

The Day She Left Me

She left me on a cold winter day. Christmas decorations still lined the streets and lit up homes even though Christmas was over. It was too cold to snow—the kind of cold that numbs your face when you step outside. But I wasn't just numb on the outside, I was still numb from the shock of losing my oldest brother four days before. He died on my mom's living room floor in his sleep, right next to his three sons. Mom tried to revive him, but he was already gone. Not even the EMTs injecting charcoal into his veins and shocking his heart could bring him back. I was still trying to process how my big brother who was bigger than life, the one I looked up to growing up, my protector, was gone. My eyes saw his cold, lifeless body, his skin turned blue, lying on a gurney in the ER. But my brain had not yet processed it; I could not yet accept this reality. I was not granted time to do that. It was up to me to be strong for everyone else, and I had to take care of the business of death. I had to make his funeral arrangements. He didn't have life insurance so I chose to take out a loan to pay for his funeral because I felt that my brother deserved one, and his loved one's deserved to say good-bye. I did this without hesitation because I was the caretaker for my family. It didn't matter that I was barely an adult myself; I had been filing the role of an adult since I was a child.

Mom took his death hard, as she did most adverse events in her life. I made her stay with me, to ensure her safety. But the night before she left me, we got into a fight about something petty and she went home. Before she left she told me, "I can't do it. I can't bury my baby." I threatened to make her stay. I made her promise me she wouldn't do anything stupid. I had heard my mom threaten suicide so many times it was as regular as any daily conversation. But I was a little more nervous because I knew she had just been to the doctor who had her on medication. Methadone ~~that~~ killed ~~him~~ my brother. Valium killed his dad (we have different dads). All of these medications had been prescribed and attained illegally. With much hesitation, I let my mom go home.

My mom's addiction to pills was lifelong for me. But I was oblivious as a child. When you're growing up, whatever is going on around you is the norm. I didn't know when I was 4-years-old that she was in a state hospital because she was ordered by a judge to be there for six months due to her addiction to barbiturates and benzodiazepines. I just knew mommy was gone for a few months so she could get better. As an infant, I was clueless that she was gone for nearly a year in prison. But as a result, I suffered severe separation anxiety that would sometimes keep me home from elementary school because I was certain that something bad would happen to her and I thought if I was with her, I could protect her. I don't remember much of my childhood, but I remember the time that my mom drove up onto the side of the sidewalk and hit a pole, despite me begging and pleading for her to stop the car. I remember nearly going through the windshield of a vehicle because she slammed on the brakes. I guess she forgot to buckle me up. It's hard to think straight when you're high. Of course, I didn't know she was high or that she had a drug problem when these things occurred, I was just a little kid. When you're growing up, you're taught that drug addicts are the scary guys who wear all black and ski masks and they rob people because they are bad people! It's not your mom. Not the woman who you have the strongest bond in the world with, the one who is supposed to take care of you, show you unconditional love, provide you with guidance.

By the time I was a teenager, I had more street smarts than most adults. As a teenager, I was the adult. I was well aware of everyone who was a drug addict, what their drug of choice was, and

when they were high. Most importantly, I knew I didn't want to be anything like them. I didn't know at that time how I would get out of there, how I wouldn't become just like the adults around me, I just knew I was going to do whatever it took to make my life better. Despite her flaws, my mom was my biggest cheerleader. She always wanted me to do my best, always told me I could achieve great things. She just lacked the tools to show me how or even guide me down the right path. Some of my most difficult days as a teenager were the six months she spent behind bars.

Even though our roles were reversed, I loved my mom dearly and I always knew she loved me. There was this warmth to her that's difficult to put into words; she was home, even when she was homeless. When I was seventeen, I moved in with her to pay her rent so I knew she wouldn't be homeless again. But there came a time when I needed to be out on my own. Even though we lived apart, it never really felt that way. I was constantly checking on her, making sure she was okay. She could never seem to make it to her bed at night. I would get so frustrated that she couldn't take her sleeping pills at a certain time and be in bed at a certain time. I tried hard to convince her to get on a schedule, but instead I would go to her apartment only to find her passed out on the floor, on the couch, or near her bed; sometimes with food nearby or in her mouth or with a cigarette burning or melted into the carpet.

The day that she left me I was finalizing the loan to pay for my brother's funeral. My mom wasn't answering her phone so I went to check on her. She didn't answer the door. For some reason I didn't have my key to her apartment. I knocked on her neighbor's door to see if he happened to have a key but he didn't so I had to drive to my place to get mine. When I returned, her neighbor informed me that he called 911 and suggested that I wait for an officer to arrive before I open the door. My heart dropped. This couldn't be happening. No! Not my mom!

I waited for the officer. As soon as he arrived I opened the door to my mom's apartment where my brother had just died four days before. I saw my mother face down on the floor in front of the loveseat. I went to run to her but my knees gave out, and I didn't make it any more than five feet into the apartment. I had found her passed out on the floor many times before. But something came over me, and I knew that she was dead, but I didn't want to admit to this feeling that overcame me. The officer made it to my mom. His first words were, "Her back is warm. She is unconscious." I kept screaming at him, "Does she have a pulse? Does my mom have a pulse?" I kept screaming at him. I saw him turn her over, but I can't remember seeing her face. He said something over his radio and told people to take me out of the apartment. So I sat in the hall, panicking, unable to breath. I wanted to know what was going on, now! I don't think that I have ever been so scared in my life. All of those times as a child when I was afraid to leave her side. I left her. I didn't protect her.

The officer finally stepped out into the hall and I screamed at him again, "Is my mom dead?" He looked at me and said, "Yes." With one word, he confirmed my worst fear I carried with me most of my life. In that moment, I actually lost touch with reality. I can't think of a word to describe how I felt, hearing that my mom was dead before even having the chance to bury my brother. I'm not so sure that there is a word to describe the immense pain and emptiness that I was experiencing. It was like the bottom was ripped out from underneath me, and there was nothing to stand on. My insides were gone, and I was just an empty shell of a being. Like my brain was just ripped into two pieces, and I couldn't process simple things. All I could do was scream and cry.

I was in such a state of panic that I was rushed to the ER and was given a shot of something (not sure what) to bring my blood pressure down. Somehow that night I ended up in the presence of the funeral director I had just met with days before. He told me to come to the funeral home the next day to make funeral arrangements for my mom. My mom didn't have life insurance either. The funeral director was very generous, agreed to combine my mom and brother's funeral, and didn't charge me extra for my mom. I'll never forget what he said to me: "This kind of a tragedy doesn't usually happen." Tragedy. A tragedy is never included in anybody's life plans, it sure wasn't in mine. Not that my life was ever great or that I had really high hopes, there was just never supposed to be a tragedy. This had to be someone else's story. Like how you are reading mine.

Just three weeks after my 21st birthday, there I stood in a funeral home with my mom and brother in caskets side-by-side. To say that the day of the funeral was the hardest day of my life is an understatement. I could do nothing but cry. It was so surreal, like a nightmare that I couldn't wake up from. When it came time to leave, I had to be pried off of my mom's casket. I didn't want to leave her side. I didn't know how to live without her.

The next year of my life was a living hell. My only other living sibling went to jail for six months, his wife went to prison (both of them because of drugs) and their kids went to foster care. Two of my nephews were moved to a different state. I lost almost my entire family within months—all because of drugs.

There was a void in me that could not be filled. I felt completely hopeless. I questioned everything about life. If I even wanted to live. I didn't want to love anyone, because I knew the pain of losing someone you love and there is no greater pain. There were people who were expecting me to move on with my life and be back to "normal" within a month. Normal? How was I supposed to go back to what was normal? My life had just been completely torn apart! Not only did I lose half of my family, I lost my identity. I no longer had people to take care of. I was in so much emotional pain that I just wanted to die. I did come to a point when I knew I had a decision to make. I was so miserable that I could not take it any longer. I knew I had to end my suffering. I either had to end my life or change life. I chose to change my life for the better.

I do not see myself as a victim or even as a survivor. Rather, I am a warrior. I've battled the deepest, darkest depths of depression that are unimaginable to those who have not experienced it. I've looked suicide in the face, turned around and walked away. I chose not to become a product of my environment. I have had to prove repeatedly that I am not my family's problems; that humans are capable of being resilient rather than being destroyed by trauma. I still battle depression and grief, but not like I felt the day she left me. My mom has missed so many milestones I wish she could've been there for like the two times I graduated college, the birth of my children and their birthdays, my wedding day, not to mention all of my nephews' milestones. She's a great-grandmother now! There was still so much I needed my mom for. But she made a choice, whether it was intentional or conscious. Her long-time addiction to pills led to her demise. Knowing the horrors of her past, I don't fault her for her addiction, but I also don't see it as a valid excuse. All I can do is make a conscience decision not to do drugs. Because I am a warrior!

As told to Kelly Sickafoose

