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# This, My Breath

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**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my family.

Mom, I finally created the book you encouraged me to write.

# THIS, MY BREATH

by

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THESIS

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## Acknowledgements

***This, My Breath,*** is a creative collection of memories gathered along the seasons in my life–mostly from my formative years. The stories highlight the patient, unconditional love my parents shared, and the way it has influenced me throughout my life. The stories are about life, love, loss, a yearning to belong, and a longing to be both interdependent and independent.

In my family of origin, it was the simple rhythms established through daily life and the honoring of traditions that inspired the deepest meaning, purpose, and hope. The seasons of the year brought my family alive with a flow of passion, purpose and meaning that have left an imprinted tempo that guides me still today. Through this, it is my ancestors who remind me to return "home" when I falter, stray, or feel lost and rejected.

The yearning to share my memoirs had the unexpected effect of opening wide a multiplicity of grief. Processing the stories-memorializing the people I've adored, baring open some of the private issues I've endured, digging into history to clarify the cultural climate during my life and sorting through photos to help me remember-also connected me to a broader world. Writing this has helped me better understand how we interconnect as humans, while also maintain our boundaries as individuals. Through this, our individual stories become shared.

As I work to complete my MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas El Paso, I write my final piece with the hope of culminating my education into something that inspires others along their own seasons in life. It is my desire to further pursue work in the arena of creative memoir-writing as a way to process grief collectively and individually. I envision opening up such a project to anyone interested, where stories can be told in creative writing clusters, as grief and love dance into the light of life. The process will no doubt bring astonishing surprises.

My writing style for this immediate work draws upon some of the multiple forms of writing I have been invited to explore during my studies at UTEP, particularly nonfiction, antropoesía, and

coming of age. I touch on some tough memories and emotions, but also share some joyfulness along the path. It is with gratitude to the Creative Writing program at UTEP that I'm sanctioned to write this piece with the creative release encouraged throughout this program, while also adhering to the standards that shepherd creative writing. I'm eternally grateful to Professor Sasha Pimentel, my Thesis Director, and my Thesis Readers, Professor Daniel Chacón, and Professor Jessica Slade. Your caring and critiquing helped push my words into the world. Thank you for being part of my journey.

Suzette Louise Mack

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## Critical Preface

I burned all but two in my expansive collection of personal diaries the year my mother died, three years after the death of my father. The words flew into the evening air from the firepit, transformed into soft, powdery fragments of fragile ash as they scattered like yesterday's seeds on a March wind. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I started writing in diaries when I was eight, filling book after book with my hurts, joys and philosophical questions, and filled still more pages, pining the unjustness of being a middle child. The lined sheets were my purge-zone for noting the highs and lows of my dating (and later, married) life. When I had cancer, the pages acted as blankets to cover my fears, pain, anger and hope. My diaries did not always compliment the people around me as I worked through growing pains. Always, I ended my entries with a prayer of gratitude, asking God to help me be a better person.

A precursor to the journal burning was experiencing the heartbreaking, cumbersome process of emptying out the family home my parents had lived in for over forty years. I think death is the biggest exposure–it leaves a person with no secrets, except those left unspoken or unwritten. Certainly, diaries have made people famous post-humous. But they have also caused shame, shock, hurt, and embarrassment as their scribbled pages reveal secrets no longer hidden between the closed pages of personally censored work. Once you die, you can no longer choose who will read your private words. I thought it better to be prepared.

I have an unexpected keen memory for remembering my personal past. That said, burning the affairs of my life caused fluxing regret as I forced myself to separate from the tangible words I'd been able to rely on to remind me of my roots. Burning the journals was an abolition-somewhat of a ritual of closure to rid many of the moments of the most significant people in my life, whose shared stories were penned throughout their pages. I experienced a deep rage through my grief as

I tore through boxes where the journals were stored, taking ripped out remnants of them in clenched hands to the fireside. Death robbed me of control when it stole my parents, and I relented to its grasp, giving it what felt like the final preciousness I had: the very memories that delighted my soul and inspired my breath.

I started the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso a year later, in memory and honor of my mother. She had encouraged me for years to write a book, and I had promised I would, but lacked the direction necessary to propel myself forward to keep my word. Writing has always been my private, therapeutic tool, and this online program could fulfill a dual purpose: help me work thorough grief-and push me to write the promised book. I was ecstatic to receive the letter of acceptance signed by Professor Chacón!

Writing this thesis as my final project for the MFA degree has been reminisce of the garden that was a staple throughout my childhood. First came the dream and inspiration. Next, a structure began to take form, requiring planning and gathering resources. Then, tilling the ground, providing a home where the seeds could be sown. Next, a time for watering, waiting, thunderstorms and sunshine as the sprouts grew into plants that soon needed thinning and weeding as the harvest approached. With the harvest came a time to enjoy, preserve and share. Tailing this came a time to rest and reflect, letting next year's garden surface as winter promised spring's new life.

**INSPIRATION**

A passage about the seasons that has formed the lens of my life perspective is Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, from the Holy Bible (2015):

1 For everything there is a season,
a time for every activity under heaven.
2 A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.

[3] A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
[4] A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
[5] A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
[6] A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
[7] A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
[8] A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.

I was clear on only one thing when I began exploring the topic for my thesis. I wanted to write something that would reflect on the seasons of life. Spring's green, hope-filled buds, the freedom within summer's expansive days, and the time to enjoy autumn's bounty played melodically in my mind as I pondered the project. The theme of death (winter) perpetually winds itself into my life, so I knew that would easily find itself in my work. I felt compelled to write something spiritual. I work at a church and much of my reading has a spiritual focus-prayer, meditation, liturgical dance, finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, helping someone die with peace, the quest for forgiveness, honoring the liturgical calendar, and the on-going challenge to be a better, more selfless person-themes that seemed natural for me to express. I began to gather the resources I thought would help me write whatever it was that I needed to tell, hoping that moment of "yes!" would erupt.

I began by looking through all the class materials from my studies at UTEP, wondering which I could glean the most from as I proceeded with this specific writing effort. I sorted through my notebooks remembering the books, writing, discussion and lectures over anthropoesia, poetry, social action writing, mysticism and magic, flash fiction, screenwriting, early childhood education and more. Certainly, all would contribute through the experiences and lessons they rendered.

Then I wandered through my home, pulling out books by my favorite authors who write about end of life, and whose work inspired my own work in occupational therapy with the elderly and dying, including Stephen Levine and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Jo Spence's inspiring autobiography that details her journey with body image and breast cancer, and which includes an image of her skeletal self, lying on her hospice bed, joined the stack. Caleb Wilde, a 6th generation funeral director, inspired me further with the quirky, confessional stories he outlines in his book as he finds the deeper meaning to death and refuses to become callous to its grip, even when the relentless tragedies he deals with threaten to splinter his soul. Jennifer Worth's beloved *Call the Midwife* beckoned, as did *Bettyville*, a memoir written by a man about his mother that my sister gave me the year after our own mother died. I leafed through some of my books about recovery from eating disorders and depression, and revisited books on the use of creative movement for healing.

As I dug through the stacks and heaps of books my spouse perpetually begs me to donate, children's books from my own childhood began to wave from their shelves. "Pick me, pick me," cried Edith, the Lonely Doll and the Velveteen Rabbit.

An old seed catalogue I'd plucked from my dad's garage came next, followed by books about prayer. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Darby and Stastny's *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From a State Hospital Attic* joined my stack of "thesis ideas".

Then the dusty, cracked family photo albums, whose pictures are timelessly held into place with black triangular mounts pasted to yellowed pages, motioned for me to come and sit with them for a while. Reminiscing the timeline of my life-life that spans further back in history than from my own first breath-held me quiet for several hours.

Tracy Smith (Smith) discusses Spanish poet Federico García Lorca's "Duende" as that, which unlike an external muse, lies sleeping within the writer. Once awoken, it will wrestle, fighting for voice. The duende has stirred something life-changing that has been lying dormant within the writer's soul/subconscious, and whose time has come to be moved outward, where it can be seen, smelled, touched, tasted and heard. The writer is powerless to the powers of the duende once it has stretched and yawned from its napping spot, and the writer ultimately must relent, writing feverishly as the passages emerge. Smith goes on to say:

"I love this concept of duende because it supposes that our poems are not things we create in order that a reader might be pleased or impressed (or, if you will, delighted or instructed); we write poems in order to engage in the perilous yet necessary struggle to inhabit ourselves—our real selves, the ones we barely recognize—more completely. It is then that the duende beckons, promising to impart "something newly created, like a miracle," then it winks inscrutably and begins its game of feint and dodge, lunge and parry, goad and shirk; turning its back, nearly disappearing altogether, then materializing again with a bear-hug that drops you to the ground and knocks your wind out. You'll get your miracle, but only if you can decipher the music of the battle, only if you're willing to take risk after risk. Only, in other words, if you survive the effort. For a poet, this kind of survival is tantamount to walking, word by word, onto a ledge of your own making. You must use the tools you brought with you, but in decidedly different and dangerous ways" (Smith).

While I gathered ideas for my thesis, I realized that much of what I was doing was headwork. I wasn't truly inspired. I was trying to control the process, thinking I could figure it out by figuring it out. I thought I wanted to write poetry. Then I traveled to the idea of fiction. I originally wanted to craft a children's book but did not think that would work for this manuscript. I love using images to express my thoughts, but this is a word program. Writing is personal, yet to

be shared with others; however, I never intended to write a memoir, but that is what began to emerge. Originally that idea felt self-absorbed, given the causes so much greater than me that need attention, and besides, what have I lived that is so important it must be told beyond? As I looked through the family photos, a rubber-banded bundle of letters my grandfather had written to my dad fell out from where they'd been sleeping between pages. They were written during the final years of my grandfather's life-penned words my father had treasured and used as a way to keep his communication with his father visible, real, eternal. While reading the letters, the duende's hibernation ended. I let go of the steering wheel, and my memoir began.

## TILLING THE GROUND

In *The Art of Memoir* (Karr 28-29), Mary Karr gives a pop quiz on the reasons not to write a memoir. She warns that writing should not be about people you hate, in place of therapy, for revenge (see a lawyer instead, she prompts), and one should not be written until the author is more seasoned, because "most of us are still soft as clay before thirty-five" (28). To have rich soil for a memoir, one must write with a balance of the good and bad memories, able to let go of ego and even emotion for the sake of telling the story that needs to be told. Karr warns that if you are "sobbing with shoulders shaking and big tusks of snot coming out of your face," you aren't ready to write about it yet (32). She notes that there is a difference between crying and being devasted (33). It's okay to cry writing memoir, but the tears should be manageable.

Sometimes, the ground just isn't right for growing. Maybe it needs more fertilizer (lived experiences), or the stones within need to be tossed-even hurled-as emotions are processed, before the memoir in its purest form can unfold. Writing with "self-righteous rage" (32) is a red flag. There's the audience to consider, which factors into the writing process, as well as into accepting

there will be rewrites (which means there will be the need to let go of some memories that matter less to the final product, than to the emotional clinging). One must be able to apologize, and revise, always keeping the audience at the forefront. As Karr states, memoir is for the reader-it's about their emotions, not the writer's (34).

While writing this memoir, getting the ground ready for the words the duende began to push forward, meant the season was plump. It had rained for an extended period, and the sun had come out just long enough to clump up some of the mud. I had a plot to write in, and was ready, directed, and finally stopped resisting the progression.

**SOWING THE SEEDS**

I was adamant at the onset of my thesis that it would be structured into sections to reflect the seasons of the year-winter, spring, summer and autumn-metaphorically proposing both a linear timeline for my life's memories, as well as the emotional and spiritual meanings attached with the seasons. I laid out my work, beginning with winter and progressing through the seasons. After autumn, I decided to add another section called "Winter Returns" as a way to show the perpetuality of life's seasons, and the predictability of all that comes and goes with life.

Seeds were sown in the form of words as I began to write a series of memories from my childhood. I relied on the family photos and multiplicity of books to guide the process. I used Google, historical societies, and even my mother's cookbooks to help me fish out details that were unclear from my own memory, such as what the weather was like during a certain year, what year the show Mork and Mindy aired, and when the brand of jeans called Dittos were fashionable, to be sure my facts were correct.

My writing initially came out pressured and lyrical. I had wanted to write poetry. Instead, my work came out in short, protective lines. For example:

My father would grow
quiet then and
reflect on later
autumn days,
when his youth had
passed, and his father
and mother
were thousands of
miles away,
welcoming autumn

or:

Our seasoned
aluminum rowboat
turned upside down
in the damp sand
resting, waiting…
home to possums
in the winter
freeway to mosquitos
in the summer

Early in my writing, I felt as if my siblings were censuring my work. I hadn't told them what I was doing, yet I feared their disapproval and criticism. What if we remembered incidences within the same story, very differently? What if I didn't give each of them enough space in the stories I chose to recall? What if they just felt I was too old to be in school? They encumbered the process without even knowing it.

Jack Hart discusses the ethics of memoir by stating, "But creative nonfiction writers, with their intent to write good stories that are true, must grapple with the boundary between ethical and artistic clarity. Too much reportage and we cross into scholarship or journalism. Too much imagination and we cross into fiction" (Hart 223). He adds, "In even the most scrupulous work of

nonfiction you will make mistakes…no human being can get ninety thousand words absolutely accurate. The real route to responsible nonfiction is not absolute accuracy but good faith. You work hard at your craft and do your best to get everything right. You check and double-check. And you never deliberately falsify anything, large or small. The devil never quits suggesting a fib or two" (235).

Lee Gutkind defines creative nonfiction as the genre that accurately and succinctly truthfully tells stories well (Gutkind). He further states that the goal of nonfiction is to make the stories so enthralling, that the readers become "as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy" (Gutkind). The cardinal rule of nonfiction is to never lie, but within the realm of writing the truth comes huge licensure for author creativity. He distinguishes between public and personal creative nonfiction by stating that memoirs alone are private, whereas pushing them into the creative nonfiction realm opens them to an audience. In this sense, it is both risk and choice to air one's private world. I finally decided, "why not share?" and the voices of dissent withdrew.

I dug deeper, needing to discover more about the structure of creative nonfiction. Gutkind explains that the building blocks of creative nonfiction are the scenes and stories. Remembering that I couldn't make up scenes, Gutkind further prompted by saying the stories must also make some sort of point and communicate a message. There is a difference between relaying something that happened, and making it come alive with vivid, original, memorable specifics.

Singer and Walker echo the vitality of place (scene) in creative nonfiction. "In any narrative, report, or rumination, place has more than one function. The first and most obvious, in terms of fundamental narrative craft, is that of setting. In film, this concept is called mis-en-scene, and refers to what the auteur chooses to contain in any single frame, the scenic characteristics and telling details that help illuminate character and do some of the visceral work of telling the story"

(Singer and Walker 98). The function of place is more than just where action is contained-it must give that sense one has when traveling and arriving into a foreign place, where the architecture and landscape provoke visceral responses (98). There must be a texture within the words that the reader embodies; that place where body and place intersect is what Singer and Walker call "autogeography" (99).

The seeds of my memoir were now laying in short, unfettered rows. I gently patted a blanket of dirt on top of them and turned to peer and professor review.

**WATERING, SUNSHINE AND LIGHTNING**

Key to this part of my thesis journey was not being afraid to keep on writing, even though I still felt unclear about what the final book would look like. I'd tested the waters with my big toe, and after shivering by the shore for a bit, having written the skeleton of my creative nonfiction piece, felt brave enough to immerse myself fully into the adventure.

Professor Pimentel shared a story by Steven Church (88-112) with me during our review process. The story, "I'm Just Getting to the Disturbing Part", details a life-sucking hell-hot day in Fort Collins, Colorado that ended in a tragic drowning as residents swarmed to Horsetooth Reservoir to cool off. The author uses vivid details, humor, and disturbing facts to captivate the reader. The story came alive for me, not because I've lived in Fort Collins and boated at Horsetooth, but because he wasn't afraid to tell the uncomfortable details-from being too physically large to cool off in a pink Barbie wading pool, to what it felt like to swim through dank waters, frantically gasping for the appendages of a drowning child. I remember his story because of the details.

One of the first things Professor Pimentel noticed was that I had covered up all the details in my work rather effectively by not relaying them. “You’re teasing the reader,” she told me. “You give them a snippet of information, and then end, leaving them wanting for more”.

I shuddered. That meant exposing my secrets-the memories I held dear that were so far contained within the history of only those who had been present. But, hadn’t I already decided to make this a public work?

Then she told me I had to make my fragmented lines into prose.

“I can’t do it,” I told her. “I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know how”.

“You do know how. You’re a writer,” she told me. “Now bring out the details. Make every adjective and every verb essential. Engage the reader’s senses-every single one of them”.

Next, she told me she did not understand my need to frame the work under the heading of the seasons. “It’s not organic. It’s unnecessary. It doesn’t make sense to your story”.

CRACK! Thunder rolled and a bolt of lightning cracked through our Skype session, threatening the integrity of my computer screen and causing me to gasp.

Lightning is vital to the growth of plants. It’s usually a negatively charged burst of energy from a cloud, attracted to the positive charge of the ground below it. A strong electrical current occurs when the two charges meet, and negative energy is transferred to the earth. The basic science here is that lightning helps provide the roots of plants with much-needed nitrogen (fertilizer) in a useable form during this process.

“For our next session, I want you to highlight your whole thesis in three colors: pink for every time you mention something being cloaked, covered or layer; blue for anything mentioning quiet, and yellow for the records of preserving, keeping and recording”, Professor Pimentel

directed. “Remember, this is a creative writing program. You must bring to the surface the structure that is currently buried under the water,”.

“Okay,” I said, not certain I knew what she was talking about, or more truthfully, that I could calm myself down enough to focus on what she meant.

She then recommended I read Liz Scheid’s, *The Shape of Blue,* Edwige Danticat’s, *The Art of Death,* and Joan Didion’s, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

“Don’t worry ahead,” she told me. “Trust the process. Keep doing the work”.

I ordered the books from Amazon immediately after our Skype session ended.

On page 17, Didion describes what it was like coming home from the hospital alone the evening her husband dropped dead. She describes the contents of his silver money clip without leaving out a detail:

“…I look now at the clip and see that these were the cards he was carrying: a New York State driver’s license, due for renewal on May 25, 2004; a Chase ATM card; an American Express card; a Wells Fargo MasterCard; a Metropolitan Museum card; a Writers Guild of America West car (it was the season before Academy voting, when you could use a WGAW card to see movies free, he must have gone to a movie, I did not remember); a Medicare card; a Metro card; and a card issued by Medtronic with the legend “I have a Kappa 900 SR pacemaker implanted,” the serial number of the device, a number to call for the doctor who implanted it, and the notation “Implant Date: 03 Jun 2003” (Didion 17). All that in one sentence, yet only part of one paragraph.

Why do these details matter? Perhaps it is in the remembering that we forget our pain. It's also the way we hold on- first, to the pain as we process the early stages of the loss of a loved one, and then later, as a way to not forget that which made our hearts jump whenever that person came into focus. As I wrote more details in my own memoir, that was my experience. I began to decipher the areas Professor Pimentel observed when she saw themes of covering, cloaking, preserving and quiet, beginning to better understand the theme the duende was pushing for. I became less inhibited, realizing that embedded within the details are the real message of my stories. Without the details, the scene became just like any other creek, boat or bedside. And sure, sometimes I cried while writing, as the memories evoked painful longings for my parents and the quiet, innocence of my childhood. But there was also discovery in writing the details. Instead of fearing that I'd have to make some of them up, I was surprised at how many I remembered-and aware of how without uncertainty, anyone else at the scene would of course remember it differently, because they experienced it as uniquely as I had.

My initial lyrical writing became long sentences and paragraphs, filled with details:

My father would grow
quiet then and
reflect on later
autumn days,
when his youth had
passed, and his father
and mother
were thousands of
miles away,
welcoming autumn

became:

> My father would grow quiet then, and reflect on later autumn days, when his youth had passed, and his father and mother were thousands of miles away, welcoming autumn with pumpkins and leaf-raking extravaganzas, that included drinking warm alcohol beverages with neighbors, but for my father, clad in fatigues, his youthfulness heavied by boots caked in mud and a helmet weighting his freedom, the clouds of autumn that season blended with

the smoke of artillery, and smothered the landscape in the crimsons and ambers of war.

And:

Our seasoned
aluminum rowboat
turned upside down
in the damp sand
resting, waiting…
home to possums
in the winter
freeway to mosquitos
in the summer

became:

Our seasoned aluminum rowboat lays upside down in the damp sand, resting, waiting for summer. Home to burrowing possums in the winter, it snares tumbleweeds and heaps of soggy, rotting autumn leaves that fill several trash bags when we dig it out for summer adventures. Now, mid-July, it's a freeway for mosquitos, as my dad, siblings and me bob on the rippled lake just outside of Boulder, casting baited wormy lines from rugged bamboo poles that ker-splash into swirling waters before they sink, hungry for fish.

While reading Danticat's book, I learned a new term: "momoirs" (in contrast to memoirs"). This is daughters' accounts of their mothers' deaths, and apparently its own, popular genre (135). Danticat states, "…we all have been orphaned, except by our words, which we eventually turn to in order to make sense of the impossible, the unknowable. We want to write not just of our mothers' deaths but of their lives too and of the ways, beyond the obvious, that

our lives and their lives were linked. We want to share the connections that we have built with our mothers, be they through books, clothes, or words" (135). Our mothers were there before we were, and they pulled us along into their lives, and then left us, wondering what to do next. In a sense, as we read others' momoirs, their mothers become our mothers, with many shared characteristics, except in how they suffered (135-136). My story is not about how my mother died; it is much about how she lived, and how she continues to influence me, years after her death. Reading Danticat helped me clarify what I was writing, and why. It guided me in how to write the details, yet I was still sitting with my work, trying to figure out how to organize it.

**WEEDING**

My ceramics teacher told me, "never fall in love with anything you create before it's done in the kiln". Anywhere along the process, from the wheel, to the glaze and kiln, something could go awry. The clay, wobbly and wet, might shred apart on the wheel. The glaze could be tainted, colors mixed in by a careless peer dipping from container to container, causing mis-coloring. The piece could be dropped on the way to the kiln, and even explode into hundreds of brittle bits while baking. I remember her wisdom when writing. It's heightened my ability to release when something needs to be edited, or even completely pulled.

During one of our sessions, Professor Pimentel recommended I read Barry Yourgrau's article, "On Writer, Hoarders, and Their Clutter" (Yourgrau). The article discusses hoarding as an extreme accumulation of physical items done unconsciously to avoid the emotional pain that would come if forced to let go of the items. The amassed "stuff" lying around one's home (and even car and office) buffers the deep pain of loss. "Hoarders seem more liable to trauma than other people. But they also possess a heightened sensitivity to the allure of objects, a kind of artistic

temperament. I came to believe that some people, myself included, just like having lots of things of all kinds around, are more sentimental than other folk, can tolerate more disorder and even a touch of dust" (sic).

Perhaps hoarding versus collecting (and clutter) bare some subjectivity in definition. Certainly, a spectrum lies between the terms. Cleaning out one's closet is inevitable when writing. However, I don't believe any idea ever needs to be fully deleted; there's always another time and place for it to be used. With computers and cloud storage, I suppose it becomes quite easy to hoard our words. That said, I learned to let go of words I had in my original manuscript because in telling the details in memoir, it is not necessary to remember every event, but to describe the chosen scenes with details so heightened the reader experiences the moment with the author. The ego enters in here too. Letting go of one's efforts requires being able-being willing-to open oneself up to listen and learn. After all, in creative nonfiction, we aren't writing merely for ourselves.

Jane Alison, in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, discusses her love of noticing patterns and the elements that make them up, and how this applies to writing. She grew restless of the linear plot she was taught was the only way to organize writing, and began, instead, to notice the different shapes writing can take. She noted meandering, spirals, radials, fractals, wavelets and cellular motions, as narrative can move and flow, and even take on colors and textures. It's an impressive, visual concept that helped give me the ability to sit back from my work and see its artistic imagery, versus its flatness on my computer screen. It helped me see where the details were missing, and where some of the narrative needed to be pulled to the cloud for another time.

As I envisioned the words in my own narrative freestyling along a ski slope, following the spiral of a fiddlehead, or filtrating in and out of the permeable walls of a red blood cell, I was able

loosen my insistence that the pieces of my narrative fit squarely within the concepts of the four seasons of nature.

"It's not organic in that form," Professor Pimentel had told me. "It's not truly expressing the deeper part of what your story is needing to say".

So, I pulled on my gloves and weeded, taking out awkward (and even some favorite) elements that didn't belong in this piece (yes, storing them in a folder for future use). I pulled a few of the stories by their blossoms, shook dirt from their roots, and placed them in completely new parts of the garden. I read Scheid's *The Shape of Blue* and got more comfortable with non-linear placement of words and realized the heightened emotions this evoked as I read, and then re-read my stories.

And I trusted the thesis-producing process with Professor Pimentel, who consistently helped me realign my work, challenging me with new concepts and authors, and not letting me stop just because I felt overwhelmed.

During its final restructuring, my creative nonfiction memoir lost not just its seasonal headings, but all of its chapters and their titles. During the writing process, I struggled most with seeing how the different scenes in my memoir interplayed, and how best to organize them to express the sentiments of my journey so that the eternal influence of my parents, grandparents and siblings were highlighted, as I journeyed from the innocence of childhood to the awkward, often painful stages towards adulthood. I could now envision the blanketing imagery in a new way, with my mother as the matriarch, covering my father, who covered my grandparents, who covered my siblings; throughout the layers lie my experiences, reactions, and the wisdom gained, as a child, friend, and human being. The wind had come, scattering the seed tops, and in doing so, gave the past that I both mourn and celebrate, a certainty for future life.

## HARVESTING AND PRESERVING

*This, My Breath*. My thesis-the cumulation of over 50 years of life, three years of graduate school, and nine months of intentional labor-has matured. While reading back through the manuscript, I continue to see places that need reworking, and I realize that the process of thinning and weeding are never complete. I'll awake from a dream that reminded me of an element of childhood that I instinctually want to add to the stories, but the time for seeding is over. I'm preparing now for the final defense, knowing I'll be nervous. I've done the work, but am I prepared for the questions? Can I explain the purpose, the form, the process for my work? What will it be like, to distribute my book when the person I wrote it for is with me now, only in spirit? How can I thank all of my professors appropriately, including the three on my thesis committee, for their guidance, patience and generosity? What will I write next? When will the duende resurface, and how will I instrument this next phase of my writing career without the support of my UTEP professors and peers?

Perhaps, if only for a short season, it's permissible to just sit back and enjoy the harvest.

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Itchy, miserable, feverish, my little brother and I lay together in bed, sharing a faded cotton quilt Grandma stitched. My mother tucked the edges of it firmly into the mattress all the way around, cocooning us. Our father's green, woolen Marine-issued blankets hang from clothespins on top of the sheer lace curtains to filter the sunlight. The raised spots of chickenpox spread and itch across our faces, backs, tummies, and legs. I have a pox on the bottom of my right foot and slide down deep into the bed, pushing my foot up and down against the wooden footboard, desperate for relief.

Mama dabs our spots with fluffy cotton balls saturated in sticky pink Calamine lotion, then lays the saturated orbs on the bedside table, next to twin glasses of ice water, a can of flat Ginger Ale, and a stack of saltine crackers that are turning mushy around the edges from summer's Midwest humidity.

Mama brushes crumbs from the tableside into her hand and empties it into the pocket on the pink gingham check apron she wears over her red Bermuda shorts and light pink T-shirt. She smooths the covers or our bedding and lays her the tips of her fingers over my forehead for a moment, and then shifts them along my cheeks. I welcome their coolness. My mother shakes her head once, side to side, and wrinkles and frowns. The black shadows under her eyes expose her lack of sleep; the deep sigh she quivers makes her seem young, helpless, afraid.

She turns from me and I think maybe she's crying. But then she finds composure and straightens tall, picking my brother's teddy bear up from the floor where it had slipped from his feverish hold.

Tucking the bear into the crook of my brother's left arm, she warns us, "Don't scratch. You'll be scarred for life."

She turns, then, to leave the room, and draws the door closed behind her, further dimming the room.

My brother reaches to itch the pox that is breaking out above his right eye, groaning in misery. I grab his hand, provide a shield between his fingernails and flesh, and hold it firmly in mine. Yesterday, when we were both well, he would have resisted. Today, our fingers interlock and we fall asleep, sharing our suffering and healing.

Sitting next to my mother on the cool cement step outside our back screened door, I angle myself so I can see her better, and bump her knees as I do so. The large green Tupperware bowl resting in her lap angles precariously and she reaches to grab it before its contents spill. The small pink Tupperware bowl in my own lap falls to the ground with a gentle thud. It's warped and peeling from being put in the dishwasher too many times.

My mother laughs and tells me, "Your legs need to grow longer." Then she pats the large stack of fresh green beans my father has just picked from the garden and directs me, "Come on, go ahead and try it. Two sets of hands make this job easier."

I grab a handful of beans, just like my mother has, and try to imitate her skill as she snaps the long, curved, crisp green beans. She snaps off a tiny curvature from one end, then snaps the same curvature off the other end, dropping the remnants and remaining bean into the bowl. She works quickly, grabbing a new handful of beans even before I've snapped any at all.

I hold two beans in my hand and attempt to snap one end off of the longer one. It shreds at the seam in an incomplete break, and the second bean jumps from my hands and ends up in the dirt next to the step. Frustrated, I sit back and put my bowl on the ground.

My mother continues, steady with her snapping, the bowl between her knees is nearly half-filled now with beans that will soon join a ham hock and bay leaf in a big pot of boiling water for dinner's soup. Her work is steady and rhythmic as the headless, then tailless, beans amass in her bowl.

She pauses, invites me back into the game. I try again, slowly this time. The pile of snapped beans grows in our bowls.

“You know," she says, "your grandmother and I used to sit together, snapping beans when I was just seven, too. We always had such a huge crop-enough to share with the neighbors. One day when you’re older I’ll show you how to can the beans. My mother always wore a handmade, cotton apron over her clothes when she worked. Whether it was in the garden, cleaning or in the kitchen, she always had it on."

She leaned back against the door to rest her back.

“I have her pattern for that apron, somewhere-probably in the basement. I’ll find it after the soup gets started. I think I’ll sew her one for her birthday.”

We start snapping beans again, and my mother reminds me to focus and slow down when she catches me breaking beans in half, instead of snapping them near the ends. “We’re not in a rush,” she tells me.

It’s a message I hear from her often during my childhood, as she works to slow my impulsivity and tendency to breeze over details when I’m anticipating playing instead of working. Although I craved being around my mother, I didn’t necessarily find the same satisfaction she did with how we spent our time together-especially when we were doing chores instead of something I considered to be more fun, like climbing the trees by the creek, playing with my dolls, or swimming.

Shopping for Thanksgiving many years later, the memories of snapping beans with my mother flood back as I sort through produce and see pre-cut packages of green beans laying near the cranberries. I chuckle, take a quick photo, and message it to my sister who also did time snapping beans.

*Something wrong with this*, I typed.

*Bing!*

*Haha. LOL. You'll have more time to watch the Macy's parade now*, she messages back.

As I finish my shopping, I think of how patient my mother was in everything she did. She worked with a steady routine and rhythm, as if every moment and each task were precious, needing to be savored. I want to be like that, to show that reverence too, but too often I'm rushing through, anticipating something ahead.

My mother didn't complain about the tasks in her life. She put the proverbial one foot forward, over and over again, thankful-even when the work was callousing. I consider her snapping beans with gentle care, taking as long as it took to complete the task, and I feel a chill through my body.

It was as if she had anticipated the future with my father and how she would care for him through his open-heart surgery, cancer treatments, and the myriad of other health challenges he faced in the last decade of their marriage.

When her hands became twisted, red and gnarled from rheumatoid arthritis, she still carried out her tasks at hand, at times grimacing in pain, but never complaining.

When my mother was bed bound for several months as we cared for her with home-hospice, her sense of profundity in the moment grew even stronger. There was always something to do to fill the day with meaning—putting on make-up after breakfast, reading the newspaper, making a grocery list, or eating a blueberry scone my sister brought from *Starbucks*. In spite of how miserable she felt, my mother comforted her own caregivers with words of wisdom and made room in her small hospital bed so her grand (and great grand) children and big black cat could nestle next to her. One task that seemed extraordinarily important to her was making lists of who she wanted to have the items she'd loved the most after she died. We spent many hours sorting through the small items we could bring to her-jewelry, china, fabric, recipe books, and more.

And then there was me, in the middle of it all, her youngest daughter who had become her primary caregiver. I clung to my job with a frenetic energy as I attempted to write down the stories she shared (many I had heard before, but knew I'd risk losing once she was gone), listening to her breathing as she slept, and being obedient to the tasks she asked me of me—not just to soothe her, but so that I might become like her, perhaps to be able to grasp her ability to live fully, contently, and profoundly in the moment.

Through what seemed the endless episodes of refilling her pill boxes, making a run to *Walgreens* through yet another Colorado snowstorm, the repetition of laundry, buying groceries, cleaning up the kitchen, dealing with the home medical supply company when her oxygen tanks were empty, calling the hospice nurse, and entertaining out-of-town company who came to say their goodbyes, I did begin to better assimilate the preciousness of the moment. I began to understand for myself how it's more important to spend time with people you treasure, just being, than to just spend it doing things I enjoy, for truly those two concepts of time meld when we're with the ones we love.

One of our favorite hangouts was in the alley near the local mortuary, diagonally across the street from *Pasquale's*, where we'd crouch down, waiting for the long, black hearse to crunch its wheels across the gravel. We'd wait for what seemed like hours in hopes of seeing that elongated auto roll in, and then shift into reverse, backing up tightly to the garage to unload its corpse.

We were kids and death was novel, ghastly and eerily fascinating. I remember running away in fear when we finally saw a body being unloaded.

Trips to Louisville, Colorado almost always included a visit to *Pasquale's*, where my dad would enjoy a beer, my mom a 7-Up, and the kids, ice cream and soda. On special occasions, we were allowed a Shirley Temple. Pasquale Colabello brought his family to America from a small village in Italy in hopes of a better life, and opened up *Pasquale's* shortly thereafter, operating it with his wife, Sue. The bar was unique, nestled among only a handful of businesses on Main Street. Pasquale's friends and family all helped out from time to time, filling in during times Pasquale traveled to Italy to see family, or on Holidays, such as St. Patrick's Day, when everyone seemed to be Irish for the day.

My parents often filled in during holiday rushes. My dad would tend bar, while my mom made pizza, sausage rolls, and tripe soup. When we were old enough (thirteen, maybe fourteen), my siblings and I were each initiated into the world of employment at this bar. Once on a return trip from Italy, Pasquale brought along his aunt Wilhelmina, who was unable to speak English.

Wilhelmina taught us how to make huge batches of pizza dough and red, chunky pizza sauce, using herbs bought especially from Italy to carry on the family's traditional recipes.

I spent most of my high school weekend nights working in the kitchen at Pasquale's with my siblings. We sweated hard in that tiny kitchen that had no air conditioning.

The restaurant would be overfilled, with people lining up outside the building, yearning for some of Pasquale's infamous pizza to wash down with cold beer on tap. I can still remember the favorite: A Large Supreme, topped with sausage, pepperoni and mushrooms, was only $6.00. Most would order at least one pizza to go, doubling our work.

Pasquale rewarded us well—cash paid in hand at the end of a shift, plus all the food and soda we wanted. I could finish off an entire six-pack of Dr. Pepper by myself during the hot summer nights, while buzzing in and out of the kitchen to place steaming pizzas on red-checkered clothed tables. The juke box seemed to be always playing-Bobby Darin's, "Jack the Knife" or Dawn's (Tony Orlando) "Knock Three Times".

A group of Italian men would sit at the bar with glass plates filled with home-grown peppers, challenging each other to see who could eat the hottest pepper without needing a drink. Profusely sweating, eyes red, breathing erratic, the men wouldn't concede while sampling bits and pieces of jalapeños, cayennes, and Italian Long Hots (the Russian roulette of peppers), and my dad tried new pepper seeds in his garden each year, having saved them from some of these contests.

My mom would always warn him, "Ron, be sure to wear gloves when you harvest those peppers…don't touch your eyes," and our freezer would be filled with frozen peppers my mom used throughout the colder months to make chili, sausage rolls, and other meals that would steam up the kitchen and sting our eyes.

Sundays, after church, we'd change out of our finery, help my mom prepare for the big noon meal. Pasquale taught my parents how to use dandelions to complement our springtime dinners. What many people consider to be nuisance weeds, were plants whose arrival Pasquale

anticipated every spring. He'd poke his toe into the earth, looking for the first showings dandelion greens. He showed my dad the best way to dig them up for salads, carefully avoiding the bitter root. They were best in salads when the leaves are still striped with pink, he showed us, before the blossoms formed. Dandelion greens can become bitter and tough once they flower.

In our own yard, my dad would grab a shovel and a kid or two, and we'd run around the yard, pointing out dandelions for him to unearth. He'd stick the shovel into the earth just to the depth Pasquale had taught him. Then one of the kids would kneel down to shake off the dirt from the plant's roots, and then add it to the plastic pail my dad carried. Inside, my mother would be cooking dinner.

She'd graciously take the pail filled with greens and wash the dirt from them, using her Tupperware strainer to sort out random bits of grass and dirt. She had a special French dressing that was a "must" when eating the greens. It added a bit of sweet and savory to the greens, making them more palatable to my grandmother and the youngest children. My mother always gave one of the older kids the honor of making the special dressing. She'd help measure and pour the ingredients into her weathered blender—the grated onion in last—then the concoction would be whirred to perfection.

Pasquale also taught my father how to make dandelion wine. We helped pick as many blossoms as we could locate the year they made a batch together, walking for hours around the fields surrounding Louisville, dressed in our ski jackets and winter boots as we hunted for the yellow blooms. Early Colorado spring, wind, and muddy ground make for red chapped hands and wind-kissed lips. My sister, brother and I were so excited to help my father and Pasquale, that we didn't think about the weather-just about who could fill their paper bags first with the blossoms. A few years later when my brother was in high school, his best friend and he attempted to make

their own batch of dandelion wine in our basement. The wine was a success at a youth group event my church hosted at one of the member's mountain homes. Unbeknownst to the adults, many of the youth drove home under the influence that night.

Louisville has changed a lot since my childhood. Main Street businesses have come and gone. Pasquale and Sue are both deceased, and the space occupied by his little bar has since had several owners. The Italian flare has dissipated as the city has grown and become more diverse.

When I spot the early leaves of dandelion greens, I think about the salads I will make, and how beautiful the yellow blossoms will be of the many I do not unearth. There's a simple, yet profound, blessing in co-existing with the weeds.

*The Jung Seed Catalog*.

Four words that made my dad smile in anticipation at the beginning of each year. The catalog would be delivered in the mail just after the New Year. It would be waiting for him on the little desk we had in our kitchen when he got home from work, placed playfully by my mother who retrieved the mail around noon each day. They would smile at each other, and we could feel something stirring, a longing.

After dinner, my dad would grab the catalog, his magnifying glasses, a tablet of lined paper, and a mechanical pencil. He spent the next few hours sitting at the kitchen table, leaning over the catalog with his magnifying glass as he examined and dog-eared page after page of the colorful photos of his favorite vegetables as he planned his garden—my parent's garden—for the season ahead. My mom would bring him a cup of coffee in his favorite mug, with dessert—always something homemade—as an interlude.

My dad's garden was steadfast, filled with the favorites each year, while also holding place for a few new types of plants each season. He'd begin with onion sets. These could be put in before the fear of frosty mornings had abated. Radishes, beets, garlic and a variety of lettuce followed. Then corn, peas, carrots, potatoes, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, more lettuce, rutabaga, pumpkins, zucchini, spaghetti squash, string beans—the staples that he'd nurse through Colorado's predictably unpredictable environment—drought, torrential rains, weeds, deer, insects, wind, and hail storms. My dad struggled with Colorado's weather, something I didn't fully understand until I moved to Kansas as an adult. The growing season in Colorado is several weeks shorter than what he was used to in the Chicago suburbs, and some of the things that grew so prolifically there—

raspberries, for example—often failed to thrive in Boulder's climate. While he loved living in Colorado, I believe he wrestled a bit with the grief of the luscious garden he'd left behind when we had moved from our small Hinsdale home to Boulder in 1969.

My siblings and I helped my dad in that huge garden with the same commitment we had for attending church every Sunday, holiday, and Wednesday night. Helping was really more of a family mandate—something we did as a team before we got to play. Saturday mornings, when the weather was warm (or at least when the threat of a major snowstorm wasn't impending), we ate a breakfast of eggs, toast and bacon around 6:30 a.m., then headed outside to toil in the garden until lunch time. In the early spring, we bundled up in layers—weighted down by our ski jackets, earmuffs, gloves and the long, fringed scarves my mother had knit. In mid-summer, cut offs and T-shirts sufficed. Then in the fall, jeans and sweatshirts helped keep out the wind and early autumn chill.

My dad's garden wardrobe had one staple all year long—his pair of Boondockers. As a child I didn't understand why these boots were so important to him. He'd wear a pair until the soles were smooth and cracked, exposing his feet to the elements. My mother would beg him to buy a new pair, telling him he embarrassed her out in public.

"Ron," she'd scold him, "you should be ashamed to dress that way when we can afford new shoes. Everyone thinks I'm a bad wife for letting you dress that way." But my father would continue to resist until a new pair would be waiting for him near his bedside after work one day, complete with seamless soles. Breaking in the new boots seemed extraordinarily difficult for him, and I doubt my father owned more than a few pairs during his entire lifetime.

I did some research on Boondocker boots, discovering that they were considered the official shoe for soldiers during WWII. Footwear that was durable, protective, slip-resistant and

comfortable was necessary for soldiers at battle who were weathering all sorts of combat conditions. My dad was a WWII veteran and his heart was always miles away in the South Pacific, ambushed by memories of his time fighting for America—some memories fond; others, explosive.

I keep the last pair of Boondockers my dad owned in my home, altar-like, on a little bench my mother painted. I see them several times a day and having them near helps my father's presence linger. I often wish I could've taken away the terrors my dad had from being a Marine, enlisting at just eighteen.

As an adult, I've learned so much about how being present in the moment with someone, participating in what brings them purpose, can be profoundly healing. While time does not heal everything, it does have a way of bringing the intensity of the past out of focus—at least for periods of time. For my father, it was time in the garden which brought him that type of healing.

His garden was prominent. He'd dug at least 3/4 of an acre by hand on our property, through all that hard, rock-filled Colorado earth. It formed a rectangular shape across the back yard, parallel to our house, and took up a huge square to the south of it. We'd start turning the soil over in the early spring, breaking up clumps of dirt with our shovels and heels. When the earth was muddy and partially frozen from melting snow, we'd break up the ice-laden clumps with gloved hands, stopping to blow on our fingers periodically to warm them from blue, back to pink. My parents taught us to watch for the first indications of warmer weather—tips of asparagus peaking up along the fence where they'd been planted years before, the emergence of tulips and daffodils, strawberry leaves peeking through the earth, garlic and rhubarb breaking through the soil after a winter's rest, and dandelions greening the fields. The spring birds, particularly the return of robins, was also a sign we watched for, as was the thinning of the flocks of noisy geese who flew less frequently in V's over our house as the weather warmed.

My dad was a mechanical engineer and methodically precise about the way things were done. He had a folding metal ruler he used to measure the width between planting rows, and a special string-system he created for us to mark and create each row where the seeds would be gently placed. My dad would take a ball of waxed string, unraveling long pieces of it along either side of the garden, then wrap it around a post at either end and tie it off. Then, another piece was strung, perpendicular to these rows, and tied with a slip knot that allowed it to move along the length of the original string. With one kid holding the string on each side, my dad would take the hoe and carefully dig the trenches that would hold the seeds, bulbs and immature plants he'd started inside weeks earlier. The ends of each row were marked by stakes he hammered in with a rock. After the rows were dug, we laid the seeds and bulbs, gently covering them with a dusting of topsoil.

The next step: nurturing the seeds. My dad hand-watered them at first with just a trickle coming from the hose, spending hours each evening after coming home from work. He'd take a quick dinner break, and then water the garden until it was too dark to navigate without the flood lights on.

Once the plants were up and they'd become steady, sprouting several pairs of leaves, he'd put the sprinkler out, careful not to water during peak sunny hours to avoid burning the plants. And then there was weeding. Tenuous hours spent weeding—our backs bent over, salty sweat in our eyes, making sure we didn't disturb anything edible. My dad became easily unglued when one of us would misidentify a precious plant for a noxious weed. We learned to cover for each other when that happened, working quickly to help the offender bury the roots of the surprised plant so my father wouldn't see our mistake. Harvesting began in June —with lettuce, radishes, onions and

peas, and was completed after the first hard frost left the tomato and squash vines mushy, shriveled and black.

My mother was busy with her own gardening roles. In early March, she began sowing seeds in tiny peat containers that she set in west windows. Peppers, cauliflower and tomatoes were her some of her favorite early starters. Sometimes she also started herbs this way-oregano, basil, mint-planning recipes for how she would later use them in Italian dishes, over lake-caught fish, and steeped in sun-brewed tea. She watered them in the late afternoon with a small brass watering can with a long spout, quenching the seedlings thirst just as the sun was heading towards its mountain slumber. In the morning, she would turn each plant 180 degrees to prevent them from growing bent as they worshipped the sun. Occasionally, one of the cats would get curious and cause soil and uprooted seedlings to scatter all around the seedling nursery. My mother was patient, and would just pat the plants back into their soil and sweep up the mess.

As the garden developed from seedling to maturity, my mother spent increased hours in the kitchen surrounded by a mass of canning supplies-water simmering on every burner, canning jars and lids lined up on dish clothes, a small metal food scale, colanders, metal pans, strainers, various sizes of plastic freezer bags, crockery, pickling and canning spices, cane sugar, vinegar, and alum and pectin. The countertops were covered with mounds of fruits and vegetables, waiting their turn to be halved, sliced, cored, diced, shredded, boiled, frozen or set in a vinegar bath. We'd anticipate the clink-pop sound when the lid on each jar that had finished its boiling bath would seal. Those that didn't seal made it to the dinner table that night.

My memories of the garden's year-long feasting include chunky strawberry jam, sticky apple butter, dill and sweet pickles, frozen sweet peas, acrid sauerkraut, shredded zucchini made into muffins and bread, and what seemed like hundreds of Ball Mason jars filled with preserved green

and yellow beans, carrots, beets, homemade catsup, and relishes. The freezers brimmed with bags of flash-boiled vegetables that made their way into stews, soups, pot pies, and casseroles for months following the final harvest of the year. What we didn't share with friends, we feasted on throughout the winter months.

When my parents died, I was left behind to do much of the sorting of the family home we had lived in for more than forty years–skills that benefited me greatly with the estate sale business my spouse and I bought shortly thereafter. I had moved in with my mother during the final eighteen months of her life, and so I was literally living amongst all my childhood treasures since my parents hadn't done any downsizing. Even our childhood bedrooms contained many items from yesteryear.

My dad treasured the things he owned. He was meticulous in how he cared for his tools, hunting and fishing gear, marble and stamp collections, and gardening supplies. For example, one of the first things my father did after we moved into our home in Boulder was to construct an organizational system on the west wall of our garage for his gardening tools. There were specialized hooks and other gadgets to hold the various sizes rakes, shovels and hoes (his most-used tools) and hedge trimmers. He laid down pallets underneath the tools and set big plastic buckets and bushel baskets on them to hold the hand tools, gloves, hoses and nozzles. There were also big metal trash cans filled with horse oats and pellets, birdseed, and dog food on the pallets. Keeping this stuff off the floor helped deter winter rodents that squeezed their way into the garage.

My dad then put up shelving on the east wall of the garage to store pesticides, bags of dirt, clay pots, stacks of neatly folded white sheets (used to cover plants during "freeze warnings" in the late spring and early fall), and much of his fishing tackle and gear, including nets and boots. Over the years, hard-to-reach items on the top shelves grew foggy with the webs of spiders who loved building their houses in our garage. Next to the shelves was a long workbench, filled with a variety of hardware, random pieces of splintered wood scraps, and lots of sawdust. There were hooks on the north wall of the garage door that held the old bamboo fishing poles, cracked and crisp with

age, that we had used hundreds of times during our childhood. On this wall, under the bamboo poles, were 2 huge, old freezers filled with enough food to last for at least two years—fish, rabbit, mourning doves, duck, goose, venison, elk, vegetables, bison—items that were mostly grown in the garden, or fish or game my dad had hunted.

My mother's sewing area alone attested to her love of items that either held memories or held future purpose. She didn't waste anything, and had boxes, plastic tubs, and shelving filled with fabric, patterns, notions, partially-finished items, magazines (lots of ideas!), her glue guns and glue, beads, sequins, thread, interfacing, yarn, needles, scissors…and so much more. My mother loved to shop the post-holiday clearance sales at local hobby stores. She'd bring home bags filled with silk flowers, Christmas garland, spools of ribbon, candle-making supplies, and whatever gave her imagination bursts of ideas. She didn't procrastinate–she was always creating–but she simply ran out of time to make everything she wanted to. Before her hands became painful and crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, my siblings and I (and the grandchildren and my mother's many friends) could always count on something handmade–sachets, stuffed animals and dolls, clothing, Christmas stockings, cloth books [quiet books for the little ones to "read" during church], casserole holders, and more) from my mom on birthdays and for Christmas.

The year before she died—one of the last times she was able to climb the basement stairs that led to her sewing room—my mother and I spent a few hours sorting bundles of fabric, boxes of vintage patterns, and marking pages in her favorite craft books so we wouldn't forget what pages to return to when our creative energy struck. At that time in her life, rheumatoid arthritis had crippled her hands, necessitating several hand and wrist surgeries. She was in constant pain and no longer able to do handwork. She turned from me for a moment to pick up a small box from a shelf, then sat down next to me on the small sofa near her sewing machine.

“I want you to have these,” she told me, handing me her button collection.

Hesitating, I took the buttons from her. They were organized by color, placed in old baby food and jelly jars, cigar boxes, and blue Mason jars. My throat began to hurt as I fought back tears.

“I can’t take these, mom. You’ll need them.” I told her, putting the box back next to her, unable to give her eye contact.

She reached for the box, with tears in her eyes. My mother hardly ever allowed me to see her tears. She was always strong for all of us, through so many tough times—but silently admitting the loss of her ability to sew, which was her trademark and passion—overwhelmed her with grief. I remember being gentle in my response, promising to take good care of the buttons—to use them for future sewing projects I really intended to get to. To this day I wish that I had decorated my mother’s bedroom where she lay dying with her button collection. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it at the time. Now, the hundreds of buttons she gave me are preserved in my home in the same containers she kept them in, but using them feels like it would be separating them from the spirit of my mother, and except for an occasional project, am impelled to keep them together.

My dad designed our house, which was built in the late 60s, in a suburb called Spanish Hills, nestled just west of Table Mesa in Boulder. My family moved into our new home–having spent two years living in rentals–in December of 1971, just in time for Christmas. Complete with a huge basement (which soon became a huge suitcase for holiday items, arts and crafts, the pool and ping pong tables, tools, books, canning supplies, and so much more), a suite for my maternal grandmother, and five bedrooms on the upper level, this house–our house sat on three acres, was horse ready, and was a dream for my parents who had both grown up during a time of great poverty. My parents treated the house as a masterpiece from God, and cherished not just the property itself, but all the memories within it. It was as if they both carefully sculpted the house–first as an idea,

then as a reality, and later, each memory it contained.

Even as time elapsed and we all grew older, traditions—especially around holidays—were preserved as sacred. As an adult who eventually moved to Kansas City, I tried to make it back "home" as often as I could throughout the year to celebrate Easter, Christmas, my parent's birthdays, Thanksgiving, the fourth of July, and to enjoy peach-time in August. Both my parents loved celebrating, I think mostly because it meant that family would gather, and on special occasions, there was a sense of stepping back in time once I crossed the threshold. Surrounded by familiar decorations, the aroma of familial foods, the warmth of the winter fireplace filled with wood my dad had chopped himself, and in the summer, the slight cool in the wind that blew through the open patio doors on a late summer night, represented a type of irreplaceable love and acceptance I equate only with my parents.

My spouse and I planned on spending Christmas 2009 with my parents and started the day-long trek from Kansas City to Boulder early on Christmas Eve. As usual, the more west we got on I-70, the windier it became. Snow was blowing so tightly that eventually we could not even see the hood of our car. It was terrifying, and I felt relieved when we finally found the exit to Limon, Colorado. Soon after, I broke down in a crying heap on the hotel bed when the reality of being forced to spend Christmas Eve away from family due to road closures hit me hard. I remember calling my parents and telling them we'd miss Christmas Eve worship and dinner with them. My dad's voice broke on the phone, and I felt even worse.

We were able to head out to Boulder mid-morning on Christmas Day, amongst hundreds of other travelers who had been trapped in Limon. My husband kept trying to reassure me that Christmas Eve is, in some ways, "just a calendar day", and that my parents were just grateful that we'd be there at all. I remembered how thin and pale my dad had been when we'd last seen him in

October during our last-minute trip to Colorado for my mother's birthday.

"What if this is the last Christmas with my dad?" I asked my husband, fighting back tears.

"Stop worrying," he told me, trying to concentrate on driving the snow-packed roads.

Christmas that year was tough.

My dad was quieter than usual, and uncharacteristically tearful. It seemed as if almost everything made him cry. He kept telling my husband and me that he wasn't feeling well, and that time was short. During the week we stayed, my dad attempted to have several conversations with me about a multitude of things, reminiscing about my childhood, his childhood, his father's childhood, the war, his garden, and the day he met my mother. When we went to leave to head back to Kansas City, my father pulled me close and told me this was his last Christmas.

"I'm dying," he told me.

Certainly, he had no terminal diagnosis, but he did look frail. In my work with the elderly, I have seen several people set a "death date" and meet it—not by suicide, but somehow by intuition or will.

I shivered and held him back, embarrassed to address what he said except by telling him, "I love you dad". I cried most of the way back to Kansas City.

December's grip decorates the windows of the family car, making shoulders sore from scraping with inflexible plastic blades. My dad pulls on his boots, and buttons his heavy corduroy coat. My mother, still wearing her flannel robe, wraps a long handknit scarf around his neck. They kiss each other gently on the lips, and then he's walking to the car, sliding his boots through the blizzard's icy gift, trying to avoid a tumble.

My dad doesn't get snow days like we do, that begin with hot chocolate and cinnamon toast, then transition to time folding clothes, sweeping the kitchen floor, making beds, and feeding our three horses as pails of steaming water from the house are slowly carried to the pasture, and pockets, stuffed with oaten treats, are emptied into their troughs by mittened hands.

Creativity peaks as Christmas is nearing. My sisters mix sugar cookie dough, while my brother pours through the Sears catalog, docking corners on nearly every page of the toy section. I run down the basement stairs, following my mother to her craft room, where she grabs several rusted coffee cans, candle wicking, and scented paraffin. We spend the rest of the morning heating wax on the stovetop and pouring it into plastic molds as we make candles to send to relatives.

After a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches, apples and Fritos, the house still aromatic with jasmine and bayberry from the candles, my siblings and I bead and cross stitch ornaments for the tree, while my mother stirs a batch of her infamous fruited German Stollen that she'll bake ahead and freeze for Christmas morning breakfast.

It's mid-afternoon and the blizzard has calmed. The sun breaks through but is quickly covered again with the shifting clouds. My father had called around noon, easing my mother's tensions. She doesn't let on that she worries about the forty-minute drive he has to make through

mostly unplowed roads as he heads to work towards Denver. It's not until I'm much older and my spouse commutes home from work at midnight through an ice storm that's stranding the city, that I realize the terror of wondering if he'll make it home alive when the roads are slick, or in the heat of July when we've argued, thinking there's always more time to say I'm sorry.

Women's Liberation was unfolding, just as my father got a transfer from his job and my family pulled its roots from conservative suburbia Chicago, to Boulder, Colorado, where people were grazing on alfalfa, smoking dope, and picketing the war in Nam. The standard of "woman" was changing as we witnessed women burning their bras, wearing Birkenstocks, and letting their hairy legs and arm pits hang out of silk wrap-around skirts from India, while pulling up their strapless tube tops that needed constant adjusting.

I was 13 when my mother started dropping me off Wednesdays after school at the Music Building on campus at the University of Colorado for private cello lessons with a graduate student named Adam.

I saw the bulletin boards covered with hand drawn invitations to parties, pickets, documentaries, and coalitions against rape, violence, and infanticide. I began to witness the war between the rigid religious voice and rebelling atheists as I was introduced to the bartering philosophies on personal freedoms and legislated controls. I saw graphic posters depicting pro-life vs. pro-choice that left me feeling panicked.

After my private lesson, in between practicing scales and etudes at home, I'd sit back in my chair, my cello resting quietly across my chest with its neck nestled on my shoulder, and I'd recall the rainbow signs, etchings of doves, and the pictures of mangled baby appendages. I'd remember the images of chains clasped tightly around the wrists of women in some far off country, the gory images of victims of Napalm, and the pictures of children with hollow eyes and distended bellies, and I'd wonder if my mother knew about this stuff and what she would do if our ideas differed.

My family faithfully attended a Missouri Lutheran church in Table Mesa that still nestles just below the edge of the property where I attended high school off of Greenbriar Boulevard and Broadway. I felt "watched" during my four high school years that ended the 70's and got me through May of 1981. It was as if God had an extra eye on me because church was so close to school. Even as a youth, I understood faith, religion and spirituality to be valuable and sustainable only if lived internally, and this was reinforced multiple times a day as a teen as I spent much if my time on a campus near the church, where three crosses set on the front lawn gave constant remembrance of the crucifixion, and whose intriguing bell suspended in a grand wooden tower we took turns ringing to exclaim the start of Sunday morning worship, repeatedly beckoned my conscience.

I was quietly rebellious, defying family rules when I thought I wouldn't get caught—ditching classes, smoking occasionally on "the hill" where the other non-conformists hung out, and making other typically, deviant, teenager, immature-frontal-lobe choices as my parents begged me to mature. But still, having church so close to school was like having a constant angel of conscience sitting on my right shoulder. I wasn't able to put God on mute, even during my rebellious outbursts.

For many years during my childhood, there were church people who seemed judgmental towards my family because our flock was different. The kids who sat in the pews with us were only partially ours by blood, and from week to week, we'd have additions and subtractions depending on whether social services had placed or taken one or more of our foster children. Sometimes my foster siblings came to church in tired clothes if my mom hadn't had a chance to

shop with them yet, or being unfamiliar with the hymns, were too scared to sing. Sometimes they'd forget how to smile (or not feel like smiling, grieving the transition from their home to ours) when the lady in front of us would offer a penance of candy or gum.

Even if there was not absolute judgment, there was a certain awkwardness because we defied typical standards and ideologies set in some unwritten social book of church rules. It bothered my mom a lot that some of the women she wanted to befriend would not be friends, but my father just weathered it. He'd come home from church, change his clothes and head to the garden, washing himself clean.

We enter the tall bricked historical cathedral. Everything with sound echoes. Voices travel upward, spiraling towards heaven. Wet shoes squeak with exaggerated enormity on the polished tiled floor. Children's laughter sounds explosive. Paper bulletins rustle, like rats gnawing in nighttime walls. In the Sanctuary, 100-year-old stained glass windows depict Christ's final journey, enwrapping the pews with the Stations of the Cross. One pane is over-sized and sits upright near the altar, letting in a large sunburst of yellow light that radiates the resurrection across the baptismal font, and depicts Christ sitting at the open tomb, an angel on one side and a weeping woman on the other.

Slowly, reverently, we walk down the unlevel center aisle, ushered by an older man who searches for a pew with enough space left to sit eight. The floor groans as we walk, its carpet worn from age, funeral, weddings, holy services, and over-zealous fits of vacuuming. Before turning to sit in our pew, we bow, facing the gilded altar that's covered with a purple cloth fringed in gold. Christ hangs above it, suspended on a large cross. There are large nails through his hands. A drop of blood leaks from his right eye. A thorny crown draws blood around his temple that marries sweat and tears that trickle down his cheeks.

We make the sign of the cross. With muscle memory, we take our fingers and touch first our foreheads, then center chest, left arm, right arm, then center chest again. A pause, a bow, reverence. Then we sit. In red velveted cushioned pews. Heads down, palms together in silent prayer. The organ suddenly belches an airy bellow that startles. Quickly, rhythmically, it finds it poise as it preludes the parishioners, signaling all to gather and to silence. We sing a hymn, *I Come to the Garden Alone*. Tears surface as I recall singing this at my grandmother's funeral years prior

when I was just a child. How do I remember this moment? But somehow, I do and it distracts me and I sniffle, look up, blink my eyes, push away tear. The priest rises from the chair he's been sitting on-the one resembling a throne. He leads us, with low, mumbling, humbling sounds, through the *Kyrie, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei.* The congregation united as the prayers are recited. The sign of the cross is made again. A physical sensation of grief, respect, honor, guilt convulse inside my stomach as I feel a sense of holy, honor, pause.

Scripture is read from the enormous leather-bound Bible sitting on the altar. The sermon is orated.

I scribble a few notes on my bulletin, noting my sins, and the things about me I need to amend. The priest hiccups unexpectedly.

Giggles travel from front to back among the children, like the sound of rain moving through a forest and the sound of "shhh" and "hush" escape the lips of embarrassed parents, like an ancient hissing furnace. Worn wooden offering plates are shared, handled, one person to another, extending the lengths of the pews. The clink of coins, reminiscent of hail on a roof on a lazy summer's eve, oddly invigorates. The organ rises again, this time with *Amazing Grace*. The priest leads the Lord's Prayer, then the invitation to unleavened bread and wine of holy communion:

"Take, this is my body…the blood of the covenant, poured out for many. Eat…Drink…in remembrance…"

And we confess, eat the body, drink the wine. Then rise to sing the final hymn, a cheery, unfamiliar one with a quickened tempo. And the hour is complete. Tetelestai, it is finished, Christ's work complete. We shuffle out. Silent, broken, atoned, filled. Our hopes resurrected.

On June 29, 2010, my father died.

His health had been failing for a few years, having dealt with cancer and some major cardiac issues. While his death was not necessarily sudden, it was quick-and we were unprepared, even though he had forewarned us in January that he was dying. Hospice was called near the end—he lasted less than two days after that. We had kept our promise to him that he would die in his own home, surrounded by loved ones. It provides some comfort—at least reassurance—that my father lived out his final days the way he desired. Towards the end of his life, so much had been taken from him due to his declining health. His doctors had forbidden him to drink or smoke-two simple pleasures he had always enjoyed. I remember telling my brother over the phone one of the last nights my dad was alive to "just let him have a beer and a cigar".

"What's it going to hurt?" I told my brother, "Dad loves to smoke and drink—maybe he'll actually feel a little more like himself for a moment."

I made the trip back to Boulder from Kansas City with my spouse two days after my dad died. I can still the grief that flooded me when we drove into my parent's driveway, facing the home that I had loved for so many years. I could instantly sense my dad's absence.

His old yellow wheelbarrow lay resting on its side next to his garden, as if waiting for its master. Next to it, his old spade stuck in the ground, its splintered handle standing upright. A rake lay on its side nearby, and one of the old wicker bushel baskets my dad used to carry weeds in rested near the scene, half-filled with dry, crusty thistles. His old metal-framed lawn chair was sitting near the asparagus plot, leaning precariously, as if someone had just gotten up from it too quickly. It was late June, and the first summer I recalled not seeing anything green growing in the garden he had loved so much.

As we approached the house, I noted fishing rods leaning up against the garage door, and my dad's wading boots hanging from clothespins on a hanger in the garage. He hadn't fished for a long time, but yet, it was as if he had just stepped out of the stream with his legendary, milky green waders on, proudly holding up a trout that my mom would later cook.

I drew my breath in deeply, hoping that if I held it long enough, I wouldn't explode with tears. It didn't work. I felt almost terrorized with a type of grief I had never experienced in my lifetime. When my grandparents died, my grief had overwhelmed me, but this was a whole new layer to those experiences. I was ill-prepared, and even though I have a background in hospice care, nothing prepared me for the death of my father.

I remember feeling embarrassed to go into the house. I wanted to be strong for my mother, while simultaneously knowing how impossible this was going to be. I cried for her loss–they were due to celebrate their 61st wedding anniversary less than a month later–and I cried because the man I had relied on for my entire life was never coming back. Digging deep into my gut was the awareness that I could no longer be that dependent child on my mother, letting her do the "heavy stuff" during life's saddest times. I recalled the time my father driving us all to get ice cream after we'd buried one of the cats when it had been hit by a car. It was evening and dark by the time we arrived back home. My mother had the front porch lights on and was waiting for us in the kitchen, with glasses of soothing lemonade. I wanted to be that child again–to have someone comfort and nurture me and to have someone turn the lights on and protect me from that shadows that lurked under the bed on a stormy night.

It was the first of about 100 times during the course of the next two weeks that I would be triggered like this from seeing my dad's stuff sitting around. It was as if at any moment he would walk in the room to use the TV remote as he searched for an old Western, pick up his magnifying

glass or eyeglasses to read the Boulder Daily Camera, or ask my mother for a glass of water so she could take a handful of medicine from the over-sized pill organizer that now lay still on the kitchen table. His old leather Boondockers with the cracked soles were yearning for a walk in the garden, and the shot glass sitting next to a partially emptied bottle of whiskey begged to be filled. I could almost see my father's impression on the pillow that now lay vacant on my parent's bed.

His absence was intense. I wanted my father back. Even today, I cry for him.

To stave off grief, I stayed really busy during the next few days as we planned my dad's funeral. I'd heard many people tell me that's what happens when someone dies: that you distract yourself with frenetic busy-ness during the first stages of grief, simply because there is so much to do. This is true. We made several visits to the funeral home, cemetery, church, grocery store, bank, airport, and a variety of other places that are now a blur. People came and went, bringing hugs, casseroles, and promise to help with anything we needed. There was no time to be lonely with our grief.

We honored my dad with a military-style funeral, which required several long chats with our pastor so that when he gave the eulogy, he could throw in sweet, profound, and silly memories about my dad that he hadn't personally experienced during the many years he'd known him. My mother rounded up my father's military medals, his VFW Commander cap, and a handful of other mementos that would give the crowd at the funeral snippets of my father's proudest moments. Retired military would be at the funeral, to play Taps, and to salute my father 21 times.

My oldest sister, brother, and I went through what seemed a million photos, carefully choosing a variety that would represent my dad's entire life span on the special photo displays we created on poster board. My other sister was unable to be present for my dad's funeral because she had left to China the morning after he died, where she and her spouse were going to adopt my

niece. It was beyond her control to change the travel plans without it possibly meaning forfeiting their little girl. Looking through photos of our childhood brought up new waves of grief as I saw images of this sister in her youth, with the dark, tight curly hair she'd inherited from our father.

My father had been excited about the adoption, eager to welcome a new family member. I remember feeling as if he'd somehow planned the timing of his death as a way to buffer my sister from this part of his life, and as a way to allow her to celebrate new life. Our cultures often tell us what to do, especially around funerals and weddings. My father was not typically one to "break the rules". He loved traditions and their formalities, but considering the situation with my sister and how it might have appeared incomprehensible to some that she missed her own father's funeral, I couldn't help but absorb the lesson my father was delivering posthumously: family first.

Going through the house, helping my mom prepare for the funeral, was like getting repeatedly punched in the stomach as I was forced to face the pain of losing my dad over and over again. Each room I went in caused pause; I literally had to stop, close my eyes and draw in my breath as deeply as I could, and then work to hold back the sobs. My dad was just everywhere, and even through the times he'd been in the hospital for a variety of surgeries and illnesses, I had always known he was coming back, until he didn't.

Somewhere in the middle of being thrown into constant reminders of a father who was now in heaven, I had an idea of a way to keep my dad close to me here on earth. Perhaps if I took small things for myself that had been his, then I'd have a broad representation of things that mattered most to him–and memories of times we had shared. I started by gingerly taking two antique fishing lures from one of his rusty tackle boxes. I felt like I was stealing from my father. Then I took a few photos from his childhood scrapbook. My courage grew. I found one of the small aluminum bait boxes he'd slipped onto a belt while fly fishing and added that to my collection. While looking

through his clothes to decide what he'd be buried in, I grabbed a pair of the suspenders he'd always worn with his VFW attire, a handkerchief with his monogram, and a handful of random keys found in his bottom dresser drawer (we discovered that my dad had keys hidden all over the place that didn't seem to fit any locks in that house). I took nothing without my mother's permission, yet still felt like I was taking what didn't belong to me. At that time, I didn't have the strength to engage in much conversation about how comforting it was for me to hold onto "dad" this way but felt grateful that my mother just seemed to understand.

We had a night viewing, followed by his funeral the next morning. I dreaded that time. It seemed like it would never end, while at the same time, I wasn't ready for my father's final resting to occur. When I first saw my dad after the funeral home brought his casket into the church's sanctuary and opened the lid, making sure he was positioned correctly and ready for the viewing, I wept. Loudly. I felt terrible doing that and ran into the bathroom, totally embarrassed. After all, it was my mother who had suffered the greatest loss, and now faced a life alone in her 80s. Soon, people were coming and going, taking a few moments to pause by my father's casket, hugging my family, and looking through the photos and paraphernalia we had displayed on tables outside the sanctuary.

Some of the church members had made a light dinner of sandwiches, fruit, chips and brownies for us, leaving the meal on the table in the church library so my family could grab both quiet time and nourishment. I remember thinking how helpful this was for the little ones who were forced to stay through the event, skipping first dinner, and then bedtime. As the evening elapsed, I took a turn escaping to the library. Being nurtured by others during such a vulnerable time felt confusing. I was working to remain emotionally strong for my family, but at the same time, yearning to be embraced like a child who just awoke from a nightmare. I took a bit of sandwich

and silenced my mind's chatter, replacing exhaustion and confusion with gratitude.

A few minutes before my father's casket was going to be closed for the evening, I crept back into the sanctuary to be with him–alone this time. I opened my purse and took out a few of the items I had collected, tucking them underneath his sleeves and pillow so no one else would know they were there. A vintage fishing lure, a small tool from his own father's toolbox, and a bundle of pheasant feathers from a bird he'd hunted were some of the items I gave back to him. I told my father I loved him and would see him again. And then my oldest sister joined me. She had the same idea I did–but instead of hiding her items, she lay them gently by his sides. I can only remember two things she laid with him–a framed photo of my dad as a young man, standing with his father, and a wooden cross. I was still so overcome by grief that I was unable to talk. It didn't matter. My sister and I stood together, holding hands, watching my father sleep.

Later, back at our family's home, my mother prepared a special tea, "just for the girls", using a special tea set she adored. She could always make things both beautiful and bearable. The neighbors next door brought over a wicker basket filled with cheese, crackers and wine, and people from our church brought over lasagna, salad, and a variety of sugar-laden desserts. The moment relaxed a bit, but I noticed how exhausted my mother was. She excused herself in the middle of the afternoon to go upstairs to rest. She needed to be alone, but I wanted to follow her and snuggle together under a quilt the way we had when I was a child in need of comfort.

My mother's decision after that was to remain in our large family home. It was filled with the treasures she loved and the memories they represented. Her routine was there, and the house held plenty of space for out-of-town visitors (including my siblings and me) who were welcome any time. Staying there, even though she was in her eighties with declining health, gave her immense comfort. Nature is cruel with its ever-grip on the moment where life becomes death. But,

while it stole my father from my mother, it was not able to steal the things which represented all the love and years they'd shared. On August 14, 2013, my mother breathed her last in our family home. Nature again had ripped someone from me whom I adored. And, like my mother, I'm now surrounded by much of my parent's "best stuff"–items which hold memories that keep loved ones near and help remind us into the future.

My husband and I purchased a senior downsizing business the year after my mother's death. I quickly learned that sentimentality seems to be widespread amongst my parent's generation, as we spent a grueling amount of time sorting through the leftovers that filled a home that was now vacant of its elders. Closing out a family's estate happens for various reasons. Sometimes a person has been widowed, and now must live in assisted living. An incident, such as a stroke, necessitates a move to simpler living. Often, the owner is now deceased, often after living alone for many years after the death of a spouse. Once in a while we received a call from a homeowner, needing us to help him or her downsize as she/he made the transition to an apartment or assisted living. The job always got complicated when adult children were involved. Some had been intricately involved already in a parent's life; others came under duress, after years of estrangement. Always…always, grief was involved. You can't quickly resolve grief. It is an individual process that affects not just the griever, but everyone around the person grieving.

My spouse and I learned the estate sale business alongside our employees, most of who were retirement age and had either already dealt with cleaning out their parents' home or were in the early stages of considering downsizing themselves. Seeing so much stuff compacted into the homes we cleaned out was both physically and emotionally overwhelming–especially when the owners were deceased. I was drawn to the business, having learned much about it firsthand. My grief was raw which often made it difficult for me to separate my emotions from my work.

For a variety of reasons, many adult kids don't really want much–if any–of their parent's "stuff". Sometimes it's impractical to move large items of furniture across the country; sometimes there just isn't room to store more stuff, or there just isn't a sense of sentimentality attached to the items. Often, what's really wanted is just one or two items that really represent the relationship a child had with his/her parent(s). Too often, siblings are fighting over items, upset with whoever was appointed executor of a trust; one time an estranged sibling who lived out of town visited the home we were working on in the middle of the night, helping himself to all sorts of valuables he was legally not entitled to. Not all children have positive relationships with their parents, and sorting items brings up painful, resentful memories. Jealousy within stepfamilies was also a tense situation we witnessed. And the younger generations are becoming less prone to hold onto a variety of odds and ends for those "just in case" opportunities the way those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II did. There's a movement towards simplicity, as items such as large sets of encyclopedias have been replaced with the Internet, and the convenience of online shopping (with its ever-abundance of merchandise) seems to calm the fear of being without, and the need to "gather and store".

Ice skating on the creek behind our home in early February when I was nine, I fell and hit the back of my head with a cracking sound on a sharded piece of ice. The kids with me laughed and called me a big baby when I cried. They threw snowballs at my face and mocked the way I grimaced and was holding the back of my head with my mittened hands.

I cowered at their malicious, mean-spiritedness. I thought of the sermon our pastor had recently given about how we should be kind to each other. I wished he was there with me to point a finger at the kids and scare them by saying he was going to tell their mother what bullies they were.

I needed comfort—validation—but obviously was not going to get any from my "friends," so I walked across the snowy field home to tell my mother what had happened.

But I couldn't find her. I don't know where she was—possibly doing errands, mediating an argument between my siblings, or working on a sewing project. We had a jar of chewy, bitter-tasting children's aspirin in a drawer in the kitchen we were told to never take without her permission. I considered taking several to each my throbbing head but feared getting in trouble if she found out. I drank some water and headed upstairs to my bedroom where I lay down on my bed, comforting myself by nestling under a downy handmade quilt.

After sobbing for a while, sleep overcame me. I awoke, startled. The daylight had faded into black and my room was dark. I felt disoriented. I had slept for several hours.

My sister was standing in the doorway of my room yelling for me to "get up, it's time for dinner!"

The smell of chili cooking and our dog barking further roused me from my slumber. I made my way to the kitchen, where the rest of the family was already seated around the table. I had missed the table prayer, which made me feel not just embarrassingly late for dinner, but ashamed because I felt I had disappointed God by not being there to pray.

The throbbing in the back of my head had eased, and it no longer seemed important to tell my mother about my accident. She asked me why I was so tired and expressed concern that I might be coming down with a cold.

"I'm fine," I told her. "Ice skating just wore me out." I didn't know how to tell her about being laughed at, crying in front of peers, and the bruise on my head.

February's chill always seems extensive, making that short month feel exaggerated. For some reason I often remember this skating accident at some point during December, when ice skates are pulled out for a new season, even all this time later. I've since had many February adventures that were physical and socially non-injurious, including skating at public rinks, skiing the slopes in Colorado, and enjoying hot chocolate with friends while sliding down the icy sidewalks on Boulder's Pearl Street Mall. So I wonder, what is it about an experience that feels violating and unsafe, that brings it vividly to memory, time and time again?

As a child, I was cordial and shy. I excelled at staying unnoticeable, sitting in the back of the classroom or playing (mostly) alone on the playground. I felt calmer this way, more able to handle my world. This meant looking down in my lap, hoping not to be summoned when the teacher would randomly call on us with math riddles, spelling challenges, or random conversations about summer vacations and how we spent our weekend time. I had an immense magical world inside my head. Sitting in a little chair I dragged into my closet, I'd shut the door and write for hours. By the time I was twelve, I had dozens of journals filled with poems, sketches, accounts of my daily life, and prayers. I always began and ended my entries with prayer.

My parents surprised me with a birthday party the day I turned nine. We were at a restaurant and suddenly the waitress walked up and place a cake in front of me. I could feel my face turning hot and red and I literally slid under the table, in tears, somewhere between the candles being lit and everyone gathering around to sing "Happy Birthday" to me. I was further embarrassed when the room lit up with laughter at my behavior.

I loved being outside, fascinated with insect, plants, and other critters that swam or crawled in and near the creek behind our house. Nature provides a wealth of eager friends for introverts. I spent hours outside, not wandering far from home. We had three acres I could play in, and the creek that ran behind our home that offered a playground that filled my mind with ideas about fairies, flowers, and the private lives of insects. I'd gather clover to press into books the way my mother did, and sketched pictures in my journal of nature, including pine cones that had fallen from the tree, the purple irises that grew in our yard, a bird's abandoned feather, the grasshopper that lay sunning on the fence. I'd make mud pies, dandelion flower necklaces, and suntan on

webbed lawn chairs, slathering baby oil all over my skin while watching clouds turn into animals. I could hear the neighbor kids playing together in little groups, their voices traveling across the creek, yet rarely felt an urge to join them. I was never alone or bored when outside; my magical make-believe world was my kingdom.

Word that the new neighbor had a trampoline traveled quickly early in June, just as summer vacation was beginning. My brother's friends gathered on our driveway to discuss who would be brave enough to ask if they could jump on that stretchy contraption with the shiny springs. Soon, a small boy named Tommy, emerged from that house. It was as if he had a magnetic pull, and soon after, my brother and his friends gravitated to that yard daily, enjoying bouncing, telling crude jokes, and passing the time until dinner or other family plans beckoned. One day, my brother invited me over to "bounce." The novelty of jumping had worn off, and none of his friends were interested any more. We ran up the gravel road to the house in anticipation, but once we stepped onto the neighbor's driveway, realized we needed to ask permission since Tommy wasn't outside. He wasn't home, but his mother assured us it was fine to bounce.

"Just be careful, please" she yelled after us.

That afternoon event became a near-daily one for my brother and me throughout the rest of summer and into early autumn. I was eleven and he was nine. It's a significant memory for me for two reasons. One, it was the first time I really asked anyone outside my family for something. It was awkward to ring the neighbor's doorbell and ask if we could bounce; Tommy was rarely home the second half of the summer. He spent most of it with his father (his parents were divorced). I knew at times his mom was annoyed with us, but she always said, "Go ahead—just be careful."

The second reason is that this was the beginning of my eating disorder and body dysmorphia. While jumping on the trampoline I started becoming self-conscious about my body.

I felt huge…fat…in comparison to my brother. I remember putting my hands around my thighs, comparing my legs to his smaller ones. I wasn't going through puberty—and it wasn't about suddenly needing to wear a bra or feeling modest about getting my period. Nor was I overweight. I can remember adults at school asking me if I ate enough at home because I was so slender (there was plenty to eat at home, and I did not restrict my eating at that point). It wasn't because my brother said I was fat in comparison to him—he had no idea what was going on within me. I know myself better than anyone—and have lived with my eating disorder now for over forty years—yet I still cannot give an answer as to why it began, or why I suddenly began to feel the need to thin away.

I look back at the memories of bouncing on the trampoline with an ominous sense of grief. Yes, my brother and I had mountains of fun doing acrobatics under the Colorado sun, but it also marked the advent of the inner hell of my eating disorder—the one that destroyed so much of my life and my body. I can't blame the trampoline, but for all the years of treatment and therapy I've endured, it would have been nice to be able to point a finger at someone…something…and feel like a victim, instead of my own perpetrator.

Today I'd do just about anything to be strong enough to bounce on that trampoline again, to enjoy the strength of my legs and flexibility of my spine without caring about the amount of mass I take up in this world, and to have that time back with my brother.

We recycled and composted without begin prompted during my childhood. Everything had a potential second use, and somewhere, someone, or something needed our discards and creative re-formations.

There was a small bucket by our kitchen sink that caught table scraps, seeds scraped from pumpkins that were cooked down to make pies, pet food that had gotten soggy, and all sorts of scraps from my mother's cooking. Every evening when the snow and ice didn't deter him, my dad would carry the bucket to a small fenced area at the end of the garden. My parents would also put out small plates of food scraps near the back door for the wildlife. It wasn't unusual to see entire families of racoons come for their late evening meal. The food attracted foxes, skunks, rabbits, mice, deer and an occasional coyote–at least from what we were able to see. One of the neighbors complained once that we were attracting bears. That might have been true.

My mom was unusually creative and saw potential to craft-up (or cook/bake/can) items others would discard as rubbish, or things that grew dusty on the clearance table at one of her favorite department stores. She made Christmas ornaments out of seed pods and pine cones, front door wreaths out of plants picked and dried from the roadside and fields; she sewed (and knit) many of the garments we wore, and loved to sew little sachets, dolls, stockings, and other seasonal items out of scraps of materials she treasured like diamonds. Every Christmas, the pixies she made from Styrofoam balls, felt and sequins still sit on my fireplace mantel, mimicking the way my mother displayed them in our home. My mom's handmade treasures showed up in local consignment stores, holiday boutiques, and were often donated as raffle items for fundraisers for my nephew's Boy Scout Troup, the VFW in Lafayette, and other non-profits.

For my parents, growing up during the Depression meant there was never enough-and whatever one did have, needed to last a long time, be shared with others, and often be creatively modified. This is much like the reuse, recycle and repurpose motto used today as taking care of the environment becomes a priority. My dad's favorite phrase was, "waste not, want not." He'd cringe when we wasted. Leaving the water run to get it hot or cold enough was a certain trigger for hearing these words of wisdom.

Other paraphernalia kept on hand for later use ("just in case") by my Depression-era parents were:

- Styrofoam containers from meat
- Aluminum foil containers
- Plastic butter containers (with or without lids)
- Newspapers
- *National Geographic* Magazines
- Books
- Empty shotgun shells
- Empty cardboard boxes
- Greeting cards
- Tissue paper; wrapping paper
- Nails, screws, washers and other miscellaneous hardware
- Small pieces of wood
- Larger pieces of wood
- Scratchy wool blankets
- Canning jars (many were Mason)
- Paint cans – partially full, and a mass of wooden paint stirring sticks
- Hangers
- Christmas decorations
- Boxes of cotton fabric (what we'd now call "quilting" materials)
- Sewing notions and patterns
- Beads
- Wax (paraffin)
- Outgrown winter coats
- Rubber bands
- Canned food and jelly/jam my mother had preserved
- Two garage freezers filled with vegetables, fish and meat (from the garden, and my father's fishing and hunting expeditions)

Some of these were new when they entered our house. It was an era when buying things was becoming easier and things were more abundant. No doubt, some of my mother's most exciting social events included trips to the store. Of course, there wasn't online shopping yet, and this preceded the big Walmart stores (Target and Mervyn's did move to Boulder when I was a teenager). For one-stop shopping we'd stop at TG&Y in the Table Mesa Shopping Center and frequented a department store called Eaker's in that same plaza. We mostly shopped at locally owned stores, finding friendship with the proprietors, connecting with them through stories we shared, and stories we'd pass along with gifts we bought from them. Purchasing stuff became a luxury at some point-not just a necessity. We weren't wealthy, but we grew comfortable as the economy became more trustworthy. That said, my parents saved a lot of things-just in case. They didn't waste anything and were grateful for what they had because they knew what it was like to be without.

When my parents died, they left my three siblings and me in charge of deconstructing a three-story house filled with items from their almost 62-year marriage. We divided up many of the things to cherish in our individual homes, donated tons of stuff, and trashed a bit as well (Styrofoam meat containers!). Things from my parents' home that followed me to my own include antique furniture, recipes books, photographs, a piano, framed pictures, linens, fishing gear, books, jewelry, sewing/crafting items, dishes and china, tchotchkes, Christmas ornaments (including my grandparent's creche from Germany), my baby book (complete with a lock of hair from my first hair cut), dolls-and so much more.

Once a minimalist, I now own too much "stuff". Holding on helps me keep a chunk within my eyesight of history that has deep personal meaning to it. I used to laugh when people would tell me the old adage that "people end up just like their parents."

My earliest memory of needing to get up several times during the night to be sure I had touched all the light switches throughout the house twice, is when I was eight.

It took an enormous amount of time, and a tremendous amount of mental energy to stave my anxieties about what would happen if I didn't touch them all twice. Someone would die– probably my mother-and I could not endure that. God would punish me in some other way, if not by slaying my mother, if I did not comply with that inner, ever-pressing directive to touch. Each light switch. Twice.

I'd start with the switch by my bedroom door, and then the one in the hall, just across from my room, Next, I'd touch the switches in each of my siblings rooms, the three in my parent's big master bedroom, and finish the upper level by touching any switch I'd missed along the hallway. Then came the main level of the house: the dining room, living room, kitchen, dinette, family room, bathrooms, and my grandmother's room.

I was stealthy about it. Usually, everyone was in bed by the time I began my rounds, but if anyone awoke, or wasn't  yet in bed, I found a viable excuse for being up.

"I need a drink of water," I'd say, or, "I forgot my homework somewhere and can't find it." It may sound silly—even a bit insane—this ritual that began when I was eight. But it wasn't silly, it was the onset of some sort of obsessive-compulsive disorder that cumulated into an out-of-hand eating disorder as I got older. The obsession turned from touching things twice, to weighing myself at least twenty times a day and stealing images of myself in everything that reflected as I pulled my stomach in tight, hating what I saw.

The obsession calculated the calories of everything I allowed myself to eat and drink-prior,

during and innumerable times after the indulgence. Sleepless nights were not because I hadn't touched the light switches, but because I sat up on the edge of my bed, measuring my wrists, thighs, and waist, marking the numbers in a journal, and then repeating the measurements in case I'd miscalculated. The obsession led to ritualized exercising, where I was impelled to do fifty sit-ups if I ate an apple, run three miles if I even thought about eating a chocolate chip cookie, and constantly wiggling my toes inside my shoes as a way to secretly burn calories.

I was able to jump off the merry-go-round of weight obsession sometime in my forties, after years of treatment where I was proverbially pushed to ruminate about my childhood and the "obvious" causes of my anorexia, but during which we never explored the need to touch the light switches. Twice. Every night. For years…and during which we really never did figure out the cause of my eating disorder.

Yelling. He was always yelling. After work—rarely before—he'd lose his temper. His space violated, his routine out of kilter with the ever-spontaneous noises and needs of children and worry about bills or the weather or the car's flat tire…something would provoke him. And on weekends the yelling would escalate–especially before a beer, or time in the garden or a walk with the dog calmed his nerves and lulled him back to center. His temper kept him absent. Not physically-emotionally. He existed with us, entombed in a way, searching for ways to quiet the demons that broke open his temper.

When I look back, I want to honor my father appropriately-the deceased with the honor he deserves-and to propose that none of us are perfect, and that there are bushels of room for forgiveness and growth. You know, to relay that I know I'm also imperfect, so who am I to point an accusing finger, or be bitter, unbudgingly unforgiving?

But yet I remember his yelling and irritability. Hi unkind words were often directed at my mother, but sometimes at me. And when they were, I'd run to my room and sob, feeling violated. That hurt transferred into writing my feelings into dozens of diaries throughout my childhood, which was confusing because my mother taught me to see my dad as steady, loving, generous- and to read between all the emotional tatters he had from fighting in a war in Japan when he was just a kid proudly serving the USA.

We didn't talk about it often–my mother and me-but sometimes my siblings and I would talk with fear, indignation, disgust. My dad had a reputation. His yelling could be heard across the neighborhood, especially in the winter when the bare trees let in the sounds that summer leaves and stuffy heat buffer. My brother's friends said they were afraid to come over. Afraid of being

yelled at. Their dads didn't explode like ours did.

Sometimes I think my dad needed to be angry. His life didn't happen as he'd planned. He married my mom in 1949. Had kids. Went to night school to become a mechanical engineer–a job that wasn't his passion, but fulfilled his duty to pay the bills, work steady, and earn retirement after forty years. My dad's experience in the military prompted his unrealized dream to work as a mortician with the deceased and their loved ones–to somehow make sense of all the death and dying he'd experienced during the war when heads exploded and hearts were broken in the trenches, in burrowed foxholes, and anywhere in between.

My dad's own hand was struck and bore the shards of shrapnel. He used to let us feel the pieces of the metal memories in his hand and told us massaging it helped his pain. I marvel at how he survived with a purple heart and made it home to wed, become a parent, pursue a career, and enjoy hobbies. Yet in some ways, the war never ended. My dad's temper flared like missiles erupting in the night, leaving destruction, scattering life and extinguishing hope. This was never mentioned in his eulogy. Perhaps it should've been. We could have, for once, been honest about our dichotomous life with this great man. But we closed his earthly life with gentle love instead. Remembering his faithfulness, his goodness, the times of laughter, the promises he excelled at keeping. His stubbornness and love of nature. His generosity. His fortitude. His love of Christmas, a tall glass of chilled beer, his garden, lake fishing, Italian sausage and hot peppers cooked with freshly caught trout from a stream, and huge scoops of vanilla ice cream on hot summer nights.

Our seasoned aluminum rowboat lays upside down in the damp sand, resting, waiting for summer. Home to burrowing possums in the winter, it snares tumbleweeds and heaps of soggy, rotting autumn leaves that fill several trash bags when we dig it out for summer adventures.

Now, mid-July, it's a freeway for mosquitos, as my dad, siblings and me bob on the rippled lake just outside of Boulder, casting baited wormy lines from rugged bamboo poles that ker-splash into swirling waters before they sink, hungry for fish.

A bullfrog sings deep and throaty from the weeds along the shore: garuuhmp, garuuhmp. A dragonfly alights on my muddy shoe, fluttering its iridescent blue-green wings as I laze in the boat, one of my feet up over the side. My sister and I are wearing sleeveless tops and our bared shoulders begin to turn pink with the sun's lipstick.

My father snaps open a can of Coke, intentionally letting some of the carbonated syrup spray my brother's back. He jumps and pretends to be angry: "Daaahhhad!", then grabs the can and gulps its sweetness, releasing a belch that competes with the men drinking beer in the bar my dad frequents.

My mother-redheaded and freckled-sits in a woven chair at the shore under the big elm trees. She's prepared a homemade picnic of fried chicken, macaroni salad, and brownies. I look towards her just as she stands and raises the bottle of forgotten suntan lotion over her head, trying to get my father's attention. I remember the story she often tells about when she and my dad were newlyweds and he took her fishing in Shawano, Wisconsin where my grandfather had a cottage. They stayed out on the lake for most of the day in spite of the intense heat. My mother spent the next week in bed with delirium, being tended to by her new in-laws (something that caused her

great embarrassment). Since this adventure, she can't be out in the sun for more than a few minutes, and her body bears scars from the sun blisters.

The bottle's shiny label catches the sun, refracting off the lake, and I squint and look away as her shouts echo across the waters. She's begging us to come back to shore, fearing we'll end burnt and scarred.

My father shrugs his shoulders, waves back "hello" with feigned innocence to her intent, then winks at me and picks up the oars. They splash into the water, causing droplets of its fishy smell to splatter across our laps. We relocate closer to the weeds on the shoreline distant from my mother, where the striped bass play, and the morning trawls into mid-afternoon before we head back for our picnic.

I'm so sunburned the next day that I spend the day in bed, shivering with fever.

Oh, how my father loved to fish.

For my fourteenth birthday, my mother gifted me with an antique black metal trunk – the type shipped to America by European immigrants around the turn of the 20th century. Most kids turning fourteen at my school were getting things like new skis, Dittos bell-bottom jeans, and subscriptions to *Seventeen* magazine.

My mother loved antiques, for they held stories of the past and provided opportunities to be used again. History, the present, and tomorrow often blended together for her, and she never apologized for sharing this mindset with her children.

I remember coming home from school, tired from a long week and eager to open birthday presents. In my family, whoever had a birthday got to choose that evening's menu. I loved fried chicken and homemade biscuits. The cake would be completely chocolate. I put my cello on its side in the living room, and marched up the stairs, where my mother was sitting on my bed. Not expecting her there, I remember jumping in surprise and feeling a little embarrassed. I was getting to that awkward age of needing more privacy and didn't necessarily want my mother snooping around my bedroom.

She looked towards the corner of my room and I followed her gaze.

"It's for you!" she said.

We both kneeled by the trunk as she opened it. A delicious dry-musty smell danced at us as she lifted two rolls of wallpaper with a delicate pink rose pattern from it.

On a recent trip to an antique store in Estes Park, my mother and I had seen a trunk similar to this one. It had been displayed, lid open, its walls covered in delicate wallpaper. A wooden tray

covered with a hand-tatted lace cloth had been sitting across the top of the open trunk. Resting on the lace was a delicate china teacup, vase with a rose, and small china cat figurine.

"Where did you find this"? I asked my mother.

"I'm not sure if I should tell you…" she said. "I don't want you to feel like your father and I slighted you on your birthday".

"Please…it's beautiful. I don't feel slighted" I told her, not really knowing what she meant by "slighted".

"We found it at the thrift store in Boulder, honey. It's precious–just, not expensive," she said.

My mother loved things, but rarely did she calculate their monetary worth over their sentimental value to her. It was out of character for her to even voice something to me about the cost of a gift. Looking back, I suspect she knew that children have a tendency to cost compare, competing with siblings about who got the most (i.e., expensive) stuff at holidays.

I remember loving the trunk instantly, pushing aside any desires I had for getting that yellow-banana-colored pair of Dittos I had asked for. It didn't matter.

My mom was perpetually creative, and excitedly shared this gift with me–one that she envisioned transforming into a beautiful work of art, just like the one in Estes Park. I was her eager apprentice. We didn't know the original history of my black trunk, just that it had been abandoned outside the door of the thrift shop we frequented, but it linked my mother and me together with the secret journeys it had taken. My mother and I thought perhaps it had traveled a long way on a big ship, holding beautiful silk and lace dresses, crisp white linen baby clothing, the family's leather-bound Bible, and maybe even a pair of leather button-up boots, a wool hat with feathery accents, and an heirloom quilt.

The trunk stood empty for several months. I'd sit by it, take out the rolls of wallpaper, and envision what it would look like clad in roses. The trunk began to store treasures of my own heart. First, it became representative of my mother's unconditional love. Then, as my grandparents died a year apart, held two small items that had been theirs–my grandmother's stuffed lamb, and one of my grandfather's pipes. As I matured and moved out of the family home, the trunk began to store other items I was too sentimental to part with. I consider it one of my most valued treasures; it has traveled with me to at least fifteen different places, and I can't imagine parting with it.

Moving has always been difficult for me, especially when it places me further from family, so stuffing the trunk full of special memories spared me tissues and tears. I've justified holding onto items I'm sentimental about. They are all relatively small, don't take up any extra space, and barely add weight when I've paid a professional moving company to haul my stuff.

In my current home, the black trunk is nestled between my cello and piano in the music room. When I'm feeling lost and missing my parents, I'll sit on the floor, leaning my back on the trunk, letting it bear the weight of some of my burdens. About once a year, I wake up compelled to pry back the old metal lid and reminisce as I take out each item, one by one. Keeping the items memorialized within the trunk has helped me contain pieces of my grief. It gives me a sense of control over time, space, life–even death. The items are preserved, safe, quiet–and mine. The memories are restored when I open the trunk and am greeted by the items, snuggled neatly together. Met with a tint of musty odor and lily of the valley, I'm quickly taken back in time as I gently take out and am allowed precious time with:

- **An ivory knit jumper with appliqued pink and navy flowers on it, size 8 (children's), tiny stain where it hits near the right knee**

My grandfather always spent most of the summers with us. He'd fly into the Denver airport from Chicago, full of life and grins, carrying his old green suitcase, and spoil us until it was September and time to go back to school. The last week of our vacation included an extended trip to the then Crossroads Mall in Boulder, where my grandfather lavished us with back-to-school attire. Our bags would be filled with goodies, including shoes, socks, jeans, tops, dresses, underwear…the basics, plus accessories my mom typically wouldn't have bought us (she was more "practical"). I wore these outfits with pride. I could still smell my grandfather's apple-scented cigar smoke in them long after he'd made it back to Chicago, and even after several spins in the washing machine. When I close my eyes, I can still hear him lavishing compliments on his grandchildren, telling us how "beautiful" we looked as we walked, hips jutted out, modeling the new outfits for him down the "runway" in the fitting room.

- **Coty - Muguet Des Bois. Perfume Spray. 1.8 Oz**

This bottle of perfume is the last Christmas gift my grandfather gave me. It wasn't expensive perfume–but to me, it is one of the finest gifts I've ever received. As a young teen that year, I was just beginning to explore the wonderful world of cosmetics, sampling Revlon eye shadow and mascara, coveting Bonnie Bell lip glosses that smelled like bubblegum and fruit, and trying to figure out what hair products would make my hair flip and feather like Farrah Fawcett's. Having my own bottle of perfume that wasn't a mild Avon scent felt exquisite. I used the perfume in coveted small amounts, spritzing my wrists and neckline with it only for Sundays and special events. The evening we got the news of my grandfather's death, I remember being unable to stop crying. I was laying in bed, rolled in blankets, miserably grieving. My mother came into my room and took the perfume bottle off of my dresser and tucked it into the blanket, near my heart. I don't

know how she knew that would help, but it was as if my grandfather was suddenly there, wrapping his arms around his “little girl”. I will need to be buried with this.

- **Size 12 months infant Oshkosh B’Gosh overalls, light blue, barely worn**

These were for my little boy, *Griffin (*not his real name). Griffin’s mother was young and unable to care for him. In fact, she wanted to give him away quickly so she could go on with her life, unencumbered. My sister knew of the situation, and after a brief meeting, Griffin’s mother handed him over to me–crib and all. He was nine months old. Social services intervened when I could not present consent papers when he needed medical care. He ended up in a foster home, and I had weekend “privileges” while the judge determined the best thing for him. After two years, which included getting my foster care license and complying with all the court mandates, I lost all rights because I was single and Griffin “had attachment issues and needed a two-parent home”.

For nearly two years, I had picked up Griffin from his foster home after my Friday classes at Colorado State University, and we’d spend the weekend playing and bonding. Sometimes I’d mousse his hair until it stood up in one big, blonde poof, and then he’d run in delight back and forth across the creaky floor of my third-floor apartment. The neighbor below would soon bang on his ceiling, yelling for us to “be quiet!” and then Griffin and I would head outside to the park if the weather permitted…or to the mall or my parent’s home.

Having Griffin was a gift, and when I lost him that day in court, I remember going home and sitting in his room. The crib still held his favorite stuffed bear, clothes folded neatly in dresser drawers, comb, shampoo, piggy bank, and “Baby’s First Bible” laying, discarded now. It took me weeks of grieving before I could disassemble the room. I’d sit after classes, holding the overalls

to my cheek and I'd rub my finger across the little overall hooks, bring the garment to my nose, gently, smelling the soap they were carefully hand-washed in that last time. I'd be taken back to the fields we played in, the storybooks we read at the Public Library, the Cheerios we shared-memories I knew he'd quickly forget.

I remembered his fear of the baby swing that first time in the park, and how I held him in my arms as he slept, recovering from the chicken pox. I think about Griffin often, and wonder if he remembers me at all, perhaps through pictures his adoptive parents might have shared with him…and mostly pray that wherever he ended up, he knows that he was never unwanted.

- **Velvet Suit**

The suit includes a matching velvet jacket and skirt, the color of basil, and a lemongrass-hued silk camisole top, all hand sewn by my mother to help me feel beautiful for a military dinner I attended in high school with a guy I was dating. He was a student at the University of Colorado Boulder, in the Army ROTC program, and friendly with the guy my sister was dating (both were also Army ROTC). All four of us attended the event together on a chilly, early December evening. I had no idea what the protocol was for being a date to a formal event like this. I was young, shy, but remember dancing and laughing until early into the morning before we headed back home on an icy road in my boyfriend's daring, vintage Mustang. The outfit brings back memories of my mother and how she wanted everything to be special for us; in her eyes, her daughters were all princesses who deserved to be cared for, loved, even adored. I think she delighted in helping us feel "beautiful" as a way, perhaps, to make up for the times she didn't get to feel so glamorous growing up in poverty during the Depression.

- **Round cedar stool with tripod legs, measures 9–inches from the ground and 9–inches in diameter**

My mom's oldest brother, my Uncle Mart, made this stool. I was about three when he created a four of these stools – one for each of my two sisters, one for my brother, and one for me. The stools are fairly identical and in amazingly good shape for being more than fifty years old. These stools sat in the corner of our living room, pulled close to the TV, where we sat on them, watching episodes of "Flipper," "Gentle Ben," "My Three Sons," and later, "The Brady Bunch" and "Land of the Lost." We used them as tabletops for coloring books, fields for army toy maneuvers, and as pillows to rest weary heads on. The stools were mainstays in our home, and frequent reminders of Uncle Mart who dearly loved woodworking–and children.

The stool is meticulously made, with a smooth, polished seat. The wood itself tells a tale, with its unique circles hinting at time, as if demarking memories in my own life as well telling tales of its own. I imagine the giver of the wood–the tree-and I thank it for its generosity. I wonder about my uncle, and if it was during the creation of these in his magical workshop that he lost three of his fingertips. I was always fascinated with his hands, but too shy to ask about his injuries (and where the fingertips were!). My aunt and uncle didn't have children of their own, and they showered us with the kind of love that pushed away the busy-ness of adult hood, making us feel as if we were the most important thing for that moment. They had a way of filling the moment, making it larger than life. The stools are now divided across the continent, one for each sibling. I know that in my home, I've chosen the most perfect spot for mine.

- **Tube socks, circa late 1970s, grayish-white with green and yellow stripes at the top; hole in one of the heels**

My brother loved tube socks. He wore them all the time in the 70s–to church and school, and when fishing, hunting and playing in the creek with friends. He wore them to bed, on holidays, and when maneuvering his blue banana–style skateboard. It could be that tube socks were just what was "in" during that time, but regardless, whenever I see tube socks, I think of my brother.

My brother's bedroom was across the hall from mine. One afternoon, we were bemoaning the task of cleaning our rooms. I was sitting on the floor, playing with my cat, instead of dusting and changing my bed, when a pair of tube socks came flying across the hall, hitting me in the face.

"Get your stinky socks away from me. Yuk!" my brother yelled.

I picked up the wadded-up pair of grey-white tube socks with green and gold stripes, stood up, and hurled them back into my brother's room.

"These aren't mine, you nerd!" I yelled. "Gross!"

The sock match continued, until I finally folded. I took the socks and stuffed them in my dresser. My brother's birthday was approaching, and I couldn't wait to surprise him with the socks. I planned on nesting boxes, so he'd think he was getting something really big from me…only to find the dirty socks stuffed deep inside after unwrapping several empty boxes.

And so the mystery of the socks began (seriously, no idea where these came from), and so did the pranks we pulled with each other. They ended up wrapped for me under the Christmas tree that year. In February, he found them folded together on his pillow, along with a box of heart conversation candies. The sock-volley continued for years, We'd unwrap a gift with expectation,

only to find the gnarled socks laying inside (looking smaller as we got older), or we'd unexpectedly find them in our coat sleeve, pushed into the tip of our skates, or in our lunch bag.

After college, the Army called my brother to Germany; he received a care package from me shortly after. A few months later, the socks returned to the USA with my name on the outside of an over-taped box. He moved back to the United States and I welcomed him to his new home with the socks.

I can't recall exactly when I received them this last time–it's been many years, with marriages, children, jobs, illnesses, relocations, and general adulting replacing silly childhood jokes. I sense he's long forgotten about the socks. Yet, when I'm sorting through the trunk, I bond with him while holding the old tube socks, twisting them through my hands and wondering if I should risk losing them by sending them to him, one more time. What if they get lost in the mail? What if he doesn't reciprocate? What if he throws them away, rolling his eyes and thinking how stupid this all has become? But in the moments I hold the socks, I dream of all the ways he will remember, and the ways I'll surprise him back.

- **10.5-inch green rubber tomato worm, complete with horny head**

I found this green tomato worm at a dime store in Louisville, Colorado when I was thirteen. I had recently lost my grandfather, and cherishing the memories of tomato worm escapades, owning this hard rubber worm has helped keep the memory alive. Luckily, when you squeeze it, the only thing it does is squeak.

- **Handmade queen-sized quilt**

The quilt was my wedding quilt from my first marriage. My sister and mom had cut out squares from ivory muslin and given one to each of the guests at my bridal shower beforehand, allowing them a month or so to create something meaningful for my fiancé and me. My sister then sewed the squares together, finishing it with a minty-green border. The result: stunning.

I can still remember opening each little tissue papered gift at my shower and delighting in the uniqueness of each square and the woman who had made it. The squares include embroidered scripture, a cross-stitched cat, and notes of love and blessings written with fabric pens. Each bears the autograph of someone dear to my heart. The overall result is beautiful. I know – it was for my ex and me…a relationship that ended before it bloomed. It was love that didn't endure because he couldn't keep his vows, but love that persists within me because of its innocence. I wrap the quilt around me and allow myself to remember the past, before I knew heartache and brokenness, and it connects my soul to the little girl who dreamed of the perfect white wedding.

- **Handknit Dress**

My mom's sister, "Auntie Helen", was my godmother. She loved to sew, knit, bake, paint and bead, and was known in the Hinsdale, Illinois area (where she lived for over forty years until her death in 2012) for her fashion design skills. My aunt was several years older than her siblings and had moved from rural Wisconsin to "the big city" of Chicago in the early 1930s on her own, where she studied fashion design while working full time as a secretary. She was eccentric and a bit exotic, and I cherished the precious times I spent with her. One day she gifted me with a beautiful

black dress she had knitted; it looks like needlepoint with tiny pink, green and lavender flowers intricately patterned into the black dress that ends in a slight ruffle at the hem. The original box she gave me the dress in also contains small balls of yarn of each color she used to knit the dress–remnants she saved "just in case it needed repairing". I wore the dress a few times in my early twenties, but one day decided it was too precious to risk damaging, and so now it rests in the trunk, holding space for the memories of my auntie.

- **Two rolls of wallpaper with tiny pink roses**

I always leave the two rolls of wallpaper from the original gift, still rolled tightly, in the bottom of the trunk. The sides walls of the trunk are now cracked with age and putting paper on them would be difficult. The wallpaper itself, though never used, has also grown crisp and yellowed; it splinters a bit when I try to unroll it.

I dreamed of papering the trunk's walls, imagining how pretty it would look and how it would please my mother. I held the paper out and envisioned the way my bedroom would look with the little pink-coated antique trunk as a centerpiece. I'd be able to leave the trunk's lid open, maybe find an insert for it, and lay a doll or quilt on top of it. But then I rapidly became a teenager who spent hours every night talking to my friends on the telephone, writing furiously in my journal about something I was emotionally out of control about, or going to the skating rink with friends. The trunk never quite became what it was intended for.

I have felt guilty about that for many years–as if I've betrayed my mother–for not ever getting around to papering the trunk–making it show-case ready. She never said anything to me–her style

was never hyper-critical. But still, I wanted to please her. Mostly, I wanted my mother to know the bond the trunk signified between us.

Over time, the trunk took on a deeper purpose as it began to hold more and more of items I wasn't able to let go of. It signifies a struggle between letting go of my childhood and moving into adulthood. How do you leave your mother, your best friend–even for marriage, and for what is considered a normal transition for a child–when you are filled with remorse, guilt and grief? I had an enormous struggle with that transition, and the trunk helped me hold onto something I was unable to fully let go of.

What I wish I could tell my mother, now that I've worked through my guilt and confusion about my journey into adulthood, is that leaving the rolls of special paper just as they were on my fourteenth birthday, is like placing a bookmark to hold open a treasured page in a book, allowing easy return to a magical, safe world of childhood.

I believe it wasn't a conscious decision (maybe part instinctual-nesting behavior), but deciding to put my treasures in this trunk gave me ease in knowing I'll always have a tangible piece of loved ones who contributed in some significant way to my life. And it's true. When I open that trunk, its musty scent reminds me of antiquing with my mother. The ivory dress and perfume bring me bobbing up and down on the water, summer fishing with my grandpa. The light blue overalls bring back the smell of baby powder, and the ringed stool, of ancestors who paved the way through physical labors of love. The quilt signifies dreams lost, but also how much love has followed. My sorrows and disappointments meld in the trunk, and I'm able to spend time there, asking for forgiveness and begging for love to shine strongest.

I close the trunk and think about the day I'll unwrap the wallpaper and glue it along its interior. I want to call my mom and ask her for some tips–what tools and paste to use, and to hear

her voice, enthusiasm, and love. I want to tell her I'm sorry, for all the times I let her down, and apologize for not papering the trunk in the fashion she intended. I wonder, as I always do, if she can see me from her other world. She still is with me, in an ethereal way, guiding my journey and reaching out to me through all the memories, but yet I yearn for something more tangible–a sign, a symbol…and this trunk helps give me that.

The anticipated Easter sun rises, its slanted arms slide into the shadows across the quiet cemetery where I've gathered with my youth group to reenact Christ's empty tomb. It's quiet. We are listless and tired from waking up before the sunrise, shivering in our thin-cotton Easter clothes as early spring blankets us in an unexpected blanket of powdery snow that falls like gentle raindrops. Down the hill across the bumpy landscape of the expansive cemetery, the agonizing weeping of a woman shatters the silence. I wonder, is she part of another group's drama? Is she prone, face melding into freshly packed earth, lamenting a loved one? Should one of us go to her? I've heard that sound once before when someone was hallucinating on PCP in the emergency room when I was there with an intractable headache.

I'm about to ask our youth leader if he thinks someone should check on the woman, when he clears his throat, glances at his watch, and tosses his arms out in an attempt to have us gather near him in a circle. There are two services at the church to follow, and the youth group must be back in 30 minutes to start cooking the traditional pancake brunch. I suddenly remember with a surge of guilt the two dozen colored eggs I'd left laying on the counter in the kitchen at home. I'll call my mother from the church and hope she hasn't left home yet. If she has, I'll be finding a brightly painted hardboiled egg in my lunch for the next two weeks.

I sigh in deeply and can almost taste the pine that saturates the air; my chest shutters with the inhale, like it does when I've been crying. Two teens next to me lean into each other, barely noticeably touching each other's fingertips with desire. They jump apart when the leader shakes his head, scolding them with his eyes. He then prays, reading rapidly from his book a prayer about Easter and the risen Son. He hands a Bible to one of the teens, who reads the Easter story from the Gospel of Luke. One of the chaperones passes out curled music copies, one for each of us, and we

gather closer, bending forward to keep the music still from the rising wind. The youth leader strums on his tinny guitar and our voices rise to meet the sun and roll with the wind, disappearing into the trees on the mountainside that hovers over us and guards the dead. I have a sudden thought-what if those sleeping deep beneath the earth can hear us? I'm distracted again, shivering from the cold and a bit of fear.

"All praises to the Heavenly King!" the leader shouts.

"He is risen, He is risen!" one of the girls says, reading the words from her script.

"Hallelujah! Risen indeed!" the rest of us reply.

"I'm hungry!" the kid, who never seems able to learn that his impulsive humor nearly always ends with stern results from an adult, shouts with unusual volume.

Surprisingly, our leader laughs, seeming grateful for the excuse to shuffle us into the church's van and head back to more responsibilities.

I look back at the mountains and gravestones as the van pulls away and notice a magpie in its tuxedo attire standing upright on the mound of a fresh grave, its sassy call audible even over the chatter of my peers. I meld into the day…into life…and forget the scenario for years, recalling it only when I notice a lone magpie standing silently on a tree branch near the place my family has gathered at the same cemetery, over thirty years later, as we bury my father. I'm now the wailing woman wishing someone would come to me with comfort and awake me from my grief to tell me "he has risen!"

On the first Sunday of Advent, after folding his church clothes neatly on the chair by my parent's bedside, my father would rummage through oversized dusty boxes in the basement until he located strings of snarled multi-colored lights to place on the evergreen tree we'd pursue after Sunday dinner. After the dishes were washed, my mother would help bundle us up in wool coats, mittens and scarves, and we'd pack into the station wagon and head for the Christmas tree lot in Louisville. We'd search the lot for a flawless tree, parting the boughs with our little mittened hands, as my father would stand the tree upright, dancing its limbs out while determining if its dimensions were adequate to fill the appointed corner in our living room.

Finally deciding on the best tree, my father would drag the tree through the snowy lot to our car, and we'd all work together to hoist it onto the rack that held our boat in the summer. Using a roll of waxy twine he'd brought from his garden tool bucket, my father would wrap the fiber around and around the tree, securing it with a knot he'd learned in the Boy Scouts, and then cutting the twine with one of his hunting knives.

The drive home seemed to be twice as long as the way to the lot, as we chattered about Christmas lists, hot chocolate, and Santa Claus. Once home, my father would take the tree from the rack, again using child labor, and then secure it in a red metal tripod stand, filling the base with cool water. The tree stood like this in the chilly garage until Thursday, giving it a chance to plump itself out, before debuting in the corner of our living room with the purple carpet and 12 foot rose quartz fireplace. My father loved Christmas—so much, that when he designed our home he had the living room designed especially for this holiday. I think he would've built the room with a taller ceiling if he had thought he could find a tree to fit that space.

Before going to work that Thursday, he'd drag the tree into the living room, where its aromatic pine needles filled our home by late afternoon. My siblings and I would come home from school and sit at the base of the tree, anticipating the evening decorating party. Finally, after supper, my family would gather in the living room. First, my father would untwist the lights-cursing loudly at the stubborn snarls-as he climbed an unlevel ladder that wobbled with each placement of his foot. We hated his yelling, but it was part of the tradition.

My mother sat nearby on a chair, surrounded by dusty corrugated boxes, lovingly unwrapping each ornament. She'd detail the origin of each as she unwrapped them-antique glass German bulbs that had been her parents, miniature brass horns that reminded my father of the Marines, fragile, hand-painted clay ornaments we made for her in Kindergarten, the felted reindeer she had made that required a wrapped candy cane to give them form, and countless others, including beaded, cross-stitched, feathered and hand-sequined orbs.

The littlest hands were given the paper and other less-fragile ornaments to hang. My mother savored her role, placing the old glass bulbs near the top of the tree where they'd hopefully be safe from the cats. Metal tinsel and static-filled icicles completed the masterpiece.

After a hot chocolate and homemade sugar cookie intermission, my father would unwrap his childhood train from its brindled newspaper blanket, winding the track around the base of the tree, and then settling each car into its place along the rusted track. Like my mother, he loved to reminisce. He'd unpack childhood memories of flying down icy slopes with friends on their Flexible Flyer sleds, tales of his first BB gun (the only item he'd wanted for Christmas when he was nine), and stories of ice fishing the frozen lakes in Wisconsin with his father and childhood friend, Bob Cromer. Soon, my parents would recall memories made together-early dates when they skated, hand-in-hand, and their first Christmas as a married couple, when their only child was

a sassy cat named Paddy.

Soon, ribboned presents dressed in red and green foil would be placed under the tree, on top of the handmade felt skirt my mother had created. Our stockings would be hung from hooks along the fireplace, anticipating being stuffed with candy and toys on Christmas Eve. The ancient nativity my grandmother had from Germany would find its way to the top of the piano, surrounded by plastic reindeer, and my mother would string rows of evergreen along the stairway sometime while we were at school. Christmas cookies would fill the oven, pageant rehearsals rushed our Saturday afternoons, and my parents would read their daily Advent devotions together over simple breakfasts at 6am, lighting the candles of their yule log in anticipation for the Light of the World.

December, 1975. *The Waltons* on TV and *Alvin and The Chipmunks* records kept us company while my brother and I studied the *Sears Roebuck* and *Montgomery Wards* Christmas catalogs. I can still remember the way the glossy, photo-packed pages smelled. It was probably not the healthiest thing to have inhaled all those ink fumes as we lay on our tummies, faces as close as we could get to the enticing pages filled with toys, but I associate that smell with Christmas, so I think it balances things out.

My brother was ten; I was twelve. We both wanted the same thing for Christmas that year: a skateboard. I wanted a banana yellow one; his love was deep blue. I'm not sure how we first discovered skateboards. This was long before skating parks, and none of the other kids in our neighborhood had them. We lived in a somewhat rural area, where the roads were—although paved—a bit rougher than the sidewalks the kids were privy to who lived inside the city limits of Boulder. But dream-oh, how we dreamed of what we would do on our boards.

Santa delighted us with the exact skateboards we wanted. The weather cooperated too, so my brother and I were able to head outside early on Christmas Day to experience the wheels beneath our feet. It was awkward, teetering, and frustrating. My sister suggested we each hold onto a broom–the way we did when we had learned to roller skate. That helped us keep our balance. A bit. But after a few scraped knees and episodes of embarrassed egos, we headed inside to warm up, and to rethink our strategies.

Dinner was slated for a round 1:30, and we were soon distracted with the smell of turkey and fresh yeast rolls, random chores my mom asked us to do, and greeting friends and family as they began to arrive. Soon my father was calling us all to the table, and we were saying our

traditional “Come, Lord Jesus” meal prayer in unison as we held hands around the table that was dressed in poinsettia-printed linen. The turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, yams, green salad, cranberries, green beans, pickle and pepper tray, and all the other goodies my mother had prepared, were then served.

My father was adamant about certain things that seemed extreme to me as a child. One of these was that he commanded we pass the dishes of food to our left in order to avoid serving-plate-traffic-jams. Maybe he just got tired of wiping up spilled gravy and smashed peas from the carpet when we were younger and collided serving dishes while developing our motor skills. Maybe it was something left over from his military experiences; he had many carry-overs from those days. It’s odd to mention it, perhaps, but it’s something I still quietly police whenever I’m at a big meal with others. “Left…pass left,” I silently direct, feeling a bit of unease and irritability welling up.

Another carry-over from my dad’s military experience was his enjoyment of alcohol. It served as a reward while he was a Marine, and part of being a good host, was sharing drinks with others, including his under-age children. I grew up with alcohol freely accessible. When I went to college, free flowing alcohol did not delight me like it did many of my friends. I’m not condoning the way I was introduced to alcohol, but for my siblings and me, having it available at a young age seemed to take the rebellious joy away from it sooner than it did for our peers.

Christmas dinner was settling in our tummies when my mom brought out her traditional plates of handmade Christmas baked goods, including iced cut-out sugar cookies, Mexican wedding cakes, haystacks, spritz dipped in chocolate and colored sugars, Pfeffernüsse, slices of stollen, and more. My dad poured glasses of wine for whoever wanted it, adding more sugar to the menu. My brother pushed out a tall water glass, which my dad quickly filled to the rim with pink-

red liquid. My brother quickly glugged  the liquid down as if he was drinking lemonade on a scorching August afternoon.

"More, please," he asked of my dad.

A few glasses later, my brother was now sitting in the corner of the dining room, out of his chair, with ruddy cheeks. I remember my sisters and I laughing at him, and the way he laughed back-as if the funniest jokes ever to be told had just been shared.

"I'm going outside," he announced about an hour later.

The adults were still congregated at the table, sharing memories, while making new ones. No one was really paying attention to the kids at that point.

My brother picked up his skateboard and headed outside-a little unsteadily. My sisters and our foster siblings followed. This was long before cell phones and quick access to "take a video" moments, so the memory of what happened next is imprinted in my own memory, not a digital one that can be shared online.

My brother was simply unable to ride his skateboard. He put one foot on it, and tried to balance, and ended up sitting on the ground, looking stunned and delighted. We laughed and laughed.

"Are you dizzy?" my sister asked him.

"Maybe…a little…" He laughed.

"Get back up!! Try it again!" I taunted.

We all waved as the neighbors drove by in their paneled station wagon, window down, yelling, "Merry Christmas" with such naivete. We were all sitting down on the ground in a circle around my drunk brother, as if seated around a bar waiting for more rounds. To those passing by, we were innocent children, enjoying our Christmas gifts.

My brother stumbled to his feet and just stood there, laughing and almost crying at the same time. It was then that I felt compassion—even fear—seeing my little brother in that state. My oldest sister took him by the arm and started a parade to help him walk it off. We walked around the neighborhood with my brother, skateboard tucked tightly under his arm, until he sobered up.

Gwen worked at the Yarn store off 29th and Valmont In Boulder. She was a greying woman with an enormous love of needle arts, particularly knitting and crochet. My mother would venture to the store, with my sister Betsy and me in tow, on coveted Sunday afternoons away from household responsibilities.

The store smelled like sheep's wool, freshly printed magazines and books, and the peppermint candy that lay in a crystal dish on the table that stood in the middle of the store. The table was used for classes during the week, and Gwen was typically sitting at it when we arrived, knitting something cabled, when we visited.

Gwen would greet us by name, set down her work regardless of where she was in the row, and take us on a tour around the cozy store, showing us the newest yarns and patterns. After the tour, she and my mother would sit down at the table together to catch up. I never did stop to listen to their conversations because I was too absorbed in deciding what to choose first: yarn or a knitting pattern?

Choosing a pattern meant browsing through several racks of knitting books and magazines that held complicated patterns whose stunning results were shown on beautiful models in exotic places (places I'd never been). My favorite patterns were often in German, further complicating the chances of me successfully knitting the item. My sister and I would sit together on the carpeted floor and peruse the magazines like they were the toy catalogues that started showing up at our house shortly after Thanksgiving.

"I love this one!" I'd exclaim, excitedly pointing my finger at a tri-colored scarf, hoping to get my sister's approval.

"It's pretty, but-look at this one!" she'd counter, pointing at red mittens and a matching stocking cap with a pom-pom on its tip.

We'd continue leafing through the magazines and books, one page at a time, as we entered the fantasy world of knitting where the models showing off the finished patterns were ultimately what intrigued us to buy them. For example, ski sweaters with intricate Irish cables were shown off by women sipping hot drinks while standing on skis, their tips pointed into a vee, in fresh powder snow. A hat, scarf and mitten set made of the finest white, fluffed out yarn, and worn by a blonde, svelte woman, seated in a horse-drawn carriage. Headbands in spring pastel colors were spread on a blanket amongst spring wildflowers, and knitted lace tank tops were displayed hanging over Adirondack chairs resting on sandy beaches, with happy children playing in the background. There were attractive couples in some of the photos, walking hand-in-hand in matching sweaters and scarves.

Then there were the pages of beautiful young women in sweaters for all seasons and occasions. An ecru camisole made from mohair, a multi-striped turtleneck with contrasting sleeves, and a sweater-skirt set made of exquisite sheep's wool, dyed milky-mocha are images I still remember. One magazine spread featured college women on a fall campus, each wearing frilly vintage white linen blouses under the sweaters, and bobby socks and saddle shoes to give a timeless flair. Another featured young women playing near an ocean in knitted swim wear attire. They were tossing water at each other and laughing, holding seashells to their ears while making pouty lips at the camera, and lying next to tanned men on striped terry towels.

I believe I was more mesmerized by the dream of becoming these people should I knit the garment they wore, than I was practical about how difficult the patterns were to construct. I'd

choose a pattern and excitedly show it to my mother, who (ever-practical) would sit me down at the table by Gwen and figure out the yardage I would need, and show me how complicated the pattern would be. It turns out that knitting a bathing suit required using size 3 needles-some of the smallest-and my mother rolled her eyes when she told me, "You know, you won't be able to really wear this swimming."

Unless we had a pattern in mind when we wandered into the store (my mother had a plethora of vintage patterns at home-Reynolds, Bear Brand, Vogue, Coats & Clark's-she always encouraged us to use), my mother recommended we choose our yarns first, and then ask Gwen to help us find an appropriate pattern. But choosing yarn also posed challenges. First, there was the cost factor. Some of the yarns were too expensive once we factored in the number of skeins we'd need for a garment. The Vogue dress pattern I yearned to knit required Mohair, which would've cost at least $70 to knit-a lot of money in the 70s for something I did not really "need". The time to knit the dress also seemed prohibitive to my mother as well, who knew my propensity to start a project, but quickly drift from it to something else. The yarns had to be gauged to be sure they were appropriate for the pattern we chose. We had to adhere to the washing instructions we needed to abide by. Most of the yarns required either dry cleaning, or hand washing in cold water, then blocking it flat on a towel so the garment would keep its shape as it dried. My mother knew who would be doing that part, but she never complained.

My sister and I would make our purchases, spending the money we earned babysitting and working at Pasquale's, and then Gwen would help us cast the yarn onto our needles, and explain the patterns to us, deciphering what different symbols meant.

"P is for purl, K means to knit, SS means to slip a stitch," she'd explain, underlining these instructions in the pattern with a pencil.

My mother rarely bought anything. Sometimes, she'd buy simple baby yarn to knit booties or a bonnet for a baby shower or a new (great) niece or (great) nephew being welcomed into the family. Gwen didn't mind. She'd sit with my mother, knitting together, whether or not my mother bought patterns or yarn from her store. Her personality was soft, like the volumes of yarn that filled the wooden shelves in the store and tempted all the grandmothers who entered her store. She never discouraged us from starting a project, even when it seemed over-complicated for our skill level, and she taught every patron as if the item she was making was the most superbly beautiful thing she had ever seen.

I loved being in her patient presence as she practiced casting on and off with me, taught me how to use a cable needle, and translated the complicated European patterns I "just had to have". She showed me how to calculate metric measurements, and how to make sure I purchased enough yarn the first time (I could return extra, unopened skeins) because she couldn't guarantee the same dye lot would be available the next time I came in. I don't remember when we stopped dropping by the store. I do recall the owner had cancer at one point, and I believe the store's hours were shortened during her treatments. My sister and I became teens, busy with our social worlds, but neither of us ever stopped knitting.

While cleaning out my parent's home after their death many years later, I found a lumpy paper bag under a stack of handmade quilts in the linen closet. I pulled it out, expecting to find another non-functioning heating pad. Instead, I discovered several pairs of scratchy woolen socks my mother had knit for my father, probably in the 1950s before they were married. Two of them are argyle patterned; one pair has tiny cables running the length of the socks. I gathered them close, hugging them to my chest as if I'd found my childhood Teddy Bear. It was one of those moments when grief unexpectedly surges, and I realized I had rarely seen my mother knit outside our times

with Gwen. I remember my mother sitting with me over a frustrating undertaking, helping me relocate lost stitches. I remember the times she put her hands over mine as we knit together, showing me how to find a consistent tension so my father's Christmas scarf wouldn't be quite so warped. I remember my mother helping my sister sew the sides of a sweater together, and teaching us how to bury the ends of the yarn into our projects.

But what I don't remember are the times my mother sat knitting for herself. I believe that her knitting, like so much else in her life, was sacrificed for others-my father, my siblings and me (including foster siblings), church, neighbors, countless charities. She was holding the reins of one of our horses with her left hand when she was in her late 50s, while the farrier worked on the horse's back hooves. The horse spooked, reared into the air, breaking my mother's fingers with the force. In her 60s, my mother was diagnosed with crippling rheumatoid arthritis. Over the next 15 years, she required several surgeries on her hands and wrists, which further collapsed her ability to use her hands for knitting without searing pain. Although my mother did not knit near the end of her life, she continued to encourage others to knit, teaching hands-off the techniques she had learned from her own mother. For me, a final gift as I despairingly emptied the home we'd all loved for over forty years, was to find the socks, and to realize anew the depth of my mother's ever-expanding, creative love, and to vow to honor this tradition.

Laying on our backs in just-cut summer grass, chiggers nipping their way through our clothing, clouds above taking form, humidity tightening itself, making breathing sticky, we rested, sucking on *Jolly Rancher* watermelon and cherry Stix, listening to Elton John sing *Rocket Man* on the tiny red battery-operated transistor radio, as the sun dried our bathing suits, painted our skin with golden rays, and freckled our flesh with seasonal souvenirs.

When I was eleven, my dad took my brother, my middle sister, and me for a camping adventure. He packed the old green Chevrolet station wagon with our old canvas tent which had taken on the smells of Yellowstone's evergreens and Old Faithful from our trip their two years prior with my mother. He added flashlights, sticking two under the driver's seat, and put a pack of batteries in the glovebox. Next came our flannel sleeping bags, backpacks of shoes and clothing, and then the rusted green Coleman camping stove, with pots, pans, silverware, paperware, canteens, and dish soap all nestled in a box. My mother had prepared sandwiches to last for the first two meals on the road-mayonnaise, bologna and thin slices of Velveeta cheese nestled between slices of White Wonder Bread that was wrapped in wax paper. Baggies filled with homemade dill pickle slices and cherry tomatoes were also packed. The perishables were placed in the cooler on top of the ice, cans of soda, hot dogs, fruit, and miscellaneous other items that needed to stay cool. The car barely had room for us after the box filled with potato chips, cookies, baked beans and some other dry food items was crammed precariously into the back of the wagon.

We settled into the car and my dad kissed my mother through the open driver's window. We were pulling out of the driveway when she came running through the stones waving the big, marked-up map of southwestern Colorado my dad would've been unable to navigate without.

Traffic lightened once we got through Denver and headed towards Pueblo, slated to be our first stopping point, just in time for lunch. The terrain started to change as we headed towards Colorado Springs from Denver. The houses became sparse, and there were more and more pine trees and hills. We picked the city park for our feast. There were public bathrooms, a trash can, and the opportunity to stretch our legs without the worry of traffic.

My dad laid the big map on the picnic table, locating the Great Sand Dunes with his finger.

"Are you guys ready?" he asked. One of his friends had recently traveled a similar route we were planning with his own family and had shared enticing stories with my dad. He was more like a kid than we were, anticipating how much fun it would be to climb the shifting sands of the dunes.

We hit the dunes in the early afternoon, just as the sun had pushed away the clouds, radiating immense heat off the shifting, crystal sand. My dad slathered suntan lotion all over everyone's arms, legs and faces, and we headed off for an afternoon adventure. Along the way we made snow angels in the sand, waved at everyone (hoping we'd see someone we knew), and chased little lizards who were so quick that espying them felt like a desert mirage. At the end of the afternoon we were exhausted, our shoes were filled with sand making it difficult to walk, and we were in desperate need of water. We guzzled bottles of coke once we got to the car, and my sister and I ran back towards the sand, filling two bottles full of sand to claim as a souvenir. My dad was uncharacteristically patient with us and it felt like the day would last forever.

We drove for another hour to the campground, where we helped my dad pitch the tent and set up a rustic home around it. He rarely cooked at home, but that night, cooking over the kerosene stove, he treated us to savory hamburgers and charred hot dogs that tasted like the finest steaks. Baked beans, opened with a vintage metal contraption my dad had kept from the Marines, raw onions from the garden, potato chips, and homemade brownies completed the feast.

My dad let us eat as much as we wanted, warning us that we had to make our food last for four days. I wrapped a brownie in a Kleenex, deciding to save it for the trip the next day. It seemed as if there were no stores around for miles, which was possibly true. Regardless, I'd watched

enough TV westerns to understand what famine was like. Could we possibly starve here, on our family vacation?

My dad lit a campfire as the sunlight was fading, and we roasted marshmallows, pierced with sticks we'd found earlier around the campsite. At one point he told us, "last log before bedtime," as he tossed another log onto the flames, causing them to erupt sparks of greens, teals, and yellow-orange. He scared us with stories about ghosts who visit little children in the middle of the night while they are sleeping under the stars, and then corralled us into the tent.

"Good night my little campers," he told us. I think my brother was already asleep.

The next morning, we awoke to the chill of thin mountain air. I burrowed deeper into my flannel-lined bed and pulled my arms out of the sleeves of my sweatshirt, seeking body heat from my chest. I could smell bacon cooking on the stove outside the tent, and daylight peaked through the opened flap of our canvas home. The birds were chattering as the sun was beginning to extend itself across the campground. The early morning grass was wet with dew, and droplets of water clung to the car's windows.

I roused my siblings and we sat in our sleeping bags, rubbing sleep from our eyes. My brother's sudden scream pierced the serenity of the morning when he spotted a spider scampering across his backpack. My dad ran into the tent, holding a carton of eggs in one hand, and a metal spatula in the other-ready to clobber whatever wild animal might be attacking his children.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" he exclaimed, laughing as he told us, "Get up-it's way past sunrise. You'll never make in the Marine Corps like this!".

After breakfast, my dad taught us how to carefully wash and rinse the dishes in order to prevent the yellowing illness he'd become unfortunately familiar with during WWII when

sanitation lacked. After brushing our teeth In the KOA restrooms, we repacked the car and headed towards Mesa Verde to spend the next two days of the trip.

My dad had prepared us for Mesa Verde by relaying stories of primitive native American life-a people who had walked that sacred earth, leaving echoes and questions in abandoned cliff dwellings amongst shards and ruins. We set up camp once we climbed the steep drive in the park, and then joined a guided tour of the Puebloan ruins. The altitude, peaking at about 8,500 feet, causing our breath to shorten and our appetites to soar. Our legs ached that night and we slept early, foregoing the campfire stories. The next day, we repeated the journey, searching for petroglyphs, daring each other to pose on rugged rocks that tipped over great canyons, and buying remembrances at the bookstore. I still own my purchases: a faux arrowhead and a big coffee table book with huge, enchanting pictures of Mesa Verde.

During our second night, we were startled awake by baying coyotes. I don't think any of us could fall back asleep after that, and we headed out early, back towards Boulder where my mom was no doubt waiting in anticipation to reclaim her children.

As we wound down the mountainside, my father had an idea. Why not take an extra day-since we were already on the road-to visit Colorado's western slopes? I'm not sure how he communicated that to my mother-or if he did. There were no cell phones, and the telephone call would have been long distance, and possibly costly. I think he justified his rebellion by buying my mother two large boxes of succulent peaches from Paonia. The crop was early that year, according to the owner of the orchard we stopped at. He gave us each a peach, warning us to eat them outside the car.

“You’ve never tasted anything like this before,” he told us, taking his knife and slicing out a piece to give my father. “The most plump, juicy peaches you’ll ever feast on come from here…right here,” he said, pointing towards his trees with a sense of applause.

We camped near Grand Junction that evening, feasting on whatever tidbits were left in the cooler. My brother had a tummy ache that night from eating too much fresh fruit. My dad was not typically our “nurse” and I sensed that he knew it was time to get back home. He sent us to bed early, telling us we could sleep in the car tomorrow if we were still tired.

We left the campground early the next morning-before other campers were awake-and slowly spiraled down the canyon, headed home with our arms hanging out the car’s windows like tanned broomsticks, melding memories and singing silly songs in unison as we shared the last bag of red shoestring licorice. The cuffs of our jeans were filled with dirt and sand, and our hair was snarled and grimy as we marinated in the remnants of pine and smoky campfire, sticky marshmallows, syrupy mountain peaches, and the magic of a passing landscape.

In August for many years, my mother and I canned fresh Colorado peaches. Plump and furry, the fruit's juicy ripe fluids would drool down our arms with every bite we took from the fruit delivered from orchards along the western slopes. We looked forward to our peach festivities every year, always saving enough fruit to make some pies and to have on hand to slice onto breakfast cereal for a few days.

My mother had mastered canning, having done it innumerable times with garden berries, vegetables, and a variety of fruit from our trees. But canning peaches was the one time she enjoyed company.

After donning handmade aprons, we washed, flash boiled, peeled, sliced and then snugged the peach segments into sterile jars, adding a sugary solution before twisting on lids and setting the jars in a boiling bath for 20 minutes.

After their steam baths, the jars were carefully set on white cheesecloth towels to cool and seal. We'd sit in the other room, knitting or watching TV, waiting to hear the Pop! of the metal lids being sucked into the jar as they created a vacuum that would keep the fruit fresh for at least a year. Any jar that didn't seal became a topping for vanilla ice cream that evening. Once cool, we adhered labels across the jars' fronts, labeling the item and date of canning. The labels had originally been gifts to my mother and bore the inscription, "Love from Ann's Kitchen, to Yours" across them. She had them reprinted several times as the seasons passed.

Then it was time to tuck the peaches away on a shelf in the cool basement, where they waited for winter feasts. There was no reason to open them before the weather got cold, as there was plenty of fresh food to eat before then, but using self-restraint was a challenge. The contents

in the jar were like gold, and by the time my mother would open one for us, it was like eating a Hershey's bar after fasting from chocolate during Lent.

My mother died on August 14 in 2013. It had been the first August we did not can peaches together because she had been so ill. My sisters and I had brought her a few fresh ones from the Farmer's Market, but it wasn't the same. There would be no peaches waiting for us in December.

The first anniversary of her death approached after I had moved back to Kansas City, and was no longer in our Boulder home where we had lived together during the last two years of her life. I've learned that death anniversaries grip, whether you are looking at the calendar or not, and it is not possible to escape the reliving of grief that hasn't even had a chance to go dormant.

Was there a way to stave off the uncomfortable feelings that were overpowering me? Tears flowed as if she had just died the day before. I was supposed to start a new job the day after, and I didn't know how I was going to get through it without crying all day.

"Get it together," I told myself. "Don't feel sorry for yourself-a lot of people lose their mothers".

Out of my foggy state, I suddenly remembered the peach parties with my mother and thought, "what a great way to be with my mom". So, my husband helped me hunt down two cases of fresh peaches, which we finally found 120 miles from home in Manhattan, Kansas. On the drive back to Kansas City, we stopped at a grocery store so I could buy jars, lids and sugar. We unpacked the car and I found my mother's canning recipes. I would proceed the next day.

I began early in the day, just as my mother and I had. It takes a few hours to can peaches, and I wanted to be done by early afternoon because I had a hair appointment in anticipation of looking my best when I started my job the next day. I envisioned feeling close to my mother as I

toiled on this anniversary of the day her breath had expired, and was certain this would lighten my loss.

Early into the project, I cut my finger with a knife while paring a peach. I bled for a bit, and was forced to take a short break. Then I spilled sticky solution all over the stovetop, which required half a roll of paper towels to clean up. Several times into the project I realized why my mother loved company during canning: it is hard work. But yet, I persisted, working hard to mimic the way she had taught me to can, until my back ached, and the last sterile lid was snug on a jar.

The sugary sap of the peaches left a residue across the kitchen, creating a sticky bath for summer flies. I suddenly felt angry, void of joy, emptied of my humanness. I collapsed on the sofa, weeping. Hearing the "Pop!" of jars sealing eased my grief a bit, but then made me wish, again, for my mother's company.

Two years later I remembered the jars of peaches sitting in the dark in my basement near my idle sewing machine and the boxes of fabric my mother had dreamed of creating children's dresses from before illness and age had made her too tired. I held a jar of the now cloudy fruit to my chest as grief spilled down my shirt.

I was fourteen when I babysat for a flamboyant couple my sister usually sat for. She wanted to hang out with friends, needing a teenage Saturday night, so I agreed. I had been eyeing a pair of white platform sandals at the mall, and now my dreams of parading past the locker of my crush, wearing those darling shoes when spring arrived, could become reality with cash from this job.

The children's dad picked me up around 4:30, and we drove along South Boulder Road, winding our way west toward their house. The evening flowed as planned: dinner, decorating Valentine's Day cookies, watching some TV, pajama time, milk and cookies while I read them books and then time for bed. The children were energetic and inquisitive, but easy to redirect. I was grateful for what felt like a fairly easy night.

After they were asleep, I read a *Cosmopolitan* magazine I found lying on the coffee table and learned how to curl my hair to look like Farrah Fawcett's. I answered a quiz about eye color and the chances of falling in love and getting married before I turned thirty. I watched late night TV, trying to stay awake, while huddling under a lavender blanket in the chilly, hushed home. The thermostat must have been on a timer because at some point I was certain I could see my breath inside that house.

Finally, the parents segued home, an hour late, with their bodies blended together with another couple's as they skated their way along the long icy sidewalk and through the front door.

Their loudness was dissonant for a tired midnight, laughing and sloshing their words as the women tossed their fur coats onto the back of plaid stuffed chairs, and the men veered to the liquor cabinet to toast a nightcap.

I sat uncomfortably, waiting for my ride home. An hour later the guys cordially held my

coat, one at each side, while I embarrassingly stuffed in my arms. Then they kissed their giggling wives goodbye, and pushed me into the truck, where I sat awkwardly between them, shivering in the February Colorado cold. The dad, who assumed the driver's position, drove slowly at first, joking with the guy named Peter, who kept poking me near my breasts through the thickness of my wool coat, asking if I'd been kissed yet and if I was still a virgin. The truck was a stick shift, and every time the dad needed to shift, he'd place his arm between my thighs and exaggerate the motion needed to change gears.

My face burned red and I wanted to cry. My sister had never told me how date night ended.

When we got to the big, icy winding curve on South Boulder Road, about a mile from my home, the dad slowed the automobile and crept into the wrong lane before coming to a complete stop. The truck quieted and sputtered. I drew my breath in deeply, dreading what would happen next if the engine kicked out in the cold.

Suddenly, the dad revved the engine loudly several times, causing Peter to laugh and shriek.

"Dude-go for it!!" he yelled, slapping me firmly on the back.

And the dad took Peter's dare, taking the truck from 0 to over 70 miles per hour in seconds, as he crammed the gears, driving around the blind curve recklessly, daring oncoming traffic to end us. Luckily the traffic was sparse, and our only witness was the moon that pulsated its fullness above us. The guys laughed until we were at my house.

Peter opened his door, but refused to get out, making me climb over his lap to make my descent. While I was doing so, he tried to kiss me on the lips, grabbing both sides of my face in his greasy hands, but in his drunken sloppiness, he missed the mark.

"Fuck it!" he yelled, spraying spit all over my face as he did so.

He reached out just as I landed on the ground and slapped me hard on the butt, causing me

to lose my balance and nearly fall.

"Buh-bye, cutie pie," he yelled as he slammed the door shut while the dad simultaneously kicked up gravel and snow with the truck's tires as he sped out of the driveway.

I ran inside and into the bathroom, where I scrubbed my face with my bare hands, my coat still on, watching the night's filth circle down the drain and wondered, is this what love is like?

On a hot August night in 1980, I took a walk alone, after telling my parents I was going to go look at the stars.

Josh and I met in the middle, having each walked about a mile. We shyly held hands, talked for a bit, and then embraced-awkwardly, hesitantly, uncertain what to do. He asked if he could kiss me, and then did, with gentle passion after I nodded yes.

Josh took my hand and led me off the moonlit drive, where we kneeled, uninhibited, in a bed of overgrown brush near the edge of the gravel road, the stars our only witness. Josh cupped my chin in his hand and reached for my lips with his. I stopped worrying about my parents catching us and relented to the temptation.

A coyote sang out somewhere distant and then a dog barked, and a woman yelled, “quiet down!” as Josh and I danced together in the wildflowers, our legs and arms enmeshed.

Later, we stood, awkward again. He gently brushed dried grass from my hair and pulled pieces of bent grass from the back of my tank top. Then he pulled me close against his chest until I felt his heart tapping out the rhythm against my breast as we kissed our goodbyes.

My childhood dreams to dance were overshadowed by not having enough money, too many other family obligations, and being the middle child. So, in the eleventh grade, my friend and I ditched classes on Mondays for most of the spring semester and rode the city bus to the ballet studio on Boulder's Pearl Street Mall, where the teacher let us dance for free.

We'd run up the huge creaky staircase to the studio, pull off our jeans and sweatshirts, and join the students from the University of Colorado who were taking the dance classes for credit. Mary and I would parade around in the new leotards we had shoplifted, admiring ourselves in the long mirrors, stretch out along the barres, and then dance for hours, pretending we were in college. We'd side talk on breaks with the other dancers, chatting about boys, parties, and the stress of finals, as we metamorphosized into college girls.

After classes ended, we'd take the bus back to school, just in time for the final period. We'd walk through the front doors, as if we had just stepped outside to smoke with the stoner kids who hung out on the hill. Ravenous, we'd grab the sack lunches thrown into our lockers earlier that day, and head to our final classes without a conscience.

I transformed from being a straight A student that year, to being a private dancer who could pirouette right back into innocent teenager mode without hesitation. I still ponder how I got away with stealing, truancy, lying, and sculpting a dancer's body, without being noticed by the adults.

Tuesday, December 9, 1980. 6am. The clock radio on my bedside table wrestles me from sleep, blaring John Lennon's, "Imagine".

Eyes still closed, I join in, "…there's no heaven…It's easy…," while simultaneously deciding between wearing my 501 Levi shrink-to-fits, or a denim skirt–with my rainbow suspenders-to school.

I'm still reclined, in "just one more song" mode, blankets pulled up to my chin, when the D.J. from Boulder's KBCO tells the listeners that John Lennon was fatally shot the night before in NYC.

I'm awake now, sitting upright in bed, one leg draped over the side of the mattress, dazed, frantic, needing to talk with my best friend, but's it's impolite to call her house this early. Her dad would answer and sternly tell me, "Ann is still asleep, don't your parents teach you any manners?" in a tone that made it challenging to know if he was joking or not.

My friends and I are still mourning our beloved drummer John Bonham. His death lingers with a shrine of Led Zeppelin posters taped across half of the senior lockers. And now Lennon.

I shudder-partially from the chill in the house, but mostly from emotion I can't fully define.

I stand at my clothes closet and finally choose my T-shirt with a peace symbol on it to wear under a scratchy wool Woolrich sweater, my 501s, and knee-high Frye boots that cost me six months of babysitting money. I sit on the bedside for a moment, letting a Kleenex on my lap catch my tears.

My eyes are scarlet-veined when I finally make it down the stairs and into the kitchen for breakfast. Activism and rock & roll were silenced topics in my home. My dad detested Vietnam

War protests, taking them personally and horrified by how much American was changing, especially in attitudes towards the military. My mother loved music, but distrusted the rock & roll scene, worrying about the influence drugs and promiscuity at the wild concerts at Red Rocks and Folsom Stadium could have on her girls. Both my parents had a powerful work ethic, and spending money on concerts seemed frivolous.

"Did you hear that John Lennon died?" I mumble.

"Who?" my mother answers.

"John Lennon–one of the Beatles–you know…".

"Oh. Well, what a shame," she says, and walks back into the kitchen to fidget or bake or stir or mix.

"You look like a dork," my brother tells me.

I glare.

He wasn't satisfied.

"Think you're Mork and Mindy or something?" he says, reaching across the table and snapping one side of my suspenders.

I open my mouth, full of partially chewed pancakes, and display the contents for him.

"Grow up", he commands.

"You grow up," I snarl.

"Your mascara's smeared–raccoon eyes," he taunts, ready for a fight.

I jerk my plate from the table, slam it into the sink, and stomp up the stairs, pounding my heels into each one for effect, and finish getting ready for school.

Later that day, when the sun is sleeping and my tears have softened, I overhear my mother talking about me to my father: “She’s always so moody lately-just like my mother. She’s going to grow up and have no friends if she doesn’t straighten her attitude up."

And I draw in a deep, shuddering breath–the kind that comes when you’ve exhausted tears-knowing what hypocrisy it is to offer hate instead of love, to lack loyalty, to be unempathetic–callous, even-to the people you call family.

I’m in bed at 10, still fixated on John and Yoko, crying again for her loss-the world’s loss-of this great artist who dared to dream and push his message of justice and peace…of love, not greed…of the abandonment of power and possessions for a chance at oneness.

I lay quiet, covered in quilts, unable to sleep, feeling weighted by Lennon’s quest, while I awakened to his resistance.

Summer was barely cooling into early autumn, when the heat is still high, and the sun still sets late. Back-to-school shoes squeeze my feet, and I ache to be free in my open-toe espadrilles, their scarlet ribbons braided around my ankles, as I hunt for fresh produce at the local Farmer's Market with my mother, fish along Boulder Canyon with my father, shop for school clothes at the mall with friends, and lay for hours on the sofa, watching afternoon TV soaps with my sisters. I yearn to be walking down the make-shift runway my sisters and I created in the hallway where our bedrooms connect, showing off our new clothing after facials and make-overs, comparing tan lines with our favorite Hollywood stars'.

"You're almost tall enough to be a model when you wear those shoes!" my sister told me.

I jump down the school bus stairs, as it puffs and huffs its brakes at the intersection near our home, and tear off the binding leather shoes I'm forced to wear, cram them into my backpack, and run barefoot the quarter-mile jaunt home. I'm shedding authority, responsibility and constriction with each step forward, and that freedom feels exhilarating.

Around nine, after homework, chores and dinner complete, I'm lying on my belly on the hand-braided rug my mother made with pinks, mauves, and blues for my room, knees bent, my feet dancing to their own rhythm as the fan blades fly dusty air in my face as I try to cool down. I'm talking to my new friend about the first day back to school, our eye rolls simultaneously, even through the wire. We giggle as she tells me about the guy she met this summer at the pool, and then I tell her about a guy I have a crush on.

"I hope he asks me to the football games," I tell her.

Between being enrapt in the conversation and the noise of the fan, I hadn't heard my sister

burst open the bedroom door. She yanked the phone cord hard, causing the phone to disengage from my hand and fling into the wall, leaving a dent in the plaster.

I blush anger and embarrassment when she taunts and sings, “Na, na-you’ve got a cru-uhsh,” and laughs with a snort. She’s been listening in on one of the other phones, and demands I hang up the phone or she’ll tell our dad on me for trying to sneak-date before I’m 16.

I lay supine on my bed with my feet up against the headboard for a long time afterwards, thankful she didn’t hear my friend tell me her period was late.

I was jittery and uncertain that first day of high school. The sensation was similar to the way I had felt earlier that summer, on the first warm day in June at the swimming pool, when it wasn't really quite warm enough to just jump in up to our chins, and I had stood shivering on the side of the water, testing it with my big toe.

"Just jump in! What are you waiting for?"

I could still hear my brother's voice. He was already in the pool on his belly, treading water, his short, wet hair standing up in little tufts.

I just stood there, by the side of the pool, with the over-sized purple terry cloth beach towel wrapped tightly across my hips and abdomen.

I adjusted the blanket to make sure my thighs were covered and kicked water at my brother with my toe. He splashed me back, creating a small tidal wave throughout the pool, and then swam towards the deep end.

I sat at the edge of the pool, putting both feet in, while holding the towel tightly around myself until he was done swimming. The pool wasn't crowded and so I could watch him easily throughout the afternoon.

"Why didn't you get in?" he asked me as he pulled himself out three hours later. He stood shivering by the poolside, drying himself off with his towel.

"It's too cold," I told him.

It wasn't cold–it was a little chilly. The sun was out, and I would have quickly warmed up after getting used to the initial shock of the water's grip. How could I tell my brother I felt too fat and embarrassed to get into the water?

“Fat pig! The water’s going to overflow and drown the whole city when you get in! Better stop eating so much junk food, Bessie!” I imagined the mean kids taunting me. At 5’4, I weighed 110 pounds.

I felt that same intensity on the first day of school-as if I wanted my very self to just disappear. I hated how I looked, with all my imperfections-especially my legs, which would never look like the ballerinas I admired. And my hair. My sister called it a “rat’s nest”, and my mother was always fussing about how I should “put it up” or “curl it in the front”. You know those times you want to cry and shove everyone away, but have to act agreeable? Yea, this was one of those days. We all know boys don’t cry–but freshman high school girls better not cry either or they’ll be branded as weak for the years to follow.

All the older kids seemed to know each other at school that first day. The girls embraced in the hallway, flipping their hair, and comparing tan lines. The guys jumped “high-fives” with each other, hollered happy sounds, and paused to whistle as a group of cheerleaders, dressed in their uniformed short skirts and long ponytails, bounced by. One couple was making out, the girl’s back against the locker as her boyfriend leaned in to kiss her. A group of artsy kids in matching Goth-looking T-shirts was sitting on the floor in a circle, tossing a stuffed bear wearing a Tie-dye shirt back and forth. I felt jealous, of everyone–even the kid with the thick glasses who was handing out pamphlets about the chess club to everyone who walked through the glass front doors of the school.

I wanted to fit in–to be pretty, have a boyfriend, be a cheerleader, be admired and belong. As an introvert who loved to read about God and Victor Frankl’s philosophies about surviving prison camp, yearned to walk barefoot in nature, and hated styling my hair, I was certain I never would. I wanted to cry. I wanted to disappear.

And then I met Ana. It was a few days into the semester when she introduced herself to me. She seemed like an illusion, but accidentally or by fate, I never questioned our meeting. I embraced the gift of a meticulous friendship that gave me a center-a place of refuge and belonging, a sense of hope, and a place to pour my energy and creativity.

Ana and I clung to each other the way new friends do during those first days of high school when they finally discover each other amongst the noise and loneliness, both standing alone in the cafeteria or sitting in the back of the classroom, trying to look nonchalant, but certain everyone is laughing at them. I remember feeling such relief when I found Ana. My loneliness was transformed by our friendship, and I gave her 100 percent of me. There was an ever-growing intensity in our relationship, and I could tune out the world around me because of her, making the awkwardness of high school nothing but a distant ripple.

Our play was fun–more so in the beginning, of course, as time has a tendency of either making things mundane or creating damage from ill-intentioned moments. Even after the exhilaration of our time together ceased, we still held hands–as if our souls had merged. Ana consumed my time as I gave into her allure. She had so much to show me, to teach me, and for a long time, Ana fascinated me, in spite of warnings the adults-and later, my peers-began to harangue me with.

"You aren't yourself anymore," my mother told me.

"What you are doing with Ana is dangerous," the senior who sat next to me in orchestra told me. "I'm not going to have your back anymore if you keep messing up like this," she scolded.

"Get yourself together. Focus on something else. You are going to die if you keep hanging out with Ana," the school counselor said, with sincerity, but also while scribbling notes on another student's file while we talked.

But Ana charmed me-lured me in-until I became addicted to her. No one else, for all their words of advice, sarcasm, and criticism, stuck around. But Ana did. She was there for everything, helping me feel like I belonged.

Self-image was vital to our relationship. I wanted to look like the other girls-even better-as they walked through the school in their Levi jeans, cowl-neck sweaters and sassy ski jackets. One of the first things Ana taught me was how to catch my image as it reflected in the long glass windows that lined the corridor of the school, and how to draw in my stomach so it looked flat – even inverted, so I looked svelte like a model. We spent a lot of time practicing. She then taught me how to push my food around on my lunch tray so it looked like I was eating, and how to slyly push things under a napkin, just before jumping up to dump the entire, non-eaten tray of food into the trash can. She showed me how to wear baggie clothes so my mom wouldn't notice I was losing weight, and later, how to layer to keep warm, and tell everyone it was my idea of "fashion." That was believable. Colorado winters are long, and layers are necessary, and even in the warmer months with its unpredictable forecast, layers are acceptable.

When I started losing weight, Ana cheered me on.

"Just one more pound, and then you'll be beautiful!" she coached. "You can do it!"

Ana taught me how to precisely count the number of calories in food, whether it was fresh, canned, frozen, or wrapped in plastic, until it was intuitive. The counting started out benignly–in a science class when we were learning about nutrition–but later in the cafeteria, we began to count how many calories were in the pizzas, salads, tomato soup, hamburgers, green beans, and half-frozen, ready-to-expire milk cartons that were plopped on every tray by the cafeteria aides whether we wanted the liquid or not. We adventured the Ala Carte Line, deciding that the enticing line-up of Hostess Fruit Pies, Twinkies, Sno-balls and Ding Dongs were on the bottom of the list of

allowable foods. Ana and I decided that in order to look cool, we would buy these occasionally, displaying them on the table next to our tray like the popular kids did. We'd even walk around in the hall after lunch with a half-opened packet, pretending to take small bites like the skinny girls did.

Ana was with me when I bought a small journal one evening on a family shopping trip to TG&Y. The journal had a velvety cloth blue cover and its pages were neatly lined. It quickly served as our food diary. We filled the pages passionately with statistics of what we ate, what time we ate it, and how many calories of each item we consumed. Soon, we knew the exact calorie count of each giblet of corn, bite of bagel, sliver of cheese stick, and wedge of apple we consumed. We began to record the number of sips of water we drank throughout the day, finding great pride in the number of "zero calorie" entries we produced. Next came the record of our weight, including the time of day of the weigh-in, what we were wearing, and how many hours it had been since we'd last had anything to eat or drink.

Weighing in meant we needed a scale. Ana helped me locate every scale we could find in our proximity. We discovered one in King Soopers' grocery store, right next to the blood pressure cuff by the Pharmacy. Excusing ourselves to the bathroom at anyone's house was any easy way to weigh-in because everyone seemed to have a scale in that room. We found scales at the veterinarian and doctor's offices, the science room at school, and even in the church nursery.

The blue journal's pages became easily filled with numbers as our weigh-ins became daily, then twice-daily, and then as frequently as possibly. Ana and I were obsessed and concentrating on anything besides our weight and what it took to become thinner replaced focusing on anything, or anyone else, around us.

Occasionally, I woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare in which I was consuming large amounts of ice cream uncontrollably, shoving it into my mouth without being able to stop. The nightmare became more frequent, and one early morning I was so shaken by the dream, that I was compelled to get out of bed, and after peeling off my night clothes and undergarments, gingerly stepped on the scale. How much weight had I gained during that dream?

"Are you okay?" my mother asked.

Her voice piercing the quiet of the night scared me and I jumped off the scale, making a crashing sound as I hit the wall behind me. I had snuck into my parent's bathroom at 2am to use their scale, certain I had been quiet enough not to wake them up.

"Are you sick?" she asked.

"No. I'm fine, mom," I said, with a sense of dread. I knew I had been caught and there'd be no way to explain why I was weighing myself instead of sleeping. I quickly put my robe back on.

But my mother didn't say anything else to me except for "turn the light off when you're done, please". How could she not know? How could she not understand that Ana had taken over my life? I mean, she had warned me to stay away from Ana, but when the opportunity to pull me from her presented, my mother had rolled over in bed and gone back to sleep. It was the first time I felt fear-and embarrassment-about my friendship with Ana. I also felt alone and fragile, caught in a pattern I didn't understand until years later that was a type of addiction and followed the patterns of obsessive compulsive disorder I'd displayed when much younger.

Ana was pleased. I hadn't gained any weight while stuffing my face with sugary foods in my dream, and so instead of going back to bed, she encouraged me to exercise for several hours

before it would be time to get up and go to school. Sit-ups. Push-ups. Ballet warm-ups. Exhausted, around 4am, I finally slept after recording more numbers in my blue journal.

Ana then taught me how to punish myself for not complying with the strict meal plan we had come up with. If I ate more than was allowed, I was mandated to do 100 sit-ups every hour, on the hour. She taught me how to do isometric exercises so I could hide the fact that I was moving. This came in handy during school, church, on the school bus, during dinner time-basically anywhere I was in public, where dropping to the floor to exercise was not a proper possibility. In order to eat anything, I was now mandated to a certain number of exercises. I started jogging because it seemed like an easy way to burn calories fast. Other kids were doing it too, so no one questioned my sudden interest in wanting a pair of blue Nike Waffle Trainers.

"Can you please be quieter please," my mother scolded. "Stop running up and down the stairs. Why can't you plan ahead a bit so you don't have to make so many trips up and down?" she asked, innocently, not realizing my obsession with calories, numbers and weight loss now included sets of stair flights in order to justify a meal.

It wasn't until I was in my late twenties that she confessed her history with anorexia.

"You know what finally helped me get over my obsession to be thin?" she asked me, holding up a picture of my dad and her when they were dating, her arms pencil thin.

"What?" I asked, feigning interest because there was no way anything would ever encourage me to have fat thighs or a bulging stomach.

"You. Your sisters. Your brother. Having my babies meant everything to me, and I had to feed you in order for you to survive," she told me, trying to encourage me. "I promised God that I'd do anything for you-after years of not being able to conceive, you were such a gift," she said, her voice trailing.

I had just gone through a divorce and felt convinced I'd never find love again-or anyone who'd want to have children with me. I was the skinny odd person everyone stared at. I had one failed inpatient treatment already, and my blue numbers journal now had siblings. I was too thin to have my periods, so having children didn't even seem possible any way. I felt confused, lost, and alone on a journey in life that didn't look anything like it was supposed to. Looking back, I wish it had been as simple as just conceding at that moment with my mother, laying my head on her shoulder like I had when I was six and came home exhausted from being teased at school, and letting my mother magically take away my pain. But Ana had been my obsession for so long at that point, and the understanding and treatment of eating disorders in such an infantile stage, that this magic never happened. I do remember telling my mother that I had no idea how to get over my eating disorder.

"It's not like I can just stop having it, you know, like how an alcoholic has to stop drinking to get sober. I have to eat. I just can't figure out how much to eat, and when to stop so I don't eat too much…" I had started to cry.

My mother knew I was in a bad place. She promised that something would happen that would turn things around for me.

"I feel it," she said. "I pray for you all the time."

Ana, of course, is the code word people often use when referring to their eating disorders. It's a way to keep the obsession cryptic, giving it a sense of mystical, magical-ness, where the control is given externally. It allows a sense of mystery and privacy. For me, my friendship with Ana began as a way to gain comfort and control during some really stressful times. I survived sexual assault in both high school and college, lost a child, was drugged by a friend who thought it was "funny", and endured physical and emotional battering in two relationships as a young adult.

My marriage ended due to infidelity. There was violence, loss, guilt, and the typical things kids experience while trying to figure out their independence-but as time when on, I felt violated, fearful, and ashamed. Somehow, the traumas I experienced became wrapped in layers around my soul, acting as a barrier between what I wanted my life to look like, and how it actually came to unfold.

Having Ana to turn to gave me that sense of friendship I needed-that ever-nebulous relationship one craves but doesn't really have the ability to fully determine. Ana isn't someone I made up in a moment of psychosis. She was a relationship I had with my body, food, soul, and the world around me. Our friendship led me down a path of severe starvation, isolation, and illness I am lucky to have survived.

Even today, so many years later, our friendship is still something I crave. It's as if I am Eve in the glorious garden of Eden, and Ana is that beautiful, forbidden fruit hanging just inches from my reach as it taunts me with its ripeness. After tons of therapy, failed inpatient treatments and years of desperately learning to at least maintain my weight, I have come to a sense of being able to thrive without Ana by my side. I still yearn for our closeness in some perverse way; if it were possible, an order of protection should have been filed thirty years ago against this monster.

The damage from Ana is chiseled in me, a statement bared whenever my medical records are perused, when I walk down the aisles at church, when I am visited at home and the awkward issue of meal time approaches, or when new friends notice that chunks of my young adult life seem to be missing when we explore our histories, and how we can't relate when they begin to brag about their children. The temptation to return to Ana's destructive, seductive comfort to avoid a lifetime of inner angst that can be triggered by the smile of a stranger can still be overbearing. Whenever I'm honest about my eating disorder, I've taken a step away from Ana, and writing

gives me the ability to have that voice of authenticity, while being able to walk for miles without her companionship.

When I was younger, suicide was a very private thing. People who died by suicide left behind their loved ones, who were typically not supposed to talk about what happened. The deceased was quietly buried–often with a private family funeral and graveside service. An accidental mention of the deceased any time later was met with glares from adults whose warning eyes silenced the curious children in the room.

I was about twelve when I asked my pastor about suicide. I wanted to know whether it was an unpardonable sin–the type he preached about occasionally. He looked at me inquisitively, and then told me he didn't have an exact answer for me, but that the Bible teaches suicide is the same thing as murder -which is something God forbids.

"We are not to hurt that which the Lord creates", he told me. "Remember, you are made in the image of God, and when you see your face in the mirror, you are seeing God's reflection".

I wasn't satisfied with that answer. I wanted a definitive answer. Yes or no–people either do, or don't get into heaven after suicide.

I read the Scriptures, trying to figure this out. It didn't seem right that people who were sad enough to not want to live, were somehow not permitted to see Jesus. It also seemed impossible that someone could be that despondent-enough to not want to live-and that people around did not notice. As a child I was so rarely alone that I couldn't fathom how someone could actually have the opportunity to slip away to commit a fatal act without being noticed.

I struggled with depression as a young child, so I understood the pain of feeling a sadness so deep the world could sometimes feel bleak. At times I felt unloved, unneeded, and useless. I knew what it felt like to be bullied, and the reverberating pain of being shamed and humiliated by

peers. I think I wondered about suicide and heaven because of my own inclinations to depressive episodes.

I knew some very sad people, even as a child. My best friend attempted suicide during the summer between 8th and 9th grade. She didn't start school that fall and wouldn't answer my phone calls. I had no idea what was going on. Her parents had just divorced, and I knew she was troubled by their separation and torn by loyalties. My mother somehow found out what had happened and pulled me aside one day after school. She gently relayed the news, reassuring me that Noel would be "just fine in time". Noel started school about a month late, and she did not seem okay. She wouldn't talk to me. In fact, she wouldn't talk to anyone. We had been orchestra and art pals; she no longer played the violin or attended any of the art classes we had excitedly signed up for together. She ate her lunch alone and got some sort of release from gym classes so she would walk the perimeter of the field during gym or sit on the bleachers reading when it was too cold to be outside. It appeared the teachers had been instructed never to call on her, as whenever we had to present to the class, Noel was given a pass.

I wrote Noel a letter a few weeks later. Tearfully, contemplating each word, I begged her to talk with me–to let me know what was going on. She wrote me a letter back, sticking it between the metal grate on my locker door. In the note she told me she was ruined. Her summer had been filled with her parents fighting, the sale of most of their possessions (including her violin) because her now single mother needed money, and her struggle with depression. Noel's family had moved to Boulder three years prior after one of Noel's school (and bus) mates had been abducted on her way home from school and murdered. Noel suffered from incredible survivor's guilt–and fear–over the incident. She'd been forced into adulthood too quickly, and now, for the second time in just three years, had lost stability.

Over that school year, Noel began to talk again. Our friendship, however, was never the same. She was guarded, even haunted, by things she couldn't talk about. I learned later that the older neighbor who lived down her street had sexually assaulted her that summer after she had trusted him, needing a "friend." She'd been afraid she was pregnant when she attempted suicide.

"My dad would've killed me," I remember her saying.

I was a teen–immature, dealing with my own insecurities and depression issues–and was ill-equipped to reach Noel in a way that might have helped. She ended up dying by suicide several years later. I will forever wish I had that year in school back. Perhaps I would've been stronger – better equipped to talk with her, invite her to my home a few times, reach out to an adult who could've offered the missing links to Noel's need for feeling loved, accepted, needed. I've heard what you're probably thinking–"it's not your fault"–but maybe, in some ways it was.

I began to ask more spiritual leaders about suicide several years later. I argued with a pastor once who told me suicide was an ultimate selfish sin that barricaded someone from heaven.

"What a waste," he told me. "Someone might be a believer in Jesus their whole life, but then not have enough hope and faith to make it through a dark time."

Suicide, and the prevention of it, are not as simple as "making it through a dark time." There will be more dark times ahead–that's the human condition. Most people I know are suicide survivors in some way or another, bearing scars from their own attempts, or struggling with the loss of a child, partner, sibling, friend, or someone who seemed "too strong" to die by suicide.

I've come to understand suicide as not someone's spiritual life gone into failure mode, but about life becoming overwhelming, and a hope relief from pain in future, dismal. It's not about being too weak, or not strong enough. It's complex and heart-breaking, and I am grateful it is no

longer as private an issue as when I was young. It gives hope for prevention and hope for survivors who need safe and loving places to process their griefs, their questions, and their guilt.

My experience with Noel changed me. I miss her, still–mostly, what we had before her world changed that summer before her will to live and hope for the future began to falter. She became broken and traumatized by things that led to impulses to just stop, forever, her hauntings. I was inadequate for Noel, and ultimately, she rejected me which hurt and confused my sense of self and ability to be a friend. Eventually, I backed away because I felt I had nothing left to offer. I wish there had been school counselors at that time who would have talked about suicide during an all-school assembly, and who would have noticed the signs and symptoms of depressed students. None of them ever seemed to notice my own depression, even though looking back it should have been obvious…the times I'd cry all day, sit alone writing in my journal instead of participating in class, and my infatuation with writing about death for every English assignment-certainly "red flags" as we understand teen behavior today.

What offers hope is that the support for suicide is increasing. It's less a shameful secret, and more of an open and honest conversation. There are suicide hotlines to call and even text. There are support groups (some online), medications, counseling, books, and even a World Suicide Prevention Day (September 10) set aside to give a special space for people to share their stories and for resources to be offered to those struggling with suicide.

I'll always wish Noel was still here, breathing life and love. Her story has become part of mine, and gives me strength to face the dark times, and courage to reach out to others who struggle. For whatever the after life looks like, I hope Noel knows how much I loved her.

I told my doctor: “I think I have an eating disorder.”

It was early April my third year in college and I was obsessing so much about food and my weight that I was having trouble having enough energy to walk the campus to get to all my classes. Even when I slept, the images in my thoughts were all about ways to restrict food and fears of being fat.

He stood, hovering over me, his smile fading. I was sitting on the edge of the examining table in a paper gown, shivering.

“An eating disorder-like Karen Carpenter?”

“Yes.”

“You are so young-you’ve got your whole life ahead. Why would you do something like that to your potential?” he asked. “You do know Carpenter is dead, don’t you? It’s was all over the news not too long ago.”

I drew in a deep breath and my right foot began to wiggle back and forth the way it always does when I am nervous.

“Stay in college. Find a boyfriend. Make something out of your life,” he told me. “Most of all, eat. You have to eat. It’s not that difficult.”

“But…” I started to answer, feeling something between embarrassed and dismissed.

“You look pretty healthy to me,” he answered, with a bit of a parental tone. “Didn’t we do labs around Christmas time?”

He picked my chart up off the countertop near the glass jar of over-sized cotton balls and paper-covered swabbing sticks and began to flip through its pages.

Refusing to be slighted, I told him “I’m losing a lot of weight. I don’t want to eat and it’s beginning to scare me.”

I looked down at the floor, my face feeling flushed.

Then I twisted on the table and looked at the monstrous metal scale that stood in the corner of the room. His nurse had weighed me on it while taking my vitals just minutes before he’d walked in the room. After she weighed me, she tried to take my blood pressure, but my arm was so thin that the adult-sized cuff wrapped around it twice.

“This isn’t going to work. Geesh, you’re skinny—I’d die to have your figure,” she said, excusing herself to leave the room in search of a pediatric cuff.

My doctor looked at the scale, then at me, and then at my medical chart again. He sat down in a chair with a black leather cushion and wheels and rolled backwards towards the scale.

“Well, your weight *is* down a bit…four, five—no, eight pounds, since December,” he noted. “Maybe the scale needs to be calibrated. I’ll have my receptionist call Doug to come look at it.”

He sighed and rolled the chair back towards me.

“Eating disorder? I just don’t get it. Are you nervous? I can prescribe something to help with anxiety. A lot of women get that at your age.” He said.

Anxiety? Maybe. I wasn’t sure. I did feel anxious. Staying thin was a big job that took a lot of energy.

“Maybe,” I said.

He pulled a prescription pad out of the pocket of the lab coat he was wearing and scribbled something on it. Then he signed and dated it.

"Start with one a day for three days, then two a day for a week. If you aren't feeling better, call my office and we can talk about next steps," he said as he handed me the prescription. "And for goodness sake, stop at McDonald's on your way home and get a burger and fries-maybe a milkshake," he said as he stood to mark the end of my appointment.

"You can get dressed now. Make a follow-up appointment with me in three months."

Then my doctor left. He left me sitting there, in a paper dress on the edge of a stainless table, shivering with fear, confusion and shame. It had taken weeks of courage to make an appointment with him, and I had rehearsed what I would say to him. I knew I needed help-that my obsession with being thin had now detoured into a true eating disorder. I had a boyfriend. I was doing well in school. I wasn't trying to disregard my life. I wanted to eat again-but I couldn't. I knew I needed help. I knew for the first time that I couldn't stop the pattern alone and I had reached out to someone I trusted.

This marked the first time I reached out to a professional about my eating disorder in a serious attempt for help. It also denoted the first of many ill-treatments I would receive around what became a series of labels scribbled in my medical records that I get to carry for life. I have the day, date, place and time (Tuesday, April 1995, Boulder, Colorado, Alpine Drive, around 11am) scripted like a journal entry in my brain, where it takes up space with other memories I have of feeling defeated, afraid, demoted, and overtaken by people in authority who misuse power.

I lost track many years ago of how many times I've been told to "just love yourself," or "you aren't begin grateful (and that's why you have an eating disorder, are depressed-or are whatever psychiatric label we justify this prescription for)."

I left my doctor's office and headed to go work-out. I did not stop at McDonald's. I did not try the anxiety medication. Instead, I continued to fixate on my phobias about food and fat,

participating in the ritualized behaviors that brought me both peace and war within myself.

I learned early that there weren't very many people I could trust, and that love always seemed to be turning away from me. As I've gotten older, what I really wish to do is examine the treatment I received in a variety of eating disorder settings, and expose what went well, and what was nearly lethal. None of the inpatient centers I've stayed at are still in business, so perusing history will be difficult, yet it's something I feel compelled to do. I used to tell myself to "just get over it and let bygones rest". This feels not just dismissive of myself, but of the others I've met along the path who struggled with eating disorders. Some have died, others are thriving… and some still struggle. I feel obligated to help the ones who've yet to reach out for support-to help them avoid mistreatment and to lessen the number of years it takes to recover.

I love watching autumn Canadian geese formations flocking overhead, how they blur the fall colors, erupting in bursts of fire along the treetops. It mirrors childhood episodes with my father. We'd be outside harvesting the final pumpkins, or plumping straw onto the garden ground, getting it ready for winter slumber, when he'd suddenly pause, head turned upward, and point to the sky telling me to "Shussssh, now listen—do you hear them?"

And I'd obediently pause and listen to the hawonk, hawonk, hawonk of the geese flying over in shifting formation.

We'd stand there, my father and I, until the parade of geese and their music, had progressed across the horizon, like soldiers, marching out of view. My father would tell me about his childhood autumns, in the suburbs of Chicago, when his own father and he would stand outside in the shifting seasons, buttoning sweaters that just yesterday were still folded in a moth-proof box in the attic.

My father would grow quiet then, and reflect on later autumn days, when his youth had passed, and his father and mother were thousands of miles away, welcoming autumn with pumpkins and leaf-raking extravaganzas, that included drinking warm alcohol beverages with neighbors, but for my father, clad in fatigues, his youthfulness heavied by boots caked in mud and a helmet weighting his freedom, the clouds of autumn that season blended with the smoke of artillery, and smothered the landscape in the crimsons and ambers of war.

The winds along the foothills gust in chilly torrents mid-day on New Year's Day, and funnel dust and bits of dried, splintered, golden weeds in spiral dances that circle across the yard before relaxing their way back into the shadows of the lengthening day. Just a week before, soft snow had fallen, rising until it wrapped itself like a soft blanket over the bottom rail of the horse's fence that ran the perimeter of our property. Last year's snow ripples hard and crusted as the wind embeds it with dirt and tiny rocks, bearing the weight of a tired year, blowing away the old.

After our move to Boulder, my paternal grandfather, “Grandpa Mack”, who relished traveling between his Illinois and Wisconsin homes throughout the seasons, began to spend summers and Christmas seasons with us. It was a big relief to my father, whose biggest regret when we were relocated from Illinois to Colorado for his job, was leaving his father behind.

Grandpa Mack defined joy and unconditional love. He laughed readily, and nothing seemed to really bother him. He lived in the moment, enjoying puffing on his pipe, sharing the myriad of sweets he packed in his suitcase for us, and sitting with my grandmother in lawn chairs, chatting for hours. Antics that annoyed my mother, would make my grandfather laugh with zeal. Partially because he didn’t have to deal with our naughty behavior all of the time, and partially because I think he knew that in the long run, love mattered more than discipline.

Grandpa Mack loved his grandchildren without reserve. He had special nicknames for each of us. I was his “Sue-a-Lou” (Susan Louise) and I can still hear him singing this to me when I close my eyes and drift back in time. My grandpa lit up my world. I have many memories tied with him, including fishing excursions, adventures in the candy store, being rocked by him when my tummy hurt, and being taught how to dig earth worms out of muddy ground for later fishing use.

In late July during my grandfather’s visits, when, by noon, the hair along our necks wound into moist curls and the fans in each of the bedrooms of our non-air-conditioned home whined 24/7, my dad’s tomato plants had just reached the state where they were filled with aromatic, curling leaves, and ripe with flowers that promised an excellent harvest. My grandfather was an early riser, and after breakfast, he’d head out with my father to inspect the garden. That feared morning would always come-that day they’d discover some of those strong tomato vines stripped

of their leaves. The dreaded green, horned, tomato worms had hit overnight like a fearsome bolt of lightning. My father would leave to work in an uproar, his precious tomato plants in ruin.

My grandfather would just wink, wish him a good day, and tell his son, “Ron, don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

My grandpa would then summons his army-recruiting as many kids in the house as possible-to head out to the garden, where he’d pay us a nickel for each worm we found. He’d carry out the dented lid of our old aluminum trash can like a shield, and holding it flat under each plant, pluck off the worms with his bare fingers as we excitedly pointed them out. After scouring the plants for as many worms as we could find, we’d trek over to the little sidewalk by our garage. Here, my grandpa would take each worm, one at a time, and toss it to the ground, then squish it with the heel of his boot until green guts flew out in multiple directions. It didn’t seem cruel then, just gross and exciting. To this day, when I inspect my own summer tomato plants for the dreaded worms, I feel as if my grandfather is standing beside me, ready with the trashcan shield.

When Grandpa Mack died unexpectedly of a heart attack on September 24, 1976, part of my heart went dark. Not the part with all the precious memories, but the part where I anticipated his visits, and where our love melded in playful fun and unequaled trust. I do believe in heaven and an after-world, and even though they say that veil is thin, I wish it wasn’t there at all. The last time I saw my grandfather was just a few weeks before he died. He had spent his usual summertime with us in Boulder, fishing at the lake, grilling chicken, smoking his pipe, taking time to call friends back home, and spending long days helping my mother while my father was at work. He was a faithful companion and we adored him.

Even as a child, I sensed something wasn’t quite right that last summer. No one said Grandpa was sick, but in honesty, I sensed he knew something he was not sharing. He had surgery

a few months earlier due to a problem with swallowing and was a little overweight, but other than that I did not know of any health conditions he had. He was in his 70s, so maybe I was just worried about his aging.

He spent time with me one afternoon a couple of weeks before he left to go back home. He took me shopping, something we had never done alone before. While we were out, he told me he wanted to buy me something special. We chose a pale green rod and reel combo, and I promised I'd fish often, even when he wasn't able to be with us. He told me he loved me, and that he was worried about me sometimes because I needed extra love. I'd had some challenges when I was younger. For example, I didn't talk until I was three, and had a history of experiencing disabling anxiety attacks during school that required frequent trips to the nurse's office and a lot of missed school. I brought the rod and reel up to my bedroom when we got home instead of leaving it in the garage with the other fishing equipment we had. I wanted to savor this gift from grandpa.

On the way back from dropping him off at the airport a couple of weeks later, my dad, who was driving, said nonchalantly, "what if my father doesn't make it back for Christmas?".

It was an offhanded remark, yet poignant. I am certain, looking back, that he worried about losing his dad just as I had about losing my own parents. I cried the rest of the way home, and well into the rest of the day. My family wasn't the best about dealing with grief or being supportive with things that brought tears. I laid on my bed alone, feeling overwhelmed with sadness, embarrassed with the tears that wouldn't stop flowing. I was certain I could not go on if my grandfather died.

I've often wondered if my grandfather suspected something was wrong with his health that summer, and if in his own way, was trying to prepare me. The rod and reel remain one of my most

treasured possessions, and the duo rests in my bedroom now, leaning against the wall near my bed, as if waiting for my grandfather to walk in anytime, ready to take me fishing.

My maternal grandmother, Martha Schneider, lived with us for many years during my childhood. When we moved to Colorado from Illinois in 1969, my father included a special annex on the main floor of the house he designed for us that were her living quarters. She shared meals with us, but also had a large room and bathroom to give her independence and privacy.

Although I was just fourteen when my grandma Schneider died, my memories of her are vivid. She loved handmade dresses made of floral prints, singing along to hymns on Christian radio on her static-ridden AM radio, orange marshmallow "Peanut" candy, zinnias and daisies, and climbing in the family station wagon for drives up the mountains as we looked for deer and enjoyed lunches along the way, sitting at cement picnic tables at the same pull-off along Boulder Canyon.

My grandma loved to share memories of her earlier days in Wisconsin. She also had several friends who would visit often, heading to her room where they'd laugh for hours, telling stories in strong German accents. Grandma Schneider was Lutheran and would remind us to say a prayer before meals if we forgot. She also loved to talk on the telephone to her kids–my mom's sister and three brothers–who lived in Illinois, Washington, Oregon and Michigan. Their conversations would be a combination of German and English, and I loved to listen nearby, trying to understand what she was saying.

My grandmother sometimes scared me when she chided my behavior, her harsh German accent making her sound angrier than she really was. Not that her anger wasn't warranted at times. I could be sassy to her, sometimes sticking out my tongue at her in disrespect. I did other things on a dare from my older siblings I'm ashamed to mention. She'd take off her slipper and raise her hand up to me-and I would run! She told my mother several times that I was "a child of the devil's".

I grew out of that behavior, thankfully, and wear the guilt of not always being the best granddaughter.

As my grandmother aged, she made the decision to move to a nursing home. She argued with my mother, who assured my grandmother that she was "not a burden". Grandma Schneider won and moved from our large house into the nursing home's tiny room when I was around eleven. For several years, my mom would load up the car with homemade soup and rolls, magazines, bags of candy, tubes of Ben Gay rub, and new (or mended) clothing, and we'd head off for a visit with grandma. Rain, sun, snow, ice–my mother was so committed to caring for her mother that we often drove through risky conditions just so she could be reassured that all was well. In the 1970s, we relied on the telephone. There were no devices that would allow us to see my grandmother–no Skype, Messenger, Facetime–just an old, red rotary phone that sat by my grandmother's beside. When my grandmother wouldn't answer that old phone, my mother would panic. She'd call the nurse's station, whose phone was unreliably answered. My mother would dial and redial, trying to not let us know she was worried.

My grandmother had a stroke in 1975 on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. My mom got a call from the nursing home to let her know my grandmother's health had deteriorated quickly and she was in an ambulance, headed for the ER. By the time my parents arrived at the hospital, my grandmother was barely alert. My mother held her own mother's hand, talking gently to her while she breathed her last and finally met her Savior and my grandfather in eternity–something she had talked about looking forward to for many years. I had discovered a box in my mother's closet several months prior to this that contained an outfit, a prayer book, a necklace, and some instructions written in my grandmother's Germanic script. These were to be her funeral clothes and other items to be buried with, as well as the scripture and hymns she wanted at her funeral. As

a child I thought it was odd for someone to think about their death–even plan for it. As an adult, I understand the yearning to reunite with loved ones.

One day, several years after my grandmother died, my mother, who had been very private in her grief, turned to me and said, “You know, it took me a long time to stop reaching for the phone every time I wanted to tell your grandmother something. When she was alive, I made a list throughout the day of things to share with her. I’d write things down so I wouldn’t forget to tell her. Every day so much happens that I want to tell her, questions I have. I really miss my mother”.

My mother stopped and breathed in deeply, not a public displayer of tears, and finished, “I think not having my mother to talk to has been the hardest part of losing her. I miss getting to do things for her too-like buying gifts and making her dinner. But not being able to talk with her has made her death so final. I’ll never get used to this”.

My mom died on August 14, 2013 and it was then that her own words became mine. To help with my grief and to find a place to list all the things I wanted to tell my mother-the questions I had throughout the day, the wisdom I needed from her, the times I needed to vent and have her tell me everything was going to be okay-I began a journal I entitled, “Hi, Mom”. This is the way I always greeted her–in person and via our phone conversations. Just a simple exchange to prelude our conversation. I wonder how similar the conversations I keep in this journal are to the ones my mama had with her own mother-and how similar they are to the ones she wished to have after my grandmother’s death. The journal entries are like valuable letters I never got to send to my mother.

I wish I had known my grandmother when she was younger. She had five living children–two daughters and three sons. Life was hard on my grandparents’ rural dairy farm in Medford,

Wisconsin during the early 1900s. The winters were brutal, and there wasn't indoor plumbing. They slept on mattresses stuffed with old straw, and nearly lost everything the winter my grandfather slipped on ice and broke his back while feeding the cows early one morning.

My grandparents were first generation immigrants to America. They worked hard to learn English and American ways, dealing no doubt with a spot of grief in their heart for the country and family left behind (Poland, Germany and the surrounding areas). But they were motivated by the American dream, by tattered memories of why they had immigrated, and by the wisdom to know the oft-destructive nature of looking back.

My grandmother lived simply-her material possessions had never been many-but moving in with my family meant scaling back even more as she rid herself of now unnecessary items. Each possession she had was precious, be it rusted pins and some sewing needles stuck into a red wool, sawdust-stuffed tomato pin cushion that had been her mother's, the old Bible with the family tree written on the first page, a handful of homemade cotton dresses she had made for herself, or her aging Steiff monkey with stiff, wiry fur-small enough to sit in an adult's palm.

I can't recall if the monkey had a name, just that it held a prominent spot in her heart. When I was five, this monkey developed a habit of wandering. It kept disappearing from my grandmother's dresser where it typically sat, like a guardian angel, keeping her safe. The only thing my grandmother could think of was that it was escaping while she slept.

My grandmother would call my mother into her room, expressing disbelief that her beloved monkey was once again missing. "Ach! Naughty little monkey!" my grandmother would exclaim, interspersing German with English.

As it turns out, the monkey had a little friend named David (my younger brother), who coveted this little primate. David would sneak into my grandmother's room and escort the monkey

into his own. This happened repeatedly, each time my grandmother and mother pretending loudly that the monkey had escaped on its own. Being just five, my imagination was shrewd, and I believed the little stuffed toy could actually become real. I think my brother believed, as well, that the little monkey was alive in its own magical, delightful way.

My mother would always locate the little monkey in my brother's room-tucked into his blankets or hiding under his pillow, sitting on the nightstand, sleeping in a dresser drawer under layers of socks and pajamas—and she would help my brother carry the monkey back to my grandmother's room.

"Ach! Goodness!" my grandmother would cry out in delight as my brother shyly handed over the monkey. She'd hold the monkey to her face, kiss its nose, and then set it on her lap. Patting her knee, she'd invite my brother to join her.

No one chided David for "stealing." No one teased him for believing in the make-believe. Instead, the clever little monkey's antics helped secure a special bond between my grandmother and my brother where the imagination of a young child melded with the wisdom of an elder, making their world feel adventurous and complete.

One day, the monkey was given permission to stay in my brother's room permanently. I think my grandmother realized he loved it at least as much as she did. Somehow, he had proven himself a suitable keeper. David still has that treasured, worn, naughty little monkey. The monkey holds his childhood innocence and the blurred memories of the grandmother who died when he was just eleven. The monkey bears an omnipresent sense, inviting opportunities for more fun and love as my brother passes it along to his own children and grandchildren.

I don't know the story of how my grandmother gained possession of the monkey to begin with, and truly, there's no one left in my family to ask. Maybe it was her nursery toy–something

that comforted her while immigrating from Germany to America. Maybe it was a gift from my grandfather, or maybe it belonged to one of her sons who tragically died in infancy. Perhaps, on a quiet night when the crickets sing to the wind, the monkey will come sit on my brother's lap and tell the tale of how and when he met Martha Elizabeth Schneider. The world-traveled monkey will tell him of the adventures they shared when my grandmother's health was still strong, and when the tears she shed were those of childhood skinned knees and disappointments, instead of the adult ones I'd remember hearing from her room when she thought we were all asleep.

I held her hands, fingers bent with rheumatoid arthritis and nearly ninety years of hard work, and we sang the first verse of "Amazing Grace" together, my grandmother's German accent standing strong over my 14-year-old voice. Then we hugged, collar bones touching, arms around each other's neck. She waved goodbye, seated on her bed with the swayed mattress, as I turned at the doorway of her room. I was old enough to understand the lifeless bond between a grandmother and her daughter's child.

A few days later all I had to hold was a small white stuffed lamb that used to sit by her bedside. She used to hold it in the palm of her hand and move her fingers, making it look like it had jumped. We'd laugh and beg her, "do it again, grandma!".

The Sunday after Thanksgiving, my grandmother had a stroke and never regained consciousness, dying later that night.

The nursing home called on Monday and told my mother she had five days to clear her mother's room to make space for someone new. There was a funeral to plan, beds to make for out of town relatives, plane schedules to coordinate, trips to the mortuary for decision-which casket, what flowers, what scripture.

I needed silence. And space. To grieve, to make space in myself for this transition, to say goodbye to my grandmother. Instead the house was noisy, busy and overstimulating. Chores were assigned, casseroles overflowed the refrigerator as giving friends came and went. The cousins ran around, chasing each other through the house, laughing, teasing each other, daring the adults to discipline. My memory of people trying to cope, evokes, through my brokenness, images of unsympathetic, unfeeling, incarnate strangers.

I was miserable. How can life go on-and, so quickly?

After the funeral my mother packed her suitcase, hugged my father, and then someone drove her to the airport where she flew from Colorado to Wisconsin with her mother, who was dressed in a simple dress, holding her cross, sleeping eternally, her graying hair on the casket pillow. She was buried two days later in Medford, next to my grandfather, a man I never met who I'm told was generous, kind, patient, and gentle.

Anxiety rose. I'd never been apart from my mother before. Death loomed strong. What if my mother didn't return? Was my grandmother really in heaven? Who would bring candy and hugs to her sweet roommate in that old nursing home now? Who was going to cook supper for my father in my mother's absence? What if I cried at school, thinking of my grandmother? What does it feel like to be dead, trapped in a casket, dug deep into the cold soil? Were my grandparents dancing in heaven, like everyone told me they were? Would I ever stop associating the overbearing smell of white lilies with death?

These are questions I couldn't voice, didn't journal, but held in, until my heart ached, and the tears overflowed. And still, I waited for answers.

Some answers came without prompt. My mother came back, four days later, looking tired, worn and fragmented. My dad ate leftover funeral hamburger and green pea casseroles, reheated in the oven, until my mother returned. I did cry, and my teacher let me spend the afternoon in the school's library, where the quiet was forced. We frequently brought candy to my grandma's roommate, until she too, passed away. I still equate lilies, in all their fragrant forms, with death, but they don't always make me cry.

The other questions-how do we ever really know? Perhaps by submitting to what we cannot change except by perspective, attitude, approach, and faith. It helps to not doubt that which comforts, even in the face of amassed life experiences and peer pressure that push reason over emotion and religious ideations. In time, being able to bring that peace to others when they are struggling, in need, in loss, seems like a bit of victory over grief.

I believe we thrive again by having community support and loved ones around to give us focus, purpose, belonging, and something to anticipate. It's through the awkward, soul-aching, breaking times of not-knowing and when we can't quickly repair, that our haunting questions find resolution. Wisdom emerges from the shadows, and gentle, simple, profound silence is found when our lives stir, sing, and sync anew with hope.

## Vita

Suzette Mack is a creative writer with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Colorado at Boulder (1986), and a Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy from Colorado State University (1994). Her work has been published in *Just Between Us: A Marquet-Dubois Poetry Quarterly* (1989), *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health–Recovery and Wellness: Models of Hope and Empowerment for People with Mental Illness* (2001), *Pathways to Recovery: A Strengths Recovery Self-Help Workbook and Group Facilitator's Guide* (2002), *My Tree Called Life: Writing & Living Through Serious Illness* (2009), and *The Trail is the Thing: A Year of Daily Reflections based on Pathways to Recovery: A Strengths Recovery Self-Help Workbook* (2010). She has written for the Merriam Police Department and Boulder County Sheriff's Office (crime bulletins and community education), and a variety of Christian devotions and other materials for various churches in Boulder and Kansas City. She enjoys helping people tell their stories and helped both of her parents write and publish their memoirs.

Ms. Mack worked as an occupational therapist for many years, specializing in gerontology, hospice and psycho-social work. She has an extensive history working in church communication, and has worked in medical recruiting, real estate and estate sales. When she's not writing, she's creating visual art through her business, "Barefoot Fox Designs". She can be reached at peacefulsuzette@gmail.com or her permanent address: 7614 Bradshaw Street, Shawnee, KS, 66216.