

D A U G H T E R S



A Joyful Spirit

Her name was Joy and that's what she was. Once she stepped into your life you never forgot her. She was respected and loved by everyone who met her. Throughout her life she had endured heartache and tragedy. She lost her father, sister, and two brothers in the prime of their lives. Her nineteen-year marriage ended in divorce. She suffered periodically from depression. Through all her hardship and struggles, she pulled herself up. Her determination to survive was tremendous, her spirit so strong. She was only fifty-seven when she died.

She raised five daughters. She was my light when I needed direction, my rock. I married young and found myself struggling to keep the marriage together while working and raising a family. Mom supported me—emotionally and in many practical ways. I named my first daughter after my mother, as I wanted a part of her grandma to be with her always. My mother was always a proud and active grandma. Thus, Mom's reaction when I had my third child was particularly strange. She didn't get a present for the new baby, she didn't call as often, she seemed preoccupied by trivial things. I was so wrapped up in the new baby that I didn't read much into these changes.

Then five weeks after the baby was born, Mom killed herself. At first, I was filled with anger. How could she have truly loved us? How could she leave her own grandchildren? Why couldn't she make it one more day? Wasn't our love enough to make her stay alive?

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My three children (ages fourteen, six, and five weeks) kept me from falling apart. I had to be strong for them. They had depended on their grandma as much as I had. I never hid the truth from them. I never gave them the horrible details—but I never lied. Any questions that they had deserved an honest answer. Always, the hardest question to face was “Why, Mommy?” How could I respond when I too searched so hard for the answer? I told them that she was sad, so sad that the pain she felt was unbearable. My answer haunted me later, sometimes even today. If I was having an extremely hard day, my precious children would sometimes ask, “Mommy, are you sad? Are you sad like Grandma was?” I could see the fear in their eyes. I could only reassure them time and time again that I was okay, that sometimes people do feel sad but they are all right. Other times my children were so angry they would scream out at their grandma. Punches thrown at doors and walls would express the depth of the anger. One child had been particularly close to my mother. She was the buddy, the soul mate. Now she was gone. No one could fill her shoes. Shortly after her death, this child was so upset at Grandma’s betrayal that the words, “I’m going to kill myself. Grandma did, so can I,” came out. I was devastated. A caring counselor came to our rescue and helped the children sort out their complex emotional reactions.

Somehow we made it through the firsts: Christmas, birthdays, all those holidays that Mom made more special. I sheltered myself in my home. As long as my kids were around me and my sisters nearby, I felt safe. Nothing could happen to them if they were close by. In the beginning, it seemed I drowned in tears. But slowly, very slowly, the pain in my heart began to lessen. The baby brought joy to us all. She reaffirmed life. She was a new beginning. Going through the everyday routine of life became less of a struggle. Laughter became real again.

But while I fought to keep my children and myself going, my

marriage fell apart. Our marriage was fragile before my mom's death. It was not strong enough to survive the demands of grieving. Within two years, I had lost my mom and my marriage. It wasn't long after that that I almost lost myself.

After the divorce, I decided to go back to school. I had to earn a decent living. I had to start all over with my life. The anxiety of leaving the safety of my home and family overwhelmed me. After pulling myself up day after day, I just could not pull anymore. I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I would try to sleep, but I would wake up every hour, my heart racing madly. I tried to eat, but the food choked me. For the first time in my life, I had lost my will, my spirit. I wanted to crawl in a dark corner and be left alone. I started crying on a Thursday. The next day, I was still crying. My sister took me to a mental health clinic. I hadn't stopped crying. The nurse was wonderful. She knew I was having a breakdown severe enough to require hospitalization. I had no insurance, no money. She found a hospital that had a community bed for people in situations like mine. It allowed me to get the help I needed at no cost.

The doctor who was assigned to me came in that night. He pronounced me suicidal. He said I needed to face the fact that I was like my mother. I argued with him. I got mad at him. I was not like her. I WANTED TO LIVE. But slowly I realized that what he was trying to say to me had some truth to it. A propensity to depression is hereditary. My mother's father had taken his life. My mother fought all her life with depression. It finally won. But I was determined to break the cycle. I reached out for help. Mental illness is not a shameful thing. What's shameful is not getting help. I can now say I have a small idea of the hell your mind can put you through. I lived through a relatively short episode of what my mother experienced. But I reached out for help and found hope.

It's been a long journey back—but a worthwhile one that has enabled me to live my life to the fullest. After my recovery, I enrolled

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in a vocational-technical school and received a certificate in building maintenance. I was the first female to graduate with this degree. I now have a dream job with the National Park Service. I am learning to love again. I have met a wonderful man who holds me when the tears fall. He knows my grief and understands my life. My children are surviving right beside me. They lost their grandma, their dad, and their way of life. To say it has been easy would be a lie. To say we don't struggle at times with Mom's death, even today, would be an even greater lie. But now when we talk about Grandma, it is with fondness and smiles more than anger and tears.

I am in control of my life now. My children have seen and know the determination it takes to keep going. I hope I have given them the strength to persevere when all seems lost. Through all our struggles we have survived together. My spirit has survived along with me, and I see that spirit in my children. I believe this spirit belongs to my mother. It's the part of her that has been with us all along.

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Treva Gordon was thirty-six in 1991 when her mother, aged fifty-seven, completed suicide.