Two Girls, Two Years, and Two Losses:
The Story of Friendship and the Power of Hope through One of Life's Hardest Journeys
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Dedicated in Loving Memory to
Sally Mills (1957-1989)
Beverly Mills (1957-2003)
James Thayer (1956-2002)
They say a girl never forgets her first best friend. I know I'll never forget mine. Her name was Diane, and she helped me through the hardest time of my life. I can remember the first day we met like it was yesterday...
"Class, you all did a wonderful job on your poems," Mrs. Taylor said as she passed them back to us. 
  "Be sure to put them in your take home folders before going outside."
She handed my paper to me and whispered, "You did a nice job, Beth. I'm proud of you."
I looked at the top of the paper. Mrs. Taylor had given me an A, just as I thought she would.
I shoved it in my pocket and hurried to the playground for recess. I could never put something this secret in a take home folder. What would happen if my mom read it?
Once on the playground, I ran to my usual swing. Back and forth I pumped my legs, thinking about how much I wanted to reach the clouds. I was too busy looking up to notice that a fourth grade girl was walking toward my swing.

"Are you Beth?" the girl asked.

The question startled me. "Yeah, that's me," I replied, and I kept swinging.

"I think you dropped this," the girl said. It was my poem! It must have fallen out of my pocket. I stopped my swing as fast as I could and snatched it from her hands.

"Did you read it?" I asked.

She nodded yes.

"Please don't tell anyone what it says," I begged. "No one knows but Mrs. Taylor and me." I couldn't let anyone else find out what the poem said, so I took a deep breath and asked, "Will you keep my secret?"

She smiled. "Of course; I won't tell a soul." She sat down in the swing beside me. "By the way, my name is Diane."

We talked until recess ended, and I hoped my new friend would keep my secret.

The next day, Diane had reached the swings first. "I saved you a swing," she said.

"Thanks," I replied and began to pump my legs.

"So why don't you want anyone to know your secret?" she asked. "I don't think it would be a big deal if people knew."

I sighed, "It just makes me different, and I don't want to be different from everyone."

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "Beth, I don't think you are very different at all. Lots of people have secrets. I know you don't want people to know your dad is sick, but you are not as different as you think you are."

"Maybe you're right," I said, "but I still feel different."

"Even I have a secret," she whispered. Before she could tell me what it was, the bell rang, signaling the end of recess. "I'll tell you tomorrow," she said.
All night I wondered what her secret could be. When I saw her the next day, she had a serious look on her face.

“Hey,” she said as she took a seat in the swing next to mine.

“So what is it?” I asked, judging it wasn’t a good secret by the look on her face.

“Well, it’s kind of like your secret,” she said.

“Does your dad have cancer, too?” I asked.

“No, my mom used to have cancer, but I don’t have a mom now.” Her eyes were brimming with tears. “No one at school knows except for my teacher. I am keeping your secret because I want you to keep mine.”
Over the course of the next several months, we met on the swings and talked about all sorts of things. Most of the time we talked about usual fourth grade stuff like cheerleading, softball, and school; but sometimes we talked about sad things like cancer. Diane listened whenever I was upset about my dad, and I would listen to her whenever she wanted to talk about her mom. She told me all about her mom’s treatment and illness. She was only four years old when her mom had died, and her mom had been sick for three years before that. Sometimes her mom would stay at the hospital when she had her chemotherapy treatments, and sometimes she’d stay at their house. One morning Diane’s dad went in to her bedroom and sat on her bed, telling her that her mom had gone to heaven. He said that she wouldn’t get to see her mom anymore, but that her mom was no longer sick. Diane told me that she was so glad to have a friend who would listen to her memories and keep her secret. She said she didn’t know what she would have done if she didn’t have me to talk to.
Before we knew it, Thanksgiving had come and gone. Christmas was just around the corner. It was the Monday after Thanksgiving break, and I noticed Diane wasn’t her usual self. When I asked her if she was okay, she started to cry. “I just miss her, you know? She always loved Christmas, and it makes the holidays so hard without her here.”
Hearing Diane talk about her mom scared me so much. I knew I was lucky to have a mom and a dad, even if my dad was sick.

If only I would have known that it was the last Christmas with my dad, I would have never let go when I hugged him that morning.
Like everything that year, Christmas happened so fast. Before I knew it, we were back in school. One morning I woke up, and I couldn't wait to see Diane. There was one question I just had to ask her. As we sat down on the swings at recess I asked, “Did your mom ever look weird when she was sick?”

“What do you mean?” she said, looking confused.

“Well, I just thought of something I noticed over Christmas break, and it was really weird. I mean, my dad looks more like my grandpa than my dad because he is bald from his medicine, but there’s more. It’s like he’s changing colors! At first I thought it was just the lights from the Christmas tree that were making him look yellow, but then I realized that he really was a yellowish color. Did your mom ever look weird because of her medicine?”

“Yeah, I remember when my mom was sick she lost her hair, too. Sometimes she wore a wig, and other times she would wear a scarf on her head. She also got thin from the medicine, and sometimes her eyes would be really watery. It just depended on the medicine she was taking.”
One Monday, Diane could tell I wasn't my usual self. "What's wrong?" she asked as we swung toward the sky. "My dad's birthday was on Sunday, and something was different about him. He just wasn't himself." Diane's face turned sad. "I know you get upset when your dad seems different, but at least you have both of your parents. I would love to see my mom, even if she was different. I wish I was able to celebrate things with my mom like you can with your dad."

"I'm sorry." I didn't want Diane to be upset so I said, "I know I should be happy he's still here."

We swung in silence for the rest of recess.
On February 22nd, my worst fears occurred. I finally knew how Diane felt to have just one parent.
The next few days were a blur. There was a constant stream of visitors in and out of our house. Family members brought hugs; neighbors brought food.

Mom explained to me that there would be a visitation for people to come and "pay their respects." The visitation was on Monday. My mom, my sisters, and I had to stand in a line where people walked by us and gave us hugs. They told us they were sorry and that we were strong girls. We didn't feel very strong. We were tired from standing there for hours. Towards the end of the line, I saw Diane. Her eyes were red, just like mine. She was holding a heart-shaped locket, which she gave to me along with a hug. She told me to put a picture of my dad in it, so I could look at it whenever I missed him. I fell asleep wearing it that night.
The next day was the funeral.
Snow blew in our faces as we made our way up the church steps.
My family and I walked up to the casket, and that’s when I saw my dad for the very last time.
I didn’t go to school for the rest of the week.
All I wanted to do was sleep and cry, but I felt like I had to be strong for everyone.
I didn’t want my mom to see me cry, even though I saw her cry a lot.
I just wanted to look at pictures of my dad and be alone in my room.
The only reason to go back to school was to see Diane. She was the only person who I knew would understand. So for the next several days we went back to the swings. Back and forth, we pumped our legs. We didn't talk much, but we didn't have to. I knew she would understand that my heart was breaking.
After my dad was gone, everything seemed so much harder. I couldn’t concentrate on reading, and I kept misspelling my words. One day, everything came crashing down during my math assignment.

I didn’t understand anything on the math page, and everything on the paper started to blur. I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing onto my paper.

Mrs. Taylor lightly tapped my on the shoulder and whispered, “Go to the office and calm down.”

As I walked to the office I thought, it’s just not fair! I can’t stop thinking about my dad! I can’t concentrate on anything, and I just keep messing things up!
Once at the office, I didn’t want to talk to anyone but Diane. The nurse went and got her from her classroom. Diane hugged me as I cried. “I was doing math,” I sobbed, “and I just couldn’t understand any of it. I’m not mad because of my math assignment, I just miss my dad. I can’t stop thinking about him. I can’t stop dreaming about him, and I want it all to go away!” My eyes were so swollen I could hardly see. “It’s just so hard!” Diane said, “I know it’s hard, but you’ll make it through this. It seems impossible now, but you have your mom and your sisters to help you. I’ll be here, too. All I know is that if I hadn’t gone through it then, I couldn’t help you now.”
I dried my tears and we hugged. “Let’s promise to be there for each other whenever we are sad and miss our parents, no matter what,” I said.

“Of course,” she said and smiled.
For the rest of the school year, we swung together every day. On the last day of fourth grade, we exchanged phone numbers and promised to keep in touch over the summer. "Call me!" I yelled as I got on the school bus and headed home.
On July 13th, my tenth birthday, I received a phone call from Diane. “Happy Birthday!” she shouted. “I know it’s your first birthday without your dad, and I just wanted to call to make you smile.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It makes me sad that he’s not here, but I’m glad you called.”

“It’s all part of our promise,” she said as she hung up.

The following weekend, Diane came to my birthday party. My birthday wish was for us to be in the same class when school started in the fall. I hoped it would come true!
On the first day of fifth grade, I smiled when I walked in the classroom and saw Diane. I was excited that we would get to spend more time together this year. Like the year before, we swung together at recess. One day, Diane asked me to do her a favor. "Will you go to the cemetery with me? September 1st is my mom's birthday, and I don't want to go alone."
So on September 1st, we went to the cemetery with Diane’s dad.
Hand in hand, we walked to the gravestone.
Through her tears she placed flowers on her mom’s grave.
As the school year went on, things began to get better.
I still missed my dad, but I found ways to make myself smile. I began to laugh a little more and cry a little less.
When I thought of my dad, I could look back and smile, not look back and cry.
Mom said that Diane and I were the strongest fifth graders she knew.
I don’t know what I would have done without Diane to help me.

On the last day of fifth grade, Diane had one more secret.
“Beth,” she whispered, “I have something to tell you. It’s my last secret.”
“What do you mean it’s your last secret?” I asked, suddenly nervous.
“I’m going to be moving because my dad is getting remarried. I’m going to have a mom again!”
“That’s great!” I said. “You’ll have two parents again.”
“Actually, I think of it more as having three parents. I got to have one mom for awhile, and now I get a new one to make more memories with. She can help me do the mom things that my dad can’t help me with. So, I have my dad.
I had my first mom, and now I get a second mom. She’s really nice and helps me with a lot of things.
I’m excited to get to have her in our lives. Life keeps changing, and I just have to prepare myself for this change.
I don’t have to say goodbye to my first mom, either! I get to keep the memories I have of her while making memories with my new mom!”
Although I was happy for her, I was sad that she was moving away from me.
She was my best friend, and I couldn’t imagine recess or life without her.
I always remembered what she said on the swing that day. Life keeps changing. I just have to prepare myself for the next change.
After she had moved away, I often thought of Diane and how much she had changed my life. She taught me how to smile, even during the worst of times. She taught me that it was okay to cry, and that it was okay to talk about it, too.

The other day I went back to the swing set to read a letter I had received from her.

Dear Beth,

I hope everything is going well at school. I still think about my mom every day, but my second mom is wonderful. She is just what my dad, sister, and I needed in our family to keep us going. She has made it easier to keep moving when life changes.

Beth, we'll always be friends. Never forget our swing set secrets.

Your Best Friend,

Diane
Creators’ Note:
Both creators know first hand the pain of losing loved ones in their immediate families to cancer. After meeting in college, they supported each other through their losses as friends who could understand similar life circumstances. Both graduated in May 2005 from Ball State University with degrees in Elementary Education. Using their academic and personal experiences, they created this resource for classroom teachers to educate their students about the effects that cancer can have on a person’s life. Their hope is that the lives of those they have lost will be memorialized through the pages of this book.