

Just a Shopping Trip  
By Valerie Fletcher Adolph

Mary was still in her forties when I found out she had breast cancer. Breast cancer. My big sister. The one person who tried to keep me out of trouble when I was a kid, the one who patched me up when things blew up in my face or made sure my mother never heard the worst of it. Hearing the news was the moment I realized that being a bratty little sister, albeit now a 45-year old bratty little sister, was a luxury I probably didn't deserve.

She wasn't even going to tell me she was ill; I found out totally by accident. They had called me in to the hospital to do a relief shift in the oncology department when someone called in sick. I don't work often these days, just once in a while to keep up my skills, but who should come in that morning but Mary.

I don't know who was most shocked between the pair of us. She looked just furious to see me there, in the way only Mary can. She's never had much luck in life – she puts on ten pounds if she even looks at chocolate, she married a deadbeat and she's never been able to afford a car that doesn't break down every month. It shows; her expression clearly says 'don't mess with me' even on a good day. When she's mad she looks as if she could pulverize every atom of your body and feed the leftovers to tigers. Her lips go into a thin line and you can see the steel in her soul.

“So much for confidentiality,” she spat.

No point saying this wasn't my fault. I just dealt with her like any other patient and drove straight to her house right after my shift. She knew I was coming, of course. She had the kettle on, the teapot warm and the Peak Frean cookies on the table.

I dropped my purse on her kitchen floor and demanded. “How long have you known?”

Because by now I was even madder than she was. I had worked the rest of my shift with my teeth clenched and a perma-smile on my face. I had gone into overdrive and done three days work in eight hours. My co-workers had taken one look at me - I can look almost as angry as Mary - and stayed the hell out of my way. I had bargained with God and planned an Internet blitz to find the best specialist even if he was in New York or Texas.

But suddenly my anger evaporated and all I could do was put my head down on her kitchen table and weep. Just what she didn't need.

I'd seen her file. I knew the answer to my question, and I knew a lot of other stuff that tore me apart. The prognosis was about as bad as it could be. It was going to take surgery pretty quick, heavy duty chemo and lots of luck. Lots and lots of luck.

Did I mention that Mary never had much luck?

I wanted to say things to her like “It will be all right.” “No sweat. I've seen lots of people with worse prognoses get well within a year.” But I couldn't lie to her.

Even more than that I wanted to say, “You can't leave me. I need you.”

But our family had never said words like that. We knew our parents loved us, but they never had much money so they never spent money on non-essentials like treats. Nor did they ever think to give us the warm hugs or ‘I love you’ that other kids seemed to get all the time. We grew up not just careful with money but downright miserly with any show of affection.

I wanted so much to say “I love you.”

But neither Mary nor I reached out to touch each other. I think I've only touched Mary once, when I coloured her hair over the kitchen sink. Now I wanted to hold on to her, tightly, as if holding on might keep her from ever leaving. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, I'd always loved her, and I'd be with her, stay with her until...

At last I pulled myself together. Without even brushing against her I got up and poured the tea. It was so strong you could have stood the teaspoons up in it.

Out of nowhere I found myself saying, "Let's go on a shopping trip, just you and me. We can fly down to Vancouver Friday night and get back Sunday night. We can look in all the expensive shop windows and try on all the latest styles. We could spend ages just in the Bay there, it's huge. We could go down Robson Street with all the tourists. Come on, it'll be fun."

She looked at me as if I'd gone off my rocker. "I can't afford that."

"I'll pay," I said. My husband makes decent money now, programming computers. It wouldn't be that big a strain. Before she could object I said, "It can be an early birthday gift."

"I can't let you do that – it would be way too expensive. Do you know how much the flights are? And the hotels?"

I did some rapid calculations and gulped, but it didn't matter. For the first time in my life I considered spending hundreds of dollars on something that wasn't a necessity. Me, who doesn't even own a flat screen TV. I could almost hear my mother's voice, "And how do you expect a shopping trip to cure cancer?"

"My husband has tons of frequent flyer miles" I exaggerated, "And the hotels aren't that expensive as long as you don't stay at the big name ones."

She looked at me doubtfully and I tried to look as if I honestly knew how to find a decent cheap hotel in Vancouver.

“It’s just a shopping trip,” I said

It took me more than half an hour to talk her into going. To be truthful I was kind of scared myself, not of going to Vancouver but of what my mother would have said about spending so much money when it wasn’t necessary. But I refused to leave her house until she agreed to go.

I booked flights and started phoning about hotels. Well, you know, they’re all expensive so I thought ‘Why not just go for it?’ So I booked the Hotel Vancouver, the best hotel in town in my parent’s time. Having splurged once I booked seats to the Abba show and arranged for a couple of luxurious treatments at a spa I’d read about.

When we got off the plane in Vancouver Mary started to look for the bus stop. She could hardly believe it when I shoved her, suitcase and all, into a taxi.

“We can’t afford it,” she hissed.

“It’s all taken care of,” I said, but she sat on the edge of her seat as if the taxi ride would cost less that way. She hadn’t heard me to direct the driver to the Hotel Vancouver – he must have wondered why I whispered it in his ear – but when we arrived there she was caught between the expensive taxi and the expensive hotel so she went up to our room looking daggers at me. Only when the door closed behind us did she say again, “We can’t afford this.”

“It’s all taken care of,” I said, as if some invisible other person somewhere had paid.

It wasn't until I took her to the spa that she truly relaxed. I don't think she knew such heaven existed. She had the works – massage, manicure and pedicure with the low lighting and the other-worldly music - but only because I had pre-booked the treatments. I wouldn't have got her through the expensive glass doors if I hadn't told her that missing the treatments would have wasted money that had already been spent.

Later we went shopping and I bought the most gorgeous nightgown, embroidered satin in a delicate lavender shade. I switched it to her size before I took it to the cash register. All she bought was an umbrella because it was raining and a couple of shirts, on sale, for her husband.

But she laughed and sang at the Abba concert and for a few hours she was so light-hearted and happy that she seemed a dozen years younger.

It wasn't till we were on the plane Sunday night, waiting for take-off, that Mary turned to me, shoulders stiff, and said, "I want to pay my share."

Her back was ramrod straight and her lips were in that tight line.

"Not possible. It's all been taken care of."

"By you. This lot must have cost hundreds of dollars. I can find out the prices."

She used that steely tone of voice that brooked no opposition.

"It was just a shopping trip," I said. "No big deal. Some people come down here a couple of times a year just to shop."

"Not us."

I saw red.

"That's right, not us. Heaven forbid we should just enjoy ourselves one time. We don't spend money on non-essentials and we don't tell each other how much we care.

Well, this was essential. I needed to show you that I care about you. The thought of losing you to this God-awful disease kills me.”

Bad choice of words.

“You did this all because...?” She didn’t look at me any more, just spoke staring out the window, her shoulders turned away from me. I could see her reflection; the straight-line lips were trembling.

I took a leap into the unknown. “I did this because you’re my sister. I love you. What’s money compared to the fun we had together?”

And might never have again.

“I didn’t mean the money. I meant ...I guess...I guess...I love you too. We’ve never, ever said, any of us...”

And she travelled all the way home, back straight, staring straight ahead, lips in a straight line while we held hands as tightly as we could between the seats.