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HOW I KNOW MY MOTHER WENT TO HEAVEN:

by Joe 'Kirsch' Curcio

People can't imagine anywhere in New York City being a small town. But my little village of Greenpoint Brooklyn was once a place where you were minutes from your first kiss - and up the road from the church where you'd someday marry that same gal.

A quiet corner of the city, its modest skyline dotted with church towers - Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic - all within walking distance of our homes.

My mother's parish was St. Francis of Paola, built by the Dutch and known as "the Church on the Hill." In 1923 the original structure was replaced. My mother was born the following year and baptized there in 1924. More than ninety years later, her loving spirit was welcomed back into heaven from that same church - her entire life within the footprint where she was born and raised.

I admired her devotion - her novenas from the couch; vigils to Saint Jude; treks from Brooklyn to the Bronx - Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto where she'd return with holy water to share with ailing neighbors. She even donated a statue of Padre Pio to a local parish. Her faith ran deep.

In 2012 that faith was tested. My father - her soulmate over sixty years - was taken. Three months later, her firstborn son passed, my older brother, at sixty-four. Losing a husband is one heartbreak, but losing a child violates the natural order of life.

Her faith never wavered, and I can think of no better way to explain her devotion than one Sunday morning

After mass I picked up coffee and Italian pastry and headed to her house. She loved our Sunday visits and looked forward to the treats. Although her Dunkin' decaf was never really a surprise, she always acted as if it were. When I handed her the red-and-white twine-tied cake box, her smile told me she already knew what was inside: her favorite sfogliatella - a flaky, sweet, ricotta-filled pastry known in the neighborhood as sfoo-ya-dell.

I could also smell the garlic frying in the kitchen. In our Italian family, it didn't matter if it was a holiday or just another Sunday - there were always meatballs sizzling in the pan after mass. Then came her big smile and that hug that squeezed my shoulders and warmed my soul.

As I traded her embrace for a piece of Italian bread cradling a meatball straight from the pan, I noticed a glow about her. Her face radiant, the scent of Jean Naté and faint sweetness of her violet gum surrounded her. This woman who had endured such loss now seemed... at peace.

I held her hands and said, "Mamma, you look so nice. Your face is glowing."

A whisper of a smile crossed her as she tilted her head and bashfully replied: "I went to confession last night."

In that moment, I totally understood her peace, her faith, her relationship with God.

Without a doubt in her heart she knew why she was so vibrant that morning - because she went to church and made her confession. It wasn't a ritual. It was renewal - a reminder that God's unconditional love could restore whatever life had taken away and rekindle the light inside her.

I still walk these Brooklyn streets less than a mile from that "Church on the Hill." Some mornings I feel the glow of her faith shining through me - or catch a trace of her violet gum drifting in the air. In those moments - when I can feel her soul—I know without doubt that my mother went to heaven.