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INSPIRATION: AN UNLIKELY FRIEND

I first met Reese when I climbed into her caramel-colored chair. I was barely 6 years old and not quite sure why my mother had brought me to that non-descript office in downtown Tustin, California. From that initial visit, Reese made me feel at ease, even when she approached me with an arsenal of odd tools. And I thought it was cool to know someone named after one of my favorite candies.

By Liz Holzemer

Reese was my dental hygienist. I know it sounds strange, but I always enjoyed my bi-annual appointments because it meant Reese would tell me all about her exotic trips to places I didn't yet know how to pronounce. The 45-minute cleanings always passed too quickly, so I employed every technique to extend them. I begged her to describe just once more the exhilaration she felt the first time she set eyes on the azure Pacific Ocean. I purposely took longer to swish and spit the remnants of blood and gritty polish into the porcelain bowl. What if I ceased brushing altogether or tossed the floss? Surely my mother and three younger brothers waiting patiently for their turn would understand.

I gathered early on that the detailed adventures she shared were her way of imparting life lessons to every child who occupied the seat before and after me. I learned more than the importance of flossing and why I needed braces and humiliating headgear to correct the worst overbite she'd ever seen. Reese taught me to escape the familiar.

After I moved to Boulder, Colorado for graduate school, I treasured every internationally stamped postcard. When I returned home, I always scheduled an appointment with Reese. Now older, we could talk adult to adult about her next trip and my challenging writing courses.

I still considered Reese one of my dearest friends--she encouraged me to form unlikely friendships. When she called to tell me of her just diagnosed cancer, I didn't believe it would ravish her body so quickly. I selfishly wanted just one more story, just one more visit in that chair. Weeks later when my mother called to confirm the news I dreaded to hear, I refused to accept Reese was gone.

I miss the handwritten notes, but what I miss most are Reese's words of encouragement and how she shaped my life from her perch above that well-worn leather caramel chair.

Liz Holzemer is the author of Curveball: When Life Throws You A Brain Tumor and founder of the non-profit Meningioma Mommas (meningiomaomommas.org). For more information on Liz, visit her website at lizholzemer.com or email her at info@lizholzemer.com.

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