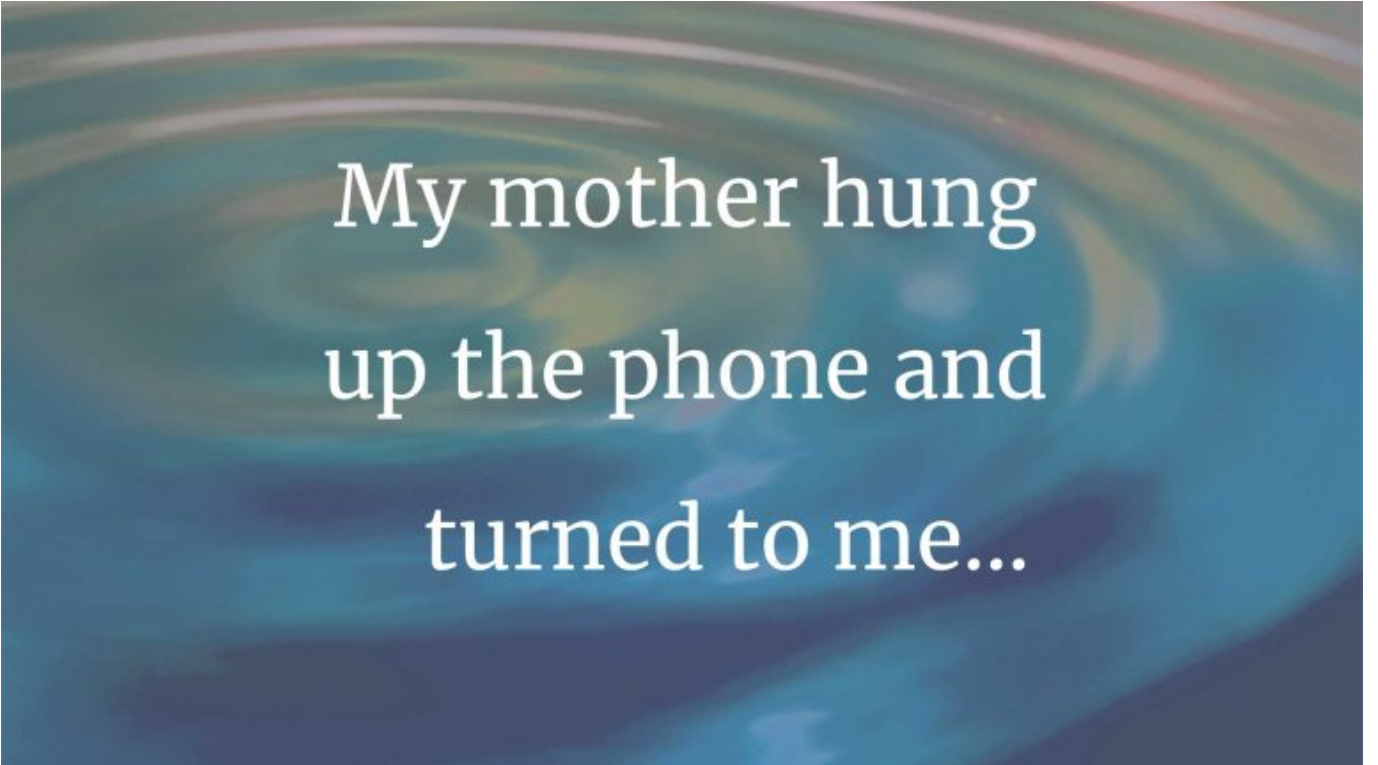


The Mirror of One's Soul

Category: Stories

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My mother hung
up the phone and
turned to me...

It was the day after Christmas, during my third year in medical school. My mother and I sat in silence, the house still heavy with the remnants of holiday cheer. My two siblings had just left for their homes, five hours away, and she was visibly sad. Our family was scattered once more, each of us at different stages in our lives and careers.

Then the phone rang. My mother took the call right there in the room as the news played quietly on the television. I watched the TV screen, half-listening to her short, subdued answers. The call was so brief, and her responses so terse, that I couldn't tell who had called, or why.

She hung up the phone and turned to me, her face blank.

"I have breast cancer," she said. Her words hung in the air, unreal yet indelible.

Months earlier, she'd gone for a routine mammogram. It had revealed a mass, and she'd had further testing just before Christmas. Over the holidays my siblings and I had known that she was awaiting the test results, but none of us expected them to be abnormal.

To us, our mother seemed invulnerable. She'd been through many tough times, always emerging unscathed, as if no hardship could touch her. Also, her test results had come so fast. I'd assumed we'd have more time; I hadn't imagined facing this moment alone with her.

My mind flooded with memories of my mother—a woman of unwavering faith who, in hard times, had always chosen prayer over tears. Her strength had been my strength; but now, she seemed vulnerable. It shook me to my core.

Our family had long been haunted by loss. Nearly twenty years earlier, my father had died of gastric cancer. Though my parents were divorced, my mother never let her personal pain take away from the moments my siblings and I spent with him. I remember one time in particular: She took time off from work and drove us more than twelve hours, across state lines, so that we could visit him in the hospital. It was the last time we saw him before he passed. She carried us through that grief; never once did we feel that we were going it alone.

Now, sitting beside her, I feared that we were about to relive that nightmare.

“Why me?” my mother asked tearfully, staring straight ahead. How do you answer that? Some say that suffering has meaning, that pain serves a purpose. But how do you find that meaning when suffering has been your constant companion?

My mother’s life was defined by sacrifice. At age ten, she emigrated with her family from India to the US, arriving here with little or nothing. As the eldest child, she felt an unspoken duty to help provide for her family first, even at the cost of her own dreams. She’d wanted to become a physician, but financial constraints forced her onto a shorter training path. She became a dietician and chose a career in public health, which enabled her to both serve her patients and advocate for systemic change.

Despite all that she gave, though, life never seemed to give back to her in equal measure. As a young woman, she lost the first man she’d ever loved. She raised three children alone. She always put herself last—passing up career opportunities that would have required frequent travel so that she could stay close to home for us, and pouring her energy into helping us navigate college and graduate school.

I’d always viewed my mother’s resilience as something she was born with. Now I understood that it was something she’d had to build to survive. Now, for the first time, I saw her fragility.

In the coming months, as the youngest in my family, I stepped into the caregiver role for the first time. My family doesn’t show affection openly, so I expressed love the only way I could: by showing up. I became deeply involved in my mother’s care—managing her medications, tracking her follow-up visits and explaining her imaging reports in terms she could understand. During my surgical rotations, after spending ten hours in the OR, I would rush home to take care of her.

My maternal grandmother also made it her mission to be with my mother, traveling from Philadelphia to do so. At nearly ninety, she had her own health struggles, but she insisted on helping out. I once came home to find my grandmother feeling dizzy, and I ended up taking care of both of them.

This experience changed me. As a child, I'd wanted to become a doctor out of an innocent belief that by doing so I might protect another child from suffering the loss that I'd suffered when my father died. Over time, that idea has evolved, and I no longer see my role as simply preventing suffering. Medicine is also about caring for families—recognizing that when one person gets sick, it affects everyone else in their life.

My mother never resisted my help, but her acceptance of my care felt unfamiliar, because she'd spent her whole life taking care of me. Even as our roles reversed, her question still resonated inside me:

“Why me?”

In the moment when she asked this, I had no adequate answer. The only thing I could offer was my silent presence—a space for her to feel the burden of her diagnosis, and for me to share it. But in that silence, I began to see more clearly into my mother's soul—and, perhaps for the first time, I began to glimpse my own identity as a healer.

Now, four years later, my mother is doing well. In fact, she's probably healthier than I am. She remains active and continues to serve others through her work—and her faith has only deepened.

In witnessing her resilience, I've come to understand that the question “Why me?” isn't just about finding a simple answer; it's also about how we hold each other through suffering. It's about seeing someone fully—not just their pain, but their strength as well.

These moments, I've learned, serve as mirrors to our souls. They can help us to see ourselves more clearly—and in that process, we can learn more about how to care, how to heal and how to carry each other forward.