



Best friends:
GinaRose, 20,
right, with
mom Doreen, 49

A torn heart

As the doctors rushed my mom into surgery, her last words to me were “I’ll come back for you, baby” *by GinaRose Avveniri*

10:30 P.M., NEW YEAR’S EVE, 2003: I SHOULD HAVE BEEN at a party, celebrating and catching up with friends. Instead, I was holding my mother’s hand as she lay on a stretcher in the cardiac unit of New York University Medical Center. Mom was trying to be calm, but I knew she was scared. I was trying to hold it together, too, but really, I was panicking. As the doctors wheeled her toward the operating room, an awful thought crossed my mind: Was this the last time I’d see my mom alive?

A sudden scare

I’d come home two weeks earlier for Christmas, having just finished my first semester at college. When I pulled into the driveway of our Aberdeen, New Jersey, home, my

mother, Doreen—looking beautiful and healthy at 47—ran out to greet me. I’d missed her so much. She’s my best friend, and I’m her only child. She was on vacation, too, from her job as a school speech therapist, so we spent the next few days enjoying each other’s company.

Later that week, I went to spend a night with my dad, who lives nearby (my parents divorced when I was 14). Not long after I got there, Mom called. I could tell something was wrong. Finally, she told me she’d had some chest pressure and had driven herself to the closest hospital. Tests showed that it wasn’t a heart attack, but she was being kept overnight for monitoring.

“I’ll be right there,” I said. She insisted I stay put until morning. I knew she didn’t want me to worry, but ►

how could I not? I slept horribly and was up at dawn. By the time I arrived at the hospital, she was about to be released. A few days later, she called her regular doctor. He said she might have a virus; if so, she'd be feeling better in ten days. I started to relax.

A frightening diagnosis

Christmas came and went. Still not feeling 100 percent, Mom decided to see her doctor to make sure she was not getting worse. She left for her appointment at 11:00 A.M. on New Year's Eve. She called me in the early afternoon to let me know that the doctor had found a heart murmur and was sending her to Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank for tests. It all sounded pretty routine.

A few hours later, she called again; this time, Mom was crying. "They've found a tear in my aorta—inside my heart," she said, explaining that it was a rare condition called aortic dissection. The tissues lining the wall of her aorta had separated, causing blood to accumulate inside. (Later, I'd learn that once the aorta ruptures, less than half of affected patients survive; an aortic dissection had killed actor John Ritter just months before.) Mom was going to be taken—by helicopter—to New York University Medical Center, 40 miles away.

This can't be happening. I thought as I sat on the floor and started to cry. Then she called again: Airspace over New York City was restricted for New Year's Eve, so she'd be going in an ambulance, not a helicopter. They were waiting for me to get to the hospital before leaving for NYU.

On the drive to Riverview, I remember telling myself to stay strong for Mom's sake. I ran into the ER and was surprised at how fragile she looked. I pulled the doctor aside to

ask if Mom would be undergoing surgery in the city. "Yes," he said. "But she doesn't know it; we don't want her too wound up for the ride."



Back home: Mother and daughter are even closer.

"Your mother is a lucky woman," the doctor said.

I tried to keep Mom from seeing how scared I was. "You're gonna be fine," I promised. "We'll be home in the morning." I choked back tears and held her tightly.

Racing against time

The ambulance sped along I-95, sirens blaring. The New Year's Eve traffic at the Lincoln Tunnel was insane. When troopers cleared a lane for us, it finally hit me how serious this was. At the same time, I heard the EMT shout, "We're out of meds; we needed to be there yesterday!"

We pulled in just after 10:00 P.M. Within minutes, a team of doctors surrounded Mom. One came over to tell me about the procedure to repair the tear. The whole thing would take about six hours; everything should go smoothly, he said. I couldn't get

over the word *should*. "Doctor, please take care of her," I begged.

At 10:30, they began rolling her away; I couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Her last words to me: "I'll come back for you, baby."

Waiting to exhale

All I could do was wait. And pray. About an hour later, I heard my dad's voice; I just about fell into his arms. He and his girlfriend took me to the waiting area; soon after, my aunt and cousins arrived, and the six of us settled in for the night. Just a mile or so from Times Square, we watched the ball drop—on TV. Those first few hours of the New Year were agonizingly slow. Eventually everyone—except me—fell asleep.

At 4:00 A.M., the doctor I'd met earlier walked into the waiting room. I was so nervous. "Everything went beautifully," he announced. "Your mother is a very lucky woman." The tear was about ten days old (it had likely happened the night I was at my dad's), and it had been caught just in time. Her aorta had not yet ruptured. I took a deep breath. *She's going to be OK.*

Then we were allowed to go see her. Though she was asleep, she looked beautiful. Even the nurses noticed—one said she'd never seen anyone come out of major surgery with lipstick on. Well, that's my mom!

Her recovery was normal but slow. Luckily, I had the month off to take care of her. To see her now, you'd never know what she went through. But I'll never forget. That night, I learned that when you love someone, you sometimes have to tell them everything's going to be OK—even when you aren't sure yourself. My mom's always been a rock for me; this time, I got to be there for her. ■