

THAT NIGHT WAS THE HARDEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE

LIANNA LARABEE

That night was the hardest night of my life. Sitting in a truck, awaiting something...intangible and yet, I couldn't get my mind off of what may befall me, should something go awry. "She is not going to die this time; this is just like all the others..."

That thought kept soundly in my head, I gave myself no time to prepare for the worst of what was going to happen, what I would see, how I would cower so helplessly in an elevator. I made my way out to the parking lot in that cold night to chain smoke. A puff of well treated air exhaled from my lungs, a wheeze sounded as I tried to breathe in and forget about what was going on up on the fourth floor, my mother's floor at Onslow Memorial in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

She had been sick for a while, and as I stood there flicking the ashes from my cigarette into the night, I thought of all the time that was misappropriated on my part and hers. I remembered boarding that plane with my younger brother, I twelve years old, he nine, and knowing it would be forever until I saw my mother again. November 7, 1994; a day that would forever change my brother's and my destiny. Through all of the moving, this one was the hardest. I didn't know what lay ahead, and I wasn't reassured by the stewardess who continually checked and doted on my brother and I, offering us peanuts and soda as we traveled alone. In the years to come, I longed to take back that day, to show my mother what she was giving up: two beautiful kids that cared so much for their mom, our hearts broken and variably ripped apart.

I then remembered some of the awkward visits from my mother and her partner; high school graduations, a marriage, my college graduation, and finally, the death of her father. It was always so stressful to have her there, yet it just wasn't the same without her. She had a spark and a love for us that was unmatched, yet altogether unshown when she was miles away, doing as she pleased and writing her "wisdom filled" journals. Five minutes into each visit, I was ready for her to leave. She made me feel awful about myself and we got into altercations almost every time we saw each other. However, there was no one, save her father, whom I loved more, and needed more. She had my heart, my guilt-ridden heart from all of the judgment and condemnation she put me through. I wanted so much to please her. Bitterness oozed like puss from my veins as I started to contemplate how different my brother and I might have been if

THAT NIGHT WAS THE HARDEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE

LIANNA LARABEE

she was more involved with her children. I would never speak for my brother, of course, but as for me, she had my heart wound so tight from attempting to please her, that I didn't want to hear her rejection through the earpiece of my phone.

I was shaking now, cold, lonely, and without a jacket; the tears began to well up in my eyes, fall and, freeze to my dry red cheeks. When I came to my senses, the first of which was touch, I discovered that my cigarette was burning me between the two fingers that were holding it. I resolved to go back up the elevator to that dreaded fourth floor and into her room without tears. It didn't work. She looked starved as a skeleton and I could not wrap my mind around her appearance. I had never seen a person in the throes of death. God had always protected me from the inevitable wasting away and bloating of both of my grandparents, and a few close friends. Now, the shock of her emaciated figure and her face loomed in my mind continuously. I had not eaten in hours and my uncle and I had driven almost 25 hours straight through to see her. We were dead on our feet and even more emotional from all of the driving and sleep deprivation.

I had only slept 2 hours on the drive straight through from Oklahoma to North Carolina. I felt old and grungy. I did not want mom to see me like this. Truthfully, she was in so much pain that she was blissfully unaware and took no notice of our disheveled faces, and our wrinkly traveling clothes. It took four times of going in and out of the room and a talk to the nurses and social worker to help me regain some sense of decorum. I was heartbroken by her hurt. I was heartbroken by her life choices, but most of all, I was heartbroken by all of the walls my mother and I had constructed to keep each other out of our hearts.

Finally, when it came time to say goodnight, I tried to talk with her, but no words would come. My uncle made mention of my new apartment and the quaint neighborhood I lived in. He told her it was nice. Then she said what I always longed to hear from her: "I wish I was there..." As I stepped behind the privacy curtain to cry, I did not want her to see my pain, she said "I love you Lianna." I did not hear her at first; I had to ask my uncle later what she said. I never got to say it back to her.

We went back to the hotel, exhausted and painfully aware that this was the end of the line for my mother. I prayed so hard that night; I prayed that God would just take her over and over. I could never stand to see my mother in pain and helpless.

THAT NIGHT WAS THE HARDEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE

LIANNA LARABEE

I had seen this a lot over the years. She was always dependant on someone else to get her through. She did not seem to have the capacity to make it on her own. I do not say this to judge, I merely observed this over the years. We lay down in our separate double beds and thought we would dream like kings and be refreshed for the morrow, we were wrong. He answered my fervent prayer.

The nurse later said that my mother asked them to call us; she wanted to see all of us one more time. It was 1:30 a.m. when she asked. The nurses did not get any responses from us or her partner when she called, my uncle and I were so sleepy, we almost missed the call from the hospital to inform us of her death two hours later. She also inquired of the nurse as to how close she was to heaven. The nurse replied, "You are as close as you are going to get." She then medicated my mother, and she breathed her last. She died around 3:30 a.m.

I hurt because of her absence. I hurt that there were so many times that she made herself unavailable to me or was belligerently focused on refusing to speak with me. I miss the fun times, though they were few and far between. I miss her once beautiful face, now fatally flawed and emaciated from sickness and starvation. I miss what could have been, who she could have been. Nevertheless, she was my mother, sometimes detached and cold, sometimes childlike in her groanings to me on the telephone, and, on rare occasions, in complete support of my work and how I lived my life. She was in some ways, an enigma to me. But, I know two very simple things and they drive my heart every day. She was beautiful and she was my mother.