ride? Can I keep up the normalcy, beach-time fun, in the intimate space of a cottage? Can I handle his parents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and give them what they need? What if the worst happens?*

My stomach was perpetually clenched. I felt so alone. I was scared.

But we returned to the cottage. Just like every other summer.

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"If they don't leave soon, we can't decorate." Rachel grumbles impatiently to big sister Jennie.

"*Shhh*, she'll hear you. I can't believe the beach store had Mom's favorite, Sara Lee orange cake. "

I hide behind the book I'm reading, pretending I'm absorbed.

Steve emerges from the bedroom where he's been napping. "Are you ready to pick out your birthday present? Let's go to that gallery that we like in Wickford. I want to find you a special gift."

He's relaxed. Not as ashen as he's been the last few weeks. He smiles.

I smile back and put aside the book.

"We'll be back soon!" Steve calls to the girls. "Don't get into trouble!" He's so obvious about our leaving, and I hear the girls giggle in the kitchen.

I start the car and turn to him. "I'm glad you're up for this. It'll be fun to do something—just the two of us."

We arrive at the shop, but he doesn't unbuckle his seat belt. I grip the steering wheel. He is pale again, and his voice is low.

"I can't get out of the car. I don't think my legs will hold me up."

He presses a roll of bills into my hand. "Go on in and pick what you want."

I don't want a present! Why the hell did we come to Wickford? I just want to go back to the cottage. I just want to go home!

"Okay, honey. I'll be quick." I try to sound upbeat.

"Take your time. I'll be fine."

I circle the store for five minutes and select a blue and white pitcher, decorated with a peaceful scene of seagulls drifting over the sea. I pay with the cash Steve gave me and hurry out, almost forgetting to take the gift box with me.

"Thank you for my present," I smile and hand him the change. "Want to see what you bought me?"

He nods at the pitcher. "Sorry it had to be this way."

"Me, too. But at least you know I like it!" We both smile. For a brief moment our eyes lock. I start the car for the short drive back to the cottage.

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The living room is draped with streamers and a huge, glittery "Happy Birthday" sign. Balloons float up against the ceiling, bobbing like happy onlookers. I blink to hide my tears. I know that the children also want to embrace the façade of normalcy by creating this celebration for me.

"Wow, how did you guys ever—this all looks so cool!" I clap and give them a wide smile.

The kids laugh. Steve settles on the couch. I see his normally bright blue eyes are cloudy.

"Didn't we do a great job, Mom? Don't you just love your birthday room? And we have cake and candles, too!" the girls squeal over each other.

"I taped the streamers," Jennie points out. "I used that rickety chair to climb up."

"I held the tape," Rachel chimes in.

"We asked the guy next door to blow up the balloons, because we couldn't do it."

"And we made the sign together, with NO FIGHTS!" They give each other high fives.

"Unbelievable! Thank you both so much. These are the most wonderful birthday decorations I've ever seen. And look at what your dad gave me. I'll put this beach pitcher on the shelf in our kitchen so I can see it every day."

I wrap my arms around my children, and we laugh. Steve joins in from the couch.

It almost feels normal.

Almost.

