Diary of a Gay Bride

A Thesis

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By
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For my mother, whom I may never fully understand but love with all my heart. And dedicated to the loving memory of my father.
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¹ Most names have been changed to protect the identity of the people mentioned in this memoir.
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Abstract

Diary of a Gay Bride is a memoir about an artist planning her multi-cultural gay wedding in hopes her dying mother will be able to attend.

Keywords: lesbian, wedding, mother daughter relationship, death, cancer, Asian.
At what age does life stop giving and start taking away? I felt that once when I was 21. And now, ten years later, I felt it again as I stood in my mother’s living room. I stood because I didn’t want to sit. The chairs looked uncomfortable and unwelcoming. The forest green hue of the easy chairs matched the pine trees that flooded the large window. I stared out the window because I couldn’t look at my mother.

“It’s okay to cry, Honey,” Mom said.

Disappointment joined my anger and sadness. I thought it would all work out like it usually does. Why were all my plans falling apart? I just wanted to get married.

Planning a wedding shows you a lot about yourself. You may focus on aspects you hadn’t thought were important to you before. You may find yourself holding on to some ridiculous tradition when you don’t even like it.

For me, planning my wedding only confirmed I’m as anal and controlling as my mother than I originally thought; however, those two qualities do produce a decent final product. My mother’s product was me. My product was the wedding.

As almost every young girl dreams about her wedding, I did too. I planned for a big Catholic church filled with people and for a white dress that I designed and my mother sewed, with silver sequins and cut-out butterflies. I pictured the girls’ dresses each a color of the rainbow and the guys with matching ties. The flower girl wearing purple butterfly wings like a fairy. My father walking me down the aisle and giving me away to my handsome Italian groom.
Sun coming in the church’s stained glass windows and God nodding with approval. All my relatives and friends sharing in the happiest day of my life.

But as this pivotal day approached, I had to let go of every wedding fantasy I ever manifested. We won’t be getting married in a Catholic church or any church. My fiancée isn’t Catholic, but now, neither am I. Our marriage won’t be legal in our state of Minnesota because we are both women. My father can’t walk me down the aisle because he is no longer living. My mother can’t sew the dress I designed because she was too sick from chemo treatments.

Forced to improvise, my partner, Dana, and I decided to have a destination wedding in Hawaii, just us and “Momtom” (my mother and my stepdad, Tom). Dana’s parents were quite elderly and sickly to travel.

Yet as I stood in my mother’s living room that day, my adult dreams of a Hawaiian wedding were crushed.

“I’m just too sick to go, Honey. I can’t see myself getting on another airplane for a really long time. I don’t have any energy left.”

I looked at her for the first time since I entered the living room. I saw the sadness on her face from my disappointment. Her light aqua eyes looked gray and tired. She lay on the light pink chaise lounge under a matching blanket her father made for her. It was in this wretched living room that Mom told me her cancer had come back. It was in this living room that my father told me he had only months left to live. I should have called it the dying room.

While ignoring the idea of losing another parent, I tried to accept losing another wedding fantasy. Dana and I would still go to Hawaii for our honeymoon. But now there were less than four weekends to get married before we left.
“Can we have the wedding in your backyard?” I asked Mom. Her eyes, which now lacked eyelashes, were closed, resting. She slowly opened them without moving her head or the white hat which covered her mostly bald scalp.

“Sure, that would be nice,” she said.

Déjà vu. I felt the sense of abandonment again. The first time my mother had cancer she thought she wouldn’t make it to my graduation ceremony. The feeling of being the only immediate family member at an important life event is like wearing an orphan’s shoes. The kind you picture from movies: too big or too small, dusty, worn, and more holes than a pair of socks.

Despite her cancer, my mother did come to my graduation from art college that May of 2003. But I still needed her at the last major event in my life.

Since the honeymoon was scheduled for the middle of May, I had three weeks to plan a ceremony, pull it off, and get ready for the reception for over 200 family and friends in June.

I wrote my list: Ceremony, Invitations, Dress, Video, Food, Shoes, Photos, Hair, Flowers, Candle, Cake, Rings.
Ceremony

As I pictured the ceremony in my mother’s backyard, I tried to romanticize the atmosphere: the willow tree my dad planted blowing in a subtle wind, birds singing, purple and pink flowers in pots, saying our vows under the white trellis. But negative thoughts painted over grandeur. I saw my white shoes ruined with grass stains, ticks crawling up the legs of the wedding party and guests, and deer flies landing on people’s heads. And worst of all, I saw snakes crawling through the lawn from Momtom’s recent snake infestation.

I forced myself to put aside these thoughts and focus on what needed to be done. First, I had to pay $800 to cancel the officiant in Hawaii, and then find a local officiant who was available on the day we chose.

When I found someone online who could perform a commitment ceremony for a good price, I chose the wordings myself to make it not too church-like. Dana wasn’t comfortable with anything religious, but I also wanted to represent my spiritual background. As I e-mailed words back and forth with the officiant, she told me legally they were not allowed to say the word “marriage” at the ceremony. I accepted that our state did not recognize our marriage and that it would not be legal. But I hadn’t anticipated not even being able to say the word “marriage.” For the first time I really felt the discrimination and unfairness towards my marriage to Dana. I didn’t mind calling it a union or a commitment, but I didn’t like being told what I couldn’t call it.

When I first told my mom I wanted to marry Dana, she was going through a period wondering if she should accept the fact that she could be dying.
“Mom, I want to marry Dana. We want to live together.”

“You really know that this is what you want?”

“Yes. I’m sure. Didn’t you say you knew right away with Dad? That when you know you know.”

“Yes.”

“And I know she has a son. I love kids. I want a family.”

“You can’t even legally get married in Minnesota, right?”

“No,” I said looking down.

Dana and I couldn’t get a mortgage from Fannie Mae or Freddy Mac because they didn’t recognize us together unless we were legally married. Since Mom felt she was dying, she helped us get a mortgage and appliances we needed.

“I only want to make sure you still have a relationship with God. And that you still have your faith,” Mom said to me. Her eyebrows lost expression as the brown dust from the eyebrow pencil faded away, the only make-up she wore now.

Dana’s family was Buddhist but they didn’t practice it. Growing up in Vietnam she didn’t know much about God at all. The only experience she had with religion or Christianity was her husband leaving her for it.

My spiritual experience had been like a fishing lure. I’d dive into the lake of faith and then be sucked back up out of it again. But faith was still with me even though I didn’t feel religious. Faith isn’t faith until it’s tested, and I had tested it many times. I tested it first with the Catholic church, then the Lutheran church, then Assembly of God, non-denominational, finding God in nature, studying Islam, Buddhism, Christ Church of the Big Bang, to finally being spiritual.
Knowing Dana didn’t know much about God or that she wasn’t raised under a religion, I noticed her spirit wasn’t any different from anyone else’s. She loved, cared, had good moral values and a positive outlook on life and how people should live. Dana didn’t need religion to tell her how to be kind or live her life.

My friend, Becky, once told me that God was an elephant and religion was blind men standing around it, each holding a part. One says, “I know what God is. God is this trunk.” Another says, “No. I know what God is. God is this tail.” Another says, “No. God is this foot.” All of them are right but they are all missing the larger picture no one can see.

I kept my faith in God except it was no longer through any religion. I felt that faith was knowing life is more than just a bunch of beautiful coincidences.
Invitations

I tried to have faith that my mother would be able to come to my wedding ceremony. As I wrote out invitations I thought if my mother felt better she would have liked to help; she was great at crafts. Yet I sat in a lonely seat at the kitchen table Dana and I bought. The marble swirls of black and white on the hard surface felt cold and smooth. I didn’t have any sisters or good friends who lived close to help me. But being an only child and as controlling and meticulous and creative as I was, I wanted to do it all myself anyway. And being a starving artist going back to school for writing, I didn’t have much else to do while Dana was at work.

I didn’t know what to call a gay wedding. Since I couldn’t legally even say the word “marriage” at the ceremony, should I say it on the invitations? If I said a party or celebration that made it less official. Even though our marriage wasn’t technically official in my state, it was to Dana and me.

I also had to consider whom to invite. I asked my uncle if I should invite my great aunt, Doreen. Aunt Doreen was very Christian and used to work for Billy Graham. She believed everything in the Bible as it is written. She once lived in Loring Park, one of the neighborhoods with the highest gay population in our state. She would say, “The gays are out again,” in a frustrated voice when we’d pick her up to go somewhere. She would be shocked to know the gays were closer than she thought.

“You should invite Doreen,” my uncle said. “At least give her the choice to make for herself.”
After I sent the invitations I called my uncle again. Uncle Lou was my dad’s last living brother and he very much resembled Dad.

“So Doreen called me the other day,” he said.

“What did she say?”

“She asked me if I was coming to your wedding and I said ya. Then I asked if she was going and she said she didn’t think she could bring herself to go.”

“Oh, really?”

“So I asked her, I said, ‘So Doreen, do you think I’m a good person?’ And she said, ‘Well, yes.’ And I said, ‘But because I don’t believe in Jesus I’m going to hell?’ And she said, ‘Well, yes.’ Then she told me to read the Bible and keep an open mind. I just laughed.”

“Ya, a mind as open as hers, huh?”

“So I told her that it’s so hard to find love in this world and if someone finds it you should be happy for them. I think she’s starting to change, she said she should be more open. But don’t be surprised if she doesn’t come.”

“Sorry you had to deal with her on that subject, but thanks,” I said.

“Oh, it’s no problem for me,” he said. I pictured his face. His cheek bones stuck out like my dad’s and his thinning white hair that didn’t cover all of his head, yet somehow he still looked close to handsome. His blue eyes hid behind his glasses. My green eyes didn’t resemble my parents’ blue, but I liked being different.

The next week I received a card in the mail from Aunt Doreen. It read:

Dear Kelly,
I had prayed that the Lord would give you a loving Christian husband. It appears that that prayer isn’t going to be answered in the way I had thought. The main thing is that you know The Lord Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord. Then all else of life falls into its proper place. The picture of you and Dana is beautiful. I look forward to meeting her-

Love, Aunt Doreen

If a 79-year-old woman can see through new eyes, perhaps there is hope for the rest of the world.

I folded paper cranes and glued them to the front of the invitations. I told Dana I wanted to represent her culture and background by adding an Asian theme to the wedding. When she saw my origami she said, “You know I’m not Japanese, right?” Her Vietnamese accent sounded sarcastic and sweet. She smiled.

Dana let me take care of almost all of the wedding details. She wanted it to be simple, since she had been married before and was tired of over-the-top Vietnamese traditional weddings. Letting me take care of the details also caused fewer disagreements.

I looked down at the invitations. The white of the cranes contrasted with the purple of the paper. The cranes I folded for name markers sat on the kitchen table. I noticed one’s wing hanging lower, forcing it to fall over. I picked it up to fix it and read the name on it. It was my mother’s. Her broken wing of love, health, and happiness weighted her down and wouldn’t let her back up. I was able to fix it, but it was only paper.
Dress

The next day I drove the few hours north past Minneapolis to see the wedding dress I had found online. I chatted with my Mom’s sister as she rode in the passenger seat of my tiny orange car. Her cream-colored shih tzu, Tootsie, sat on her lap. My mother has three younger sisters and they each have a personality trait of my mother. There’s the giggly one, the quiet one, and the stubborn one. This one was the quiet sister, so I did most of the talking.

“I wanted my wedding dress to be white with a little hint of color and something that sparkled,” I told my aunt.

Originally I had drawn a design and Mom told me to get a pattern and she would help sew it.

Figure 1. Frankenberg, Kelly. Dress Designs. 2012.
Mom always sewed my clothes when I was little, and worked constantly in her sewing room on projects. When I learned to sew, I liked to design and make clothes. But I never used a pattern, so my outfit never fit right or hung right. This irritated Mom because she would have to try to fix it. I gave up on sewing and stuck with what I did best: design.

This time I bought a pattern for my dress. But after I showed it to Mom she said, “I wish you’d just find a dress you like. It would be easier. I don’t think I’ll feel well enough to help.”

I ignored my disappointment. By now I was used to plans not going my way. I then started my search for a dress already made.

“After searching forever I finally found one I liked,” I said, continuing the story. “But it was too short. I wrote down the name of the designer and looked online. I didn’t think they made a long version though it was worth a look.”

My aunt sat quietly and listened, saying “oh ya” a few times. The only blonde in the family, her hair bordered on platinum and hung to her shoulders with a few curls. She had a love for motorcycles and cute little dogs.

“I couldn’t believe it when I found the long version. Unfortunately it was $400 and no store would order it in for me to try unless I bought it first. After calling 24 stores, I got lucky with the 25\textsuperscript{th}, though three hours away.”

Tootsie sat as quietly as my aunt and enjoyed the ride.

“It was meant to be, just like my prom dress in high school.”

“Oh, ya.”
“I had found one online and ordered it but it said it wasn’t available till a month after my prom so we cancelled the order and bought a different one at a store. A week before prom the dress I wanted magically arrived in the mail.”

I remembered my prom dress well: a long gold gown covered in black transparent fabric with black lace on the chest. Mom sewed some embroidered butterflies on the side to complete it. Though this time, Mom was too sick to even come with me to try on my dress. Mom told me to call her sister because she had broken her foot and was off work. I didn’t want a replacement for my mother, but I didn’t want to go alone either.

When we arrived in the small Midwestern town of Little Falls, we left Tootsie in the car and my aunt hobbled to sit in a chair by the fitting room. Her black foot brace was wrapped tightly around her jeans. I put on the dress, four sizes too big, but I knew it was the one. The attendant tied the back to make it fit.

“Wow, you look perfect,” my aunt said.

“Thanks,” I said, looking in the mirror. My hair was straight and thin. Its long reddish brown strands fell to the middle of my back. It made me look feminine even with barely any make-up on. The bead-work at the top sparkled in the shop’s light. This was supposed to be an exciting and joyful moment. The absence of my mother only reminded me of what life would be like without her one day. I forced a smile.

Dana and I had decided on black for our bridesmaids’ color, since it was last minute. We figured our bridesmaids all owned a black dress or could borrow one. When my mother and I went dress shopping for my father’s funeral I wanted any color except black; I couldn’t stand
wearing the depression on the outside. Now I could only hope the black dresses would look
elegant and formal instead of depressing and funereal.

As a teenager, I had visualized a wedding in the colors of my painting palette, a full-color
rainbow, not knowing the rainbow represented the gay community to which I would belong.
Video

It was easy to find a videographer on Craigslist more than happy to film a gay wedding. I thought about the last time I was in front of a camera for a long period of time. It was for an episode of Showtime’s *The L Word*, filmed on a gay cruise, the gay cruise on which I came out of the closet.

When I was 23 I explored my sexuality. I always felt more comfortable with women and I never had a huge desire on a sexual level, especially for men. My online friend, Becky, suggested we take a gay cruise. Becky was 42 and worked at the Pentagon. We met on a fan site for our favorite TV show, *The L Word*. Once Becky found out an episode would be filmed on a ship she called me right away. The cruise would also host a lesbian film festival, a concert by Shawn Colvin, and one by the Indigo Girls. A Halloween party, contest, and presidential election party also topped the itinerary. The ship, called *Olivia*, left from Tampa, Florida and stopped in Key West, and two places in Mexico before heading back to Tampa. I couldn’t miss this opportunity.

First, I needed to tell Mom I planned to take a trip with someone I had only met online. Then, I couldn’t tell her the cruise was gay, because I hadn’t come out. Growing up with little experience besides dating guys (without having sex), I was still in an exploratory state. The only term I could use was bi-sexual or bi-curious, but I didn’t want to tell her that either. I would tell her I was a fan of the TV show, but the TV show was quite provocative. Luckily my mother hadn’t seen it or heard of it.
“It’s like Will and Grace,” I said, describing the show to her when she stopped over to my place one weekend. I lied since Will and Grace was a comedy on regular TV with no gay women, only gay men. She bought it.

“And it’s a ship with only women, I think some are gay because there’s a film festival and a few concerts, but it’s safer with all women,” I said trying to convince her. “My friend works at the Pentagon, Mom. She’s safe. I talked to her on the phone many times.”

“Well, that sounds fun, but maybe you should meet her first,” Mom said.

Was I finally at the point in my life when my mother realized I was an adult and going to make my own decisions?

A few months later October brought the anticipated cruise. Becky and I met at the airport. She was shorter than I expected and her blonde hair and pretty blue eyes couldn’t mask the look of her having swallowed a 200-pound tractor tire. Her wits, extensive knowledge, humor, and the fact that she worked at the Pentagon made her a great travel companion and friend. I loved to pick her brain for information.

We arrived at the hotel in Tampa for a pre-cruise party. There weren’t any men, of course, but for some reason I hadn’t expected it. I glanced around, seeing palm trees, torches, and women in many shapes, sizes, races, ages, hairdos, and fashions. We all stood in the Florida heat. A breeze came off the ocean and Tampa’s nightlife lights flooded the darkness. The only male I saw, the D.J., played music for our group of over 100 women.

I have always felt different from everyone else in a group. I felt I didn’t belong with the beautiful girls in school because I focused intently on my imperfections. I felt different from all
the comic geeks at the International Comic Convention because I hid my geekiness better than they did. And now I felt different from everyone in this room because I didn’t feel 100% gay.

Olivia was my eighth cruise, yet my first all-gay women’s cruise. I didn’t know what to expect; I had never even gone to a gay bar before. The only other time I spent that many days around that many women was at Girl Scout Camp. This wasn’t in any way close to that.

The more I looked around, the more overwhelmed I became. There were women everywhere and they stared at me as men would in a bar. Did some of them want me like that? I had never had sex with a woman or even had that desire. At the time of this trip I had kissed two girls. I had no interest in either, but I was still curious about women.

As I looked around at the women I wished I fit in. I only belonged in the hallway between the “straight room” and the “gay room.” I hoped I would feel different on the ship since we were stuck on it for seven days.

The next day Becky and I boarded the ship. It was a normal sized cruise ship from Holland America. It had many decks and several pools and bars. We made our way to our room and then the casting desk. They were casting for extras in The L Word. I waited in line and memorized the lines. Becky waited in the hall for me. When I walked in the tiny room the directors stared at me and didn’t say anything. I waited for them to say start or cue me.

“Do you know the line?” one asked, annoyed.

“Oh, I didn’t know you wanted me to start,” I said, now extra nervous.

Another one pushed the script on their desk closer to me. I stood in front of a long desk with four women on the other side. Now I felt I didn’t belong in this room either; I wasn’t an actress, especially with this stage fright.
I had memorized the line but it lay in front of me, distracting me. I tried to say the line yet kept looking at the paper as I said it. I sucked. They asked me if I’d be a stand-in for one of the actors because I had the same body size and height. I said I would.

But they ended up choosing another person to stand in. Because it was an intimate couple scene they chose a couple, Lizzie and Shelby. Lizzie and Shelby from Michigan were a cute, femme couple Becky and I had met earlier. Lizzie was fit and tan with brown hair while Shelby looked exactly like Uma Thurman: skinny, blonde, and high cheekbones.

The next day they filmed the scene with the lines I tried out for, which they had given to a tall black woman with dreadlocks. Becky and I found our way into the background of the scene, but later noticed we got cut out of the shot.

The rest of the filming that day was of dancing by the pool. Becky was off somewhere talking to a new friend. I danced with Lizzie and Shelby. We were dancing on camera when Shelby leaned down to kiss Lizzie and Lizzie pulled away.

“I don’t want anyone from my work to see me on this show,” she said, obviously not “out” at work. Shelby cared less what people thought.

I started to feel more comfortable in this group. But then a woman took off her shirt to reveal a chest full of tattoos. I looked away.

The sun sailed in and out of tiny clouds and the breeze by the side of the pool cooled down the crowd of bikinis, sunglasses, drinks, and buzz cuts. We danced for what seemed like a long time. Then the director said, “Cut!”

“Everyone has to stop singing ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ because we may not get the rights for that song,” the director yelled.

The next shot we had to do without music for sound purposes.
“We can’t dance to music?” Lizzie said. “Then they are gonna paste a song over this and we are all gonna be off beat and people are gonna see it and think that lesbians can’t dance!”

The next day I felt more comfortable in my skin and enjoyed it. I flirted with a girl who was completely not interested in me, but it still felt good to flirt. One girl whispered in my ear that I was hot and I got nervous again.

That evening Becky and I hung out in a big group. We met twin sisters who were gay, Sara and Anna. They were both business women in their 40s, short blonde hair and no make-up. Anna told Becky that Sara was a player and stole her girlfriends in high school because Sara was prettier than her.

I had always been attracted to older women and most of my teachers. I thought the hottest actresses in Hollywood were over 40 or close to it. Older women were more stable in their lives; they knew what they wanted. They were wise, experienced, and in their prime.

My initial attraction wasn’t that of romance or sex. I wanted them to tuck me in at night, love me, care about me. I had a good relationship with my mother; it wasn’t about her. I had the desire for something more on a level I hadn’t yet explored.

That night Becky and I went to the Halloween party. Becky didn’t care much to dress up. I dressed as Halle Berry’s version of Catwoman. Black leather belts criss-crossed my back and open waist. I cut jagged holes in my pewter colored vinyl pants. My heels made me over 6 feet tall and my bright red lipstick accented my full lips. My Victoria’s Secret bra in leopard print pushed up my tiny breasts. I was now a target for the single ladies and the committed ones. I felt uncomfortable again. I went back to the room to change while Becky waited in the bar.
I spent the next evening in the dance club on the ship. The ship had a few bars and nightclubs but the one on the top deck was the most popular. Shelby came up to me and pointed at a girl who had asked her about me. I confidently walked up to the girl. Her name was Darlene.

“Were you Catwoman last night?” she asked. The rainbow-colored lights of the club flashed around us.

“How did you know?” I asked because I wore a mask.

“The shape of your lips,” she said.

She sounded more honest than trying to flirt. Her goofiness was cute and charming. Darlene looked younger than her age, 33, and her blonde hair shone with a reddish tone. With her long hair and slender body she appeared feminine. She was a graphic designer from the East Coast. Darlene told me her coming out story, which was not so different from the path I was on.

By now I had met many gay people and heard their coming out stories, each so different, some sad but powerful. It’s hard not to have sympathy for people struggling just to be themselves. I then understood the meaning of gay pride. It’s not that people are just proud to be gay, but they’re proud for standing up and being who they truly are, especially when it’s so difficult.

Darlene and I kissed and danced and talked. Her sandy blonde strands tickled my cheeks. And every time we kissed her teeth hit mine and she moved her body in a strange circular motion that wasn’t sexy. I said good night and went back to my room. Later she called and we made plans to meet up the following afternoon at 4 after our day in Mexico. I enjoyed the attention and experimentation.
The next day we docked at Progresso, Mexico by a cruise ship full of old retired couples. I watched them as they looked out at the ocean then at our ship. It was amusing to see some of them realize what they were seeing. The old men did double takes when they noticed the couples kissing and holding hands were women. One old man even took out binoculars.

After climbing and sketching Mayan ruins with Becky, 4pm quickly approached. I came a couple of minutes late for the date, but Becky had said anything under ten was on time. I waited for twenty-five minutes. Darlene didn’t show. I had been stood up. I went to the buffet to grab some food.

The dining area had a large buffet with a variety of cuisines. I sat down by a couple in their 40s. “Gosh, where is everyone?” I asked, looking around at the near empty room.

“Oh we don’t know. Seems they are all off doing something. I guess there was a time change when we arrived in Mexico.”

“Really? What time is it? Must be an hour early! I didn’t get stood up! I can still make my date,” I said looking at the time, nearly 5, or what should be 4.

They laughed as I set my drink down and ran upstairs. 5 came, then 5:15. Now she’s late, I thought. Or had I gotten stood up twice for the same date?

Ten minutes later she showed up and apologized. She, too, had been confused about the time. I smiled, glad I hadn’t been stood up. My knee-length black skirt blew up in the wind. A fake pink flower barrette held my hair behind one ear. Darlene’s tight purple tank top revealed her small waist. She wore shorts and sandals. Her lilac eye shadow said 80s nostalgia.
Darlene and I hung out and ended up in the club on the top deck. We sat at the bar and Darlene went to the bathroom. I realized going to the bathroom is not a possible intermission during a date with the same sex, as we share a bathroom and women usually go to there together.

Darlene seemed to be gone for a long time. A woman approached me.

“I see you have a bump on your nose, like me,” she said. I wasn’t flattered since I hated the bump on my nose. “I’m Gina,” she said, extending her hand politely.

“Hi, I think I recognize you from one of the movies I saw playing on the ship,” I said. Gina had a Greek, rebellious Jackie Kennedy look to her with a fit body.

Finally Darlene came back from the bathroom. “This is Gina, from one of the films,” I said, introducing her. Darlene wasn’t impressed, in fact she looked pissed. Gina asked if I wanted to dance, and I did, so I tried to pull Darlene out on the dance floor. Darlene resisted. I gestured to get her to come but she became more upset. I didn’t know what to do so I kept dancing with Gina.

Gina’s sporty tank top was a mix of blue and purple and sat just above her black mini skirt. She seemed to be the type who preferred jeans.

“Who’s your favorite actress besides yourself?” I asked her.

“I’m actually a comedian; that was my first film. I like Susan Sarandon,” she yelled into my ear because of the loud music.

“Me too!”

“Maybe I’ll see you later,” I said and went back to Darlene.

Darlene wouldn’t talk to me or look at me. Finally she turned around and said, “You wouldn’t do that if you were on a date with a guy.”
What was she talking about? What did I do? I had tried to get her to dance and she wouldn’t. I guess we were on a date, but wouldn’t it have been okay for us both to dance with Gina? Was Gina trying to be with me? This confused me. I rubbed Darlene’s back but she never turned around, mumbled something about me being a player and obsessed with celebrities. With no more response from her I left. I saw Anna on my way out sitting at the bar. I needed advice.

I poured out my problems to Anna. She explained that when you’re on a date, you don’t leave your partner and go dance with another woman. But it also felt like Darlene was a jealous person and had overreacted. This gay world wasn’t going to be easy. I wasn’t even used to guys asking me out in bars or anything of the sort. I wanted a real girlfriend; that was my goal.

The next morning Becky and I hung out in the lounge. I sketched while we chatted. I spotted Darlene from a distance with her friends. Her friends glared at me but Darlene did not look my direction. I didn’t care. If she was going to be that jealous I didn’t want her. And she was a bad kisser, anyway.

The presidential election happened while we cruised at sea. At the party I saw Jane Lynch. (She’s mostly known now for acting in the TV show Glee.) I didn’t know she was gay, but knew she had played a lesbian in the movie Best in Show. Jane’s shirt said, “Wax Bush.” I guess the other lesbians didn’t follow her as we found out most voted for Bush. Why? Then I figured it out. Most of the women were business women in their 40s. They wanted their money from the Republicans more than they wanted their gay rights from the Democrats.
The last night on the ship Becky teased me about Gina and I teased her about her crush on the marketing director for Showtime. Becky and I went to the top deck club and tried to set someone up with shy Anna. No luck. Gina came over and danced with me for a bit. I wanted to know more about her, talk to her, have a conversation. But I said goodnight because we had to pack and get up early.

“I’ll be here all night,” she said.

I went with Becky back to our tiny room to pack. We lay in our beds, the space between barely big enough to walk to our bathroom, which was right by the door. How Becky’s large body maneuvered in our microscopic bathroom I didn’t know.

Becky’s snores became louder as I lay in bed. Each one broke my concentration on my struggle between sleep and Gina. I couldn’t get Gina out of my mind. I had to go back up there. Gina was waiting and curiosity killed me.

I got up and snuck out during snores as to not wake Becky, though I don’t think much could’ve woken her up at that point.

I wore my black tank top and black pants. I saw Gina in her shorts and white tank top. She stood right in the place I left her, now with Jane Lynch and Jane’s girlfriend.

“This is Jane,” Gina said, introducing me to her.

“Hi, I’m Jane,” Jane said, as she shook my hand.

“I know,” was all I could say. But I did know who she was. Does Angelina Jolie go around and say, “Hi, I’m Angelina.” Duh, who doesn’t know you?

It was the first time I had been formally introduced to a celebrity.

Gina wanted to dance so we did. Then she whispered, “You wanna get out of here?” I nodded.
We ran around the ship hand in hand, her, a 43-year-old, experienced, semi-famous lesbian, and me, a 23-year-old virgin. We talked a bit out on the windy deck. I asked her what her second career choice would be. She told me weather patterns interested her and I told her I found astronomy fascinating. You could barely see the ocean in the darkness. The wind blew hard. I felt excited and free. Who was this amazing woman who liked me?

We left the deck and attended the lecture going on about the first major lesbian film, Desert Hearts, by the director herself. We listened for a while, then I kissed her on our way out and she kissed me back. We ran down the hallway, obviously going toward her room.

“Are you okay with this?” she said. Was there something I might not be okay with? Now I was nervous, but nothing stopped me from following her to her room. Her room, much larger than my and Becky’s room, encased a giant bed in the center. We talked about the death of Gina’s mom and my dad. I remembered Becky saying how comedy comes out of grief. Perhaps that’s why Gina became a comedian.

Gina went to the bathroom and stayed longer than I expected. I had a little time to figure out what I should do. Should I lie on the bed? Take my clothes off? Sit on the chair?

When she finally came out I decided to act out a scene from Desert Hearts right before the younger woman seduces the older woman. She caught on and finished the scene with the innocent, almost old-fashioned, words that passed in the 70s for foreplay.

We started kissing. She was an amazing kisser, maybe because she had the most experience of anyone I had kissed. And, in contrast to the last girl, almost anyone would have been better. Her nipples were as soft as baby skin and I took advantage of kissing them.

“What do you wanna take off your pants?” she asked.
I shook my head, scared. She rubbed her naked body on my black pants. Then I thought, screw it, and took my pants off, still leaving my black underwear on. I didn’t know what she wanted me to do, but my finger found the right place. I loved a woman’s body artistically and comfortingly, and now, I loved it sexually too.

I had never made a woman come before. I couldn’t believe the sounds she made just because of me. I once gave a hand job to a Romanian guy (who I still swear was a vampire), but he only squealed like a bat and I found it disgusting. The thought of sex with a guy had never excited me. I was born this way and now everything made sense.

I felt comfortable with who I was; however, I still couldn’t say it out loud. It wasn’t until I was on an airplane with Momtom on our yearly ski trip to Salt Lake City, that the words just spilled out.

“It’s a bad sign when the safety video doesn’t work,” I remembered a guy saying on a previous flight. Luckily the safety video on this flight was working.

I watched the video even though I could probably have recited it by now. As the plane took off my mother held my hand tight, as was our tradition whenever we flew. We let go when the plane was up and steady. Mom took out her travel rosary and began to pray.

Mom sat in the middle seat with her head back, eyes closed, lips moving forming the words of the rosary. She held the tiny ring of ten beads and one cross between the fingers of her right hand.

“We have reached an altitude where you may use electronic devices with the exception of cellular phones, TVs, and radios,” the stewardess said in a monotone yet pretty voice.
I reached for my headphones and CDs.

When Mom finished silently reciting her daily prayers she pulled out her stash of various candies: Peppermint patty balls, M&Ms, and mint Lifesavers. They appeared during road trips, plane trips, and movies in theaters. I shared her treats and gave her some of mine: chocolate covered pretzels, pistachios, and Smarties.

Tom closed his eyes yet refrained from snoring.

My mother’s short hair, dyed red, stuck to the side of her head where she rested on the plane seat. It had grown out since chemo treatments ended and she had dyed it red for Tom.

I could never lie to my mother, at least not for very long.

“Mom, I’m gay, and so is Becky.” I held my breath.

My mom looked at the seat in front of Tom, who now awoke.

Scared to look at her face, I distracted myself with the exit instructions. Plus the seats faced forward so turning my head and looking at her would be awkwardly too close.

People sat behind us chatting softly, whispering. About me? I looked around. Did the people in front of me just hear that? Did the people beside me? The people behind me? Of course they did. The inside of the plane looked smaller and smaller. I wanted to leave but realized the only place to escape was the bathroom and you couldn’t stay there for long. I noticed the barf bag in the seat pocket. I hoped my mother couldn’t see my face turning red.

“Ok,” my mom said slowly, as if she was still processing what I said.

Silence. More whispering, then silence. Was everyone waiting for me to speak?

“You know that cruise Becky and I went on last month? Well, I was intimate with a comedian on the ship.” I held my breath again. My throat dried up. Why did I always feel the need to tell all the details? Where was the stewardess with water? Why didn’t I think before I
spoke? I could tell my mother relatively anything, but I felt like I was being recorded or telling my secrets to a jury.

“Oh,” she said softly, still listening, and perhaps aware everyone around us was listening.

“Are you dating someone now?”

My mother sat stoically, almost creepily, like an old woman waiting to pass away naturally in her chair. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. I looked at Tom from the corner of my eye. He pretended not to listen, though I knew he always did.

I started to whisper more now, yet I felt as if everyone’s ears were strained, listening.

“Yes,” I said.

The long pauses between responses sneered at me.

“What does she do?” Mom asked.

“She’s going to college in Minnesota to be an English Professor,” I said, proud.

“She’s pretty,” my mom said looking at the dark-haired Mexican girl from Texas I had met online. I was comfortable dating a woman, but not yet comfortable to tell the world beyond my friends and family. I put the photograph away and Mom closed her eyes.

I had started dating my first girlfriend, Ellie. She was 34, tall, fit, and her geeky smartness made her more attractive. She had a passion for obnoxious looking shoes that took people’s attention away from her shyness. Bright purple heels with lacy yellow sides topped her favorites. Like me, she had one cat and a passion for writing.

Before Ellie I attempted not to be exclusive. I dated an Indian girl named Sasha, and a guy I met online named Albert, the geekiest guy I ever went out with. But I wanted to know what it was like to date more than one person at a time.
After dating Sasha and Albert for two weeks I realized I had no time left for myself and that I very much preferred women. Albert didn’t even get one kiss and Sasha got a sleepover and 2\textsuperscript{nd} base.

I kept waiting for some kind of approval from my mother; but, she only sat there quietly. I tried to think of something I could say to get a reaction.

“So, did I surprise you?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “Well, you don’t have to make any decisions about anything now.” I knew Mom still loved me. But would she treat me differently?

She hadn’t met Sasha, but Albert came over to play cards at her house once. Maybe she thought I was still confused, thought it was a phase. This was going to be a process. I couldn’t sit still, wondering what my mother thought. What was in her head that she wasn’t saying? It was a long silent plane ride to Utah.

My mother had asked me my first year of college if I was gay. Surprised, I asked her why. She said, “You have pictures of actresses on your walls, you talk about your friends that are gay, and you always say you’ll never find the perfect guy.”

I told her no. I had thought the pictures of actresses meant I wanted to be like them. Gay friends were common when you attended an art college. And the perfect guy really doesn’t exist. I had thought I knew myself.
When we arrived in Salt Lake City Tom rented us a car and my mom and I sat and waited on a bench. Tom’s small but noticeable beer belly reminded me he wasn’t as skinny as he looked from behind.

“Tom says he thinks you’re dating women because you want to have sex and you think it’s wrong to have sex with a guy before marriage,” Mom said, out of nowhere, as we waited on a bench.

“Ok, well that’s not it,” I said, embarrassed Tom even had an opinion on my sex life.

Later during our vacation in Utah we went out for dinner. My mom was in a giggly mood and Tom left to go to the bathroom.

Out of nowhere my mother said, “So are you the guy or the girl?”

“What?” I said confused for a moment. Then I giggled. “Mom, we are both women.”

She laughed and then said seriously, “I know what you mean. Even with your dad we were equal on things. He had quite a few feminine qualities and we shared a lot of responsibilities.”

Tom came back to the table. I was so happy my mom had started to accept and understand, until Ellie and I visited at Easter.

My mother wanted to set up her youngest brother, Pete. Pete was nearing 45 and had been single his whole life. He was a handsome and honest guy, but his lack of finances and habit of drinking kept him from being an eligible bachelor. Easter Sunday Mom invited Tom’s
youngest sister, who was single, and I brought Ellie and my best friend from college, Yolanda. Since Uncle Pete had a history of dating skinny women, I knew Yolanda wouldn’t be his type.

At Easter, Ellie met my mom for the first time. My mother was so distracted by her guests that there wasn’t much interaction besides a polite hello. I hadn’t told anyone else in the family Ellie was my girlfriend, so I couldn’t complain that Mom treated Ellie no differently from Yolanda. Ellie didn’t like showing affection in front of anyone so we only looked like friends.

Yolanda’s obnoxious laugh and round figure contrasted with Ellie’s quiet smile and tiny ankles. Ellie wore a copper cross necklace and a black dress that matched her medium length hair. Instead of her black frame glasses, she opted for contacts.

We played some card games with my aunts and uncles, ate, and left. After, Mom asked Uncle Pete if there were any girls he was interested in. He said maybe.

Later that week Pete called, asking me for Ellie’s number. I told him she was with someone. He even asked about her again a few months later after we broke up. I was so mad my mother had to make a big deal out of the “single girls” and my uncle had to pick my girlfriend!

I called my mom.

“Mom, why did you have to keep asking Pete about the girls when you knew Ellie was my girlfriend? You were pushing him and you knew he was going to pick her!”

“I didn’t know he was going to pick her,” she laughed and giggled like it was all a joke to her.

She wouldn’t understand so I gave up and let it go.
A month later I broke up with Ellie. Even though Ellie was beautiful, smart, and good to me, I wasn’t ready for a serious relationship. I hoped she’d stick around, but she was heartbroken and disappeared from my life. I didn’t like hurting her, but I didn’t know what I wanted with my life and my career and wanted to be free. When I told Mom, she said, “So because it didn’t work out that lifestyle’s probably not for you.” I didn’t respond to that, but it made me feel like she wanted my gay days to be over.

When I first met Dana, I wanted to tell my mother right away. But because it had been a few years since I mentioned dating women to my mother, it was as if I had to come out to her again. Dating Ellie had been the last conversation I had with my mother. I was sure I would never be with a guy again and I wanted my mother to meet Dana and be a part of my life since our relationship had been so distant. For some reason I was more nervous this time to come out again to my mother.

I drove to my mother’s house and sat in her sewing room, waiting for her to finish her project. The room contained many sewing supplies and leftover projects but it was far from messy as my mother was the most organized person I knew. Brightly colored pin cushions hid between slightly open drawers. Numerous rolls of thread filled up a shelf, each sitting upright and organized by color. Plastic containers with labels sat stacked in the wall-sized cabinet. Dust from thread and lint piled nicely in the white ceramic trash can like it had collected itself magically by the snap of a finger.

The TV was on with a show she had taped. It didn’t matter that it was 2010, or that I had bought her a Tivo, Mom still insisted on recording TV on VHS tapes.
I made some small talk so she turned off the show. Sewing was so natural for her yet she looked focused. We had to talk in between times she used the serger machine as its chopping sound was too loud.

“I met someone online,” I said.

She kept working on her project.

“It’s a woman. Her name is Dana. I’m really serious about her.”

She cut the thread with a scissor.

“I’m very sure of myself, Mom. I know I’m gay.”

The chopping sound of the serger was loud and became faster.

I swallowed twice.

Silence.

“Ok, what do you want me to say?” she asked.

“I just wanted to tell you.”

“She’s pretty. What does she do?” Mom asked as she glanced at the photo I was holding of a beautiful Vietnamese woman in a pink shirt with a white coat.

“She works for Homeland Security and has an eight-year-old son,” I said.

I kept the fact that she had a motorcycle to myself for the time being. I knew Mom thought motorcycles were dangerous. Mom’s salmon colored t-shirt hid the few pounds she had been trying to lose for a year now.

The pedal of the serger squeaked as it activated the chopping sound.

“Were you and Becky together?” Mom asked.

I was surprised she remembered Becky and thought we could be together.

“No, no way,” I said, “We were just friends.”
“How do you feel about your faith in the church?” She finally asked what I knew was on her mind.

Though my mother was very Catholic, she was also very open. She didn’t believe everything the church said. I was proud of her for using her own mind. She grew up with a gay uncle, my great uncle, Leon. He was such a loveable man that his family was able to embrace him instead of shun him. I’m eternally grateful to him for being out and making it easier for me. I wished he hadn’t died when I was 12.

“I have a relationship with God and I know that these feelings of love I have are not wrong. God isn’t showing me they are wrong. I don’t think I will go to Hell for loving someone.”

“Ok, if that’s how you feel, I just want you to have a relationship with God, Honey,” she said.

“I do.”

We walked into the kitchen and she called for Tom to help her with dinner.

“She has a son, though. You won’t be able to travel much,” my mother said.

“I don’t care, I love her,” I said. “Dad had kids too and you said you knew right away he was the one.”

“Yes, I did. Set the table,” she said.

I reached for the plates from the cabinet and set them down on the deep blue marble countertop.

“I would like to meet Dana someday,” she said, finally telling me what I wanted to hear.
I smiled to myself and glanced at the frozen broccoli and corn Mom pulled out of the freezer. I was now used to the freshly grown vegetables, fried pork, and jasmine rice that Dana’s family cooked.
Food

Deciding on food for the wedding was a bit difficult. Dana preferred Asian food, but most of the guests would be American. We compromised on a mix. At the ceremony we would have Asian-style cake, pork dumplings, spring rolls, egg rolls, stir fry noodles with vegetables, four cheese spreads with crackers, vegetable pastry cake, crab dip, and bread with hummus. For the entrée choices at the reception we picked lemongrass chicken with rice and salmon with wasabi mashed potatoes.

I believed in true love at first sight when I met Dana. She was my ideal type; the one I had been searching for, but thought I would never find. She understood my humor. Her beauty overwhelmed me. Photos of her motorcycle and her in a security uniform with her gun excited me. Family was important to her and she shared my dreams of traveling and having another child. I enjoyed the differences of culture and language. I had always wanted to be with someone foreign to me, who could teach me first-hand about another place on this earth.

Dana and I danced together, worked out together, and played cards together. She taught me Vietnamese, how to cook Asian food, and various other intricacies about her culture. Dana had been with a few women before, after her ten-year marriage to a man, but no one serious.

Dana taught me bits and pieces of Vietnamese and I would ask her to say the words as I enjoyed her accent and other languages in general. Within just a few days of knowing each other, one evening Dana said to me, “Yêu em.” Without knowing Vietnamese, I knew what she said; I felt it too. She told me she loved me.
Two months into our relationship Dana and I went house hunting. We hadn’t been together that long, yet we were committed enough to want a house together. When I first met Dana, she had been looking for a house for herself and her eight-year-old son Tim, so it only seemed rational for us to look for a big enough place that would fit my stuff too, cats and all. Some of our friends called us crazy, but we knew what we wanted.

Dana and I sat in the back of the realtor’s car. The once-clean tan interior showed off its Coke or Pepsi stains. I tried to ignore them as the realtor’s leftover tuna sandwich smell drifted into the back. Dana put the window down for air, but then put it up when she heard my phone ring.

The realtor, Shirley, slammed on the breaks and Dana and I lunged forward.

“Oops, stop sign,” Shirley said with an apologetic giggle.

Dana caught my eye, as this was the fourth time that day Shirley had almost broken driving laws.

My phone waited for an answer.

“Wow, look at that house,” Dana said, pointing.

I pushed the green button. The car continued to drive past green lawns, fences, mailboxes; eventually all became a blur.

“Hi!” I answered, excited to hear her voice.

The car drove on, passing parks and walking paths.

“What?” I asked the phone, not believing. “Is it cancer?”

Dana and Shirley’s side conversation about backyards abruptly shifted.
Dana’s long black hair lay in a ponytail on her back beneath her blue baseball cap. When Dana ran out of things to say, Shirley filled up the silence like she always did with chatter. When Shirley looked at me in the rear view mirror she knew it was more serious.

“We can head back to the office,” she said.

“My mom has a tumor in her skull,” I said, when I was able to talk.

Dana’s eyes widened but she tried to hide it as she put one hand on my knee and one on my back. I used the sleeve of my sweatshirt as Kleenex.

“No, let’s go see the last house. I need to keep my mind off things,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Dana asked worried, rubbing my leg. Her short jean shorts revealed much of her tan muscular thighs.

“Yes, I’m sure, can we please go see it, Shirley?”

“Of course,” Shirley said, her voice back to cheery.

Shirley was a very overweight woman, short and round, not so dissimilar to Becky. Her cheeks were big and poofy and inviting. She laughed a lot, especially with Dana and me. I liked her, but she talked too long and too much about issues we didn’t need to know about the realty business. I liked the fact, though, that her husband was from the former Yugoslavia and that she, like I would someday, had a mother-in-law who didn’t speak English. Dana’s Vietnamese parents lived in America but didn’t speak any English.

I calmed enough to explain my personal life in front of Shirley.

“My mom has been having headaches for a while, and some double vision. We were supposed to meet up with my stepdad’s daughters for his 50th birthday in Oregon next weekend,” I said, smelling the exhaust out the window that Dana had put down to get some air in the back.

The sunlight coming in the car faded away. The cancer storm was back.
“They were in Utah. Mom went to the hospital for scans. There’s some mass in her skull. They are driving back home now for her to see her normal doctors and have more tests,” I said, as if speaking about painful topics was a motor function.

It was Utah again. It had been in Utah that my dad had been told he had three to five months to live. Now my 59-year-old mother relived the bad news in the same hospital. And the bad news would ride along on the 22-hour drive home. Death with a bow wrapped around it, a black bow of thorns. How much was she remembering of my father? Now she was the one sick and unknowing, unsure of what her diagnosis would be. Death just wouldn’t leave this family alone, not for a year, not for five years.

“It will be okay, Honey, it could be nothing,” Dana said.

Her comfort didn’t work. I knew cancer too well. My mom’s friend had died of a brain tumor a few years ago. They had given her steroids till her face ballooned up. Then she died anyway. And our accountant had died last year. She was 52 and her breast cancer had spread to her brain. She had left her two teenage daughters behind. I wasn’t ready to be an orphan at 29. Couldn’t I at least get to 40 without losing the only family I had?

I walked into the house Shirley showed us, not caring and not seeing. My mother’s health consumed my mind.

On the way back to the office, Shirley made a wrong turn.

“Oopsies,” she said giggling, but less this time.

I wanted out of this car, out of this place where bad news littered the air. The thick air I didn’t want to breath in. All I could do was wait. Waiting for tests, waiting for answers, waiting for stoplights, waiting for my next breath, waiting for the sun.
After my mom returned home and had more tests, I drove the hour to her house for dinner. Mom never told me information right when I walked in the door. There had to be an informal greeting, some iced tea that was watered down to barely a taste, the way we both liked it. There had to be some quiet time when the phone wasn’t ringing or the news wasn’t on, some time between dinner and feeding the cat; time for a burden of news, the receiving of the gift with the black thorn bow.

My stomach tightened beneath the muscles I forced myself to use to breathe. I wasn’t hungry. I hadn’t been hungry the night they told me Dad was sick. That moment that cuts the red ribbon of happiness you had throughout childhood if you were lucky enough. My frayed, muddy ribbons lay in pieces on the diseased ground.

Mom said we would go out for dinner. She didn’t feel like cooking either. Go out to celebrate the bad news? I guess it was easier to hide emotion in public.

My mom sat in her forest green soft chair in the living room. I sat on the edge of the pastel pink chaise lounge. Both were taken so well care of for years that they looked brand new. I tried to sit in the chair in a relaxed position, but it was impossible. This was worse than the first time. I was seven years older yet somehow it was worse. Before, it had been breast cancer. Something that could be removed. And they removed it. However, they couldn’t remove my mother’s skull. Was it cancer? Please no.

“Ok, just tell me,” I said, waiting for the bullet I had now accepted.

“I have a small mass in my skull in the bone. They also saw a spot on my hip. It’s really tiny but they still want to do radiation. The oncologist said it’s the breast cancer coming back as bone cancer.”
I took a short quick breath. The room screamed the word cancer at me till my ears rang. Cancer of the bones was bad. My great uncle had died of it. I remember people saying how painful it was. I couldn’t imagine my mother in that much pain. I watched her part her lips to speak, my mind fighting not to shut down.

“The oncologist is really optimistic. The radiation treatment is very effective. They will keep testing me and giving me medication and if something new pops up they will treat it. But I may never be cured. It will be up and down like a roller coaster for a long time.”

I couldn’t take this constant up and down, not knowing when you’re going to be sick to the point of dying or sick to the point of living. I tried not to cry for her. I’m not sure if I wanted to hold her or I wanted her to hold me. I went over to her chair and reached for her hand.

“I’m not ready to lose you yet,” I said.

All the sorrow I had avoided during my dad’s death, all the sorrow I had bypassed when my mother first got cancer piled up on top of me now. I was alone again, alone with this big fat sorrow wrapped in black ribbons of thorns pushing into my body. It didn’t shield me from the clouds overhead. Where was the rainbow after the storm, the one that was made of colored ribbons but never actually made a bow, the one that promised you the storm was over?

It rained harder and harder and it didn’t stop.

There actually was a storm that night, a flash flood warning. Dana drove the hour up through the rain to be with me at Mom’s, leaving Tim with his father. She didn’t want me to be alone that night in my mother’s basement, the word cancer floating above, devising how it could attack me like an enraged bird. Did my mother feel like it was a bird attacking her? Was it a tiger sitting on her bed, waiting for her to move?
Dana worked security and had to get up at 4am just to be on time the next day, yet she still came.

I worried about the radiation. What if the radiation was a tiny bit off? What if the wrong part of my mother’s skull was irradiated? The tumor was close to her brain, what if the doctors screwed up? I couldn’t think about those questions.

“What’s on your mind?” Dana asked me in Vietnamese one night.

I answered her in English since my Vietnamese was so limited.

“Honey, try not to think about these things. She will be okay. It could be worse,” Dana said, kissing my hand in bed.

How could it be worse? The only thing worse than cancer was death, but cancer was basically a death sentence. In my mind there was nothing worse than this. However, I understood how Dana could say that.

“Go hug him, that’s your father,” her mother had told her when she was three. Scared of the dirty, tortured stranger in front of her, Dana still obeyed her mother. Dana didn’t see her father again until he was released from prison when she was seven.

Dana’s dad had been a Special Agent for the U.S. Government in Vietnam in the 1970s. When Dana was still in her mother’s womb, her dad was captured by the Communists and tortured in prison for seven years. Since her father was in prison, her mother worked to support the family. Dana wasn’t even breastfed by her mother. Dana’s sister took her around to neighbors who could breastfeed her.

Dana’s family worked on the farms, sometimes more than 13 hours a day. She didn’t come to America with her parents until she was 18 years old. Forced to learn English and go to
American high school, she went through depression from being away from her culture, country, and sister. Dana had been through hardships I never experienced, horrible life trials. But she hadn’t experienced her parents dying at a younger age. She was 35 years old. I would be lucky to still have a mother at 35.

The next week Dana and I left on another house-hunting session with Shirley. Dana and I wanted nothing more than to live together. After all, life seemed shorter every day.

“How’s your mom?” Shirley asked politely.

Why did it seem like realtors weaved into the most strenuous times in my family’s life?

When my mom’s depression was so bad that she didn’t even talk, there had been a realtor there, too. I had hated the realtor and the “point of interest” yellow post-its she stuck around the house and on my closet door. But my mom had hated her the most, and only because she was behind the changes in life that my mother found too hard to handle.

The first encounter I ever had with realtors was when I was five. We were selling our house and a couple came to look at it. I didn’t know what was going on but I knew it was something bad. I played in the backyard while the realtor showed the couple the house. When they came to look in the backyard I sprayed them with the garden hose. My mother yelled at me.

When my parents bought a second home in Utah, they used a realtor. My parents were in Utah when my dad got sick, two years after he retired. My mom was out shopping and didn’t have a cell phone. My dad needed someone to take him to the hospital. The only person he knew was the realtor, so Dad called him. That started the beginning of the demise of my happiness: cancer, my father, and a realtor.
Shirley’s GPS led us to the wrong house.

“Well that’s funny, I thought I typed in the address right,” Shirley said, fumbling with papers.

The familiar back seat of bad news smelled of fresh cut grass from the open window.

The contrasting smell of my Dr. Pepper calmed me. I rarely drank pop, but I needed something to distract my senses and I hoped it would distract my mind.

“Oh sorry, hold on, my daughter’s calling me,” Shirley said while starting to drive again.

The drink holders in between the seats put a distance between me and Dana.

“Red light!” Dana said as politely as she could in her Asian accent from the back seat to Shirley’s blue-tooth covered ear.

We lunged forward again.

“Oh, sorry guys,” Shirley said with the familiar giggle.

Dana and I both took a deep breath. Then we saw it: the beautiful white house on the corner with the big tree.

We escaped the smelly car and waited by the door for Shirley and her key. Dana and I smiled at each other and gleamed. We loved the fenced-in backyard with a playground for Tim and the daughter we both wanted. The kitchen sold us. Its tall triangle window let the sunlight in to make the kitchen sparkle.

There wasn’t an island but there was counter space all around. Brand new stainless steel appliances and a dining room that led out to a nice deck. It immediately felt like home to both of us. Shirley gabbed about something in the other room. Dana and I ignored her, stealing kisses, talking dirty in the kitchen.

We would make this place our home, whatever it took. Life would go on.
As we signed the purchase agreement, I glanced down at the table in front of us. *We didn’t agree to purchase this life of ours. Would I have chosen to buy this life for myself if I knew all the hardships and sadness I would have to face?*

I looked up at Dana’s face and I knew the answer: she made my life worth living.

Dana’s older sister and her family had come from Vietnam only a year before I met them. They didn’t speak English, but the children picked it up fast in school. Her sister, Kay, wasn’t comfortable with Dana being gay. Kay stared at me like an eagle, intimidating me when I came to her place to visit.

Once Kay got to know me she started to like me a lot, yet wouldn’t admit it. One day I sat with Kay in the hospital waiting room. Dana and Kay’s elderly parents had been hospitalized after their return trip from Vietnam. They just happened to have a layover on their way back in Tokyo, at the moment the 2011 earthquake hit Japan. Stuck there for four days, they became sick.

Kay and I sat waiting for Dana to come back with news after talking to the doctor. The awkwardness of silence from not speaking the same language was ubiquitous. My Vietnamese was limited to conversations about food, sleep, kids, and some naughty phrases Dana taught me. So Kay and I sat quietly waiting.

Then I asked Kay if she was tired. She said yes.

She asked me if I thought a girl walking by was pretty. I said yes.

We sat for a while watching the people in the ER come and go.

I asked Kay if she thought another girl was pretty. She said yes.
She asked if I was hungry. I said no.

I asked if she was hungry. She said no.

And so we sat, staring at the floor.

Finally I had an idea. I reached into my purse and pulled out my tiny sketchbook. I started drawing pictures of a house, a car, a shirt, a toilet. I gestured to her to write the word in Vietnamese by the picture. Kay had the same beauty as Dana only most of it was hidden behind lines and years of worry. Her long hair was pulled back and frayed in the ponytail. Her skinny body wore clothes that were never new.

Kay wrote down the word and said it so I could pronounce it and practice. Then Dana came back from her mother’s hospital room to find us. I showed Dana what we were doing. She told Kay to draw something. I handed the sketchbook to Kay. Kay said something in Vietnamese and laughed. Kay’s immense smile brought life to her face. I looked at the sketchbook. Kay had drawn a penis.

We all giggled. There was no culture or language barrier when it came to drawing penises.

A few months after we bought our house, Dana’s youngest brother, Vinny, planned to get married. Dana had three brothers who lived here in Minnesota and one was still in Vietnam.

A wedding ceremony in Vietnam is different from an American one. There’s a ritual at the boy’s house and then they go to the girl’s house and have a ceremony there. But Vinny already lived with his fiancée, Connie, and her parents. He was in need of a boy’s house if he wanted to do it the Vietnamese traditional way. Since Dana and I had recently moved into a new
house that was larger than his other siblings’ apartments, he asked if we could do the boy’s ceremony at our place. We agreed.

“Make sure your parents come to the wedding,” her father told me one night at dinner, translated by Dana.

“Okay,” I said. At least “Okay” was universal.

Dana’s father didn’t approve of her being gay, but at least he accepted me enough to invite my parents. I felt fortunate until her father’s and Vinny’s request the day of the wedding.

“Connie said she ran into some of my friends from high school and invited them to the wedding,” Dana told me in the bathroom while we were getting ready for the wedding. “Connie said they asked if I was married and she told them I was. I don’t like that she lied like that.”

I sat on the side of the tub and listened to her.

“My dad and Vinny want to introduce me as married to my ex. I told them I wouldn’t do it.”

“What? What do you mean?” I asked.

“The ceremony is videotaped and they send it back to Vietnam and I guess my dad still wants me to be married to Ted.”

Dana told me there wasn’t even a word in Vietnamese for significant other, partner, girlfriend, or lesbian that translated well. People in Vietnam, primarily when her parents lived there, never acknowledged that topic as it was more or less unheard of, especially in the country. I didn’t expect her traditional Vietnamese father nearly 80 years old to try to find the words for it. But it wasn’t right to still pretend she was married to her ex.
I had sympathy for Dana’s father. After all, he was tortured in prison for seven years. Dana said he had wanted to kill himself in prison as some of his friends did, but because of Dana he didn’t. Every time I saw him without a shirt, I wanted to see if there were scars of torture, yet I couldn’t look.

Vinny’s wedding wasn’t like an American wedding. The ceremony at “the boy’s house” was only a few minutes and a few photos of eight huge trays of fruit, rice, and a giant cooked pig. The boy’s family and friends then drove an hour to the girl’s family’s house to present her with the gifts. All the linens were red with gold tassels. There were embroidered designs of dragons, Asian faces, birds, and flowers, each brightly colored.

Connie wore a traditional Vietnamese head piece that looked like a fabric crown that matched the bright pink of her dress with gold decoration. Vinny wore a bright yellow traditional outfit with the same gold decoration on the fabric. The ceremony was in a tight living room in Connie’s family’s house. Both her parents walked her in. Dana’s father presented Connie with gold jewelry. Each bridesmaid wore a different brightly colored dress, some Asian style, some American. There was a plethora of colors in the decorations, clothes, cups, and flowers. Even the food was bright. The sticky rice was orange and the jello molds were each rainbow color.

Dana’s dad held the microphone and introduced each person in the family as they presented their gifts. He introduced Dana’s ex as a brother-in-law, and then Dana and me as his daughter and a friend. Dana was disappointed but I couldn’t expect more than that.
At the reception people brought their children and sat where they wanted, not assigned. The Asian restaurant had to bring in more tables. Vinny even asked us to move twice. He thought my parents and I could sit by the other Americans. But there wasn’t room for Dana.

“I want to sit by Dana,” I told him.

“She can pull up a chair,” he said. His spiked hair with bleached tips stood off the top of his head like blades of grass. His muscular body was slightly visible under the tuxedo which he changed into.

“There’s already ten places at the table, it’s too tight to fit another one,” I said.

“It’s okay, Honey, we’ll find another place to sit,” Dana said and left to look for one.

“Kel, it’s okay, we can sit here,” my mom said.

“No, I want to sit by you guys and Dana, I don’t think that's too much to ask,” I said, not letting Dana’s brother tell us what to do, even though it was his wedding.

When my mother first walked in, I was surprised to see her without her wig. She wore an off-white hat with a blue flower pin in it. Her faded red and short thinning hair peeked out under her hat, another reminder she still had cancer. She said she wasn’t going to dye her hair anymore this time.

Connie appeared in her white wedding gown, changing from her traditional colorful gown. The guests, who were almost all Vietnamese, took photos with her before she changed into a peach evening gown for the dance. Her high cheek bones were covered in a pink blush that matched the color above her eyes. Her black hair was lightened to a caramel brown. Connie’s flamboyant, long nails were made conspicuous by their painted white tips; this display
was expected as nails were her profession. Most of the female guests dressed up in brightly colored and sparkly dresses.

In Vietnamese culture it’s polite to ask the older generation to eat first. At the table Dana found for us, Momtom were the oldest. The others at the table served Momtom from the large plate of food. Chopsticks weren’t foreign to my mother.

“So we get served first because we are older huh?” Mom said amused by the new culture. Mom tried everything in the ten-course Asian meal, even the octopus. Dana was impressed.

I glanced at Mom while she observed Dana’s father giving a speech. His Parkinson’s disease made his entire body shake. Dana’s dad stood in his royal blue traditional Vietnamese outfit. It closed at the shoulder like a Chinese gown. His face looked stiff as his speech sounded like an order given to an army, though Dana’s translation was the typical well wishes of a father to his son on his wedding day. Dana’s other brother helped him back to his seat. When Momtom were ready to leave we found Dana’s parents and requested a photo. This was the first time our parents were together for a photo with us, and because of this my relationship with Dana felt more official. I smiled and enjoyed the idea of the contrast of cultures, colors, and generations juxtaposed in one image: my new family.

One night after Vinny’s wedding, we visited Dana’s family. In their culture, there’s not much personal space. Everyone in the family will pile in one room and sit on one bed. I sat on Dana’s parents’ bed between Dana’s mother and Kay’s eight-year-old daughter. Dana’s mother’s jade necklace in the shape of Buddha sat heavy on her mother’s chest.

“When you smile you are so pretty,” I said to her mother in Vietnamese. “When Grandpa smiles he’s handsome, but he never smiles,” I said.
Dana’s dad started to smirk and then stopped.

That night at dinner it was over 100 degrees in the house and they didn’t turn on the A.C. Not used to the tropical feel of Vietnam that their place created, I drowned in my sweat. And of all food to eat on a hot day, it was roasted pig and pig intestines. On hot summer days my mother usually made salad or something cold to eat, not anything hot and certainly not intestines.

The kids, or whoever couldn’t fit at the small table, sat on the floor. I sat at the table. I had tried pig ears, chicken feet, duck liver, and goat, but I wasn’t ready for intestines. Meat bones and chopsticks covered the table. After dinner I put a slice of orange in my mouth and kept the outer peel. I smiled creating a face with orange teeth. Dana’s dad laughed.

Dana’s niece gasped, excited, and said, “You made Grandpa laugh! No one can do that!”

I looked at this man whose stern face changed. He was now a man who laughed at silly things. Maybe he would come to our wedding and accept me as a daughter-in-law, maybe not. Either way, I was happy to be part of this culture that was so different from mine, yet on some level, exactly the same.
Shoes

You can’t understand someone just by trying on their shoes. You need to put them on and walk around in them.

The day I met Dana we weren’t alone. Her friend, Lori, had been at the bar with her before I arrived. Lori felt the awkwardness of being a third wheel on a couple’s first date. Luckily she didn’t stay that long.

Ironically, Momtom weren’t alone on their first date either. I was the third wheel.

It was the first Christmas after my father died and my mother and I had decided to take a New Year’s ski vacation in Utah. Mom and I planned on driving and invited my boyfriend, Jimmy, to fly out and meet us. I had no idea my mother’s relationship status was about to change yet again.

The day after Christmas we left for Utah. When Mom and I drove we always looked at the clouds and saw shapes. We both saw the same images. I could say, “That cloud looks like a person with a big nose,” and Mom would know exactly which cloud.

My mother’s long fingers moved over the tiny ring rosary as she held the steering wheel. Her finger nails were long and real, never fake. I could hear the sound of her lips moving while words of air spoke the silent prayers. Most of the time she drove there was no music and only occasional conversation between prayers. She liked the conversation but then acted upset as if I interrupted her too many times, which wasn’t far from the truth.
I was my mother’s only child. I told her everything. I always felt too special being the first and only baby born a week before Christmas. Being premature, only three pounds, also didn’t help to make me any less special. My mother had come into this world as the first child to a twenty-year old couple who proceeded to have six more. There are three boys and three girls besides my mother.

We stopped at a gas station. The previous Christmas I gave my mom a journal to fill out like one I had given my dad. This Christmas Mom gave it back to me. She suggested I bring it with me and read it on our trip.

I read out loud the hopes I had written for both of us.

* I hope we will maintain our close relationship if it can’t get any closer, and that we’ll live out our days together and enjoy my future kids.*

I then read her hopes for me, which she wrote in her clean and consistent handwriting.

* I hope we’ll always be close and want to get together and do some traveling and that you never have to take care of me.*

I looked at her and smiled, having read her words for the first time.

We hugged and cried at the gas station. I read on.

* My greatest joy has been being a mother. I couldn’t have made it without you, sweetheart! I could never love anyone else the way I love you--not even Dad.*

I cried again. Love was painful, even when it felt good.

When we arrived at our second home in the Utah mountains after stopping for a night, the aftermath of the summer mess still existed. This summer the heat unexpectedly came on (the
outside temperature was over 100 degrees) and melted the candles, the butter in the fridge, and cracked and split the wood floor.

The builders hadn’t fixed the floor and mouse droppings lay on our beds. The water ran pink and foamy due to the fact that the heated driveway system backed up into our plumbing. And of course it was a Friday night so no one was available till Monday.

Then all of a sudden my mother’s wrist started to hurt. I attributed it to clenching the steering wheel tightly while driving through the strong Wyoming wind. She started having something in between an anxiety attack and a temper tantrum.

“Mom, it’s okay, we’ll call the builder people’s cell phone and see if we can get a hold of them, I’ll get a warm washcloth for your arm, just take a breath.”

“Don’t tell me it’s going to be okay, don’t tell me how to feel!”

I stood and stared at her in the kitchen as she grew younger in my mind, as young as a child.

“I’m only trying to help.”

“You don’t have to worry about anything, this is all my responsibility and Dad’s not here to help me. Just leave me alone!” She looked away and grabbed the phone.

“Are you calling the builder?”

“Yes. Shit, answer your phone. Well, where’s the washcloth?”

I brought her the washcloth without attitude and took a shower downstairs to get away. After my shower I walked up the steps to the kitchen to see her holding the phone.

“So, it’s not a good idea to drink the water or shower in it?” she said to the phone.

*I’m not supposed to shower in it? I just did.* All the anxiety I held in burst out as tears.

And for some reason my mother thought that was funny. I liked seeing her laugh but it pissed
me off when she laughed at me while I was crying. Her anger gradually waned as she talked to her sister, the giggly one. I went downstairs to my room and found more mouse droppings. My mother’s talent at interior decorating was exhibited throughout the rambler with a Southwestern theme. Kokopellis danced on the walls. Silhouettes of wolves howled at the moon next to pictures of cacti and clay pots.

Once Jimmy arrived, issues between my mother and me calmed down. It would have stayed that way had we not gone to the more advanced ski place the first day. Neither of us had skied in a year nor been to this ski resort for a few years. During the first ski run my mother thought she was going to die and put all the pressure on her thighs and complained the rest of the day.

The next day was far better than the previous, but tension was building. Jimmy was leaving in one more day. My mother and I would be alone again for the drive home. Mom agreed that we could take the scenic route home through the Grand Canyon, adding a few days to the drive. Had I known what those few days would entail, I would have given up the Grand Canyon in no time.

That evening I saw a flash of light out my window followed by a loud crackling. I opened the shades. From the mountain the view of the valley looked endless. All the streetlights sparkled like stars and Christmas lights flickered. The dark night filled with colored lights for miles. Then came another bright flash. Someone was setting off fireworks for New Year’s. I could see some in the far distance from another suburb. Jimmy had already fallen asleep in the guest room. Happy New Year’s, I said to myself.
The new year brought with it a surprise.

“Can you find the house on this map?” Jimmy asked the next morning as he showed me a piece of paper with a map. Jimmy was tall with dark hair. His facial hair, never more than a few days old, sometimes displayed a small beard or side burns. His blue eyes, slightly crossed-eyed, had no depth perception unless he looked through binoculars. Like my dad, he grew up skinny with thick glasses, but now had contacts and worked out. Jimmy worked as a waiter and played trombone in a community band. His left deltoids muscle displayed a tattoo of an 8 ball and a 9 ball.

“Yes. What’s this?” I pointed to an address highlighted on the map.

“Oh, oh, that’s where my uncle lives,” he said to my surprise.

Of his mother’s eleven siblings, all live in Minnesota except one, Tom, who happened to live in the exact city in Utah where my parents had bought a second home.

“Well, call him!” My mom said.

When Jimmy got a hold of Tom, he agreed to come skiing with us.

The entire day Tom and my mom never stopped exchanging stares. Later that evening out to dinner they kept exchanging bites of food. Jimmy and I looked at each other as if to say, “What kind of monsters did we create?”

Being the only sober one, I drove Tom’s car back to our house. Thank God Tom’s car wasn’t a stick because I couldn’t drive one to save my life.

After Tom sobered up at our place he left, yet not without an awkward hug with my mother, the kind that lingers a little longer than it should.
The next morning Tom called to give my mother his “four other phone numbers,” and she invited him over our last night there. We took Jimmy to the airport and packed for our road trip home.

At dinner that night, without Jimmy, I was the third wheel. I had been a third wheel before, but never on a date with my mother. I felt invisible. Neither of them made conversation with me. I stared at the metal fish sculptures on the wall while they flirted. After dinner they held hands as we walked to the car. I didn’t even have a real brother to make me jealous of my mother’s affection, but this felt strange.

I fell asleep before Tom left, and when I awoke in the morning my mother confessed he hadn’t left till 3am. Since I had slept more than Mom I started out driving. My mother, unfortunately not fast asleep, sank easily into her usual role of backseat driver.

“Get in the right lane. The left lane’s only for passing. Slow down. Pass that truck. Get back in the right lane! Stay in the right lane except to pass!”

I had heard enough. “Fine!”

“We’re not even going to make it to Arizona tonight and it’s starting to get dark. I’m tired.” Her voice went from a complaining adult to a whining child.

“It’s not my fault you stayed up till three in the morning.”

The conversation ended for a while and we spent the night in southern Utah at the entrance to Zion National Park. My mother complained while driving through it the next day.

“Yes, it’s beautiful. Slow down, the road might be slippery. Oh God, I hate the edge. Speed up going up this hill. Stay on your side!”
How could I see the beauty of the park when every thought became about what I was doing wrong? I felt like I was maneuvering a driving course and she was my guide, or rather my drill sergeant.

We made as far as chilly Flagstaff that night. I thought Arizona was supposed to be warm. I sat on the bed writing a postcard to a friend, surprised when I realized what I just wrote. I had written my mother’s first name down instead of “Mom.”

Who was this woman I had known my whole life but was now a stranger? Who was this woman who, as a girl, played in lilac bushes, whom now I wanted to picture running in thorns? Who never went without a perm? Who gave my father ten minutes to pick my middle name? Who baked cakes and frosting almost every day for people’s birthdays, weddings, piano recitals? Sometimes she still smelled like the sweetness of the frosting. I smelled it now. The cocoa in the chocolate mixture. The marble swirl of cake batter. The leftover pie crust baking in the oven with butter and cinnamon sugar on it for us to share. But then the sound of the sewing machine hissed in my memory. It started out steady and smooth like a dial tone and then became louder and fierce. Then the sound of the serger, like a machine chopping up vegetables on high speed. The sound of the chair rolling over linoleum and the quick cut of the scissors on thread, the chair rolling back, only to have the needle pierce the fabric again.

“My hair looks terrible,” she said, piercing my memory. “This curling iron isn’t working. I hate this bathroom. My hair looks terrible. I need to get another curling iron. We’ll go to a Walmart. I didn’t see one on the way here. I hate my hair. I need better shampoo, this hotel shampoo is shit.”
I looked at my mother for the first time in a while; she rarely swore. Mom’s blue eyes appeared aqua in the light. Her pearl clip-on earrings hid behind her hair that sat a few inches above her shoulders. Terrified of needles, she had never pierced her ears or gotten a tattoo.

Our second visit to Walmart on the trip semi-satisfied her. Exhausted from the complaining, I slept well.

The next day it rained. Freezing rain. Whenever it rained at home my mother turned on the news, grabbed the flashlight with extra batteries, put on her tennis shoes, and took the cats to the basement with her. This ritual occurred throughout my life. One night, while my mother and I were sleeping under the stairs, I asked her, “Why is Daddy still upstairs in bed?” She answered, “He believes in probability. I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

At age 14, my mother experienced the largest tornado outbreak in Minnesota. It was voted the “fifth most significant Minnesota Weather Event of the 20th Century” by the Minnesota Climatology Office. Six tornados had gone through Minnesota the evening of May 6th, 1965 and the two largest, F-4s, had damaged my mother’s neighborhood. Her father had gone to get milk at the strip mall after the first storm had gone through. He came back to the house without milk. “Where’s the milk?” the family asked. “The mall is gone,” he said. Then they piled in the basement with some neighbors while the tornado from the second storm system damaged the high school gym and their neighborhood.

After the storm my mom’s family walked upstairs and cut their bare feet on broken glass; they hadn’t thought to bring their shoes downstairs. Their clothes, scattered everywhere, were covered in black oil from some chemical plant in the area. A huge piece of wood came through the wall and into the crib where my mother’s youngest brother slept moments before. The brand
new swing-set my grandpa had bought and laid out on the lawn to be assembled was gone. My grandpa walked outside and said, “I guess I don’t have to clean out the garage now.” Their garage was on top of their neighbor’s home four houses down the block. I understood my mother’s fears. And that explained my reoccurring nightmare of tornadoes.

Mom gave me ten minutes to get out of the car and look at the Grand Canyon. Seeing this spectacular site for the first time, the 40 shades of brown earth dividing one side and the other, didn’t look or feel as grand on this cloudy day surrounded by snow and hatred. What was once divided by a river, now stood dry and desolate like the space between my mother and I.

We left the snow in Arizona but took the tension all the way to Texas. New Mexico may have looked prettier had I been in a better mood to enjoy it. Oklahoma was flat, uninteresting, and didn’t show me any sympathy.

Finally, we made it to Texas, which was ironically colder than Minnesota. I decided I hated January or maybe only the northern hemisphere. And most of all, I now hated anywhere my mother was.

We sat, emotionally and physically exhausted, in a Mexican restaurant in Texas, despising each other and talking out the animosity that had been building up for days.

The three main things that make me cry are: death of a loved one, being completely stressed out, and my mother yelling at me. Now all those things at the same time made me cry in this restaurant. I’m not the kind of person who cries in front of anyone but my mother, let alone in a public place. I almost smiled, remembering my mother hated Mexican food. But no smile could break through this anger.
“If you complain about one more thing, I think I might go insane!” I said in the calmest voice I could muster.

“I just want to go home.”

“Mom, we can’t worry about that now, we’ll drive home tomorrow.” I stared at the table.

“Don’t tell me what I can worry about!”

“Do you want me to drive you to the airport and I’ll just drive home?” I said in a serious voice.

Silence. We both knew that idea wasn’t practical, though I pictured it happening.

The bright colors of yellow and green painted on the walls and paintings of red flowers failed at cheering me up. Our poor waiter now saw my tears. I asked him in a surprisingly composed voice for more napkins without taking my eyes off the table. He brought fifty.

“Mom, it just shouldn’t be this hard.” My exhaustion made my voice calm.

“What do you mean it shouldn’t be this hard!” She started to become more hysterical.

“Mom, you aren’t even being tolerable.”

“I don’t know why I let us do this. I’m not a road trip person.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling guilty.

“You can go on road trips with your friends. I won’t ever do this again.”

“It’s only one more night.”

“Don’t tell me everything’s fine. I have the right to feel.”

I looked up to see if her eyes were wet. They were dry.

“Mom, it’s so hard when everything that comes out of your mouth is negative.”

“Well you can’t just brush it off and tell me I can’t have feelings. You’ve been doing that all the time!”
I pretended to look for a response in my food.

“Well maybe it’s the only way I can react to it!” I said, “I’m sorry that Dad’s not here to travel with and help figure things out, but I’m trying to help.”

“I thought I’d do this for you, I guess that wasn’t a good idea.” Finally she was calming down, maybe because I mentioned Dad.

“I guess it wasn’t. I don’t think we were thinking clearly. Maybe you need to think about yourself sometimes,” I said nicely.

“Well, you’re such a kid! You get into that kid role!”

“I can’t help getting into that role, you’re still my mother and I’m always going to be your daughter. I try to be responsible. I looked up all the information and planned this trip. I’m trying not to be the kid when I’m with you but sometimes I can’t help it. I’m trying! Can you give me an example then of when I was acting like a kid so I can work on it?”

“Well, just forget it. Never mind, I guess it’ll always be like that.” She looked down at her plate.

“There are too many issues and too many things going on and we are both emotionally exhausted. I don’t even think we can talk about it anymore,” I said.

“You’re right. There are too many issues.” She looked up at the waiter. “I’ll take the check now please, thanks.”

Winning against your mother is like overthrowing the government, a coup d’état. But in the end the satisfaction of winning the battle isn’t worth the ruins and casualties and disorder that you’re left with.
Later that night Mom lingered in the bathroom talking to Tom on her cell while I watched ER.

“These batteries are supposed to last longer!” she said when she came out of the bathroom and threw the cell phone on the bed.

“How’s Tom?”

“Good,” she said sweetly, like the cliché of a young girl in love.

Tom was about the only thing we could talk about that lightened the mood, if only for a few minutes.

We drove straight up I-35 the next day. My mother is someone who can’t spend a night in a hotel if she’s only a state away from home. We were four.

“We’re driving all the way home tonight, we should be home before 11.”

“Fine.”

“You can lean your seat back.”

“Okay.”

Both exhausted, we found lighter subjects to talk about. Mom listened to her CDs, which I preferred over silent prayers. It was to be a smooth last couple hundred miles, or so I thought.

“What was that?” I said to a beeping noise.

“Shit! We’re almost out of gas!”

“Mom, it’s okay, don’t panic.”

“Don’t tell me that! Oh my God, I forgot to fill up last time. I don’t know if there’s a gas station!”

“Mom, when the light comes on we still have about 30 miles we can drive. I saw the special they did on TV about when you’ll actually run out of gas.”
“Pisshead! Is that a sign, what does it say?!!”

My mother hated when the tank went under a half and now it blinked empty. She also hated getting off the freeway when she couldn’t see where to get back on. Of course the exit we chose took us far away from the freeway.

“How far away is this goddamned gas station! There’s no sign, I don’t even know where to go!”

“Mom, it’s okay, calm down, it looks like it’s up there.”

Thank God I saw something resembling a station.

“You don’t know it’s going to be okay, stop dismissing my feelings! It’s seven below outside! We need gas! Shit, it doesn’t have a credit card thing!”

“Yes it does. Do you want me to do it?”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t put gas in yet, and it’s cold out.”

She got out and the credit card thing didn’t work and the inside looked closed.

“Shit shit shit! What are we gonna do?”

“We’ll get back on the freeway and go to the next exit, Mom, don’t worry, we’ll find a gas station.”

“Just shut up. You don’t know there’s a gas station! Shit!”

I always hear that there comes a time in a woman’s life when she sees her mother as a person and not just a mother. I thought I had experienced that occasionally in the last few years, but this time I really understood what it meant. I witnessed my mother’s weakest moment. My father could have calmed her down and taken some of the responsibility; she never let me take any. I kept my mouth shut. There wasn’t one word I could say that would help. I shut down
like a computer. I put on my headphones and turned up my music and closed my eyes tightly. I
had no control over anything but myself. My mother, blinded by her anger and panic, lost
control.

“Stupid, stupid, I can’t believe I did that!” At least she didn’t blame that one on me.

We found another gas station and made it home by midnight. I slept over and drove
home to my place the next day. We parted with a stoic “I love you” and didn’t talk for a week.

Two weeks later Mom called the doctor on the way to pick up Tom from the airport.

“Breast cancer,” the doctor told her.

Now she was the one in my father’s shoes. The one people felt sorry for, the one people
were afraid to call, the one fighting to live.

Dana wouldn’t let me have shoes with heels for the wedding because it would make her
look even shorter. She was already over seven inches shorter than me. Therefore, I decided to
get comfy yet stylish flipflops. I searched several stores until I found a comfortable and
affordable pair, white with silver sparkly jewels. A contemporary, gay Cinderella look.
Finding a wedding photographer who was affordable but experienced was tricky. Dana and I ended up choosing a woman who had taken pictures at a friend’s wedding. She was very affordable, yet we didn’t know how our pictures would turn out.

The weekend before Momtom married, Tom’s kids came to town and we had a professional family photo taken. I sat with them and looked at the camera, feeling strange. I had seen my step siblings less than ten times, maybe less than five. The three sisters had each other and two of them had children. I smiled for the pictures like a recently adopted foreign child.

But a portrait or photo couldn’t capture the story of fear or pain. The film only gets to see what the shutter allows it to. And the longer the shutter is open the more exposed the film is, letting in too much light, causing the film to go black.

When I was still in college, my mother asked me to draw her nude portrait before her body became different from a lumpectomy in 2003. Taking showers with her as a child and having drawn her previously for drawing assignments, my eyes were used to her body. On the chaise lounge her face hid the fear of change. I sat in my mother’s living room remembering what my Watercolor professor had told us in class the week before. “Don’t worry about painting what you see, but paint the essence of it,” the professor said. I tried to capture my mother’s distilled spirit, her essence. I looked down at the dark gray charcoal shards that sullied my fingers. How do I to capture this essence of my mother? The essence of my mother was more than her body. Her body would change, but her essence would not. Her powerful presence could crush a room, but in a way a fort falls down and hugs you with its blankets. I picked up
my white eraser, now gray with the black ashes of my medium. Will anything keep her close when her essence is gone?

Goldfish were flushed and forgotten.

The previous week my Watercolor professor had dropped one of the bags of goldfish we were painting. Trying to save them, he quickly filled the bag with water from the sink in the painting room. Minneapolis city water filled their lungs like smoke.

I sat down at one of the small tables in the room with the tall ceiling. Natural light came through the large windows. I got my supplies ready as did the other twelve students. The bag of goldfish rested on the table in front of me. One of the three goldfish had risen to the top and now floated upside-down. I wanted to cry. Why was I falling apart this easily especially at school during class? I wanted to leave the classroom but if I did I was sure I would cry. What would I tell the professor? That I felt bad for a fish? That my father had been a goldfish in faucet water gradually swimming slower and floating to the surface? That my mother was that goldfish too and was thrown back in the distilled water with the others, but maybe not soon enough?

*Goldfish die faster in faucet water than distilled.*

During the painting session the second goldfish slowly rose to the surface of the bag. Why did *our* table have to get the bag of death? Was it a stigma that now followed me?

The other students kept on painting, not seeing my pain. I looked down at my paper. The ultramarine blue choked the cadmium orange of the goldfish to the edge of the composition. The technique known as “wet on wet” only looked like a polluted puddle. Water from my brush drowned the Cold Press watercolor paper.

“Two are dead!” yelled the skinny girl at my table with the flower-patterned shirt.

I wanted her to cry so that I could cry with her.
My family sat before me, encased in a bag. I swam in a suffocating bag of contaminated water moving slower and slower. I watched my lifeless parents rise to the top, anticipating the moment when I also would no longer breathe. At least a goldfish’s memory only lasts two minutes. Reminders of my orphan nightmare never stopped.

*Goldfish die faster in faucet water than distilled.*

Tears. I stopped painting. So did the skinny girl.

“I’m putting the alive one in the bag with the ones in the distilled water,” she said as she got up and did it not waiting for approval.

Finally an angel! I was saved! Though a parentless child, I could go on living in life-breathing water again.

“Don’t worry about painting what you see, but paint the essence of it,” the professor said.

I looked through some photos of Dad to put out at our wedding ceremony. As I was looking through my drawer I found the papers with questions on them I asked my dad. He had answered them before he died. I sat down and read them. Then I knew how my dad would still be able to be at my wedding. I had asked him to write down advice for my future spouse. I could read it at the wedding and it would be like he was giving a toast and his advice. He would be there in his words, in his spirit, and in his photos.

His advice for my future spouse:

*Listen to your wife. Respect her feelings. If you get very angry, stop and cool off and resume the conversation later. Set periodic times to do fun things together. Things change and interests change- try to experience new hobbies and interests together. Try to understand each other and where the other person is coming from. Understand your wife’s needs, wants and desires. Try*
lots of little things to make your wife happy. Be open and honest and communicate as often as possible. Eat celery with peanut butter.
Hair

I had a dream I lost my hair. It came out in chunks and in its place were spider bites that turned red and grew into anthills.

I remember sitting with my mother outside on the bench in front of her house. It was perhaps May or June. Either Dad was sick in bed or well in Heaven, but it was just her and me. After a long pause she said, “It’s the temperature of Heaven.”

It was the air in which worries float away. It was the one moment of peace everyone expects yet never finds. We had it together.

That memory came back to me as I sat in the hospital waiting room waiting for them to prep my mother before her lumpectomy. I tried to keep the thought of losing her out of my mind. My dad hadn’t been gone for a year yet and I had to deal with the idea of losing another parent. My mother acted so strong on the outside that it was easy to overlook her own loss of health and physical perception.

When the team of nurses finished prepping my mother for surgery they let us visit her. The room was bright with white lights, white walls, and a white bed with a white blanket. The room resembled an artist’s bleached canvas, but not one that invited color and creativity, one that covered it up.

Mom didn’t look scared like I had expected. She looked peaceful and calm. I held my mom’s hand as she lay in the hospital bed. Her sisters and brother walked back to the waiting room, leaving us alone.
“I’m going to get through this for you and Tom,” she said.

She looked down at our hands and then back at me as her eyes started to water.

“I’m okay Mom, really.”

“I’m proud you’re my brave daughter,” she said, looking at me, squeezing my hand.

I sat in the crowded waiting room with my aunts and uncles. I attempted to read The Hours by Michael Cunningham, while the surgeon removed the cancer from my mother’s breast, the one that covered her heart. Many moments later the surgeon appeared.

“She’s in recovery, everything went well. We did find that the cancer had spread to the main lymph node and two others of the thirteen we removed. I really feel that we got it all, but the pathology report on Monday will tell for sure.”

We sat back down in the chairs and my mother’s closest sister, the giggly one, explained the news to the ones who couldn’t hear what the surgeon had said.

Then I lost it. I hadn’t cried about her cancer yet. Tears flowed but no sobs. My aunt held me to her breast and I hid my face under her arm against her dark green shirt. I didn’t want to pull away. I stayed there until I felt composure returning.

It was good news. Good news. The surgeon said so. He thinks they got it all. She’s fine. She’s in recovery. My dad’s brother had died in recovery from a blood clot. I cried again.

I couldn’t get the word “spread” out of my brain. Spreading meant it could go everywhere. My father’s cancer spread from the pancreas to the liver. We found it in the last stage. My mother’s was found in stage two. With breast cancer you could still be saved in the first part of stage four. But it had spread. How could this surgery save my mother from cancer, yet there hadn’t been a surgery to save my father? It didn’t make sense to me. I was only
familiar with the kind of cancer that took your life in less than seven months. This cancer didn’t do that? I didn’t understand.

My mother’s three younger sisters, the giggly one, the quiet one, and the stubborn one, followed me to the recovery room. My mother looked white and her thin hair lay slicked back. So relieved to see her alive, I didn’t notice she looked ten years older.

Mom requested some oxygen and the nurse appeared.

“Are these your daughters?” the nurse asked.

We looked at each other tensely.

“I’m the daughter,” I said quickly, hoping my mother didn’t pick up on the horrible reference to her age. Her eyes were closed as she rested.

“Do you think she heard that?” one of my aunts whispered.

“Yes I did!” my mother said in a loud angry voice that made us jump.

We smiled, relieved she was more alive than she looked.

The pathology report came an annoying day late.

“I don’t care. Postponing what could be bad news is fine,” my mother said. She lied. She hated waiting.

I stayed with my mother that night. To pass the time I looked at books from my childhood. I grabbed Sleeping Beauty off the shelf. It was illustrated with photographs of dolls. The witch had scared me so badly when I was little I had taken crayons and tried to color over her. Fear can’t be colored or painted over. You have to look it right in the face until it doesn’t scare you anymore.
The next day brought the good news we hoped for. They got it all. Yet there was always a but: they felt she needed to have chemo before her radiation to flush out her system of any cancer cells left floating around. Mom had watched my father go through chemo; she wasn’t excited about the idea.

The idea of the chemo acting as a precaution instead of attempting to be a cure sounded better. Yet there was still the worry of her immune system being weak and her catching a cold. And then comes the visual change.

“I’ve always hated my hair,” Mom told me. “I want to lose it. Maybe it will come back curly like they say it does. I’m going to pick out wigs.” I admired her for finding a little joy in the hard change cancer forced her to make.

A week later my mother stopped by on her way to the airport to pick up Tom. She wanted to show me her wig. My friend Alice had come to visit for the day. My two-bedroom condo wasn’t as clean as my mother would have it. The walls weren’t white or tan, they were covered with murals of clouds and butterflies. Junk I needed to take upstairs occupied three steps.

I opened the door for my mother. She stepped inside. She looked like a relative of ours; I couldn’t say which one. Her face was familiar but her hair was not. The wig, a dark red, stood out in contrast to my faded auburn color. A barrette held the sides of the hair and the bangs that rested just above her eyebrows.

We looked like twins. My mother looked younger and made me look older.

“You look like the daughter and you look like the mother,” Alice said bluntly.
My mother even acted younger. I noticed we had the same tone of voice and same expressions. She giggled like a girl and wore her new boot cut jeans over high-heeled caramel-colored boots. She sat at my kitchen table and painted her fingernails the shade of her wig, smiling and laughing between bits of conversation.

“She has eyes in the back of her head,” I said to Alice in our conversation about my mother.

“I don’t anymore, my wig covers them up.” My mother joked as if humor now came easily to her.

My mother and I tried to see the humor in every situation.

I looked at my mother noticing her beauty. The Rosacea on her cheeks was less discernable. She wore eye make-up and lipstick only on special occasions. Since Tom came along her confidence made her beauty shine.

When I closed the door after my mother left, Alice said, “It was like there were two of you.”

I had noticed it also. My mother was like me. The same look of possibility in her eyes, she now looked like me. She felt young and happy. She was a girl with a new hairdo who painted her nails and fit into her sexy jeans going to pick up her boyfriend at the airport. This was not my mother. But she was happy.

I wondered what it would be like to have seen my mother at my age. I also wondered what it would be like to see yourself outside of yourself. This was the closest I would ever get.

I remembered when my mother and I met Jimmy at a gas station and he came late.

“Let’s go walk up the street and stand on the corner with a sign and wave,” my mom said.
“That would be hilarious! Let’s do it,” I said, half joking, thinking my mother was kidding.

“Come on,” she said.

“Really?” I couldn’t believe she was serious.

I grabbed a pen and paper from the gas station and made a welcome sign and we started walking up the street. “It’s not like you to do something like this, Mom.”

“You don’t know me very well.”

How could she say I didn’t know her? I had known her my whole life. She told me about everything. I thought I knew her pretty well. Did she do this to show me that she could be cool and stand on street corners with signs like a teenager? What was it about her I didn’t know?

Now I knew I didn’t really know her. I knew my mother as a mother. I recently got to know her as a widow and single woman who became “the girlfriend of my boyfriend’s uncle.” I didn’t know her as young. Now I did. She had the spunk put back in her that life had taken away throughout the years.

But I didn’t want to be optimistic about the whole idea of her spunkiness and bliss. What goes up must come down. And with the chemo treatments starting the next week she would be exhausted, sick, and crabby. Menopause was bad enough, but mixing it with chemo…who knew?

My mother married a guy, Jay, at 19 who never looked my grandmother in the eye. He went a little crazy and even pushed my mother once. One day he ended up in a mental hospital.
“Jay may never recover from his illness,” the doctor told my mom. “You’re so young. You may want to consider leaving him.”

She handed the doctor some photos.

“This makes a lot of sense now in his case,” the doctor told her.

They were photos of Jay dressed in women’s clothing. My mom originally thought it was just for fun. Mom told me once that she came home and he had bought her an outfit of a skirt and Gogo boots. She looked in his closet and saw he had bought the same thing for himself in his size. She left Jay in the hospital and divorced him at nineteen, a marriage of six months. And her second husband became just a friend and roommate who didn’t want kids.

My mother knew it was true love when she met my father. They were together “till death do us part.” Mom said she didn’t want anyone after my father died. She hadn’t been looking for anyone, but then she met Tom, this young man with a full head of hair and a soft, sensual voice. This Catholic, 42-year-old grandpa had been surrounded by women his whole life. Tom grew up with nine sisters and two brothers, married the woman he got pregnant at seventeen, and had three daughters and two granddaughters.

When my mother started dating again, I thought the worst thing wouldn’t be heartbreak, but for him to get cancer and her to have to deal with it all over again. Yet now she was the one with cancer.

Mom wasn’t supposed to drive because she had a port put in for her Chemo treatments starting this week. When Mom asked me to drive Tom back to the airport, it was the last thing I wanted to do. Yet my mother needed me and I would follow through.
“Grandpa and Grandma would love to,” she said, still in a voice that made me feel guilty if I said no.

“No, it’s okay, I’ll do it.”

“Tom made sloppy-joes.”

“I don’t like sloppy-joes,” I said like a child.

“But these are different,” my mother said, defending him. I knew she could tell my attitude from my statement.

I ate the sloppy-joes anyway; they actually weren’t that bad. I passed by opportunities to make sarcastic comments to Tom. I was crabby and chose not to say anything. That didn’t work. My mother could see right through me like she always could.

I felt the jealous daughter in me as I watched my mother hug her boyfriend as he left for his plane. Tom made a joke. She laughed, saying it hurt her neck when she laughed. The tape held on the gauze above the metal port beneath her skin.

“Maybe you didn’t think my operation today was a big deal,” she said when we got back in the car. “But it was for me.”

“Well I’m glad Tom was there for you. I haven’t been in your life much.”

“No, you haven’t, and I know you have a lot to do, but being crabby right now is not the best thing. I don’t have time to deal with trivial stuff anymore.”

“I have a lot on my mind.”

“Then why don’t you get rid of some. You are going skiing this weekend and then that trip with your friends over spring break. You’ll have plenty of time for fun then. Stop trying to make time for things you want to do now, only do the things you have to do. Is school stuff going okay?”
I thought about this weekend skiing, being in Utah for the first time without her. Only Tom, Jimmy, and me. No rules. I could be free and not worry that I didn’t make the bed right or forget to put my bowl in the sink.

“I guess.”

“You guess.”

“Just leave me to deal with it. I need to process everything, I’ll be fine.” I bit my lip, trying to stop tears.

I wanted to make her laugh so her neck would hurt. I wanted her to feel the pain I felt. These were the last days of my mother before she started Chemo for the next twenty-five weeks. My own worries were piling up and people were asking me to do things. I was sick of the world. I wanted to go on a ship by myself for a few months and sit there and watch the ocean pass by.

I hated the phone calls I received. Someone would be sad about his or her uncle’s neighbor’s dog dying. I couldn’t even conjure up fake sympathy. My father died and I’m supposed to care about someone’s dog that we barely know? I hated people saying on the phone, “Oh, this must be such a hard time.” But I hated it more when people wouldn’t even acknowledge that this was a hard time.

Either way it didn’t matter. I was alone in my pain. I almost liked it. I could be as selfish as I wanted. But then it came back to my mother and what she needed and how her pain was worse than mine. I should be thinking about her at a time like this and if I didn’t I was a terrible person.

The more Momtom were together, the more alone I felt. Though sometimes I’d feel like we were a family because there were three of us. But then I’d be the child again, the only child, alone with her thoughts dissolving into the back seat of the car while nobody noticed. A world
lived inside my head that nobody knew. I could put people there and take them away, make up new people and anything I wanted to happen would happen. Yet it was a child’s game. My days of being a child were over and I needed to move on and be responsible however hard that would be. But I cried more easily now.

“I think maybe you’re a little upset about Tom,” Mom said when we arrived home.

“No, it’s not him,” I said. “It’s nothing, I just haven’t processed the work I have to get done, that’s all. Where’s my stuff?” I opened my drawer looking for my toothbrush.

“I moved your stuff to the bottom drawer.”

My toiletries had been demoted to the bottom drawer now that Tom used the bathroom too. I only used her bathroom when I stayed to keep her company when she got ready for bed. Mom liked having someone there to race while she got ready. She used to hate when Dad would be in bed before her with his teeth brushed.

I left the room. Why was pain the only way to happiness?

My mother didn’t need this crying mess of a daughter on top of everything. The fantasy of traveling with my mother to foreign countries, our bond becoming stronger until we couldn’t stand each other for another moment, faded away because of her new companion. There’s a reason why the seasons don’t change in a day. Was I jealous? I wanted her to be happy. But I was jealous.

The next day she told me Tom had decided to quit his job and move back to Minnesota to help her through her chemo treatments. The happiness was back in her voice, but I realized we wouldn’t have much time alone anymore before the chemo and before Tom moved in.
The black case I used to sit in as a baby housed my dad’s guitar. I opened it. It smelled the same: musty, metallic, like a cold garage.

I played for a while then chatted with Mom as she opened mail in bed. I took care of her like she had once taken care of dad, making her dinner and cleaning the litter box.

I hated doing dishes. Washing dishes was always my punishment as a child. It wasn’t the actual act, but the idea of doing them I hated. One time my mother tried to convince my father and me that we didn’t love her because we didn’t wash dishes for her.

“Don’t you know how the plates go in the rack?” she asked, coming into the kitchen to help.

“Yes, I just didn’t think it mattered.”

“It does if you want them to drip-dry,” Mom said. She still critiqued the way I did dishes. Tonight I did her dishes because I loved her. I finally understood what it meant to do dishes for someone because of love.

While I dealt with feeling like an orphan, my mother dealt with symptoms. She used cream in her nose. She lost her nose hairs to chemo and sores developed inside her nostrils. She also lost the protection of her eyelashes covering her eyes. It reminded her of when she was young and her elbow slipped off the counter and the eyelash curler pulled out every eyelash.

For Thanksgiving 2004, we went to Tom’s sister’s house. Among Tom’s eleven siblings, awkwardly, I was the only stepchild. The twenty-two cousins grew up together, making me feel like the black sheep. And, of course, my ex-boyfriend Jimmy was one of the cousins. Jimmy
and I were still friends but it was his family, not mine. We had broken up because I didn’t want to have sex with him and he thought I wouldn’t change. I was more gay at the time than I realized.

I tried to be outgoing and chat with Tom’s sisters. Mom told me later, “You help me fit into Tom’s family.”

Of Tom’s nine sisters my favorite was Maggie. Petite with tan skin and dark hair, Maggie, an artist, was strong, single, and wild. She would say anything to get a reaction and she swore a lot. Maggie got cancer a couple years later. They removed her arm and her shoulder before it consumed her and she died at 42 years old.

Before Maggie died I entered an art show with her that dealt with cancer. When my mother lost her hair to chemo, she bought various hats and wigs to cover her bald head. I noticed how her personality changed from wig to wig and hat to hat. For a class in college, I created a series of portraits of my mother in each hat and wig, and the emotion or personality each conveyed. The painting that was the most successful I submitted to the show. It portrayed my mother in a melancholy, reflective state, though the overall emotion she exhibited throughout her recovery was bravery (see figure 2).
It took till December that year, nearly a year after Mom’s surgery, before she felt better and her hair grew back.

By 2012, my long reddish brown hair was down to the center of my back. My friend from high school said she would fix our hair for the wedding. I preferred long curls with orchids pinned in my hair.
Flowers

Different colored orchids, birds of paradise, bamboo, thick green leaves, hibiscus, and passionflowers bloomed in my brain. I wanted Hawaiian flowers for the wedding. My mother had lived in Hawaii in the 70s with her second husband. Eventually they moved back to the mainland because paradise sadly became too much work, and without enough money, no fun. But Hawaii was still Mom’s favorite vacation destination.

To save money, I set out to make my own bouquets for the ceremony. As I looked through the options of flowers, a memory came to me from my teen years: picking flowers on a mountain in Norway. It was another time in my life I tried to be happy when my mother was sick.

I had woken up in a dark hotel room in Lillehammer; bright yellow light entered from behind the curtain. My mother lay in the bed next to me.

“I have a fever,” she said in a raspy voice, “but I’ll be fine. I just need to stay in bed.”

I told the hotel desk she was sick and asked if they could bring her some tea and crackers and not disturb her.

Leaving the hotel, I felt free for the first time in my life. I was 13, had finished school for the summer, and was no longer under my mother’s watch. The sunlight followed me as I walked down the street. You’d never have known this main street, surprisingly minute and calm, had seen millions when it had hosted the Olympics not so many months before. Locals and tourists came in and out of shops in no hurry. American music played on the street corners and Olympic souvenirs still hung in shops. Almost everyone spoke English.
I walked with confidence the few blocks to the gate that led up to our relative’s home right on the main street. We had been there the previous night so I knew where it was. I stepped up the tiny dirt hill to see the young boys outside running around. They were about two and five with pale skin that looked orange in the sun. Their white-blonde hair was long enough to cause them to be mistaken for girls, but their nudity answered the question.

“Good morning,” Ingrid said as she appeared at the door.

Ingrid stood tall with long carelessly uncombed black hair. Despite her blue eyes she looked plain, but that’s what made her so beautiful. The veins in her arms popped out slightly more than usual; perhaps it was from the days she played drums in an all girl band.

“My mom’s sick, she won’t be able to come,” I told her. I loved knowing I was experiencing this adventure on my own.

“I taught ve’d pick some vild flewers fur da funeral,” Ingrid said.

“Sure, that sounds fun.”

We got in the car, a manual.

“Vant to try?” Ingrid asked, explaining how to put the car into gear. Unsure, I tried.

“I think it’s in reverse,” I said.

“Ve’ll see,” she said and stepped on the gas.

We drove straight forward into the wooden fence.

I smiled with embarrassment.

“Tat’s okay,” she said.

Ingrid drove us up into the mountains covered with grass and wildflowers. I looked at my legs, embarrassed because I hadn’t shaved in a while. Then I noticed hers. She never shaved
a day in her life. I fantasized about living in the mountains, not shaving, raising little boys who grew their hair long and ran around naked whenever they pleased.

We passed cows.

“Jacob, what does a cow say?” Ingrid asked in Norwegian.

“Moo!” Jacob said. His older brother echoed.

I smiled. I had expected a cow to speak differently because it was a different country.

Ingrid stopped the car so I could see the ski jumps from the Olympics. We then drove onto a tiny road where Ingrid told me the healer lived. We picked the most beautiful wild flowers, flowers you’d buy at a floral shop in America.

“I tink Signe vill like dees,” Ingrid said.

The boys danced around, this time in their clothes.

My family had visited Signe the year before she passed away. I didn’t know why we had come back for the funeral. Probably because my mother never missed out on a funeral for a distant relative, though this was the first funeral overseas.

From the time I understood death I attended more funerals than I could count. One funeral in particular stood out in my memory (aside from the one where a fly landed on my cousin’s nose and I burst out laughing). It was the funeral for my great aunt’s mother.

My great aunt’s mother had an artificial leg. Someone always put me on her lap for a photo when I was a child. I hated it because her fake leg terrified me. At the funeral my great aunt cried so loudly the room shook. At eight years old, even with twenty funerals of experience, I never heard an adult sob so loud. At that time I realized no matter what age, losing my mother would be excruciating.
Ingrid took me by a waterfall. I sat down. The powerful beauty of the water made me feel like I might fall over. Light green grass filled in around it. The pure air made moss grow on the rocks and trees. The water rushed softly, entering a small pool below. The pool encased shards of sun and reflected brilliant greens and blues. I sat and worshiped it as if it were a god, promising myself I would come back and paint it before I died.

My high from the morning remained when my grandparents arrived at Ingrid’s for the funeral. My mother’s parents had traveled with us. Ingrid’s husband Aksel was there too. Aksel was a thin man, barely taller than Ingrid. His light brown hair hinted that he used to be blonde as a kid. His crooked smile welcomed me like a comforting hug.

I sat by my grandparents and Ingrid at the funeral service. I hadn’t thought the funeral would be in Norwegian. I barely recognized when they said her name. As the casket was lowered into the hole in the ground, we placed the wildflowers, now wilting, on top.

Back at Ingrid’s, my grandparents stayed and chatted with her and some others while Aksel took the boys and me swimming. I hadn’t brought a swimsuit, so I wore some shorts and my black sports bra, embarrassed because it wasn’t really a swimsuit. I wore a shirt over it while we walked up the hill.

We hiked up a trail surrounded by pine trees and passed only one party of tourists. Then it was only us and nature. We stopped at a point on the trail and then stepped down the rocks to the water. Aksel stepped in first and helped the boys, who already began to undress, down. Then he helped me down. Perhaps Aksel would usually strip too, but he kept his shorts on today for my sake.
We entered the water right below a miniature waterfall. The clear run-off from the mountain felt chilly. The beautiful ambiance still glowed from the morning sun. I imagined us as ancient explorers discovering this untouched pool.

The day had been Heaven to me and I didn’t want it to end.

Later my grandma and I left Ingrid’s to check on my mother. Mom felt well enough to take a shower. Grandma and I sat in her room and chatted about the cute Norwegian guys we had seen.

“Grandma! You’re not supposed to look at guys! You’re married,” I said laughing.

Then suddenly a loud alarm sounded in the hotel. I opened the door and saw, towards the top of the wall, a red light blinking. Nobody told people to exit and there was no one around. Grandma ran to the lobby while I ran to the shower.

“Mom, I think the fire alarm is going off!”

“I don’t care. I’m staying in this shower,” she said firmly.

Eventually they turned off the alarm and the next day, though still sick, my mother got on the plane. Months later she found out her sickness was Lyme’s disease.

But now, eighteen years later, my mother’s sickness was much worse. Her breast cancer from nine years ago had come back and spread. Then I remembered my Norwegian relatives. Jacob had died of leukemia at age five, yet Ingrid had given birth to a daughter after years of miscarriages. I had to believe that when God closed a door He opened a window. Where was my window?
Candle

Many wedding ceremonies include unity candles. Instead, I wanted a candle to represent my father.

Eleven years ago, when I was 20 and attending art college in Minneapolis, I usually came home on the weekends; an hour drive. One weekend my parents had something to tell me. They told me to eat my dinner before we talked. I couldn’t eat. I knew my dad was sick and the fact they were insisting I eat first couldn’t mean good news. My stomach rebelled at every thought of food touching it but I forced myself to eat.

“I’m done. Just tell me,” I demanded of my mother.

“Let’s go sit in the living room,” she said.

I sat on the white couch that Mom never let me sit on when I was younger. Perhaps that’s why it still looked brand new.

“Dad has pancreas cancer,” Mom said.

Dad explained further. “It’s in stage four and has spread to the liver.”

“Can’t you remove the pancreas and get a liver transplant?” I asked.

“No. There is some chemo I can take but it’s not effective in this final stage.”

“How long do the doctors say you have?” I asked, thinking a measurement of years.

“Four to six months.”
“What?” I asked, as tears came without permission. Hearing the word ‘months’ made me feel like sinking into the couch all the way to the center of the earth. At least there I would be burned to death and not have to deal with this pain.

“No one can tell you when you will die,” I said, climbing back up from the center of the earth, “only God knows that.”

A month later my mother went out of town for a wedding. I agreed to stay with my father and take care of him for the weekend. I’m usually a light sleeper, but that night I slept my hardest.

Something forced me to awaken from my deep slumber, though I was so physically exhausted by the sleep, I couldn’t move. Eventually a noise was discernible, though I couldn’t perceive it. Was I in a dream, a nightmare?

The buzzer kept beeping. My dad needed me. What could possibly be wrong that he needed me at 4:30 in the dark morning? I panicked. How long had he been buzzing? I took this long to wake, had I missed minutes of endless buzzing? Did he lose faith that the buzzer even worked? I saw myself in a movie. I jumped out of bed like an actor responding to a cue.

I ran down the hallway in the dark. I entered my father’s room before I realized I ran up the steps. He sat, crouched over awkwardly on the bed, one hand by the buzzer. He made a sound of pain.

“What’s wrong? How long have you been buzzing?”

“About five minutes or so.”
What? My emotion wanted to take over and make me a puddle. What would keep this man buzzing for five minutes? Did he think I heard the first buzz but took my time? I can’t believe I didn’t hear the first buzz!

“What’s wrong?”

“My back,” he started to say, but it became too painful to speak and he made another sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a cry.

“What can I do?”

“I think we need to go to the hospital.”

I didn’t understand. He was fine. My mother made sure. She made sure he was fine. He told her to go to the wedding that weekend, that he would be fine, that I could take care of him, it was only a weekend.

“Okay,” I said, surprisingly calm. I saw the movie again. How would the audience react watching me deal with this? I could see myself telling my mother, Look what happened when you left, look what I had to do, look at how I did it. I imagined that the crisis had already passed. I had already been there and taken care of it. But it was happening now.

“I’ll need my license. It’s on the dresser.”

“What’s a dresser?” I panicked. I couldn’t process the word. I forgot at that moment what a dresser was. I thought, oh no, I don’t know what a dresser is, we’re screwed. Yet the panic only lasted for one sentence.

“In the closet,” he said, barely moving an inch on the bed.

I knew what he was talking about now. I even laughed a bit thinking it was funny to forget what a dresser was. He needed his socks and shoes. His socks seemed 12 sizes smaller.
than his feet. Every little push of the sock caused pain, then the shoes. I grabbed the wheelchair he hadn’t needed but once before.

It took all his energy just to sit in the chair. I tried not to imagine putting him in the car. I had never witnessed anyone suffering with constant pain. Yet he was himself, strangely so. His intelligence and sense of calm remained. It was like he was saying, “Everything’s going to be okay, don’t worry about me,” with only his presence.

I offered to call an ambulance, but he didn’t want that. Perhaps it was the extra money on the hospital bill. No matter how much money my father made, because he grew up poor, saving ten dollars was a victory.

I looked at his face; no tears, thank God. Once I sat him in the car I thought everything was going to be okay. He knew how to get to the hospital, and there shouldn’t be traffic this early. Yet every little bump hurt him.

I kept focused on the road but took a quick glance at him. His once tan face was now pale and sunken. Hair that was turning gray was now entirely white and thinning even more. His blue eyes only reflected gray and his skinny body made him look 80. Was this what it was like to take care of your 80-year-old parents? It’s like I skipped all the years in between and my father jumped to a dying great-grandfather in a couple months.

I tried to drive slowly, but, I wanted to get there quickly. The conflicting desire to drive slow and fast at the same time ate away at me as I drove. I drove my mother’s Lexus, one of the smoothest riding cars on the road, and yet it didn’t help Dad’s pain. I wished I could call Mom. Yet she’d be upset and there was nothing she could do from two states away.
We arrived at the hospital and found the emergency entrance. A small town hospital at five in the morning is basically deserted so I had to push a buzzer to get in. No one came to the door.

Finally it opened and I ran inside. It looked empty.

“Hello!” I screamed.

No response.

I walked farther into the entry and looked around. Finally I saw a few people in the back. “Hello! I need help!”

A person, perhaps female, it didn’t matter, slowly walked up and said, “Yes?”

“My father needs help, he’ll probably need a wheelchair. He’s in the car.”

“Okay,” she said.

I ran back to the car quickly, praying my father was still conscious and hadn’t given up on me. I hated leaving him alone for what felt like ten minutes.

Two guys came out and helped my dad in a wheelchair. I couldn’t look at him in probably the most pain he had yet. They took him back and a nurse said I could sit in the waiting room. I read a magazine and wanted to be taken away by the words so badly I actually processed what I read.

How did this end up as my life? Watching my dad suffer while my mother was gone wasn’t supposed to happen. My dad never asked those questions. He told me he didn’t have any regrets. How could he not ask how or why he was dying at 53 years old? A recently retired man with a healthy lifestyle? A man with so much more of life ahead of him? Why this pain?
They gave my father a shot of strong pain medicine in his back, gave him a prescription, and told him he could go home if he wanted. He said he could feel the comfort from the shot gradually fading away.

I picked up his prescription and took him home. I lay on the bed next to him and took little naps. His breathing became quick and loud from the pain. I slept through some of his breathing sounds, but woke up from a nightmare feeling smothered. I went to lie in the living room, exhausted and unable to sleep. Thank God we had decided to hook up the buzzer just in case. What if we hadn’t hooked up the buzzer and tested it? He couldn’t have gotten up, could he? He may have made it to the intercom, but would I have heard his weak voice through my deepest of sleeps? Yes, I would have. I would have.

I hated seeing the pain that came with this disease, and with the treatment. First came blood clots in his legs that prevented him from walking, and with the blood clots came the risk of sudden death. Then came the nausea and now the back pain, tremendous back pain. I didn’t want him to die, but I’d rather him die instead of being in this much pain. Sometimes I was afraid he’d die and sometimes I was afraid he wouldn’t.

I sat in a chair by Dad’s bed.

“I’m sorry I won’t be around for the events in your life like your wedding day,” he said sincerely.

“It’s okay, Dad, it’s only one day,” I said. All I could think about was that he wouldn’t be around for the rest of my life so one day didn’t seem to matter.
When Mom came home we put Dad in the hospital for a few days to monitor the pain, or whatever they call it.

I had class on Monday. I felt good enough to go, though I felt agitated. We critiqued our projects. I had put little effort into mine; it was the last thing I cared about. During critique a girl said, “It doesn’t look like any of your other work.” In other words, it sucked.

I didn’t need this. They all looked at me for a response. I wanted to say, *I was in the hospital all weekend with my dying father. Go to Hell!*

Instead, I said in a bit of a harsh, defensive tone I’d never used in a critique before, “You haven’t seen all of my work. I have a different style for each medium I work in.”

Everyone became silent. Then one guy made a cat hiss noise. I didn’t care. I just wanted to go home and throw something.

Spring semester ended in early May, so I stayed with my parents and spent time with my father.

Six months from diagnosis had passed, the chemo no longer did anything but make Dad sick, blood clots still lived in his legs, his stomach started to fill with fluid, and he used oxygen occasionally.

My father had two sons from his first marriage. My half brother, Mark, was ten years older than me. James was two years younger than Mark. I had never lived with Mark or James and only saw them a few times a year. Mark hadn’t seen Dad since Christmas, over five months ago. Mark only lived two hours away, yet James, who had a nine-hour drive, came to see Dad often.
Dad had called Mark a few weeks before and said, “If you want to see me, now would be a good time. I’m not going to die tomorrow, but I’m feeling up to company now.” Mark didn’t come.

My dad’s father had been to see my dad and saw how weak he was. My grandfather, a distant and light-hearted man who never used the telephone, called Mark and said, “Get down here and see your father.”

Mark finally obeyed.

I wanted to take advantage of sketching my father from life before it was too late. I sat down on my parents’ bed to sketch him. He slept in the rented hospital bed by the window while I sketched. Dad never lost his hair to chemo, but it was now thinning and white, like his body. Mark arrived, so I quickly showed Dad my sketch which looked done yet felt unfinished.

“It’s good,” he said.

Mark came out of the room and into the kitchen with wet eyes. He hadn’t seen Dad for five months and the progression of the disease was shocking. “Can you get me some smokes?” he said and handed me a ten-dollar bill. His stocky body bulged out of his worn blue t-shirt and jeans. His hair, wet from sweat, stuck to his red forehead. Beer, Mountain Dew, Playboy, and cigarettes had masked his pain for years.

I left the house without my purse. That was the first time I saw my brother cry. Even though I never felt close to him, I felt his pain. Who was this sad man--the boy who had dropped out of school, lived through a divorce, ignored his kids, cheated on his wife, and sold the car and cabin Dad gave him? Was he finally showing his emotion from regret? Had he ever appreciated
anything? Maybe a handful of fishing trips and nights jammin’ on guitars. Was that all he shared with Dad?

“I’m sorry, I can’t sell you cigarettes without an ID.”

“I do not look seventeen! I’m twenty-one!”

“I’m sorry, we card everyone who looks under 30.”

“My fricken brother is thirty-one,” I mumbled to myself as I left the store. I almost asked a lady if she would buy some for me. I knew Mark’s lowest moment in life had come and he needed a cigarette more than anything. I hated letting him down.

I looked in the car mirror. Spots of acne and blotches of cover-up shined a shade brighter in the sun than my dirty blonde hair. I didn’t notice the sun. There was no sun on days like these.

Mark stayed with a friend that night and came back to see Dad the next day. He came later in the afternoon. I didn’t make it back in the room to finish my portrait. My mom and I left Mark alone to talk with Dad. Then we noticed the strangest thing. The door opened and my father came out and walked, slowly but confidently, into the kitchen and looked out the window.

Dad hadn’t had that much energy for days. They say you emit great strength before death. Now I knew it was true. After my brother left Dad went back to bed and never got up. He had waited to see my brother before he could die.

I spent the later evening taking a bath and looking in the mirror, wondering who I was. My long and messy hair hung around my neck like a wet mane. My green eyes looked lost.
Sometimes if I pulled my hair back, turned my head right and squinted, I could see my father’s face looking back at me.

I never heard my mother’s voice on the intercom, only the growling of my stomach. I walked upstairs and opened the fridge, grabbing a piece of bologna.

“Kel?”

I closed the fridge.

“What?”

“Kel, come here, I didn’t know where you were, I thought you went outside.”

I walked into the room and my mom said, “I think it’s time, he’s dying.”

I walked back into the kitchen and threw the piece of bologna in the trash. Right then I prayed every piece of bologna I saw after that wouldn’t take me back to this moment.

My mom and I held my father’s hands and watched his breathing fade. His spirit had already left--it was his fifty-three-year-old body that still fought for life. His body realized it was going to lose. Like the last efforts a fly makes before dying between the window screen. Or the last flop a fish makes out of water.

The nurse from the hospice care arrived and pronounced him a few minutes later. A great calm came over my mother and me.

“Some have a much harder time leaving, they fight it,” the nurse said. “You could tell he was ready to go.”

“Why won’t his eyelids close?” I asked her. I didn’t like looking at my dad’s body, his eyes half open.

“That’s why they used to put coins on people’s eyes back in the day,” she said.

I tried to put a penny on his eyelid but it wasn’t heavy enough.
“Mom, are you going to call the morgue?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s late, maybe they aren’t open. I can call tomorrow.”

“I’m not going to sleep in this room with a dead body in it,” I said sternly and looked at
her in the eye.

“Okay, okay, I’ll call them,” she said.

I didn’t feel my father was there anymore; all I saw was a body. I didn’t want it there
reminding me of death, even though I knew Mom wasn’t ready to let him go.

I read in Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* that when you die your pupils
dilate. Your brain is no longer controlling your eye functions. That afternoon my mother had
mentioned going in to check on my dad and heard him talking in his sleep. She thought he was
having a conversation with his dead brother. She heard him say, “Turn off the light, turn off the
light.” My mom thought he saw the bright light of Heaven but wasn’t ready to go yet.

I wondered if people say they see light before they die because their brain is dying and
their pupils dilate and let in light. I decided if our eyes are windows to our soul, dilating is our
body’s way of opening the windows and letting our soul out.

The entire month after my father died, I had to listen to my mother tell the details of his
final two hours to people on the phone, people that came over, even the mail lady. The horrible
sound of his breathing haunted me. I relived the moment over and over again until I became
numb to it and it left my brain. Reliving it was painful, yet having it no longer haunt me was
worth the torture.
A particular song by Dido helped me through many of the painful days. The lyrics are:

*You’re asking me why pain’s the only way to happiness. But I promise you you’ll see the sun again.* I made a promise to myself that I would see happy days again. And my father would see the light of Heaven. And that’s what got me through.

My dad’s brother died suddenly, without a hug for his daughter, without an “I love you, goodbye.” I could say goodbye to my dad. My friend’s dad left her as a child with hardly more than a “I don’t want to be with you anymore, bye.” I was lucky I had a great father, if only for 21 years.

My dad was a healthy man. He played tennis once a week, exercised, and liked eating healthy foods. He never smoked and only caught a cold once every other year, if that.

As a boy he was teased and made fun of for his big glasses. He had bad eyesight since he was a baby, though it was his bad eyesight that saved him from going to war. He was called the math geek, the guitar nut, and the shy romantic who grew up poor and worked for everything he got. Saving every penny, he was frugal. My dad worked for and invested in a company that, by chance, happened to be successful. He worked hard and shared his riches with many people.

When I was a baby my mother borrowed baby clothes, used cloth diapers, and made cakes for extra money. But by the time I was twelve I had been many places in the U.S. and Europe. I owed it all to my father, and of course my mother for convincing him to spend money on traveling.
Before Dad’s funeral I leaned over the casket to put a guitar pin on his jacket. When I reached down to pin it my father’s arm raised up.

“Ahhh!” I screamed and turned away into my mother’s arms as she stood behind me. I breathed heavy as my mother giggled and the startled funeral director apologized. I hadn’t seen the funeral director on my right, grabbing my father’s left hand to reposition his arm.

The funeral was the most uplifting funeral celebrating someone’s life I had ever been to, and I had been to many. The song, “On Eagle’s Wings,” fit the tone and my dad’s best friend gave a poignant speech. Instead of a melancholy atmosphere like most funerals, there was positivity and hope; a true celebration of life. My mom printed copies of the sketch I had done the day Dad died and gave them to everyone (see figure 3).

![Figure 3. Frankenberg, Kelly. Unfinished. 2002.](image)
The worst part about the funeral though was the grave site. I didn’t know my mother and father had picked out a name plate together. My mother’s death year was missing but her name lay on the ground next to Dad’s. Seeing my mother’s name by a grave put a knife in me.
Dana and I wanted a bachelorette party. Our maids of honor agreed to throw us one last minute. “I didn’t know what to do for a bachelorette party for two lesbians,” Dana’s maid of honor, Lori, said. “But then I realized you just do what you’d do for a guy.”

Two weeks before the wedding, Lori and Alice threw us a Hawaiian-themed shower/bachelorette party. Pink and purple leis and fake palm trees decorated the private room at the restaurant. They made us wear coconut bras over our dresses and grass skirts and sunglasses with parrots on them. They even made us a boob cake.

There were two mounds of cake covered in light pink frosting that lay on a flatter surface to represent the stomach. Two dark pink chocolate rings topped off the mounds representing the nipples. A hole was made for a belly button.

After the dinner we went to a local dueling piano bar and sat on stage while the pianists played songs and made jokes. Word got around about the Bachelorette party. When Dana and I walked out of the piano bar area, a drunk lady in her late 40s came up to us and said, “Oh, Congratulations! Which one of you is getting married?”

“We both are,” we said.

“When?” she asked.

“On May 6th,” we said.

“On the same day?” she asked surprised and excited.

“We are getting married to each other,” I said.

“We’re kinda gay,” Dana added.
There was a pause for the lady’s drunk mind to process the information.

“Oh, well, I am so happy for you two! Congratulations,” she said, and gave us a double hug but didn’t let go of our arms. “You ladies are so beautiful and I am so happy for you. I am a Republican but I have a gay nephew and I’m very proud. I believe you should be able to get married.”

“Thank you.”

“Ah, I’m just so happy for you,” she said and hugged us again.

“Okay, we have to go, thank you,” Lori said and pulled us away from the drunk lady’s grip.

“Okay, congratulations again and have a wonderful wedding!” she yelled loudly as we headed down the hall.

“On the same day,” Alice laughed and shook her head.

Seven years ago, before Momtom married, I thought it would be fun to host a bachelorette party for her. I would only invite her three sisters and we could watch a romantic comedy and it would be a nice girly party.

I purposely didn’t invite my grandmother. Not that many people’s mothers attend their bachelorette party. My mom agreed to attend the party but made it clear that she didn’t want anything sexual. I knew my mother was respectable, yet open and honest. She could talk about sex, but, she only got wild and joked about it when she was drunk. This would not be one of those nights. Problems didn’t start until my aunt, normally the quiet one, now the wild one, showed up with my grandma.
“I invited myself!” my grandma said, giddy. I looked at my wild aunt and rolled my eyes. I loved my grandma, she was fun. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt. I made some pasta and veggies and put cut-out magazine pictures of cute young guys in jeans and underwear in the middle of the table, nothing too dirty.

It turned out that my wild aunt and my grandma had stopped at the sex shop before coming to the party. They had picked up a bunch of dirty gifts for my mom and a pink cake in the shape of a penis.

“Oh no,” I said under my breath to my aunt, the giggly one.

She gave me a look of full teeth to say, “Yikes.”

My mom’s face looked respectful even though it said disgust. She opened each of the themed gifts. Edible candy underwear, a penis bouquet, orgasm sounds key chain, handcuffs, suckers, etc.

“The sign by the counter said, ‘Ya, we know it’s not for you,’ and I told the guy, actually it’s for me!” my grandma said, proud.

My eyes widened and I looked at my aunts. I didn’t know my grandmother was so sexual and I would have liked to have died without knowing that.

My mom stood and held the plastic penis bouquet with a veil attached for a photo. She made a fake smile. And then she smiled the same smile while holding the penis cake. Everyone ate a tiny piece.

After everyone but my mother left, I said, “I didn’t mean for it to be like this, I’m sorry.”

“That’s how it goes,” she said. “I didn’t want to feel gross about this. I don’t want my wedding to Tom to feel gross. It’s not about sex.”

“I didn’t invite Grandma,” I said.
“I know, it’s okay. You can keep all this stuff,” she said as she left.

“What am I going to do with it?”

“I don’t care what you do with it, throw it out if you don’t want it,” she said.

I threw out the rest of the penis cake and I kept the rest of the naughty gifts in a paper bag in the pantry. It had been in there for several months before I bumped the bag and remembered what was inside. “What the?...Oh.” My kick set off the orgasm key chain.

Dana and I wanted an Asian style cake for the wedding. We chose a bakery in St. Paul that her brother had used for his wedding. There were many different fruit options but we both loved mango.

Figure 4. Frankenberg, Kelly. Cake Design, 2012.
My mom and I used to decorate Christmas cakes and cupcakes for friends and neighbors. We even gave a cake to the mailman and the man who sold frozen food from a truck door to door. We stopped decorating cakes together the Christmas after Dad died.

For extra money when I was little, my mom sold cakes that she decorated for people’s events. Even though she could draw any design with frosting on a cake, she never admitted she could draw or was artistic in any way. She made piano cakes for piano recitals, wedding cakes with layers and flowers made out of frosting. There were retirement party cakes, 4th of July cakes, welcome home cakes, graduation party cupcakes, birthday cakes with a Barbie doll sticking out of the top and the frosting was the dress. There were cakes for funerals, cakes for 80th birthdays, new homes, new babies, and showers. Truck-themed, cartoon-themed, business logos, college mascots, high school colors, fish, flowers, hearts, stars, quilts, over the hill cakes, and even boob cakes.

The smell of frosting lingered with me most of my life so I rarely ate cake anymore. Yet I did love the creativity and mixing the frosting colors like a painter. I could write well with frosting and design a better cake than most of the store-bought cakes. It was something fun Mom and I did together.

But Mom and I hadn’t baked and decorated cakes or cupcakes together since before Dad died. Now it was ten years later and Mom asked me to help her with cupcakes. This time it was a funeral theme. It was her father’s.

After going into an assisted living home, Grandpa started going downhill. I told myself I would speak at the funeral. I tried to stay strong, seeing another man in my family who was dying. One would think I would be used to it by now, but it only got worse.
“Grandpa, I just wanted to tell you I love you and that you were the best grandpa,” I said trying to hold back tears.

“I don’t think I did much,” he said.

“You loved us. That’s the most important thing.”

“I love you, sweetheart,” he said, returning my hug the best he could. Even though he had a lot of pain in his back he still made jokes and told us he loved us, even the nurses who took care of him. Like my other two grandparents and both of my parents, my grandpa had cancer. But he wasn’t dying from his slow moving leukemia, ironically. Back pain and medication that takes away your appetite don’t give an 82-year-old man many more tolerable months of living.

The most recent book I illustrated I dedicated to him. It was called Real Norwegians Eat Lutefisk. He was the reason I knew my relatives in Norway and other states. And the reason Mom dragged me across the countries for all their funerals.

I found the pile of invitations that hadn’t yet been sent out. I would have to take my grandpa’s name off the invitation. One more important man in my life would not be attending. Age didn’t matter, the death of parent was excruciating, and now my mother also knew what it was like to lose a father.

Mom was exhausted from the funeral plans, cleaning out Grandpa’s things, dealing with her younger siblings, and most of all her radiation and chemo treatments. I drove over to her house to frost the cupcakes. They were lemon, Grandpa’s favorite. Tom came in and out of the house, working in the garage. My feelings starting spilling out of me as I frosted the cupcakes.

“Mom, I want to spend more quality time with you.”
“We just went to the mall not that long ago,” she said right away.

“You are so busy with your schedule. I only want to make time to see you.”

She became immediately defensive. “I’ve never said you couldn’t come over here. Have I ever said you couldn’t come over?”

“We’ve been busy with things,” Tom said.

“You’ve been busy with your own life,” Mom said to me, ignoring Tom.

“I know, Mom, but when I have a full time job and a baby I’m going to be a lot busier, so I’m trying to make time now, before it’s too late,” I said, fighting back tears.

“It’s like that song about the cat in the cradle,” Tom said. I wanted to tell him to shut up or that I just wanted to have this conversation with my mother but I was too frustrated to even speak to him.

“I don’t know what more you want from me. I’m having a hard time dealing with my parents’ things and doctor appointments,” my mom said.

I could tell she was getting physically tired from standing at the counter. Tom went outside. I sighed, relieved.

“I just want to spend time with you without distractions,” I said.

“Where is that place? Tell me where that place is.”

“Mom, it’s really hard to talk to you. I’m trying to tell you what I need and it’s hard for me. This doesn’t have to be so difficult. You are making this sound impossible.”

She sat down at the counter and put her head down and held it with her hands. She then looked up at me with a strong face, keeping her defensive vibe. Her red hair color had faded since she stopped dying it. She was nearly bald now.
I wiped away tears and struggled with words. “I don’t consider it quality time when we meet up with other people. I want there to be time for just you and me.”

“Just tell me what you want. What do you want?”

“I want you to stop raising your voice at me right now,” I said bluntly.

She finally took a moment to hear what I was saying.

“I’m willing to make more effort to find time to spend with you. I want a better relationship with you. I don’t feel your love anymore, Mom. I want a hug now and then. That’s all I want.”

She put her head back in the chair and closed her eyes, resting her brain from stress.

I walked over to her and bent down and hugged her. She hugged me back.

We went into her bedroom so she could rest. I lay down next to her on the bed.

“I’m sorry you lost your dad and your grandpa,” she said.

“I’m sorry you lost the love of your life and your dad,” I said.

“I think I closed off since your dad died. I haven’t been very loving towards you. I haven’t let myself be emotional. I would just fall apart from all this if I let myself feel,” she said.

The first tear I had seen on my mother’s face in years slowly fell down her cheek and onto the pillow.

It all made sense to me now. She had put up a shield around her to keep the hurt from coming in, but it also kept the love from coming out.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay.”
I held her hand as she closed her eyes and rested. I felt a sense of peace. Something in my mother had changed. She had to lose her father to finally understand what I needed from her. All I needed was her love and presence.
Rings

I visited my mother again before the wedding. She told me over the phone that her radiation had gone well but I wanted to know the results. A phone call was too cold.

The usual greeting of “Hello,” sang in the doorway. Sometimes my mother got so busy it would take her a half hour or hour into the visit before she would hug me. Phone calls poured in, sometimes every five minutes. She answered every one of them. When the news ended and the annoying sounds of commercials danced in the air, she turned the TV off. Tom was there like always.

“You want one?” Mom asked. “I bought these for my sisters.”

She pointed at the pink ribbon rings on the table, the pink ribbon of breast cancer, the pink noose that choked the soul. It didn’t matter, pink or black, thorns or no thorns, I didn’t want one.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“The radiologist is optimistic. They said the treatment is 80 to 90% effective. We just have to wait until it starts shrinking,” Mom said.

I nodded as she finally told me what I had come to hear. But there was more.

“The doctor actually didn’t tell me this until after, but there was a tumor on my brain too, not just skull, but they radiated it and it’s gone. I don’t know why she didn’t tell me. I’m not going to tell my mom though, I don’t want her to worry.”
A brain tumor now? Not just a tumor in her skull? I pictured my mom’s body full of cancer everywhere, disintegrating away to nothing. If there was one brain tumor, another could pop up again any time.

“The place on my hip was so small it probably only needs one treatment,” she said and then pulled down her peach-colored shirt to show me her chest. “They had to put in another port,” she paused, “again, just like last time.” I could tell that bothered her the most. The port of chemo, the point where poison enters the body, the front-line of a war for survival, the bitter reminder you can always feel in your chest.

Tom finally said something. “We heard they may make the chemo into pill form next year, the one she has to take every week for the rest of her life.”

“That would be good,” I said, looking at the wood floor, still in a shocked state.

“There’s also some spots in my lungs but they are very small and the doctor thinks they are just an infection from the steroids and should go away once my immune system gets stronger.”

Spots on her lungs? It just wouldn’t end. Hope choked to death. Now the only thing left to do was pray. Pray to the God from whom I felt so distant. Was I asking for too much?

Dana and I found rings we liked on clearance. Both of us weren’t big spenders when it came to jewelry. A post-it love note meant more to us. Yet we wanted rings for the ceremony and the tradition of committing to each other. The ring I bought was white gold and said “I love you,” and hers was yellow gold and said “Love.” They both lay flat with a small band of diamonds and a smooth band that twisted with the other one. Dana’s needed to be resized, but with only a week before the wedding there was no time.
“What do I do as a ring bearer?” Tim, Dana’s son, asked me.

“Well all you need to do is carry the rings and when the lady asks for them you give them to her,” I told him.

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

“Aww, I wanted to do more. Can I have a ring too?”

“You want one? Sure, we can get you a ring too,” I said.

The night my dad died, my mom told me to find his wedding ring before the guy from the funeral home took his body away. Dad had taken it off and put it somewhere when his fingers became bloated. He forgot where it was and my mom couldn’t find it. I walked into his closet and up to his dresser. I opened the top drawer and saw plastic bags with various trinkets in them. I pulled one out that had some screws, paperclips, and odd things in it. It just so happened to also contain his wedding ring. I had walked right in and found it without effort.

“How did you find it?” my mother asked, shocked yet relieved.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Two days before the wedding, I came down with a terrible cold. I started to lose my voice. The same thing had happened to my mom the day of her wedding to her second husband. Her laryngitis was so bad that she could barely say “I do.” After her marriage ended she saw that as a sign that she shouldn’t have married him. I hoped I wouldn’t lose my voice.
When I was in Salt Lake City with Momtom before they married, Mom was still having doubts. I had woken up in the middle of the night and couldn’t sleep. I heard someone upstairs walking in the kitchen.

“Mom? What are you doing up?” I said.

“Couldn’t sleep. Want some tea?”

“Sure,” I said.

We heard Tom snore. Mom closed the bedroom door.

“I’m not sure I should get married again,” she said.

“Why?” I asked as I sipped tea.

“Four marriages is a lot.”

“So. Hasn’t Elizabeth Taylor been married like seven times? If you love him, then marry him.”

Our tea steamed in glass mugs on coasters atop the coffee table. We sat on the couch. Mom handed me a blanket.

“This is where we found out Dad was sick. He didn’t even get to enjoy the place,” she said looking around.

“I know. He didn’t even get to go to the Olympics with us,” I said.

We had driven to Utah with Dad during the 2002 Olympics but he had been too sick to go to the events. I had to miss school and had asked one of my professors if I could miss two classes without it lowering my grade. I had told her my dad was sick and this would probably be my last trip with him. She had said she’d think about it. I stopped caring about grades after that.

“When I die, I want you to take off my ring with Tom and put on my ring with Dad,” Mom said. “Your dad was the love of my life.”
The darkness hid our watery eyes. We sat on the couch in silence while the sun came up over the mountains.

On Momtom’s wedding day, May 1st, 2005, the sky dropped flakes of snow. My mother didn’t wear white. She wore sea green. Her worries were gone. She was beautiful. She sparkled.

My grandma, my mom’s mom, had gotten breast cancer and had some of her breast removed. My mom stood by her on her wedding day for a photo.

“If we stand next to each other, together we have one set of normal breasts,” my mom said.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had boobs,” my only grandparent without cancer said. My dad’s mom was referring to her sagging set that rested just above the pants she hiked way up. She had worn pants since the 1930s, attended business college, and traveled the world mostly on her own. She was the strongest woman I knew besides my mother. “Stand up straight and stick your breasts out,” Grandma used to tell me. Why did I want to have breasts so badly if they were going to fill with cancer and be cut off or sag down to my waist anyway?

“I miss Dad,” I said to Grandma that day.

“Me too. But you know how much it hurts when you miss someone, so don’t let your mind go there. You know you miss them and you leave it at that.”

On the morning of my and Dana’s wedding day it rained. Our backyard wedding plans would have to change like previous plans. It was May 6th, 2012, exactly 47 years after the tornadoes took Mom’s garage on May 6th, 1965. My voice had returned and I called Mom.
“I’m tired but I’m okay. I take a lot of breaks. Tom has done a lot. The yard looks so pretty,” Mom said.

“Too bad we will probably have to get married inside,” I said.

When we arrived at Mom’s she had her hat on.

“I’m going to put my wig on later,” she said. “Did you tan or something? You look orange.”

“Thanks, Mom. I know, it looks awful.”

My friend, Holly, came just in time to do my and Dana’s hair and makeup before the ceremony. Holly’s Pakistani beauty was reflected in her long thick eyelashes that almost looked fake. We fought about using fake eyelashes on me but I gave in. I wasn’t used to much make-up even though I could be very feminine at times.

While Holly did Dana’s makeup, Dana’s friend, Lori, helped me decorate the porch. We hung the large white paper cranes I had folded from the steps of the spiral staircase and in front of the large windows that spread from the ceiling to the floor. It had stopped raining but it was chilly enough to make us want to stay in the porch, especially since the porch was now beautifully decorated. We still could take photos outside in the brilliant green of the damp grass, the well groomed flower pots hanging from the gazebo, and, best of all, the willow tree my dad had planted. Today I didn’t care about snakes, ticks, or grass stains.
“Good afternoon,” said the officiant. She stood shorter than Dana and me. She was Asian too, probably Hmong. Her brown shirt and black pants didn’t flatter her figure. “The celebration you are witnessing today is the outward sign of an inward union of hearts. On this happy day we are gathered to acknowledge the true union that already exists between these two people.”

The porch windows connected the ceiling to the floor. Outside the pine trees blurred their forest green shades with the misty air. There was barely enough room for our wedding party to extend across the porch in a line. Momtom sat directly across the porch by the entrance to the house. Dana’s mom and siblings filled the other wall. Her father didn’t come.

“Whenever a family gathers to celebrate an important milestone in the lives of loved ones, there are those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot be present. Today is no exception.
There are those we would wish to be here who are not. Among those absent family members, Kelly particularly wishes to remember and appreciate her father.”

My father didn’t walk me down the aisle and neither did Dana’s. We both walked down the white spiral staircase from the turret to the wood floor of the porch.

“For Dana and Kelly, this ceremony means that they will love each other day by day, taking each one as it comes. That they will be honest and communicate with each other, so unspoken thoughts are not misunderstood. That they will stand beside each other, when one is standing alone.”

The Hawaiian flower and orchid bouquets stood out bright and colorful against the bridesmaids’ black dresses. The videographer positioned herself in the corner by the entrance to the house and Dana’s family. While snapping pictures, the photographer moved around the floor and up on the staircase.

“That they will believe in each other and try to understand each other as best they can. That they will treat one another with care. And that they will continue to share their lives with each other as partners, as friends, and to go on building their future together. This ceremony expresses the spiritual bond that they experience together.”

I tried to listen to the words the officiant said as my mind tried to calm my nerves.

“For Dana and Kelly, this ceremony means that they will love each other day by day, taking each one as it comes. That they will be honest and communicate with each other, so unspoken thoughts are not misunderstood. That they will stand beside each other, when one is standing alone.”

Dana’s short royal blue dress with sequins on the crossing straps and chest fit her beautifully. My comfortable flipflops sparkled with jewels that matched the jewels of my white dress.
“Dana, do you take Kelly, to love and to cherish, to honor and comfort, in sickness and in health, in sorrow or in joy, in hardship or ease, to have and to hold from this day forth?”

“I do.”

Dana’s niece, Quynh, was the flower girl and wore a glittery lilac-colored dress. The same color fabric take-out box held her pink and purple rose pedals which she dropped as she walked down the steps. Tim held a light blue fabric take-out container which housed the rings.

“May I have the rings?”

Tim walked up to the officiant and pulled out the fortune cookie-like ring holder from inside the take-out box. His second-hand black pants, which were slightly too big, rested on his black shoes. His blue shirt beneath his black suit coat matched the Chinese take-out box, as my meticulous planning made sure themes and colors matched.

“Let these rings be forever a symbol of the unbroken circle of love. Love freely given has no beginning and no end. May these rings remind you always of the vows you have taken here today and may these rings be blessed by the love with which they are given.”

Dana had forgotten to take off her engagement ring. She quickly turned to Lori to help pull it off.

“Kelly, will you place this ring on Dana’s finger and say to her, “Dana, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love for you.”

I repeated the officiant’s words and looked at Dana. I then glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw my mother. We weren’t in Hawaii, we weren’t in a church, but she was here and that’s what mattered.

“Dana, will you place this ring on Kelly’s finger and say to her, “Kelly, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love for you.”
As Dana repeated the words, I looked in her eyes. It felt official. We were finally getting married. I then turned to Tim and motioned for him to come forward.

“Tim,” I said. “I want you to know that I love your mother very much, and I also love you very much. I want for us to be a happy family together. I promise to love your mother forever and I promise to also love you forever too.”

“Tim,” the officiant said, “Do you promise to love and support your mother and her partner?”

He nodded and said, “I do.”

I placed the blue tungsten ring on his finger.

“Do you like it?”

He smiled and nodded more than twice.

“By the authority of God and life itself, and by the day given to us to live, by the love of friends that honors and supports this loving relationship and by the hurts and pain through which your lives have passed alone, by the long struggle of people for the freedom to love, and by the delight and hope you have found in each other, I recognize you as united in holy union. You may now embrace.”

Our lips pressed together firmly for a moment before we wrapped our arms around each other. Dana and I were now married in every way that was important.

“Let us congratulate Dana and Kelly.”

Clapping filled the porch. Tears and smiles reflected pieces of light and shined like the glitter from our shoes and dresses. Dad’s candle stayed lit throughout the ceremony. And for that moment I forgot about all the holes in my heart.
After the ceremony the smell of Asian food filled the kitchen. Shrimp and fried noodles. Pork and rice. Eggs rolls and spring rolls. Fish sauce and soy sauce.

My mother approached me, holding a long and skinny box.

“Someone gave this to me at my wedding,” she said.

I opened the box. It was a long serrated gold knife with a white handle engraved with the word, “Bride.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have more to give you,” my mom said with tears in her eyes.

“No, Mom.” I tried not to cry and hugged her. “You’ve given me everything.”

I then looked at Dana. Her mom handed her an envelope. I heard Dana’s mom say in Vietnamese that it was from her father. Dana opened the envelope. Inside were ten 100-dollar bills. Even though Dana’s father didn’t want to come to the ceremony, his gift recognized our commitment to each other. My smile met Dana’s.

When the photos were finished, dinner was over, and everyone had gone home except Dana, Tim, and me, I saw my mom resting in the small porch off the kitchen. She sat in the light pink reclining chair holding her rosary.

“That was a really nice ceremony,” Mom said, with watery eyes.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t very religious,” I said.

“No, it didn’t need to be,” she said.

She paused and looked out the window and then looked at me.

“We should be able to love whomever we want. It shouldn’t be about sex,” she said.
Dana and I exchanging our vows in front of family and friends felt like a real wedding, legal or not. People could see we were in love. And, more importantly, my mother could too.

“I made Tom sit on the other side of me because when you guys walked down the steps you could see up everyone’s dresses,” Mom said.

“Mom!” I smiled as I bent down to hug her.

That night Dana and I stayed at the Embassy Suites. The next morning we had breakfast in the dining area and the TV was set to CNN. The headline was gay marriage and how Mitt Romney didn’t support it. Ironically it hurt to finally be married and have the headline of opposition shoved in our faces.

Dana and I sat close on the same side of the booth as usual. There was an old lady looking at us with her judging eyes. “What are you staring at? Your grand kids gonna be gay,” Dana said, though perhaps not loud enough for the lady to hear. We laughed and ate our breakfast. Even if being gay in a Christian city in the middle of the Midwest wasn’t tolerated, it felt good knowing we chose to be who we are and chose to love.

The very next day President Obama voiced his support for gay marriage and my mother called me.

“Did you see the President supports your marriage?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom, that makes me happy.” But I was happier for her excitement.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too, Mom.”
With each day life will take away and life will give. I thought about my wedding day. My mother’s presence was the ultimate gift life could give.

I thought about my mother’s smile and her generous heart. That was her essence.

Then I thought about the rainbow and the hope and happiness it represented with its ribbons of color. Even with the lack of color in the bridesmaids’ dresses, I realized the rainbow was still present that day. The rainbow was inside me.
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Kelly Frankenberg is an artist and writer and has a Bachelor’s of Fine Arts degree in illustration from the Minneapolis College of Art & Design and a Master’s of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans. Her artwork has appeared on TV, in films, newspapers, magazines, books, the web, and on walls, mailboxes, and windows. She lives in Minnesota with her partner, Donna, and their son, Todd.