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Alone

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Alone
MERRILY GUYER

SHE DIED ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT, without us. Wintertime in Dallas wasn't the only reason that night would be frozen in my memory.

Earlier that evening, my husband, two children and I visited my mother's hospital room with cake and candles in tow. A store bought cake was usually out of the question, but being hospitalized kept my mom from baking my annual birthday cake. When we entered her quiet, dim room, I announced, "Happy birthday to me." She tried to speak but was only able to mumble through her oxygen mask. The respirator fed her lungs pure oxygen to keep her body alive. The severe pneumonia was quickly overtaking my mother's body. The hospital staff was doing everything they could, which wasn't much—that's the way she wanted it.

We ate cake, she couldn't. We all loved on her the best we could in spite of all the beeping machines, wires, and tubes entering various points in her body. We didn't stay long. Even though she was bed-ridden, we all attempted to hug her goodbye. We just didn't know that this would be our last embrace.

Later that night at 11:30 p.m., my whole family and I were asleep at home. In the morning, my ringing telephone in the kitchen jolted me out of bed. On the other end of the line was a nurse who told me that several hospital staff had recorded numerous messages on my cell phone. I had accidentally left it in my car. The hospital had been trying to reach me all night. By the time I found out my mother had died, she'd been gone seven hours.

Through the waves of shock, my husband's loving arms were barely noticeable. Emotionally distraught, I felt useless to anyone. My muscles didn't work, and my mind was lost in a maze of disbelief. Time itself was meaningless through the darkness of that cold February morning. I don't even remember the sun coming up.

The fact that my mother died on my 40th birthday didn't even register. The immense impact of that cruel act of fate wouldn't affect me until much later.

After I got the hospital’s message, I called my Aunt at 6:30 a.m. I stood in my bedroom with the phone to my ear listening to her cry for the loss of her only sister. My frozen tongue and paralyzed face gave no relief to her wails.

After I told her that mom had passed the previous night, and that I had just received the hospital’s message, she asked the worst question I’ve ever been asked.

“So, was she alone?”

An incredible shot of guilt stabbed through my body. The job of caring for my mother was mine alone. I was the only family member in close enough proximity to be there physically, day or night. And, I wasn’t there. I had missed her passing. I had failed. I wasn’t by her side when she died.

I didn’t really know if she was alone or not. I think the nurse had said something to the fact that my mother had struggled for a while and then just slipped away. The nurse’s account led me to believe that someone was with her, but I wasn’t sure.

My Aunt sounded slightly relieved by my recollection of the conversation, but I wasn’t. Aching in my mind was the unanswered question, “Was she alone?”

The pain from the slight possibility that the answer was “yes,” kept me from asking the hospital staff when I arrived later that day. I definitely had a conversation with a nurse about the events of the previous night, but merely danced around the question. I didn’t have the guts to ask point blank. I failed again.

Many regrets can be resolved, but I’m not sure that being absent from a parent’s death is one of them. Is it ok that I wasn’t there when she died, or not?

I have always had conversations with people in my head. Sometimes I’m right about what they would say, sometimes I’m wrong. I believe I knew my mother better than anyone. Over the past 4 years since her death, I have spoken to her in my mind so many times—in thousands of conversations. And, you know what? Every time I have brought up these failures, every time I have apologized to her spirit for not being there when she died, I believe she has whispered to me, “It’s ok honey. I love you.”

So this morning, once again, apologies have been accepted. Now I just have to learn how to forgive myself.

The Road Less Graveled

D. KNAPE

I’ll bet you money
 The road less traveled
 Is just a lane
 That’s dirt and gravel

 Stick to the paved road
 The decision you’re makin’
 Will get you home quicker
 Than the road not taken.