

One of Them

by Jeanne Holtzman

It must have been slipped under the side door. Ana came home from work, and found the creamy white envelope lying on the kitchen floor next to a splotch of tomato sauce. She hung up her keys, put down her bag, and bent down with a small groan to pick it up.

She saw the border of pink ribbons, and in curlicue pink letters, the words, "You are Invited!!"

She walked directly to the trash and tried to slam it in, but the envelope stuck to her hand. It wouldn't fit into the slot with the bills no matter how hard she shoved, but she was able to toss it on the kitchen table where it grew large and dark, with ragged, charred edges.

How did they get her name? Ana had told almost no one, never lost her hair. It was probably a HIPAA privacy violation. Who could she blame?

She looked at the clock. The school bus would arrive soon. Ana needed to provide hugs and kisses, snacks, rides, costumes for Halloween. An ordinary day. An ordinary mother.

That evening, her husband saw the envelope lying beside the salt and pepper.

"Where'd this come from?" he asked, picking it up.

"It was on the kitchen floor when I got home."

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"No."

"What if it's important?"

"It's not."

"How do you know?"

"If you're so interested, you open it."

He slid his finger under the flap and it opened with a pop, releasing a stream of aromas: lilacs, mashed potatoes, gunpowder and rotting flesh.

He read the card, and then looked at his wife.

"You sure you don't want to consider it? It's next Saturday."

"No. I don't want anything to do with it."

Ana tried to live her life like before. She went to work, cooked, cleaned, played with her kids, made love with her husband. Kept the fear, the anger, the grief, locked in a box under her bed. In the morning and at night, when she was alone, she would crack open the box and inspect the contents. Then she'd carefully lock it back up and store it away.

Next Saturday came and went.

Sunday morning, with the kids watching TV and her husband at the gym, Ana sat down to read the paper. Ads for costumes filled the pages, and articles about awareness. Who the hell wasn't aware by now? What about prostate cancer awareness? One out of six men got prostate cancer, but you didn't hear them whining. They weren't waving blue ribbons in your face.

The next day Ana came home to a mailbox stuffed with invitations. She heard voices inside them, calling to her. "Come join us Ana. You're special now. You belong."

She imagined there'd be theme music -- probably "Live Like you are Dying". A woman behind the podium would say, "Hi My name is Bonnie I am a Survivor," and then tell her personal story of woe. How her mammogram was abnormal or she found the lump but the doctors didn't believe her. She'd recount the stage, the treatments, the recurrences. The members would all nod knowingly, wipe tears from their eyes and secretly compare her plight to their own.

Ana grabbed one of the invitations and slammed the mailbox shut. Ignoring them wasn't enough.

When the day arrived, she drove herself to the meeting. She straightened her back and lifted her chin and stomped up to the podium. She faced a roomful of women. These weren't smug women who'd never had to hear the words biopsy or prognosis. Who'd never had to say the phrase, my oncologist, and wonder if they would live to see their children grow up. These women knew Ana. They knew what was inside the box under her bed.

Ana felt her knees grow weak. She gritted her teeth and blinked. She pushed away the comfort.

The room fell silent and all eyes were upon her.

"My name is Ana and I am NOT a survivor," she said, gripping the podium in both hands.

She paused while wavering voices answered, "Hi, Ana."

"I won't know if I will survive my cancer until I die of something else. If I succumb to heart disease, or Alzheimer's or a car crash,

then with my dying breath I will finally be able to say that I am a survivor.

"Don't expect epiphanies from me. Don't ask me to walk the survivor's lap in The Relay for Life. I am a woman, a wife, a mother, a professional who will, like everyone else on earth, die one day of something. I am not special. I am not my disease. Please just leave me alone!"

Ana stepped off the podium to a silent audience and strode out of the room. Her footsteps echoed in the empty hallway, but slowed when she heard the sounds: animated conversation, scraping chairs, rustling clothes. She imagined all the women, the survivors, rushing out the door to catch her. To surround her. To embrace her.

Ana hesitated. Waited. Until she heard a voice announce, "My name is Natalie, and I am a Survivor," and a soft chorus murmur, "Hi, Natalie."

