



Jodi's story of
Gail



My mother died on a Tuesday in September of a massive pulmonary embolism. She collapsed to her knees and took her last breath at the age of fifty-three. She had been born with a particular set of challenges and had augmented those challenges with poor choices.

Gail Marie Harbour was the third of four children born to my grandparents in the mill town of Laconia, NH. It was a hot summer day, the thirteenth of August in 1961. My grandmother, Sally, showed concern for a pain she felt on her left side throughout the pregnancy, but without the invention of the ultrasound at the time, it was impossible to know that something was going wrong inside the protected womb of my grandmother.

The once over the nurses give babies after delivery yielded an imperforate anus- no opening. From there, the complications worsened. My grandmother knew nothing of the problems until she was awakened after the delivery. Back then, mothers were sedated during labor and their breasts were strapped down to inhibit milk production. My mother was transferred to Boston Children's Hospital because Lakes Region General Hospital didn't have experience with those kinds of congenital anomalies. She had many operations by the time she was two years old and she would endure more well into her teenage years. Her birth defects were numerous, a tracheoesophageal fistula – her esophagus and lung were connected ; she had one kidney and required the use of a urostomy bag, that's when doctors re-route the normal function of the urinary tract to a stoma, an opening in the abdomen. A bag then collects the urine that the bladder would normally hold. This would be a permanent solution to the problem.

My grandparents drove the hour and a half every couple of days for the first few weeks. When my mother was stable, without the need of feeding tubes, she was able to come home. They named my mother Gail, like the very strong wind, for the way she came into this world. As she grew, my grandparent's realized she also had no calf muscles and one leg was longer than the other, possibly due to a spinal abnormality. The doctors wanted to install braces but my grandmother was adamant about having her use her legs; if she relied on the braces, she would never learn to walk properly. Also, through a tubal ligation done in her late thirties it was found out that she had been born with just one ovary and one Fallopian tube.

My mother was very well cared for. My grandmother and her parents lived side by side in a duplex, so my great-grandmother was a built in babysitter. Nana doted over my mother mightily. Even with all of the problems my mother endured, she always wore a smile on her face.

My mother became a teenager in the 1970's and raised hell just like her friends and siblings. She smoked pot, drank alcohol, snuck out of the house at night, ran away from home, and joined the traveling carnival. The story goes that she asked her younger sister, Lisa, to jump out of the window of their second story room first, in order to catch my mother as she landed. My mother then met up with a boy she had met at the carnival. Maybe he told her she could be the girl to hand out those giant teddy bear prizes. She ended up calling my grandmother in the middle of the night to come pick her up.

My mother was petite, just five feet tall and a hundred pounds. She had brown eyes and straight dark brown hair.

My mother met and fell in love my father when she was seventeen. They were married soon after on a cool day in October. In one of the many doctor's visits over the years, she was told she shouldn't have children, that it would be detrimental to her health. When she became pregnant with me, everyone believed it would be best for her health to have an abortion. I'm sure she was afraid that her baby wouldn't make it or maybe that she wouldn't. As God works in mysterious ways, she had fallen ill with the flu and by the time she was better, it was too late to safely have an abortion. Her water broke while helping make

spaghetti at her brother and sister-in-law's house. Since her hips weren't aligned properly she was not able to have a natural child birthing experience. She was given a cesarean section, while my dad, white as a ghost, dressed in blue scrubs and work boots, waited outside the operating room, trying his best not to throw-up. My grandmother was the first one to hold me. I weighed six pounds, one ounce and was perfectly healthy, besides a bit of jaundice. My grandmother told me that when my mother awoke and saw me for the first time; she immediately declared "I knew I could do it!" She had brought a healthy baby girl into the world, just like any normal woman could.

My mother divorced my father when I was two years old. We moved in with my grandparents. When I was six years old, she met her second husband and we got a place of our own.

My mother didn't graduate high school. She worked as a dietary aide in nursing homes for a while and she drove a taxi cab like her father. They supplemented their insufficient income by selling drugs. They also did the drugs and when I was thirteen years old, she let me do them too. She would rather I did them at home than on the streets. Abuse of every kind transpired, things got very ugly and they got divorced. That was an awful time for my family.

My mother got in trouble for letting a friend use her car to bring cocaine across state lines. She ended up taking a plea deal for possession of marijuana. She went away the day after my sixteenth birthday. She served eight months in the county jail. During that time she was granted work release and she also worked hard to attain her GED.

When she got out of jail she moved in with my grandparents again. My grandmother did everything she could to take care of her daughter. After some time, my mother met her third husband and was happy for the first time in a long while. They loved NASCAR and went to the races in Loudon, NH; they went camping in their camper, barbecued, and genuinely had a great time together.

My mother worked for close to fifteen years wiring transformers, magnetics and inductors until she got laid-off. She tried a few other jobs. She did laundry for the hospital but being on her feet all day was too much for her legs. She got a job at a factory using small equipment but she had carpal tunnel syndrome and that aggravated it. She couldn't drive for a living because she had a DUI on her record and other jobs were out of the question because even though it had been fifteen years, she was still considered a felon. She tried to get disability but it proved difficult. She had doctor's visits and tests were done. One doctor told her that she would be dead by the time she was sixty years old if she didn't stop drinking or smoking at the rate she was. She stopped. She had some problems with her electrolytes and edema of her legs and face. She wore compression socks to help and eventually it got better.

Things turned sour between her and her third husband, so they divorced in December 2013. My mother moved into her younger sister's house until she was finally granted disability and could afford to get her own place. She found a room to rent in a condo down the street. The owner of the condo had a second home in Vermont and only visited once a month to get the rent check. My mother had made a new "friend" that she enjoyed spending time with. They weren't ready to make it official; they had both been burned before.

I got the call on my way to work. I thought it was my mother calling me back since I had just left her a message on her cell phone. I heard my grandmother's voice but I couldn't understand or believe the words that were coming out of her mouth. She didn't know how to tell me, but my mother had passed away. "What?" I yelled. I had to pull over to the side of the road. My grandmother received a call from my mother's landlord that morning. He had gotten in the night before to pick up the rent check. My mother

and he had spoken that night and in the morning he found her unresponsive in her room. An autopsy told us it had been blood clots from her calves to blame. Pieces had broken off and traveled through her body to the pulmonary arteries. The coroner said it was all but instantaneous. She had maybe felt shortness of breath, if anything.

The last time I saw my mother she looked good and she seemed happy. My mom was small but her heart was big. She was an easy-going, ride the wave type of person. She smiled a lot and laughed a lot, that laugh that often times annoyed me. She made friends easily and often. That was apparent at her funeral, where nearly 250 people had signed the guest book.

My mother liked apples sprinkled with salt. She preferred pie to cake. She liked pistachio pudding. She always took more than she could eat; her eyes were bigger than her stomach. Her favorite color was green. She wore a Santa hat at Christmas-time. She liked getting those shelled nuts that you have to crack open yourself during Thanksgiving and she liked the drumstick best. Her favorite meal was corned beef and cabbage. She liked to go tanning in the spring so she'd have a nice base when summer came around.

She gave me the greatest gift of all, life, and I am forever grateful for her sacrifices. I am thankful for the lessons she taught me and I am so happy that she overcame the obstacles in her life. We all make mistakes, but I was able to learn from the mistakes she made and become the daughter she could be proud of.

I have lived on my own since my mother took that plea deal. I was angry with her for a long time, for her drinking and drug use, for not protecting me, for her perceived selfishness. I am thankful that I told her I loved her each and every time we spoke on the phone. I only hope she felt that love.

When a parent dies, you realize they were only human. The standards you hold people to are just that, your standards. People have to live their own lives, in the ways they feel are right for them. She was a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a cousin, a niece, a mother, an aunt, and a grandmother.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of my mother. There isn't a day that I don't wish I could pick up the phone and say hi or hug her small frame or see her bubbly handwriting in a birthday card.

I took for granted that I'd always be able to give her a call later, that she'd always be there when I needed her to be. Her physical body is now gone but she's still with me. She's in the butterflies that cross my path, she's in the leaves turning color and in the wind that blows the top most branches of the trees.