

Beyond Walls: Finding Shelter in Family

A shelter is commonly understood as a place of protection. It is where people go to escape storms, seek safety, and find relief from dangers that may lurk outside. This definition suggests that a shelter is physical, but many of life's greatest challenges cannot be kept out by walls or roofs. Fear, grief, and uncertainty often emerge from within, making them impossible to avoid through physical protection alone. As a result, some of the most meaningful forms of shelter are not places at all. They are created through relationships, emotions, and shared experiences that help individuals face uncertainty with confidence rather than fear.

Most people think of a shelter as protection from something visible. A shelter keeps out rain, wind, and storms. It provides a barrier between people and danger. Yet some of life's most difficult challenges cannot be kept outside. Fear, uncertainty, and grief do not arrive through doors or windows. They exist within us, following us wherever we go.

Cancer has always been part of my family's story. My grandparents battled it, and other relatives faced it as well. Before I understood the science behind the disease, I understood its presence. It appeared in conversations at family gatherings, in stories shared around the dinner table, and in photographs that captured moments of both joy and hardship.

As a child, I did not fully grasp what cancer meant. I only knew that it had caused pain for the people that I loved. As I grew older, my understanding deepened. I learned about chemotherapy, hospital visits, and the uncertainty that often comes with a diagnosis. Along with that knowledge came a question that quietly followed me for years: What if one day I have to face it too?

Unlike many fears, this one never felt entirely imaginary. Family photographs seemed to reinforce it. Looking through old albums, I would see faces that looked familiar because they looked like my own. I saw grandparents, aunts, uncles, and relatives whose lives helped shape mine. I also knew that some of them had faced the same disease that I feared. The uncertainty was difficult because it offered no clear answers. There was no way to predict exactly what the future would hold. No amount of worrying could change it. Yet uncertainty has a way of demanding attention. Late at night, when everything else was quiet, questions about the future often felt louder than anything else.

One evening, my family began sharing stories about my grandparents. I expected conversations about illness and struggle. Instead, I heard stories about who they were as people. My grandparents were remembered for their humor, generosity, and determination. Family members laughed while recalling old memories. They spoke about the way my grandparents cared for others, even during difficult periods of their own lives. They talked about resilience, not because life had been easy, but because challenges never defined who they were.

For years, I had focused on the possibility of inheriting a disease. I had spent far less time thinking about the qualities that had also traveled through generations. The same family history that frightened me had also provided examples of perseverance, hope, and love. Before then, I viewed shelter as protection from danger. I imagined it as a place where difficult things could not reach me. But the fears that troubled me most were not physical threats standing outside a door. They were questions about the future that followed me everywhere.

The stories my family shared became a source of reassurance. They reminded me that uncertainty is a part of every life. My grandparents could not control every challenge they encountered, yet they continued to live with purpose, care for others, and find moments of joy. Their example showed me that courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the decision to keep moving forward despite it. Despite knowing there is a chance that I could inherit cancer and possibly lose my life, I still feel confident enough to fight because my family is there to support and encourage me.

Whenever fear begins to grow, I think about the people who came before me. I think about the obstacles they faced and the strength they demonstrated. I think about the support my parents provide every day and the encouragement I receive from relatives who remind me that I am part of something larger than myself. Fear often becomes most powerful when it convinces people they are alone. It isolates them from others and makes challenges appear larger than they really are. The support of family does the opposite. It creates connections and it reminds people that burdens can be shared and that difficult moments do not have to be faced in isolation. Many people find it in different places. Some find it in friendships that provide encouragement during difficult seasons of life. Others find it in communities that offer acceptance and belonging. Some find it in traditions that connect them to their history, while others find it in memories that remind them of who they are. They exist in conversations that make someone feel understood. They exist in the comfort of knowing that another person genuinely cares. They exist in the stories, relationships, and experiences that give people strength when circumstances become difficult. It exists in the stories that transform fear into perspective. It exists in the examples left behind by my grandparents. It exists in the knowledge that whatever challenges the future may bring, I will never face them completely alone.

When I think about the meaning of the word “shelter” today, I no longer imagine walls, roofs, or physical spaces. Instead, I think about a family gathered together, sharing stories that connect generations. I think about the resilience that has been passed down alongside family history. Most importantly, I think about the people whose support gives me the confidence to face an uncertain future. My shelter is not built from concrete or wood. It cannot be found on a map, yet it provides something far more valuable than physical protection. It offers belonging, strength, and hope to me even when I feel like trying is futile.