



A Moment Before

"One, two, one, two - can you hear me? Is it too loud? Oh, DJ MMC, I think the sound is not good. The guests are getting deaf, and I need them to hear my speech. My mom sat up all night and corrected what I wrote, I mean, deleted most of my jokes."

"Ahhhh, now it's better (breathe, Katy, and don't forget to exhale). Dear guests, I thank you for coming to celebrate my Bat Mitzvah with me. First, I want to thank my parents who got me so far, and didn't let me take the bus... (Damn... I knew they wouldn't laugh here). Huh, and many thanks to Grandma Edna and Grandpa Isaac, to Grandma Ellen and Grandpa Saul, I love you all dearly and there's no meaning to the order in which I read your names, really."

"To my aunt Doris and Uncle Mickey, to Uncle Gad and Aunt Irene, they always support me, especially from afar. (Oops, I think they were offended by that.) And of course, to my friends, Sam, Emma, and Julie, you

are like a family to me, and you're always here for me." (And let's face it, I really need them when my family members are busy with all of our troubles, or just can't understand that a day in the mall can improve my mood.)

"Major thanks to my sister, Julia. Your presence gives me strength. Because of you, I learned that there's nothing like sisters bonding, and I wanted you to know that passing along your outfit to your little sister is a Mitzvah that will reward you with long life. If I forgot to thank someone then I am really sorry..."

"Hey, Hayley, make it short; it's not the Oscars here," said DJ MMC.

"My name is Katy," I corrected him.

"That's what I said. Now, Hayley sweetie, move on to the paragraph when you invite everybody to dance. I have a show tonight as a clown at my nephew's birthday, and I still need to pick up the suit from the dry cleaner, look for the red nose, and iron the pompon at the top of the hat. I don't really have time to waste."

"That's not my problem," I answered, "and my name is Katy Roth."

"OK. Ladies and Gentlemen," he yelled, "Here's Hayley Doth - where's the applause?"

My name is Katy, and we'll talk about my Bat Mitzvah, but before that, we have a long way to walk together.

It's a funny, sad, emotional, special, and a bit delirious road. However, before I get too dramatic, I want to tell you about myself.

Grandma Ellen always tells me that I'm unique, sensitive, creative, and a bit of a whiner. Of course I strongly disagree with her, and to my defense, I can say that I'm a reasonable, practical girl, with a slight tendency to drama, to see everything as black, to be hysterical from nothing, and to cry with roars like the kind that a hungry lion wouldn't be shy of.

My best friend is Sam, and we've been together since first grade, when she sat next to me because it was the only available chair. We're glued to each other, even though we're so different. She has curly hair, is funny, and tends to be loud even when she's only asking for the remote. Sam is connected to three main things: herself, her TV, and sports. Compared to her, I have straight and boring hair. I'm quieter and shy, but when I'm feeling comfortable with people, my funny side comes out. I'm especially close to my mom.

That doesn't mean, of course, that I care less about Julia or my dad. Julia is my big sister; she's a film-making student with the most amazing green eyes I've ever seen and the most beautiful hair on earth, totally not as boring as my hair. Jonathan is her boyfriend and they've been dating for two years now, and he's



certainly the love of her life. Regarding boys, my situation is less satisfying. For a long time I was in love with Justin, the most handsome boy at school, but he was always interested in Britney, who thinks that she's the most popular girl at school because of her blond hair, but everybody knows that her mom, the hairdresser, colors it for her once a month. Sam says that at that rate, she'll be bald at 40. It's too bad that Justin doesn't know all that. And there are so many other things that happened, but I think that I need to start with what happened to Julia.

I remember perfectly that horrible day, six months ago. I came home as happy as can be because Justin and I got a joint assignment in English class, so I ran home to tell Mom. Sam said that I must relax and practice "integrative yoga," which is a kind of yoga that integrates several methods, a new thing that she's into, after watching too much TV. All I wanted was to tell Mom.

I came home and yelled that I must tell her something and couldn't understand why there was no smell of chicken and mashed potatoes as usual and why I could hear my dad's voice. Julia was lying on her bed, her beautiful long hair wet from tears, and Mom was muttering that we don't deserve this and Dad was calling his secretary, telling her to cancel all of his meetings for today.

"What happened?" I asked Julia. "Jonathan dumped you?" And I was hoping that's the reason that dad left work early.

"Katy, we have news that isn't good," Mom said.

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And Darkness Was Upon the Face of the Deep

Mom got closer to me and gave me a weird hug - tight, scared. Nothing like the hugs she usually gives me that are warm, soft, and big. My heart was pounding and my gaze moved from Mom to Dad, hoping that one of them would smile. I didn't need a big smile, just a little sign to show me that everything was going to be okay.

However, they were serious, much more than that time in fourth grade when I was caught stealing a chocolate bar from the grocery. I wanted to know how it feels to steal after Bell, my classmate, said she stole a chocolate. She said it was very exciting, more exciting than kissing boys, but then, boys were not my interest, and I knew that I could steal once without inadvertently rolling into the life of a criminal. I went to the grocery store down the street near my house and put a chocolate bar in my pants pocket. Salomon, the grocer, caught me

immediately, gave me a disappointed look, and said he did not expect me to do that. After I burst into tears as crazy as an actress in the soap operas that Sam is addicted to, he sat me down on the chair behind the cash register, opened a new box of tissues for me, and while I wept, he assured me that he would not tell my parents.

I got upset and wanted to run to tell Mom what happened, like I always do. However, I remembered that stealing chocolate is not something that makes parents proud. A report card with straight A's yes, theft, a little less so. Instead I asked Sam to help me build a good plan, so after I had told my parents what happened, they would say that the main thing is that I'm okay. The problem with this idea is that with Sam's plan, chances are good that I'm really not going to be okay. So I go to Grandma Ellen, who always protects me from Mom and Dad and always has candy. Not stolen. Nevertheless, I had no strength to hear lectures on the children of today, as if they didn't steal chocolate in her time. Finally, I decided to get it over with and admit the crime, which I did.

What do you think happened at the end? Nothing very special. My mom gave me a boring lecture that you mustn't steal, even if it's a little thing, and when she was my age kids wouldn't do that. Right after that, my

dad told me that when he was a boy, he stole a bottle of vodka from his father's cabinet, but he could not open the cap, an example I would keep to myself because of the shame.

"Katy-Kat, you remember that Julia has not been feeling well lately?" Mom asked me and I was back to reality.

"Yes, but the doctor said it was like the stomach problems that so many people are having," I replied and started to sweat.

"True, but her stomach pains have not gone away. She had a number of tests and we got the results today. They're not so good," Mom said slowly, stretching out the difficult moment. I was afraid to look at Julia. I heard her blow her nose loudly, and I wanted to hug her, but I got upset. I did not know what from, but I felt that an unwanted guest had entered the room, the kind who will not leave even when everyone is tired, and I was sweating, Oh how I was sweating.

"So today we saw the doctor in the hospital," Mom continued, "and he said it was a disease called cancer. Do you know what this disease is?" she asked.

"Cancer is a serious illness, right?" I asked all stressed out, my stomach turning upside down. I remembered our classmate Emma who returned from summer vacation with a bald head. She told everyone that she

shaved her head because she had a bad hair day in the morning, but everyone knew what she had. Sam's mother is a good friend of Emma's mother, so Sam already knew she was sick with the "disease," as she whispered in the middle of Bible class.

"What disease?" I whispered back.

"THE D-I-S-E-A-S-E!" She stretched it out, as if she was going to present the next big breakthrough in the medical world.

"What, AIDS?" I asked in alarm.

"No, stupid, cancer," Sam whispered. "This is a serious disease with all sorts of harsh treatments, and some people die from it and some remain alive, but that depends on their acting abilities," she explained.

"What?" I asked confused.

"In the soap opera that I watch, there was someone who got sick and then recovered after a hundred episodes, which was too many, while her brother, who also had the disease, dropped dead within a few hours," explained Sam.

"You can die of it so fast?" I asked, upset.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not a doctor. But in his case, he had to leave to act in another soap opera," she explained seriously.

"Is it contagious?" I panicked and recalled that last year I was sort of a friend of Emma. Sam assured me

that it was not contagious, although she did not really watch the show and thus could be missing some information.

Since then, every time Emma walked by me, I lowered my eyes because I did not like to see her bald head, but mostly because I did not like the fact that I didn't say a thing to her, and when she had her birthday I did not even call her because it seemed silly to wish her good luck. After all, she had no luck, I didn't think she felt good, and I just didn't have the courage to wish her to live until she reached one hundred and twenty years, and I was afraid that if I told her all these things, she would break into tears. So finally I said nothing and avoided her all the time.

"Cancer is a general name for various diseases," Mom said, bringing me back to reality. "Every person has cells in his body, and for a person who has cancer, the cells mess up and create a bad bunch," she said, and I tried to imagine a bunch of kids making chaos in the neighborhood, throwing dirt on the floor, harassing people over the intercom and shouting until the mother of one of them comes, screaming at them to get home right away. This time, it seemed to me that, even if mom screamed to the heavens, it wouldn't help.

"Is Julia going to die?" I shot the question that most

bothered me from the moment Mom said the word "cancer."

"God forbid!" Mom said with fear, even though I'm sure she asked herself the same question. "Fortunately, the cancer was discovered in its early stage, when it's really small, and the doctor said the chances she will recover from the disease are near a hundred percent."

"Ninety-seven percent," Dad interjected, accurate as a disciplined student who was listening to his teacher.

"And how did the doctor determine the percentages?" I asked, "How did he know that it's 97 percent and not 95 percent?"

According to the type of tumor, Dad began to explain, "the size, where it was found, the type of treatment for the tumor, the patient's age, and of course, their experience with patients similar to Julia. In any case, it is considered a great mark, is it not?" Dad tried to smile.

"Sure," I assured him, "What happens now?"

"Julia will have to undergo surgery in which the doctors will remove the tumor in her stomach," Mom explained. "Then, she will get shots to prevent the disease from recurring. Because they found the cancer so early, she will not need chemotherapy and radiation. That is very good," said Mom. I imagined the doctor sitting with a calculator and adding another percent to

Julia's chances and then checking another calculator just to be sure, and maybe after he went through all the calculators, he calculated the percentage on paper, because the calculators might be a bit outdated. I just hope that when he calculated Julia's percentage, he did not forget a number. I was suddenly afraid.

Julia wasn't saying a thing:

Her eyes were expressionless, as if Mom and Dad and I were talking about someone else who happened to be named Julia. I saw her left hand clutching the edge of the sheet tightly, as if a terrible scream was stuck in her throat.

Mom begged her to call Jonathan, her boyfriend, and tell him, but Julia just wanted to be left alone. She wasn't in the mood for this cancer. She had planned to fly with Jonathan to Greece, and now instead of lying on her stomach at the beach, she would have to lie on her back in the hospital.

"How will we notify the grandparents?" Mom asked sadly, and suddenly it looked like she was a little girl who just wanted her mother to tell her that everything would be fine. I also wanted my mom to tell me that everything would be fine, that it was a terrible nightmare. Then we'd sit together in the kitchen, drinking hot chocolate, and she would pat my forehead with her soft hands... But now she was glued to Julia.

"So what will happen with my Bat-Mitzvah?" I asked aloud. Apparently too loud.

"That's what matters to you now?" Dad asked angrily, and I ran to my room in tears, angry with myself for even thinking about celebrations and angry at Dad because he was angry with me. It's not my fault that Julia has the "disease," I thought angrily. I, too, wasn't in the mood for cancer.

Dad came into my room and stroked my ponytail. He comforted me, telling me that everything would be okay, but I think he actually was comforting himself. He suddenly looked like a little boy wearing his father's large suit. His loose tie looked as exhausted as his eyes that seemed to want to shut down, sleep, and discover, like me, that it was just a bad dream.

He continued to pat my head, and I cried. I cried over myself, Julia, my parents, Emma, the grandmothers, the grandfathers, over our dog Louie who was peering into the room, his eyes confused. Mom also came in and suggested I go tell Sam.

How do I tell Sam? I thought in panic.