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## THE DAY I REALIZED I COULD NEVER MAKE MY MOM GROW UP

By *Peggy Carouthers*

I'm in the car with my husband when my friend Courtney calls, asking if I've seen the newspaper from our hometown.

"My mom asked me if that's your mom in today's paper," she says.

I'm surprised that her mom has seen it, but mine already told me about what happened.

"I talked to my mom yesterday, and she said her neighbor assaulted her," I say. "I told her she should press charges against him. Are you talking about the police reports?"

Courtney is silent for a moment. "The paper says that *she* was arrested."

"Wait, that doesn't make any sense. For what?"

"Firing a gun near a school bus stop."

It's my turn to be silent. "That makes no sense. Let me read it, and I'll call you back."

I hang up and pull up the newspaper's website on my phone, and there it is. The story reports that my mother had been arrested the previous day for firing a gun while intoxicated at 7:30 in the morning.

I'm baffled. I spoke to my mother yesterday and she said nothing about being in jail. Her story begins to unravel along with the image in my head of my mentally ill alcoholic mother's improvement.

I call her to get the truth, but she lies, insisting that she wasn't drunk despite the police report and two news stories.

She begins to criticize me to take the attention off her. As she's yelling I start to wonder why I'm

fighting with her, why I'm bothering to try to maintain this relationship that only produces lies and heartache.

And then I remember: it's for my stepfather, Russ. He had been the peacemaker who always stood as the buffer between my mother and me, between her abusive alcoholic rages and my fury at her actions. I'm trying because when Russ' health started getting bad and his dementia began taking over his mind, he asked me to take care of her.

But he's been dead for months. I know that keeping my promise to him means living with the constant abuse, manipulation and lies from my mother for the rest of my life, and that's something I don't know that I can do without Russ.

Russ took care of my mother through her stints in mental hospitals, her mood swings, and her alcoholism. He took me to get my driver's license and to the doctor when she was in rehab. He went to school functions for my sister and me when Mom was asleep on the couch in such deep depression she couldn't get up. He stepped in when I fought with my mom over her behavior or when she was belittling my sister or me.

He kept our family together while my mother's mental illness threatened to tear us apart – until he had a major stroke in February 2013.

It was not his first – the one that made the left side of his face droop – but it was the worst.

Suddenly the tall, bright-eyed, stoic man who had cared for me since childhood couldn't walk or hold a real conversation. He'd forgotten that he had moved to Tennessee from Kentucky almost twenty years earlier, and, most painful of all, he forgot my name, conflating me with his sister.

At 24, I felt like I was alone with two fully-grown children; I didn't just have to care for Russ and his failing mind, I also inherited his responsibility for my mother. Until then, I'd been able to maintain some distance from my mother's issues, knowing that Russ would keep them from getting too bad. But after the stroke, it was all on me.

My sister, Jamie, had kept her distance from my parents altogether, making the occasional phone call or visit, but never getting involved in their daily lives. Though she visited Russ in the hospital often, the burden of our parents' care was a responsibility I carried alone.

As the severity of the stroke became more obvious and Russ was discharged from the hospital, Mom and I debated whether he should come home with us or go to the rehabilitation facility the doctors recommended. The facility was the only way he might have learned to walk, talk and hold a pen again, so we decided that he should go, though he was angry that he wouldn't be going home right away.

My mother and I walked out of the facility to the car in silence, and we both broke down crying. It was clear the Russ we knew was never coming back. In that moment, it seemed we were bonded together, a team in taking care of him.

I was managing finances and taking power of attorney over Russ. I picked up his prescriptions, and checked on them both throughout the day and night with phone calls and text messages.

My mother seemed to be adjusting to the fact that her husband needed her help. While I worked during the day she fed him, washed several loads of laundry, took him to doctors' appointments, and even made arrangements with his work for his retirement.

I began to wonder if my mother's newfound maturity was the new normal, but I couldn't accept it. Growing up with my mother meant always waiting for the next mistake that would throw our

lives into chaos. While we adjusted to the new routine, I waited for it all to start again.

About two months after Russ' stroke, I called my mother late one night. Even over the phone I could hear the heaviness of her breath, the syrupy slowness of her speech, and I knew she was drunk.

It had been two years since the last time I caught her drinking at night while my stepfather slept. But this time, she wasn't just hiding it from Russ, who could manage the situation. This time she was taking advantage of the fact that he had dementia and he wasn't in control anymore, and she thought I wouldn't find out.

My husband and I drove over to her house to catch her in the act. She opened the door, and her blue eyes were exactly as wide and glassy as I pictured, remembering every other time she'd been drunk. Her normally pale freckled face was a deep shade of red I had come to know and hate. Like a teenager caught breaking the rules, she lied.

Now I feel the irony of the child catching my mother in some inappropriate act and wondering how to handle it, but at the time all I knew was that no matter what progress she seemed to have made, she was never going to be responsible.

The weight of the fact that I was going to be stuck caring for them both crashed on me. I was angry because I wanted to be the child, and my mother had taken that from me.

The unfairness of the situation built until I felt myself breaking, and then, without Russ there to calm me or intervene, I exploded. I raged at her for drinking and for how she'd hurt my sister and me. I raged about how we were scarred from having a drunk mother who lost our house and forgot to pick us up from school when she passed out in the yard.

"You're right. Your childhood was *so* horrible," she mocked. "I was *such* a terrible mother."

“I’m done,” I said, leaving with my husband.

I wanted to never speak to my mother again, to make her be the adult for once, but I knew even as I left that I couldn’t leave for good. I had to talk to her because she was taking care of Russ, and I wanted to be there for him.

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Ever since Russ died a year later, I’ve kept trying to help my mother, but I have been burned by her drinking and lies and have tried not to expect too much from her. I decided that as long as she is trying to keep her life together I will be there for her.

Now, after my friend calls to tell me about her arrest, I’m listening to my mom yelling at me over the phone, deflecting the responsibility for her actions, twisting everything until she’s in the right, and everyone else, including the police and the newspaper and the news anchor on TV, is wrong.

It isn’t even close to the worst thing she’s ever done, but something about the way she is willing to refute the police and journalists to save face tells me all I need to know. It’s clear to me that no matter how well she seems to be doing, she is severely ill and not getting better.

And that’s when I know I don’t have it in me to do it anymore – to play the games I have played since childhood with my mother. I don’t have to take the insults, the lies and the manipulation anymore.

I feel powerless and alone, because realizing Russ isn’t there to help me through it all feels like I’m losing him all over again. But this time I’m also losing what was left of my family.

I realize I don’t owe it to anyone to care more about my mother keeping her life together than she does.

In that moment I feel like I’m letting Russ down, but I can honestly say I did my best to do what

my stepfather asked – to take care of my mom. Yet I feel liberated knowing that I can live my life without being the parent or the caretaker. For the first time since Russ's stroke I can live just for me. The openness of my new life without being bound to my parents scares me, but I am free of the lies, abuse and manipulation I've spent my whole life living in, and that's something I will never regret.

I hang up and block her phone number because I can't live in her world anymore.