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Erika Doremus
Concordia University - Portland

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol16/iss1/49

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THE DAY MY WEATHER CHANGED

Erika Doremus

July 27th, 1999, was one of those typical, hot July days. One that would have been perfect for taking the boat out on the Sound, or riding the ferry over to Seattle. I woke up that morning with the sun peeking through my window. I felt the gentle warmth of it splashing across my face, as if to welcome me back to the waking world. Opening my eyes slowly to adjust to the light, I suddenly remembered what I had to do. I had been dreading it all week. I didn’t even understand the need for it.

Finally, I willed myself to get out of bed and headed down to the kitchen. Mom happened to pass me going up the stairs. I tried to greet her cheerfully saying, “Morning Mom, did you already eat breakfast?” She looked at me blankly and tried to say something, but just couldn’t get anything out. She walked away in silence. Accepting defeat I continued my trek to the kitchen. There I wasn’t met with any better of a mood. I sat down next to my brother and waited patiently for my dad to pour me a bowl of cereal. Turning to my brother I asked, “Did you see Mom this morning yet?”

“Yeah, but she wouldn’t talk or eat anything,” he replied. About a minute later my dad came over with two blue bowls half filled with granola. As he sat down to eat with us he let out a heavy sigh. My brother and I both knew without words that this was going to be hard on all of us. In silent agreement we looked down and continued eating our granola.

When I finished eating I went back up to my room. My window was open and I could hear the robins chirping outside in the pear trees. Since it was late July, the ripe pears had turned that old gold shade and were weighing down its branches. I sat there on my sill for a moment, just smelling the sweet air and taking in what was going to be a beautiful day. Then I felt ugly for thinking about beauty. There was not going to be anything beautiful about today. Today everyone would be dressed in black. I could see them walking slowly and hear them speaking somberly. Trying to shake off this foul feeling, I stood up and went to grab my long-sleeved navy dress from the closet. I looked at it for a second. I am usually thrilled with new clothes. Even as a little girl I can remember being excited to go shopping. However, this article of clothing brought me no joy. I pulled it on reluctantly and stared in the mirror. I definitely had grown since last winter, when Grandma first got sick. She made me this dress when she first knew. I think we all held out hope that the chemotherapy would work; even the specialists sounded optimistic. And when it didn’t we thought one of those experimental drugs would certainly be our magic wand. But Grandma knew, she knew as soon as Doctor Nelson asked her to meet with him in his office. Yes, she did everything the professionals had suggested. Although, I think she went through all of that painful radiation and chemotherapy just to appease us. She didn’t want people to fuss over her. But that was always the way Char was. Always trying to please everyone, and not stir the pot.

“Dying isn’t that bad, Erika,” I remember her telling me one particularly crisp February afternoon. We sat out on the back porch bundled up in the heavy Icelandic quilts that they had brought with them so many years ago. Mom was inside making lunch. This was when Grandma could still eat. She went on, “Dying is just a transition.” I nodded, wondering where this conversation was going. “God created my spirit in heaven before he sent me to live here on earth. Death is just my spirit leaving my body and returning home to him.”

“But I won’t be able to talk to you,” I almost cried out. “No, Miss America (my family always calls me Erika Miss America, because it’s the only thing that rhymes), I will always be here for you, just not in my body,” she tried to explain to my disconcerted twelve-year-old self. I have seen photographs of my grandmother when she was a young woman; she was classically angelic with high cheek bones, porcelain skin and carmine red lips. Even then, in her cancer riddled body, she still had a kind of Audrey Hepburn aura about her. I thought about all of this as I stared at the dress that was now two inches too short, exposing my skinny ankles.

The half hour ride in the car was somber. What few words that were said hung in the air like a fog that wouldn’t lift.
Once we pulled into the parking lot, I saw that many people had already arrived. There seemed to be row after row of cars. I didn't even think that I knew that many people. Inside the church there were twice as many people as there were cars outside. I don't know why I was so surprised by that. St. Charles was not a huge parish. There were no formidable gargoyles guarding the entrance, or high gothic spires. It was simply the single bell tower, white-washed church of my childhood.

Once inside, my family and I had to walk past all of the apologetic faces and pretend to be fully composed. The aisle was probably twenty yards long, but that day it could have been twenty miles for all I knew. After what seemed like an eternity, we finally took our place at the reserved pews at the front of the nave.

Mass started out as it normally did. The organ sounded, we said the "Our Father," and then we crossed ourselves, stood, sat, and knelt. When Father Thomas started to talk, I reached out to hold my mother's hand. It was ice cold. I looked over and she was staring vacantly ahead. She was so thin that her cheekbones were protruding out of her face very dramatically. I honestly don't remember the last time I saw her really eat. As hard as this was for me, it was one hundred times more difficult for my mother.

She and her mother rarely went a day without calling or seeing each other. Father Thomas was talking about Jonah on a ship for some reason, and I started daydreaming about last summer on my grandparents's yacht. One day Dad was pulling overtime, so Mom drove my brother and me out to Penrose Point, where we met Grandma and Grandpa on their boat, Molly. On the way there Mom sang to Shania Twain with the windows rolled down. She smiled and laughed, letting her hand move up and down with the passing wind. I can't believe that the sunny, loving mother I was used to was now reduced to the person sitting beside me.

When mass was over, we all walked across the cemetery to lower the casket. The cemetery had winding pathways that led to different sections of perfectly manicured lawns and other forms of shrubbery that you would expect at a cemetery. Grandma's plot was on the edge of the grounds, shaded by a line of century-old trees. I stood under a massive oak holding onto a dozen yellow roses that I had picked from her garden, because yellow roses were her favorite flowers. I watched my father and all of my uncles carry the casket from the hearse to the burial plot. The sky was cloudless, and a slight breeze rustled the leaves of the tree I was under. As I was taking in the reeling sea of green lawns and the amorous sun above, I felt my face getting hot. This isn't right. Why did she have to get lung cancer in the first place? The day should be dark and stormy.

My grandmother was the most pure, most loving, most devout Catholic that I knew. And she still got dealt the short end of the straw. So what is the point in being a good person? Why go to Mass? Why pray to God, when he takes away the one person who deserved to live the most? Damn it, why couldn't it have rained? Why couldn't it have been bitter cold, because that's the way I felt inside? Why did God have to make this day beautiful? I was so angry; I threw down the roses and sprinted as far away from that oak tree as I could.

"Come back here!" my father yelled at me. But I didn't hear him; I did not want to hear him. All I knew was I wanted to get away as fast as I could. I ran and ran until my chest was heaving. Then I just fell to the ground and lost it. I hadn't allowed myself to show any emotion until that moment. I always had to be the strong one who comforted everybody else, but the weight of what was happening suddenly crashed down on me. I couldn't handle pretending to be fine anymore. I couldn't tell myself that this too shall pass, because it wouldn't. Reality just kept coming up and hitting me in the gut. That was the day that I lost my faith.