

I Couldn't See the Silver Lining

By Sheila Johnson

The year was 2001, the month was September, and the day was yet to come. Soon after they met, my son and his fiancée decided they wanted a small, exotic, family-only wedding on an island with white sand and calm water. So both sets of parents moved forward with the wedding plans in a grand effort to make their dreams come true. Both families had met on several occasions, as the couple met and attended college in Atlanta, Georgia. One summer, we spent the fourth of July together. The bride's father, my husband, and my son went on golf trips together. Each family had three children, two girls, and one boy. The bride's mother and I enjoyed talking about education and the state of affairs in our nation with regard to setting higher standards in the school systems. Becoming in-laws with this beautiful family appeared to be heaven sent. This union was meant to be.

Meantime, as I was designing the bride-to-be's dress, cutting silk fabric, hand-stitching lace on the veil, hemming lining and netting, and planning a bridal shower in Denver (as the bride-to-be was from another city), my precious mother lay on her death bed in El Paso after a bad fall caused by a grapefruit-size tumor that had been growing behind her eyes for several years.

Our immediate family along with my future daughter-in-law had just been seated for lunch at the Olive Garden when I received the phone call from my brother giving me the bad news about my mother. The girls and I were giddy with excitement and talking about the food menu for the bridal shower to be held at the Denver Botanic Gardens at the end of the week. "Do we have enough volunteers to help with the decorations?" "Did you remember to check the mail for final RSVPs from the people from out of town?" "Do we want to offer liquor in addition to wine?" "Should we include the children?"

"Mom's doctor said she might live for another week. You need to come home now." His voice was grave and shaking; he was alone and afraid, and he needed his big sister to come home then. The caterers had been paid. Airline tickets had been purchased by out-of-towners. The deposit for the venue was non-refundable, and I was at odds with my heart and my soul. I wanted to see my mother alive one more time. I wanted to support my brother who had taken care of her for so many years. I wanted to be in two places at one time. I needed a clone that would never be.

I chose life over death. The Sunday after the engagement party, my mother passed away. I was not there. The following Thursday, I preached my first sermon – my mother's eulogy. That Monday we left for Saint Maarten. That Tuesday 911 happened and the world shook in horror and froze in fear. The bride-to-be's family was stuck on the runway for five hours. They didn't come. Vows were not spoken as planned. The seven of us were able to fly back to Denver after two weeks in various airports and on several carriers.

The world changed. My world turned upside down. It was the worst summer that I can remember.