

Family Inheritance

Coming to Gnosis on Genetic Vulnerability

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Family Inheritance is a reflective exploration into the biological legacy we carry through the generations. Inheritance often brings to mind ideas of monetary and object possessions that get left to relatives upon someone's death. Yet, inheritance can also refer to the various genetic gifts passed on – from a common eye color and nose shape to predispositions for certain cancers or diseases. Both forms of inheritance raise questions about identity, living, and death as who we are as individuals and in relation to family are examined. Is our lost relative defined by their collection of porcelain statues? Do my genes determine my death? How do we live knowing about increased risk without it limiting our experiences?

Through a curated collection of photography, illustrations, and poetry, *Family Inheritance* wrestles with my personal confrontation with genetic identity, life, death, and vulnerability. This visual essay takes the viewer through an emotional negotiation of the stages of grief as defined in Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*. The process begins with a reflection on the word inheritance and what family inheritance implies, thinking back to conceptions of the “old world” and family separation across oceans, time, and culture. Next a visual collage illustrates the visible genetic inheritance among my immediate family, highlighting the biological legacy we can see. Following this collage, the essay turns towards the darker side of genetics with a family tree of cancer. This image marks the point of realization that one's own body and genes could be the enemy. Here I explore what it means to be at “increased risk” and how to reconcile one's notion of self and family with the inheritance of possibly lethal mutations.

Once the moment of realization happens the emotional turmoil begins. Denial serves to illustrate how one can choose to ignore their inheritance and continue on as if life has not changed. Isolation explores a difficulty with opening up and engaging in emotional solidarity with family and friends playing with notions of being the “rock,” the holder-up of others, and the one who must use optimism and humor to boost morale. This unconscious, self-imposed isolation leaves one prone to breaking, which is examined in the next three pages – anger, bargaining, and depression.

Anger speaks to the specifics of body parts and the intimacy of confronting the possible enemy within by targeting the culpable locations with fire. The images on this page explore my frustration not knowing some family members due to cancer, the anonymity with which illness strikes, and the cheerful platitudes that feel like a slap in the face. Bargaining confronts the reluctance to let go and the realization that life may need to change. Depression is the breaking point. It's the moment at which all the emotions repressed during isolation come burst through the seams. This slide, like isolation, plays with negative space and a sense of cold, distant, emptiness.

The final two stages of grief – acceptance and hope – close out the visual essay with images of serenity and goofiness. Acceptance introduces a sense of calm and joy at the realization that “increased risk” does not mean illness and death are inevitable. The images on this page illustrate the gift of knowledge bestowed by the struggles and death of past family members. Without them we could not know what we now know. Hope concludes the essay with a return to exploring family traits. However, unlike at the beginning of the essay, these family traits are character defining. The images attempt to convey feelings of awe with life, family unity, silliness, and resiliency – all personality traits shared by my family.

The ideal conclusion of this essay is a *gnosis* of genetic vulnerability and self. However, this “knowledge” is not that of knowing one is at “increased risk.” It is not the realization that occurred at the start of the essay. *Gnosis* suggests a spiritual, yet embodied, knowledge. To know has become part of the self and integrated into living. Vulnerability no longer serves as a hindrance, a threat, or deterrent from living. With *gnosis*, vulnerability becomes a strength and a tool by which to combat the possible enemy within and continue the generational battle of a mutated inheritance.



To Inherit (verb): to receive as an heir at the death of a previous holder

Upon one's death --
 belongings are divided and conquered.
 A watch claimed. A deed signed over.

Gifts of those gone before.
 Granted at the grave --
 amidst salt and dirt.
 A life in remains.

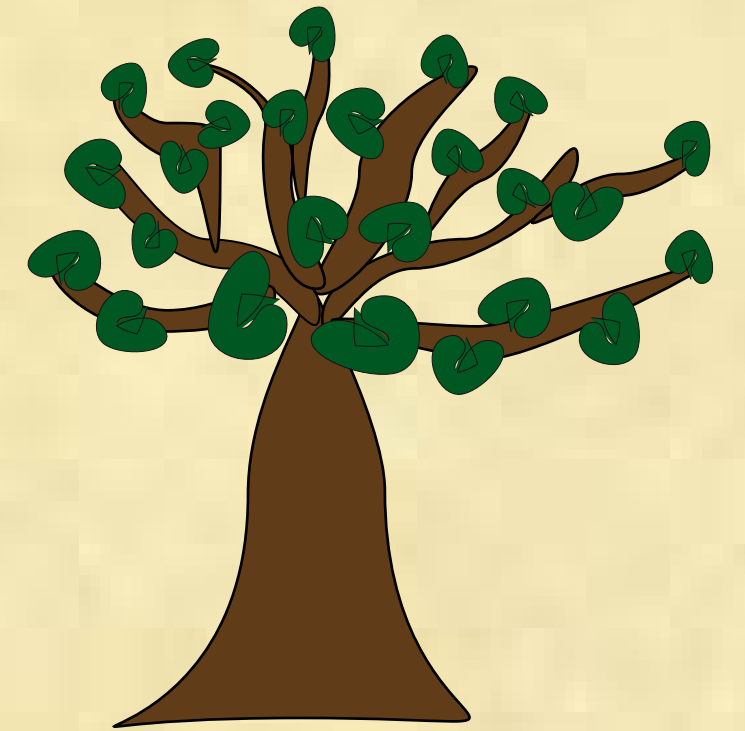
An inheritance.

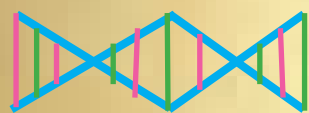
To Inherit (verb): derive genetically from one's parents or ancestors.

Upon one's birth --
 traits are passed and bestowed.
 A crooked nose. A fair tone.

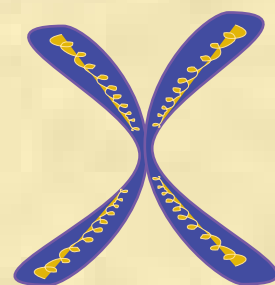
Landmarks connecting generations.
 Linked in the womb --
 where X meets Y and X meets X.
 A life in beginning.

An inheritance.





X
A pair of markers
| by |
Xcross

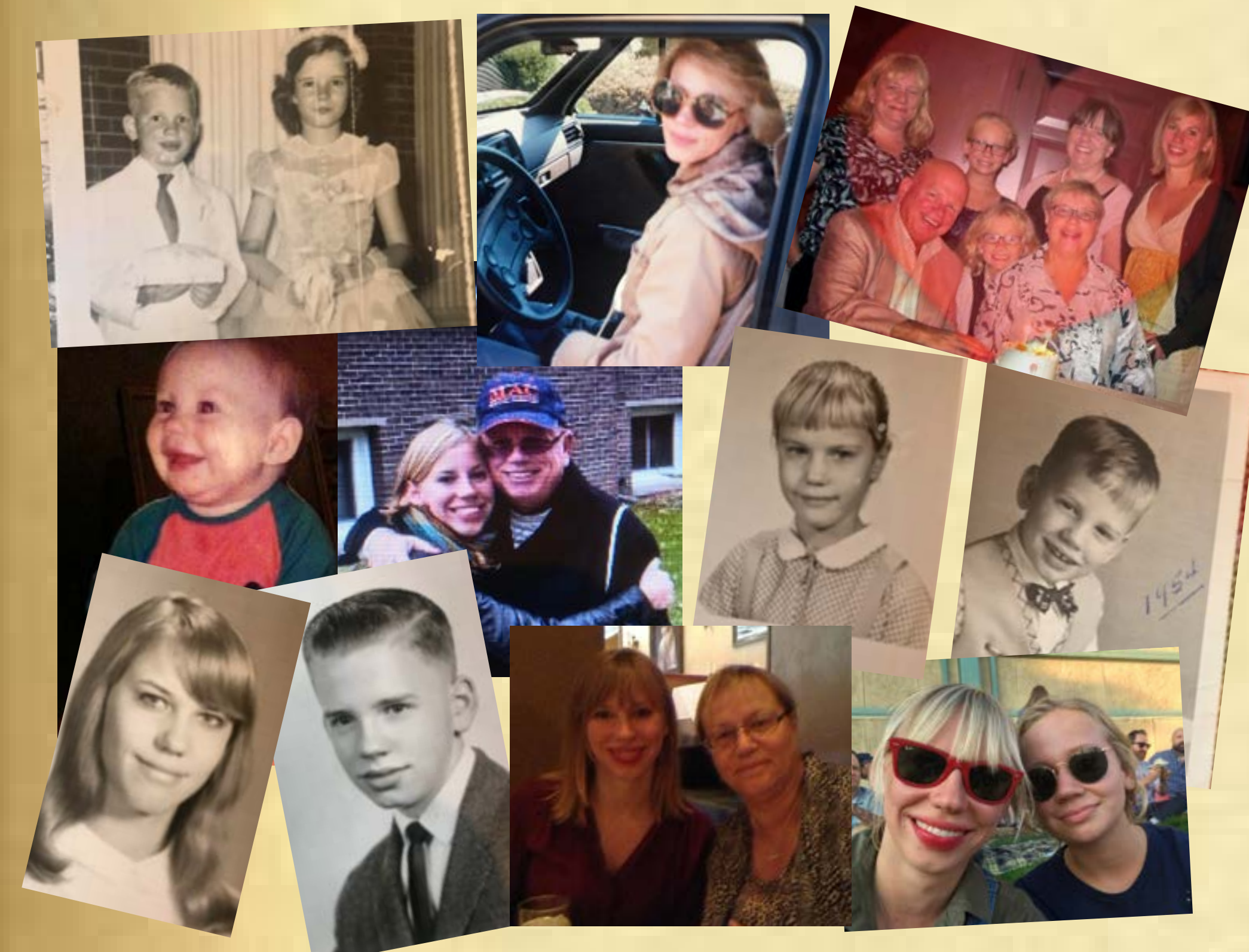
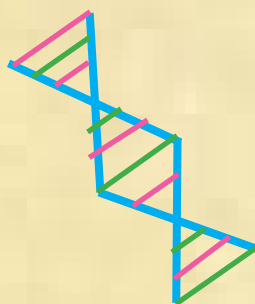
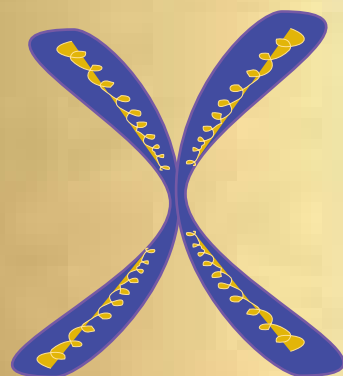


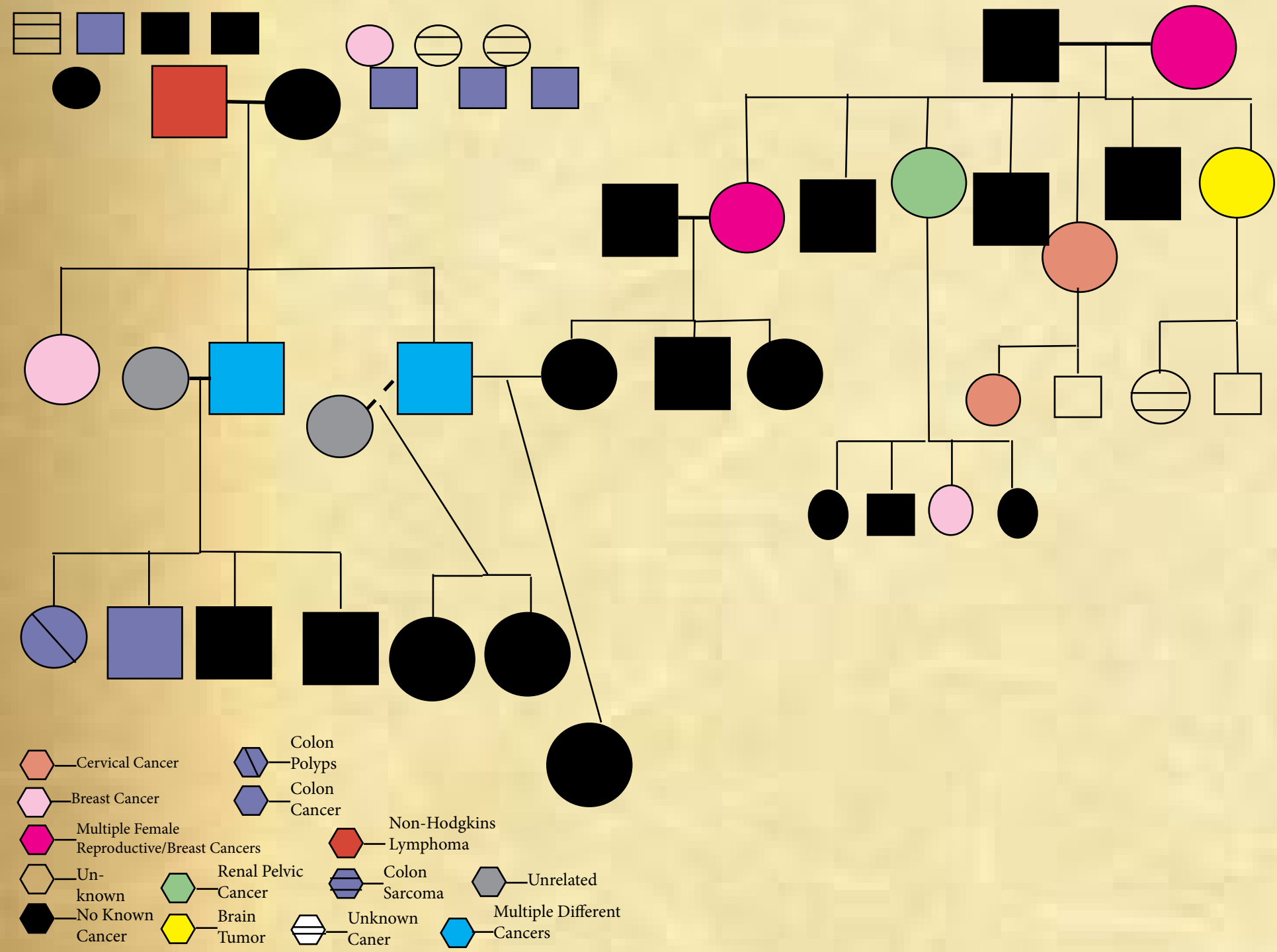
Recessive becomes dominant
And the internal code reflected

U
A chain of pairs
Ladders
Woven

Blonde Hair
Green Eyes
Ski Sloped Nose

A genetic recognition







Always prepared, Always ready
It's not just for the boy scouts.

My brain runs the scenarios.

What if?
I should be there.

But what if?
I can't be there.

Always strong, Always stoic
Don't let them see you cry.

My brain runs the scenarios.

What if?
I should say say something.

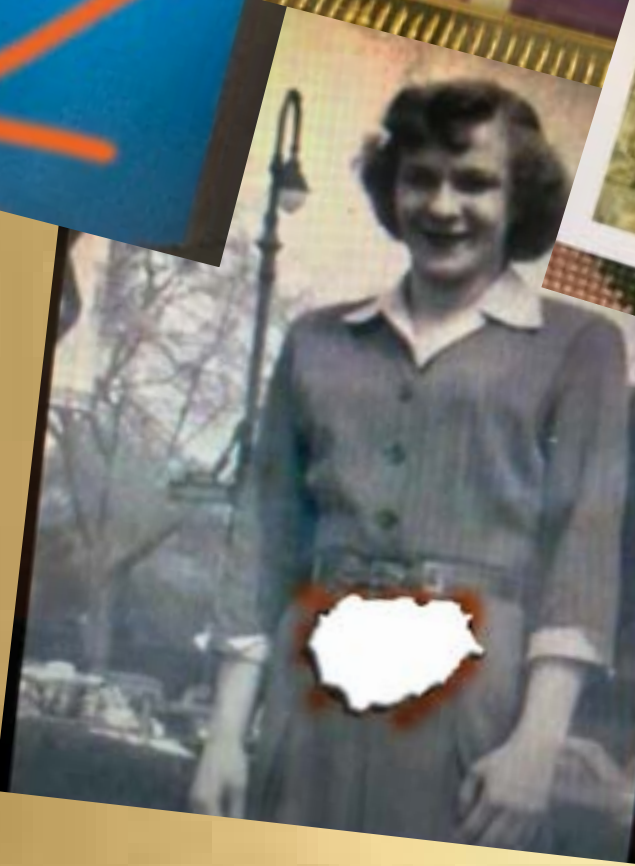
But what if?
I don't tell him.

Always prepared, Always ready.
Always strong, Always stoic.
Except when...
I'm
alone.

We're #1



Today, we provide better cancer care. Why? Because people participated in clinical



Some days I'm a giant
I feel like I could bound the Pacific in one leap
Like I'm a sequoia guarding those I love from high above
It feels as if I could reach my arms around the world and
engulf it in the biggest hug
Some day I feel like a titan

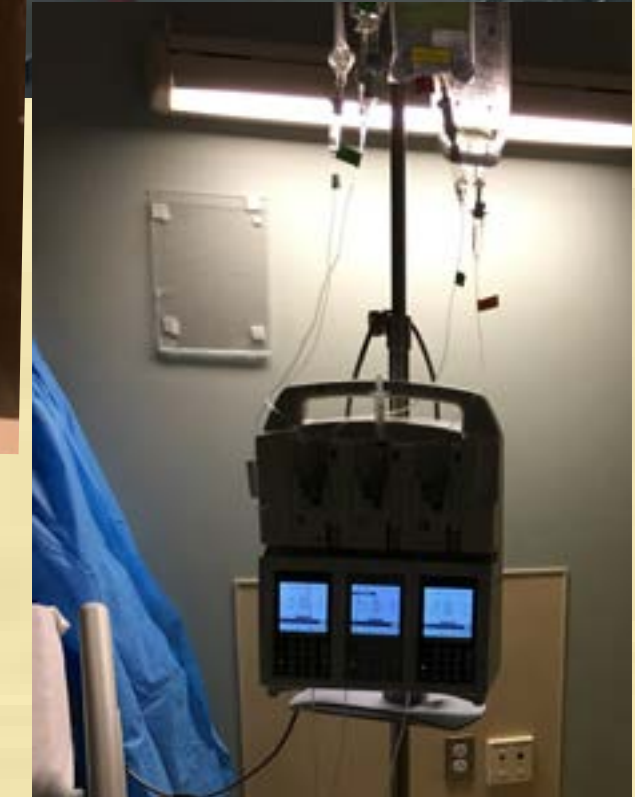
Until I don't...
Until the whispers in my head spit their venom
Until shadows descend like a choking fog
Until thoughts strangle clarity like a boa around its prey

Then I feel like an ant
The sheets of my bed could drown me
I am lost like a grain of sand far from the beach
The world swirls like a vortex tossing a plastic bag
Then I feel like a speck of discarded dust

Salted water
Flows like oxygen

Gasping
Gulping
Does not burn

Salted water
Breathes like air





LET IT BE

