

My Memory Box

A simple piece of white notebook paper can come alive in the hands of a child. Adrienne made me artwork because she knew I loved it, and I keep everything. I have a giant box in my garage labeled Memories, which contains every card, letter, and drawing anyone has ever given me. Every time I move, people are reluctant to lift the box. My memories are heavy.

My life as a parent started when an exuberant eight-year-old bounded off a plane. The stewardess running after her laughed and said, "You must be her sister, Andrea." Adrienne chimed in, "Yep! That's my Sissy!" After flashing my driver's license, I took Adrienne to baggage claim. When I commented on how light one of her suitcases was, she said, "Oh. That one is full of my stuffed animals; they wanted to visit you, too."

Neither one of us knew it at the time, but Adrienne's two-week visit to Los Angeles would turn into a permanent stay. The day after Christmas, our mother called and asked if I could keep Adrienne for a while. She was tired, ill, and no longer capable of being a mother. I was 22-years-old, living with my alcoholic boyfriend, had little money and no job stability, but it never occurred to me to say no.

Adrienne soon challenged me. Our mother let her run wild, so she was used to doing whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. When staff at a local restaurant tried to sing Happy Birthday to her, she threw a fit that would make the worst toddler's tantrum look tame. Her screaming drowned out my numerous apologies. My boyfriend Dave and I carried her out by her arms and legs; I was convinced people in the parking lot were going to call Social Services. I could tell by the weary look on Dave's face he wouldn't last too much longer.

I sent Adrienne to her room, which had been Dave's office. When I walked in to discuss her behavior with her, she was still thrashing around, yelling that she hated me, and why did I make those people sing to her. I grabbed her arms, pinned her down, and slapped her forearm to get her attention. It worked. "You live here now. My house. My rules. You do not make scenes in public. Understand?" "Oh yeah? I'm moving back to Alabama," she said. I may have stopped her body from moving, but I couldn't do anything about her mouth. "I don't like you. I don't want to live with you. I want Mom, and I want to go home!"

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I looked into her green eyes and wondered if I should tell her. *Mom got caught shooting up morphine at work and lost her nursing license. She can't get a job. You have no home. No one else wants you.* Instead of saying those things, I called her bluff. I released her arms, walked over to the desk, picked up the phone, and dialed 411. "May I have the toll-free number to Northwest Airlines, please?" Adrienne watched me in silence as I proceeded to make a reservation in her name for a flight out the next day. I pulled out her two suitcases. "Start packing, kiddo. Are you taking your stuffed animals or should I mail them to you?" She glared at me, crossed her arms over her chest, and refused to say anything as I walked out of the room.

In the living room, I hoped I had done the right thing. I knew this moment would be a turning point. She had to accept me as an authority figure. I heard her moving around in her bedroom. Shuffling one thing, slamming something else. What would I do if she packed her things? I waited. It took almost an hour, but Adrienne finally came out. She stared at the ground. "Okay. I want to stay. Don't send me back." Thank God, I thought to myself. Even if I wanted to send her back, I didn't have the money. "Here's the deal: I'm your parent first, then your sister, and when you get older, I hope to be your friend. Got it? One more thing—don't ever threaten me again." Her eyes met mine. "Alright, Sissy. I got it."

I wasn't perfect; I made mistakes. I hit her one more time when she talked back to me, which I now regret. I was too strict by most parents' standards, but Adrienne needed firm boundaries. No telephone, television, or Internet until all homework was done. I read her email and instant messages on a regular basis. Family friends busted her when she entered chat rooms that were off limits. Adrienne often protested, but after years of living in a lawless land with our mother, she appreciated that I set consistent rules that stemmed from love.

I had high expectations of Adrienne, and I was so proud of her. By age 14, she had a summer job making \$125 per day working as a clown with me at corporate picnics. I allowed her to spend \$25 from each paycheck—the rest went into her personal savings account. Her plan was to save \$1000 and to invest in a mutual fund to prepare for college—a goal of hers since she was six-years-old. Adrienne maintained a 4.0 GPA during her freshman year of high school, took two honors courses, and was one year ahead of her peers in math. She couldn't decide if she wanted to be a zoologist, a professor, a forensic scientist, or an artist. With all of her talent, intelligence, ambition and drive, she could have been anything she wanted.

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On May 16, 2001, I walked in the door and discovered Adrienne curled up in fetal position—crying and saying she couldn't breathe, I thought she had cracked a rib at Coachella, an outdoor music festival she had attended a few weeks before. Six hours and eight words later, an ER doctor changed our lives forever when he said, "She has tumors in her liver and lungs." Not equipped to handle the situation, the local hospital transferred Adrienne to Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. Adrienne was admitted to the fourth floor—Hematology and Oncology. By midnight, I was falling asleep holding Adrienne's hand through the guardrail struggling to recall what oncology meant. I knew one thing for certain though: benign tumors did not spread.

Hepatocellular carcinoma literally means liver-cell cancer; hepatitis, cirrhosis and aflatoxins are known causes of liver cancer. Tests revealed Adrienne had hepatitis B and hepatitis C her entire life, which the doctors determined our mother gave her during childbirth. I told Adrienne the news after her biopsy. Seeing the look on my face, she said, "What's next—chemo? Hey, I'm not going to die." The night before chemotherapy was scheduled to begin, Adrienne cut off her blue-green hair—she wanted a wig made from it. Then she shaved her head into four Mohawks, which she called her Quad-hawk.

Throughout the summer, Adrienne endured three more rounds of chemotherapy—without an ounce of self-pity. She became determined to make the most of her situation. When her blood counts were up (decreasing the risk of infection), we tried to do everything she had ever wanted to do. Adrienne's spirit was infectious. Her boyfriend declared, "We're going to milk this cancer thing for everything it's worth." Within hours, he had obtained tickets to *The Tonight Show* so Adrienne could see her favorite musician, Dave Navarro of Jane's Addiction, perform live. Jay Leno introduced Adrienne to Dave knowing that she didn't come to see "the dorky talk show host, but the cool rock star."

We ate our first set of crab legs at Crabby Bobs with plastic bibs tied around our necks and butter dripping on our laps. Adrienne saw her first ballet, *Giselle*, at the Orange County Performing Arts Center only hours after being discharged from the hospital after an emergency 24-hour stay and two days before her third round of chemotherapy was scheduled to begin. Upon admission to the hospital, Adrienne routinely asked, "When will I be out of here? I have places

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to go.” We cheered on our knight at Medieval Times, clapped after a benefit held in Adrienne’s honor, and walked through the mall searching for the perfect dress for her Make-a-Wish day.

In September, Adrienne started her sophomore year—at home—with me as her teacher. She often fell asleep at the kitchen table with a pencil still curled up in her right hand, her body exhausted by a fifth round of chemotherapy. I taught English and World History, but I was unable to teach her other subjects: French II, Algebra II, and Physics. To obtain teachers, I had to challenge the school district by citing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which guarantees a public education to handicapped or ill children. By the time superintendent granted my request, Adrienne was in an altered state of consciousness. Her brain was not getting enough oxygen because the tumors filling her lungs made it impossible for her to breathe.

On October 1st, we entered new territory. Adrienne’s oxygen intake was 88 percent, her speech was slurred, and she had no concept of time. Even as her body was failing her, her brain functioned normally. I understood her when she asked, “When can I go back to school?” even though her words were muddled. Trying to coax her into eating mashed potatoes, I noticed a yellow film over her eyes—she had developed jaundice; her liver was dying. Each day we descended farther into an abyss. A pharmaceutical company offered Adrienne an investigational drug, which was safe, but its efficacy was unknown. Like a piece of driftwood in a vast ocean, I held onto this drug—hoping and needing a miracle.

One week later, Adrienne was transferred to hospice care. She never tried the drug; it was too late for miracles. People flowed in and out of her bedroom saying their goodbyes. Adrienne purposefully blinked twice at a friend, a cue to get me. I lay down next to her, counting the 15 seconds between each breath. The air whistled through Adrienne’s teeth during the deep, long inhales followed by shallow exhales. Then—no more breath. My world began slipping away, I grasped for it—checking for a pulse. Nothing. I removed the oxygen mask. With my ear to her lips, I strained to hear a sound—a lost breath. Nothing. My life—with Adrienne—was over. The day before, her last words were: “I love you Sissy.”

It has been six years since I lost Adrienne. I stopped looking for her on the street a long time ago. Time has moved forward, but I can’t move on. Part of me died with Adrienne, leaving a void so vast that nothing can fill it. For years, I tried to relieve my grief: I started a nonprofit to fight liver cancer; I got 200-pound dog that loves me unconditionally; I took antidepressants, saw

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a therapist, switched careers, went back to school, lost old friends and gained new ones. I even got married. Nothing works. There is no cure for death.

My Memory box holds my most precious treasures. I look in it often, combing through its contents. One of my favorite pictures by Adrienne was for no occasion whatsoever. She was experimenting with watercolor and although every letter is legible, the paint appears to be thrown on the page. I used to call her my little Jackson Pollack. There are broad red strokes and small purple squares around the words: **BEST PARENT, SISTER, AND FRIEND!** Every time I see this picture, the warmth of Adrienne's love spreads through my body. Sometimes I cry, other times I smile. Adrienne's soul lives on in her art. Her painting tells me what I still need to hear: I was—and will always be—her parent.