If there is one thing my family enjoys, it is coffee. Coffee is a part of all we do. During times of celebration and sadness with family and friends, we turn to coffee as our comfort. Throughout the 3-year battle my mother fought with cancer, we drank a lot of coffee.

In early December 2011, when Mom was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, the family talked it over and drank coffee. When we met with the oncologist at 6:15 a.m., we had coffee. When Mom’s first positron emission tomography scan revealed lymphoma in her bone marrow, we cried, prayed, and had coffee.

Chemotherapy started December 21, 2011, and during these long days, we shared a pot of coffee whenever we were at the oncologist’s office. Mom would wrap her hands around the cup—filled with more cream and sugar than coffee—and coddle it as if everything were okay.

Family came to visit at home and in the hospital. Mom was known for her sweet spirit and caring nature, and worried about others more than herself. I wondered if all the sugar in her coffee made her that sweet. Growing up, friends and family would stop by for impromptu “coffee time.” Over a cup of coffee, you could sit and share your thoughts and dreams and let the cares of the world melt away. Coffee was often enjoyed with a piece of Mom’s yellow butter cake. It was the most delicious and moistest cake you could have. (Don’t tell anyone, but it came from a box.)

When Mom got too sick to make the cake and serve coffee, my dad jumped in. Instead of Mom being the “hostess with the mostest,” she became the topic of conversation. Sitting in her chair or lying on the couch, she still filled the room with love and laughter. She would try to make sure my dad fixed coffee for the guests before hers. He did not go for that, though; she was always first to him.

On November 10, 2014, Mom started radiation therapy for her non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, which had resurfaced. Just 1 week later, she was admitted to the intermediate intensive care unit (ICU) for chest pain and shortness of breath. Ending a long day, my dad kissed her goodnight and walked out, drinking his cup of coffee.

November 18, 2014, was their 42nd wedding anniversary. They celebrated with a hospital tray of food and two cups of coffee. The next day, Mom’s breathing was shorter; she
had more pain and could not get comfortable. Despite her breathing issues, the one thing she still wanted was family near her and coffee.

Over the next week, her caregivers were great and loved caring for “Mrs. JoAnn.” After a night of bad breathing and being made NPO (i.e., nothing by mouth), the doctor making the morning rounds asked Mom what would help her. When she answered “coffee,” the kind, “good looking” doctor brought her a huge cup to get her morning going.

Difficulty turned into tragedy when we found out Mom had suffered a spinal stroke, making chemotherapy and radiation no longer feasible. We cried and wondered what was next. I thought, “If we cannot heal her, then we will make her comfortable and spend time together before her journey ends.” Over many cups of coffee, I called family and friends and told them we were waiting to hear from hospice.

Moving day was full of emotions—happy tears to be leaving the ICU, but sad tears because I knew she was never coming home again. Staff members came in one by one to say their goodbyes and give hugs. Jennifer, one of our favorite techs, said, “Mrs. JoAnn, you never know, I might just stop by and have a cup of coffee with you.” Soon after, they loaded Mom on the transport stretcher. As the doors of the ICU closed behind me, I felt like part of my heart was already gone.

I guess she was more ready to go than I first thought. Tuesday night, the evening she arrived in hospice, I knew we were losing her and wondered if she was comfortable going to the “other side.” Over a cup of coffee the next morning, I told her that I thought this was the next step of her journey before going home. Without skipping a beat, Mom said, “Yeah, I know, I can go home whenever I want. I can go home tomorrow if I wanted, or even Saturday.” Shocked, I replied, “Mom, I am not talking about the apartment, I am talking about heaven, and you know that, right?” She said, “Yes, I know that, I just am not ready; I wanted to live longer and do some more things. I am not giving up.” I told her that I knew and felt the same way. I explained that I thought the Lord had willingly taken the choice from her and allowed all the recent things to happen so she could go home to heaven without feeling like she was giving up; I told her I felt the Lord had taken the weight off of her. Holding hands and holding back tears, we finished our cups of coffee.

The next two days were her rally days. She was awake, alert most of the time, and full of laughter and joy. She ate and drank, and interacted with the many people who came to see her. Thursday morning, December 4, we ate breakfast together and talked about life over our cups of coffee. I went through the things I was thankful for and reminded Mom how much I loved her. For just a little while, we sat and held hands and listened to worship music. Soon after, my dad and aunts arrived, and we all visited. Aunt Judy, Aunt Beth, and I went and sat by the fireplace, and over coffee said that we thought Mom was getting close to being able to see Jesus.

Mom was tired, but happy. She was also quiet and reserved, which was quite a change.
When I had to leave to take my son to a neurology appointment, I turned and hugged and kissed her. Something about that hug—the way she held on, the way it made me feel complete and whole—made me wonder if it was the last one she would ever give me.

Mom went to sleep that Thursday night and never regained consciousness. I got the call at lunch that she had not yet woken up and her breathing had gotten worse. I arrived to find her still struggling to breathe, but not aware of the struggle at all. She was making her journey and all I could do was sit beside her and tell her to go. For the next several hours, we took turns sitting and holding her hand. When the emotions became too overwhelming, we took breaks and got coffee.

Later that night, my aunt and uncle arrived from New York. Surrounded by those she loved, Mom received her last dose of morphine at 8:00 p.m. Within 10 minutes, her breathing eased, she closed her mouth, opened her eyes, sat up a little, and reached out to my dad. Then she rested back. The fight was over and we believe that she won.

Mom also loved hot pizza and a cold Coors Light®. So, in honor of her, we had pizza and beer, and shed a lot of tears. I was so thankful to have my family there.

After her service, we drank coffee and shared memories. Her journey was over and I would not change a thing. After all, coffee and caregiving never change.