

## Thunderstorms and Anxiety

By Shelley Hildebrand

I spoke with my mom almost every day. On Saturdays we'd have marathon conversations. She'd tell about a movie she was watching on Lifetime or the Hallmark Channel, basically shot for shot.

One Friday I went into to work and I was having a pretty exciting day. I had just got to my office, when my phone rang. It was my niece, my mom had a tear in her bowel and she had to have immediate surgery. So, I went to my supervisor's office and told her that I'd be out of work indefinitely because my mom was having surgery. "I'm so sorry, she said, take all the time you need".

My mom was terrified of anesthesia. That made me terrified, too, for her. I remember sitting in the waiting room with my family we played games and made each other laugh to take our minds off it. Then, finally the doctors came in and told us she was out of surgery. She was alive! I ran out of the waiting room to get to the elevator and as I did I said "mommie". When we got to the room, she wasn't what I expected. She was awake but not really alert and on a ventilator so she couldn't talk. For the

next 2 weeks my sister and I would take turns sitting with her. I would stand by her side telling her how strong she was and that she would recover. She had once told me that I was her greatest cheerleader and she was mine. Over the first few days, she became more alert. After the first week, the doctors decided to remove the ventilator! We could finally talk! Sadly, that's not how it works. A throat needs time to heal. The doctors told me that she was not to talk at all. I stayed the rest of the day and then decided to return to Atlanta for a bit. I was home for one day. The next day, my sister called. They had to put my mom back on the ventilator. So I went back to Birmingham. And cheered her on again.

Every night as my sister and I would leave the hospital we would think the next day would be better. It never was. She got worse and worse. And then one day the doctors decide to talk to us about end of life decisions. We decided it was time. The day came and we all stood around her and they cut off all the machines. She passed almost immediately. We all stood around her, sobbing and comforting each other. Then we were telling stories and we started laughing and remembering all the joy she had brought into our lives. As we were leaving, I said, now that mom is in heaven with her sister, there's going to be thunderstorms tonight.

Now, my mom and her sister had been separated by 3 states for 20 years and rarely got to see each other. After my mom retired, she made the decision to move to Alabama, partially to be with her sister. My Aunt died that same year. When they were together, they were troublemakers and they would make you laugh so hard that you were crying. My Aunt loved to do things to embarrass my mom and that made my mom laugh. That night there were thunderstorms and I knew the 2 of them were at it again.

I went back to work immediately after the funeral. It was just over a week when, one morning, I was in my office when I started feeling funny. My heart was racing and I couldn't calm it down. I thought I was having a heart attack. I panicked. I thought "I'm going to die in my office and they won't find me for days!" I went out to reception and told them what I was going through. One of the assistants was trying to reassure me, but then she got scared. She had her hand on the phone and was going to call 911 when a co-worker walked in. She said, "Tiffany can help you". And Tiffany did. She said "it's anxiety. Honey, you just lost your mom. You probably should've taken more time off". She sat and talked with me until I was reasonably certain I wasn't having a heart attack.

Never did I imagine that I'd have an anxiety attack at the office and a co-worker would help me through it. But she did.

Since I had caused such a ruckus, I told my supervisor about the anxiety attack. She reacted with nothing but kindness and care. All of my co-workers did. She told me that she was surprised that I came back to work so soon and that it may not have been a good idea. She was willing to take on the additional work that my absence would cause. All of my co-workers were. It was at that point that I realized, "take all the time you need" meant just that.

Over the next year, I learned how to manage my anxiety attacks and identify possible triggers, like driving. And the missing marathon conversation on Saturdays.

Then, a huge trigger was coming up. The one year anniversary of my mom's death. Now, I would rather remember someone's life rather than their death, but I realized the first anniversary might be a doozy. When the day came around, I didn't really think about it. I wasn't until that evening that I realized my sister might be upset that I didn't reach out. So I did and we had a good talk.

The next morning as I was getting ready for work, this wave of relief swept over me. I had survived a year without my mom. I started laughing and then crying and then both at the same time. The joy that came over me. Celebrate your resilience, forget the anniversary of a death. I am resilient because I made it

through! I see more and more of my mother in me as the days go by. Especially her strength. And I smile knowing that she and her sister are raising hell in heaven.