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### Shame on Me

We must all make many decisions in life. Some of our choices turn out to be ones we regret, leaving us with feelings of guilt and shame.

I grew up with a mother who never had to work, not even after my dad died when I was only eleven years old. Between that time and my eighteenth birthday, my mom made ends meet with both a monthly life insurance benefit check and also monthly Social Security death benefit checks she received on behalf of my sister and me. The Social Security checks would continue for my sister and me beyond age eighteen if we remained in school. My sister went on to become a doctor of veterinary medicine, earning her undergraduate degree from the University of Delaware and her graduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania. I, however, did not attend college, and therefore, to appease my mother's worry regarding the loss of the Social Security income, I promised her that I would get a job and give her all but about ten dollars of my paycheck each week.

This worked okay for about a year while I worked as a stock clerk and cashier at a greeting card and gift shop in the mall. Since I did not yet have my driver's license and could not afford auto insurance nor a car while giving my mom my paychecks, I would ride the trolley to and from work each day. It was about a twenty-minute ride each way.

During that year I observed all of my friends going dancing, dating, going to the pool, and doing all the things normal teens do. I yearned to experience those things, too. I had expressed my

dissatisfaction to my mom on several occasions, but she apparently figured that if I wanted those things badly enough, I would take the needed steps to earn the money required. However, instead of looking inward at what changes I needed to make or at what actions I needed to take, I looked outward and saw only what I perceived to be my mother's selfishness. Consequently, I delivered an ultimatum to my mom: if you do not at least start looking for a job, I am going to move out.

I felt justified making such a demand for several reasons. First of all, why shouldn't she pull her own weight? She was only forty-five years old and in good health. She had been working when my dad had met her; she could do it again.

A second justification in my mind at the time was the fact that all the other guys my age got to keep their incomes; they had their driver's licenses, cars, and girlfriends. The desire for a girl of my own—that alone—seemed justification enough for almost anything I might consider doing. Somehow, though, I managed to overlook the fact that those guys also had two parents, both with incomes.

In addition to feeling justified in my demand, I also felt more "manly" by making it. I perceived the deliverance of the ultimatum as "forging my own path." I was ready to "set out on my own" (to my grandmother's house, anyway), ready to earn a living and manage my own money. I gave little consideration, if any, to mundane tasks such as meal preparation or laundering dirty clothing. I would be a "man" making his way in the world. I would get my own car, my own place, and a woman. In retrospect, I wonder why I could not have done those things anyway, while living with and helping my mom.

Another sense I had at the time was that my decision was the product of maturity. I deemed myself exceptionally intelligent, as well, having graduated Valedictorian of my high school's college preparatory curriculum. I had easily landed a job after that. My supervisor liked me and trusted me

with responsibilities. In my mind, I had proven that I was more mature than the average eighteen-year-old was. Later in life, I would realize just how immaturely I had behaved.

Mom did buy a typewriter in response to my threat to leave. She practiced daily, got up to speed and accuracy, and sent out lots of résumés and cover letters. In spite of her efforts, she did not get hired before my best friend, Robert, offered to drive me to my grandmother's house a hundred miles northwest of my hometown if I only accompanied him to a "Blue Angels" U.S. Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron air show in New York. I guess I could not pass up the opportunity and the free ride. Therefore, when the day of the air show arrived, I quietly packed a suitcase and without any discussion or even a kiss goodbye, in a cold, gruff kind of way, I departed with Robert in his car, my mother watching me go, she with an odd-looking mixture of hurt and pride on her face. Whenever I replay that scene in my mind, I know that she wanted me to grow up, but I am certain that the cold manner in which I left the nest had to feel like a stab in the back to my mom. All of this happened thirty-four years ago, and my mother passed away in 2000; nonetheless, the feelings of guilt, regret, and shame still live on.

There are plenty of reasons why I feel guilty. I think the foremost is that I forced my mom to work instead of taking care of her. After my dad died, my mom did not spend her time having fun or looking for another husband. Instead, she sacrificed for my sister, Cynthia, and for me, spending the next seven years taking care of us, always there for us every single day. Mom is the reason Cindy and I did so well in high school, too. I feel that if I were a truly good son, I would have been the one sacrificing, working more or better jobs to support my mom and myself. My mom deserved that from me; I failed her.

I also feel guilty because I had been the one to take care of the house. I mowed the lawn, painted the trim, washed the car, bagged and carried the groceries, walked the dog, etc. When I left, all

those things fell to my mom. She was unable to handle it all, and ended up having to sell the house. She had to move back to South Philly, into a row home, in the concrete jungle. She had loved gardening in the backyard of the house in Yeadon, a Philadelphia suburb. We had the most beautifully landscaped house on the street because of mom. Flowers grew all around the house, in an arrangement that, in combination with the lush lawn I had kept meticulously manicured, was astonishing. Mom and I shared a love for the horticulture that adorned our home, and I inadvertently destroyed that; it hurts as I write the words.

The regret used to be even worse, but time heals wounds and therefore the pain has diminished; it is far from erased, though. There is regret that the family house is forever lost to us. There is regret that I can no longer show my daughter where I grew up, except to drive by the outside, which now looks drab, nothing like the way it did when I resided there, no more smorgasbord of annuals, perennials, and more; only shades of gray and brown. There is no more sky-blue trim. There is the regret that I will never see my room again, nor will I ever see the cozy, hunter-green accented red and pink kitchen where I enjoyed so many lovingly prepared meals, including the delicatessen-style lunches mom and I would share on summer afternoons after working on the thriving nature surrounding our home. There is the regret that comes from the fate of the family Yorkshire Terrier, Tippy, who I abandoned at my grandmother's house after enlisting in the Navy. He ended up there because Mom could no longer care for him properly when I left home, so I came and got him to keep him out of the pound. But years later, my cousin enlightened me to the fact that he "had to shoot" that innocent little dog because no one cared for it after I became a sailor!

Shame on me! What kind of son—what kind of man—puts himself first to the point of giving his mother an ultimatum to get a job and then abandons her when she doesn't manage to do so quickly enough despite her efforts? To this day, I am ashamed of that. Whenever I tell the story, I am ashamed

and embarrassed. I am a devout Traditional Roman Catholic. Our religion and the Bible both tell me that I ought to be ashamed of myself. *"He who mistreats his father, or drives away his mother, is a worthless and disgraceful son."*—Proverbs 19:26 *"A wise son makes his father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother."*—Proverbs 10:1 *"Honor your father and your mother."*—Mark 10:19 Thus, I am ashamed.

It is not very difficult to attribute my choices that year to my youthfulness; nonetheless, I still feel the guilt, regret, and shame over three decades later.