

On Death and Friendship

MARSHA LEDERMAN

L'auteur se rappelle son profond chagrin à la mort de sa mère et sa réaction face aux voisins, amis et collègues autour d'elle à ce moment.

I was at an Indian buffet, and then a play—an old musical called *The Boyfriend*—the night my mother died. She was alone, in a rented condominium in North Miami Beach. I had talked to her just before leaving work in Toronto that afternoon. She hadn't been feeling well that day and I told her I had booked a ticket for a visit in a couple of weeks. Her friend, Mrs. Fisher (who I've called Mrs. Fisher forever, even though I've known her since birth), was there; she had brought my mother some soup.

When the delivery person from the Florida pharmacy showed up with the medication ordered that day following her visit to a doctor—who had diagnosed a chest cold—there was no answer at the door. My mother had already died of a heart attack.

I'm not sure what time he got there. I'm afraid of the details of this night. I don't know if she died while I was at the buffet, or the musical.

My boyfriend lived in Vancouver and I phoned him immediately. He was giving his kids a bath, so our conversation was brief. He was distraught, but also distracted. You

don't want to leave kids alone in a bath.

My best friend and my niece came over. They sat with me on my couch, for hours.

I didn't hear back from my boyfriend for an hour or maybe two. When I did, he told me he was on his way to the airport. What I don't remember well is this detail: that I was furious with him for not calling sooner. And I hung up on him.

This was something he brought up in a fight, more than a year later—really the only crazy blow-out fight we've ever had. He told me that after I'd hung up on him, he'd considered turning around and not coming to Toronto after all. Of course he came, and was supportive and wonderful. But it is this detail, learned more than a year after my mother's death, which I cannot let go.

Letting go of slights, and perceived slights, has been a challenge. I have grouped people into two categories since my mother's death: those who were there for me, and those who weren't.

It's amazing who surfaces in a situation like this. People you haven't heard from in years. Friends of friends. Co-workers who take a moment to write a note of support. I carried their e-mails around on my blackberry for days following my mother's death, and read them

at the most difficult times: just before the funeral, at the airport after my boyfriend's departure, in the middle of the night when I could not sleep.

But what I managed to carry around, for much longer, is the anger I felt toward people who did not acknowledge my mother's death, or didn't provide what I considered to be sufficient support. This anger manifested itself in odd places: a co-worker, who I had joked around with every now and then, maybe had a real, non-work conversation with three or four times over the years. When I returned to work, he didn't say he was sorry, he didn't say anything to me. And for months after that, I could not look at him or say hello.

A friend's boyfriend, who did not show up at the funeral and who, when I saw him two weeks after my mother died, said not a word to me about it, but tried to strike up a thoughtful debate about my profession, journalism.

A good friend's mother, who did not send a card.

Really, these were incidental people. But they somehow became the centre of my angry world. How dare they not say anything? How would I seek my revenge?

Not that I didn't have anger left over for others: relatives who didn't bother to call to see how I was do-

ing, friends who were absent, people who didn't get it.

Someone who was there for me, in the most surprising way, was an old friend from school. Rosemary Reid, not quite 40, and dying herself from breast cancer, came to the funeral, the *shiva*, phoned as often as she could, managed to phone me on Mother's Day, my first Mother's Day without my mom, to see how I was feeling. This, we all knew, was going to be Rosemary's last Mother's Day.

And it was. Rosemary died in August, seven months after my mother.

I went to Rosemary's bedside in the palliative care hospice as often as I could. I talked to her about everything. Even though her mind was pretty much gone, I apologized for a stupid fight we'd had on one of her birthdays. I went through the details of our shared experiences. I thanked her for teaching me how to make a stir-fry. I told her that if I ever had a child, I would give its middle name in her honour—Rose for a girl, Reid for a boy.

Watching this close friend slip away was devastating, but I understand that there was some transference happening here too, with my frequent and verbal visits to her bedside. I had not been able to express my final feelings to my mother. My gratitude for all she had done. My sorrow for all she had lost. My apologies for my bad behaviour as a child, and sometimes as an adult. I had not been able to ask her all the important questions: the details of her life, advice for mine. I am haunted by the loss of that opportunity.

My oldest friend, who witnessed the intimate details of my childhood, once remarked that she often wondered what would have become of me had my parents done more to develop my talents as a child. I was a smart kid; my parents were immigrants, Holocaust survivors, who didn't think much about encouraging my intelligence or other attributes by enrolling me into a

gifted program, or exposing me to the right books and music, getting me some extra-curricular lessons, or getting down on the floor and doing flash cards with me (if they even had flash cards back then). Until this friend came out with this stunning statement, I had never thought much about this. It made me really mad at my mother for the last few years of her life. Had she taught me anything to help me get on in life? Or did I do well in spite of her? It was too late to be angry with my father; he died when I was 18. This made me angry too.

I am trying to be less angry these days. To let go. The anger isn't worth it. And often, I've learned, it isn't warranted. I ran into the work acquaintance who hadn't said anything after my mother died at a party recently. He took me aside and told me he'd read a piece I wrote about her in the newspaper. He said he was haunted by it. He wanted to know more about me, and her. He wanted to make changes to his own life. He wanted to meet someone who thought and felt deeply, like I did, and share his life with someone like that. He wanted to know if I was okay.

It was partly the beer talking, I know, but hearing those words was a balm to my angry soul. This incidental person never deserved to be the focus of my anger. I did. I was mad at myself for not treating my mother like the queen she was, for not listening at her knee at every opportunity to every word she said about her life, or mine. For not getting on the next flight that January Tuesday and being there to call an ambulance and save her life.

Hearing how the words I wrote about my mother may have had an impact on this person meant everything to me. It came at an odd venue, a karaoke party, but the timing was right. I had flown into Toronto, from Vancouver, where I now live, with the boyfriend who did not turn his car around that night my mother died. I felt happy, really

happy, not just going through the motions, as I had for a year after her death. I made it through to the other side—scathed, for sure—but with the ability to feel joy again. And I know how I got here: friends who sat next to me for hours on couches, who phoned me on national holidays, who sent encouraging notes; and that one friend, the boyfriend, who stuck by me, even when I was horrible.

I know where I learned this. Most of the people in my mother's family were killed in the Holocaust. So her friends, the ones she developed after the war, became her family—including Mrs. Fisher, who was there at the very end, trying to feed her chicken soup.

I ran into Mrs. Fisher a few months after my mother died. She told me that my mother had requested tea and honey that final afternoon of her life. She had seemed particularly desperate for the honey. I could hardly stand to hear this detail. The vulnerability of my mother and her need for something sweet. The fact that I could not bring it to her. The comfort and pain of knowing she had a friend there to do it, instead.

I got through that horrible night, and that year, and I get through each lonely day without my mother—thanks to the friendships and relationships I have developed through my life. I had a wonderful role model for this. I may not be a scientist or composer or award-winning novelist, but I am a person who feels things deeply, and who values my relationships above all else. It's something I learned from my mother: a survivor in every sense of the word, who did not live long enough, but who lives, still, in me.

Marsha Lederman currently lives in Vancouver.