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Feeling at Home with Grief: An Ethnography of Continuing Bonds and Re-membering the Deceased

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by

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Abstract

Bereavement scholars Silverman, Nickman, and Klass (1996) have argued that rituals to continue a relationship with the deceased do not have to be considered pathological in nature. Since their work, scholars have offered specific strategies for the bereaved to actively construct a bond after death, including telling stories about those who have died, having imagined conversations with the deceased, celebrating their birthdays and anniversaries, and reviewing artifacts that represent or once belonged to them (among other strategies). Hedtke and Winslade (2004) call these "re-membering" processes by which the deceased can regain active membership in their loved ones lives. This dissertation is an answer to Root and Exline's (2014) call for researchers to produce work that explores the bereaved individual's everyday subjective experience of continuing a relationship with the deceased. Constructed from six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork and interactive interviewing in his hometown, the author has created a case study of continuing bonds with a specific individual (his mother) and community of grievers 10 years after her death. This dissertation investigates how continuing a bond with the deceased is a relational, communicative, and communal phenomenon as well as an individual, internal, and psychological process. It expands the perspective on continuing bonds as a coping strategy to a narrative blueprint for living one's life.

Introduction: Exploring Continuing Bonds in a Community of Grievers

Seeking My Mother's Voice

I seek my mother's voice.

Late at night when my father and stepmother are fast asleep and my younger brother is spending time with his friends, I search for her voice in secret. I feel as if I am part of a pair of star-crossed lovers in a romance novel, and I am prepping for a rendezvous with my mate. Why am I worried about being caught? Why must I to do this alone? Am I ashamed of my grief?

I reach under my bed and pull out a box of old VHS tapes. My Aunt Susie gave me these three days before when I asked her if I could borrow some old home videos where mom was included. "I need them for a research project," I had said. This was partly true, but I also desired the live presence of my mother. Maybe I believe that by seeing her move and hearing her speak right in front of me, this will somehow resurrect her. This will somehow resurrect me.

Quickly, I pull on a pair of snow boots over sockless feet. In my desperation, I refuse to spend time looking for socks. With the box of home movies in my arms, I quickly but carefully walk down the iced steps of our front porch and into the car garage. This is where my brother's room is—the only place in my family home that still has a VCR.

Upon entering my brother's room, I gag from the musty smells of tobacco, body odor, and alcohol. I look around in horror at the sight before me—fast food dinner bags and wrappers, empty beer cans, and dirty dishes litter the ground. I push aside dirty laundry as I plop onto his dirty, ripped, and sagging mattress in front of his old-fashioned television set.

I check the VCR and find that there is already a tape inside. I yank it out in frustration. *Kelly the Co-Ed* the title reads. I am not making any judgments about my brother's porn watching, but I feel like the tape has tainted the VCR and will soon contaminate the spirit of my mother. Quit being a drama queen, I tell myself.

After perusing the box of tapes, I settle on one labeled "Olivia's Birth." Olivia is my cousin (my Aunt Susie's youngest daughter). I specifically remember my aunt telling me about the content of this video. It was the day of Olivia's birth, and my mother volunteered to video the whole afternoon in the delivery room.

My index finger trembling, I push the tape into the VCR and wait. It makes several clinking noises and hisses. The blue screen of no return appears. I push the stop button and then rewind. C'mon I need this. I eject the tape to see if the VCR has eaten it. Nope. Okay, well that's good. After a few more minutes of maneuvering, I finally get the tape to play.

I hold my breath, waiting for the moment I've been longing for.

In front of me is my cousin Olivia as a newborn in the hospital bassinette.

"Here's the babyyyy…Isn't she prrrettyyy?"

I inhale sharply.

It is mom's voice.

Her voice sounds familiar and foreign at the same time. I feel resonance with her voice, physically in my gut. However, it sounds higher and much softer than I remember. It sounds childlike. Perhaps she is trying to mimic the voice of the newborn as she once did with our family dog. Perhaps I am so used to what I have constructed as my mother's voice in her absence that the actual, real voice just does not sound correct. I try to let go of my uncertainty and not just hear her voice but feel it—like a deep massage. I can only describe taking in her voice with the

following analogy: It's like being denied water for days and finally being able to take an ice cold sip. It's cooling. It's calming. I cannot have my mother's full physical presence back in my life. So, as one would sip water to recover after draught, I will slowly savor every note of her voice to recover from my denial of grief.

There are a few moments of silence and then a close up of Olivia. The camera zooms out and focuses on my Aunt Susie holding her newborn daughter.

Mom continues to narrate, "And her mom's lookin' like a fox, too!" Aunt Susie gives mom a look of affectionate annoyance. It would not be a true family event without my mother's humor.

I laugh through the tears that flow freely down my face.

Susie says to the camera, "Do you want to hold her, Ann?"

There is a shift in the role of video recorder and there she is. I cannot believe my eyes. I have not seen my mother in the past eight years, only in the stillness of photographs. I have not seen her embodied, loving, moving presence. Growing up, my mother gave my brother and me a lot of tough love, but she always provided us with the promise of tenderness. We were always guaranteed a soft pair of shoulders to fall into, filled with the smells of scented body cream and the texture of curly hair brushing against our faces.

I stare in wonder at my mother rocking my cousin Olivia back and forth in her arms. It's hard to conceptualize, but I am envious of Olivia. I want to feel my mom's touch. I want her to hold me in her arms again. I want to feel the warm, smooth texture of her lipstick brush against my cheek. As a full-grown man, I envy a baby—a baby who is a full-grown woman now. It's illogical but I cannot help how I feel. To soothe my frustration, I close my eyes and invite my body to remember the feel of my mother's embrace.

In this moment, I realize that I do feel her embrace. I do hear her voice. I do continue a relationship with her.

And with this realization, I am free from the tyranny of closure.

Holding On, Letting Go: Our Dialectical Dance with the Deceased

In the song "Holding on to Letting Go," the lead musician sings, "Still holding on to letting go. I can see your face, right here all alone. You're so far gone that you don't even know I'm hanging around holding on to letting go" (Robinson & Rogers, 2010, 5-8). While the song is about an individual grieving the loss of a former lover, its lyrics might possibly suggest certain potential processes for mourning the deceased. When loved ones die, can we ever truly let go of them and the memories they leave behind? Perhaps processes of holding on and letting go are not diametrically opposed. There may be ways to hold onto the memory and presence of the deceased while letting go of the more paralyzing aspects of grief and mourning.

Freud (1917/1961) was one of the first to theorize the bereavement process. He argued, "When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p. 245). Throughout his career, Freud revised his theories on grief. Even though he first described grief as the freeing of the ego, eventually he acknowledged that a connection with the deceased would remain after death (Berzoff, 2011). However, Freud never claimed that actively maintaining this connection would be healthy. After Freud's theoretical contributions, many scholars of the bereavement process continued to build upon his work through psychological attachment theory (Bowlby, 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Parkes, 1975; Worden, 1991). This scholarship led to one contemporary paradigm of grieving in America, which stresses that the bereaved can and should recover from grief by relinquishing ties with the deceased. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) were the first bereavement scholars to challenge this perspective. They argued that though

the deceased was no longer physically present, a relationship with that person could still be maintained. The bereaved could form "continuing bonds" with the deceased, and these relationships should not necessarily be deemed pathological.

Since the introduction of the continuing bonds paradigm, many researchers have conducted studies that have extended Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's foundational work (Berns, 2011; Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011; Clements, DeRanieri, & Benasutti, 2004; Davis, 2010; Ellis, 2013; Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; Klass et al., 1996; Parkes & Prigerson, 2010; Paxton, 2013, 2014; Rennels & Paxton, 2013; Valentine, 2008). Many of these scholars have offered strategies for the bereaved to construct a bond after death, including telling stories about those who have died, having conversations with the deceased, celebrating their birthdays and anniversaries, and reviewing artifacts that represent or once belonged to them. Hedtke and Winslade (2004) call these "re-membering" processes by which the deceased can regain active membership in their loved ones' lives. These practices are much more active than simply reminiscing about the dead and require engaging in behaviors that make the deceased's presence more apparent.

Apart from offering strategies for re-membering and continuing bonds, some scholars have compared the effectiveness of continuing bonds for individuals grieving different types of loss (e.g., gradual or unexpected) (Carr et al., 2001; Stroebe et al., 2011). Other theorists have revealed how specific populations of the bereaved (e.g., widows and widowers, parents who have lost children, children who have lost parents) form continuing bonds (Bennet, 2010; Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Kempson & Murdock, 2010; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Researchers also have described how continuing bonds are formed differently within families who experience the same death of a loved one (Foster et al., 2011). In short, the idea of continuing bonds has been widely

discussed in scholarship, and explored in various fields including psychology, social work, gerontology, and more recently, communication (Davis, 2010; Ellis, 2013; Paxton, 2013, 2014; Rennels & Paxton, 2013).

In order to effectively continue this research, scholars must consider the various ways grief can be discussed in any situation. As Neimeyer (2001) argues:

> There is no single 'grand narrative' of grief but a panoply of perspectives within which any given family or individual is positioned. Situated at the confluence of multiple discursive streams, each person constructs a unique response to bereavement that distills the meanings of loss current in his or her family, community, and culture. Each of these ways of 'languaging' about loss, in turn, provides a partial prescription for how loss is to be accommodated by the individual and the social world. Viewing bereavement within a discursive frame configures grief therapy as a rhetorical process, with rhetoric being understood as the artful use of language to achieve pragmatic ends. (p. 264)

Developing alternative ways of speaking about grief and relationships with the deceased can be important in helping a bereaved individual relearn their world after loss (Attig, 2001). How might the process of continuing bonds with the deceased alter some of the discourses we have about grieving and our communicative practices for showing social support to the bereaved?

In attempting to answer this question, researchers may run into many obstacles. People often cast grief as one of the ultimate villains in the story of human experience—it is something to be defeated, resolved, or avoided. This seems to be more apparent in the United States. In other countries, a relationship with the deceased is not something that eccentric, and citizens culturally allow each other more time to grieve the death. For example, the Day of the Dead is a celebration of the deceased's continued presence in Mexico and other Latin countries. However,

often in America, when someone dies, individuals have several colloquial phrases to choose from when wanting to show support: “I’m so sorry for your loss,” “I know how you feel or what you’re going through,” or “He or she is in a better place.” Consider the following alternative phrases: “I am here to listen and feel your grief with you,” “Your loved one may be physically gone but perhaps there are ways to connect with their continued presence,” or “I am here to help you relearn your life throughout your indefinite grieving process.” These phrases would definitely be something many Americans are not used to hearing. Some bereaved individuals might even react negatively to them. However, I believe they are worth considering as additions to our lexicons of grief and loss. As a communication scholar, I hope that introducing these alternative discourses can transform feeling rules for grief (Hochschild, 1983) and help the bereaved grieve well (Frank, 1991).

In this dissertation, I have explored these issues through ethnographic inquiry into a case study of my own continuing bonds. Since learning in graduate school about the possibility of an ongoing relationship with the deceased, I have become intrigued with continuing this research to try to understand the lived experience of continuing bonds, how they work, and how they can break down. Through writing academic papers, volunteering at a bereavement center, and teaching about continuing bonds in the classroom, I have embraced the possibility of my mother’s ongoing presence in my life. These activities also have left me feeling more connected to those that are still living in my life—with some people that I felt I had little in common with or a lack of purpose in having a relationship. So, not only does this dissertation explore how continuing bond activities can make people feel closer to the deceased but also how these bonds might facilitate stronger relationships with those who are still alive, rather than pull people out of the world of the living.

As with all paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962), some still want to cling to one traditional grieving model based on detachment with the deceased. A few theorists argue that in some situations continuing bonds will make the bereavement process worse, causing the bereaved to form a co-dependent relationship with the deceased (Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). Klass (2006) has responded to these critiques by stating that when he and his colleagues developed the theory of continuous bonds it was not their intention to argue that it was a panacea for grieving. Rather, their goal was to develop a richer understanding of the bereavement process and to show that if an individual can maintain a healthy relationship with the deceased this should not be considered pathological. Klass writes, "My own position, then, has been that the criteria for the health of an interpersonal bond are the same whether the bond is between living people or between living people and dead people" (p. 845). There are occasions where a continuous bond can be unhealthy, especially if the relationship with the deceased was hostile or ambivalent before death.

Furthermore, in this response to critics, Klass (2006) proposes that researchers of continuous bonds should start exploring more of their collective nature. While completed work has been valuable, he argues too much emphasis has been placed on the individual nature of continuous bonds. He writes, "If we do not include community, cultural, and political narratives in our understanding of continuing bonds we are in danger of using attachment theory to build bereavement theory that applies to a small portion of one population in one historical time" (p. 856). Culture influences the way in which communities form relationships and talk about grief. These communities and networks then inform the individual on how to treat the deceased. The individual can also influence the community's way of collectively continuing a bond.

Root and Exline (2014) expand on this notion of community influences. They argue:

> Because bereavement is not a solely internal experience, it is important to examine continuing bonds' interface with the "living community." Individuals who experience continuing bonds are parts of families, communities, societies, and cultures that may encourage or inhibit maintaining connections with the deceased…If bereaved individuals are concerned that their continued ties to the deceased will be criticized or rejected by others, they may feel limited in their experiences of the bond or may find the bond distressing. (p. 5)

With this in mind, they argue that the next step for researchers of continuing bonds is to study the bereaved individual's subjective experience of the continued bond expression and the bereaved person's interpretation of the meaning of the expression—"in particular, what the expression signifies about the bereaved, about the deceased, and about their relationship" (p. 5). To better understand this subjective experience of continuing a bond, they argue researchers can also look at other factors, such as the relationship with the deceased before death and afterlife beliefs.

If family and community members accept the dead's ongoing presence in their lives, this may also change how members describe grief and loss. Does the loss of a loved one always have to be viewed as something we need to "get over?" While I have felt sadness because I miss my mother's physical presence, I also have found great joy in continuing a relationship with her after death. People often are encouraged to seek closure after the death of a loved one—even when the meanings of closure are contradictory and unclear (Berns, 2011). If we accept continuing bonds as a guide for living (instead of seeking closure) after the death of a loved one, what does this look and feel like in everyday life? Can grief ever be satisfying (Sprengnether, 2002)? Should

closure be our ultimate goal or should something else? How does one experience grief in the best way possible?

In order to address these questions, I have analyzed my own experiences of continuing a relationship with my deceased mother and how this relationship has evolved over time. This required me to review past autoethnographic projects (Paxton, 2013; 2014; Rennels & Paxton, 2013) I had done on the topic and also interrogate my current emotional experiences associated with the loss. Thus, I had to engage in meta-autoethnography and as Ellis (2008) proposed, "turn narrative snapshots I have written in the past into a form more akin to a video—a text in motion—one in which I drag and drop in new experiences as well as revised interpretations of old storylines, then reorder and thus re-story them" (p. 13). Through my meta-autoethnographic analyses, I have found that the feelings I experienced with grief did not always coincide with societal prescriptions. Similar to what Ellis (1991) describes in her work on the sociological introspection of emotions, I sometimes felt culturally opposed emotions (such as joy and sadness) simultaneously. There were moments when grief empowered me to make better decisions in my life. I even desired and sought out experiences where I knew I would grieve—not just alone but with others.

Since grieving is not only an individual but a relational and communal process as well, I also explored the complexities of other people's stories about and emotional experiences with losing my mother. These individuals included family members and friends in my hometown community as well as new friends with whom I had shared my loss on an intimate level. To study this, I completed six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in my hometown of DuQuoin, Illinois—conducting interactive interviews with family members, my mother's close friends, and her former clients. My hope was that this project would not solely be about feelings of grief but

also how we all may find ways to live the best we can with grief. Furthermore, I wanted to show how the process of writing and sharing personal narratives provide mechanisms that contribute to the process of continuing bonds and help us heal from trauma and disruption.

This dissertation investigates how continuing a bond with the deceased is a relational, communicative, and communal phenomenon as well as an individual, internal, and psychological process. It expands the perspective on continuing bonds as a coping strategy to a narrative blueprint for living one's life. In so doing, I have tried to address some of the experiential properties and feeling rules of grief and continuous bonding with loved ones who have died. For example, the canonical sense of sadness is that it is a negative emotion that one wants to get rid of. But as Sprengnether (2002) writes, *"*Sadness, at some times and in some conditions, may be perceived as satisfying—if not blissful, then at least serious and grave, if not perfect or full, then at least enough" (p. 180). Those who want to continue talking about and incorporating the deceased in their daily lives will hopefully find resonance in my work. They will know that they are not alone, and that other individuals in the world also cherish the moments in which grief can fill people up—making them feel more alive, whole, and engaged with life. It is possible to engage in the dialectical dance with the dead by holding on to letting go.

Chapter One: Saying Goodbye to Mom[1]

A Quiet Winter Morning

Winter 2002-2004: DuQuoin, Illinois.

My mother plucks hair from her cheeks in front of the bathroom mirror.

"I'm a goddamn man woman," she mutters under her breath. I observe her expression. She squints her eyes and narrows her eyebrows together. Each pluck of the tweezers is more aggressive than the preceding pluck—her anger escalating.

It's a Monday morning on one of her days off from work, and I am on winter break from school. Awakened by her groaning and cursing, I jump up from bed to find a familiar scene of her dealing with unwanted beauty flaws. She pauses from tweezing and silently stares at her reflection. Her disheveled hair frames a face full of raw fear. My mother likes to wear a lot of makeup. But in the early morning hour before she uses the cosmetics to cover up her insecurities, I see deep, dark circles forming under her eyes.

Noticing me watching her, she turns around to face me. In her frustration, she throws down the tweezers in the sink and yells, "I just used the hair removal cream three fucking days ago! What the hell is going on?"

I shrug my shoulders. We have a unique relationship for a mother and teenage son. While I would not say I tell my mother everything about my life, I do share a lot with her—my goals of being a famous writer one day, my frustrations at school, and my bowel movements. Yes, my bowel movements. Personal boundaries are sometimes so loose that I have even discussed a

[1] Portions of this chapter have been previously published in *Qualitative Inquiry,* 2013, 19 (5): 355-365, and have been reproduced with permission from Sage Publications.

bowel movement with her while making one. My mother has jokingly coined the phrase "having a blaster" for particular occasions in the restroom, and this has caught on among family and friends. I'm glad we can share a giggle over these types of issues, but it saddens me when I see her body causing her so much frustration.

She washes and dries her face, tightens the front of her long, red bathrobe, and walks out of the bathroom to meet me in the hallway. "Between this shit and the swelling and the weight gain and the headaches, I'm losing my mind!"

My mother has struggled with weight issues most of her life. "If only I could just get back to *that*!" she has said numerous times to me when reviewing old photographs from her and my father's wedding. She was only 18 when they married, and she possessed a smaller, lighter frame. I often wonder why she likes to look at these pictures so much. Does she feel so much shame about her body that it is a way to relive her moments as a thinner woman? I think mom is beautiful no matter what size she is, and I wish she could understand that about herself. There are so many times I've been saddened when watching her put herself down.

These moments of self-deprecation have become worse over the last three months. For some reason, mom has been rapidly gaining weight—even with no change in her diet. This isn't normal weight gain either because she is retaining water. "I'm the fucking Michelin man," she's been telling people. My mother likes to make many things a joke, but as I stare at her bare swollen ankles this situation doesn't seem so funny.

"Come on. Let me fix you some breakfast," she says. "We're not going to be able to do this for long because you're going to be back to school soon."

On our way to the kitchen she peaks her head into my younger brother's bedroom. "Let's not wake the sleeping dead," she murmurs.

Our house is unusually quiet with my father at work and my brother sleeping. I cherish these times when Mom and I are alone together. As we walk into the kitchen and look at the back deck window, we are surprised to see a large blanket of snow on the ground.

"Alright! Look at that!" My mother exclaims. She loves snow as much as I do. She also is fascinated with snow globes and snowmen—a tall curio cabinet in our living room houses her many treasures.

The temporary serenity of the morning is abruptly interrupted when Maddie, our pet Beagle, shoots into the kitchen—her claws create a clicking symphony across the hardwood floor. She charges right up to the glass door leading into the backyard and begins growling menacingly.

I softly stroke the back of her neck and ask, "What is it girl?"

And then I spot the bright flash of red. There is a cardinal slowly prancing across the ground. For some reason, I always enjoy spotting the rare occurrence of this beautiful species of bird.

Mom quickly opens the back door to let Maddie out. "I don't want her to wake up your brother."

We both laugh as the dog dodges through the snow piles toward the bird. She looks like a clumsy puppet on a string, running and then collapsing to the ground. The cardinal spots Maddie way before she has a chance to attack and flies away.

Mom murmurs, "Dumbass dog. She'll be whimpering to come back inside within five minutes. What do you bet?"

"Yep," I respond as I take a seat at our kitchen table. I can tell we haven't kept the heat on very high during the night when I feel the cool press of the wooden seat underneath my boxers. I shiver and pull my hands into the sleeves of my shirt.

"So what's for breakfast Mom?"

She smiles and opens the refrigerator door. "Well, you are in luck mister. While you were out at the movies last night, I rolled out some donut holes!"

Yes! Mom's homemade fried donut holes. This will be a perfect treat for the cool winter morning. The idea of the hot sugary dough melting in my mouth already makes me feel much warmer.

As I peruse our town's local newspaper, I watch mom in action. She places the pan of raw donut holes on the counter next to the stove. Then she heats a pot of oil and turns on the radio. Her eyes light up when she hears one of her favorite tunes "Perfect" performed by country singer Sara Evans. During the introductory section of the song, I giggle as she starts shaking her hips back and worth with her spatula raised over her head.

She sings along with the first stanza, "If you don't take me to Paris on a lover's get away, it's alright. It's alright."

She begins tossing the raw dough into the oil and as each one crackles it creates a nice accompaniment to the song. The smell of fried goodness massages my nostrils and makes my stomach growl stronger. By the time she reaches the song's chorus, I join in:

"Perfect. Baby every little piece of the puzzle doesn't always have to fit perfectly. Love can be rough around the edges and tattered at the seams. Honey if it's good enough for you, it's good enough for me!"

This is more than good enough for me. I try to push aside my worries about mom and just enjoy the moment. We do not get to spend as much quality time together as we would like because she works a lot. She has her own salon in our home, and you might think this would help her spend more time with my brother and me. But she is a popular hairdresser with a long list of clients and if you do not make your next appointment before you leave the salon, expect to wait for at least six weeks before you can see her again.

The stress from work also has not helped her feel better about whatever is going on with her body. I tell myself that everything will be fine. I tell myself that whatever is happening is probably just a "female" problem—an issue with her hormones. I tell myself just to sing along and have fun with Mom.

But I can't help but worry about her strange situation, and I hate that she feels so unattractive and like a freak.

I can relate. I know what it is like to feel different.

Fatal Attraction

I watch him run.

It is a steamy afternoon in late April, and I am waiting for after school jazz band practice to begin. Our high school's graduation ceremony is approaching, and I am one of the lucky few underclassmen who will have the opportunity to play during commencement. Usually, I feel a certain comfort with my baritone saxophone in my lap. The feel of cool hard metal beneath my fingertips is a signal that moments of joy and creation are imminent. But my mind is far from music right now. I grip the saxophone closer to my chest and continue watching him from a nearby window.

His name is Mark, and he is on the track team. At my high school, the football field and surrounding track sit behind where the band room is located. It is often difficult for students to be both in the jazz band and on the track team because practices meet at the same time after school. *Oh well. It's not like my fat butt can run anyway*.

Mark is a nice guy. I tend to not get along with most of the "jocks" at school because they often have an arrogant attitude. They like to make fun of me because I'm heavy and a geek. My mother mockingly calls them "cool dudes" in an over-exaggerated masculine, husky voice. "You just keep doing what you're doing in school. Don't worry about the cool dudes," she often tells me.

Mark is different than the other "cool dudes." He's a year ahead of me and will be one of the graduating seniors this spring. I have known him ever since I started high school because his locker is only two down from mine. On the first day of my freshman year, I was panicking because I could not get my locker open and he helped me unjam it. From that point on, we have spoken to each other just about everyday. Every time football season is about to begin, he tries to get me to join the team but is unsuccessful. "Dude, you've got the shape and size of a lineman. You'd be killer on the field!" he always exclaims.

Indeed, I do have the body type for a football star but I guess I do not have enough of a desire to play. The idea of trying to tackle someone and people trying to tackle me is terrifying. This not only breaks Mark's heart but my father's as well.

Mark and I do not run in the same circle of friends so we have not really officially spent time together outside of school. That would probably be social status suicide for him to be seen out with me. Mark is very handsome, tall and super built with broad shoulders and large biceps. He's also one of those guys that can pull off a buzz cut.

As I watch him run around the football field, I also notice his legs. *Boy, does he have really nice…I mean built…legs. They are nice and tan with just the right amount of hair. And wow. What awesome bulging calves and thick thighs...*

His shorts are up enough on his waist that I can also see a smooth, white tan line peeking out from beneath each leg opening. The air is on full blast in the band room, but I feel a bead of sweat roll down my forehead.

That's hot.

What? Why did you just think that?

A conflicting inner self dialogue sets my mind racing.

Okay. It's not hot. Maybe that is not the right word.

Are you gay?

NO!

You were definitely checking out his legs.

So…that doesn't make me gay. I can appreciate another man's physique. Maybe I want my legs to look like his.

Faggot!

Shut up!

It's true. Don't you feel your boner right now?

I had that before I started watching Mark. I talked with my friend Sarah on the way to practice.

Whatever. Your friend Sarah—who is a girl! Who is among one of your many GIRLFRIENDS. Gay guys have lots of friends that are girls.

That's just a stereotype.

You want Mark to touch you…

STOP!

The band director taps her baton against the podium and my troubling thoughts are silenced. I begin to play the opening stanza of the first concert piece, but as I perform I cannot help but continue to feel a strange mix of desire and dread.

And with every resting measure of the song, I continue to glance out the window.

A Brief Description of Home

DuQuoin, my hometown, is a small, rural community in southern Illinois with about 6,600 residents. When most people in the country hear about places in Illinois, they automatically think of Chicago. While Chicago is a notable major metropolis of the United States, it does not represent the whole state of Illinois. Some individuals have argued that the northern and southern regions of Illinois are so different that they each could be a separate state. The boundary between northern and southern Illinois is also difficult to decipher. Most claim that any community below Interstate 80 is considered southern territory. Others say that any place below the town of Champaign, IL is considered southern territory. Some argue that the state is divided into three geographic regions: northern, southern, and central Illinois.

Regardless, the southern portion has a distinct culture. The physical environment is filled with farmland and cornfields. The roads are long, winding and often on top of large hills. There are urban aspects of the communities, and they are often made up of several sub divisions and historic town squares.

DuQuoin is no exception. All along Main Street there is a town square with various small businesses: post office, local bakery, movie theater, banks, shoe store, T-shirt store, antiques and collectibles store, gas stations, bars, a couple restaurants, and one of the town's many Christian

churches. The larger business chains are located further south in the town (including Wall Mart and fast food restaurants). Even further south, is a section of small ponds and rolling hills known as the DuQuoin State Fairgrounds. Every August for two weeks, the town hosts a fair with carnival rides, food stands, and a whole line up of music shows in beer tents and a small stadium. This stadium, know as the DuQuoin Grandstand, is where an annual circus is held every fall and all school graduations take place.

When the fair is not in session, residents use the grounds as walking and running routes for exercise. Families have picnics and fish. Children often feed ducks in the ponds, throwing pieces of bread. A monthly flea market and different programs are held at a large exhibition hall located in the grounds. During the winter months, there is a Christmas light exhibit that residents leisurely drive through and observe from their cars. When school is cancelled because of winter weather, many of the students in our town find a way to drive to the grounds and spend the day sledding down the hills.

My mother and father were born and raised in DuQuoin. Most of their siblings continue to reside here. Not everyone continues to reside in the town when they graduate high school, but many residents stay in the general area of southern Illinois. The nearest university is about 30 minutes away, and often town residents will live at home and commute to school. While I appreciate the comfort of small town life and the friendly personalities of my community residents, I hope to leave DuQuoin after graduating high school. Aside from the humid summers, there are some aspects of this culture that can be stifling for me.

Hair Loft! Ann Speaking…

"Maddie, get down!" my grandma Jo-Ann yells. She is eating a chocolate chip cookie from Hardees, and our dog Maddie is jumping on her lap attempting to get a piece. Jo-Ann's

appointment has been finished for at least an hour, but she has decided to visit with her daughter during work hours.

It's a humid spring afternoon in southern Illinois. I sit in my mother's salon and watch the occurring scene of chaos ensue. While the environment is hectic, I still believe that my mother's salon (the "Hair Loft" as she calls it) has a southern charm similar to the beauty shop in *Steel Magnolias.* She serves mostly female clientele, elderly women and mothers. They chattered avidly about the latest small town gossip—from who's expecting to who's having an affair to who's being forced to close their small business. The shop used to be our garage and now is adjacent to the kitchen in our home. My father has since built a separate building that serves as the garage next to our house. When he first finished building it, my mother rolled her eyes and said, "The damn garage looks bigger than our house." Even though it isn't really larger than our house, for some reason it appears that way.

Working at home has its advantages and disadvantages. My mother does not have to commute to the work place, but the line between work and home seems to blur at times. Family and friends sometimes have the impression that even though my mother works certain days and times of the week, she might make exceptions for them. As kind as my mother is, I hate that she has a lot of trouble saying no to these requests.

Her father, my Grandpa Corky (this was his nickname), has been dead for two years now but I often laugh about a special memory of him in the salon. Grandpa was a cheerful and chubby man, but he liked to stay active to try to combat his diabetes. When he was bored and wasn't playing golf, he would often go to a nearby mall. He would not go there to shop but to exercise and flirt with some of the younger female cashiers. When I would spend time with him, he would introduce me to some of these women. As a big flirt, he was also very conscious about

his age. My mother would color his hair to cover up the grey. It was like a secret operation, and these appointments would happen after hours with the blinds drawn. I chuckle thinking about how mom would have to sometimes distract an unexpected visitor from coming into the salon during these appointments. Grandpa would pace back and forth, the black color smeared around his temples, while my mother stood outside the door creating quick diversions.

My sweet reverie is interrupted when my younger brother Kyle comes crashing through the salon door drenched in wet mud. My mother looks up from cutting a young female client's hair and yells, "KYLE! What the hell have you been doing?"

Kyle replies, "I've been riding my four wheeler."

Mom turns to him in exasperation and points her scissors at him. "Go straight to the laundry room and put those in the wash!"

"You are such a dumb ass dog!" my grandma yells as Maddie continues to beg.

Mom shoots her a look of extreme annoyance—a look that says she should leave, but my grandmother ignores it. My grandma assumes she has ultimate power and should deserve special treatment after raising seven children.

As my brother retreats into the laundry room, my father comes through the salon door. "Now, come on girl! You can't be misbehaving like that!" He laughs flirtatiously. I look behind him to see mom's hair product sales person, Christine—a sassy red head who always gets my father's attention.

Christine chuckles and asks my mother, "How the hell do you put up with this one?" She takes a seat next to another female client who is sitting under a hair dryer getting a permanent. My mother has become somewhat of a contortionist with the ability to serve multiple clients at once. Often, she will be able to do a quick haircut while another person is sitting under the dryer

getting a perm or highlights. This usually goes well but can turn disastrous. If a customer takes too long discussing a haircut or for some reason it takes longer than expected to color a client's hair, a catastrophic domino effect results. The next scheduled customer arrives, the salon gets even more crowded, and my mother feels the pressure crushing upon her of economic responsibility and salvaging her great reputation as a local hairdresser.

Mom turns back to Christine and responds, "I threaten to withhold sex."

As my father walks into the kitchen he yells, "Oh, hell! Christine, I'll just come visit you."

I watch mom in the mirror purse her lips into a mischievous smug. "Sorry, Christine. That won't happen because he likes these big cow titties too much!"

Everyone in the salon bursts out laughing. The dog continues to bark and beg for Grandma's chocolate chip cookie. I place my head in my hands and shake it back in forth with exaggerated embarrassment. My mother is known for her talent as a hairdresser, but many of her clients also describe the entertainment you will most likely receive during your appointment.

The phone rings and mom answers, "Hair Loft. Ann speaking." She attempts to juggle the phone between her shoulder and ear while cutting her client's hair. I look around at the pandemonium and wonder how she keeps her sanity.

Bad News

"I have a tumor."

My mother utters the words, and my heart wants to leap out of my chest. She and my father exchange a troubled glance and look back at Kyle and me. We have just finished dinner and are sitting in the living room.

I had hoped that what was happening to mom was just a hormonal problem—a condition that could be remedied with some medication. *But, a tumor? This is a big deal.*

"Where is it?" I ask, but I am really wondering about so many other things. *Can the doctor remove it? If so, what does the surgery entail? Will my mom be able to be the same great mom she has always been? Is the tumor cancerous?* And the most excruciating question of them all: *Could mom die from this?*

My mother lets out a deep breath and continues, "The tumor is in my pituitary gland which is located at the base of the skull."

Oh my god, it's in her head!

"My endocrinologist Dr. Clark says that this is often referred to as the master gland. It controls most of your body's hormones. The tumor is causing my body to produce too much of a hormone called ACTH. This is why I have been having all of these problems with weight gain and hair growth. These are also symptoms of a condition called Cushing's Disease. When people have this type of tumor, the disease often accompanies it."

Kyle interrupts, "Whoa. Wait. You have a disease?"

My father places one hand on my mother's shoulder and jabs a cautionary finger in the air. "Just listen to your mother," he advises.

Mom shifts uncomfortably on the sofa. "I only have the disease when the tumor is present. The good news is that the tumor can be removed. Your dad and I are going to see a neurosurgeon in St. Louis next week to discuss my options."

St. Louis is about 90 miles away and is the nearest major city. There is a hospital in our town, but anytime anyone discusses going to the hospital in St. Louis it means the condition is

serious. I feel the hairs stand up on the back of my neck and the slight hint of worried tears. *When will mom ever get a break?*

This isn't the first health problem she has encountered. Four years ago, she kept feeling these sharp pains in her stomach. They were so painful she would have to quit work for the day and lie down. Doctors diagnosed her pains as stomach polyps, and she had them surgically removed. A year later, she experienced a meniscus tear in her knee and had to have surgery for its repair. An unexpected blood clot resulted from the surgery six weeks later, and she had to be rushed to the hospital via ambulance.

She had survived all of these challenges, and I thought this was enough. My mom is a good person. Why the hell does God keep giving her all of this shit to deal with? I keep thinking about all of my friends and their moms. I never hear about them having health problems. Maybe they do, and they keep this information from their children. I also think about some of the students who torture me everyday at school. Why can't their moms get sick? And then I feel guilt for wishing illnesses on their mothers. Nobody deserves what my mother has had to go through.

"We don't want to keep anything from you boys," my father says. "It is just important that you are good for your mom. Keep up with your chores and be nice. We'll get through this." He gives mom's hand a tight squeeze.

"So you're going to keep working?" I ask.

"Yes," Mom responds. "I don't see the point in quitting until the surgery. If my headaches get too painful, I may have to take the day off. I'm trying to spread the word to my clients as quickly as I can."

There is a moment of silence among the four of us and then Mom asks, "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

Kyle and I shake our heads and retreat to his room where we keep the Super Nintendo. We both grab our controls and plop on the floor in front of the television to play our game—*Donkey Kong.* The game's main players are two monkeys that throw bananas at opponents and ride on train tracks in wobbly carts. I try to concentrate on the game, but I am distracted by what our mother has just said. Kyle and I play in silence with the weight of illness bearing down upon us.

Kyle pauses the game.

He turns to me in a panic. "Mom, is going to be okay…right?"

I begin to respond but then hesitate. What is my role as the older brother here? Do I show him my fears? Do I tell him that I too worry about her surgery, cancer, and god forbid let's not even consider our mother's possible death?

No. I do what I have been taught, compartmentalize my emotions, and sternly say, "Of course. She's going to be fine."

My gut tells me otherwise.

An Intensifying Illness

My mother's surgery is successful—for the most part. Her surgeon, Dr. Grayson, has to microscopically go up through her nose to remove the tumor. Unfortunately, the tumor is so close to the optic nerve that he cannot remove it all because he fears this would blind her. She now must continue radiation therapy to shrink the tumor every week at the hospital in Saint Louis. This requires a three-hour commute round trip. I am in school and too young to drive in the city. My brother cannot drive yet. My father is busy working and trying to support our family while also keeping our health insurance to pay for all of my mother's medical expenses. Luckily,

with the help of her four sisters, friends and neighbors, and various clients from her hair salon, my mother is able to go for her radiation treatments.

* * *

"Well hellooooo Dolly. Well hello—Dolly! It's so nice to have you back where you belong," I proudly bellow the refrain of the song. Even with the heat of the stage lights blaring, sweat rolling down my face and smearing my makeup, and my whole body fatigued from dancing, singing, and costume changes for the last two hours, I could do this all night. I look out at the audience members' dark sea of faces. I cannot really recognize anyone, but I know Mom is there.

Every summer, I am involved in a community theater group that is run by two local music teachers in a nearby town. The group organizes two different shows every season—one for children and young adults (8-14 years old) and the other for adults (15 years old and up). I have performed in the shows every summer since I was in the fourth grade, and my mother has been a huge supporter of these activities. She has helped me prepare for every audition, carpooled with my friend's mothers getting us to every practice, and has assembled my costumes and even put on my stage makeup. Even with her busy work schedule, she still volunteers to help back stage for some of the shows and dress rehearsals.

It doesn't matter how large or small my role in the show, she always watches every performance she possibly can. "When you get famous, don't forget your mother," she always says. This year's role in *Hello, Dolly* is much smaller than the one I had the previous year. I starred as the cowardly lion in the *Wizard of Oz*. In this show, I am in the chorus acting as a server in a restaurant and a local community member of the city. This role requires more

costume changes and less stage time. It is quite different from tromping around in a large fur suit and singing about courage, but I am still having a lot of fun.

I think I enjoy it more because I am supported in my theatrical pursuits. This is the last show of the season, and most of my family has already seen me perform. It is a bittersweet moment for many reasons. I am sad because I won't see many of my friends in the show until next summer—some of them I may possibly never see again. The cast will tear down the set tomorrow, and then we will all go our separate ways. All of these thoughts run through my mind as the show comes to a final end and I prepare to greet other actors and audience members backstage.

About 10 minutes pass and almost half the audience has exited. *That's strange. I'm pretty sure mom had a good seat tonight.* I look around the bathrooms. *Maybe she had to duck out early to relieve herself.* She still has not appeared. I know she watched the show because she was my ride here.

"Blake!"

I turn to see Susan, the mother of one of my friends in the show. She approaches me and gives me a hug. "Nice job tonight, bud! I think that was your best performance of the season!" Her enthusiasm quickly diminishes to subdued concern and she continues, "Your mom had to leave after intermission."

I feel my body tense. "Oh? Is she okay?"

"She said her vision was bothering her, and it made her sick to her stomach. I am going to give you a ride home."

Sensing my worry, Susan continues, "I guess she needs to get her prescription checked. That's all."

"Right."

* * *

The tumor continues to grow quickly—much faster than Mom's doctors expected. As it grows, it continues to torture my mother causing her to see everything in double. She copes with this ailment by keeping one of her eyes closed throughout the day. In her usual fashion, she makes humor out of the situation and jokes about considering an eye patch and looking like a pirate.

My family worries about her going blind. I feel that there are some things we already refuse to see.

* * *

My mother screams in pain as if she is being burned alive. It is one of the most frightening sounds I have ever encountered. I am sure she has heard my agonizing screams of pain as a child but they were probably nothing like this. Having the roles of parent and child switch feels like watching a mirror fall and shatter on the ground. And then, you just stand and stare hopelessly at the pieces unable to put them all back together. You want to so badly because that mirror helps you remain confident in who you both are and how things are supposed to be.

Not like this.

It's a Saturday afternoon. My mother usually works on Saturdays but she has cancelled all of her appointments because she cannot tolerate the pain that radiates all through her body. For the last three weeks, my mother has felt aches and pains—mostly in her back. She has described the sensation as similar to that of small knives continually gouging into her. A few days the pain has been so intense my 40-year-old mother has had to use a walker to get around the house. Time seems to have sped way too many years into the future as I have watched her

trudge up and down the hall from the living room to the bathroom—the intensity of the pain causes her to shake as she slowly moves with the walker. Doctors are completely mystified as to why this is occurring, and she has been scheduling appointments for the last week to run more tests. In the meantime, they have prescribed pain medication, which has helped somewhat, except for days like this.

My Grandma Jo-Ann, Aunt Cindy, and neighbor Karen look at each other panicked and then back at my mother. She is reclined in the armchair of our living room. As she yells, she alternates clutching each side of her back. "Oh…Fuck!"

"When was the last time she had any pain medicine?" Karen asks.

"I don't know, but I am going to call the hospital. She has got to see one of those doctors. *Today*," Cindy insists.

"I'm not going to that goddamn place today! I can't! I hurt too much," Mom sobs.

Grandma walks over to my mother's side and quietly attempts to calm her. She turns back to Cindy and Karen says, "You might want to call John in case we need some help from the men."

I overhear Cindy urging her husband John to come over to our house. I consider whether I should try to contact my father at work, but I stand paralyzed watching this train wreck in front of me. Kyle is out riding his four-wheeler around the neighborhood, and I thank God because he should not be subjected to this. But why should I have to observe all of this anguish?

My anger at God is overshadowed by fear when I hear my mother yell out in intensified pain. My heart jumps in my chest, and I feel tears form in my eyes. The emotions I feel are a strange mix: sadness because my mother is in pain, numb because I am in shock that this is all happening, anxiety because I feel this strong desire for her to get to a hospital as quickly as

possible, and compassion because I just want to go over and hug her. Just as a mother kisses her child to ease the pain of scrapes and bruises, I want to do the same.

But I can't because whatever is causing her pain is invisible and underneath the skin, and it's so powerful even strong pain medication like Oxycotin cannot soothe it. All I can do is just stare and pray.

From the kitchen, I can hear my Aunty Cindy raging on the phone. "She has to see someone, *today*! Yes, her surgeon is Dr. Michael Grayson…I already told you what medication she is on!"

Within minutes my uncle and Karen's husband have arrived. They get ready to lift my mother off the chair and she yells, "You guys are not going to be able to get my fat ass off this chair!"

I sigh. Even in the worst conditions, she tries to make a feeble joke.

She continues to yell and resist the men's attempts to hold onto her. "I can't go! It just hurts too much. There's…no…way!"

Karen leans over the arms of the chair and sternly speaks face-to-face with mom. "Ann! Look here. Look at me! I know you hurt, but we have to figure out what is going on with you. We're going to get you to St. Louis. Maybe they can prescribe you something stronger, but you are going to have to tough this out. Don't just do it for you. Don't just do it for us. Do it for your boys."

She looks up from the chair at me. In our exchange, I see desperation in her eyes. I cannot imagine all the things running through her mind. Maybe seeing me gives her some temporary burst of strength, and I can at least help in that way. By seeing me, maybe she is reminded of one of the many reasons she needs to continue living.

The next few minutes seem to move in slow motion. Both men are able to maneuver my mother out of the chair. While my grandmother hugs me tightly, we watch Aunt Cindy and Karen help them guide Mom slowly out the front door, down the front steps, and into my aunt and uncle's jeep.

As I watch them pull away, I wonder if she'll return cured of her pain.

Or, I wonder if she will ever be without pain again.

* * *

"I'm sorry. We just don't know when she will be back to work," I say before hanging up the phone.

I look at my mom sleeping in the armchair—the walker still by her side. It has been two days since my aunt and uncle have rushed her to the emergency room. Her neurosurgeon, flabbergasted, was not quite sure what was causing her so much pain. He ended up prescribing her more pain medication and scheduling an MRI. Now, instead of what should be a peaceful quiet after the intensity of the storm, I experience ominous stillness. The uncertainty of my mother's future lingers and unanswered questions continue to weigh on the family. We are still waiting on the results of her MRI. Obviously, she cannot work, and I have volunteered to notify all of her customers of her indefinite leave. They are all very concerned about her.

I find myself becoming a useless source of information. I have to cover up uncertainties with forced optimism. I really want to say the following statements: I don't know when she will be able to come back to work. I don't know if she will feel better soon. I don't know if she will ever be her normal self again. But, I offer what optimistic family members are supposed to say: "We know she will get through this." "We're hoping for the best in her time of recovery." "We'll keep you updated on her results."

"And yes, I will let you know if we need anything," I respond at the end of every phone call even though I know that no one can give us (give *her*) what she needs.

* * *

"So what did the doctor say?" I ask Mom and Dad.

It's a Sunday evening, and our family is enjoying an amazing dinner. My mother is usually the cook of the family, but due to her illness, my father has taken over many of these responsibilities. With his experience in formerly running his own restaurant, he does well. He likes to grill meat the most. Tonight's dinner consists of pork chops, baked potato, and a side salad.

Since mom is still in a lot of pain, we all eat together in the living room. Of course, I make sure to heavily douse my salad and potato with fattening condiments. I am not much of a fan of the pork chop because I do not like fat on meat. If I even taste the slightest hint of fat in my mouth, I will become nauseated and gag. Mom usually babies me and will cut all the fat off every piece of meet. I do not want to bother my mother nor hear my father complain, so I force myself to eat my pork chop—fat and all.

We all sit in front of the television in silence. Our Sunday dinners are usually relaxing, and they are something I look forward to. Tonight is different. I have an idea why I cannot shake this feeling that a potential, uninvited visitor may come bursting into our home at any minute.

I know Mom's neurologist called yesterday. While Dad was out doing yard work and she was asleep, I snuck into their bedroom and listened to a message on their answering machine. "Hi. This is Dr. Grayson. We have Ann's results. Please call me back at your earliest convenience." Of course, I could not tell the nature of the news from the tone of his voice. Most

doctors have probably perfected the act of sounding neutral. While I had appreciated his professionalism, I secretly wished to hear a hint of positivity in the message.

And so, after finishing dinner, I continue to reflect on the potential news my parents might be giving us tonight. With mixtures of pork, barbeque sauce, butter, salt, sour cream, ranch dressing, bacon bits, croutons, and cheese, my stomach growls warnings of future indigestion. My nerves are not helping either. *How does it usually work in legal trials? Is the verdict more likely to be not guilty if the jury is out for a longer period of time? Or the other way around?* I realize that this is our family and not a court of law. The verdict will neither be guilty nor not guilty but rather news about the next hurdle we have to face in helping my mother get well.

The program we are watching has come to an end. When my father switches off the television, I know the moment I've been waiting for has finally arrived. I fight the urge to throw up.

"Your mom and I have to talk to you boys," he says. His expression is grim.

Mom looks nervous. "Now, Lindon. Do we really need to…"

He interrupts her. "Yeah, Ann. We already talked about this."

Mom sighs. "You're right."

I look at Kyle. Glancing down at his dinner plate, he slowly forks through his leftover baked potato.

Dad continues, "Dr. Grayson called yesterday, and he gave us some news about your mom…about why she's having all of this pain throughout her body. So…you remember that they couldn't remove all of her pituitary tumor because it was too close to the optic nerve and other important parts of the brain?"

We nod our heads showing that we understand.

"He thought the radiation would shrink the tumor enough to where she would just have to have yearly check ups with him. Well, your mother's tumor has spread through her body…and it's cancerous."

I feel bile from tonight's dinner come up and burn my throat. I swallow it back down. Suddenly, one of my worst possible fears has become a reality. Aunt Betty and Grandpa Corky both died from lung cancer. Grandpa Lindell died from cancer of the esophagus. I have experienced family members dying from cancer before, but I never would have imagined Mom could get cancer. Nobody ever prepares you for these things in school.

Mom quickly takes over explaining the news. "So, I have been diagnosed with pituitary cancer. It's extremely rare."

The room suddenly begins spinning and my breathing becomes labored.

"So. What does that mean?" I manage to choke out.

You are going to die?

Mom answers, "Because so few people have this cancer, Dr. Grayson is not completely sure what to expect. However, he said I should probably start chemotherapy. We've already scheduled my first treatment two weeks from now."

Kyle shifts uncomfortably next to me on the sofa. "Will you lose your hair?" he asks.

My mom takes out a tissue from her pocket and wipes her face. "Yes," she responds through tears. "Come here guys."

Kyle and I walk over to my mother, and we all embrace in a group hug. As she cries softly into my shoulder, I slowly stroke her curly brown hair. In this moment, I try to be optimistic. *People beat cancer everyday. Mom has gone through so much already…She surely can get through this last battle. We just have to keep praying.*

But as much as I try to reassure myself with these thoughts and put on a sturdy façade, I cannot deny that I am more scared than I have ever been in my life.

The Worst Day of My Life

It's six days before Christmas.

I'm working part time as a cook in a family owned Italian restaurant called Pia's. It is nice to have a little extra money, and the job also helps keep my mind distracted from worrying so much about Mom. I have worked here the last two years, and even though the tasks can be physically and emotionally exhausting, I have fun with my co-workers.

All of the kitchen cooks are male except for one female who works during the daytime hours. Most of the servers are female. The cooks, some of whom also go to school with me, are a rowdy bunch who like to play practical jokes. Between activities like hiding pizza toppings, throwing flour on one another, and snapping wet towel matches, I wonder how we ever get anything done. I also have learned the difficult lesson about what happens when you disclose to one of them private information. My secret infatuation with a young woman named Melissa was leaked to all the cooking staff, and they took advantage of this information when she decided to show up at the drive through to pick up food one evening. The men working during that shift decided to sing the Allman Brother's "Sweet Melissa" in the background while I was waiting on her.

Today, aside from the old 80's rock music on the radio, there is an eerie silence in the kitchen. My co-workers have not played any jokes nor have they said much to me in general. I have only told a few close friends about my mother's diagnosis, but information gets around very quickly in a small town. I feel a strange mix of anger and gratitude when I see them look at me

with pity. I want to yell, “Don’t feel sorry for me! My mom is going to be just fine!” But I realize that cancer represents the ultimate doom in most people’s minds.

I look up from my station at the digital clock on the wall and realize the time has come to end my shift. Tossing the last pizza of the night into the fiery hot oven, I grab a paper towel and wipe sweat from my brow. I say to my co-worker, “Time to get the hell out of this joint.” He nods at me smiling. “Later, Paxton.”

I untie my apron and toss it into the laundry bin on the way out the door. The remaining pungent smells of garlic cling onto my skin. Normally the cool winter air would feel like a sharp slap in the face, but due to the five-hour shift of continuous kitchen heat, the cool feels wonderful. It signals soothing relief from the end of hard labor.

On the drive home, I jam out to some of my favorite country songs. I am happy to be on winter break from school, and I am looking forward to starting a new internship in the spring at our city hall. I’m also worried about the future. The typical questions of a graduating high school senior are on my mind. Where will I get into school? How will I afford it? Will my parents be able to help out?

I pull into my driveway, and I am surprised to see an unfamiliar vehicle. I go in the house and find Randy and my father frantically standing over my mother. She is lying back in the armchair, shaking her head and moaning. Randy, a nurse, is a family friend of ours.

My father shows a look of desperation mixed with relief when he sees me. “Blake, can you go to the store real quick? Your mother’s blood pressure reader needs new batteries. Get size triple A.”

I stand there for a second staring in fear at the scene.

“Blake!” my father snaps. “I need you to go now!”

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Your mother is just not feeling very well, and Randy has come over to check on her. But we need to take her blood pressure. So, please go to the store."

I speed to the store. After searching for a minute for the battery size, I give up and ask a clerk to assist me. As she slowly looks through the shelves, I just want to scream at her to hurry the fuck up. After what feels like a hundred years, she hands me the batteries I need.

There are two people in front of me in line for the register. I think about asking them if I can go ahead of them, but by the time I make the decision to ask it's already my turn to pay for the batteries.

I rush back home to find the situation has become worse. I am paralyzed with fear, and I can hardly breathe when I see my mother lying unconscious on the floor and Randy giving her CPR. My dad is frantically talking on the phone to an ambulance dispatcher. He places his hand over the receiver and yells to me, "Blake. Take your brother and the dog and stay in your room."

I want to help. I want do something. But what can I really do? I lightly guide my younger brother Kyle into my bedroom, while tugging Maddie's collar. Once we enter, the dog continues to paw at the door and whine to get out. I nervously pace back and forth. My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. I start to feel dizzy, and the room begins to sway.

"Is mom going to be okay?" Kyle asks.

"Yeah," I lie. "She's had a scare before. Remember, a couple years ago?" I am referring to the time she had blood clot in her knee due to surgery for a meniscus tear. An ambulance had to take her to the hospital, but she ended up being okay. I pray, *beg* to God for this time to be the same.

I am startled from my thoughts when I hear the shrill sounds of an ambulance outside our house. I watch out the window as workers place my mom on a stretcher, get into the ambulance and drive away. I also see my dad quickly follow in his car.

At this point, many of our neighbors are in the house and standing in our front yard. Karen and Jon approach us. Karen says, "Do you guys want to go to the hospital? We can take you."

I ask, "Do you think we should go?"

"It's up to you." But I can tell from her concerned expression and the feeling of dread in my gut that I should go to the hospital.

When we get into the emergency waiting room, I see familial pandemonium. All of my mother's siblings and my grandmother are there. Some are talking on their cell phones. Others are sitting in chairs and hugging one another. They are waiting; their faces filled with terror at the events about to unfold.

Everyone's attention is drawn to the doctor as he emerges from the OR. His expression is grim. My grandmother and one of my aunts rush up to him and ask, "How is she?"

Everything comes to a halt. The world stops when he says, "I'm sorry. She didn't make it. We tried everything we could."

I feel an ice cold numbness flow through my body. I take in the sounds of agonizing moans from my relatives. I see my Aunt Cindy slam her fist against the wall in frustration and yell, "God damn it! Why her? Why did you have to take her from us?" Tears of anger run down her face as she places her hand over her mouth, stifling a series of sobs.

The doctor asks, "Where are her children? They may see her at this time."

My uncle gives me a tight squeeze on the shoulder and guides Kyle and me to the doctor. I feel like this is just a horrible nightmare, and I will eventually wake up. However, when I enter the room of my mother's death, and I see her lying on the examining table, I know this is all too real.

My father's head is buried in his arms draped over her. He looks up at Kyle and me. His eyes are flaring red, bloodshot. "Come here, guys," he murmurs.

I just stand there, numbness continuing to radiate throughout my body. I look at this thing in front of me. This isn't my mother. The care free, fun loving woman that I know is not this post-mortem specimen. This corpse.

I snatch Kyle's hand as he tries to reach out and touch her. I tell myself it's to protect him, but it's really because if he touches her this becomes more real for him and threatens to become a part of my reality. And this cannot be happening.

We hug my father as he cries. I'm still in shock. The tears are not coming yet, but they will eventually. "She's in a better place now," my father assures us. "She won't feel pain any longer."

I slowly reach out and massage her thick, brown curls of hair—the only part of her that hasn't changed.

Death's Aftermath

I lay flat on my back in bed staring straight up at the ceiling. Maybe if I focus all of my attention on the little white sparkles that scatter the white space I can tune out the moans I hear coming from the living room. Numbness continues to encapsulate my body. I cannot move nor do I want to. Maybe I'll just stay here, starve myself, and join mom in the after life.

My mother's death was ruled a result of a pulmonary embolism, a major blocking of an artery in the lung. These can happen when a person has had long periods of inactivity or is suffering from other diseases such as cancer. This was why mom was having shortness of breath and eventually stopped breathing. The coroner stated that it was likely mom was dead even before being transported to the hospital.

"I just can't believe she's gone. It's all my fault!" I hear my father yell.

My Uncle John whispers a response. I'm not sure what he is saying. He has volunteered to spend the night with Dad, Kyle, and me. After returning from the hospital, the only visitors we have are my Uncle John and Aunt Cindy. Other people are also most likely in shock. Maybe they believe that if they avoid the space of my mother's absence, they can avoid the reality of her death as well. Or, perhaps they are trying to give us space.

Is the numbness I'm feeling denial or devastation? *I fucking hate you, God. How could you do this to us? To me?*

I continue to keep focusing on the ceiling, trying not to think about what's ahead.

* * *

There is a country song where the performer sings about how everyone dies famous in a small town. My mother's death is definitely a testament to this. It's the morning after her death and family members, neighbors, friends, and even acquaintances have come flocking to our home. Some people bring food—from tuna casseroles to cheese and sausage trays to fruit cobblers to cookies and donuts. Being an emotional eater, I already have devoured four types of donuts called chocolate Long John's that are made at our local bakery. They are long fried rectangles of dough doused in a dark chocolate icing. Some of them have banana pudding in the middle. The sugar feels so good and soothing. No matter what happens, food will not disappoint

me. Then I remember that my mom is dead, and I feel my stomach cringe. The sugary solids threaten to come back up.

Some family members not only bring food but they offer housekeeping services. My aunt Debbie has vacuumed the living room, dusted the coffee tables, and swept the kitchen floor—*twice*. "I just like to keep busy when I'm anxious," she says.

My brother has been hiding in his bedroom all morning. While I barely was able to sleep at all, sleeping is his way of coping. If I could escape from this harsh reality through dreaming, I would too. Even with his television droning on in the background, he is able to continue in a deep slumber.

Dad has been able to keep it together for the most part. I have observed him interact with people all morning. It is almost as if he is on autopilot. Step one: Answer the never-ending ringing phone and have a conversation. Step two: Chat with visitors while ignoring the never-ending ringing phone. Make statements like, "I hate that she's gone but she is no longer in pain." Step three: Pick at a piece of food. Step four: Go to Kyle's bedroom and make sure he is still breathing. Repeat steps one through four.

The family priest, Father George, stops by our house. He had been with us the night before in the hospital to give Mom her last rites. At one point in the morning, Father George and my Aunt Janet (who hasn't attended a church service in at least five years) sit across from one another in our living room. George, known for being a staunch Catholic fundamentalist, allows my aunt's grief to excuse any potential lectures he may want to give her on church attendance. That still does not prevent him from giving her a slightly reprimanding glare over his coffee mug.

Time escapes all of us, and the minutes soon slip into hours unnoticed. All of my mother's siblings—her four sisters and two brothers are gathered in the kitchen with me while my father chats with neighbors in the living room. Stories about mom come in waves and then there are moments of devastated silence. Why should we not talk about the happy moments we spent with the deceased? It is better than thinking about our future attempts to live without them.

"I just keep thinking about how much pain she was in over the last few months," I say to my Aunt Susie. She is the youngest of my mother's sisters, and many believe she looks the most like my mother.

"I know," Susie responds and pats my arm gently. "Just think about how happy she is now. She's up in Heaven with Grandpa Corky, Aunt Betty, Uncle Jack…Your Grandma and Grandpa Paxton."

I nod my head slowly. I try to envision my mother excitedly being greeted by all the previous deceased relatives but my attempts are interrupted. My mind turns to yesterday when I observed Randy giving her CPR. I did not tell Dad but at one point I saw my mother's eyes widen in horror as she gasped for breath. Squeezing my eyes tightly and wincing in pain, I try to shake the ominous vision but it keeps replaying over and over.

"Yesterday," I stammer. "When…when she was lying there on the floor. She just kept struggling for breath and she looked *so scared*."

And then the horrific visions overcome me and shatter the constant numbness I have been feeling since last night. I hear a sound rise out of my gut and into the air—one that feels foreign and nonhuman—not my own. Sobbing uncontrollably, I fall into my Aunt Susie arms. The familiarity of her embrace, just like my mother's, causes more tears to flow. But there is

something comfortable about letting go of all control and making room for my grief to overpower me.

The only problem is that I want to stay in Aunt Susie's arms forever and not face the hard future reality of life without my mother.

* * *

My mother looks like she is sleeping.

This is not my first encounter staring death in the face. I already have had experiences viewing the deceased. I've been to funeral services for three grandparents, a great aunt, and a great uncle. I remember when I first saw these deceased relatives I felt extreme fear. When I was eight and saw my Grandma Paxton's body, I ran and hid in the funeral home bathroom.

I'm not really afraid now. I look at my mother in the casket, and I feel a strange mix of sadness and relief. Her hair is perfectly curled, and she is wearing her usual amount of make up. The outfit her sisters picked is fitting. Her floral dress with soft color mixes of red, violet, and blue is definitely fitting. It matches the vibrant personality she possessed in life. I extend my hand and consider touching her but then I slowly retract. It is almost as if I am in an awkward dance with death—trying to find the delicate balance between holding on and letting go of her.

For some reason, I think back to my birth and wonder what the moment was like for her. After my delivery, when she rocked me in her arms, I am sure the idea of leaving me at 18 never crossed her mind. Moments of birth and moments of death—are these the ultimate moments of intimacy between a parent and a child?

My Aunt Debbie lightly caresses the side of the casket. "She looks so pretty and at peace."

During many funeral preparation periods, it seems that the decision whether to have an open casket is often one of contention among family members. However, with Mom there is nothing that visibly scarred her body. After seeing the hell that her disease unleashed upon it, I am sure I am not the only one who actually finds viewing the body therapeutic.

It seems as if the whole town has decided to come to Mom's visitation service. Father George says out of his whole career in the priesthood this is the longest line he has ever seen. The line goes down the church steps and wraps around the sidewalk almost two miles down the street. Those who have come to pay their respects are a mixture of many different types of acquaintances: family friends and neighbors, clients of my mother's, my father's co-workers, and some of Kyle and my schoolmates. There are people here I would never have expected to attend—some of the "cool dudes" at school that like to torment me.

Brent Wadley and his older brother John approach me in the visiting line. I feel my body recoil because these are two brothers who have had received pleasure from pinning me against a wall, twisting my nipples, and calling me a faggot. *Why are they here?*

John places a sympathetic hand on my shoulder with his eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, man. If you need anything at all, let us know."

Oh you mean like you could stop being a dick? I guess sometimes loss can't always bring people together especially when past actions poison offers of sympathy.

I am surprised that I have not cried at all during the visitation. In fact, I am one of the most cheerful members of my family. With a big toothy grin, I chat animatedly and optimistically with each individual who comes to pay respects. It's like I'm one of those wind up dolls—someone keeps pulling my string and then off I go. It is so surprising that I am actually

being less emotional than most of Mom's visitors. Then again, I've been drowning in this sea of grief for the last 48 hours.

Most people offer the typical statements of condolence: "I'm sorry for your loss." "Your mamma is in a better place." "She is no longer in pain." "I know what you are going through." Or "I know how you feel." I nod politely and thank them because this is what I am supposed to do. Who wants to see a negative Nancy at his own mother's funeral? Painting on a happy face, I do what I've learned to do best and compartmentalize my emotions even though I am broken inside.

The emotional reactions among the crowd are gendered. The men stand stoic and offer humorous stories from the past. The women can barely speak through sobs as they hug my brother and me tightly, some of whom I never thought I would ever share this sort of intimacy with. Mrs. Schwartz approaches me. She was one of mom's former clients, and right before her appointments we used to have to hide Maddie because she supposedly hated animals and children. Schwartz, in her 50s and never married, often would complain about the weather and some town residents' un-Christian like behaviors. "Do not come out here for the next hour," Mom used to warn us. "Her hair cut and color might buy you guys another video game, so scat!" These sorts of warnings would often work. However, one time my brother accidentally walked in to the salon, observed her color treatment, and exclaimed, "Well geez! Your hair sure looks orange!" Schwartz did not appreciate this, and Mom was very surprised when she continued to come back to the salon anyway.

Chuckling from this brief memory, I try to use it to distract myself from gagging. Schwartz's embrace brings forth the pungent smell of mothballs. "You poor things!" she squeals.

"Well at least you got your Daddy. You all are gonna be strong for him, okay? Just find peace in knowing your mom is with Jesus!"

"Thank you for coming Mrs. Schwartz," I say and hope that she will release me from her taut vomit-inducing grip. She moves forward in the line and I catch my brother watching and giggling at the latest spectacle. I shrug my shoulders and give him a look that says, *Hey, I'm not the one that told her that her hair looked orange.*

I am pleasantly surprised when I see four of my co-workers walk forward in line. We do like to have fun at work, but we all are not the type to express and talk about our feelings. My breath catches when I see Renee—one of the female servers in the restaurant.

Renee is what some might describe a "natural beauty," reminding me of actress Angelina Jolie in many ways. She is tall with dark brown hair and eyes. Pink luscious lips frame her bright, white smile. I do not know much about makeup, but I doubt she wears much, if any. Renee is one of those pretty girls who is super nice at the same time. Her father and my father have been good friends, and she would sometimes accompany her father on his random visits to our home. Renee and I often talk about our mutual interests in journalism and speech communication. She is waiting tables to pay for her college degree and fund her future career as a public relations specialist. At work, after small conversations with her in the middle of a lunch or dinner rush period, I have often daydreamed while washing dishes or making salads about what it would be like to marry her and start a family. I would be so normal if that happened, and we would be happy. Wouldn't we?

The warm feelings from my reveries continue as she hugs and consoles me. "How are you doing hon?" she coos.

"I guess as well as can be expected," I respond. I need to make sure I show masculine strength in front of her. *Don't be a wimp.*

"Well, I know what you're going through."

I consider this an appropriate statement because Renee's father died about five years ago from a brain tumor. "If you need anything at all, let me know."

I nod to thank her.

I continue to greet more and more people coming through the line—never taking a break. Before I know it, three hours have flown by. I find myself feeling *happy*. My face actually hurts from smiling, and I feel guilt about this. *How could you smile at your mother's funeral and for so long that your face hurts?* I am not happy she died, but I am definitely happy that so many people love us and have come to show support.

The happy supported feelings do not last for long, though. When we get home, I sense more of my mother's absence. I crawl into bed and softly weep into my pillows. Sleep does not come easily the night before her funeral.

* * *

We receive a full foot of snow overnight. Dad has already been notified that some staff members have been to church and shoveled off several layers of snow from the sidewalks. Two to three more inches are expected later in the day.

In the early morning hours on the day of my mother's funeral, I struggle with insomnia. I sit alone in the living room and stare at my mother's curio cabinet of snowman figurines and snow globes. Getting up from the chair, I reach in and begin to slowly move through each artifact. It might be mindless tinkering to cope with my anxiety, but at some level, I feel my mother's presence in every touch of her prized possessions.

A smile spreads across my stiff and tear soaked face. I look out the window toward the morning sky and say, "Looks like you got your big snow of the year. You always were one who had no trouble making your presence known."

* * *

The snow has not stopped many loved ones from paying their respects and every pew in the church is full. We have shared stories about Mom and reviewed pictures from various points in her life. Everyone laughs when we see Mom and Dad in old school dance pictures. Mom is sporting a tight knit 80's perm, and Dad is without a beard and has the same haircut John Travolta had in *Saturday Night Fever*. The beautiful memories encapsulated through photographs keep coming: an image of Mom cutting my hair in her salon when I was six, a moment where she is posing with my brother in his uniform on the football field, and a picture with eight of her closest friends from high school on a cruise liner. This would be her last vacation.

A few family members participate in the service. My cousin gives a lovely eulogy filled with compassion and just the right amount of humor. My brother, a young man who usually utters few words, has written and read a poem. And I decide to sing for her.

I stand in the church rafters and look down at the full rows of pews. My brother and father, along with grandmother and all of my aunts and uncles sit in the first three rows. Some are staring ahead in the distance—still in shock. Others cry and cuddle in one another's embrace. I spot my father place his arm behind my brother's back, slightly massaging his neck.

Taking a few deep breaths, I approach the music stand. I glance at the organ player and give him my nod of approval. I am ready. I can do this. I *want* to do this. My mother supported me in all of my academic and artistic pursuits, and I believe this is one final way I can honor her.

Many of my family members have reassured me over the last couple of days that should I break down in my attempt it will be okay. Some have even cautioned against me singing at the funeral.

But, I am determined. This still does not mean I am not nervous.

Originally, I wanted to pick a song that my mother enjoyed or one that represented the many loving relationships that she had with other people. However, this service is in a Catholic church and Father George was adamant that I choose a religious hymn. We decided that I would sing the Lord's Prayer.

Upon hearing the organ, my heartbeat increases. I follow my voice instructor's advice and make sure to take slow, deep breaths. It is hard to just breathe normally because I can still see my mother's body in the casket at the front alter. *God. This is really it.* Fighting back tears, I begin the first line.

Our father, which art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.

I try to focus on happy moments with Mom. My mind naturally goes to the many times she has watched me sing in the past. I reflect back on my first solo. In the third grade, my music teacher led a program in which the theme was "Music Around the World." My class represented Mexico and I adorned the stereotypical outfit of sandals, sombrero, and a bullfighter cape. The finale of the program consisted of me and three other peers singing lines from Lee Greenwood's "God, Bless the USA." Mom took me out for a blizzard at the Dairy Queen afterwards.

I remember the excitement of future possibilities for her child gleaming in her eyes. She had said, "My sweet boy. You have such a beautiful voice!"

My response was only a big cheesy smile smeared with cookies and cream ice cream, my sombrero slipping off and cocked to the side of my head.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On Earth as it is in Heaven.

My memory turns to my eighth grade graduation. Many in our community had joked that I won so many school awards that I needed to bring in a dump truck to help my parents take all of them home. I also sang lines from LeAnn Womack's "I Hope You Dance." In the weeks leading up to the ceremony, mom would play the song in the car and help me practice. The threat of tears becomes more intense when I think about how she will not be able to attend my high school graduation.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

"Blakey! Blake come sing for us!"

This was a phrase that Mom would often yell into the house from her salon. There were several elderly ladies who got their hair styled every week—the "weeklies" as we called them. Every chance she had, my mother would have me come perform for them. I remember several of the gray haired ladies gleefully clapping their hands together and giving me so much praise. "That boy is going to be famous one day!" they would say. "Ann, he truly has a special gift!"

For thine is the kingdom.

I'm building intensity, now. I need to breathe.

And the power.

Breathe, Blake. Breathe.

And the glory. For—

Here comes the big moment—the part of the song with the highest vocal range.

EEEVERRR

I feel a sense of deep warmth tingling all up and down my body. Maybe it's God. Maybe it's my mother's love. But it soothes me in my grief. I look at the crowd and see two of my aunts breaking down. My singing has caused them to come undone in their sorrow.

Now, the final word is to be sung.

Amen.

* * *

Snow continues to fall softly during the burial. I watch the small flakes collect on the top of my mother's casket. The overcast gray sky and the cool wind seem to reflect everyone's mood: a quiet devastation. Most people knew my mother was in much pain during her illness, and as in most small towns, I am sure there were many discussions about her progress.

Progress.

We were always asking, "What's next? Which surgery? Which treatment?" My mother's whole community of grievers fell into the trap of commonly accepted ideas of illness. This rare disease was something to be fought and defeated. With very little information, we were all blind to the possibility of her illness being terminal. Palliative care or hospice never entered discussions surrounding my mother's condition. Why would it? For many individuals, my mother was just too young to die—too *important* to die.

Now, the lips of the townspeople no longer move as they watch my mother being lowered into the ground. There is no more potential progress to discuss and my mother has been robbed of the ability to die a good death.

* * *

After all of the services have been completed, my Aunt Cindy and Uncle John join my father, Kyle, and me back at home. My aunt nervously sweeps the nearly spotless kitchen floor. She also puts away some folded laundry as my uncle chats quietly with us in the living room.

"Are you guys hungry?" she asks. "I can fix you some hamburgers."

"Oh, no!" my father quickly interjects. "We're fine. Right guys?"

Kyle and I slowly nod our heads. I barely ate at the funeral luncheon and despite the growling I feel in my stomach, I do not wish to eat. It has been hard to distinguish between hunger and nausea lately.

"Alright, then. I guess we'll head out, John. You sure you guys don't need anything else?" Cindy inquires as she gives each of us a tight hug.

"No, no. We'll let you know if we need any help," my father reassures her.

After they both leave, we sit silently in the living room. My father listlessly flips through channels on the television. I watch the dog lying on the couch staring far off into the distance—the glare of the flashing television seems to illuminate her exasperated expression. Dogs sense things, too.

"She's really gone guys," Dad chokes out. "But we'll be okay."

In this moment of emptiness, it finally sinks in that Mom is really gone. *What do we do now?* I think as we sit in silence. *What do we do now that the ritual, the show of death is over and we are left with the hard reality of loss?*

* * *

I catch my father in a private moment of grief.

It is about two months after mom's funeral. He has left the door open to the bedroom he shared with mom. Sitting at the foot of their bed, he grasps the answering machine in his hands.

There are no tears on his face but just a blank expression. He stares off into space and presses the play button for the second time. My mother's voice fills the room:

"Hi Lindon! Hi Blake! Hi Kyle! Hi Maddie! It's so beautiful here! I just wanted to call and let you know I'm doing great and having a blast. I love you and I will see you soon!"

She left the message while she was on a cruise to the Bahamas with eight of her closest friends from high school. My father has played this message every day since she has died. In a strange way, it seems as if she is directly speaking to us from Heaven. I think this is why it gives Dad so much comfort. Maybe he also just wants to hear her voice. It is the only artifact of her living presence that we have left.

He hits the play button again.

"Hi Lindon, Hi…"

There is an interruption and my mother's voice is silenced by an automated voice message.

"Message deleted…"

Dad's mouth drops open in horror. "What?" he mutters and begins to frantically push buttons on the machine.

"No new messages…"

He then begins to pound the answering machine up and down against the wooden bed frame. "Piece of fucking shit!" Every slam gains speed, intensity, and more cursing.

My breath catches in my throat as I watch him leap up from the bed. He lets out a roar comparable to a wild animal. As he yells, he lifts the machine over his head, yanks it out of its sockets, and throws it against the wall. I then watch him fall to his knees and sob into the mattress.

I quickly move into the bedroom and embrace him.

In this moment, I feel this hardened man crumble. This is the same man that worked 12-hour shifts slaving away in a coal mine for 18 years. This is the same man that would tell me to tough it out whenever one of the neighborhood kids would give me a bloody nose. This is the same man that I thought seemed to think showing any emotion was a sign of weakness.

This same man's grief allows him to seek comfort in his eldest son's arms. But instead of feeling my body become soft I sense resistance. What he has pressured me to be ("*Be a man! Tough it out!*") all these years is suddenly back firing. In a time when we should be able to grieve together, I feel empty—numb. His tears fall onto my body that has morphed into a cold, hard stone.

I try to fight the numbness and sympathize as much as I can. "I know this is hard for you. You were going to have to get rid of that message at some point," I say.

"I know," he murmurs. "I just can't believe she's gone."

He takes my face in his hands. I watch his blood shot, red eyes search mine. Maybe he senses my emotional resistance and is searching for compassion, trying to understand why his son is so defiant.

"Every time I look at you boys, I see your mom. I know you can't help it but it just hurts me sometimes to just even look at you," he says and sobs.

I am not quite sure how to respond so I just continue to hug him in silence.

An Unfinished Coat of Arms

Fall 2005- Spring 2009: Saint Louis, Missouri.

"Welcome to 7M!" Stephanie, my resident advisor, proclaims.

It is the first night before freshman orientation week activities begin. It took me a while to believe that I would go to school after mom's death. After graduating high school, I had considered taking a year off and helping Dad at home. "No way," he had said whenever I suggested this. "Your mom would not have wanted that."

And so, after looking at a few schools, I choose a school in Saint Louis. Dad and I joked that mom and my grandpa were trying to give me a sign that this was the school for me when we realized one of the university's main streets shared my grandfather's first name. Also, during a moment looking at the student recreation center on the campus tour, a special on hairdressers came on several of the center's televisions.

This university also has exactly the kind of degree program I am looking for. It is located in a city but its architecture is set up in a way that many students claim it feels as if you are living in a small community. This is perfect for me because I am able to explore the metropolis lifestyle I have craved but at the same time feel comfortable in a culture similar to that of my hometown.

Stephanie has gathered all of the students on my floor in the common lounge area for a meeting to help us get to know one another and go over this week's schedule of events. I am excited but a little overwhelmed because the organizers seem to have every minute of each day scheduled. I am looking forward to the country western themed dance party at the end of the week.

I look around at the sea of 48 faces, both men and women on a co-ed floor. These will be my neighbors (and hopefully most of them friends) for the next year. *Man I hope there aren't any major jerks in this bunch*.

Continuing to beam from ear to ear, Stephanie pulls out a few plastic grocery bags. She dumps their contents out on the floor. They contain art supplies— a myriad of colored pencils, glue sticks, and scissors. “We’re going to be little artists tonight!”

There is a mixed chorus of uttered responses. Some students groan and roll their eyes. Others smile and give cheers of joy. I am indifferent. I want to get to know everybody, but I am not very much of an illustrator. The only project I did really well in a past art class was where a sketched picture was already provided and students had to just fill it in with dots of a washable marker.

Stephanie continues to give the group directions. We all have to draw a coat of arms. The theme for our floor is Medieval Life. I thought the knight in shining armor door decorations were pretty cool. After everyone is done completing our coat of arms, we have to spend a few moments sharing these with the group. Most of the students speak animatedly about their hometowns and families. As I hear each presentation, my heartbeat begins to quicken. I am not one to get nervous about giving presentations, but there is something about this one that shakes me.

I get through my presentation. For something I had so much anxiety about, it sure felt like it went quickly. I look back at the 48 pairs of eyes, attempting to gauge their thoughts. *Do they know what was missing from my coat of arms? And if any of them does, am I going to get asked about it?*

But no says a word about the missing person in the description of my family.

First Kiss

I slowly pull a wooden block from the Jenga stack, and I am relieved that it does not come crushing down. I’m still in the game. This game of Jenga is a little different than the one I

am used to. My floor mates have constructed "Dare Jenga." On the back of some of the blocks are dare statements they have written. In order to stay in the game, you have to complete the dare should your block have one.

Turning my block, I brace myself for what may potentially be coming my way. I feel sick to my stomach when I see a dare that reads, "You must kiss a person of the group's choosing." I have never *really* kissed anyone, romantically anyway. This is something I have much shame about, and I have told only a handful of people.

After reading the dare out loud, a chorus of mischievous squeals and giggles results. *Alright, let's just get this over with*. I watch a few of my friends whisper among one another and debate my kissing prospects. After a brief minute, my friend Paige proudly proclaims, "We want you to kiss…Denton!"

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. *Oh shit! Denton.* This is the guy on our floor who has everyone questioning his sexuality. He acts interested in both men and women but he never explicitly states how he identifies.

He's certainly not bad to look at. I have had a huge crush on him since move in day. I had to move in early before everyone else because I got a job as a security desk worker for the residence hall. I loved working the first shift during move in because I got to greet all the incoming students. Denton had been kind enough to bring me a soda. The infatuation started then.

And now I have been dared to kiss him.

I look over at Denton to see what he thinks about all this. He's leaning back in his chair, arms crossed with a cool and collected smile. This guy is good.

My body begins to move toward him. *Yes, I'm really moving. This is really happening.* Our faces come within inches of one another, and heat radiates between us. Our lips touch and we have a brief and fairly awkward kiss. *That's it? This is what all the fuss is about?*

While the kiss is not phenomenal, the actual event is extremely significant.

I finally feel like I know who I am.

***

"Dad, I got a summer job!"

The first year in college has flown by so quickly. It is the last day of final exams week, and I feel so relieved. I'm pretty sure I got all A's this semester. I let my father know this as well, and he is pleased with all the good news.

He asks, "So are they going to let you go back to work at Pia's?"

I nervously look down at my desk and make squiggly marks in my notebook. "Um…no. I actually got a job on campus."

There is a slight pause in our conversation. I am not sure what to make of the silence. Is he disappointed?

He responds, "The dorms are open over the summer? How are you going to pay for housing?"

"Yes, the dorms are open over the summer. I will be working as an office assistant for our student housing office. If you work for any of the university offices, your housing is paid for in the summer."

"Ah. Well that's a good deal. Are your friends going to be around?"

When I had asked my friends on the floor if they planned to stay on campus over the summer, many of them looked at me with bewilderment. *Why would we do that?* Their expressions seemed to say.

"Yeah, a few," I respond.

I love living in a city so much. There is always something to do—even if it's something as simple as enjoying an espresso at the local Starbucks. The nearest Starbucks to my hometown has limited hours, and it takes 45 minutes to get there. Plus, I can be *me* here, embracing the warm summer nights and flocking to all the local gay clubs (well, the ones that only require you to be 18 to enter).

Shaking my head, I attempt to snap out of my private reveries of flashing lights, pulsating beats, and hard bodies. I need to give my father some sort of rationale for my decision, but this is difficult to do under the confines of a heterosexual mask.

I come up with something, a trivial offense in the form of a small, white lie. "I have been told by other students that the more time you invest in the housing office, the better chances you have of getting a resident advisor position. If I am a resident advisor, my housing is paid for all year round."

This seems to satisfy him. "Okay. That's fine. I'm proud of you son."

"Thanks, Dad."

"It's good that you are only 90 minutes away. You can come home on the weekends."

"Sure."

But as I utter the word my mind drifts again to more private reveries of male exotic dancers, drag queens, and dance floors.

* * *

I continue to work on campus every summer. The time I spend visiting home over breaks from school decreases with each year. The more secure I feel in my identity as a gay man the more distance I feel from family and friends in my hometown.

With no pictures on display, artifacts to hold onto, or conversations about her, my mother's presence continues to diminish from my life.

Grasping for Hopeful Signs

The day has finally come for my college graduation baccalaureate ceremony. I am not as excited about this ceremony as I am for commencement tomorrow. The four years have flown by, and I have already shed many tears and given goodbye hugs to my friends. A few of them have been offered jobs that will take them far away to other parts of the country—some in other parts of the world. I have been accepted into a graduate program in communication at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I am fully funded through a teaching assistantship and am very excited about the move. I try not to think about the summer I will have to spend at home before I leave. I will not be able to work on campus and receive free housing this summer because I will technically not be considered a student anymore.

The ceremony takes place in the college church. The university I have attended the last four years is a Catholic school. Every Sunday night, priests would hold mass for the college students. Dad would always joke and say they held it Sunday nights to give the students enough time to recover from their hangovers. My family was so proud of me when two years ago I finally decided to take classes and become a confirmed Catholic. The church is more than 100 years old, and like most Catholic churches, has beautiful stained glass windows. The priests do an exceptional job relating to students, giving homilies on contemporary and pertinent issues in society. A student choir and full band also provide music at every university church service. It's

the only Catholic service that I have been to where, aside from standing and kneeling, people actually clap and dance in the pews. The services here and the church community have really helped restore my faith in God after mom's death.

Unfortunately, I am only an audience member for today's ceremony. In my high school baccalaureate, I was given a singing solo. I remember how everyone raved over my rendition of Whitney Houston's "One Moment in Time." During college, my interests have changed somewhat. When my mother died, my love of singing publicly did as well. I instead devoted my time to student political groups and research endeavors. My father and stepmother were proud of my undergraduate thesis project I completed and presented at a recent undergraduate conference.

They continue to be proud of me. I look out from the rows of graduating students and find their beaming faces in the audience. Kelly, my stepmother, has been great for my father. Growing up, I did not know many peers who had stepparents. The only representations I had of them were the wicked stepmothers from the movies. However, I have never considered Kelly wicked at all, and I really like her a lot. She knew my mother and had actually gone to her a few times for haircuts.

Kelly and my father found love in the local grocery store. It had been a couple years since mom had died, and Kelly's father had died recently. My father approached her in the produce aisle and offered his condolences. After two failed attempts, Kelly finally accepted my father's third invitation for a first date. This led to several more dates, Kelly moving into my childhood home, and their marriage a year and a half later. My father seems much happier with her in his life, and while the blended family (she has four adult children) has resulted in some conflict, they continue to work through the problems.

The baccalaureate ceremony is pleasant. A few student representatives give statements on all our bright (or for some, hopefully bright) futures. The choir sings a few religious hymns; some scripture is read, and the president of the university gives a concluding address. He is a short, stout balding priest that is often criticized for his outspoken Napoleon like behaviors. The speech is religious but broad enough for students of many faiths and backgrounds to resonate with. He ends it by stating that we will all be sons and daughters of the university forever, and we all can make a difference in this broken world. By this point, I have already glanced at my watch four times and am ready to leave. The band starts playing exit music and as the choir sings, students slowly shuffle row by row out the church doors.

I find my parents outside at the bottom of the church's front steps. Dad reaches out, grabs me by the shoulder, and pulls me in for a bear hug. "Hey man! That sure was a nice ceremony! You ready for tomorrow?"

"Hell, yeah," I respond.

My stepmother, Kelly, stands and looks at us admiringly. "You have a lot to be proud of Blake. Think about where you want to eat tomorrow after commencement. It'll be our treat."

My stomach growls in anticipation as I think about going to one of my favorite restaurants in the city that serves giant cheeseburgers, greasy French fries, and root beer floats.

Dad's bright expression dims somewhat. "Your mom is proud of you too."

"I know…I know," I say quickly.

Unexpectedly, my father asks, "Did you feel that little ray of sunshine on you earlier?"

"What?"

"I was thinking about your mom and all of a sudden a ray of sunshine came through the stained glass windows and it was only shining on you and nobody else."

I roll my eyes and slightly pull away from his embrace. “Oh, come on Dad…”

He turns to my stepmother in exasperation. “I’m not kidding. Kelly, you saw it too! Tell him!”

Kelly nods to confirm Dad’s observation.

In order to not cause an argument and ruin these joyful moments, I just accept the possibility this could be communication from Mom. “That’s really neat, Dad,” I say, mustering some enthusiasm.

I continue to possess many masks and have become a pro at covering—covering my sexual orientation, covering my anger at God, covering my grief. But no matter how much I try, I know they can both see my skepticism about Dad’s hopeful observation.

Interlude One

My mother is crying.

She sheds tears of joy as she sits in front of the television set.

I am about 12 or 13 years old and at the developmental stage of what Piaget would call formal operational. My childhood obsessions with magic, witches, curses, and spells have lapsed.

Feeling slightly troubled, I hesitate in sharing my mother's enthusiasm for the television show she watches. It seems to be placing a spell of emotional reverie upon her. She sits clutching her hand to her chest. Her eyes are glazed over and misty.

My mother watches the television show Crossing Over With John Edward. Edward is a popular psychic medium from New York. Gathering large audiences together in his studio every week, he supposedly passes on messages from the dead. Once he has zoned in on a family in the audience, he starts asking them questions. He makes statements like, "Someone is coming through with an M name. It's a female. Maria? Marla? Marissa?"

There is then usually an excited recognition among the family members. Edward proceeds to tell them information that only those close to the family would know. Sometimes he can guess the name of the family dog. Or he knows a favorite meal of the deceased family member that is "coming through."

It's almost as if Edward is Jesus Christ among the duped audiences. I consider my mother one of his innocent victims, and I believe he is a fraud.

"It's fake, Mom."

As the ending credits float on the screen, my mother quickly shuts off the television. She turns to me in exasperation. "No it isn't! How could he have known that information?"

My body cringes defensively, and I squirm in my chair. Mom and I are pretty close so when there is any disagreement among us I feel really uncomfortable. "He probably has snoops get information about audience members before the show." I can't get myself to face my mother in this biting retort. My right index finger anxiously strokes the dog-eared pages of a paperback novel as I await her response.

"Do you not remember what happened with Grandpa Corky and the keys?"

I raise an eyebrow and shake my head slowly back and forth.

"Ha!" My mother's faces shines with excitement and she jabs her finger at me from across the room. "You want proof? Here's a story that will knock your socks off!"

Aside from being a highly respected hairdresser in our small town, my mother has also taken on the role of master storyteller and counselor for her clients. She is widely known for not only providing a great service to her patrons but also for her many entertaining talents.

"What story mom?" I ask begrudgingly.

"Your grandfather used to have a set of keys to his vending machine business. Even after he retired, he carried those keys around as a good luck charm. Well when the cancer was at its worst, you remember your grandfather was not very right in his mind. He would constantly yell about his missing keys. No one in our family could ever find them for him. We eventually forgot about them and then he went into the hospital. Well, it wasn't a day after he died, the family was gathered at his home. Your cousin Seth leaned back in his old recliner and bam! His keys fell out!"

I roll my eyes.

Ignoring my skepticism she continues, "He sat in that chair all of the time, but the keys just happened to fall out the day after he died. He was telling us that he's around and okay!"

"Alright, mom." My tone is slightly condescending.

My mother sighs. "I am very proud of you, but sometimes I think you are too smart for your own good. There are ways in which we can connect with those that have died. You'll understand one day."

Chapter Two: Starting to Re-member Mom[2]

An Afternoon at IKEA

Fall 2013: Tampa, Florida.

"Do you think a black or brown frame would be better for this picture?"

I watch closely as my friend Tasha places a family portrait up against each frame.

"You should definitely go with the black frame because it works best with the blue background you have in the pictures," I respond.

It is early on a Saturday morning, and I have agreed to go with Tash to IKEA to pick out picture frames for some of her recently taken family photos. We are also here to pick out furniture for our office we share at school. Tasha and I are both in the same PhD cohort in the communication department at the University of South Florida. We have spent a semester in classes together; we both share an office in the department. We spend a lot of time here discussing the hectic nature of graduate school life. From the moment I met her, I knew we were destined to be good friends.

Tasha is a couple years older than I, and she has been married to her husband Matthew for the last four years. I have become great friends with Matt, and I have continually told Tasha how I hope to be in a relationship as loving as theirs. Tasha is tall with light blond hair and green eyes, and she has a very bubbly personality—very much the optimist. We both share a love for

[2] Portions of this chapter have been previously published in *Qualitative Communication Research*, 2013, 2(2): 182-212, and have been reproduced with permission from University of California Press.

music, singing, and the theater. Tasha identifies as a cultural studies scholar but also an ethnographer. I would consider her one of my best friends here in Tampa.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "Because sometimes I feel like the brown frame helps make the photographs stand out more."

One thing that I really value about our friendship is that I can tell her pretty much anything. I have always felt this profound comfort with her, and she is like a sister to me. I think this feeling all started when we both learned we had a mutual loss—we both lost our mothers at a young age. I was 18, and Tasha was 25. I remember when we first discovered this and how much of an impact it had on our friendship.

I am fuming when I enter my office. I throw down books on my desk and plop down in my swivel chair. Tasha, at the desk next to mine, looks up from grading papers. Her eyes are wide with concern. "What's wrong BB?"

Tasha calls me BB, and I call her Mama TT or TT for short. I am not sure why we call each other these nicknames, but it does add one more element of fun to our friendship. I started calling Tasha "TT" before she called me "BB." Jokingly, I have asked her if "BB" stands for "Big Bitch" or "Bitchy Blake." She responded by stating that she just liked calling me BB for some reason.

I am not finding much of anything humorous right now. "One of my students just pissed me off."

Tasha sets her papers to the side. "What happened?"

I explain to Tasha that I had assigned Peggy MacIntosh's "White Male Privilege" article in my Interpersonal Communication course. As an instructor, I try to assign readings outside of the textbook to challenge my students a little. In MacIntosh's article, she makes a checklist of

issues she does not have to worry about because she is white. For instance, one of the items on the checklist states, "I am never asked to speak for all people in my racial group." She does this as a way for us to be able to question our privileges we have and be able to see forms of inequality in society. I also assigned this in Public Speaking when going over the chapter on audience analysis and have had successful results.

Today was not as successful. I had my students start thinking about other forms of privilege besides those associated with race. The discussion soon turned to sexual orientation. One student stated, "I think one of the most divisive topics in our country right now is around gay marriage. I mean, I feel like it's a freaking battle. I don't know why people are crazy about it? I don't mind if two dudes or two chicks get married. It's not going to affect my life at all!"

There was then a hearty debate about gay marriage, and I had to steer the conversation back to the article. Just when I thought things were wrapping up nicely, a student made a negative comment. "I just do not know what all the fuss about gay and lesbian rights is about. I mean it's not like those people are arrested and institutionalized like they used to be. If you're not going to follow God's plan, that's your issue. They have a Kindle commercial featuring a gay couple. I think things are fine."

This was also the same student who trivialized one of the in class presentation assignments I gave a few weeks ago as "adult show and tell." She is what I would refer to as a "constant challenger," a student who almost every class period complains about something or questions my credibility as the instructor. In the moment, I was so overcome with anger that it was hard for me to try to understand if she truly felt this was about gay and lesbian rights or if she was just trying to say something to test my limits.

I had taken a deep breath and explained to the student that while things have improved for the LGBTQ community, there is still much work to be done. In some states, members of this community can still get fired from their jobs and couples cannot get married. Young members are still being kicked out of their homes, and hate crimes still occur all over the world. In Tampa, a queer body might be somewhat safe, but these bodies are not always safe in other spaces. The student, in response, simply shrugged her shoulders and said, "Yeah. Okay. I guess you're right but I still think the media hypes the issue up more than it needs to be."

Not only did her response make me feel defeated and disrespected, but also I explain to Tasha this student happened to be white. "I just don't understand how we spend a whole class period discussing why it's important to question our privileges, and then this student makes a comment that blatantly ignores her privileges. Ugh!"

Tasha comes over and gives me a hug. "Oh, BB. You can't get to everybody. There might be more going on with her than you even realize that would make her say that comment. Maybe she'll get it eventually."

I am still fuming and shaking with anger under her warm embrace. "The Kindle commercial suddenly means all problems are solved. Are you kidding me? And then she has to bring in the comment about God's plan. I get so tired of this fundamentalist religious dogma. People try to use it against us."

Tasha sighs. "I bet it's tough trying to balance religion and sexuality. I learned a lot about this when I worked on a project during my master's program that discussed how gay men talk to family and friends about religion."

My interest is peaked. "Oh, really? I would love to read that paper sometime. I've struggled so much with my faith and being gay. I have a problem with organized religion, but I

believe that there is a higher power and an afterlife. I almost have to believe it because not believing in an afterlife would be too painful."

As much as fundamentalist religious dogma makes my skin crawl, the belief in an afterlife is comforting for me. I believe it makes me fear death less, but it also gives me hope that I will see my mother again. The alternative belief is that she will be nothing more than a rotting corpse in the ground and a dissipating memory.

Holding me at arms length, Tasha gives me a look of sympathy. "I know. Think about all the loved ones we've lost. I want to think about them being healthy and happy."

"I agree. I especially think about my mom."

"Your mom?"

"Yes. My mother died when I was 18 years old."

Tasha's mouth drops open. "Are you serious?" I am expecting for her to say something about being so sorry for my loss, but she surprises me when she says, "My mom died, too."

Taking Tasha back into my arms and squeezing her tight, I am saddened by our mutual loss but at the same time I am relieved. She knows what it is like to have one of the most important people in your life taken away from you. Tasha most likely shares the same sharp pangs of grief I experience with every life event, those moments where you think, "Damn, I wish she were here." Grief is like one big ocean that you constantly have to find ways to keep afloat in—in order to stay alive. No matter how much time has passed since the death. "When did she die, Tasha?"

"Two years ago."

"Do you mind me asking what happened?"

Tasha pours herself a cup of coffee and goes back to sit at her desk. She looks down for a moment at the mug and stirs the coffee slowly. "She died from sepsis, it's an infection in the bloodstream."

"Was it something she had struggled with for a while?"

Tales of death seem to pause the hurried, monotonous, everyday routines of life. I sit across from Tasha in my desk chair, face to face. There is a blended look of fear and determination in her eyes. I place my hand on her knee as a comforting but sturdy force, with the hope that she knows she can stop at any time. She begins her tale of loss. "No. She did not have any symptoms until the night before she died. She complained to my stepdad that she had the chills. That's it!"

"That is so strange."

Tasha continues, "I was 25 and had only been married to Matt for five months. We were living in Tennessee at the time. I was so unhappy. I lived too far away from my family in Minnesota, didn't have many friends, and hated my job."

It is difficult for me to envision this scenario, especially involving this cheerful and ambitious young woman I have grown to love so much.

She continues, "I remember getting up that day and going through my normal routine. I went to work, came home, ate dinner with Matt, and cleaned the house. Around 10 p.m., I was worn out from a long day and about to go to bed when my phone started to ring. I looked at the caller ID and saw that my sister, Danielle, was calling, and I remember thinking, weird, she never calls and even if she does call, it's never this late. I considered not answering, but something inside told me I should. When I picked up the phone, all I heard was incessant, uncontrollable sobbing on the other line."

I feel my body tense and my breath catch. I brace myself as if waiting for a swift slap to the face. "I knew right away something was wrong, so I said, 'Danielle, are you okay? What's going on?' All I could hear on the other line was her gasping for air. It sounded like she was dying, and then, all of a sudden, two words came pouring out of her mouth that I will never forget, 'Mom's dead!'"

Her words place me back in the hospital E.R. almost 10 years ago when the doctor came out of the operating room and told my family there was nothing more he could do. The messengers of death have no easy task. While they can foreshadow the potential harm their words might cause, they can never be completely aware of how much ruin they will leave behind.

Tasha starts to tear up. I grab a tissue from the Kleenex box on my desk and hand it to her. She dabs her eyes. "Man. I didn't realize this was going to be so hard."

"You don't have to talk about it anymore if you don't want to."

She shakes her head. "No, I want you to know. I think it's important that I talk about it because it kind of gets it out in the open and off my chest. I mean hearing those words ('Mom's Dead!') completely knocked the wind out of me. I felt like someone twice my size had punched me in the stomach. I dropped the phone and came crashing to my knees on the hardwood living room floor screaming 'No!' at the top of my lungs. Matt came running out of the office to ask me what was wrong. When I was finally able to tell him, he tried to comfort me, but I was so full of rage and denial that all I could do was push him away. I didn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. My mom was only 45 and completely healthy."

I feel my heart jump in my chest at our similarity. "My mom was 40 when she died. I mean no one likes to think about their parents dying, but it is something I always thought I'd have to worry about much later in life"

Tasha nods her head slowly while stirring her coffee. She looks up. "Death just doesn't seem plausible when they are that young."

She nods. "I am sure you were so concerned about Danielle on top of everything else that night."

"I eventually picked up the phone and tried to ask Danielle what had happened. I needed answers, but all she could tell me was that our younger brother, Sidney, had found Mom lying dead on her bed when he came home from school. That's all she knew. That's all anyone knew. Out of nowhere, my sister suddenly let out this blood-curdling scream. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, 'They just took mom's body out of the house on a stretcher. There's a white sheet covering her body, and she's being put in the ambulance right now. Oh my God. She's gone, Tasha. She's gone!'"

My mind races to the vision of the EMTs taking my mother out on a stretcher to the ambulance. I remember my anxious hope she would survive. Thinking back on this now, I believe I already knew at that moment she was gone.

Tasha takes a sigh. "That's when it hit. That's when I knew my mom was really dead. I told Danielle that I would get to Minnesota as soon as possible, and that's what I did. I needed to be there for my family. Matt and I arrived at my mom and stepfather's house at 11 the next morning after a restless night and long flight. I remember getting off the plane and slugging through the baggage claim when I spotted my sister—the first and only person in the world who knew how I felt. Oblivious of anyone or anything around us, Danielle and I grasped each other as if we would never let go and soaked our winter coats with stinging tears of pain. We cried openly, deeply, and loudly until we couldn't cry anymore. I remember people staring, but I really

didn't care. I will never forget that hug. When we finally regained composure, Danielle drove us the hour to my small hometown of Rockford."

I remember the power of hugs, especially when I fell in my Aunt Susie's arms the day after my mother's death. I kept fighting my feelings until I finally gave up. The intensity of the struggle I felt keeping them to myself made that embrace a sign of victory—a victorious defeat.

Tasha recounts the immediate aftermath of her mother's death. "The next few days our house was flooded with visitors who brought us comfort, food, memories, and gifts while my sister, grandmother, stepfather, and I worked together to plan my mom's wake and funeral. I remember hating the entire process, but I think the worst part was picking her casket. I remember being led down this white, spiral staircase to the dimly lit basement of a small funeral home where casket designs of varying colors and materials, complete with price tags, lined the walls. As I browsed through the selection, a burst of sadness came forth from the pit of my stomach, but I fought to hold back the tears. This is a business transaction, I thought. Compose yourself. But how can you place a price on death? How can 45 years of vivacious life be reduced to a box with a damn price tag? Do these prices signify what you really think my mom is worth? Clouded with these questions, I couldn't fight the urge to suppress the expanding grief within, so I silently let the tears stream down my cheeks as my family and I searched for a box to fit her remains. We chose a pink one—her favorite color."

*I respond, "Oh**,** God, I was so sheltered in this process! My family took care of all the funeral arrangements. I can't imagine having to pick out a casket for my mother! How can you do all the tedious preparations of death? Why aren't we just allowed to grieve? Why must we, as with too many parts of life, fill this process with strategy? Weighing the pros and cons. Calculating the costs. Choosing the right shade of pink. When all you want to do is just grieve."*

Tasha slams her hand down against the table. "I know! It freaking sucks!"

"I dread the day that I have to do all that shit for other family members. It really can be an exploitation of the bereaved."

She lets out a soft laugh and dabs her eyes with the tissue. "Alright, Blake. I thought I was the critical scholar here."

"Hey, just because I study relationships doesn't mean I don't have a critical bone in my body," I joke. "But you're right, sorry didn't mean to detract."

Tasha pauses to blow her nose. "It's okay. We had her visitation two days after her death. I was in awe at the hundreds of people who were lined up inside and outside the funeral home to offer their condolences. At that moment, it dawned on me just how many lives my mom touched. After hugging several people who knew my life story—when I could barely recall their names—I was repeatedly reminded how much she loved and talked about her children."

I respond, "And doesn't it feel great to see all of those people supporting you and your family? The priest who performed my mother's funeral services said in all of his 30 years of priesthood he had never seen such a crowd. Tasha, people were lined up from the church doors almost a whole mile down the street!"

Tasha smiles. "Wow, that is so wonderful Blake. Yes, it felt great knowing so many people loved and respected my mother. I am sure many who came that night were hoping to see her beautiful face for one last time, but I demanded we have a closed casket. The last time I saw my mom was alive and healthy, and that was the way I wanted myself, and others, to remember her. That is the way she would want to be remembered."

This is one moment of difference in our experiences of mutual loss. I found great comfort in seeing my mother in the casket. After struggling with the debilitating symptoms of her disease,

seeing her body gave me a sense of relief. It looked like she was sleeping, no longer in pain, and at peace. I consider telling Tasha this observation, but I refrain from doing so. Everyone deals with grief differently, and it is not like she can do anything about the decision now. Perhaps, seeing her mother in a casket would have been traumatizing and made her feel worse.

"My mother's funeral service happened the next day, and the church pews were so packed that some people had to stand. Whenever I think back to her service, I have one distinct memory: how strange I felt walking down the long aisle between rows of pews filled with people she loved. I remember keeping my head down as I made my way to my seat in the front. I didn't want to see the pain on people's faces because I feared it would release the pain I held so deeply inside, and I would lose control. All I could think to myself was—the last time I walked down a church aisle was with my mother, arm in arm, toward my new spouse. But now, five months later, I am walking alone, toward her casket. That was one of the hardest moments I have ever experienced."

Listening to Tasha, my heart sinks when I think about all the things my mother will miss including my graduation and potential marriage to the man I have yet to meet. I know that I have my Catholic upbringing to help remind me that her spirit will still be there. But it's just not the same.

Trying to shake away the feeling of self-pity, I give Tasha a long embrace and a kiss on the forehead. "I know it's only been two years since your mom died, but I promise it gets better. Believe me. It really does. My mom has been gone eight years now, and time has helped to heal a lot of wounds. Thank you so much for sharing your story. It means so much to me to know that I have someone to relate to, someone I can grieve with."

She smiles. "Thanks, Blake. You know, I have never been able to talk with other friends about my mom the way I can talk about her with you. It means so much to have a friend who understands how I feel. So what about your mom? What happened?"

It is the first time that I have ever openly narrated the event, including every minute detail. When I begin my story, I am timid as though I am sticking my toe in a cold pond and testing the temperature of the water. Once I get going though, I find the temperature is just right and I feel a warm, sweet comforting release in our experience of shared mutual loss.

"I am getting hungry," Tasha says. Her statement snaps me out of my reveries from that important day and back into IKEA. "The Swedish meatballs here are to die for. Do you want to get lunch?"

Feeling my stomach rumble, I decide that lunch is a good idea. We stand in the long, winding buffet line patiently waiting for the Swedish meatballs. Judging from the large crowd around that particular station, I assume Tasha is correct in her assessment of the entrée's deliciousness. We grab a small table in the corner of the cafeteria away from the pandemonium of the Saturday morning shopping crowd.

Our conversation circles around the normal topics of graduate school. For example, we talk about the seemingly impossible ability to make several major life decisions such as choosing an advisor, forming a committee, deciding a dissertation topic, making our plans of study, running for an office on our department's graduate student organization, all while trying to submit papers to conferences, finish course assignments, grade student papers, teach classes, and for some, sustain a marriage and a family. But if you ask many of us why we put up with the pressure, it all comes down to one answer.

We love the work. It's our calling, and we could not imagine doing anything else.

There is a brief lull in our conversation, and I take the time to silently savor the warm, thick sweet gravy of the Swedish meatballs. Tasha was definitely right about these delicacies.

Tasha looks deep in thought and her bright smile from preceding moments seems to slowly fade into a façade of stony sadness. She looks up at me, her eyes searching for permission from me to disclose something private and possibly unpleasant.

"What is it? Did I say something wrong?"

Looking down, she shakes her head and stirs her after lunch coffee. "No. It's just that today is the three year anniversary of my mother's death."

My hand quickly connects on top of hers. My chest tightens, there's a sharp inhalation of breath through my nose, and then slowly out the mouth. This feeling is all too eerily familiar for me. I wonder if there are theories about the anniversary of a loved one's death. Even if you forget the exact date, can your body physiologically react and be reminded of your sadness? How is one supposed to act on this day? Would our loved ones want us to be sad, try to forget about it, or celebrate the lives they lived? How can you celebrate the glimmer of life when the remnants from the trauma of death are so dark and dreary?

"I am sorry." Those three words never seem to be enough.

"It's okay. I just keep replaying when I got that phone call from Danielle in my head." She shivers. "Do these days ever get better?"

"Yes. There have been a couple years the anniversary wasn't apparent until a day or two later. I don't usually do anything to memorialize Mom on the day of her death. It is really more something that's just mentioned to family and friends in passing."

"I already talked on the phone to my stepfather today."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah. I guess good as can be expected. Before I came to meet you today, I spent the whole morning going through photographs of her on Facebook."

"It is nice that you have that. Facebook was not really around when Mom died."

"Don't you have any pictures from home?"

"No." I feel somewhat ashamed of this.

"Oh."

There is an awkward silence. I feel like I have moved on from my mother's death and do not need any pictures of her. It feels odd to me to have pictures of my mother sitting around my apartment in Tampa when she's dead. I respect Tasha's healing process though. "Maybe I'll bring some back after the next time I visit home," I offer.

She nods. "That might be good. You know, I keep thinking I'll see a butterfly today or something."

"Butterfly?"

"Yes, have I never told you about Mom's obsession with butterflies?"

"No!"

"My mother loved butterflies. Ever since she's died when I think about her it always seems like a butterfly shows up. I guess it's a little too cool right now for them to come out, even for Florida."

"I guess. You know, that kind of reminds me of my mother and snow. My mom loved snow globes and it snowed a ton the night before her funeral. Of course, there aren't many of these reminders here in the tropical state of Florida!"

Tasha pats my hand. "Aw. I guess you can appreciate snow more when you can go home and experience it."

"That's for sure. Snow and butterflies. We sure do have some interesting conversation topics! It's nice to take a break from talking about things like hegemony and postmodernism."

Tasha laughs. "But I feel completely comfortable talking about this stuff with you!"

"So do I! Do you think we'd be this open with each other had we not both lost a mother?"

"I think we would be close friends no matter what. But you have to admit that having this shared loss has done something to our friendship."

"It has, but in what way? How has our friendship impacted our healing processes?"

"BB!" Tasha slaps her hand down on the table. "I feel a research project coming."

"For sure!"

"Maybe we should do something around this topic for our final project in the grief and loss seminar!"

We are currently taking a graduate seminar called Communicating Grief, Loss, and Illness with Dr. Carolyn Ellis. For our final project, we each have to either write about our own experiences with grief, loss, or illness or interview someone close to us about these experiences. I am excited but also hesitant to do this sort of project. Am I really ready to revisit my mother's death? The desire to move on and find closure seems to hold me back from completing this work. Shaking my fears aside, I respond, "We definitely should write this paper."

Tasha gives a big cheesy grin. "I bet we're on to something."

"Here's to our project." We raise and clink our glasses of diet soda.

"Cheers, BB!"

"Cheers, TT!"

Time for Academic Tears: Trudging Through the Literature on Complicated Grief

This missing link has to be here.

In the middle of my bedroom floor, I drown in a sea of books and articles. Tasha and I have been trying to formulate the literature review for our project in the grief and loss seminar. We have reviewed articles on many topics: basic models of bereavement, children grieving the loss of a parent, friendship and social support after a loved one's death, the role of shared reminiscing among the bereaved, the effects of bereavement support groups for those who share a similar loss. Little multi colored tabs bookmark certain sections in the books. Some of them are half opened and face down. Others are in several tall stacks threatening to crumble into one messy heap. I pick up an article titled "The Incidence and Course of Depression in Bereaved Youth 21 Months After the Loss of a Parent to Suicide, Accident, or Sudden Natural Death." There might be something here. This version is from the National Institutes of Health, and it was originally published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. I read a section of the results section in the provided abstract:

> Bereavement and a past history of depression increased depression risk in the 9 months following the death, which increased depression risk between 9 and 21 months. Losing a mother, blaming others, low self-esteem, negative coping, and complicated grief were associated with depression in the second year. (Brent, Melhem, Donohoe, & Walker, 2009, p. 786)

A slight chill goes up the back of my neck as I underline in red pen the phrase "losing a mother." I guess I'm lucky I was never diagnosed with depression or became addicted to alcohol or drugs. This article is not going to help me because it only relates to bereavement up to two years after a death.

Another article beckons from a nearby stack "Time Does Not Heal All Wounds: Mortality Following the Death of a Parent." *Oh lovely. How death leads to even more death.* I

highlight a line that reads, “A mother’s death tended to have a stronger influence than a father’s death, unnatural parental deaths had a stronger effect than natural ones, and male offspring were more vulnerable than female offspring” (Rostila & Saarela, 2011, p. 236). I am glad that these statistics do not relate to my experience and that I have never considered ending my life.

These articles are important but they are not uplifting nor do I really feel as if they hold the key to our project.

Go to Carolyn’s book chapter, a voice commands.

I must be losing it. Often, I will joke with my students about hearing voices whenever a few are being rude and talking while I am trying to teach class. Some may find this method of reprimanding passive aggressive, but it usually works. Ignoring my doubts about my own sanity, I pick up Carolyn’s book chapter, “Seeking My Brother’s Voice: Holding onto Long-Term Grief through Photographs, Stories, and Reflections.” It is an autoethnography in which Carolyn revisits an earlier article about the death of her younger brother Rex, who died in a plane crash on the way to visiting her. In this most recent work, she tries to figure out what it means to grieve the loss more than 30 years after it occurred. This chapter will be in an upcoming anthology on stories of complicated grief, and it is a reading assignment for her grief course. I have been a huge fan of Carolyn’s for some time, even before reading this chapter and entering the doctoral program at USF.

She was the voice of autoethnography, and when she called, I came running to meet her.

Autoethnography was a completely foreign idea to me in my undergraduate communication program. I had learned about ethnography in my research methods course, but I was not aware of the exciting possibility of blending academic theories with personal narrative. When I applied to the University of South Florida’s graduate communication program, I

reviewed the department website. Most people applying to graduate programs have already learned about particular faculty members they wish to work with. My process was a little different.

I remember seeing Carolyn for the first time on her profile and feeling an instant connection to her work. Plus, being an avid animal lover, I loved that she was the only faculty member who was pictured with one of her dogs. Under her picture were listed general academic interests: qualitative methods (*Plus! I can't deal with numbers.*), emotions (*Nice. I loved when we talked about emotions in my social psychology class*), holocaust studies (*Wow. Tough stuff. But very important*), and autobiography (*I mean, wait, ethnography…no…*). My eyes had scanned the word again. *Aha! Autoethnography. Interesting…*

From that point forward, I read every piece of Carolyn's work I could get my hands on. The piece that spoke to me the most was her article "There Are Survivors: Telling a Story of Sudden Death." The opening line read, "I grew up in a small town of three thousand people located in the foothills of Virginia, that same place my parents were born and raised," (Ellis, 1993, p. 711), and the warm embrace of narrative resonance was already deeply felt. It was almost as if Carolyn was sitting across from me on the sofa in my family living room as I sat in the same chair that my mother sat in enduring pain for months. I did not feel alone in my experience of sudden death, and through the experiencing of her experience (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) I came to more fully appreciate my relationship with my younger brother.

Carolyn did not shy away from recounting the harsh details of that dark period in her life. While she was an assistant professor in the USF Sociology department, her younger brother Rex was killed in a plane crash on the way to visit her. I kept imagining myself in her position, in a situation that could have very well happened to me. My younger brother has visited me while

I've been a graduate teaching assistant. I would be completely devastated if he had died in a crash. Maybe I would feel some guilt—that there might have been something I could have done to prevent him from getting on the plane. I remember cringing and viscerally experiencing the desperate yearning for hope that Rex would be okay. Carolyn described watching people being rescued from the water where the plane went down. I too felt compelled to scream with her, "Rex, pop out of the fucking water!"

While not having lost a brother, I have experienced the sharp gauging, knifelike pain of sudden death when my mother died. I too remember observing the many different ways my family members grieved and how I felt like I had to take care of everyone. With so many resonances in her story and observed commonalities in our lives, it was through this experiencing of an experience that I came to realize the power of autoethnography. I came to realize that I wanted to meet this woman. I wanted to open up my heart and tell her that I feel so much of her grief even though I'm not sure how to express it. I want to thank her for helping me and allowing me to realize that there are people who have been through the dark trenches of trauma and have made it out alive. And now, after being well into the first year of my PhD program, I know that I want her to guide me as a scholar. To show me even further what it means to empathize and relate compassionately with others. To celebrate the ethnographic life.

To be my mother mentor.

I will ask her to work with me, but for now, this project is my main focus. I begin reading her most recent piece for the second time. After only reading a few pages there are several quotes that catch my eye:

> Stories about long-term grief are rare. My hope is that this story shows how grief can change over time and that it opens a conversation about the different ways the process of grieving might be experienced over a lifetime (Ellis, 2013, p. 4).

I do believe that there are many times I have felt disappointment when my mother could not be a part of major events in my life: my high school and college graduations, confirmation at church, academic paper presentations. But I do not usually cry or break down. Does that mean I'm not still grieving? I think Carolyn makes a good point that there are not enough studies on long term grief. Maybe because the idea of long-term grief is threatening to us—to the supposed tough American prototype many individuals are taught they must embody in times of sorrow. We all need to pick ourselves up by the bootstraps and move on… Right?

She continues:

> I suggest for many it can be healthy to hold on to grief as a way to maintain a relationship with a person who has died. Why should it be necessary to demand that those coping with the loss of a loved one's physical presence also detach from their feelings of love and need for the deceased? (p. 5)

At first, I am struck by the comment about it being healthy to hold on to grief. Isn't this kind of like telling someone it's okay to continue pressing your hand on the top of a hot stove? Even if you did tell someone it was okay to hold onto grief, would they even know what you were telling them? Then, I think about times where I have watched a movie or read a novel where there was an emotional ending and how shedding my tears could almost be compared to savoring pieces of dark chocolate. There is often a feeling of catharsis when I cry in those moments, and of course, there is the concept of having a good cry—but are these moments

different somehow. Less threatening? For whom or what? I leave the questions swirling in the air like a menacing fog and read on:

> The complex emotions attached to my brother become part of my self and deepen my experience of living. The stories I tell keep him alive in my memory. When others read my stories, my brother becomes someone readers and I have in common—he becomes a part of what they and I share. Thus, I do not experience my grief as pathological or unresolved, or something I desire to get rid of. (p. 5)

I underline "The stories I tell keep him alive in my memory." This definitely highlights Carolyn, my, and many in our department's belief in communication as a process of social construction. Semester after semester, I stress to my students the power of communication and how it socially constructs reality. The traditional transmission model, where there is a sender, message, receiver, and feedback, misguides many students. This model is not necessarily bad, but it is not as reflective of our communication in everyday life—"real world" situations. We often think of communication happening *in* relationships, but a social constructionist view shows us that relationships happen *in* communication. A relationship with a deceased family member is at the center of a discursive struggle: discourses from psychiatry, discourses from religion, discourses from individual family, and discourses of a community all conflict, pressuring an individual to choose between connecting or not connecting with the dead's presence. And as I finish Carolyn's text, this discursive struggle becomes more apparent as she recounts some family members encouraging her re-membering of Rex and others resisting it.

When I am finished reading, I sit in silence for a few moments. Often after finishing a really engaging piece, I like to let it wash over me. It reminds me of when I used to be in high school choir and the director would end a musical number—the harmonies from the multiple

voices seemed to create a cool mystical blanket that lightly fell over us, resulting in multiple goose bumps of delight. *There is definitely something here…the missing link…but what is it?*

I go back to page five and read the quote I highlighted again. Taking the enclosed end of my pen, I slowly move it over the page in circles. It's as if I am attempting a magic trick. *Bippity Boppity Boo.*

Then it hits me.

I excitedly clutch the chapter to my chest. *Wait! That's it!* This is the missing link to Tasha's and my project. We are both helping each other continue relationships with and re-member our deceased mothers. Just as Ellis tells stories about her brother to keep his memory alive, we tell stories to each other to keep our memories of our mothers alive as well. Neither Tasha nor I ever met each other's mothers so when we tell stories about them it is a much more active and challenging process of reconstructing their presence. More so than it would be recounting a memory with a friend or family member who knew them. By having a shared experience of loss with someone, you have the opportunity to enhance the bond with the deceased and re-membering rituals. There is a possibility that this strengthens the intimacy and quality of the friendship. Wow! I cannot wait to call Tasha and share the news about finding our gap in the literature.

Before I do that, there is something that I must do.

I pull out an old shoebox from underneath the foot of my bed. The box is brown and tattered, with pieces of material flaking off at the corners. The power of its contents radiate on my fingertips. My hands are shaking…from what? Anxiety? Fear? Excitement? Maybe I feel all of these emotions. Joy like I feel every Christmas morning surges through me when I pull off the top, but I already know what gifts are inside. Carefully, I place each of the box's treasures on the

bed. They are all pictures that include my mother: The one from our last family vacation together in Clearwater where she is laughing, dancing on the beach with a sassy finger pointed at the photographer. There is one of her in a glowing pink floral dress slow dancing with an elderly gentleman. I turn it over and in handwriting I cannot recognize is says, "February 14, 2003, Amanda's wedding." Amanda is a cousin on my father's side of the family. There's a picture of my mother, father, Grandpa Lindell, brother, and I. Kyle looks to be about six or seven and that would make me around 10 or 11. Grandpa looks very thin, and this must have been in the final year of his illness from esophageal cancer. We are wearing dressy clothes and posing in front of some sort of bulletin board. I assume this is at a church event. There are two photos with just Mom and me. One is from my junior prom, and she is helping me fix the tie on my tuxedo. The other is a picture of us in front of the Fabulous Fox Theater in St. Louis, MO.

This is one of my fondest memories of spending time with Mom. She knew of my great love for the theater. After months of pestering her, she surprised me with tickets to a performance of *West Side Story* for my 12th birthday. It was the first time either of us had ever been to the theater, and coming from our small town, this was a rare and extravagant event for both of us. I had just as much joy watching my mother enjoy the performances as I did the show itself. The faint hint of the two star crossed lovers', Tony and Maria, singing fills my bedroom, "Tonight…tonight…the world is full of light. With suns and moons all over the place…"

This final memory brings a smile to my face and a single tear falls freely down my cheek. I reach up and touch it. Instead of wiping it away, I let my fingers feel the dampness of grief I have denied for so long. And in this moment, I also feel Mom's resurrection—not so much a resurrection in the sense of bringing her back to physical life but a resurrection of her presence and memory. I also feel resurrected from a deep and long neglect of our relationship.

Re-membering Rex: Continuing Bonds in the Classroom

It is the last week of the grief and loss seminar. Tasha and I have successfully finished our project and have received rave reviews from Carolyn and our fellow peers. Today I am leading discussion on the course readings about continuing bonds with the deceased. There is so much that I want to express to Carolyn about her most recent book chapter that I have decided to begin my presentation with a letter to her.

My heart pounding out of my chest, I read aloud to her and the class:

Dear Carolyn,

I am writing this letter not just as a way to respond to your piece, but also as a way to say thank you. I think I can speak for the entire class and say that you have been so wonderful during this journey. You've allowed us to openly speak and write about what matters to us—what we really care about. You've been with us every step of the way—providing kind words of encouragement. We've become better students, teachers, writers, and human beings because of this course. We've learned what it means to grieve well—to value loss in order to value life and live again. By openly sharing your stories of love, loss, and life, you let us know that we are not alone. We have created a type of community in this course that transcends all other classroom experiences. You can't say that many classes help you live better, but I can confidently say that this one does. So thank you again for everything that you do—for everyone in this class, and also the many people outside of this classroom that you touch with your scholarship, mentoring, and compassion.

In "Seeking My Brother's Voice," you show us the power of holding onto grief. When you are going through Rex's photographs, and telling stories from his life, the stories do become the experience. I am there in every memory. From watching you lean over him with your spit

wad, to getting drunk on Moonshine, to spending time in the gay bar, I am with you and Rex. I am watching this beautiful relationship between siblings develop in the past and continue now in the present. I feel like I have stepped away from this article knowing Rex even though I never met him. I find myself reminiscing about my own past with my brother in small town America. I've taken him to a gay bar, too. It also makes me cherish the relationship I have with him even more. When revisiting, "There are Survivors," I kept putting myself in your position. What if my brother's plane crashed on the way to visiting me? It would be devastating. So by reading your story, this helps me not only learn how to hold onto grief but also to continue to hold onto the relationship I have with my brother.

I'm also brought back to my mother's death and the memories of grieving in small town life. I don't give my hometown enough credit, but by reading your experience, I have come to realize the benefits of this type of community. Everyone may know each other and get in one another's business, but in times of crisis you have a wonderful rock of support. After reading your piece, I also realize that I can continue a relationship with my mother and help others in my life hold onto their grief. I know I've told you this already, but since this class, I have started keeping photos of my mother on my bedroom mirror. I speak to my mother. I tell others about her life and death, and just like when you speak about Rex and tell his story; I am inviting others to get to know her. For so long, I tried to "move on" and I forgot her. But she's back in my life. Thank you for bringing her back.

Slowly looking up from the letter, I am not sure what to expect. Will my fellow peers take this letter seriously or will they think I am sucking up to the instructor? It is difficult to balance the line between an expression of intense gratitude and lukewarm appreciation. I tend to

wear my heart on my sleeve, and I often have with my favorite teachers. My expressed gratitude was sometimes so strong my Mom and Dad would tease me about being a "brown noser."

A few of my peers smile back at me. A couple of them look down doodling in their notebooks or hiding behind a laptop computer screen. One is even dabbing tears from her eyes with a tissue. It looks like I have at least emotionally touched one of the students. Tasha is sitting next to me and she gives my shoulder a reassuring massage. "That was great," she whispers.

Carolyn beams from across the conference room table. Three pictures of her brother Rex sit framed in front of her. I imagine she will use these for the discussion today. "That was just wonderful! I can tell there's recently been a difference in you from when we first met. I slowly feel your mother's presence coming back to you. You're truly glowing!"

"I have you to thank," I say. My throat feels a little constricted from nerves.

Carolyn responds, "Well, thank you for giving such a fantastic response." She reaches down and pulls a few items out of a nearby bag. "While we discuss the reading, I thought I would send some pictures of Rex around."

We pass around the pictures carefully, symbolic of how precious and fragile the presence of the deceased can be. There must be great care taken in re-membering processes, and it takes an active, conscious effort among the living for them to continue.

After several minutes of a hearty discussion, Carolyn makes a surprising announcement. "I am debating about whether I should end the chapter in this way." In the current ending, Carolyn is reflecting on Rex's death at the 30-year anniversary mark. She sends out an email to her siblings stating, "Thinking of our dear brother today. Love, Carolyn." Her partner Art asks her if she is focusing on the anniversary. She responds that she is but thinking more about their wedding anniversary that is the next day. Art tells her not to plan anything because he has a

surprise planned for her. I believe the ending is symbolic of showing that while it is important to re-member and continue a bond with the deceased, we also can learn how to carry them with us, and allow their presence to aid us in fully engaging in present moments of life.

Carolyn passes around sheets of paper. "This is another ending I have considered. I want you to read this to yourself and then I'd like to hear your interpretation of it."

I read the possible new ending. It takes place about a month after the 30-year anniversary of Rex's death. Carolyn wakes up from a dream in which she is in her old childhood home. A woman she does not know comes through the front door and tells her that Rex has taken a sick friend to the hospital. Carolyn stays up and waits for her his return worried they will not be as close as they once were. When Rex returns, she approaches him with open arms but he stretches out a hand and tells her not to hug her because he is too sweaty. As Carolyn wakes up, Rex slowly slips away.

Earlier in the piece, Carolyn had mentioned that Rex liked to have a good time and once after getting drunk at a party on Moonshine he asked her if she would dance with him. She declined because he was too sweaty. One student in the class wonders if this dream represents any regrets Carolyn might have specific to this event. Another asks if maybe the unknown woman is symbolic of other people who are resistant to the idea of a relationship after death.

"There is something interesting about 'the sweat' not just because you had mentioned that story earlier in this piece, but there's something about physicality," I state. "I think one of the obstacles for those of us who believe in continuing bonds with the deceased is that people don't think a relationship can exist because the person is not physically there. Some people I have explained these ideas to think that in order for a relationship to occur there has to be some

sort of back and forth interaction. Without that physical presence, for some people, you cannot prove a response from the deceased, and therefore, a relationship cannot occur."

Some of the students nod as if they understand.

One responds, "I think you're right about the 'sweat' being symbolic of some underlying message."

I add, "Maybe it is representative of your subconscious recognition of these various challenges in your relationship and managing the tensions between presence and absence and the physical and the spiritual. I'd say go with this ending. It definitely leaves people wondering and would push conversation further."

There are affirmative utterances around the conference table.

Carolyn makes a playful cheer with her fists. "Alright! Okay, good. I'll put the dream scene at the end before I send this to the publisher. Thank you all for your input. Okay, so is there anything else anyone would like to add?"

Tasha raises her hand. "I just want to say also how thankful I am for your chapter and my project with Blake and this class. It is really important to be able to talk about our losses openly and with other people. The communal aspect of continuing a bond with the deceased and re-membering is so important. And, I've talked to Blake about this…" Her voice starts to break. "But, our research has brought my mother back to me. I can hear her voice. And her laugh. I can *smell* her again. It's just so awesome—the ways that our research in this department can change people's lives."

I give her a big bear hug. "You are so right, TT!"

"Wonderful class! You guys are just the best!" Carolyn proclaims.

As we pack up our bags, I glance one more time at the photograph of Rex. He smiles back at me, and I can see Carolyn in him. I never met her brother in person but through engaging in her autoethnographic work, it is almost as if I have formed some connection with him.

I walk to my car and continue to think about Carolyn's story and feel Rex's presence. When I get inside my car, I pull out my cell phone and make a call.

"Hey, bro. I was just thinking about you and wanted to say hello."

Continuing bonds with the deceased, even those individuals we have never met, can ignite and strengthen the bonds of the living.

* * *

I ask Carolyn to be my mother mentor.

She accepts the request with great enthusiasm.

And together, through our conversations and academic scholarship, we both hold on to our grief and the dead family members we thought we'd once lost.

Introducing Psychic Medium Marguerite: My Exploration of the Supernatural

"Whenever you hear me pause and say several 'Okay's,' this is just my way of validating to the spirits that I am hearing what they are saying or seeing what they are showing me."

I never thought I would ever pay money to receive a reading from a psychic medium. But after the insistence of several friends, I have decided to spend my Saturday afternoon off from school at a little boutique in St. Petersburg, Florida.

The psychic, Marguerite (last name unknown), is not quite what I expected. I'm used to the stereotypical representations of fortunetellers in movies: women wearing bright colorful headscarves, dangling gold hoop earrings and bracelets, flashy gowns, and a glowing crystal ball. Marguerite is far from this description. She looks to be about in her mid 40's, a petite woman

with short brown hair. Wearing jeans, sandals, and a light green T-shirt, she appears rather casual for a session of potential connections with the dead. Her office is located in a former home along the water in St. Pete Beach. The cost is $125 (cash only) for a reading that can last anywhere from 45-90 minutes. When I scheduled the appointment over the phone, I was only asked to give my first name and a telephone number. I am hoping this will be worth the time and money, and Marguerite is not a fraud. My academic side is causing me to have great skepticism.

I sit at Marguerite's kitchen table tightly grasping a cup of coffee. The warmth of the cup warms my cool, shaking hands, and I slowly inhale the scent of the flavored Hazelnut blend. Marguerite explains to me how the session will work. "There might be people that you expect to come through. They may or may not decide to be here. You may be surprised at some of the spirits who do pay a visit. The spirits basically guide the session. They will show me things and allow me to feel things and as I said I will respond to them with an 'Okay.' I request that you let them guide the questions, and they may have me ask you about several things such as significant numbers or upcoming or past events. Over the years, spirits have shown me various common images that represent certain ideas. For instance, when they show me the snapping of fingers this means the person died quickly."

I nod my head to signal that I understand.

She continues, "So, I will be receiving all of this information, and together we can try to interpret what they are trying to say. If something doesn't make sense, I tell clients to write it down in the 'revisiting column.' Often times, a detail may not make sense during a reading but when clients go back to it later on they remember something about the deceased that allows that detail to make sense. Now do you have any questions before we begin?"

"No." *Let's get this show on the road*.

Marguerite sits upright in her chair, places both hands on the table, and stiffens her torso. She does not close her eyes, but she looks up as if she trying to find something in the back of her skull. “Okay. There’s a grandfather energy stepping forward. It doesn’t have to necessarily be your grandfather, but it could have been an elderly male that could have been like a grandfather to you. Does this make sense?”

“Yes.” Grandfathers on both sides of my family have died.

Placing her hand on her throat, Marguerite continues, “I feel a constriction of the throat. This could mean that he could have choked, there was a hanging, or he had some type of throat or stomach cancer? Did he have a tube placed somewhere in his body?”

My grandfather Lindell Paxton died from esophagus cancer. In the final week of his life, he was in the hospital and had drainage around his lung, a pleural effusion. This led to difficulty breathing, and his doctor placed a breathing tube in his chest.

I affirm Marguerite’s question with a nod. The skeptical side of me is trying to not be too enthusiastic. With every question she asks, I feel a tension between hope and cynicism. I visualize two clones of myself, each version representing opposing feelings. When Marguerite asks a question that resonates with my experience, the hopeful self wants to jump up triumphantly while the cynical self holds it down.

Marguerite seems to sense my anxiety. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, this is just strange…but in a good way.”

She laughs. “How do you think I feel with all these dead people talking to me?” She braces the table and looks up again. “Yes. Okay. Okay.” As she stated earlier, these types of responses signal that she is receiving information from the spirits.

"This man says that you are often misunderstood in your family. Would this be a fair assessment?"

Uh, yeah. My first gut reaction is to believe family members misunderstand me because of my sexual orientation, but my "grandfather" could also mean my choice of a profession. My father always tells me he cannot wait until I'm done with my doctorate so I can send him a check every month. I try to explain to him that even though I am going to school this long, I will not make a huge salary (and, I am not even going to think about the amount of student loans I have racked up). I have an uncle who, no matter how much I explain my profession, still thinks I'm a psychologist. I was one of a few family members that decided to leave my hometown, and my Uncle Harry is the only family member who pursued education beyond the bachelor's degree. There could be many reasons I'm misunderstood.

Marguerite continues, "Well, he wants me to tell you that he is very proud of you and not to worry about what people think. Just keep doing what you're doing."

This does sound a lot like my Grandpa Lindell. He would come over to our house to visit many nights during the week, to the point where my mother thought it was a little too much. In grade school, Grandpa Lindell would always invite me out to dinner on Friday nights at a local restaurant with an all you can eat fried chicken buffet. "You eat what you want," he would say after we both had already finished two heaping plates full of southern home style cooking. My stomach growls upon the memories of those meals full of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, cornbread, and peach cobbler smothered in ice cream for dessert. After these dinners, I would then spend the night at his house. The next morning Grandpa would bring back two sacks full of assorted donuts, one for him and one for me. I would eat the whole bag. I'm surprised that Marguerite has not mentioned the nicknames he used to call me, "Bull Frog Jack"

and “Jack Rabbit.” I am not sure where these nicknames came from, but he called me by them until the day he died.

Maybe all this information is too specific. I’m expecting too much.

Marguerite’s next question snaps me back to attention. “Now, has your father died?”

I feel my eyebrows furrow together in concern. “No.” *Oh, great. Here comes the wrong information.* I automatically want to start accusing her of being a fraud.

“Hmm. Well he keeps talking about his son being with him. So I don’t know if your father had a brother that passed?’

Confused from this new inquiry, I am about to give up faith in the reality of her abilities when it hits me. My Grandpa Lindell was married to another woman before my grandmother, and he had three sons with her. My father was never close with his half brothers, and I only interacted with them a handful of times in my life. I feel a chill go up my spine when I realize that one of them died from pancreatic cancer a little over two years ago.

After explaining this to Marguerite, she says, “It is interesting because sometimes they bring forward information we are not expecting. Now, did your grandfather smoke? Because I smell this very strong scent of cigar smoke.”

For some reason, I begin to smell cigar smoke too. It is interesting how there are just certain smells you can always remember, especially like the unpleasant staunch of cigars. “Well, the grandfather I thought you were speaking of did not smoke, but my other deceased grandfather smoked cigars for years.”

“There is a possibility that spirits can come through together at the same time—this is called piggybacking. He also keeps going on about how he is proud of you. Okay, okay.” She

stops and giggles. “Now…I don’t want to be offensive but I just want to state this like he is saying it. Are you somewhat of a geek?”

I laugh out loud. This sounds like something snarky my Grandpa Corky would have said. This was the same grandfather that lovingly called me the “Big Man on Campus.” This was the man who took great pride in knowing that former president “Give ‘em Hell” Harry S. Truman was his third cousin. As previously mentioned, he was the vain gentleman who colored his hair, but also drove my grandmother crazy when he cleaned out his ears with his car keys. This grandfather was one you could never keep a straight face around because he was always cracking a joke. While having a strong sense of humor, he could also turn very serious when one of his grandchildren was engaging in an activity that he considered high risk. I remember he had a fit at one of my younger brother’s birthday parties when Kyle received a four-wheeler ATV for a gift. He had said to my parents at the time, “I can’t believe you bought that for him. He’s going to break his neck!”

Responding to Marguerite’s question, I affirm, “Yes. I am working on my PhD in Communication so I guess I’m somewhat of a nerd.”

Marguerite smiles. “Well this grandfather is also expressing how proud of you he is. They both are really bragging about you a lot. Their message overall is ‘Just keep doing what you’re doing!’ The next energy coming through is someone who had an issue with the head.”

A cold chill goes up the back of my neck. *Could this be mom?*

“This could be someone who died from blunt trauma to the head, shot in the head, a type of brain cancer…”

“My deceased mother suffered from complications of a pituitary tumor.”

“Okay. Was she the person you really wanted to hear from the most today?”

"Yes."

"How do you connect with the number 12? This can refer to the 12th day of a month…12 years…December being the 12th month of the year."

"She died in December." My heartbeat begins to quicken, and I can hear my own pulse. I feel a weird mixture of nervous heat and a chill.

"Now, I'm starting to feel like my breathing is becoming labored. Do you know why this might be?"

"My mother had pituitary cancer but her actual cause of death was a pulmonary embolism at home."

"Okay…Wow. This is odd. I'm also sensing there was something with her vision and the eyes."

I feel the sting of tears in the corner of my eyes. Marguerite grabs a tissue and hands it to me. I wipe my face and blow my nose. "They couldn't get all of the tumor because it was so close to her optic nerve. She had double vision for a while before she died." *This is getting very strange.*

She asks, "Have you not told many people about this reading today?"

"I have told a few family members and friends." Almost all of my friends in Tampa know about the reading today. I have not told many family members and friends back in my hometown, but I do not contact them very often anyway. For some reason, I feel like I am betraying my father by not telling him that I am here. As troubled as he and my mother's marriage was, I know he loved her very much and thinks of her often. I wonder if I will ever tell him about this experience. All of theses aspects combined, the hush of secrecy surrounding this

reading, Marguerite's secluded office, and the cash only payment policy make me feel like I am completing an illegal drug deal.

"Okay…Okay…I understand." Marguerite is speaking off to the side now—as if my mother is standing right next to her. "She's very intrigued that I can hear her. She is very adamant that you tell more people about this reading today. She wonders why you haven't done a reading sooner."

Well, Mom. I don't always have $125 to blow.

"Do you have a brother?" Marguerite asks.

I sharply take in a breath. *Wow*. "Yes. I have a younger brother."

"She especially wants you to let him know about this. Your mother tells me that she is around both of you always. You *a lot* actually….Okay…Okay…She also is saying that at the end of her life she wasn't quite herself. The pain medicine she was on made her…loopy. Yes, 'loopy' is the word she is using. She doesn't mean all the harsh things she said."

Reflecting back on her final months of life, I do remember her being rather sharp with people. I cannot remember anything hurtful exactly that she might have said. I guess there are some negative memories of illness that the passage of 10 years can help erase. My relatives would often speak in hushed voices after one of her "Not Ann" moments and say, "That's just the illness speaking. She doesn't mean that."

Marguerite continues to focus on my mother's messages. "Were your father and mother separated or divorced before she died?"

"No. Why do you ask?" My mind flashes to a vision of Dad angrily shoving clothes in garbage bags. He and my mother were screaming at one another. I am sure it was about money.

This was the topic their arguments usually focused around. I remember how my brother and I stood in the hallway watching the scene unfold.

"That's it! I am getting the fuck out!" Dad had yelled.

I remember my mother beginning to unpack one of his bags. "Lindon! Stop it! You're upsetting the boys!"

After screaming matches, there was usually tense silence between them for days. Once, they went almost two weeks without talking. My mother would mischievously grin and say, "He thinks that when he doesn't talk to me it bothers me but I really love it. Ha!"

I sigh as I contemplate all of this information. *At least Dad has improved in how he approaches conflict.*

I say to Marguerite, "They did fight a lot when I was growing up."

Marguerite nods. "Your mom was just saying something about them being at a crossroads, but she's fine. She has moved on. I think she might be trying to let your Dad know that it's okay that he has moved on too."

"Dad told me that after Mom died he kept having dreams with her in them. He would try to talk to her but she always had her back turned to him. She would never speak to him. He has told me that he believed she was trying to tell him that he needed to move on."

"The deceased can come to us in dreams. She may have very well been telling him that. Now, her mother is still living. Yes?"

I nod my head.

Marguerite continues, "I feel that your grandmother took your mother's death very hard. She's had a history of anxiety problems but once your mother died it seemed as if they got worse. Your mother is letting me know that she is around your grandmother often, and she would

like you to tell her about this reading. She's also showing me a large bouquet of roses. When spirits show me this symbol it can mean one of two things, either they were not very affectionate in life and they want to show you their unconditional love now or it's just an extension of that from beyond."

"My mother was very affectionate when she was alive."

"Ok. Good. She also is telling me that she is very happy that you are happy. I know this is a general statement, but maybe she is referring to something specific?"

"Well, I am gay. I never got the chance to come out to her."

Marguerite gives a few light slaps on the table. "Yes. The vibration is rising when you just said that. I think that is what she is specifically referring to."

I smile through tears. "That makes me feel so wonderful." The cynical side of me completely retreats. "This whole experience has just been amazing!"

"Oh! I'm so glad you are enjoying it. You just never know what to expect from the sprit world! Okay…Okay…Now, this is interesting. Your mother is showing me a farm. Did you all live on a farm?"

"No, but my uncle and aunt, her sister, live on a farm. We spent a lot of time there growing up."

"Okay. Yes, she's showing me a farm and horses. Did she like horses?"

"Well, everyone used to ride two of the horses they owned in their back yard—everyone except me. I'm allergic to horses."

When I was about six years old, I was at a summer barbeque at my Aunt Cindy and Uncle John's house. Many of my mother's siblings and their families were in attendance. We all took a turn riding one of their horses, Beauty, in the backyard. Thirty minutes later, my mother

found herself in my aunt's bathroom frantically dousing me in a cool bubble bath. My body was bright red, itchy, and swollen. When the swelling wouldn't go down from the bath, she resorted to giving me some liquid Benadryl and this helped solve the issue. She consulted with our family doctor and found out that I was allergic to horsehair.

This would be one of many medical crises my mother would have to attend to for members of my family: My brother as a toddler went into anaphylactic shock after eating peanut butter and crackers (due to an extreme allergy to peanuts). My father, while working underground in the coalmines, had a hammer slam back into his face causing massive bone breakage. One summer night my brother, after playing outside all afternoon, came home urinating blood from a urinary tract infection. When I was a teenager, I worked at a hardware store and was rotating a giant truck tire. I stuck my hand in the wrong place and ended up splitting and fracturing the tip of my finger. As the nurses were sewing it up on the operating table, I remember Mom rushing in and saying, "What the hell were you thinking?"

I stare down at the small indention on my left index finger from the accident. For about three months after the stitches healed this part of my finger was numb. I worried for so long that I would never feel anything again, but Mom kept reassuring me that the feeling would come back. In a peculiar way, this injury reminds me of my grief. Like Mom's death, the injury was sudden and unexpected. After going through the necessary healing rituals, I felt numb for a while. Now, I still recognize my grief. I know the scar is there, the experience has marked me in particular ways, but I learn to live with it and the grief in productive ways.

I find some of the signs Marguerite has brought up interesting. She continues to nod her head enthusiastically and smiles. "The dead contact us often, but many people do not see these

signs because they do not believe that afterlife communication can occur. It is wonderful that you and your family are open to these possibilities. Was your mother a model?"

Her question catches me off guard. "Ha! No. She was a hairdresser. If anything, she always was down on her looks. She had a lot of confidence in her wit and ability to interact with people, but she did not think highly of her appearance. She especially did not feel good about herself during the major peaks of symptoms during her illness."

Marguerite snaps her fingers, finely manicured with green polish. "Ah! That's it. She was saying something about being 'model material.' She is model material now!"

I chuckle and picture Mom doing a diva snap and saying, "Yeah! Yeah! Who's sexy now?"

"Sprits can choose how they want me to see them," Marguerite adds. "Your mother is very beautiful. Perhaps, she is showing herself to me in this way because she wants you to know that she is happy and at peace with her self image on the other side."

"She was a beautiful woman, and I always wished she wasn't so down on herself."

Marguerite reaches out and places her hand on my arm. "Just know that she is at peace and around you all the time."

"I truly believe that death does not have to end a relationship with the deceased," I state. I unveil my academic identity and tell Marguerite about my research.

"This is all very important work," she commends and stands up from her chair. "Well, I hate to tell you this but I am feeling all the energies pull back. Your reading has now officially ended."

I sigh feeling satisfied but slightly disappointed. It is a similar feeling one goes through when finishing a great novel in which there was high personal investment in the characters. You

knew the author had to end the work eventually, but you are still left with questions. You still want to connect with the characters.

You still desire more.

As Marguerite walks me to her front door, she hands me a business card. “If you want to come back and see me don’t hesitate to call. We don’t have to do a reading, even if you just have questions about what I do.”

“Thank you again for this. I truly appreciate it!” Even though I am not sure if it’s appropriate, I give her a hug. When I feel her body relax, I take this as a sign that she is used to receiving unsolicited signs of affection from clients.

On the way home, there is much on my mind from this experience. The sunny and breezy 70-degree weather on my commute along the Howard Frankland Bridge seems to match my mood. I am thankful that it is not one of those scorching days where my inability to afford a new air conditioner often puts a damper on my spirits. Rolling down the windows of my car and taking in a deep breath of ocean air, I smile as I feel the wind blow in my face. No matter how many times I drive over this bridge back to Tampa from St. Petersburg, I never tire of seeing the beautiful city skyline and the glimmer of sunshine reflecting on the bay.

One of the many aspects that I still appreciate about my mother was her willingness to encourage me in doing what I was truly passionate about. When she was in high school, she was on the school dance team, the pep squad, and the home economics club. She went to beauty school to be a hairdresser. This was different from what I chose to do and what I do with my career now. I never envisioned myself being a professor when I was young, but I can imagine she would be proud of me. After this reading, I can have a little more faith in this belief.

While I thought Marguerite could have been more specific on some details, I do not think she was completely off base. For instance, she did not ask if I had lost a spouse or a sibling. Unfortunately, the cynical side of me wants to keep sneaking back to trivialize the experience. *There are many things she could have just guessed about you. From the very beginning when she asked you about if you had a grandfather "figure" that died, it could have been a scam. Either way, if you had a grandfather die or not, you would come up with someone to connect her question to.*

The hopeful side of me responds. *You are right. Still, overall, I think the reading was worth the time and the money.*

Even if the reading was not "real" in the objective sense, it still had a lot of meaning for me. I started to remember details about both my grandfathers and our relationships that I had forgotten about or not taken the time to reflect on. Most importantly, I continued a bond with my mother through this reading, and it strengthened my appreciation for the time that we shared and all of the work she did to make sure my brother and I had the best childhoods possible.

Marguerite stated people often miss messages from the dead because they don't open themselves up to the possibility of their being able to communicate. After today and this past year learning about continuing bonds, I intend to keep my eyes fully open.

A Thanksgiving Stroll

I smile when I feel the warm squeeze of Carolyn's soft hand. We walk arm in arm around her cul-de-sac on this blustery Thanksgiving night. Her dogs, Zen and Buddha, eagerly run ahead of us—sniffing dirt and leaves and tugging us along on their leashes. Since I have moved to Tampa, I have always stayed in town for Thanksgiving. This is my first Thanksgiving with Carolyn, her partner Art, and three other students at their home. We have all just enjoyed a large

meal of turkey, cranberry sauce, green beans, spinach, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn casserole. In order to make some room for dessert, Carolyn and I go on a light stroll around the neighborhood.

It is slightly chilly for this time of year in Tampa. I know many of my friends and relatives back home would call me a wimp for thinking that 50 degrees is cold. I am not sure if the whole theory about Floridians' blood thinning is true, but I do think your body adapts to the warm temperatures. However, the cool weather does make it feel more like a Thanksgiving back in Illinois. I find that this is a good opportunity to talk about my dissertation with Carolyn. The proposal has already been defended, and I will soon be conducting fieldwork back in Illinois.

As if sensing what is on my mind, Carolyn turns to me and asks, "So are you ready to dive into your fieldwork?"

"Yes!" I respond. "I am really looking forward to it."

Carolyn eagerly clasps the top of my hand. "I am excited about where this will go. You are taking the work I started about continuing bonds with my brother and really fleshing it out!"

"Of course! You've given me so much encouragement over the years. I just hope I can make you proud."

"You will. You're going to do wonderfully!"

A small lull occurs in our conversation. It seems as if we are both deep in thought, mulling over the dissertation's possibilities. I realize there is something I must bring up tonight.

"Carolyn…I have to admit that I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

I sigh. “I just don’t want to upset anyone by what I choose to write about. I know you’ve trained me well to deal with these issues, but I still keep worrying about them. I have been having nightmares!”

Carolyn’s mouth opens in surprise. “Oh, my. There is always going to be stress in any academic project, but I don’t want this to traumatize you. Have you written about the dreams you’ve been having?”

I have not, Mother Mentor. Perhaps I should…

Interlude Two

A man dressed in black walks through the streets of DuQuoin. He wears a long cape and gloves, even though it is in the middle of summer. I cannot see his face, but I do see that he is carrying a very large book, cartoonish in its enormity. I don't know how he is able to carry such a large object.

There are many community residents lined up on Main Street near the Catholic Church where my mother's funeral was held 10 years ago. I recognize many of them: family members, former neighbors, clients and friends of my mother's. They stand quietly chatting amongst themselves. The mood is somber, and almost everyone in the line is wearing black as well. I watch from behind a bush as the man in black goes to each of them. He holds the book wide open. The line erupts in chaos as people rush to look at what is inside the book, with some residents pushing others out of the way. There is such frenzy that the man drops the book on the ground. As he does, several sets of pages fly out and onto various parts of the sidewalk.

The crowd disperses into clumps and begins reading the pages. Their reactions to the text vary—but they all seem to be very negative. A few of the people fall to their knees weeping in anguish. Some tear parts of the pages into pieces and stomp on them. Others start pushing each other. What is written in the book seems to cause some disagreement. My heart leaps in my chest when I see others attempt to speak but no sound comes out of their mouths. They clutch their throats with astonishment. How is it possible that their ability to speak has been taken away? Some residents are so infuriated by what's in the text they set fire to the pages.

I watch all of this in horror. I want to do something, but I'm not sure what I should do or if I am the cause of this strange occurrence. The fires from the burning pages intensify and some of the burning pieces are blown on the church.

Now the church is on fire!

Running out from behind the bush, I reach for my cell phone to call the fire department. I do not know the fire department's number. Call 9-11! My cell phone suddenly morphs into a rotary phone. Clutching the receiver under my ear, my index finger shakes as I try to dial this outdated piece of equipment. I realize there is no dial tone and I cannot dial a rotary phone that is not hooked up by a modem. Damn!

A few of the residents see me. They angrily point and shout. "There he is! That's him!" one yells. I do not know who this shouting person is but I feel as if I have met her. The angry residents begin running after me, a few of the men have large hunting rifles. I know I can outrun them. But where do I go?

I decide to head to my childhood home. It is only about one and a half miles away. The farthest I have run in my life is 10 miles. I can do this! When one of the men fires a round, I scream in fear. Please, God help me get home safely. I'm only 27. I'm too young to die. Not here. Not now.

To my amazement, my body begins to morph as I run. My lean semi-toned body turns flabby. I find myself back at my old high school weight, and my breathing becomes increasingly labored. The extra weight makes my ankles ache, and I do not think I will now be able to make the run. Sweat flows down my forehead and all over my cheeks. I trip and fall on some of the gravel road. Pain shoots through my right knee and I look down and see some of the rocks have made bloody indentions in my skin.

When I look up, I find that I am at the front door of my childhood home. Looking behind me, I see the angry crowd running toward me in the distance. Luckily, the front door is unlocked. I burst inside, quickly shut and lock the door behind me, and slam my back against the wall attempting to catch my breath.

Spotting my stepmother and father sitting at the kitchen table, I feel a strong sense of relief. They can surely talk these people out of trying to murder me. "Dad!" I yell.

He is staring straight ahead into the distance.

"Dad!" I yell again.

Nothing. He is breathing but not moving at all. I shake my hand in front of his face. I lightly pat his right shoulder. He doesn't budge. I turn to my stepmother. "What's wrong with him?"

She jumps up from the table and pushes her chair back aggressively. It falls to the ground. Her face is bright red and filled with anger. She doesn't say a word but she doesn't have to because her piercing stare lets me know that I have committed some sort of offense. But what have I done? She reaches down and takes off one of her shoes and hurls it at me.

It misses my face by an inch.

I run out the back kitchen door. There is a wooded area behind the house. Maybe I can hide from the crowd long enough to piece all of this together and figure out my next move.

Growing up, the neighbor kids used to play in these woods and have camp outs. The intense fear of the moment prevents me from going into warm reveries of the past. I spot the man in black running further into the wooded area. He is no longer carrying the huge book. "It's all your fault!" I yell. "You are not going to get away with this!"

The man hears me and stops.

My heartbeat quickens the closer I get behind him. Who is this menace that has caused so much havoc in my life? What does he want from me? How can I stop him?

"What have you done?" I ask.

The man turns around and says, "Exactly what you wanted."

Speech escapes me completely when I stare into the face of this monster.

His face looks exactly like mine.

I am the man in the black.

I am the monster.

Chapter Three: Re-membering Myself Back Home

Welcome Aboard Flight Denial, Rejection, and Despair

Winter 2014: DuQuoin, Illinois.

"On the way to get away from where you are, you can run so fast that you miss the blessings along the way. By the time you realize that you have missed them, a major portion of your life has taken place without you." (Vanzant, 2011, p. 32)

As I sit on the plane traveling back to my hometown, I read the statement once again. Spiritual guru Iyanla Vanzant's message in her recent self-help book resurrects the thoughts that haunt me. The statement opens my own personal Pandora's box of ghosts. The ghosts beckon me out of Flight 1270 and into a deep sea of unfinished business. I am bewitched. The ghosts move my fingers across the keyboard, and from this exorcism come the anxieties from abandoning those I love.

In my rush to get away from the constraints of rural, small town America, did I miss something? Was the pain from the loss of my mother too much to bear? Did I fear rejection for being gay so much that these feelings forced me to lose connections with some of the people that matter most?

I will be home for 12 days this winter break.

Yes, 12 days.

It's still hard for me to comprehend. The last time I was home even remotely close to this length of time was on winter break during my first semester of graduate school. That trip lasted a

numbing nine days, and I thought I was going to have to be pulled from my permanent glued fixture behind the family television set in order to go back to Tampa.

I realize now there was a reason why this last trip made me feel so numb.

It was because I didn't try.

I didn't have conversations with my father, stepmother, and younger brother. We talked to one another, but we did not *connect*. Familial soap operas and shame created a dark cloud of severed ties around us. Evening sitcoms became hiding places. I could hide from admitting the truth. I could hide from my sexuality. I could hide from my grief over my mother's death. Belly laughs, cackles, and snickers from every joke became a shield that helped keep the things we were afraid of from coming in. These terrors were kept at bay, and they prevented us from talking about things that matter most. They prevented us from intimate moments of physical touch and emotional consolation.

I didn't have the sitcoms to protect myself from my grandmother. No, I had to physically separate myself from her. I made a conscious effort to not visit her alone. If I did that I would have had to actually talk about my mother's death. I would have to console her. *I wish she wasn't so depressing. I wish she would just get over it*, I would think. I realize now she was reaching out for help. She wanted her favorite grandson to just sit with her, watch Oprah, and talk. She wanted to remember and re-establish a connection with my mother.

And I shut her out.

Maybe I wasn't willing to face the pain of the loss then. Maybe I feared that if Grandma crumbled, I would too. I was a fighter. I had already faced discrimination and hatred for being a gay man—which for some individuals showed weakness. It was a breach in the performance of

hegemonic masculinity. Shed not a tear, you big queer. I wasn't going to lose in this fight for self-preservation. So, I ignored my grandmother.

I also shut out our family friends and neighbors. What would they think about me now? How could I face that and the fact that they were there that day? The day of my mother's death? Just seeing them would put me back in that hell—the hell of watching her take her very last breath.

I'm not sure why there all these negative thoughts about my community. Maybe this is all influenced by my past. The taunts from schoolyard bullies have now turned into whispered gossip among adults in grocery stores. People will talk—especially in a small town. I see the lips of middle-aged women slowly moving and filled with rumors.

Is that Blake? They might say. *That's the boy whose mother died so tragically years ago? He was always such a sweet boy. He has lost so much weigh. Do you think he's anorexic? I heard that he's a queer. Maybe he has AIDS? His poor father! He must be so disappointed.* Or they might say. *He left and went to live in the city. Look at him. He thinks he is so much better than us!*

I know I'm imagining all of this. I am sure if there are people who say these things when they see me in my hometown, they are the ones who truly do not matter. I just can't help but feel the sting that comes from scrutinizing eyes. In every store, the park, town square there is the potential of feeling the bite of small town musings.

And so, in the past, I would stay in my family home as much as possible—it was a safe haven. It was a place I could remain to ride out the storm—to hide within a space of what I thought was rejection and unbearable pain from loss.

There is another nightmare I keep having. No one dies in this dream. There is no monster or boogeyman in it. I am teaching speech in my old high school. After 10 years of post-high school education, a PhD, and almost $100,000 in student loans, I see myself catching paper airplanes and spit wads from immature teenagers.

I doubt this will really happen, but there is something telling about the dream. No matter how much you try to escape your past it will catch up with you. You can never completely leave it behind, and you have to deal with being in it sometimes and it being in you.

As I sit writing on the plane, I wonder what my hometown will look like to me because of this research process. Have I learned enough about grief and loss? Have I learned enough about people, communication, family patterns, sexuality—*myself* to enter this space comfortably? Can I somehow transform my perceptions of it? Will my former hometown ever really feel like home? Did it ever?

I'm about to find out.

Facing the 10th Anniversary of Mom's Death

Today marks the 10-year anniversary of my mother's death. I think about this as I sit in the same recliner she sat in before she stopped breathing. This is the same recliner that I sat in after the funeral when I stared at the devastated faces of my younger brother and father. This is the same recliner I watched my father fall asleep in every night after strained silence between us, when I would think: *How are we ever going to move on with life?*

I shiver underneath my hooded sweatshirt. I know that I have become a Tampa native when 50 degrees is frigid.

Gagging down my bitter lukewarm coffee, I contemplate the possibility of my first day of winter vacation back home. The television drones on with mindless morning talk show babble.

My younger brother, father, and stepmother are at work. The house feels cold and deserted. Never fairing well in an unfamiliar bed, my sore body feels the aftermath of tossing and turning through an almost sleepless night. I wonder if this is how mom felt on those lonely mornings when we were all gone. It saddens me to remember the pain of her illness in those final months of life.

Attempting to shake away the dreary memories, I quickly push myself up out of the recliner. While washing my breakfast dishes, I call my Aunt Jan, mom's older sister. She works at an adult senior citizen center in my hometown. I ask her if my grandma (my mother's mother) will be there today.

"Hey bud! I didn't realize you would be home so soon," she says with surprise. "Grandma JoAnn will be eating lunch at about 11:15. Everybody usually visits and watches the news for about an hour afterwards. So I think if you get here about noon you should catch her."

"Ok, thanks. I'll see you soon."

"Oh and Blake?"

"Yeah?"

"You do realize today is the day right?"

Of course today is the day. I think. *How can you ever forget the day that you lost your mother—the most important person in your life? It's burned into my brain.*

"I know," I respond.

"I still can't believe it. She was just too young." I can hear the faint hint of tears coming from my aunt. "But she was in so much pain. I guess God needed someone to do hair for him."

I smile behind the receiver. As I let out a deep sigh, I feel slight moisture forming in my eyes.

"I guess so," I manage to choke out.

"But you know how Chickee can be." Chickee is the nickname mom and her sisters made for my Grandma. They don't address her as this, but she is aware of the nickname. As far as I know, no one has ever questioned its origin.

Jan continues, "She'll want to have a big sob session."

My body stiffens at this remark. It's something I would have said in the past. It's something I would have said because I did not know how to grieve—nor support those close to me in their bereavement. It's something I would have said to further distance myself from my grandmother.

I shrug the remark off. "Don't worry about it. I study grief now. I'm prepared if grandma wants to talk about mom. It will probably be good for us."

"Okay, well I'll help you out if you need it," Jan says.

I hang up, put the dishes away, and get ready for my visit.

* * *

I walk into the entry of the senior citizen center and am cheerfully greeted by a receptionist at the front desk.

"I'm looking for my grandma…Jo-Ann Strong?"

The receptionist takes a moment to examine me. After she has determined that I'm not a threat, she nods her head to the right behind the desk. "She should be in the dining hall. They just finished their lunch."

As I enter the room, a musty scent mixed with chicken broth creeps up my nostrils. I see a few of the residents finishing their lunch. After close inspection of a few plates, I discover the menu of the day: Chicken and dumplings, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and a roll. It

would be appetizing if the physical setting of the dining room didn't remind me so much of a middle school cafeteria. I think about times as a kid when I force fed myself such school entrees as dry pizza, cold and soggy French fries, and chocolate milk. I remember kids chewing with their mouths open and playing with their food—creating mixed concoctions like canned corn and Jello. My stomach churns as I remember stuffing myself with that awful food and then running around for 30 minutes at recess almost making myself puke. All of these moments make me sick when I smell the seniors' lunch for the day. I try to mentally block the scents out to keep my nausea at bay.

The dining room consists of three rows of long metal tables. There are only a couple individuals who remain seated at the tables—a heavy set black man in overalls and a petite white woman with a tight, frizzy perm of gray hair. Bright multi-colored Christmas lights are strung along the walls. Farther past the tables is a sitting room for the center's visitors to socialize after eating their meals. It consists of a circle of worn armchairs and sofas fixated on a large screen television.

I spot my 82-year-old grandmother from behind, hunched over her walker. Osteoporosis has taken its toll on her body. She shakes as she slowly moves the walker in front of her. I notice how clearly the bones protrude from her hands as grips the side of the walker. Even though it's only been a year since I have seen her, I cannot help but notice how aged she looks. I don't think I'm afraid of getting older, but it distresses me to think about her having to constantly walk halfway bent over. I try to imagine this sensation mixed with the feelings of constant aches and pains throughout one's body. *What will the experience of growing old be like? Will I have people come visit me?*

I brush my thoughts aside, walk over quickly behind her, and lightly tap her shoulder. I'm not sure how she'll react. Maybe she will be upset with me because I never call. Maybe she won't even recognize me. "Grandma?"

She turns and is taken aback. Her mouth slightly drops open but in a surprised smile.

"Well my word! I knew you were coming to town but didn't think you'd already be here? How are you sweetie?"

My fears of rejection and uncertainty melt away. I give her a tight embrace, but not too tight. "I'm great. I just got in last night."

"I'm going to the restroom. Take a seat right there. I'll be right back."

She carefully inches the walker in front of her as she approaches the restroom door. As if in an awkward dance, I keep turning to look at the row of chairs and back at her. *Does she need my help?* This must be what an anxious parent feels like when watching their child walk for the first time.

After deciding that she will be fine, I take a seat on one of the sofas and wait for her return. As I'm waiting, I gaze around the circle at the center's residents. A few of the women smile at me. One man is staring catatonically off into space. One lady quietly sings to herself as she is knitting a scarf.

When my grandma returns, I slowly help her take a seat next to me on the sofa. After finally getting situated, she takes a deep breath and says, "So when did you get in hon?"

"I got home late last night. I flew into St. Louis and took the shuttle out to Illinois. Dad picked me up and drove me home from there." The nearest airport from my hometown is 90 miles away in St. Louis, Missouri.

"Your dad didn't pick you up from the airport?"

"No…you know how he feels about the traffic in the city."

"I don't give a damn! You're not here that often. The least he could do was pick you up at the airport."

I feel a tense silence. My father and grandmother have never been the best of friends. I'm thankful when she changes the subject.

"So where are you at in your program now?"

"I'm in the second year of the PhD program. I teach interpersonal communication to the undergraduates. I should be done hopefully in about two years."

"Well that's just wonderful! I'm proud of you! You know when you kids were growing up, you always had your nose stuck in a book. I remember your mom talking about you and your brother. She'd say, 'I got one who I can't ever track down and I got one I can't ever get his ass out of the house.'"

I laugh. "Yeah. I was definitely the reader! It helps to be one in grad school. I mean sometimes I have to read like three books in one week!"

There's a lull in our conversation and then comes the moment I've prepared for. "You know it will be ten years today."

"Yes. I know," I say holding back tears.

I tell grandma about what I'm studying in my doctoral communication program. I tell her about how we can continue relationships with those that have died even though they are no longer physically with us.

She responds, "It is really great that you are doing this research about your mom. I think about her every day. God love her. Out of all my kids, she never mouthed me. You know she would give me her opinion but she never got rude. She was such a gentle soul."

I let out a sigh. “I think about her and talk to her every day. I even have pictures up in my apartment in Tampa. While I’m home, I want to see if I can find her old appointment book to take back. Do you remember that thing?”

My grandmother laughs. “My word! Yes! I don’t know how the hell she ever read her handwriting and there were always hair color smudges all over it.”

“I’m going to go to her grave while I’m home.”

“You should. When’s the last time you were there?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe five or six years?”

“I go when I can. Sometimes your Aunt Cindy will take me out there. I just feel closer to your mom there.”

“There’s a psychic I’ve been watching named Theresa Caputo. She says that our loved ones are always with us. We think we have to go to their graves to visit them, but she says that’s not the case. They are always around.”

“I believe that. It’s still hard though. I miss your mom and your grandpa…”

She starts to sob.

I slowly take her into my arms and hold her head close to my chest. I want to hold her tightly—to reassure her that I will be strong for her. But I fear injuring her fragile body. And then I think *why do I have to be strong?* Instead of me being some solid rock she can hold onto, maybe in this moment we can hold onto our grief together.

When we release from the embrace, I pull out some tissues from my pocket. As I slowly wipe her tear stained face, I start to feel my own tears.

“I’m such a mess,” Grandma says.

“Me too. We’re both a big hot mess!” I say brushing wetness off my cheeks.

We chuckle together. Then, there is a brief silence.

Sometimes in spaces of grief that is all we need.

"I still catch myself picking up the phone to call her," Grandma says. "I know it's silly. I can't talk to her."

"But you *can* talk to her Grandma. You shouldn't ever feel strange for having a conversation with her or grandpa. I wouldn't recommend trying to call either of them on the phone though."

Grandma laughs. "You're so funny—just like your mom. She was always such a ham as a kid. Did I ever tell you the story about her walking around the pews on Easter Sunday in her new dress?"

"No. What happened?"

"She was six years old, and we had just bought her new bright yellow dress for Easter. She just loved it. Well we're sitting in church on Easter Sunday during Mass. You know with seven kids it's hard to keep track of everyone. I thought your grandpa was keeping an eye on her. Little did I know that squirt started prancing up and down the aisles. She kept saying to people 'Look at my pretty dress! Isn't it pretty?' And she was curtseying. It was the cutest thing but it was in the middle of service. I had to walk all the way to the back of the church to get her back with us."

It's such a small story, but it means so much. Since my mother has died, I have heard many stories about her adulthood. The childhood tales have seemed to go by the wayside, but I know that it's possible to bring them back into the open. It's possible to help piece together the fragments of my mother's past. It's possible to continue a relationship with her and encourages others to continue this relationship.

I leave the center feeling elated. My mother would often take my brother and me to visit grandma after church and many of the same conversations would ensue. Even though today's conversation did not take place in my grandparents' former home over eating fattening store bought cookies and drinking Coke, I still felt my grandmother's love.

And I think we both felt my mother's love and her continued presence. I realize that all the times I ignored my grandmother in fear that she would bring up mom's death, I was missing out on the beauty of our relationship. I realize that even though she's 82 years old, I can still make up for lost time. It's not too late to continue a bond with her through my mother's legacy she left behind.

* * *

I must visit Mom.

Never having felt so compelled, I am not sure why I have such a strong desire to go to the cemetery. Maybe the visit with my grandmother has made me realize that I can be immersed in grief—that I can wrap myself up in it and feel its warmth amongst the bitter cold winter air. Maybe this is another test I have given myself—a test to see if I can quit running away from my past and face the pain of loss I have evaded for 10 years.

Maybe I just want to be with her.

All of these thoughts swirl in my mind as I drive the family Ford Expedition through town. This was "her" car. The license plate used to read LABKM98 (L stood for my father, Lindon. A stood for my mother, Ann. B stood for me, Blake. K stood for my brother, Kyle. M stood for our dog, Maddie. 1998 was the year my parents bought the car.) The license plate has been replaced and now reads a random number. My stepmother, Kelly, wanted it changed. I try not to be angry. Perhaps, she just wanted to be "practical" and help the family move on.

My anger soon dissipates when I hear a familiar country song on the radio mom and I used to sing together. Driving in "her" car takes me back to some fond memories. My mother was a wild driver—some more conservative motorist might have called her reckless. On my twelfth birthday she took my best friend and me out to dinner and a movie. I, being the "nerd" as she called me with sarcastic affection, wanted to go to the local bookstore before the movie. While they waited on me, she sped through the parking lot and acted like she was going to hit numerous birds. Quietly chuckling to myself, I think about my mom speeding through the lot yelling, "Wahoo!" and the birds scattering for their lives.

Whether it was from intentionally swerving back and forth, pulsating the brakes, or from speeding, many passengers had to grab the handles located right above the window—the "oh shit" handles as we used to call them in my family. There was one occasion where Mom got out of a ticket by telling the police officer she was rushing to get home because she thought she was going to crap her pants. I remember her saying at the time, "I wasn't sexy enough to flirt out of the ticket so I had to play sick."

This was, believe it or not, the person who taught me how to drive a car. My father did not have much patience with any drivers let alone his driver-in-training son, and I was forced to put up with the antics of my mother's practical jokes. I would get so angry because mom would periodically tickle me under my armpit while I was trying to drive. "What are you going to do when a girl does that on a date?" she would ask with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

She would be proud that I have mastered the task of multitasking in the car even if my dates are with men instead of women.

A car horn blaring behind me snaps me out of my nostalgia and raises my attention to the fact that I have been sitting at a green light. I speed forward on my mission to visit the cemetery,

but in my haste I neglect one thing. I am not quite sure where I am going. *Which cemetery is Mom buried in?*

I search for "cemeteries in DuQuoin" on my smart phone and am surprised to see how many come up. You would think in a town of 6,600 people there wouldn't be that many cemeteries. Sacred Heart Cemetery. I think this one sounds right.

When I arrive, I notice that it is completely deserted. It is a winter day in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon. Of course, it is going to be empty. All of a sudden, the nausea I felt at the adult senior center comes rushing back. I quickly propel myself out the side of the car and vomit on the side of road. After a round of coughing and dry heaving, I slowly pick myself up off the ground. I find some tissues in the glove compartment and clean myself up.

Why am I so unsettled? Do I just want to get this test of grief "over with?" This sense of anxiety is like one I have never felt before. I feel disoriented and weak as I trudge between the rows of graves. My legs are shaking like Jello. The cool air is making my nose run and after-vomit-mucus dry around my eyes and lips. *Ugh* I think. *I feel so disgusting.* My head throbs, and a headache forms reminiscent of the kind you develop from eating ice cream too quickly.

Trying to do my best to continue the quest, I scan the names on the graves. *Emerson, James, Alongi. Where the hell is Paxton?* I get angry. *This is pathetic. You are working on a PhD, and you cannot find your own mother's grave.*

I pause. "Just breathe for a second," I tell myself and after a few moments of contemplation, the truth comes to me.

This is the wrong cemetery.

My mother was buried in Cudgetown cemetery about a half a mile down the road. I quickly get back in the car and drive to the *correct* space. When I arrive, I breathe a deep sigh of

relief and some of my anxiety diminishes. The scenery of this place rings true to me, and I find that I know where her grave is. It is almost as if my mother's spirit takes me by the hand and leads me to her resting place.

It's right next to my Grandma and Grandpa Paxton's grave. My father's future grave is already etched in place. Someone has left a bouquet of violet flowers—my mother's favorite color. I read the head stone:

ANN ELIZABETH PAXTON
April 29, 1964-December 19, 2004

All of a sudden waves of grief come crashing into me, and I feel lost at sea. Choking back sobs, I drop to my knees. It has been 10 years, but it still hurts, goddamn it! I cannot stand being in this cemetery, in my hometown, and in the house I grew up in. But I have to be in all of these places. *I must*. How can I ever grow or connect or rebuild from this loss if I don't immerse myself in spaces of pain? How can I ever transform my relationships? How can I ever become a better person if I keep running from my past? I cannot move on from the loss of my mother, but I can move through it. I can learn how to hold it with me.

I pride myself so much on being able to continue a bond with my mother but yet the hard gravestone makes me come more to terms with the hard reality—*that she is physically gone*. I miss her touch. I miss her scent. I miss her voice the most. I can't remember what her voice even sounds like and it kills me. I yearn for the sounds of her singing in the kitchen on Sunday afternoons as she fixes dinner. I yearn for her high-pitched cackle after cracking some self-deprecating joke. I even long to hear her yell some of the obscenities she was notoriously known for getting away with in front of more conservative family and friends. *This* is the voice I know and the woman I love. She is the one person I cannot live without. And so, since I cannot have

her as a material entity, I settle for the next best option. I maintain a relationship with her spirit because I still have a lot to live for. I know I have a purpose in life, and she would not want me to just give up.

But I still need to cry.

Alone in a deserted cemetery on a Tuesday afternoon, I'm left with a stone. I'm left with stories. I'm left with memories. I'm left with suspensions of disbelief.

Wiping my burning, chapped face, I say to the stone—to *her,* "Mom…I miss you so goddamn much! I love you and I know you're here. I know it. But maybe you can just give me a sign that you're okay? Can you do that for me?"

Silence.

I walk away still hoping that she'll respond.

* * *

Later in the evening, I receive an email from one of my colleagues back at my university. I have just asked him to review a paper on connecting interpersonal communication theory to relationships with the dead. In this paper, I mention the popularity of a recent psychic medium Theresa Caputo. This woman, like psychic John Edward who my mother adored, states that she can speak with the dead.

A cold chill goes up my spine. I cannot believe what I am reading. He writes, "You won't believe this. Theresa Caputo will be making an appearance on our campus in February. Tickets go on sale next week."

Is this the sign I asked Mom for earlier?

Memorializing Over Margaritas

I am not sure why I am so nervous. It's a few days after my cemetery visit, and I am ready to conduct my first interactive interview for my dissertation. After parking the car, I sit for a few minutes and breathe slowly, stalling my participation in conducting an interactive interview at a local restaurant. Maybe I'm feeling the remnants of anxiety from driving on icy roads for the first time in two years. The winter climate of my hometown in southern Illinois is quite different than the sunny Tampa, Florida I've become accustomed to in graduate school. Also, driving the family SUV is like navigating a large cruise liner.

Quickly, I wipe away a tear from my cheek. *Get yourself together. You have an interview to do.* In an attempt to distract myself from grief, I run through my own personal research checklist to make sure I have all my supplies. *Tape recorder. Check. Interview schedule. Check. Tissues? Oh, damn. No tissues!*

How could I forget tissues? I am interviewing seven of my mother's closest friends from her high school graduating class about her death and I am not prepared for tears? It is interesting that I retreat from my grief but I am simultaneously drawn to it and the grief of others. The pain one may feel from a loss may lessen as the years go on, but to say that one completely "moves on" from a loss would be a grave fallacy.

And I didn't bring any tissues to this interview. *Well, you are going to be talking to women. They carry tissues in their purses*, a voice inside my head states. This voice sounds like my own, but it's different somehow. I can't quite figure out the meaning behind this difference. *That is such a gender stereotype!*

The voice responds. *You didn't always think that. Ever since you've gone to graduate school, you think you are so much better than everybody else back here.*

I cringe and defensively grip the steering wheel. *That's not true! Why would I come back to my hometown to do this research? My life may be different now but I still care about the people here. I still want to understand the impact of my mother's death on their lives!*

Then, the epiphany comes: I am projecting many of the fears that I have about how people in my community will think of me through this internal conversation. No matter what I do I feel like I am looked at as an outsider in my hometown. But are people really looking at me like this or am I just imagining things? If they are looking at me as an outsider, why is this the case? Is it because of my sexual orientation? Is it because I left and am pursuing some "fancy" Ph.D.? Is it because I hardly ever came home to visit before I started researching continuing bonds with the deceased?

"Okay, get with the program," I say to myself. The voice of my past self now attempts to comfort me. *Most of these women have known you since you were a kid. These women loved your mom. They care about you.*

I take a deep breath and push myself out of the car, but when I approach the entrance of the Mexican restaurant, I feel my legs shaking and my stomach doing flips. As I walk through the front door, the heat and smell of deep fried tortilla chips calms me. Whenever I return to my hometown, this restaurant is always at the top of my list for dinners with friends and family—not because the food is all that great but because they serve margaritas. This is a small detail, but it's a reminder that I can always slip back into spaces of cosmopolitan bliss.

All the women are seated at a long table in the back of the restaurant. As I walk toward them, I find seven pairs of eyes gradually move in my direction. Some of the women smile, and others exude expressions of uncertainty. These seven women (Jill, Kristy, Shannon, Kathy, Jean Ann, Susan, and Shelley) are middle class white women around the age of 50—what would have

been my mother's age. I know half of them fairly well, but have had little interaction with the others.

My nerves are soothed somewhat when Jill cheerfully yells, "Hey Blake!" I smile upon hearing the slight hint of a familiar Southern drawl. It is still mystery as to why some people in my hometown have an accent and others do not. Many of my friends and colleagues in Tampa have commented on mine.

"We've saved a seat for you!" Kristy says and gestures to the seat on her right.

"Thank you all so much for agreeing to do this," I say as I sit down. "I know it can be difficult for everyone to get together around the holidays."

As we chomp down on stale tortilla chips and watery salsa, we make small talk. Kristy passes around an album of her daughter Jessica's engagement pictures. Jessica was in my high school graduating class, and while I had heard from my family about her engagement, she and I haven't spoken in years. The ladies "ooh" and "ahh" admiringly over the pictures. I feel a little discomfort because Jessica is my age and already done with her degree, in a career she loves, and engaged to what sounds like a great man. My uneasiness increases when Jill turns to me and asks, "Do you have a boyfriend, Blake?"

I had assumed none of them would be so straightforward with this question. The love lives of town residents are often popular topics of conversation. In the past, I have found my sexual orientation often constrains these discussions from taking place back in my hometown. People either avoid the subject entirely, or they assume I'm straight and ask, "Have you found you a woman, yet?"

"No. I am just so busy with this Ph.D. It is very difficult to date," I respond. I hope this will put a halt this conversation.

Across the table, I spot Shannon start to dig through her purse. She seems distant and distracted. “I got to go smoke a cigarette,” she states and quickly departs.

I sense she is uncomfortable. From the moment I entered the room, I couldn’t help but notice the troubled expression on her face. Her pursed lips and piercing glare was not the face of the Shannon I was used to growing up. What have I done to upset her?

There is an awkward silence at the table. My mother’s friends look at one another, searching each other’s faces, asking for permission from one another. Permission to do what? I haven’t even started the interview yet, and my anxiety is excruciating.

Kristy turns to me and puts my shoulder. “Sorry, Blake. She just never took your mother’s death well.”

Shelley adds, “Shannon always thought more could be done…that we didn’t try enough.”

I let out a sigh. “There wasn’t anything else anybody could do.”

Jill nervously stirs her drink. “She was a little hesitant to do this interview.”

Jean Ann interjects, “Jill. He doesn’t have to know that. We’re happy to help, Blake.”

What am I doing here? I think. *I never want to force anyone to do anything for my research.* “We could have done this another night. I don’t want her to do this, if it will be difficult for her.”

Jill shakes her head. “No…no…after we talked to her, she agreed that it would be good for her. Let her just get out some steam and when she gets back, we’ll get started.”

Within a couple minutes, Shannon returns with the same tense expression on her face. I hesitantly explain my research project to them. “Again, I don’t want you to feel like you have to do this,” I say. “I want this project to help people not make them feel worse.”

Shannon quickly interjects. “I am doing this because I loved your mom. I may not understand you and your lifestyle, but I want to help.”

Her statement is strikingly direct and icy. “Thanks, Shannon.” I respond softly. This is all I can offer right now. I am not in the right context to discuss my “lifestyle” with her. Any time I get frustrated in situations such as these, I often remember what a good friend told me once. He had said, “Think about how long it took you to accept that you were gay. Do you expect your loved ones to just adjust right away?” He made a great point, and it often gives me comfort. I hope this will be a successful interview, despite some of the expressed tension.

The women continue to listen attentively to me explain my project. I try to ignore the background noise of the restaurant—servers yelling in Spanish, men laughing and clinking beer bottles, and Mariachi band music over a built in speaker.

I turn on the tape recorder and Jill asks, “You sure you have enough tape in there? You know how much we can talk!” All the women giggle and converse among themselves.

I laugh. “Oh yes, up to three hours of tape here. But I don’t imagine this taking that long.”

The tape recorder further accentuates my peculiar positioning in this interactional experience. It is a symbol of the tension felt from insider/outsider status in ethnographic research. I want this experience to be just a conversation among my mother’s friends, but at the same time, I want “good data” to represent the complexity in our lived experiences of grief and loss. I wish to make the research process more collaborative with participants and do not feel comfortable taking on the role of a detached researcher. But by asking questions that might prompt displays of grief, am I like a mad scientist who creates certain conditions in order to test his subjects in an experiment?

I try to brush these thoughts aside and shift my focus on starting the interview. "Could you each tell me a little bit about how you met my mother and how you came to be friends? Also, feel free to share a story or two about her from the past."

Jill eagerly jumps in, "Ann went to the Catholic grade school with Kristy. I did not really get to be close friends with your mom until high school. We were both on the school dance team. I have a couple stories that totally show you who Ann was."

The stories begin to flow. Jill laughs about her and Mom's teenage shopping woes. "We were both heavier in school you know. We'd go shopping, and we'd bitch because we couldn't find anything that fit us. So, after we were done, you know what we'd do? Ann would say, 'Screw this! We're going to Dairy Queen to get ice cream!'"

I chuckle. "That sounds like Mom."

Jean Ann says, "She could always make you laugh. Make you laugh until you cried!"

Kristy adds, "Sometimes it was at her own expense though. She could take the crummiest situation and make the best out of it. She always knew how to make us feel better."

A few more stories about high school youth are exchanged, and then the women begin focusing on the cruise they all went on for their 40th birthdays. My mother went on a cruise to the Bahamas with her friends in April 2004. She died the following December. I remember her excitedly telling stories about her experiences but as far as the content of the stories this is all a little fuzzy. Gratitude for the friendship these women brought my mother swells as I listen to them talk about their experiences on the trip.

Jean Ann tells me about how she and my mom got stuck sharing the top bunk bed in one of the rooms. Jean Ann struggles to get through her story because of laughter. "She and I of course made fun of ourselves! We were like 'Here we go! Let's get our fat asses up here on this

bunk!' We slept in little T-shirts and panties and your mom made comments about our big butts and snoring! She joked about everything on that trip! Such a hoot!"

Kathy agrees. "She even made jokes about all the medicine she had to take for her illness. There was one time we were all on the beach. She had this huge plastic bag of pills in one hand and a drink in the other. She was like 'I'm not supposed to be drinking with all these meds but I don't give a shit! I'm on this trip and I'm going to have fun goddamn it!'"

Shelly interjects, "That's Ann!"

JeAnn adds, "Yeah she cursed like a sailor. You knew there'd always be an F-U in there somewhere."

Jill says, "But she always got away with it somehow."

We are laughing hysterically, and I soon come to realize that our tears are not so much a result of sadness but of laughter.

After a minute of gaining composure, I state, "I just want to tell you all that I really appreciate the friendship you gave my mother. She had so much fun on that trip." I start to feel my voice crack and the tears of laughter I have just felt are starting to sting.

Their faces are full of sympathy. I manage to choke out, "I'm just glad she got to go on that trip before she died. It was probably one of the best experiences of her life."

Kristy's eyes glisten as she puts her hand on my shoulder. "Your mom would be so proud of you and your brother."

"Thanks," I respond quietly as I take one of the table napkins and wipe my face.

Kathy says, "We see so much of your mom in you, Blake…" There is an abrupt pause. She breaks down and cries softly. "Man, I didn't realize this would be so hard." She forks out

tissues from her handbag and dabs her eyes. Jill gives Kathy a hug and nuzzles her head against Kathy's forehead.

I nervously rub my knuckles together. "I am so sorry. I don't mean to upset you."

Kathy shakes her head. "Oh, no. It's fine! I'm just being a hormonal middle aged woman!"

Sensing a break in the emotional tension, I find a good time to move the conversation in another direction. "So do you think it's possible to continue a relationship with Mom even though she's not physically here?"

Many of the women nod their heads in agreement, and there are a few affirmative vocal utterances.

Susan proclaims, "I still go to her grave on Memorial Day and whenever I can."

I am very appreciative that Susan does this, but I wonder if any of Mom's friends do things outside of traditional memorializing practices. A peculiar feeling of guilt overwhelms me. Not only have I asked questions which have resulted in tears, I also feel that I am pressuring these women to memorialize my mother. If they think they have moved on from the loss, this is acceptable right? People continue to live their lives when someone dies and just because they do not memorialize or re-member that person does not mean they did not love or care about them. I still want them to know about the variety of options for re-membering rituals should they choose to participate in them.

I ask, "Are there formal rituals that you do to memorialize mom?"

Susan laughs. "We're not very formal people." She and the other women pause for a few moments. They seem to be deep in thought as if they are saying to themselves: *There must be more things that we do to memorialize Ann*.

A look of recognition appears on Susan's face. "Well there was that one time at Mickey's. It's our favorite steakhouse in Florida, and they have hundreds of dollar bills all over the walls. We made one out to your mom, and we always look for it when we go there."

This is a good start. I think. *Maybe it will help if I explain a little bit more about my research interests.* I explain to my mother's friends the history of the continuing bonds literature and what exactly re-membering rituals entail. This seems to help stimulate conversation.

Kristy smiles and she reminisces about peanut rolls. "When your mom and I were young, we would spend time at my grandmother's house. While we were there, we would often make peanut rolls. I remember when I found out your mom died, I tried to go to work the next day. My supervisor sent me home because she could see that I was too distraught to work. When I got home, I just kept making peanut rolls. I mean I made over six dozen! I make them every year now, and you know, now that we've talked about this stuff, I always think about your mom and my grandma when I make them."

I smile and shake my head enthusiastically. "Great example!"

Shannon adds, "I think a lot of how we continue a relationship with her is through our continued commitment to get together at Christmas and go on trips. My mom always says I don't know how you guys can still get together after all these years and still have stuff to talk about."

Kathy says, "And we can always pick up where we left off. We don't have to explain our family situations to each other."

Jean Ann proudly exclaims, "We can just let our hair down and be ourselves!"

Kristy turns to me. "You know at our last class reunion our husbands stated that they wished they planned trips with their friends. We were like, 'Well, you got to make the effort guys!'"

I join in with their laughter. As I reflect on these moments, I find that this interview is serving as a re-membering ritual for Mom. I'm not sure how much these women know about feminism, but I can see that these individuals are proud to be who they are—proud to be rural women. In this moment, it is almost as if this re-membering ritual is also a form of feminist consciousness-raising. Through reflecting on the strength of my mother, it seems that her friends may feel a sort of female empowerment. I also feel empowered and proud—proud to be in this moment with them, proud of the profound dedication to their friendship with each other and my mother, and proud of where I came from. My preconceived notions about rejection and fear of my hometown community seem trivial now.

The transformative and inspirational nature of this interview is summed up best when Shelley says, "Your mother's death definitely made us realize how precious life is and how important it is to continue our friendship throughout the years."

I turn to all of them and raise my glass, "Well said Shelley and thank you ladies! This has been wonderful. I really appreciate this. Let's give a toast to Ann!"

After the toast, the rest of the evening is spent taking pictures and sharing more stories—stories about other loves and losses. The hum of small town chatter invigorates me. I smile as I watch a few of the women instruct one another on how to change the font size of text messages on their smart phones—pulling out their readings glasses to help the process along. I start to get choked up again when I think about what it would be like if mom were still here. But I realize that after all of the stories and laughter, she *is* here. I can't change the past, but I can make the best of the present. After this evening, I further understand the ability to hold joy and sorrow together, and I know that my mother's friends do as well. As we re-member my mother, I re-member myself back into the community I left behind.

Later, when I'm walking to my car in the parking lot, Shannon approaches me. "Blake, I apologize if I was little harsh earlier."

"It's okay, Shannon," I respond.

"I have a cousin who came out recently. It is just hard for me to understand. I'm trying."

"I know."

Before I can say another word, she comes over and gives me a hug. Her kind act leaves me speechless. Immersed in our grief, there is a potential for finding a way to accept the other we thought we did not understand.

Tender Moments of Grief and Brotherly Love

"You want to watch *what*?"

My younger brother, Kyle, is skeptical. The events of the last week have really inspired me to continue participating in rituals of re-membering mom and to include other family members in these activities.

Even though only four years separate us in age, our relationship has not always been the most loving. Shamefully using an old cliché, I always tell people that we are different as night and day. Growing up, Kyle was always the star athlete. He struggled in school but was like dynamite on the football field. Today, he chews and spits tobacco, talks about pretty women, and usually wears an old pair of jeans, flannel shirt, ball cap, and work boots. I, on the other hand, was the "smart one" growing up—as Kyle sometimes bitterly described me. He was open about his jealousy of me being a straight "A" student, and he would sometimes find reasons to start physical fights with me because of this jealousy. I have never touched tobacco, talk about gorgeous men, and always try to keep up with the latest fashion trends.

I think we learned to live with our differences. When Mom died this really made us closer. We had to help one another fill the painful silences in the evenings after school—times where we along with my father would sit catatonically in front of the television set privately hoping she'd come walking through the front door to join us. It was difficult, but we survived. We still do.

So it's no surprise that he is a little hesitant when I ask him to view the photo slide show that was played at our mother's visitation service ten years ago. He grudgingly agrees, and I set my laptop on the foot of the bed. I slide the DVD of the show into the disc drive, and we wait with anticipation. We begin hearing soft piano music and then the slides begin to run. We laugh when we see mom and dad in old school dance pictures. Mom is sporting a tight knit 80's perm, and Dad is without a beard and has the same haircut John Travolta had in *Saturday Night Fever*. The beautiful memories encapsulated through photographs keep coming: an image of Mom cutting my hair in her salon when I was six, a moment where she is posing with my brother in his uniform on the football field, and a picture with her friends on the birthday cruise.

I look over at my brother, and I see a single tear flow down his cheek. I take his rough, calloused hand in mine, and we finish watching the film. When it is over, we do not say anything. I just take him in my arms, and we hug each other tightly. Our differences and the geographical distance that sometimes separates us do not matter in this moment. We are not sobbing uncontrollably, but we do feel grief in the silence. And in our silent grief, I realize the power of our love. We defy oppressive gender roles, we accept one another, and we re-member mom together.

A Visit From Ghosts of Christmas Past

Christmas Day has finally arrived. Sadly, I wake up to find that it hasn't snowed. There are reports of potential snow coming later in the evening, up to a foot in some places. Mom would be very pleased. Every time I see snow I think of her. While others might bemoan the extra physical labor that comes with excessive snowfall, I embrace the snow's childlike innocence and the potential to reconnect with Mom.

When I talk to my family about the experience in the cemetery a few days ago, it's in the early evening. My brother and I have already finished Christmas lunch with my father, stepmom, and her children. Afterwards, we decide to go to my cousin Ryan's house to visit with my mother's side of the family. When we arrive at his house, I am pleased to find that not much has changed since last year. The large screen television is blaring in the front room. Most of the men in the family congregate around it taking in a basketball game. Beers in hand, they shout cheerful greetings as we walk through the front door. Most of the women are congregated in the kitchen and dining room area.

In what is typically this side of the family's fashion, everyone starts speaking loudly and at once. I look around at the room of guests: Ryan, my grandmother, my Aunt Cindy, my Aunt Patty, my Aunt Jan, my Aunt Susie, my cousin Olivia, and my cousin Seth. I finally find the right place to interject in this chorus of family ruminations and tell my family about what happened at Mom's grave and how I received the email about Caputo later that night. "Isn't that strange?" I ask.

My Aunt Cindy responds, "I bet that was her! I still connect with your mom. I have received so many signs from her. I've told you that story about the balloon haven't I?"

I nod my head. "You have told me this story."

My cousin Seth exclaims with excitement, “Whoa! Wait! What happened, Mom?”

The family chorus decrescendos to reflective silence, and everyone’s full attention is captured as Aunt Cindy narrates the story:

“Just so you know, I have witnesses to this event. I’m not just some menopausal woman! Ever since this happened, I truly believe that our loved ones are watching us from the other side and they can send us messages.

It was your brother’s birthday, May 31st. It was the May after your mom had passed away in December of that year. It was a cool day, and I had the windows rolled open in the house. The sky was overcast with lots of thick clouds, and it looked like it could rain at any moment.

The grandkids were over at the house. I had just finished jamming out to the radio while cleaning our swimming pool. My husband was fixing dinner on the grill, and I told everyone that I was going to go inside and fix a salad. As I was prepping the vegetables, I was feeling sad. I knew it was your brother’s birthday, and I was thinking about how hard it must be to not have his mamma. I was also thinking about the previous May. Your mom had to have surgery on his last birthday. He was so little, and he just did not understand why all this had to be done on his day.

Anyway, all of a sudden, my two grandsons come running inside. Their eyes were as wide as silver dollars. You might have thought they had found gold or something. They started yelling, ‘Grandma! Grandma! Look what we found!’ One of them hands me a deflated balloon. A picture of a girl in a bed is on the front and there is a message that says ‘Dear God, please help my friend.’

‘Where did you find this?’ I asked them. They told me they were just playing in the back yard and saw the balloon fall from the sky onto the ground. I looked at the bottom of the balloon where the artist had signed her name: ANNIE.

I said, ‘This must be a sign from sis!’ You know everyone used to call Ann, Annie so that was unique to her. And I kid you not, as soon as I said that, the song ‘Live Like You Were Dying’ came on the radio. That’s the same song that was popular when your mom was really sick. She always used to say to me, ‘Oh that’s my song. I’m going to die!’ I tried to tell her to quit thinking like that but I know she was in so much pain and the disease was getting to her.

But I’ve kept that deflated balloon and I’ve framed it. I can look at that and know she’s in a better place and with God and out of pain. But that was her sign to me on her son’s birthday. And I believe that song is my sister’s song. Every time I hear it on the radio, I think it’s her way of saying, ‘Sis, I’m okay.’”

“I always love hearing that story,” my Aunt Jan says.

“There has to be something beyond this Earth!” my Aunt Susie exclaims. She turns to her daughter Olivia. “’Liv, that story makes me think of what happened to us a while back.”

I’m intrigued. “What happened? Tell me…”

Susie says, “One day…It was about two or three years after your mom passed. ‘Liv and I had been doing some shopping and we were driving home. Sister Sledge’s song ‘We Are Family’ came on the radio. There was a car in front of us and guess what it said on the license plate?”

Several excited requests for information ring throughout the dining room.

Olivia proclaims, “ANN 1122!”

I fell the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. This is the first time I have ever heard this story.

Susie smiles at me. “November 22nd is your birthday…correct?”

I slowly nod my head in shock.

Susie continues with the story, “Minutes later we get behind this other car and the license plate says CORKY!”

There is a chorus of animated reactions: “What?!” “Nooooo!” “Are you for real?”

Aunt Patty states, “It is a lot like the story about Corky and his keys. Do you all remember what happened?”

Aunt Cindy excitedly chimes in. “Yeah! When Cork was sick, he kept talking about those damn keys that unlocked his old business. We never could find them. Two days after he died, Seth sat back in that old recliner he used to sit it and BAM! There they were!”

“All this stuff is pretty weird,” I admit. “The academic in me finds it all hard to believe, and I’m spending a fortune on these tickets to see this psychic. There will be close to 3,000 people there. I don’t even know why I’m going! It’s probably going to be a complete waste of time and money!”

My Aunt Cindy responds, “Oh, just see what happens. I’m really hoping your mom will come through. I hope she gives you a sign…”

Suddenly, she is interrupted by the clinking of piano keys from the corner of the room. I follow several pairs of astonished eyes to a peculiar scene. Lying at the foot of the piano is a stuffed doll.

My grandmother looks in astonishment behind her. “Did someone accidently knock that thing off the piano?”

An eerie silence engulfs the room. All the family members shake their heads no. Everyone looks at one another suspiciously… inquisitively…and with a glimmer of hope.

“It’s like someone picked it up and threw it down on the keys!” I exclaim.

My heart almost jumps out of my chest when I realize that I was mistaken about the object being a doll.

It is actually a stuffed snowman.

A Summertime Run

Six months later: DuQuoin, Illinois.

As I'm running, each foot quickly pounding hard gravel road, I reflect on the events of winter break. I wonder if the "signs" my family and I encountered of my mother were actually her communicating with us. When I returned to Tampa, I did attend the Theresa Caputo show with Tasha. We each sat in anticipation waiting for a message from our deceased mothers. Theresa even walked through our section of the audience three times and gave other members readings.

Tasha and I never received the messages we were hoping for, but I try not to let this upset me. I feel that I have received enough validation from Mom of her presence in other ways that it doesn't really matter. I see her everywhere I look.

I'm paying a visit to DuQuoin during the summer interim from graduate school. As I run through the middle of town, a literal jog down memory lane, I see and feel Mom everywhere.

I run past DuQuoin Elementary and Middle School. This was the site of many of my band and chorus concerts my mother would attend. I also remember how every morning before school she would try to embarrass the crap out of me. When dropping me off in front of the school building, she would turn the music on the radio up to full blast.

Laughing softly to myself, I continue my run and begin to head down Main Street. I pass my Grandma and Grandpa Strong's old house. This was the site where the madness of having a family of nine manifested. Memories flash through my mind: practicing for piano lessons on

their grand piano in the living room, favorite Christmases spent sitting in the dining room and listening to everyone chatter at once while enjoying the iced sugar cookies my grandmother ordered from the local bakery, coming by after church on Sunday mornings drinking Coke and eating Kit Kat bars while the Strong women chattered about their lives, Easters spent looking for plastic eggs with slips of paper that represented money amounts my grandparents would reward us with. They had to start using slips of paper instead of actual money because a few of the eggs were misplaced one year.

Sadness subtlety sneaks up on me when I think about how holidays are not the same as they used to be, and I have no idea who currently lives in their home or what it looks like on the inside.

I spot Mrs. Thompson's house in the distance. This was a lady I used to take piano lessons from in high school. She was a cheerful middle-aged woman who was always optimistic about my musical skills even when I did not practice nearly enough as I should have. She gave me free lessons after my mother died. "It's the least I can do," she had said.

DuQuoin's famous Grand Theater still stands on Main Street. It is so old that I remember my grandmother telling me a story about how the owner constructed a pretend yellow brick road outside the entrance for the opening of *The Wizard of Oz*. This was the only theater I can remember where you could see an evening show for only two or three dollars. People in town would joke about your feet sticking to the floors because they were so dirty. Some of the chairs were half broken and every now and then a film would be cancelled because the projector broke down. Mom would take my brother and he to see a flick on Friday nights after a long day of doing hair. I particularly remember when James Cameron's *Titanic* was in theaters and her

putting hands over both of our eyes during the scene where Jack paints a nude portrait of his girlfriend Rose. I guess Mom figured we were not ready to see Kate Winslett's breasts.

Next up is the Catholic Church where my mother's funeral occurred. I try to envision the large number people who stood about a mile down the street waiting to pay their respects to our family. Blocking out the painful memory of my mother's funeral, I try to think of happier moments in this former place of worship. I remember every year going to the Christmas Eve candlelight vigil service. A pleasing vision of Mom wrapping her arm around me with our faces glowing in the darkness as we sing "Silent Night" makes me smile.

I pass the Zimmerman's large two-story brick home, and I can see their underground pool in the back yard. Every Fourth of July they would host a barbeque for their family and close friends. My family would go just about every year. When I was really young and still had a fascination with magic, I thought the fireworks were fairies. Mom would get embarrassed when I would repeatedly yell at the top of my lungs, "Weeeee! Mom! Look at the fairies! Weeee!" There was also a close call one year when I almost drown in the deep end of their pool. Mr. Zimmerman jumped in and pulled me to the surface. I remember this was one of the times I had seen my mother the most afraid in her life. She had tightly grabbed my arm and shook me saying, "You scared the shit out of me! Don't you ever do that again!" Then she hugged me and started to cry.

I now know what this fear is like—watching someone potentially be torn from your life forever.

I'm relieved to see the sign for my family's street in the distance, Seminole Drive. This signals that my run around town is just about over. Ironically, Eric Church's "Give Me Back My Hometown" comes on my IPod.

"All the colors of my youth

The red, the green, the hope, the truth

Are beatin' me black and blue cause you're in every scene

My friends try to cheer me up get together at the Pizza Hut

I didn't have the heart to tell them that was our place

These sleepy streetlights on every sidewalk side street

Shed a light on everything that used to be

Give me back my hometown

'Cause this is my hometown

Church's character in the song is telling the story about losing someone. But the character refuses to let the pain of the loss taint his memories of his hometown. For me, in some ways re-membering mom on this run helps me enhance the memories of my hometown.

I don't ask anyone to give me back my hometown.

I reclaim it all on my own—one memory and one mile at a time.

An Afternoon with the Strong Sisters

"I like how it says on here that she needs to cook Cindy's roots," my Aunt Patty says as she points to a framed page of my mother's old appointment book.

It is a Sunday afternoon, and I have asked all of my mother's sisters (Janet, Cindy, Patty, and Susie) if they would engage in a re-membering process about Mom. They enthusiastically have agreed and are all sitting next to each other on an extra large sofa in the living room at Aunt Cindy's house. On the coffee table in front of them sits several items: a photo from my junior prom in which mom is helping me fasten my bow tie on the tuxedo, an April angel ceramic figurine that was a gift from my mom to my Aunt Cindy, an album of pictures from my mother's

40th birthday celebration cruise with her friends to the Bahamas, my mother and father's wedding album, and a framed page of my mother's old appointment book. In front of this page is a small 5X7 picture of my mother, Aunt Cindy, and Uncle John at one Christmas celebration. "Look at their mischievous smiles," Aunt Cindy observes. "It looks like they are up to no good."

I fiddle with my new video recorder as they look through the mementos. As I focus in on them reviewing the artifacts, I feel as if there are four little pieces of mom in front of me. All Strong sisters sport the dark brunette hair color and have fireball personalities. Whenever there is a family get-together on the Strong side, the family members tend to speak loudly and all at once. Today is no exception. They look through the mementos with excitement and do what my mom used to refer to as "hyena laughing" every few minutes.

My Aunt Jan is the eldest of the Strong sisters. Cindy, Patty, and Susie follow her in age. All of them, except Susie, pull out their reading glasses to get a better look at the artifacts. I let out a large belly laugh after watching Aunt Jan review an album and then look up and almost smack faces with Aunt Patty, who is also closely leaning in. Patty jumps back and laughs. She then reaches out and pretends that she is going to sexually grope Jan. "Woo woo, sexy!" she yells. It wouldn't be a true Strong family event with their antics. My mother's comedic abilities are passed on through these four women.

The women turn to my parents' wedding album and begin pointing and making various observations, each contributing to one another's memory work. "Now how old was Ann when she got married?" Patty asks.

"Eighteen years old," I respond.

"I thought so!" my Aunt Jan adds.

After about 45 minutes of reviewing the pictures, I say, "The first few questions are in the same format. So I'll say, 'Tell me a story about Ann as…and then I'll finish with some aspect of her identity. For example, the first question is: Could you tell me a story about Ann as a young girl?"

Right away, all sisters begin enthusiastically sharing their experiences and I find myself slipping back into time, even before I was just a gleam in my mother's eye. I start to see the fuller picture of who Ann Paxton was as a sister…

Ann was a rather large baby, 10 pounds and 10oz. The three older sisters (Patty, Cindy, and Jan) remember Grandma bringing her home from the hospital. "She had that one lazy eye," Patty remembers. It was one physical characteristic that stayed throughout her life.

My Aunt Susie was only 13 months older than Mom. Growing up, they shared a room and bed together. Susie remembers them playing all day outside in the summertime. When Mom was only 11, she had a bad fall on her 10-speed bike that left scars on her thighs, scars that remained into adulthood. Susie also remembers them both being left in the care of several babysitters, including a 70-something-year-old woman named Vergie who used to make them watch her soap opera, <u>The Edge of Night</u>.

The other sisters also have memories of Ann (or Annie Lou or Lou Lou Belle). They remember her having a lisp and talking about her kindergarten teacher Mrs. Bullock, which she would pronounce Mrs. Boo-lock. Susie and Annie were known as "the Grimers" because they were always caught eating sticky candies. Aunt Jan can picture Mom and Susie in their short shorts eating licorice and suckers and Lik-on-Aids. Mom was a lot taller and chubbier than Susie, something she constantly joked about throughout her life. Some family members gave them the nicknames Pebbles and Bam Bam based on the Flintstone characters.

Aunt Cindy shares one especially humorous story of Mom as a child. Grandma used to take Annie and Susie out to Cindy's house to get their haircuts. Cindy was out on the back patio cutting Susie's hair when Mom decided to get on top of a dirt pile and moo at the cows. Cindy and her husband John owned livestock on their farm. Susie turned to laugh at Mom and Cindy accidentally cut her hair too short. A month later, they were on a vacation and Susie held the door for a couple elderly ladies and they responded by saying, "Thank you, sonny!" This is where Susie's life long nickname "Butch" came from.

Susie and Mom got along very well. Susie rarely remembers any feelings of competition or fighting between them, even though many of her friends not only came over to their house to see her but also Mom. A few of Susie's friends were on the dance team with Mom, and she fondly remembers them telling her about a time Mom impersonated Brooke Shields during one practice. There was a 1980 Calvin Klein jean commercial where Shields pulled on a pair of tight jeans and seductively contorted herself on the floor in various positions. The young girls laughed hysterically as mom rolled up her shirt and tossed and turned on the gym floor screaming, "Look at me! I'm Brooke Shields in my sexy Calvins!"

That strong sense of humor carried on into her life as a young wife and mother. Patty laughs as she talks about Mom's wild driving and how she'd get nervous about her daughter Kirsten getting rides from her. "I was such an overprotective mother and I always made sure Kirsten wore her seatbelt," Patty explains. "But your mom would pick her up in the old red Pontiac Grand Am she used to have. She'd say 'Oh forget the damn seatbelt. This ain't like your mom's driving! You're with the fun aunt now.' Your mom drove so fast. It made me so damn nervous."

This tale inspires my Aunt Cindy to talk about a time Mom was pulled over in town by one of her friend's husbands, who was a police offer. Cindy can barely get through the story without laughing, "We're on the way home from a shopping trip, and all of a sudden we hear WOO WOO! Danny Bell, the officer, gets out of the car. Ann says, 'What the hell do you want, Bell?" He responds by telling her that her license plate sticker is expired. Cindy continues, "Your mom digs through her glove compartment and pulls out the updated sticker and says 'Fuck you, Bell. It's right here. I just haven't had time to put it on.'" Mom gets out of the car, puts the new sticker on, and drives away without getting a ticket. It turned it out to be a memorable end to a shopping trip.

The sisters shared a lot of time shopping together, and they always tried to meet for Christmas shopping every year. Aunt Jan remembers one year in particular when there was a horrible snow and ice storm. "But your mom was bound and determined to go. She said 'I've been saving up for months for this!' We're sliding around on the interstate and we see several cars in the ditch. It was just crazy!"

Since Aunt Cindy and my mother both had Mondays off, they had the most shopping experiences together. Sometimes they were stuck taking me with them. Aunt Cindy says, "One time, you were probably about seven or eight years old, you threw a fit when your mom wouldn't get a book you wanted at the mall because it was too expensive. We stopped by the Sonic Drive Thru on the way home, and she tried to make things better by offering you ice cream. You pouted, crossed your arms, and said that you didn't want anything. Your mom responded, 'Good! There will be more ice cream for us!'"

Not only do the sisters have a lot of memories of her as a tough love type of mother, but they also are bursting with stories of her as a hairdresser. Every niece and nephew was used as

guinea pigs to try out the newest hairstyles. Aunt Patty talks about several times where Mom had to "fly by the seat of her pants." All the sisters say that Mom was a "damn good hairdresser" but she was so disorganized. Sometimes she'd run out of gloves to put hair color on so she'd use zip lock bags instead. One day she ran out of permanent solution and had to go borrow one from another local hairdresser. She had to use a lint roller to get excess dog hair off the chairs. Instead of a booster seat for young kids, she would stack books and magazines on top of each other. She used to not change her barbicide as often she should, so instead of it being its normal dark blue color it was a milky white sometimes. Despite all these mishaps, business was always booming for Mom and some nights she would work until nine o'clock.

The sisters remember and appreciate one special thing Mom did as a hairdresser. After their father died, Mom made sure she went to the funeral and styled and colored his hair like she always had when he was alive. "He looked very nice," Aunt Susie says softly. "We'll never forget all the great things she did for us."

"Look! There's a butterfly outside the front window!" my Aunt Patty exclaims.

Her observation snaps me out of deep memory work and listening to the sisters' stories of Mom.

Aunt Cindy responds, "Oh yes! There are always two playing with each other right there by my flowers. But you know it's odd, every time I talk about your Mom it always seems like there's a butterfly around. One time I was telling a story about Ann to one of the grandbabies outside in the backyard and one came and flew and sat right on my finger tip!"

"I keep hearing about people connecting spirits to butterflies. What is the meaning behind that?" I ask.

Aunt Jan states, “I think they have to do with new beginnings. You know the butterfly was once a caterpillar…”

“Yeah! Like it’s about metamorphosis,” Aunt Patty adds.

Our viewing of the mystical creature is interrupted by my Aunt Cindy’s cell phone ringing from the kitchen. “I’m going to go take that. I think it might be Ryan,” Aunt Cindy says and goes to fetch her phone. Ryan is her eldest son who just got married and is traveling on his honeymoon. Due to inclement weather, there have been a few delays and Cindy has been a little worried about their vacation plans.

“I’m going to go pour myself a glass of tea,” Patty says and follows Cindy into the kitchen. My Aunt Jan pulls out her cell phone and checks her text messages. Susie stares off into the distance out the window. It appears there is quite a bit on her mind.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She looks back at me with a look of deep sadness. When I look into her eyes, I can feel her urgent yearning for the presence of her closest sister again. “I just miss her. In some ways, I think God prepared me for her death when Kenny took his job and moved.” About three years before my mother died, my Uncle Kenny took a job in a town three hours north of DuQuoin, and his wife Susie, and their two girls moved and started a new life. Susie has confided in me before that she hated not being able to be around as much when Mom was struggling the most with her illness.

“It’s like God was preparing me for her future absence,” she adds.

When Cindy and Patty return to the living room, and everyone gets settled back on the sofa, I finish up the interview with a few final questions. Finally, I get to the one I’ve been really curious to ask throughout the interview.

"So what has Mom's death taught you about being a sister?"

I ask this question for another purpose besides the dissertation project. Most of the sisters get along with one another but there has always been a tension between Cindy and Patty. No one really knows why this tension exists, but there have been different theories among family members: "They are too much a like." "They both think the other tries to take control of family situations too much." "They both think the other got more attention growing up."

The origin of the tension remains a mystery, but I hear about it quite a bit. I am not as close to Patty as Cindy so I usually only hear Cindy's perspective on their long lasting emotional distance. During a visit with Cindy a few days before, she had shared with me some of her frustration. "There are times we'll both be in the grocery store, and I have caught her trying to avoid me. She will barely even speak. I don't get it!" she had said. In this moment, by asking this question about sisterhood, I wonder if some relational work can begin between them. I wait in anticipation for a response.

The sisters spend a few moments in uncomfortable silence.

"As a sister?" Aunt Jan asks. I nod.

Only a minute goes by but it seems like an eternity. Aunt Cindy finally answers, "Your mom was the glue that held us together."

Aunt Patty's eyes widen in surprise. "You stole the words right out of my mouth. I was just getting ready to say that!"

Susie adds, "We used to get together a lot more."

Cindy shakes her head enthusiastically. "She was easy going and funny, even if some of her jokes were made at her own expense. I mean, she was the family peacekeeper, and she was the one that kept everybody, even with mother and her antics, together. We can't do that as well

without her. I would have a lot of holidays and get-togethers out here at the house, but your mom was always the one to initiate these things. I love her, and I miss her. They say if you touch one person in this life, you've done your job. She touched everybody. Every age group imaginable, she touched! I mean we are talking teenagers all the way to people in their 90's! She was that kind of person. A good girl."

Aunt Jan smiles in remembrance. "They say only the good die young!"

Cindy jokes, "If that's the case, mother will live to be 200!"

The sisters laugh "like hyenas" again. I know they love grandma, but it is better for them to laugh about familial conflicts than openly address them at this time. I just hope that this interview will help them learn to make peace with one another, and they find a way to fill the void of the social role they so much relied on my mother to enact.

I also hope it doesn't take another situation of tragedy and devastation to make them aware of the things they need to work on.

Finding Compassion in the Surgeon's Scalpel

I wander aimlessly around the hospital corridors clutching a building map in my hand. Syrie commands from my shorts' pockets "Recalculating…Recalculating…" *Shut the hell up, Syrie.* I turn my MapQuest application off of my IPhone and force myself to stop my unproductive pacing. 4:18PM. *You can still make your 4:30 appointment with Dr. Grayson. You just have to quit being stubborn and ask someone to help you find his office.* I spot a petite blonde haired nurse taking a drink from a water fountain.

"Excuse me, miss? Could you tell me how to get to McGanon 435?" I ask and present her the building map—as if she is unfamiliar with the hospital.

"Go all the way down this hall and make a left. That's where you will find the elevators. Take it up to the fourth floor. I'm not really sure after that, but you'll have signs that help direct you." she responds.

"Thank you!"

As I walk to the elevator, I feel large beads of sweat rolling down my forehead. Even though the hospital is ice cold, my nerves are causing me to sweat profusely. I have never interviewed a doctor before—let alone my mother's former doctor and let alone a neurosurgeon. I take the elevator up to the fourth floor and the voices of family members resound in my psyche.

"That Dr. Grayson…what a prince of a man!"

"He was the best doctor. He did so much for your mother."

"That guy is one of the best neurosurgeons in the country. You have to wait two years to see him, even with a referral from another doctor."

I always prep interview questions, but for this particular occasion I have taken extra precautions. A few nights before, I tried to read everything I could find on my mother's illness. I also called one of my best friends who is in medical school and went over my questions. "I don't want to sound like an idiot," I had said. Even though I have done everything possible to prepare, it feels like there is a little man playing hopscotch in the pit of my gut. Hospitals make me uncomfortable anyway.

Following the signs to "Department of Neurosurgery," I soon find a small waiting room with a couch and two plush armchairs. There is an empty desk to my left and a glass door on my right that leads to other offices. At the empty desk, I spot a phone next to a laminated list of names and phone numbers. Scanning the list, I fail to see Grayson's name. Uncertain about how

to proceed, I decide to take a seat on the sofa and wait to see if someone will approach the empty desk.

A man in a white lab coat walks behind the desk looking down at a file folder. “Hey, Sam!” he yells. “Do you have anything on this Baxter case? They’re coming in for a follow up in the A.M.”

As he walks to the other corner of the room, where I am assuming Sam is located, he takes a quick glance at me then buries himself back in the folder. *Well, he was helpful.* Since the man to my left is not proving to be of much assistance, I decide to venture through the glass door on my right. But before I do a woman in a black paint suit walks into the waiting room. “Can I help you sir?”

“Yes,” I say quickly getting up but right before clumsily dropping my folder with notes. The papers flop in multiple directions symbolizing the state of my emotional disarray. The woman stoops down and helps me gather everything. “I have a 4:30 appointment with Dr. Grayson.” She takes my name and asks me to have a seat back on the sofa. After a couple minutes, she returns and notifies me that Grayson is ready for the appointment.

With every step I take, my heart seems to beat faster. This is the most anxious I have ever been about an interview in my life. As an autoethnographer, I play between the lines of the humanities and social sciences. I may not do positivist research, but I can “talk the talk” and know how to discuss this work with colleagues. Maybe it’s not science that is frightening me this time. Maybe it’s the fear of being disappointed, or even worse, disappointing my family.

I am surprised to find that Grayson’s office is much like a faculty member’s office at a university. A large desk with stacks of papers and folders is in front of me. A desktop computer sits off to the side. I spot a bookcase in the corner of the room. One of the books, Eben

Alexander's *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, catches my eye. I have heard about this book, but I've never read it. Seeing it gives me some relief because it suggests that Grayson may be a spiritual person.

His appearance does not surprise me because I have already looked up his profile online numerous times in the past 10 years. Grayson's white lab coat is draped around his desk chair, and he wears black slacks and a light blue dress shirt. I try not to giggle when I think about my mother saying in the past, "He's pretty easy on the eyes, that Dr. Grayson." I do find him handsome but my feelings are similar to how you would appreciate the attractiveness of an older male family member.

Grayson greets me and shakes my hand. "It is nice to meet you, Blake." His handshake feels smooth and cold, symbolic of a surgeon's aggressive scalpel.

"It's great to finally meet you! I have heard many great things," I respond.

"Please, take a seat." He gestures to the chair in front of his desk.

Before I sit down, I take out the tape recorder. "Is it okay if I tape this?"

"Sure, by all means."

As I place the recorder on his desk, I notice my typed letter I sent him two months before. I had spent hours figuring out exactly what to say in my letter to let him know that I wasn't some quack seeking him out. I also made sure to put it on my official university letterhead.

We go through normal introductory remarks, and then I get to my first question of the interview. "I have heard throughout the years from various family members about the nature of my mother's condition. I have my own memories from 10 years ago but it would be nice to hear about the diagnosis from you."

"Sure. I understand," Grayson states and turns to his computer. "I have her complete medical records here and…"

As he speaks, I find myself getting lost in the medical discourse. *Pituitary adenoma, pituitary carcinoma, ACTH, Cushing's Disease, Cushing's Syndrome, cavernous sinus, metastasize, carotid artery, gamma knife radiation.* The terms make me dizzy. They are found in patient charts and textbooks. In an attempt to feel closer to my mother in this moment, I must wrap myself in cold hard facts. Even though I have just had quite a bit of information thrown at me, I am able to take thorough notes and put together a summary of my mother's condition:

My mother was diagnosed with a pituitary adenoma. Dr. Grayson informs me that these are fairly common, maybe as many as 20 percent of adults have them. My mother's tumor was fairly large and invaded the cavernous sinus, which contains several nerves and a carotid artery that supplies blood to the brain. My mother's tumor secreted a hormone called ACTH that causes the adrenal glands to produce excessive amounts of cortisol, a steroid hormone. This results in Cushing's Disease, which is when the symptoms my mother experienced (weight gain, excessive facial hair, water retention, moon face, hump back) are accompanied by a tumor. Individuals can have these symptoms without a tumor and this is known as Cushing's Syndrome.

Since my mother's tumor was so close to many important nerves, including some that control eye movement, Dr. Grayson was not able to completely remove it. After removing what they could, he and his team submitted it to the pathologist for further testing. The World Health Organization ranks the grade of these tumors on a scale of one to four, as far as how quickly they grow. My mother's tumor was a number two atypical pituitary adenoma, which signified future steady growth of the tumor. Gamma knife radiation was used to slow the growth of the tumor

and her adrenal glands were removed. Unfortunately, my mother's tumor metastasized to the other parts of her body and this resulted in Pituitary Carcinoma, which is very rare.

"How rare is this?" I ask.

"In my 20 years in this department, my colleagues and I have only seen five patients, including your mother, with it."

"And of those cases, has anyone survived?

"We have one woman who has been doing a combination of radiation and chemotherapy for years. It has been a pretty painful experience for her."

"Dr. Grayson, this is something I have wondered for a very long time. You hate to think of a family member still alive but blind. If you had completely removed the tumor, could my mother still have been alive but blind? This isn't a critique by any means."

"Oh, I know. Even if we had removed all the tumor, not only would your mother's vision be at risk but we could have hit one of the main arteries that supplies blood to the brain resulting in paralysis or death."

This makes me feel somewhat relieved. I would not have known this had I not taken the time to meet with Dr. Grayson. I conclude the interview with a few questions about what he thinks is the biggest obstacle to patient and doctor communication and his own philosophy of patient care. "I have seen hundreds of patients, but your mother was very memorable," he says.

"Oh, really? Why is that?" If I am honest with myself, I know I ask because I want to push him a little bit and see if he can give me an answer not just in regards to the rarity of her case.

"She just had a wonderful attitude…very optimistic. Many people faced with her condition tend to want to just give up. Your mom was a fighter."

Yes, and this ruined the quality of the end of her life.

Grayson asks about my father.

"He is doing well and is remarried. He speaks so highly of you, and he really appreciated you leaving a message on our answering machine when mom died."

"Oh, well. You know, like I said, your mom was a special patient. I'm sorry things didn't work out."

"I am too. But you know, I don't think I'd be doing the work I am doing had I not had this experience. I guess if there's a silver lining this would be it."

"True. Well I understand your need for doing this. When my father died two years ago, I was doing medical research in Africa, and I remember just wanting his doctor to send everything to me across the country. I just needed to assess the situation for myself."

Dr. Grayson's pager interrupts our conversation. Within seconds his office phone rings, signaling me to cease all questions.

I smile. "You are a busy guy. But again, I appreciate you giving up some of your time. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do," he responds as we walk out of his office.

On my drive home, I try to process what just occurred. Dr. Grayson is an outstanding doctor and very personable. He thoroughly answered all of my questions, and he devoted 45 minutes out of his busy day to speak with me. But for some reason, I still feel like something is missing—like I was expecting more from the interview. Did I expect him to start tearing up as he spoke of her? Or for us to have this warm fuzzy moment where he told me a personal story about her? Or, that we would share a hug?

I guess those sorts of experiences only happen in the movies.

"It really does fucking suck what you had to go through, Mom," I say out loud. I have reached a point in my life where I no longer think twice about speaking to myself or I guess, depending on one's belief system, the spirits and ghosts of my past.

I turn on the radio and am pleased to hear a familiar country song, Justin Moore's "If Heaven Wasn't So Far Away." I increase the volume and begin singing along with Moore, "If heaven wasn't so far away, I'd pack up the kids and go for the day. Introduce them to their grandpa. Watch 'em laugh at the way he talks. I'd find my long lost cousin John, the one we left back in Vietnam. Show him a picture of his daughter now. She's a doctor and he'd be proud. Then tell him we'd be back in a couple of days. In the rearview mirror we'd all watch 'em wave. Yeah, and losing them wouldn't be so hard to take. If Heaven wasn't so far away."

Heaven is far away, but you are not Mom. While our relationship may be different, it is still alive and I can reconnect with you everyday. I am sorry it has taken me so long to figure this out.

My Narrative Archaeological Dig into Death

I stare at the plastic storage box that I find underneath my parents' bed. A thick coating of dust covers the top, and when I go to pull it open I cringe upon viewing the gray smudges on my fingers. I quickly dust my hands off on my jeans and peer inside. My heart rate quickens as I begin to sift through items that represent my mother's last years of life.

I go through the funeral guestbook. In this particular format for a book, there isn't any space to write personal messages but it is nice to see the many names of close friends written out on each line. There are close to a hundred sympathy cards, and some of the names of the senders I recognize and others I do not. Their words of support bring me comfort even 10 years after

Mom's death. *I am so devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are with you. She was a special lady. We will miss her so much. I know she's up there laughing and doing hair.* I smile at the last comment. One interpretation of Heaven I once heard is that whatever you enjoy doing the most in life, you will be doing there. I know Mom's two favorite activities were doing hair and being a mother. I guess the latter activity she'll have to do from afar.

I find a list of chores on a scrap piece of paper scrawled in my mother's messy handwriting. It is a true testament to her ability to always care for others, especially for her family. I glance at a few of the tasks: fix button on Lindon's shirt, sign Kyle up for flag football, mop kitchen floor, pick up Blake's allergy medicine. It is amazing how one simple list of quotidian tasks can make me feel so connected to her. I envision her dancing to a country music song as she mops the kitchen floor. I'm sure she also was having a conversation with Maddie, our family dog.

A flashy purple unopened envelope catches my eye. On the front I recognize my handwriting, and I have addressed this card to Dad. In the top left hand corner, my father has written 2-14-05, "First Valentine's Day Without Ann." I open up the envelope and find a Valentine's Day Card I had given to him. Why in the world would I have thought it would be a good idea to do this? Why would Dad choose to never open it? Would reading the card be like another slap to the face?

I shake these questions aside and go on to the next item. A newspaper clipping that reads: "In loving memory of Ann Paxton, who passed away two years ago, December 19, 2004. Gone, but not forgotten. Absent, but always near. How we missed the presence Of the one we loved so dear." I am not quite sure why the "Of" is capitalized. Perhaps, this is a typo? I interpret this

message differently now because I have confidence in sustaining the presence of my mother, even if it isn't physical. I no longer believe death severs my attachment to her.

I find Kyle's poem he wrote and read at the funeral. I pick up the yellow notebook paper and read it to myself: "Mom is great. Mom is fun. I was her son. I guess her time had come but her new life has just begun. Mom's pain is over, gone, done. Now, she is my guardian angel, shining like the sun." This was so touching during her funeral, and it was a big achievement for my brother. He hasn't been much of creative type nor great at expressing his feelings. I am even more touched to see that every "is" in the poem was written above a crossed out "was."

Aside from the personal items, there are more clinical mementos. I rummage through them and find my mother's death certificate. "Cause of death- pulmonary embolism" it reads. Additionally, there are discharge papers, a hospital guidebook, copies of prescriptions for medication, and one of Mom's old driver's licenses. At first, it is hard for me to understand why Dad would want to hold onto these types of things—detached reminders of my mother's most painful aspects of her life. But if I force myself to think rationally, I can understand that this information might be useful in the future should there be any instances where I would need to review my family's medical history.

Next, I see a white hardbound book in the stack. I turn it over and find that the cover is a cartoon of a baby in a bassinette surrounded by an angel and various creatures: birds, lambs, rabbits, and puppy dogs. Opening it up, I am pleasantly surprised to discover that it is my baby memory book. The first page has a picture of an angel blowing a horn and underneath is a message that reads:

That Special Day

November 22, 1986 (Baby's Birthday)

This is the day which the lord hath made, we will rejoice and be glad in it (Ps:118:24) On the second page, there are listings of all kinds of information about my birth. I had no idea that people actually kept track of this stuff: first indications Mom was going into labor, when she arrived at the hospital, my full name, weight, length, hair color, eye color, doctor, pediatrician, and nurses. I look through the rest of the book and find several other items that melt my heart: a door deck in the shape of a green kangaroo with my name on it, the bracelet I wore in the hospital, a cigar for Dad, and a picture of me in my mother's arms right after she delivered me, my skin inflamed and covered with placenta fluid.

"*Man you were quite the aggressive baby when I delivered you. Your brother, on the other hand, moved at a snail's pace,"* my mother used to say. *"I always joke and say that you ended up acting in completely opposite fashions when you were toddlers—you being calm and easy going and your brother being hyper and always causing a ruckus."*

Letting out a deep sigh, I place the baby book back in the container. *Okay. I think this is good enough. I've had enough of an archaeological dig for one day.* When I begin to close the box, I notice a bright red paper booklet with the title "DHS Class of '82: Celebrating 20 Years" in bold black letters. This must be the program from my mother's twenty-year high school reunion. I read through a few of her classmate's listings, and then I get to Mom's entry:

Spouse's Name: Lindon Paxton

Children: Blake (15 years old) Kyle (11 years old)

Education: 1 year of Cosmetology at John A. Logan Community College

Current Employment: Hairdresser at home

Plans for the future:

A wave of long-term grief hits me hard. I choke back sobs and start to feel the tears form in my eyes when I read the final line of her entry:

Continue to work as a hairdresser for the next 20 years and enjoy watching my boys grow up.

Re-membering with Sarah

"Sometimes, you just don't realize how the smallest thing can mean so much to someone. I didn't know until it was six months before your mom died just how much that moment back in high school meant to her," Sarah Morgan says as large tears flow down her cheeks.

It is in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday. Sarah and I sit at her dining room table in a different house than the one she resided in when I was growing up. The house is quaint, decorated in the style of a log house cabin and a lovely apple cinnamon fragrance lingers in the air. I slowly take another sip of the fresh squeezed lemonade she has served me.

"Wow. That was such a powerful story, Sarah," I say and dig out a couple loose tissues from my pocket and hand them to her. "Thank you for sharing that. And thank you for doing that for Mom."

Sarah is a former client and friend of my mother's. She has just told me a story from their high school days. For some reason, when my mother was a sophomore in high school she had to take a physical education class with girls two years older than she. "The first day of class I remember seeing your mom sitting in the bleachers all by herself," Sarah had told me. "Well, the second day I just went up and introduced myself. We were friends from that moment."

Her story, even in its simplicity, moves me deeply. I picture a young Ann, insecure and scared as hell and wondering if she'll have any friends in that PE class. Then, I see Sarah, with her bright and bubbly personae walking up and melting all of my mother's fears away. I do not

know why this one simple act of kindness means so much to me. Maybe it is because I know what it's like to constantly worry about fitting in with a group of peers. Maybe it's because there are times I have felt alone and isolated from others, and I needed someone like Sarah in my life. Ultimately, it allows me to have a deeper understanding of my mother and Sarah's friendship.

"Can you tell me what you remember about Mom as a mother?" I ask.

Sarah chuckles as she dabs the tears from her eyes. "Well I think I have already told you this story. But you remember you and Claire used to go to nursery school together?"

I nod my head. Claire is Sarah's daughter, and she and I are the same age.

"Your mom and I would take turns dropping off and picking you guys up from school. The school used to get book order packets every couple of weeks. And you loved to read as a kid and you'd always want to order books, every time. So..." She lets out a belly laugh. "I'd drop you off at your house and your mom would be working and you'd walk in with those book order packets and she'd stand there and yell 'Another fucking book order! Are you kidding me? I just got him books two weeks ago!'"

It seems that with every interview I keep hearing about my mother's over abundance of using the "F" word. Memories of this, and the way she used to refer to her large breasts as "cow titties," can ensure a large belly laugh for everyone.

Sarah continues, "But I never heard you say that word as a kid even though your mom said it in front of you all the time. Your mom just had her own unique style of mothering. She wasn't really like gushy with you and your brother or overly affectionate but you knew that she cared about you guys so much. You boys were her world. It didn't matter if she'd been working a 10 or 12 hour day if Kyle had a sporting event or you had a music concert, she was there. She was a special mother and a special person. God, I just miss her."

"What do you remember about her during her time of illness?"

Noticing that my glass of lemonade is now empty, Sarah walks into the kitchen and grabs the pitcher from the fridge. "I don't know if you knew this," she begins as she pours the lemonade into my glass, "but I had a pituitary tumor, too."

I am so shocked it feels like my eyes are going to bulge out of my head. "What? I don't think anyone has told me that."

Sarah looks just as surprised as I am that I do not know this information. "Yeah, so we would often compare notes about our experiences and the symptoms we were having."

"Did you have to have surgery for yours?"

"No. I did not have Cushing's Disease like your mother because instead of producing ACTH my tumor produced a hormone called prolactin. My physician still monitors it to this day, and I have to take medicine to regulate it and keep it from growing."

"Well, that's good it can be regulated."

Sarah sighs deeply. She does not seem like she is relieved by this information and shifts back and forth in her seat uncomfortably. "There's been a lot guilt in me about why God took your mother and left me. I feel like she had a lot more to give than I do."

Her voices quivers and I can see the years of pain radiating from her eyes. "She just loved life so much and I don't understand how you can have two people around the same age with the same location of tumor but they were able to fix me…and not her."

She breaks down. I walk over to her side of the table and give her a sideways hug around the shoulders, and place my cheek on the top of her head. This moment is strangely intimate. Until this day, aside from occasional emails, I had barely spoken to Sarah. But somehow, this

interview and re-membering process melts away any superficial barriers. Her disclosures of disease have brought me closer to her—and to Mom.

"But Sarah, you do have so much to give. My mother would not want you to feel this guilt," I reassure her.

"Thank you. But your mother just touched lives positively everywhere she went. It's really hard remembering her when she was sick. There was one day…I don't know if you want to hear this." She looks up at me and her face searches mine, looking for permission to narrate her story.

I give her a tight squeeze and return to my seat. "Yeah, go ahead. I guess I should be sitting down for this."

"Do you remember that some of her friends and clients took turns taking her to the doctor when your family members couldn't?"

"Yes."

"Well, one day we were on the way back from her endocrinologist and she turns to me and says 'Sarah. I have to talk to you about something. I need to talk to somebody about this and nobody wants to talk about it.' And of course, I said 'Annie you just talk babe.' She said, 'I just know that I'm going to die, and I want the boys to be prepared."

A cold chill rolls down my spine. I have never heard from anyone that Mom actually thought about dying.

Sarah sympathetically places her hand on my arm. "You okay, babe?"

"Yes. So she really thought she was going to die?"

"I kept trying to reassure her that we would beat this, but she just wouldn't let up so I let her get it out of her system. She told me she had put things away like all of her jewelry and

certain papers. She was really worried about leaving you and your brother behind and what your Dad was going to do without her."

Nobody wants to think about a family member dying, but after hearing Sarah tell me this, I wonder if my mother's final months of life would have been a little bit easier for all of us had we considered the possibility. I am truly grateful that Sarah provided an outlet for my mother to speak her mind and relieve some anxiety about what she knew deep down was coming. I find it interesting that Sarah needs to talk about this information with me as much as my mother needed to talk to her about her possible death.

Sarah leans in closer and taps her hand lightly on the table. "Another thing she talked about that day was how she thought you were gay."

I sharply inhale my breath. While I had heard that she had hinted to an aunt that she suspected I was gay, this was pretty much all I knew. For years, I have wondered how Mom would have reacted to me coming out. Now, knowing that I will get some answers enthralls me but paralyzes me with fear at the same time.

Sarah continues, "Your mom said that if she were here when you decided to come out she'd fight tooth and nail for you, but she worried about how your father would take the news. I told her that he would come around. It may be a shock at first but if you love your kids you'll accept it, and you realize they are the same person even if they're gay. I told your mom she should probably prepare your dad in case you decided to come out. So I guess she probably discussed it with him."

I shake my head back and forth. My mother had not ever mentioned to my father that she thought I was gay. I think back to four years ago when I broke the news to him. His response was, "Well I'm not tickled pink about it." Surprisingly, he never suspected I was gay, and he also

was more disappointed about me telling other family members before him than the fact that I was gay. At least I know now that my mother would have been very supportive.

There's a crinkle of frustration on Sarah's forehead. "I told her she should prepare him. But I guess things are alright with you and your father?"

"Yes. You were right. He is coming around and has been pretty good about it. In fact, when he was in Tampa for my master's degree commencement ceremony, we went to Madeira Beach one day. This guy runs by without his shirt and Dad says, 'Hey. What do you think about that one?' I mean I about pissed my pants. Not only was Dad validating that I was gay but he was also suggesting a man was attractive!"

Sarah bursts out laughing. "Wow! That's great. Your dad is a great guy. He and your mom, though, they sure did fight hard but we all knew they loved each other. I think sometimes the couples that love the hardest fight the hardest. You know?"

"I agree. My dad did so much for my mom. At one point, just to keep our insurance to pay for all my mother's medical bills, he had to work three hours away from home. That's a six hour commute back and forth!"

Sarah gives me a warm smile and reaches over and touches my face. "They are both good people and they brought up a wonderful young man. Your mom would be so proud of you Blake."

I look down bashfully. "Thanks, Sarah."

"You got it, babe! Anything else you need to ask me about?"

Quickly, I review my notes and make sure the tape recorder is still going. "You've really helped so much Sarah. Thank you! I guess I'll close by just asking if there is anything you'd like to say to conclude the interview."

Sarah takes a few moments to collect her thoughts. As she begins to speak, she leans closer to the recorder as if she wants to make sure this statement is completely captured on tape. "It's remarkable to me that you've taken something that had to be such a tragedy and that you're turning it into something positive. Not only is it going to help give you peace, but it will help give your family peace, and all of your students and hopefully the rest of the world if you can get your dissertation published. You can validate feelings and you can change the way people look at things and that's a gift. Your mother, she'll live on through your gift. That's amazing!"

I enthusiastically click the stop button on the recorder. "Now that's a great ending line!"

Sarah jumps up from the table with excitement. "Glad I can help. Now don't go anywhere. I got some pot roast in the oven and you're staying for dinner."

Restoring Bonds with My Father

She'll live on through your gift.

Sarah's words continue to swirl in my head as I pull into the driveway. I realize that she is right. For a long time it was painful for me to come back to DuQuoin. There were too many traumatic memories, and too much fear of rejection. After being here for three weeks, I realize that my fear was completely unnecessary. In almost every interview I have conducted, a participant has asked me if I have found a partner. None of them have pretended that my potential suitor could be a female either. The more I have immersed myself in the field, the more I reconnect to those I left behind. The more I re-member mom with others, the more I see this town with new eyes and my sense of pride in the community is restored.

As I pull into our driveway, I see my father sleeping in one of two folding chairs in front of the garage doors. Our family golden retriever, Sophie, sits between them panting with her tongue sticking out. I assume Dad has been mowing the lawn when I see small remnants of grass

blades covering his arms. He sports an old gray T-shirt that says The Malt Shoppe, the name of the local restaurant he used to own and manage, jogging shorts, and a beat up pair of tennis shoes. The folding chair next to him invites, *implores* me to sit with him.

As I walk toward the seat, Dad's eyes slowly open and a faint smile spreads across his face. "Hey man. Why don't you turn that radio down?" Before sitting down, I reach behind the chair and quickly silence the sports broadcaster for this evening's Cardinal's baseball game.

It is almost sundown on this summer evening. The southern Illinois weather has been a nice change from the hot, sticky, humid Tampa heat. A slight breeze threatens to blow my field notes away, and I quickly place an empty red milk crate on them. A local convenience store still offers customers fresh milk in glass containers they may switch out in theses crates. Dad keeps them around the garage as potential footstools and storage containers.

"How did your interview go?" Dad asks.

I reach out and slowly pet Sophie. She recently received her spring haircut, and the fur is thick around her head and neck while the rest of the body is smoothly buzzed. "The interview went pretty well. It is just hard for people to remember things about Mom…since it's been a little over 10 years."

Dad reaches up and scratches his thick gray beard, appearing deep in thought. "Well, I hope all of these interviews can still be helpful."

"Oh, of course!" I continue to softly pet Sophie. "You are such a pretty girl! Yes, so pretty…" In a similar fashion to my mother, I baby talk with the dog.

Dad lets out a chuckle. "She's my baby."

"Do you know Aunt Cindy doesn't even know about her? How long have you guys had her?"

"Since Kelly and I got married…about six years."

"I guess it's still hard for her and the other sisters to come here…"

I don't state the reason but we know it is because this is where my mother died. This fact seems to weigh heavy on us creating a feeling of awkward tension. In the few moments of strained silence, I continue to coo at the dog. Why can't I just feel comfortable in the silence with him? Is it because I know that there is so much I want to say but not quite sure how? Finally, after what seems like an eternity, I ask, "So I can interview you right? I mean for my dissertation."

Dad's mouth widens in shock. "Uh, yeah! Why wouldn't you be able to?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know. I just thought it might be difficult for you to talk about these things."

"Son, you can ask me anything you want. I'm an open book."

There is a moment of silence, and I notice that the sun is beginning to set in the distance. The creatures of the night begin their chorus of various melodies: crickets chirping, an owl calling out, the faint sounds of a few neighborhood dogs barking. Even in the most residential areas of Tampa, this symphony of evening nature isn't quite as sweet to my ears as it is back here in southern Illinois.

I think about what Sarah has disclosed to me early in the afternoon, and I am left wondering if Mom had ever confided in Dad about the possibility of dying. Usually I am too afraid to ask questions of this nature, but if I don't ask it now when will I ever? This whole experience is about digging deep into this traumatic loss and trying to heal from it.

"Did Mom ever talk to you about dying?"

My father's whole body stiffens as he looks off in the distance. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out before responding. "Not really. We just tried to hope for the best. I do remember the last appointment we had with Dr. Grayson and the man who would have been her oncologist. It was on the Friday before she died that Sunday. Grayson showed us the X-ray of the brain and how the tumor was spinning out of control. He spoke with confidence though. From what I remember, he suggested it would be difficult to manage but it was possible."

I consider responding to him and letting him know that he doesn't have to narrate and relive this experience, but I refrain from doing so. Maybe he needs to tell this story.

He continues to look down the street and talk, "I never really thought about her dying. It just seemed like every time you turned around she was getting smacked in the face with something. The next night, on Saturday, we had gotten into an argument about your grandma. As always, she wanted to run the damn show."

I vividly remember my Grandma Jo-Ann coming over to visit when my mother was sick, and as soon as she could hear my father's truck grinding down the gravel road she would get up to leave our house. I have never been quite sure why there has always been tension between the two of them, and my mother's illness seemed to make it worse.

"The next morning I went to mass. When I got home, she was still in bed. I crawled back under the blankets and held her. I kept telling her how sorry I was about the argument…" My father's voice quivers. "God, she just wasn't herself that day. Your Aunt Cindy called later in the morning and we were talking about what we were going to do about Christmas gifts for you and your brother. Ann thought we were talking about her or something, and she got so angry…I mean went ape shit and started screaming, 'Quit acting like I'm fucking dying!' I had to settle her down before Father George got there."

"Oh, Father George came to the house?"

"Yes, he came and visited. He said some prayers. I think maybe that's what caused her anxiety because she felt like she was being given her last rites."

"Yeah."

"And then she started saying she felt really warm and so I kept putting a wash cloth on her face. She couldn't eat anything, had no appetite. Then, you came home and you know the rest of the story."

"Yes, I do. You know, I've thought about that day a lot and have written about it. But it's always so hard to think about and I can remember every painful detail. As time goes on though, it's been easier to keep it from being on my mind."

My father appears to be replaying that day in his mind. I feel some guilt for having him go through this again. He turns to me and says, "But you know, there is one thing I still think about a lot since that day."

"What's that?"

"I often wonder if she really loved me."

His statement is like a jab to the stomach. I take a breath and quickly say, "Oh, Dad. I think she did."

Dad's eyes widen. "That's not something you should think. It something you should *know*."

My face burns in embarrassment when I realize I did not say the right thing. I am sure my father does not want to hear that there was any hesitancy in my mother's love. Quickly, I try to think of what else I can say to cover up my disastrous blunder. "Come on, Dad. She *did* love you. I *know* she did. What would make you think otherwise?"

My father's eyes slightly glisten. "I don't know. I just said things…teased her a lot."

"I am sure you both said things that you didn't mean. I always feel like people should be more concerned about couples that do not get into any disagreements than the ones that do. It is healthy to have some disagreements."

"If that's true, than our relationship was a great success," he sarcastically responds.

"You guys always stuck it out, though. To me that shows true love." When I see that my statement isn't really reassuring him, I get up from the chair and walk over. "Come on, Dad. Get up."

I help ease him out of the chair and hug him tightly in front of the garage in the middle of the driveway. We stay there for several minutes. I realize that I can only say so much to ease his pain. For now, maybe my presence and open arms is what he needs.

Maybe I can take away some of the burden of this doubt that has plagued his mind for the last 10 years, and let him know that he was and is loved very much.

* * *

"Do we really have to record this?" Dad looks at the type recorder like it's a venomous snake.

I let out a deep sigh. "Dad, I need to record it because it will help me when I write up the data. I can stop the tape at any time. You'll barely even know it's here."

"Alright," he agrees. It has been about three days since I have spoken with Dad about my dissertation and interviewed Sarah. I have had to take a couple days off from the dissertation research because of the intensity of my grief. I have spent my time wisely, going for long jogs around town, catching up on my academic reading, and relaxing in Aunt Cindy's pool.

Dad and I are sitting in the living room. It's a Thursday in the early evening. He is in his favorite armchair and I am on the brown leather sofa. The tape recorder is placed on the end table, the only thing physically separating us. I have asked Dad if I could have a copy of mom's death certificate that I found in the plastic container. As he is rummaging in his home office to find one, I scan the opposite living room wall. A portrait of Dad and Kelly from their wedding day is proudly mounted. Surrounding the photo, scrawled out in black permanent marker, are messages of well wishes from family and friends. I am glad that Kelly is in our lives. She does make Dad happy.

Next to this portrait are two large frames housing a collage of pictures. Painted above them in fancy cursive writing it says "Our Family." There are pictures of Kelly's four children and my brother and me at various parts of our lives, even before she and Dad were married. A few candid couple shots also are included. While I appreciate Kelly's hard work in making this, I am left wondering where my mother is in the collage. Isn't she still part of "our family?" I am not angry with Kelly, just somewhat disappointed.

Dad comes back with a copy of the death certificate, and I shift my focus to our interview. He takes a few moments to settle into the chair, making sure to sit in the most comfortable position for his aching back. Every time I am home I notice my father's aging process more and more. It is the little things that I notice—him limping to the fridge in the middle of the night for a glass of water, using reading glasses even though he's had LASIK surgery, and how his beard and the little hair he has left on his head continue to turn gray.

Time is ticking. If relational work needs to be done, it needs to be done now.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Go ahead," my father responds looking up at the ceiling fan.

I look at my notes and feel very peculiar interviewing my father. We have had some very intimate discussions up to this point. I'm wondering if framing this discussion as an interview is going to have some repercussions.

"Could you tell me a story about Mom as a young girl?"

A long pause passes. My father scratches his beard deep in thought.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

Come on Dad. It's not that hard a question. I attempt to redirect. "I mean what do you remember about her when she was younger? You've told me about how you two met. Maybe that's a good place to start."

Dad begins to narrate the story of his life with Mom. I try to think with his responses instead of about them. With the information he provides me, I am able to see the relationship unfold…

Ann was more mature than a normal 14 year old. I met her through your Uncle Joe, who was one of my best friends in school. When we were first dating, we spent a lot of time at your Grandma and Grandpa Strong's house playing pool in the basement, listening to music, and sneaking a beer from time to time.

Your Uncle Joe suggested I take your mom out for New Year's Eve. I mean, man, your mom was a knockout. I was a little hesitant to ask her out, though. She was younger than me, and I had just been burnt by a former girlfriend. But, I thought what the hell? So, I asked her to the party. We went and had a good time. Damn nerves got the best of me on the way home. I told her that we probably wouldn't get serious because of the age difference. I think that really upset her.

We didn't talk for about a month. Then, I went to a basketball game with Joe. You remember your mom was on the school dance team? Well, halftime came around and she came

shimmying down the bleachers. I thought, well shit! You better get that girl back! And so after the game, I apologized and that's when it all started.

I went with your Mom to all her school dances. She used to cook meals for me and bring them over to me at my place. Mmm…She made the best meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Those potatoes were loaded with butter and salt. You remember?

Of course, I don't know if you know this but I had a jealous streak. Every guy that talked to your mom I watched like a hawk. It got to be a little too much for her and we took a little bit of a break. That only lasted a couple weeks, though.

Your mom graduated that May and we married in August. I don't really member how I asked her to marry me. We had a few conversations about marriage. One day, after going to the movies, we went and looked at rings. It was pretty simple. We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment when we were first married. Your mom used to do people's hair there while she was finishing up cosmetology school. After a couple years, we decided to have this home built. Our first year in this house, we tried to get pregnant. It took your mom a while to get pregnant with you, I don't know if you know that.

So then, you were born on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. A high school football playoff game was also going on that day. Everybody was rushing back and forth from the hospital waiting room to the cars, trying to listen to the game. Ha! You were finally born after your mom was in eight hours of labor. But something wasn't quite right with your breathing…something hadn't developed fully. So, we had to transport you to another hospital 30 minutes away. But luckily, you ended up being okay and we got to have you home for the Thanksgiving holiday.

The first few years raising you went pretty good. But then, after I got laid off at the mines, everything went to shit. Your mom had her miscarriage. She cried so much and could barely eat for weeks. When she went back to work, I decided to start a restaurant—the Malt Shoppe I called it. Then, about a year after we opened I was offered my job back at the mines. So, I hired my co-manager Ken to help me be able to work both jobs.

About two years after that, we had your brother. It was great watching you boys grow up. Your mom and I would go to his little league games and your concert and plays. She was able to go more than I was to those things. I mean she would work a 10 or 12 hour day of doing hair and then still turn around and go to one of you kid's events. My Annie, she was just an amazing woman.

The beeping of the tape recorder interrupts my father's story. After quickly examining it, I realize I need to change its battery. "Hold on, Dad. I need to fix this. Sorry."

While I am fidgeting with the recorder, Dad goes and pours himself a class of iced tea. Once we get situated again, I ask, "How would you describe your coping process after Mom's death?"

Dad continues his story…

In the first year after your mom was gone, she was constantly on my mind. I spent many nights at home wondering about a lot of things. Was there anything else I could have done? Could I have been a better husband? Could my words have been kinder in her final days?

I spent a lot of time talking to Father George. In one conversation we had, I felt so guilty that I told him I thought I had killed your mom. I just felt so bad and helpless. Of course, he told me that I did all I could do for her. He suggested maybe going to her grave and praying might help me. So, for many weeks, I would do just that. I would have conversations with her while I

was there…asking her for guidance. I can't really think of a specific example but I just knew there were times where I felt like she responded to me.

There was this one specific dream I kept having about her, too. I would always be trying to run after he but I could never catch her. I took this as a message from her that I needed to move on with my life. So, it took me some time, but I started dating again. You remember I spent time with a couple women before I met Kelly, but it was nothing serious.

I still miss her, but I know that I am blessed to have my health and family. I guess it's true that you don't know how good something is until it's gone.

I look down at my watch and am surprised to see that a full hour has passed. It is amazing that a span of 18 years can be covered in this short amount of time. It seems appropriate at this point to ask the last question of the interview.

"If Mom could come back, just for a short period of time, what would you want to say to her?"

"I think the first thing I'd tell her was I don't know if I ever told you this but I love you. You just never know how good you have it until it's gone. And just thank you for letting me be part of your life. I just hope that I didn't wreck your life. Because it was a short one."

"You didn't Dad."

"And…" Dad's voice slightly quivers and I can see his eyes glazing over. "I'm so mad at you for going and leaving me."

I begin to respond but have to clear my throat and get rid of the lump that has formed. "What would you hope that she would say?"

"I hope she would say she loved me."

I reach over the end table and take my father's rough calloused hand in mine. "She would Dad."

"And that her life was good."

"It was good Dad. Before her illness, it was really good." I give his forearm a soft reassuring rub, turn the tape recorder off, and put it away. "Thanks again, Dad. For doing this."

"No problem."

Dad flips on the television and starts channel surfing. We've said quite a bit to each other in the last two hours, and we take the time to process the interview in silence. I wonder if this interview was helpful—for my father's coping process and for our relationship. Hopefully, this interview has started something special.

Through continuing a bond with Mom, I attempt to restore a bond with my father—that had for some time seemed somewhat broken.

Interlude Three

I dream about what I hope to be my future.

And I dream about Mom.

"We are proud to announce Dr. Blake Paxton!" Carolyn proclaims. It is the day of my dissertation defense, and I have just passed with flying colors. Afterwards, my committee members and I beam widely for pictures. Friends and colleagues approach me and congratulate me and plan future celebrations for that evening. While I am ecstatic about going through this major milestone in my life, I still feel some anxiety.

I look around the room searching for Mom even though I know it is ridiculous to do so. Gradually, the people in the room start to disappear until I am left alone—holding my dissertation in one hand and a framed diploma in the other.

Mom materializes in front of me. After giving me a hug and kiss on my cheek, she leans in and whispers in my ear, "Don't worry. I've been here the whole time."

Chapter Four: Reassessing Continuing Bonds and Challenging the Causality Thesis

While much research has been completed on continuing bonds, many aspects of these relationships with the dead still need to be interrogated. Klass (2006) argues, "We do not yet know all the interactions that comprise what we now call continuing bonds. We are still developing a common set of terms with which to talk about them. We are still looking for scholars in other disciplines whose work will give us methods or theory we can incorporate into ours" (p. 857). In the remaining two chapters of this dissertation, I attempt to show how my data may illuminate current understandings of continuing bonds but also help unearth different questions about them. I believe that communication scholars can make a strong contribution to the continuing bonds literature.

Specifically, in this chapter, I summarize my findings on the complexity of continuing bonds and re-membering in my mother's community of grievers. I discuss how using certain communication theoretical frameworks (derived from research on family storytelling and end of life decision making) can provide future research avenues for continuing bonds and re-membering scholarship. This will be shown through my ethnographic data and the ways in which people re-membered my mother—consistent with the current identified strategies in the literature but also differing in several instances. While many experiences of re-membering during the research process were enjoyable, there also were situations of discomfort. I address these in the sections on the constraints and failures of continuing bonds and on the emotional challenges in interactive interviews. These observations support Klass's resistance to what he coins the "causality thesis" in continuing bonds research.

Klass writes, “My work is often cited wrongly as claiming that continuing bonds support better adjustment. If I have ever implied such a thing, I apologize” (p. 844). He continues to claim that when he and his colleagues developed the continuing bonds approach, it was not supposed to be interpreted as an antidote to loss. Rather, they developed this work to show that bonds with the deceased did not have to be deemed pathological in nature. Klass states that those scholars who have misused their theory are promoting a “causality thesis”—the idea that continuing bonds cause healthy adjustment to a loss. The subsequent analyses of my field notes and interview transcripts show that, while continuing bonds may be emotionally powerful and rewarding for the bereaved, they do not always work well for everyone and should not be viewed as a panacea for all problems associated with mourning.

In order to help build a case against the causality thesis, it is best to start with communication scholarship that focuses on how families cope with a loved one’s dying process or death. Hopefully, through my analyses, I will show that a pragmatic approach to this research (Rorty, 1982) can help the bereaved grieve in the best way possible and “liberate social and behavioral science from the bondage of polarizing dichotomies that pit laws against rules, explanation against understanding, movements against actions, and quantities against qualities” (Bochner, 1985, p. 35). The process of continuing bonds with the deceased will not “resolve” grieving, but rather, it will help the bereaved embrace life and enrich their relationships with the living.

Re-membering Stories of Post Death Contact

Hedtke and Winslade (2004) have offered specific strategies, coined “re-membering” rituals, to help aid families in a loved one’s dying process and maintain relationships after death. According to their perspective, re-membering is not to be confused with simply reminiscing

about the dead because it is requires much more active, conscious processes in everyday life. Hedtke and Winslade argue that everyone we know is like a member in our club of life, and some members are more important to us than others (e.g. acquaintances versus close friends and family members). When someone dies, this does not mean that these individuals cease to be members in our club of life. Hence, we rely upon re-membering rituals to allow the deceased to regain active membership in our clubs of life. These rituals might include telling stories about those who have died, having imagined conversations with the deceased, celebrating their birthdays, memorializing the anniversaries of their deaths, and engaging with artifacts that represent or once belonged to them.

Specifically in continuing bonds literature, scholars have found that there are ways the bereaved can continue a relationship through more reflective and cognitive processes as well. These types of reflection processes include: internalizing values and beliefs of the deceased (Klass, 1993), taking on personality traits of the deceased (Russac, Steighner, & Canto, 2002; Tyson-Rawson, 1996), participating in activities the deceased would have enjoyed (Foster et al., 2011), and recognizing the deceased as a role model for future behaviors (Marwit & Klass, 1996; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Research has also shown that exploring possibilities of post death contact (Kalish & Reynolds, 1976; Klugman, 2006) and the recognition of spiritual signs are also ways to continue a bond with and re-member the deceased (Rennels & Paxton, 2013; Valentine, 2008).

Many of these potential "signs" of the deceased may be described through family stories passed on from one generation to the next. The study of storytelling as a form of family ritual has been widely explored in communication studies. As already demonstrated, a major part of continuing bonds or re-membering practices is through family storytelling. It is through storytelling that individuals "do family" (Langeller & Peterson, 2006) and interpret and explain

experiences (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). In re-membering rituals, family members must decide when and what stories about the deceased are told. These stories construct the identity of the deceased and their memory. They also construct the family's identity without the deceased's physical presence. As Attig (2001) argues, after a loss individuals must relearn their world without the loved one. Family storytelling rituals can help facilitate this relearning process.

Baxter and Braithwate (2006) argue that a family ritual is a "voluntary, recurring, patterned communication event whose jointly enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations" (p. 263). Baxter and Braithwaite constructed this definition of family ritual through the work of Rothenbuhler (1998) who argued that are 12 distinct features of family ritual: performance based, social, voluntary, non-instrumental yet serious, expressive of social relations, evaluative, powerful, condensed, regularly recurring, emphasizing form, and emphasizing the sacred. When looking at continuing bonds and re-membering practices, we see that some of these features of family ritual are more applicable than others.

For instance, there are common rituals for memorializing the dead. Baxter and Braithwate write, "Ritual is performed and the guidelines for the performance are imported from the society at large or guidelines might emerge from the traces of prior ritual performances" (p. 261). One common ritual for memorializing the deceased is visiting the tombstone of a deceased family member's grave. There are certain tasks that are required for this particular activity, and Ellis (2003) has written about the mixed feelings one can have while performing them. These contradictory feelings may result because of ideologies of moving on and continuing bond practices may be viewed as a sign of complicated grief. These ideologies might discourage family members from participating in these activities, and this results in a lack of performance

guidelines. This also affects the voluntary aspects of rituals because people may want to participate in re-membering practices but they fear stigmatization from other family members and so they do not.

This stigmatization can affect the social nature of ritual. Baxter and Braithwaite argue, "All performances require the co-participation of one other person, even if that co-participation appears to be a passive enactment of the 'audience' role" (p. 261). In terms of continuing bonds, individuals may have difficulties finding other family members to participate in the rituals because they fear rejection, others thinking they are mentally ill, or dwelling in the loss. Since we often conceptualize an individual's personhood in terms of physical presence, many may not realize that a deceased family member can still be the "passive enactment of the audience role." By not talking about the deceased or participating in rituals that reaffirm their personhood, individuals are sending a message about social relations with them. They might be saying they do not value the life the person lived and the legacy they left behind. Hedtke and Winslade describe this as "dis-membering" the deceased (p.12). A funeral is a one-time event, but for some individuals, in order to fully reinstate the deceased's personhood, re-membering rituals need to occur regularly in everyday life.

Of course, some people may still care about the deceased and choose not to participate in certain types of bereavement rituals. However, when re-membering rituals occur they can be very powerful. Baxter and Braithwaite argue that rituals are not just reflective of reality, but they *construct* reality. During a wedding ceremony ritual, when each member of the couple says, "I do," this constructs the reality of the marriage. By participating in a re-membering ritual, an individual is constructing a relationship with the deceased that is often constrained under some mainstream ideologies of society. Baxter and Braithwaite write, "Rituals are moral commentaries

about what is valued, or an expressive hope for what could be" (p. 261). With re-membering practices, people are constructing and reaffirming a deceased individual's personhood regardless of physical presence and they are expressing a hope to continue a relationship with that person.

Within these types of rituals, many other phenomena occur. Baxter and Braithwaite argue that family rituals are condensed. Not only are members continuing a relationship with the deceased, but they also may be determining how that person's legacy will continue. They may be taking care of unfinished business or resolving family disagreements surrounding the death. Through continuing bonds with the deceased, family members may discuss with one another how they may want to be remembered after death. In order for these other various potential needs to be addressed, the re-membering ritual needs to be effective in fulfilling its foundational role of reconstructing a deceased family member's personhood. Spirituality and religion may be two strong influences that can either constrain or encourage these types of re-membering family stories about the dead or possibilities of post death contact.

In Keeley's (2004) work on final conversations among the terminally ill and their families, she found that spirituality and religion played an important role in these messages and coping processes for surviving family members. Survivors indicated that when final conversations focused around religion or spirituality, they often were prescribed certain behaviors or rules of conduct from the dying family members. One of the categories of rules of conduct coded from interviews was "cope with life's challenges after a loved one is gone" (p. 93). Survivors indicated that terminally ill family members would request that they seek out their guidance in times of strife or look for signs of their presence after the death. It is highly probable that these final conversations with the terminally ill might impact the way families tell stories about them after they have died. Extending the parameters of Keeley's concept of "final

conversations" to after a person has died may stimulate additional intriguing research questions about family storytelling and how stories about the deceased are jointly told among family members.

Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) have demonstrated that specific sense-making behaviors occur when families jointly tell stories about difficult experiences. In their work they identified three different sense-making behaviors when members jointly told stories: family-unit sense-making, individual family member sense-making, and in-complete sense making. In family-unit sense making, every member is active in the telling of the story and reach a shared conclusion about the experience. In individual family member sense-making, families share with one another separate versions of a story and come up with their own individual meanings about the experience. Finally, in in-complete sense making, one or more of the family members are not engaged in the telling of the story and no clear meanings on the experience are deciphered at an individual or collective level. They argue that this knowledge will help narrative and family therapists understand baseline behaviors of families before entering therapy.

Furthermore, Koenig Kellas and Trees do not advocate that one form of sense making be privileged over another, but that future research should "examine if and how family satisfaction and functioning differ according to sense-making type and story topic" (p. 70). As demonstrated thus far in my personal narratives, it appears there was an instance of individual family member sense-making behaviors about stories of possible post death contact from my mother. My Aunt Cindy's story (as depicted in chapter three) inspired other family members to give their versions of my mother contacting them. In retrospect, it appears that most of the family members present that day concluded these were actually messages from my mother. I do not know for sure if some of the family members present completely denied the possibility of my mother contacting them

through these experiences, and it would be beneficial to investigate this further in my future work.

Additionally, the analysis of this experience on Christmas Day still leaves me with several other questions: If all family members had been aware of my Aunt Cindy's story, how would the sense-making behaviors have changed and would this have implicated our family satisfaction and functioning? How would the sense making behaviors for this story have been different if a family member present was either agnostic or atheist? Why were the men not as participatory in the sense making process of these stories? How might my family jointly tell and make sense of my Aunt Cindy's story and the story about that Christmas Day in the future? Outside of my family, what factors would determine sense-making behaviors about stories with the specific topic of post death contact?

Even if there is no proof of afterlife communication being real, it is imperative that communication scholars consider how belief or disbelief in these experiences impact families. The ability to tell stories of post death contact and continue a relationship with the deceased could prove to be a major success for many families who were afraid to talk or uncomfortable with talking about a deceased loved one. The dead may not "really" give messages or respond to messages of the living, but this is not the point of studying these phenomena.

Peters (2001) argues:

> Our communication with the dead may never reach them, but such elliptical sending is as important as circular reciprocity. It would be foolish to disparage communications that never leave our own circle as only failures. That I cannot engage in dialogue with Plato or the Beatles does not demean the contact I have with them. Such contact may be hermeneutic and aesthetic rather than personal or mutual. I may have to supply all the

> replies they might make to my queries—rather like the contact I have with the universe. Or with myself. In this respect Charles Horton Cooley was right to claim that our concourse with ghosts may be the most important kind we have. (p. 152)

There is much at stake if communication scholars do not consider the importance of these reported phenomena and how they might help people cope with grief and enrich their lives. Stories of post death contact can help re-story family identities and enhance feelings of intimacy in the family system after occurrences of trauma and disruption. Coles (1989) argues, "The beauty of a good story is its openness—the way you or I or anyone reading it can take it in and use if for ourselves" (p. 206). I ask that you allow yourself to suspend some disbelief. Instead of critically deconstructing the objective truth of my family's reported post death contact, I invite you to think with our stories (Frank, 1995). Every person in a lifetime will lose someone, and people grieve in different ways. It might be surprising to find what one simple story of "the impossible" can do for an individual and his or her family. Stories of possible post death contact can do many things for bereaved families. Of course, stories of post death contact were not the only way my mother's community of grievers re-membered her. In the next section, I outline how participants continued a bond with her, consistent and deviating from current identified strategies in the literature.

Specific Re-membering Practices for Ann Paxton

As in every relationship, whether the person is alive or dead, there are unique nuances. Participants expressed several ways they re-membered my mother and other deceased loved ones. Those ways consistent with already established findings in the literature included telling stories about and observing potential post death contact, keeping items that belonged to or represented the deceased, participating in activities the deceased would have enjoyed, taking on

personality traits of the deceased, and recognizing the deceased as a role model for future behaviors. Those ways that were different from the literature included doing activities related to the deceased's occupation, mimicking similar vocal inflections of the deceased, using the person's trademark phrases, moments of recognizing similar habits, and telling what I coin "real" stories about the deceased. The research interviews also became a way to re-member the dead. Not only did the interviews aid participants in continuing a bond with my mother, but they also helped continue bonds with other loved ones who had died.

To begin, stories and observations of possible post death contact were numerous. Participants spoke of having visions of and dreams about my mother. My Aunt Cindy's story about the balloon was shared many times (depicted in chapter three). My Aunt Susie discussed seeing a license plate that read ANN 1122 (November 22nd is my birthday) when Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" came on the radio. My father and brother both discussed having dreams in which my mother visited them. My father also reminded me of a situation during my college baccalaureate (as depicted in chapter one). It was held in the college church, and my father was thinking about my mother and sunlight shone through a stained glass window and only on me. One of my aunts and a few of my mother's friends discussed how butterflies often appear when speaking about my mother (as described in chapter three). My stepmom disclosed to me information about a red rose bush in the backyard that she was told used to be a plant my mother started. She was having a difficult time getting the roses to bloom, but about a week before I was to return for my fieldwork, the roses were blooming. She interpreted this as my mother sending a message from Heaven.

As far as observations of possible post death contact occurring during my fieldwork, there were two mysterious situations that dealt with ants that participants discussed. When I was

young, we had an ant problem in our family home. My mother would get frustrated when killing the ants and say, “I hate you fucking ants!” People would laugh after asking me what kind of ants we had in our home when I would respond, “Fucking ants!” In two of my interviews, there was a reference to ants as a sign of post death contact from my mother. First, on the day of her interview, my aunt had told me that she and her husband went to the cemetery earlier in the day. They noticed some dirt on my mother’s grave, and when they went to clean it off, they saw many ants covering the face of the tomb. When conducting an interview with two former friends, one of them informed me that they never had an ant problem in their home. An hour before I was supposed to arrive, they said they saw several ants around their kitchen sink.

Next, participants kept many items in their homes to re-member my mother. One former hair client hangs a Christmas ornament that holds a picture of my mother every year on her tree, and another client keeps a picture of my mother in her purse. Two clients, a mother and a daughter, still keep combs my mother gave them even though they are too old to use for styling hair. A friend of my mother’s still keeps track of all dates associated with my mother on her calendar (her birthday, my mother and father’s anniversary, the date of my mother’s death). Some family members do still keep photographs and artifacts that represent my mother in their homes. One of my aunts has a framed picture of a page from her old appointment book where my mother kept records of her clients. Another aunt has a framed copy of my mother’s obituary and an angel figurine that represents the month of April (the month my mother’s birthday occurred).

Finally, participants addressed practices like participating in activities my mother would have enjoyed and recognizing her as a role model for future behaviors. One of my uncles started a scholarship fund in my mother’s name for a high school graduating senior from my hometown

going into cosmetology. My mother's best friends from her graduating class still try to take trips together as much as possible. My brother, Kyle, stated that he often reflected on my mother's personality, and he strives to be like her in his profession as a diesel fuel and farm equipment salesperson. After doing two interactive interviews with me, Kyle also reported that he also recognized his difficulty refusing to say no to various requests at work. He knew my mother struggled with this as well, and this encouraged him to seek professional help from a counselor to aid in coping with stress at work.

While many of the ways to re-member my mother were consistent with those already identified in the literature, there were also ways that have not been previously identified. These ways of re-membering were not always explicitly expressed as such. However, their behaviors could be classified as re-membering practices. First, many participants expressed they often re-membered my mother when doing something with their hair or another person's hair. This suggests that one way to continue a bond with the deceased is to engage in activities related to the person's profession. For example, Pammy, a close family friend, said she would often think of and tell stories about my mother when combing through her daughter Addison's hair (even though Addison had never met her). A family friend, Jim, even though he was bald, stated his ways of re-membering mom through his hair:

> She was the only one who knew what to do with me and this bald head. I get up in the morning and look in the mirror and think damn Ann, we miss you so much. I mean we loved her so much besides the hair stuff but you know you just can't help thinking about her that way.

Many former clients stated they often think of mom when going to get their hair cut or styled. While being in a new salon after death may have been painful at first, they soon forgot about mom while there or found comfort in that type of space.

Next, many participants discussed how they would often use words or phrases that were part of my mother's own personal language. One participant, Ronna, discussed how her daughter (who is currently a hair dresser) would get confused when giving directions on how to do her hair because of my mom's "language." She stated:

> Annie had her own vocabulary when it came to doing hair. She would take hunky chunkies out here or there or she just made her own words but we all knew what she meant and we trusted her and we always loved our hair so… She also talked about whispies! You don't have whispies out to the side like Farrah Fawcett. I need to cut your whispies off.

Again, this participant did not explicitly state that this was a way she re-membered my mother but by using these ways of speaking, she actively reconstructed my mother's presence back into the haircutting moment. One of my aunts stated she always repeats a former phrase of my mother's: "Oh. It's just hair!" She says this when a new hairdresser does a botched job. Several participants also stated that they remember a way my mother used to poke fun at herself and they will often use this method as well. When she felt that she did not look attractive, she would smirk and say, "Pretty!" So participants, mostly my mother's sisters, would often do this to poke fun at themselves or each other.

My mother always kept a very disorganized and messy purse. A couple participants, while not strategically keeping a messy purse, said that when others would comment on their messy purses, they would often reference my mother. As one aunt stated in an interview:

> I'm standing in the store paying for a Christmas present and the guy wanted to see the last four digits on my debit card and I already threw it back in my purse. I didn't put it in the same spot and I couldn't find it. John [her husband] goes Jesus Christ. Your sister will never be gone. I started laughing and I had to literally dump my purse on the counter. But it's true I never find my car keys in the same place. I can't find nothing in it and John starts calling me Edith like he did your mom.

Edith, a character in the former sitcom *Archie Bunker*, is a very sweet but ditzy wife of the main character Archie. My uncle and a couple other participants stated they would call my mother this as a nickname. Whenever their wives did something similar to my mother, they would call them Edith. This could be seen as a way to honor my mother's sweet but sometimes scatter brained personality.

Also, the use of the phrase "cow titties" was used among participants. My mother was a fairly large breasted woman and would refer humorously to her "cow titties." Many participants expressed that they still use this term when either referring to their own breasts or the breasts of other women. My mother also had a particular term for when she had to intensely use the restroom—to the point where it was difficult to prevent a bowel movement from occurring. She called these "blasters," and participants humorously reported that they also use this term when experiencing similar bowel quandaries.

Furthermore, the ways in which my mother pronounced and emphasized words were implicitly used as ways to re-member her. My mother had a specific way of pronouncing my father's (Lindon) and grandmother's (Jo-Ann) names. She would pronounce Lindon like "Lynn-duhn," and Jo-Ann like "JO-ayun." Several participants would recount these vocal inflections in interviews and while none stated they did this to re-member mom, there were many times

throughout the remainder of the interview that I heard them mimic these inflections. Participants also commented on the way my mother said several words: wash as "warsh," milk as "melk," and idea as "ideal."

The recognition of words, phrases, pronunciations, and vocal inflections came from many entertaining stories about my mother. Telling stories about the deceased has been identified as a major way to continue a bond with them. However, people usually share stories that valorize and paint the deceased as a saint. Participants did share stories that emphasized the goodness of my mother's character, but they also told stories about her that might not have shown her in the best way. These stories were not glorified but "real" stories about her. I got many interesting and, sometimes unexpected, responses from questions such as "Tell me a story about Ann as a mother, daughter, hairdresser, patient, etc."

To begin, my mother's overuse of the word "fuck" was often commented on, although not in a disapproving way. One participant stated, "It was always F this! And F that! I don't know how you kids didn't always say it." Other stories commented on some of my mother's humorous blunders as hairdresser. One participant discussed how a particular brand of hair color broke out her scalp, and my mother frantically checked on her throughout the following day. One of her sisters told two humorous stories about how my mother dealt with the local law enforcement. My mother was pulled over for not posting an updated license sticker by a police officer named Officer Bell who was the husband of one of her good friends. She pulled out the sticker from her glove compartment and said in response to his inquiry, "Fuck you, Bell. I got the sticker right here!" My mother also got out of a speeding ticket by lying to a police officer about feeling like she was going to throw up at any moment. When recounting the story to others, she had jokingly stated, "I'm not hot enough to flirt so I had to play sick." Other humorous stories

included my mother's shampoo basin falling off the wall when she was shampooing a customer's hair, being stressed about customers seeing her messy house, her wild driving, and an instance where she peed on the side of the road during a high school road trip.

However, there were several instances where stories were not humorous and focused on my mother during her time of illness. I noticed a few family members had a compulsive need to talk about my mother during her illness. For example, on the way home from a lunch outing, one of my aunts spent 30 straight minutes recounting experiences caring for my mother. She kept speaking without leaving any room for me to respond to the experiences. When she had finished her story, she stated, "It was difficult for me to discuss these things for a while but now I can and you are old enough to hear about it all." Research has shown that to heal survivors of trauma need empathic listeners to hear their stories (Brison, 1997; Frank, 1995; Mishler, 1986). Based on my experience with my aunt and other participants, it might be beneficial to study the therapeutic benefits of sharing stories about caregiving and if these narratives might also be a way to continue a bond.

After completing this research, I definitely know that my mother lived a good life. Many participants shared stories that demonstrated her dedication to her family, clients, and community. However, the question as to whether she had a "good death" (Roscoe, 1998; Schenck & Roscoe, 2009) continued to haunt me for some time after leaving the field. The story of my mother's illness and death did not have as much coherence as the story of her life—it was what Frank (1995) describes as a chaos narrative. The plot of the chaos narrative is where the ill individual imagines life never getting better. Frank argues, "The body is imprisoned in the frustrated needs of the moment. The person living the chaos story has no distance from her life and no reflective grasp on it. Lived chaos makes reflection, and consequently storytelling,

impossible" (p. 98). While pituitary tumors are fairly common, the way in which my mother's turned cancerous and metastasized to other part of the body is not common. Readers can see from my narrative accounts that there was much uncertainty surrounding my mother's illness. Among family members and friends, there were never any open discussions about whether she might die (even though I learned from some interviews that she herself acknowledged her own possible death).

The way my family narrated her illness was consistent with a Western biomedical model of progress. Instead of considering my mother's illness terminal and seeking forms of palliative care, family members saw it as something that could be cured or "beat." We desperately were seeking a restitution narrative, which focuses on how the ill individual will recover and go back to his or her "normal" life through means of medical technologies (Frank, 1995). I believe my family's unflinching certainty that we could craft a restitution narrative for my mother made her death even more shocking. While interviewing participants, I found that many wanted to continually discuss and tell stories about her moments of illness. Perhaps they were trying to in some way salvage my mother's final chapter of life. Perhaps they were attempting to transform a former chaos narrative into a quest narrative, one where the individual and family accepts illness and attempts to learn a lesson from the experience. Perhaps these are things I have even attempted to do through this work because I felt that my mother did not die a good death.

> When discussing what might possibly constitute a good death, Schenck & Roscoe write:
>
> A sudden end to the life narrative, the precipitous fall into the abyss of the extinguishing of the continuing process of life, however gradually, is antithetical to the preceding process of lived experience. The end of the narrative is challenging and requires action to compose a last chapter that offers meaningful closure. Spirituality and narrative closure

> are not things that can be delivered like pain medication for palliation; they can be achieved through creative action. A good death likely requires physical comfort and psychological support, as well as encouragement to attempt individual, creative, and spiritual work. (p. 65)

As stated earlier, my mother's illness was never spoken about as if it were terminal. One reason for this could possibly have been because there was not enough information about the condition of her illness. Another might be because of my family's strong denial of death ever being a possibility for her. Regardless, the opportunity to engage in creative narrative work in shaping a good final chapter of life for my mother was missed.

While I cannot continue to dwell on what we could have done, I can take this as an opportunity to reflect on how this work can facilitate for others a good death through re-membering practices. Hedtke and Winslade (2004) do speak at length about how re-membering not only helps individuals grieve a death but also help the dying and their loved ones. They argue that remembering conversations with the dying can go beyond funeral arrangements, ethical wills, and life reviews but also "can be about asking persons who are dying to select out highlights of life that are worth preserving in memory and ritual observance" (p. 67). While these conversations can be highly effective, there are also many obstacles one may face when attempting them. Family members may fear they will upset the dying person with these conversations, or that by speaking about death so openly this will superstitiously hasten it. They also argue that caregivers for a dying family member may be so focused on the aspect of loss they may neglect to focus on what need not be lost. If these challenges can be overcome, re-membering conversations can bring peace to the dying person. However, re-membering and continuing bonds may not be helpful for everyone.

The Challenges and Failures of Continuing Bonds

Grief is a difficult emotion for many people to deal with—not only because facing life without someone you love is painful but also because some argue we live in a death denying culture (Becker, 1973; Kellehear, 1984; Seale, 1998; Tucker, 2009; Zimmerman & Rodin, 2004). During family gatherings, conversations about death have been referred to as the elephant in the room or "the horse on the dining room table" (Kalish, 1981 cited in Corr & Corr, 2013). Many times family members are aware of death's presence, but they are uncomfortable and not quite sure how to discuss it. Part of this cultural death denial could be attributed to the declining death rates throughout the United States' history. As Corr & Corr (2013) write, "In 1900, the death rate for the entire American population of approximately 76 million people was 17.2 deaths per 1,000 in the population. By 1954, that rate had dropped to 9.2 per 1000. Still, by 2007 the death rate dropped to 8.0 per 1000" (p. 23). Even though death rates have declined, as Becker (1973) once argued, "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man" (p. ix). Because of this silence many terminally ill individuals' concerns are silenced, and their families are less prepared when death comes knocking at the door.

Of course, this denial cannot be attributed solely to declining death rates. Major advances in life sustaining treatment for individuals with terminal illness, often resulting in the longevity of life being privileged over one's quality of life, could be another reason for the denial. Physicians are socialized to treat death as failure (Hegedus, Zana, & Szabo, 2008)—something to be resisted if not avoided. Morgan (2009) argues, "The contemporary view of death in the West is that every death is contingent, a matter of chance, and that, in principle, there is no reason why

any particular injury or disease cannot be overcome" (p. 1106). With this mentality in mind, many people may choose not to face the reality of death nor talk about the topic with others and feel a state of apathy toward their own imminent mortality. Furthermore, this death denying culture can also influence the way many cope with the death of a loved one. Talking about a deceased loved one may serve as a reminder that modern medicine cannot overcome every patient's tragic circumstance. If bereaved individuals continue to incorporate the deceased's presence into their lives, they may be told by others they are depressed or not over the loss. While these attributions may be made out of care or concern for the bereaved, they also might be made because of societal fear and the taboo topic of death itself.

In fact, I struggled in some ways with how people responded to my project. I appreciated the comments that were affirmative and when people told me that this was a great tribute to my mother. The comments that caused me discomfort came from a participant who said that this "must be so therapeutic for me" and that this was a great way to help me cope with my grief. I believe I felt discomfort from these comments because in some ways I felt they undermined the "academic" nature of the project. Also, some people had a very difficult time remembering things about her life. This may have been because of the time since my mother's death or participants having more relational distance from her than others. In a few interviews, sometimes a participant's response would barely go beyond a surface level. Or, when I asked participants if there were any specific ways they memorialized my mother since her death, I got blank stares or they struggled to find something to say.

However, every person I sought for an interview accepted the offer with enthusiasm, except one woman named Kate. She was a former neighbor and close friend of my mother's. After a week of not receiving a response for an interview request, I assumed Kate was not

interested in participating in the study. I was not offended nor did I take it personally because I thought maybe it might be too emotionally difficult for her. About an hour before I was supposed to conduct a scheduled interview with another neighbor, Kate came unexpectedly to our family home. “I can’t help you with this death and dying stuff,” she had said and sat down in our family living room.

While somewhat taken aback, I was still able to respond to Kate. I told her that if an interview would be too painful, she did not have to participate. I also stated that I had enough people helping me with the project. Still, she sat for 25 minutes and talked about how she loved my mother and how she was a great person. Kate concluded her statements by stating, “I feel like we could have done more.” I responded by saying that I appreciated her help taking care of mom and that I felt like everyone did everything they could do. I made sure to visit Kate before I left the field to make sure this project had not harmed her emotional well-being. While she did not discuss my mother or the project, she seemed in good spirits and happy to see me.

Some individuals seemed ideal to interview but I chose not to because of their personal grieving process. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, was one example. While I did engage in several informal conversations with her, I noticed the intensity of her emotionality when even mentioning my mother’s name. During my fieldwork, my grandmother was admitted to an assisted living facility due to issues with her memory. Instead of interviewing my grandmother, I decided to use my knowledge about continuing bonds to help her cope with her grief over my mother’s death. For example, she told me she did not wish to attend Sunday morning worship services at the facility. She still heard some of the music from the services in her room, including the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” This song upset her because they played this during my mother’s procession during her funeral.

In attempting to help her reframe this, I said, “Do you ever think maybe it’s a way that Mom is trying to let you know she’s around?” She seemed to only half-heartedly accept this interpretation. In subsequent phone conversations, she does not bring my mother up. If she does, it is not to re-member her but to talk about her grief. It is still very difficult for her to ever mention my mother’s name. Future research might explore how the specific circumstances of a death could impede upon the bereaved individual’s ability to continue a bond with the deceased.

It seems that the death of a child could be a very challenging situation for continuing a bond with the deceased. As many bereavement researchers argue, the death of a child is very difficult because it defies a natural order of life (Becvar, 2001; Gamino, Sewell, & Easterling, 1998; Klass, 1997). I do believe that my grandmother will eventually find comfort in re-membering and continuing bonds with the deceased. She confided to me one evening that she still keeps my mother’s cell phone number in her phone’s contacts list. “I just can’t bear to erase it,” she told me. In her mourning process, I do not feel it is my place to prescribe behaviors that have worked for me. My grandmother, while not outwardly expressing a continued bond with others, may still do so in her own way. Allowing herself to cry and feel her grief may be a way she continues a bond with my mother, and she may prefer to do this privately. At the very least, this research project has allowed me to see that she may not re-member in the ways I do. This does not give me the right to prescribe “correct” mourning behaviors. This project also allows me to have a heightened awareness of my grandmother’s potential emotional states and ways in which I can improve our relationships and help her enjoy life.

It may not always be helpful at certain times for some to continue a relationship with the deceased and maintain his or her membership status. Hedtke & Winslade (2004) write:

> There may be times when it does not serve a person to remember in ways that reinstate the deceased person, or restore privileged membered status. To do so could create further harm for the person who is alive. In these circumstances, it may be of benefit to keep the deceased person's membership further away and to build remembering around a more distant, less intimate membership position. (p. 112)

This became apparent in my explorations of re-membering processes and their connections to my father's relationship with my mother, and both of our relationships with my stepmother Kelly. In interviews with my mother's friends, a few (without me soliciting the information) stated they thought Kelly seemed uncomfortable when they mentioned my mother around her. I decided to explore their concerns in the research process by interviewing my stepmother.

My stepmother was not a close friend of my mother's, but she was a former client of hers for a brief time. When my father started dating her, she told me in her interview that he worried a lot about people in our community thinking he was dating too soon. She and other participants mentioned that my father talked about my mother quite a bit the first few months they were dating. A couple with whom they were friends even expressed at times it seemed to happen excessively—to the point where they were uncomfortable during double dates. My father also said that he would mention specific dates related to my mother (e.g. her birthday and their wedding anniversary) the first few years that he and Kelly were together. Over the years, he stated that he still may think about these days but he does not mention them to her. When I asked why he feels the need to not mention them, he responded by saying that he's just moved on. He also stated that he would find Kelly mentioning dates associated with her ex-husband inappropriate, even though he is still alive.

In my interactive interview with Kelly, I surprisingly found that it wasn't so much about the amount of time spent talking and remembering mom that bothered her but rather how certain family members treated her as a result of my mother's death. I tried to ease into asking her questions about how she manages the tension of my mother's absence in our family. I stated, "I just try to put myself in your position. For instance, if I were to marry someone who had lost his first spouse, how would I handle that? What would be required of me?" Kelly responded by saying that she knew what she getting into when she started dating and eventually married my father. "There are certain things I have to deal with. That's just the way it is," she had stated. When they first started dating, he had expressed a lot of guilt about why my mother had died and not him. Kelly stated that he told her he thought my mother could have been a better parent than him. This troubled Kelly and did cause some conflict in their relationship.

However, I was shocked to hear about how some of my family members have treated Kelly since my mother's death. One family member always sends a text to my father on my mother's birthday, but she never wishes Kelly a happy birthday. Another instance where Kelly felt uncomfortable was during a family trip to visit me in Tampa. She was on the beach when one of my aunts started crying and said that she missed her best friend. When Kelly asked who her best friend was she stated that it was my mother. At a past family wedding, the mother of the bride asked Kelly if she would take a family picture that included my father, brother, and me with that side of the family. To Kelly, this implicitly was a message about her exclusion from the family. It is apparent from these observations in my ethnographic data that should one choose to conceptualize a relationship with a deceased parent or spouse and intensely continue that bond, there may be challenges to a relationship with a stepparent. In some instances, the challenges may be similar to those experienced in situations of divorce where the ex-husband or ex-wife is

still living. Furthermore, some of these challenges may not have as much to do with the deceased individual as how other family members treat the new spouse.

Some communication scholarship has explored these challenges. Bryant (2006) studied how post bereaved stepfamilies manage the dialectical tension of a deceased parent's presence and absence through rituals. After interviewing adult children on their retrospective accounts of their relationships with stepparents, she found three different types of families in regards to tension management strategies: integrated, denial, and segmented. Integrated families routinely held rituals to keep the deceased parent's presence sustained, such as celebrating the person's birthday or visiting the grave as a family. Denial families did not participate in rituals to keep the deceased parent's presence active, and in some cases discontinued rituals in which the children and the parent formerly participated. Finally, segmented families were ambivalent about managing the presence-absence tension of the deceased parent. The stepparent would attempt to create new rituals that did not include the deceased parent's presence, and the children often resisted and resented the stepparent for imposing them.

From Bryant's study and my own ethnographic observations, I would argue that without my presence at home, my immediate family would be classified as a denial family. Routine rituals are not done to re-member my mother, and there are barely any items in the family home that represent her. In an interview with my father, I told him that I did not think we needed to dedicate a whole shrine in the home to my mother. However, I thought it would be nice to have some kind of artifact that represented her on display in the home. His response was that he did not worry about these sorts of things. I also feel that my father did not put pictures or artifacts out because he was afraid it would upset Kelly. This suggests that it might be beneficial for

researchers to interview stepparents and the surviving parents in post bereaved families to help determine what factors constrain re-membering rituals from occurring.

In summary, trying to continue a relationship with my mother did and does not always work for participants and myself due to several reasons. First, the contextual factors of the death may make it too emotionally challenging to continue a relationship with the deceased, as in the case with Kate and my grandmother. Societal prescriptions and American feeling rules for grief accompanied with a death denying culture may make it taboo to speak of the deceased so many years after death. The absence of continuing a relationship with the deceased so many years after the death may also affect re-membering practices, should surviving family members attempt to perform them. Without keeping the deceased's presence active, it may be more difficult later on to construct a relationship because details about them are forgotten.

Family members who want to continue a relationship may have difficulties doing so if they were young when the deceased loved one died. I found that while my younger brother does wish to re-member my mother, he does not have as many memories as I do and so I need to take extra care in helping him maintain this relationship. Fears of making other family members uncomfortable may also prevent a continued relationship with the deceased, as in the case with my stepmother. And finally, we must remember that a relationship with a deceased family member is not the "real" thing. It may be best to conceptualize continuing bonds as a narrative blueprint for living rather than a coping strategy. If grieving is conceptualized as an indefinite process, investing too much in continuous bonds as a "quick fix" may not be helpful, especially during intense times of sadness. Even years after my mother's death occurred, there was ample proof that expressions of emotion could still be very intense.

Emotions During Interviews and Observations of Challenges to Cultural Feeling Rules

When deconstructing the social construction of closure, Berns argues:

> Closure is in particular a fraud on the bereaved, as it preaches that there will—there should—come a moment when grief is over. In reality, though we may go on with our lives, remarry, bear new children, and laugh at silly jokes again, there is no reason ever to stop mourning or to forget what we have lost. Grief may recede; instead of being the ocean we swim in, it may be the vial of ocean water in the cabinet of wonder, but it is always there. Balance yes; closure, never" (p. 51).

From my own observations conducting and transcribing interviews and also some of my participants' observations, it was definitely obvious that Bern's arguments were applicable to how we coped with my mother's death. Even after 10 years, participants showed open and intense expressions of grief over my mother's death during interviews. I also was hyper aware of how my own emotionality would fluctuate during the research process. Rarely during interviews would I express emotion but either while transcribing or reflecting on them in private, I would break down.

Even though I feel no shame in expressing my emotions, it is apparent that professional socialization norms about the researcher role could have conditioned me to stifle the emotions I was feeling. Hochschild (1983) found in her research on flight attendants that some had trouble expressing emotion in their everyday lives because of socialization and training processes at work. It is astounding to see that even working in an academic department that embraces emotionality and relationality with participants, cultural feelings rules and implicit norms of the distant and neutral researcher affected my ability to express grief.

Also, some of my participants recounted moments where they, or others they encountered, violated cultural feeling rules for grief. One of my aunts, an elementary school

teacher, discussed recently being approached by the school janitor (also a former acquaintance of my mother) at a parent-teacher conference night. She stated:

> She said, 'Oh. How's Kyle and Blake? What are they doing now?' and then she said 'Oh, I just miss Ann so much' and she starts crying and I'm thinking…I don't remember her babysitting you kids. But she just starts *crying crying crying* and I said you know I think about her all the time.

Another participant, a former client, discussed her expressions of emotions during her first hair appointment after my mother died. She stated:

> It was bad. Really bad. I was crying in the waiting room. I still go to the same place. I'm very loyal when I find someone I like. But I remember crying on the way there, crying in the waiting room, and the whole time she's cutting my hair. I hate to be one of those people that is constantly apologizing. But I kept saying "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I must have apologized at least 30 times. And then I felt the need to explain why I'm crying so I said that my hairdresser just died and I was very close to her, like family but not family. It wasn't just the first time though that was the worst. I mean I fought it the next two or three haircuts after that. The thing that was odd about that is I didn't know that I was going to do it.

It is interesting to note that this participant was surprised that she reacted in this way to her first appointment, perhaps alluding to the fact that she thought she had "moved on" from my mother's death only weeks after it had occurred. I could empathize with this need to move on as I had similar feelings the first eight years after my mother's death.

Furthermore, interviewing participants about the death and re-membering of my mother created a rather complex position for me as a researcher. There were many times I was able to

easily empathize with them but also times I was caught off guard about things they said during an interview. As with many instances of providing social support, I learned that often I needed to focus less on what to say and just be there to listen during interviews. Some participants had been withholding emotions (aside from grief) for quite some time, and it appeared that my presence and research project provided a means for them to express these emotions.

One emotion that surprised me was guilt, and two examples from interviews are worthy of discussing. A participant recalled how she was feeling with her family on Christmas Eve, just five days after my mother's passing and stated:

> I can remember coming into the living room…I remember my Christmas tree was up and all three kids were in here. I remember feeling guilty and thinking she's not going to get to have this! I hate that when someone dies you make it about you. I felt selfish for making it about me. You think I was Catholic the way I feel guilt about everything!

I reassured her that it was perfectly normal to feel grateful that she would be able to share these experiences with her children, and she should not feel guilt about feeling this way.

Another participant, who had a similar health condition as my mother, stated:

> There's been a lot of guilt in me about why God took your mother and left me. Because I feel like she had a lot more to give than what I did. She just loved life so much and I don't understand. I mean to my knowledge the pituitary tumors are rare and then you have two people that are the same age that have the same tumor. Why did hers make this happen and mine did not? I've still maintained mine. I still have to go to the doctor. I still have to take medicine every two weeks. Why couldn't they do that for Annie?

I reassured her that she still had much to give, and my mother would not want her to feel this way. While it is not uncommon for the bereaved to experience survivor's guilt, it is unique that

these two participants were former clients of my mother—a somewhat relational distance from the deceased that is typically not associated with survivor's guilt. Also, it appears that just as there may not be an expected timetable for the grieving process, there also may not be a clear demarcation between who feels and doesn't feel survivor's guilt.

However, I did have difficulties responding to some emotional reactions. A participant, who was a former client and had assisted with my mother's caregiving, said she was angry. When I asked toward whom and about what, I was surprised to find that she was angry with my mother. I asked her why this was the case, and she responded by saying, "I was just angry." Not quite sure what to say, I moved the interview in another direction. My father also expressed anger during an interview when he stated that he was "fucking angry" at my mother for leaving him. In both examples, I interpret their emotions as not so much anger at my mother but anger at the situation. If one believes that a relationship with the deceased can exist, misguided anger can also be projected onto them just as if they were still living.

It is apparent from these observations of participants' behaviors that traditional American feeling rules for grief were not always followed, and there were different processes of meaning making among them about breaches in the cultural scripts. The interview process became a way to re-member my mother in and of itself, and through these processes cultural feeling rules for grief and the divide between the living and the dead were queered (Paxton, 2014). My participants' responses showed that a dichotomy of either moving on from a loss or staying stuck in the emotional trauma is a particularly limited way to view the grieving process. In some moments in the interviews I was immersed in my participants' grief over my mother's death, but in many of those moments, there was relational growth and insight into my mother's past experiences with illness. For example, I found out from former clients and friends that my

mother was more aware of her possible death than I had originally conceptualized. She also was very supportive of my sexual identity, as were participants I had previously doubted would show support.

Through re-membering my mother during interactive interviews, participants were assisting me in re-membering myself back into my hometown. We were also helping each other re-member ourselves back into some past relationships that had gone stagnant. Several participants actively maintained a bond with my mother and some did not. For those that did choose to have this relationship (either through their own strategies or with assisting me during the research process), it did not completely "resolve" grief that they had felt or currently feel. Rather, the research process made participants feel more comfortable in their grief and confident about the bonds they were able to sustain with the living and the dead.

Chapter Five: Future Directions for Continuing Bonds Research

Root and Exline (2014) recently urged researchers to include the following concerns in their future studies on continuing bonds with the deceased: providing a more specific definition for what counts as a continuing bond, the bereaved's perception of the bond as positive or negative, the quality of the pre-death relationship, and the bereaved's afterlife beliefs. More specifically, they argue, "An important next step in continuing bonds research is to assess the bereaved individual's subjective experience associated with the continued bond expression, as well as the bereaved's interpretation of the meaning of the expression—in particular what the expression signifies about the bereaved, about the deceased, and about their relationship" (p. 5). Thus far, I have attempted to show this through my autoethnographic work, and it is my hope that readers have a better sense of continuing bond expressions.

While immersed in the analysis of my data, I found several future avenues for continuing bonds research that could help enrich our understanding of these subjective experiences and help support the endeavors Root and Exline propose in their work. These areas include: the role of social media in continuing bonds, a physical locale's effect on a community of grievers, the use of third places in re-membering, and continuing bonds implications for voluntary kin. In this final chapter, I summarize these future avenues of research and provide a brief reflection on my overall experiences of continuing bonds through the research process.

The Role of Social Media in Continuing Bonds

"There isn't Wifi in heaven!" This was a statement from a participant in a study on Facebook memorial pages (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). It is obvious that social networking sites

(SNS) are changing the ways in which people are interacting with one another. Much research has been done on how SNS affects the many facets of social life, including: impression management and friendship performance, network structure, bridging online and offline social networks, and privacy (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Thanatologists have already taken an interest in how the World Wide Web is changing the ways we think about loss (Sofka, Noppe Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). Some of this work has addressed how SNS serve as a way for people to continue bonds with the deceased. However, more work can be done in the area of what has been coined "thanatechnology."

Sofka et al. (2012) define thanatechnology as "all types of communication technology that can be used in the provision of death education, grief counseling, and thanatology research" (p. 3). In regards to thanatology research, much work has been done on how online communication technology has impacted grief and mourning. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2011) provide an overview of how the World Wide Web has changed "how we die and mourn" (p. 275). They first argue that the web has changed the dying process through the formation of online support groups and the use of blogs (in which those dying can archive their experiences). From this study, we can see that communication technology is changing the way we experience funerals—whether through allowing individuals to Skype into services from various locations or providing online guest books. Furthermore, memorializing practices are changing through communication technology—including the creation of web cemeteries and Facebook memorial pages.

In October of 2009 Facebook's head of security Max Kelly announced the site's memorization policy (Fletcher, 2009). If a family member dies, you must fill out a form and provide a link to an obituary. This will allow the profile to become memorialized. It is removed

from public searches and friend suggestions to other users. Only close family and friends are then able to post on the wall of the deceased. Some individuals have the deceased's account deleted, and they create a completely separate page for memorialization. However, Facebook's memorialization policy is not required, and it is possible to operate a dead family member's profile if username and password information is available. The social acceptability of doing this type of activity remains questionable.

Many studies on the use of Facebook memorializing focus on teens and college students. Through biographic-narrative-inquiry method interview approach of college students who had lost a close friend, Hieftje (2012) found several salient themes for Facebook memorialization. College students used Facebook memorial pages to sustain feelings of connection with the deceased by looking through old photo albums, wall posts, and private messages. These students would also post messages directly to the deceased on the memorial pages. Finally, the participants used the memorial pages as a way to commemorate the life of the deceased. For example, one student posted a running slide show with pictures of the deceased and his favorite music.

Also, some of these studies have focused on the frequency of posts after someone has died. Williams and Merten (2009) reviewed 20 profiles of dead adolescents between 2005 and 2007. They found that the number of posts decreased every month after the individual's death—from close to 80 posts one month after the death to 10 or less posts 12 months later. There were more comments on significant dates such as anniversaries of the death and birthdays. Adolescent posters would also provide meta-commentary about the posts to help them cope with the death. The topics covered in online comments included: the funeral of the deceased, seeing their body, and possibilities of an afterlife. Finally, commentary about the cause of death was highly

prevalent. For instance, in a case of suicide, one comment was "I wish you would have told us you were hurting."

Not all of these types of online studies have focused solely on adolescent experiences. Marwick and Ellison (2012) found many of the same occurrences with older populations, including direct communication with the deceased through posts. Some users would hold competitions to see if they could get a certain number of "likes" on the memorial pages. Furthermore, people would create memorial pages not only to honor the deceased but also to promote a certain cause related to the death (for example, to stop bullying in schools). Those who made specific memorial pages instead of memorializing the deceased's profile had to regulate posts more frequently. In fact, some situations occurred where managers of the pages had to intervene when "trolls" left derogatory remarks about the deceased. So while there was more potential for activity on these types of pages, there also had to be more regulation. DeGroot (2012) also found from a grounded theory analysis of posts on 10 Facebook memorial pages that users directly communicated with the deceased. These messages served two functions, to make sense of the death and to continue a bond. While there has been much research done in the area of thanatechnology, I was not able to locate any studies addressing the results of individuals creating Facebook memorializing pages that challenged cultural feeling rules for grief.

April 29, 2014 would have been my mother's 50th birthday. Out of my own desire to reconnect with her and my curiosity about the role of social networking and re-membering the deceased, I created a Facebook event page for her birthday. The page's title was "Re-membering Ann Paxton on Her 50th Birthday." I created the event a week before her birthday, and the description read:

On Tuesday, April 29, 2014, my mother would have been 50 years old. I am a strong

> supporter of the belief that it is possible to continue a relationship with the deceased even though they are no longer physically present. That being said, I am inviting you to celebrate 50 years of my mother's loving presence over the next week. Feel free to post a fond memory or story on this event wall. If you never met my mother, you can still feel free to post whatever you are emotionally moved to post. Confirming attendance to this event just means you are re-membering Mom on her birthday in whatever way you choose. Thanks in advance to those participating.

I invited close to 200 of my Facebook friends, some of whom had met my mother while others had not.

Responses to this event varied in nature, from deeply moving to oddly troubling. Out of the total number of guests invited, 104 confirmed attendance, 89 did not respond, and one person said she would maybe attend. This "maybe" response was from an individual with whom I had gone to high school but we were not very close. Her response and those who did not respond caused some friction with other attendees. One of my cousins posted on the event wall:

> Ok so there were 100 invited and 92 going and 1 MAYBE! Really????!!! Sorry to offend anybody but I think that's crazy in this situation. Did they even read the description?? "Confirming attendance to this event just means you are re-membering Mom on her birthday in whatever way you choose. Thanks in advance to those participating."

It appears that this post shows the power of continuing bonds with the deceased for some individuals. For my cousin, the lack of response was just as offensive, if not more, had this event been made if my mother were still alive. To ease the tension, I responded with the following post:

> I wouldn't take it as an insult. I tend to not really look at events as much as I should.

> Some people might have seen the title and assumed I was doing something in Tampa. Some people I sent the invite to didn't know Mom. I just hope that no matter what level of participation, this highlights the possibility of continuing a relationship with the deceased. Thank you for your comments though, and I am looking forward to seeing you this summer.

My cousin responded, "Sorry. I just feel very passionate about this! She was the greatest and I miss her soooo much! I also look forward to seeing you this summer also!" Not only was her response a way to confirm to me her commitment to a continued relationship with my mother, but it was also a way for her to show her love for me. My uncle decided to add to the thread and wrote, "I agree. Come on Cindy, Patty, and Harry! Time to join social media. What would it hurt?" Cindy, Patty, and Harry are all siblings of my mother and this uncle who posted the message. Continuing a bond with my mother in the following way allowed my uncle to reach out to his siblings and try to strengthen bonds with them.

Some of the "attendees" decided to post something right after joining. These posts were shorter and more general in nature. Here are some examples:

> "Such a sweet lady! ☺"
>
> "I remember her infectious laugh! Couldn't help but smile when you heard it. Miss her. She was such a sweet lady!"
>
> "She and Lisa were a hoot together…"

This last comment was from a friend in my mother's graduating class. I do not know who Lisa is, but I am assuming it is another friend of the group. This shows that re-membering rituals via social media may give participants a sense of freedom in their posts and, and they may not feel the obligation to fully explain a message.

One of my friends who had never met my mother posted:

> Great way to remember your mom! My favorite memory is all of the times we laughed telling stories of little Blake eating snacks and watching her cut hair. I know she would be very proud of the man that little guy has grown into! Sending my love your way, and to your mom. XOXO

This demonstrates that people can actively participate in re-membering the deceased even without ever meeting them. This post also helped me recognize times I had forgotten in the past where I had actively re-membered my mother with others.

One member of the event private messaged me the day before my mother's birthday, and she seemed distraught. She wrote, "Can't be there tomorrow. My husband's mother is being transferred to a care center for short term, and I need to be with him. I do want to share an 'Ann' story." From this single statement, we can see the power of re-membering rituals and how, again, the relationship with the deceased is so strong that the individual is interacting with me as if my mother were still alive. She shared with me the following story about Mom:

> It was a well-known fact (confirmed by your Mom) that she didn't like house cleaning very much. Well, one day she walked in to work and announced that a person could eat off her kitchen floor. I congratulated her on having clean floors. She said, "No, no...my floor has so much food on it you could literally have a meal!" LOL!!! To this day, when I clean my kitchen floor I always think of Ann. Her sense of humor will be with us forever.

I posted this for her because I wanted to help fulfill her wish to be a part of the event but I also felt the story helped paint a picture of my mother's personality.

The most posting activity occurred on the actual day of my mother's birthday. Some individuals attached pictures of my mother or themselves with my mother to accompany

messages. Many of the stories were about my mother as a family member or a hairdresser. Some hairdresser posts included:

> If you know me you know that I change my hair color all the time (I'm a do-it yourselfer). Well for Ann it was a funny joke - I remember one night in particular that I decided I wanted red hair. I colored it and when I was done I looked like the girl from the musical Annie - my hair was literally orange! So, I had to call Ann and of course she had to "see" what I had done! When I got to Ann's she took one look at it and started singing "The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow" and then laughed that incredible laugh for what seemed like forever! After she got done laughing once again she gave me color to fix my screw up! When Joe would go to Ann's shop and girls would ask what he thought of their hair color Ann would say "you're taking an opinion from a man whose wife changes her hair color like she changes underwear!" So here's to Ann - Happy 50th Birthday! We love and miss you every day!
>
> Blake, what a wonderful way to celebrate your mother. I too was a client of the Cater Vend beauty shop. She would wrap my head in toilet paper when she would run out of the beauty supply batting while giving me a perm. She would joke I only do this for my most favorite customers! Once she even dropped the lid to the shampoo bowl while my head was still in it! We about peed our pants laughing so hard! Ann was fun! She had a wonderful way of drawing people in and leaving them with a smile.

There were also times where participants made posts that discussed Ann both as a hairdresser and family member together:

> One of my funniest memories with Ann was every single time she did my hair (braiding, styling) if she would pull my hair and I would go "ouchhh" she would instantly respond

"oh wahhh wahhh go cry to your other favorite aunts" haha it would shut me up every time. She would always look at me and give me one of her warm smiles after she said it. If only she really knew how much she meant to me. She was definitely by far the funniest and most loving aunt a person could have. She is missed every day in the Johnson household.

So many memories with that sweet lady!! I used to love going to Cater-Vend for a haircut, but the start of a new school year was my absolute favorite. That was when I got my "back-to-school PERM." Aunt Annie would always do that one on the house! I used to rock some big-ass hair with huge bangs teased & sprayed. Now I have a daughter of my own, with a head full of natural curls. We rock big-ass hair everyday :))

Typically, when memorializing a deceased loved one, discussions of his or her occupation are limited (unless through the profession they did charitable things). These posts suggest that when engaging in re-membering processes, the line between public and private spheres is blurred and people may even celebrate a deceased individual's humorous blunders on the job. This information may be useful for organizational communication research in showing how if one is highly skilled in interpersonal communication, customers may overlook mistakes. In my mother's case, customers not only overlooked these mistakes but found humor in them and a way to cope with her death.

Throughout the day, attendees would continue to make posts on the event wall and also engage in conversation about these posts. Some would also post accompanying pictures with their posts. I announced on the wall different activities I was doing for mom's birthday including checking in at a restaurant for "Ann's Birthday Dinner" and posting a picture of me drinking her favorite beverage, an Amaretto and Sprite, at a local bar. There were five posts made a day after

the birthday, and one was made almost a whole month later. While I did not inquire as to why they were late, I am assuming this was because there was a lack of access to Facebook.

Since the creation of this event, no other online memorials have been created for Mom—although Facebook friends continue to send private messages about re-membering her. This specific birthday event was often brought up in my research interviews and when it was discussed, participants highly praised it. It also inspired some to talk about other ways that social media has been used to continue relationships with other deceased family members and friends. In one particular interview with a couple, there was some criticism about how certain family members were using Facebook to memorialize the deceased. One participant expressed her discomfort over family members keeping her brother's Facebook page active and acting as him. The family member would make status updates in the first person, and the participant thought that was "creepy." In another interview, a participant discussed how a friend of his used a memorial page to mourn the loss of his partner but that the posts went "on and on for months."

Clearly, we can see that there are various reactions to continuing bonds and re-membering through social media dependent upon time after death, audience, and online context of the re-membering strategy (keeping the dead's profile active versus creating a memorial page). As social media continue to blur the lines between the public and private sphere, it also might seem the same for the lines between the living and the dead. Future work can continue to explore the complex interplay between social media, continuing bonds, and cultural feeling rules for grief. While it was apparent that an online context had an effect on the ways bonds were formed with the deceased, I also found that aspects of DuQuoin's cultural and physical environment did as well.

Rural Space, Re-membering, and Third Places

In some ethnographic studies, authors have discussions about the researcher "going native" in the field in order to get "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973). The more the researcher can adapt, not only to the physical environment but also to the community's culture, the better rapport with participants and the richer the ethnographic account will be. However, in this project, I had already been a member of the community for the first 18 years of my life. I inhabited an "outsider within" perspective (Collins, 1986). This idea originates from feminist standpoint theories and emphasizes a researcher's ability to recognize particular phenomena in the field because of the simultaneous identity of being an academic but also a part of the community being studied. I had to unlearn some of DuQuoin's cultural norms and constantly question my assumptions about community life there in order to gain a fuller understanding of the interplay between the micro processes of re-membering and the larger cultural milieu.

After several failed attempts to find literature on small town grief, I decided to instead make connections between bereavement literature and work in cultural anthropology and geography studies. Salamon's (1995) study on seven farming communities in Illinois was prominent in guiding my analysis. While the study was conducted in the 1980's, I found many of her observations resonated with my personal experiences of small town life. Salamon argues, "Culture, history, and community shape a family's attachment to its land. Culture, in particular, mediates how kin groups manage, handle, and pass on land, processes instrumental to the production and reproduction of the gender and social relations in both family and community" (p. 1). I would also add that one aspect of these influenced "social relations" are relationships with the dead, and that re-membering in rural space may be different than in other types of locale.

When analyzing the social relations of members in the seven farming communities, Salamon writes:

> Next to kinship, proximity operates as an important derivation of yeoman network links. Most Heartlanders can trace some distant kinship with everyone else, but because yeoman ethics, religion, and experiences are shared, neighbors can be readily incorporated into a network. The close-knit networks in the heartland have many social benefits. Those undergoing trauma can count on neighbors as well as kin for support. Seldom does anyone complain about loneliness. Quite the opposite—people have too many visitors and too many social obligations. If an individual in crisis lacks a wide network, the minister tries to create support or social outlets. (p. 187)

Salamon provides examples where a community member had undergone some sort of trauma and how others helped. An elderly widowed woman had to be hospitalized because of a surgery and received hundreds of cards from community members. Neighbors of a recent widow trained her son on farming practices that his father would have done had he survived. The ways in which proximity influences social relations in DuQuoin can be expressed in this participant's statement:

> I mean in a small town of 6,600 people…We have the opportunity…we all went to kindergarten together. I mean I remember my sons asking me, we'd be leaving the store and they'd say how do you know them? I went to school with them. We have the opportunity and we are blessed to know each other from the time we are born, all through school, and into adult life.

This participant was discussing how his sons are amazed at how many people he knows when shopping at the local grocery store. While I was home during fieldwork, I would run into many people that I knew at the grocery store, during jogs, or while interviewing participants for my

project. I even recruited one of my participants after stopping to chat with her during a run. This was a former client of my mother's that I had not spoken to in at least five or six years.

Of course, these close-knit communities also carry social costs. Salamon argues, "People in the Heartland lack much privacy, and the constant gossip and criticism by relatives aim at maintaining the required conformity such intimacy entails" (p. 186). Members' behaviors are closely monitored and these forms of social control keep these communities "relatively homogenous and highly cohesive" (p. 187). Salamon cites an example of how it was scandalous that a man in one of the farming communities bought a new Toyota truck instead of a Ford or Chevy. Growing up in DuQuoin, I remember similar "scandalous" examples that were discussed among family and friends. After I spent time in the field, it seemed that this aspect of small, town rural life had not changed much.

Even though some aspects of small town life can be annoying, participants in my study could overlook these because of benefits in the tight knit community. In terms of memorializing the deceased, many of my participants expressed pride in the community's ability to come together and support the bereaved. They made many comments about funeral sizes—in particular for one police chief who had 4000 attendees.

One participant discussed how grateful he was for this type of support when comparing his sister's mourning experience to his own after the loss of her husband. He stated:

> Everybody knows everybody and it affects more people. My sister lost her husband in Chicago and we went up there just the next day after he died. It's nothing like we would have been here. Yeah, she had their close friends. It's just different.

This difference can be seen in the various ways community members of DuQuoin have memorialized people in the past. A large clock has been erected downtown to memorialize a

former mayor. One of the streets has been named after a former fire chief. Every year multiple scholarships are given to graduating high school seniors, and they are named after deceased community members—even individuals such as my mother who did not hold a public office.

Of course, some might argue that people everywhere do these things to memorialize the deceased. However, from my ethnographic observations, it appears that re-membering in small towns has possibly greater importance than in metropolitan areas precisely because of the ways in which the physical landscape influences social relations between the community members. This may not just apply to communities in the Heartland but to small American towns in general. Ellis (1995) writes about losing her brother in a plane crash and returning to her small hometown in Virginia. Hundreds of people, whether they knew her brother directly or not, came to the funeral services and brought food to her family. In a previous work (Rennels & Paxton, 2013), my co-author also expressed similar observations about the number of people in her small community who provided support to her family after her mother's death.

And so, there lingers a social question about why support may be stronger in small communities after a death. Is there a reason beyond the residents of a town just being in close proximity to each other? While attempting to connect re-membering and ontological theories, I see that there appears to be a difference in memorializing the deceased in small towns compared to major cities or suburban areas. People in smaller communities rely on each other more to help financially sustain one another and the town as a whole. This economic reliance could potentially influence how members of DuQuoin conceptualize their sense of self in relation to others. Gergen (1991) discusses at length the different ways in which the self can be viewed: modern, romantic, and postmodern. Theorists supporting a modernist view of self believe "reason and observation are the central ingredients of human functioning" (p. 19). Human beings and their

environments are described in terms of machine metaphors. Each person is a part of the machine that allows society to function effectively. If part of a human being is not working, then the whole human being is defective which in turn leads to a defective society.

When someone dies, this completely disrupts the system of the small town. Even if some community members do not know the person that died there is a good possibility that they still know someone connected to the deceased. Modernism relies on grand narratives and solid foundations of truth, and this is often found in many Christian faith practices. Religion plays a major role in the Heartland not only because it provides individuals support in times of crises but also because "the rural church is the next accessible network of relationships in the community" (Salamon, p. 187). Almost all of my participants practiced a Christian faith and made statements about Heaven and an afterlife. Interactive interviews with participants about re-membering my mother also helped them identify spiritual or religious ways they remember their own deceased family members—through dreams, visions, and possible divine intervention in times of crisis.

However, there was one participant (a high school English teacher) who identified as an atheist in a mixed faith family. She did not believe in a god or an afterlife, and she tentatively referred to the possibility of Heaven as "a crutch" for the bereaved. This participant still felt it was important to re-member her deceased father, and she stated:

> A major part of the grief for me was the idea that I would never see my Dad again. That's what hurt so much. I don't think there's an afterlife and how you live on is through others' actions. I assign *Fahrenheit 451* in my class and the main character's grandfather dies. He says in the book the night his grandfather died the world was robbed of a thousand fine deeds. He discusses making a difference that will go on. There are things

that my dad taught me and my boys and I will remind them of these lessons on occasion.

I continue my father's presence by taking on the various roles he left behind.

This same participant told a story about being in a severe car accident with one of her sons. They both survived but as the crash was happening, they both experienced a similar sensation. "We both stopped hearing and felt this intense feeling of peace," she stated. Her son interpreted this sensation as a spirit protecting them, and she interpreted it as simple physiology and a feeling of adrenaline. The participant stated to me that her family comes first, regardless of differing religious and spiritual beliefs.

Many participants made comments about the importance of keeping peace in the community. One participant discussed how she and her husband could still be friends with an atheist couple that lived down the street despite their different beliefs. It is apparent from these and other examples that even in the midst of differing religious or spiritual beliefs, the closeness of family members and community members is a very important value in DuQuoin. This modernist and collectivist framework for community trumps a more metropolitan, individualistic way of life. Small towns may be more isolated from the "outside world" and urban residents that follow more postmodern belief systems about self in relation to community. Therefore, when someone dies in DuQuoin or similar communities, it may symbolize a threat to a modernist way of life.

Gergen has discussed at length how processes of social saturation are transitioning individuals and communities into thinking about life in a more postmodern framework. Gergen discusses the "postmodern condition" where people in contemporary life are constantly bombarded with electronic messages, endless possibilities for personal relationships, and constant environmental change. Whether these processes of "social saturation" are beneficial for

people is a central debate within his work. Some would argue that these processes are taking away from an intensity that was once felt in personal relationships. In our current era, people are much more mobile than they were in the past. It is less common for people to live in the same neighborhood, let alone town for all of their lives. This sense of social saturation may make some in more collectivist communities, like DuQuoin, uneasy. Perhaps this fuels a need for individuals to hold onto the deceased. By creating scholarships in their name or erecting physical landmarks, town residents are not only honoring the dead but also trying to remind others of what life was like in the "good ole days" and to maintain community bonds.

One way that community bonds are strengthened is through the implementation of third places (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1999; Oldenburg, 2002). While participants shared humorous stories about my mother as a family member or friend, many of them focused on her identity as a hairdresser. Participants who were family members would also tell stories about her as a hairdresser, regardless if they were former clients. "It was always a comedy hour in her salon," one participant stated. "Your mom would be cutting one client's hair while another was under the dryer for a perm. The dog would be running around barking. You or your dad or brother would be talking to clients. It was just chaos! But we kept coming back for more." Many loved and adored my mother, but they also appreciated the space of her salon even if at times it could be deemed as somewhat unprofessional.

My mother's salon could have been considered a third place for many community members in DuQuoin. A third place is an environment where people can socialize together outside of the workplace and home. Often referred to as an escape from the obligations of everyday life, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) also argue "they provide opportunities for important experiences and relationships in a sane society, and are uniquely qualified to sustain a

sense of well-being among its members" (p. 269). People gather in these spaces primarily to enjoy one another's company.

Oldenburg and Brissett outline several characteristics of third places. First, a third place is an accessible public space that inhabitants appropriate as their own space. My mother's salon was in our home, but she had no specific criteria for being one of her customers. Some clients would come weekly to have their hair styled and others even came to visit when they did not have an appointment. In third places, there is the possibility of pure sociability, which is the "play form of association" (Simmel, 1949 cited in Oldenburg & Brisset, 1982). Individuals are able to let go of their social roles when entering the third place. There was a wide range of individuals, possessing various community statuses that could be in my mother's salon at the same time.

While pure sociability is the form of third places, "non discursive symbolism" is the content of them. Oldenburg and Brisset write, "This kind of speech is idiomatic and steeped in local heroes, and local tragedies, in gossip and romance. It ties people to places and yet removes them from little schemes and strategies of self-interest. It gives individuals a sense of continuity" (p. 272). In line with a modernist perspective of self and community, it seems that a feeling of continuity might be especially important for people in small towns. The conversations that occurred in my mother's salon were often exemplars of non-discursive symbolism. This type of symbolism "establishes not contractual bonds between people but spiritual ones" (p. 272). These spiritual bonds lead to many benefits for individuals who choose to be involved in third places. One can have experiences of excitement and novelty because what can occur in a third place is unpredictable. Also, there is a wide range of people that can inhabit a third place at one time.

Third places thrive off the inhabitants' ability to express emotions openly and contribute to their overall mental health.

As my autoethnographic depictions show, my mother's salon was a place that provided strong emotional (and possibly spiritual) bonds among people. Perhaps the need to re-member my mother also has to do with the importance of her salon as a third place for many community members of DuQuoin. For instance, when several customers openly expressed grief in a new salon after my mother's death, this may not have only been because they missed my mother but also the benefits of the third place. Milligan's (1998) work explores the social construction of place attachment, which consists of two interrelated aspects: a place's interactional past and interactional potential. Its interactional past refers to the intensity and meaningfulness of the memories associated with the place. She writes, "The degree of meaningfulness of these experiences translates into the degree of attachment to the site itself; i.e. the more meaningful the interactions that occur there (or are otherwise perceived as linked to it) the greater the place attachment to the site" (p. 2). A place's interactional potential refers to what people expect for the future, or the imagined or anticipated possibilities for a site. Milligan developed her theory of place attachment by studying the closing and re-open of a coffee shop in a small university town. While the study gained interesting insights on how an individual's attachment to a place can either enhance or hinder the attachment to a place in its new form, there is still much uncertainty about how people cope with the loss of a place. Future research may investigate this phenomenon but also how someone's feelings of attachment to a place impact the grieving process over the death of the creator or pioneer of that place.

While the places of a community are important when thinking about re-membering the deceased, it is important to consider the complex dynamics of re-membering among family

members. Research has shown the different ways in which family members conceptualize a relationship with the same deceased family member (Foster et al., 2011). However, there is minimal work on how re-membering, continuing bonds, and the possibility of strengthening relationships among family members who could be classified as voluntary kin (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

Re-membering and Voluntary Kin: Strengthening Bonds of the Living Through the Dead

Braithwaite et al. (2010) discuss at length the history of communication scholarship that explores formations of families outside of a nuclear and biological framework. In the past, these types of families have been described with various labels but most often as "fictive kin" (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Ibsen & Klobus, 1972; Muraco, 2006 as cited in Braithwaite et al., 2010). Braithwaite et al. write, "Fictive families are most often referred to by scholars as what they are not; that is, they are defined by how they are different from the conventional understanding of family, focusing on what fictive family members lack" (p. 390). Braithwaite et al. challenge this label and choose to use "voluntary kin," implying a "mutuality of selection." In their work on voluntary kin, they developed several typologies on how these families occur and the emotional benefits participants' receive from them. One of these typologies designated voluntary kin as substitute family. These families where formed when members established a relationship due to death or estrangement with biological family members. An example of voluntary kin as substitute family was when one participant lost her only son in a car accident. One of the son's close friends became like a son to her—fulfilling her son's role and satisfying her emotional needs.

It may be pertinent to explore how forms of voluntary kin help continue a bond with a deceased family member. As many readers have seen thus far, I have a very close relationship

with my advisor Dr. Carolyn Ellis. Types of advisor-advisee relationships can greatly very, but I would say that ours is very much like that of a mother and son. We chat about my work but also aspects of our personal lives, she has invited me over to her home for dinner, and I refer to her as my academic mother. This type of relationship, a form of voluntary kin, not only provides me emotional support but also helps me continue a relationship and re-member my biological mother. I know that I can talk openly and often about my mother with Carolyn. I can also share with her stories of possible post death contact—stories I worry other people might criticize me for telling.

One example of me being able to share a story happened during the final stages of the writing process for this dissertation. I was having trouble sleeping one evening and plagued by the typical worries of a graduate student—finishing my dissertation, trying to publish another article, and being on the academic job market. After tossing and turning for a few hours, I decided to just start my day early and work on the dissertation. While getting my coffee ready, I spotted a bottle of maple syrup nearby that I had not used in a very long time. I wondered when the syrup was going to expire and checked the expiration date: April 29, 2015. This is the date of my mother's birthday. When I logged onto my computer, I received a notification on Facebook that it was Carolyn's birthday.

What made this coincidence even more peculiar was because of an online exchange I had with a Carolyn a couple of days before. My mother's friends from her graduating class decided to take a trip to celebrate their 50th birthdays. This was the same group of friends I interviewed (refer to the scene in chapter four) who took a cruise for their 40th birthdays. I had sent a Facebook message to a couple of these women telling them that my mother would have appreciated them still going on trips together. I sent Carolyn a message as well about this, and I

also thanked her for helping me find what mattered to me in terms of academic scholarship. She responded by saying many affirmative things including that she thought it was an honor that I called her my academic mother. Carolyn also said that she feels that she and my mother would have gotten along wonderfully and taken great joy in co-parenting me.

And so, I was excited to tell Carolyn about all of these strange coincidences. This was not the first time I shared with her stories of my beliefs in post death contact from our deceased loved ones. Carolyn enjoys these stories and always listens carefully. I think, regardless of our differing spiritual beliefs, they help us feel closer to one another. They also help me feel closer to my biological mother. Future research could explore how forms of voluntary kin can help the bereaved continue a relationship with a deceased family member, and vice versa, how this continued relationship can help form and strengthen new family relationships or forms of voluntary kin.

Concluding Thoughts

"Do you think you'd be pursuing this career if your mom hadn't died?"

Even though I have contemplated this before, the student's question catches me off guard. We are in week three of my Communicating Grief, Loss, and Illness class. I have just shared with the class my first article about continuing bonds and my mother's death (Paxton, 2013.). Usually, I try to share my work early on in the semester to make the space more conducive to sharing personal experiences. If I am not going to make myself vulnerable and share a tragedy from my life, why would they?

Staring back at 30 curious eyes, I take a deep breath and respond, "I believe I would still be pursuing a Ph.D. in communication, but I might not be interested in studying grief and loss." This answer seems to make sense to me. I went to college thinking that I would be a news

anchor—the next Anderson Cooper. After spending a semester on our college television news station, I found that while I enjoyed the spotlight, I did not take pleasure in all that was involved in reporting. I took a required course, Communication Theory, during my sophomore year in high school. Going into the course, I thought it would be achingly boring. I was pleasantly surprised when I found it to be a thrilling experience—with the power of theory you could attempt to explain phenomenon that seemed to be on the surface impossible to understand. If you have read this far into my dissertation, then you know most of the rest of the story about how I got into this work.

Everything happens for a reason, right?

For those that might cringe while reading the previous statement, let me explain. In the past, I also would have been uncomfortable with that statement. It definitely isn't always the most helpful or supportive phrase we have when trying to help a loved one mourn a loss. However, I do think there is some benefit in interrogating this philosophy in lieu of my own personal experience. There are several doctrines of religious faith that subscribe to this ideology. Of course, I can already hear the crashing crescendo of possible objections now: *That reasoning is not helpful when we are faced with some of the most atrocious things imaginable as humans! It's too simplistic. It's not academic enough. It invalidates people's emotions and takes away responsibility from those who have done wrong in the world.*

Yes, these objections might all be true but I still believe that the excuse "everything happens for a reason" is worthy of theoretically exploring. If people cannot completely move on from a loss, this may be one motto that can help them live with it. So, take a few moments to autoethnographically pursue with me this phrase that, while overused, might have some merit. As Bochner (2002) eloquently states, I am using narrative inquiry to "keep conversation going,

to activate subjectivity and feeling, to raise consciousness, to promote empathy, and to encourage activism" (p. 93). Trying to prove that this statement of advice is a panacea for all of our problems is not what I will be attempting to do in my concluding pages.

This is not a "born again Christian" narrative. I still struggle with what I believe to be true about a God and an afterlife (and these are issues often silenced or taboo in the academy). When asked the question about my faith practices, I usually state that I am a spiritual but not a religious person. I do not identify as an atheist simply because the thought of my mother rotting in the ground is too painful. Plus, I believe that being an atheist is still subscribing to a higher power of science and the belief in a completely objective universe—so is it really not as dogmatic as religious faiths? I do not identify as an agnostic because I believe that eventually people will know more about the possibility of an afterlife. In fact, I believe most of us have the ability to learn more about its possibility even today.

I have found comfort in the words and teachings of psychic medium Theresa Caputo. I first encountered this bubbly, blonde woman on her hit television show *The Long Island Medium*. Theresa was raised as a Catholic and still identifies as one. Growing up, she would see things that no one else would see—for instance, a man standing at the foot of her bed. She also would have random physical sensations she couldn't explain such as a pain in the chest or shortness of breath while shopping at the grocery store or doing some normal everyday activity. After seeing a spiritual healer, she was informed that these visions and sensations were actually spirits trying to work through her to send messages to loved ones.

As a longtime fan, I also have read Caputo's (2013) work on God and the afterlife. Caputo's views are similar to Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation. She argues that humans live multiple lives and before we come to Earth each time, we plan out the lessons we will learn with

our spirit guides. In a way, some of the tragedies we will endure are already predetermined. After we die, we go through a life review where we see and feel how our actions impacted others. We then stay on the other side for some time to keep learning or we are sent to Earth to live another life. The overall point is that living is all about learning lessons. With every lesson we learn, our soul is enriched and we get closer to a higher power. Caputo argues that there are levels in heaven and with every lesson we learn our soul can get to a higher level.

Now, you might wonder what all of this information has to do with re-membering and continuing bonds with the deceased. I believe that if I had not found out about re-membering and continuing bonds, I would never have been able to understand "the reason" for, or how I am attributing meaning to, my mother's death. If we take Caputo's philosophy to heart, I had already charted with my guide the loss I would endure on Earth in order to learn my lessons to progress to a higher level on the other side. Perhaps, in these processes of writing and re-membering, I am able to find the "reason" for my mother's death. As tragic it was and even though I miss her terribly, I can assume several things probably would not have occurred if she had not died.

My relationship with my father probably would not have been as close. Growing up, I had a much stronger connection with my mother. My father grimly remembers times when I was a young child that I would stand at the door and cry when I saw him coming home from work. He would have eventually accepted my sexuality but I think it would have taken him much longer. My father has mentioned many times to me that he "did not fully realize what he had until it was gone." Perhaps, my mother's death has made him realize that he'd rather love and accept a gay son than not have one at all. Also, if my mother's death had not occurred, I would not be able to share this story with others. I'd like to think that this story will help many heal from whatever trauma they may undergo, but I do have two specific audiences in mind—those

who have lost a loved one and those struggling with their families' acceptance of their sexual orientation.

I already have had individuals approach me about my work. Paul, a close friend, had a strong emotional reaction after reading one of my articles that led to this dissertation (Paxton, 2014). In this article, I construct an imagined conversation with my mother. In his response, Paul stated:

> There's a part of me I don't understand/love/am confused by and that makes it hard for me to know how other people would receive me. But reading the conversation with your mom made me realize that she loves you for you and not because of any one aspect of you, since you celebrate you, she celebrates you. I think as I learn to love myself more and be honest with myself I'll be able to realize that people will love me. And if they don't, then they don't love, but they love the lie I've told them.

It is apparent from this message and when others tell me about experiences they've had after reading my work, that there is more going on during re-membering than just connecting with the deceased.

Whether I am re-membering through writing about my personal experience or through interactive interviews, I am also learning more about my experience through hindsight (Freeman, 2010). In terms of moral lateness, I am not really seeing the error of my ways in regards to my past relationship with my mother. Rather, I am seeing how I let certain canonical narratives (Bruner, 1987) of grief, urban spaces, and rural spaces separate me from family and friends back in my hometown. The narrative that one should move on from a loss and push grief aside and the narrative that says queer individuals are not accepted in rural spaces both impede upon my life story. Through this work and re-storying my life, when I am making myself vulnerable to grief

and loss in the presence of others also experiencing similar feelings —something transformative happens. I let my defenses down, and I consider the possibility that these community or family members are not rejecting me because of my sexual orientation. I realize that these individuals (from whom I at one time felt so distanced) loved and cared about my mother—they love and care about *me*. Through re-membering my mother, I am also in a way re-membering myself back into my family and hometown community.

Just as I have realized death does not have to foreclose the narrative of my relationship with my mother, I also realize it does not have to foreclose my relationship with family and friends in my hometown community. Will I ever move back and live there permanently? I doubt it. However, I should not fear or despise going back. I should not fear the pain of loss or rejection that held me back for so many years.

In these processes of re-membering and hindsight, I also start thinking about narrative integrity (Freeman, 1997). I begin wondering about how I want to be remembered after I die. Professionally, I would like to be known for producing work that made a difference—helping people heal from trauma and resolving personal differences in conflict with one another. As Bochner (2009) argues, we all have an academic calling to study things we care about in whatever ways our work will most benefit society. Journal articles, book chapters, and conference presentations are important to my career. However, the number of lines on my C.V. does not matter if I am not a good, ethical human being. I do not want to be known back home as the son, grandson, brother, nephew, or friend that left, became successful, and never cared about those with whom he grew up. I do not want that narrative thread to be part of my story. As many cultural differences as there might be between me and the community members of DuQuoin, I

find strength, encouragement, and compassion in their presence. I would not have known this had it not been for the power of hindsight and processes of re-membering.

> I would like to close with a response from a participant after reading some of my work:
>
> Well Blake I just got done reading your paper. Last night I had a dream and I can't say it was as much of a dream as it was a vision of seeing some of my loved ones that have passed away and one of them was your mom…which made me remember about your paper…and as I sit here typing this with tears in my eyes I just want to tell you it's wonderful. Reading this and hearing others tell more stories about your mom just took me right back to those days…especially the ones about the Hair Loft, your grandpa Corky, and also about your mom not wanting people to see the messy house…lol. Thanks for allowing us to be a part of this. Your mom as I have said before would have been so proud of you, I know I am. She was and always will be my best friend. Take care and hope to see you again soon.

In these processes of re-membering, we see the beauty of what happens when we grieve and suffer together. We learn about what it means to live with a story (Frank, 1995) and incorporate our losses into daily living. They allow a space for us to reflect on and learn from our pasts in order to live a better future. These processes do not bring the dead back to life in a supernatural or spiritual sense, but through storytelling and reflection, they regain membership in our lives—helping us understand others and ourselves better. What could be more divine than that?

Afterward: A Family Wedding Reception to Re-member

The wedding reception for my cousin Ryan and his wife Hillary is outdoors. Since this is his second marriage, the family decided to keep the ceremony simple. The actual wedding was held earlier in the afternoon with just the immediate family of the bride and groom. The reception is taking place in the yard of his two-story ranch house, located in one of the more rural areas of DuQuoin. As my brother and I travel to the reception, I observe the cornfields and long windy gravel roads. A thick smell of cow manure permeates the air.

The evening weather is a little chilly for June—in the mid to upper 60's with a slight breeze. I shiver as I step out of my father's midnight blue extended cab Ford truck—the "trophy truck" as my mother jokingly called it. He bought it when I was in middle school. The license plate still reads to this day "4 Packy"—Packy being my father's nickname among close friends. When he first bought the truck, he washed and waxed it weekly and was adamant about nobody eating or drinking in it. I giggle to myself remembering Mom taking it through the car wash, vacuuming up French fries, and saying, "He'll never fucking know!" It is funny how the smallest thing can bring her back—even if for a brief, fleeting moment.

After a few arguments with my brother about what he should wear to the reception and making a quick trip to a clothing store for him to buy dress pants that fit, we have finally made it to Ryan's house. Kelly and Dad are already here because they have kindly volunteered to do the catering for the reception. The evening's meal will be served buffet style and include my father's famous pulled pork loin. My stomach is already growling in anticipation.

All six of my mother's brothers and sisters are at the reception with their accompanying families. Hillary's whole side of the family is in attendance, and so are several of their close family and friends. The wedding colors are turquoise, pink, and white. My Aunt Cindy is wearing a gorgeous turquoise skirt with a black cardigan over her shoulders, and a multi-colored pewter stone necklace adorns her neck. When she spots my brother and me, she quickly embraces us and gives us a hug and kiss on the cheek. In the embrace, I smell a hint of her Liz Claiborne perfume. "Hey guys! Don't forget to sign the guest book!" she greets.

As the evening festivities progress, I find myself being quietly reflexive. The more time goes on the more difficult it is to gather all of the family together, and weddings and funerals are just about the only events where this happens. But when family members do come together, old familiar feelings of love and comfort ignite.

My father's cooking, as usual, is a major hit. Guests go through the line more than once piling their plates high with traditional Midwest cuisine. My cousin, Seth, pours him and me a few too many glasses of red wine. The buzz from the booze mixed with the sounds of my aunts' high pitched "hyena laughs" makes me feel warm and at peace.

It feels good to be home.

After dinner and a few toasts, the DJ starts up the music and beckons guests to the dance floor, which is on a concrete driveway in front of Ryan's garage. *It's like an outdoor music festival.* I jump up from my seat when I hear the familiar tune of the "Cupid Shuffle." Aunt Jan is sitting next to me at the table. I turn to her and say, "Come on Jan! Let's dance."

She crosses her arms and responds, "Oh. I don't know this dance."

I pull her up from the seat. "I'll teach you!"

When I reach the dance floor, I am surprised to find that my father and Kelly have left their serving posts and have decided to join in on the dancing. Dad usually is very particular about the music he listens and dances to. He's more of a country and old rock and roll kind of man, and so I am pleased to see he is giving the shuffle a try. "Your old man's still got it!" he yells when he sees Jan and me approach.

After the first few rounds of steps, Jan is on a roll and she is doing better than I am. I find myself getting lost in the music and the moment looking around at my fellow dancers. Aunt Cindy is beaming brightly and playfully shaking her hips at my father. Kelly laughs at Cindy's actions, and Aunt Patty whispers something in her ear that makes her laugh harder. I am happy to see that Kelly feels like she is fully part of the family now and does not feel the need to compete with my mother. Kyle, I am impressed to see, is a regular Casanova. He stands to the side of the dance floor with a big toothy grin and a Budlight in hand. He chats it up with two female classmates. They are laughing at something he has said, and one of them reaches out and playfully punches his shoulder.

In the last 10 years, many things have changed. Family members have married and remarried, grandchildren have been born, other relatives have departed in death, and there have even been a few job changes and relocations. While my aunts believe that my mother was the peacekeeper and glue of the family, I still think they are doing the best they can without her. The same feelings of joy I had at every past Strong family event before my mother's death are still here. I have laughed just as a hard and smiled just as much, to the point that my face aches. This side of the family may have to work on communicating about their feelings but it is apparent the love each member feels for one another.

And we know how to have a damn good time.

After the shuffle ends, I wipe sweat from my brow and decide to take a quick break from the dance floor. Several display tables surround the outside parameter of the floor. One holds the guest book and another pictures of the bride, groom, their children, and some of the new blended family. I spot one table I have yet to peruse since arriving at the reception. As I approach closer, I remember that this is the reception memory table. It was my cousin Meredith's idea to have this set up. On the table are framed pictures of deceased friends and family members we all wish could be here today.

I feel a single tear flow down my cheek as I examine each picture, in particular those of my Grandpa Corky and Mom. She is about 22 years old in this picture and the maid of honor in my Aunt Susie's wedding—adorning a bright blue dress and a white headband. Her smile is full and framed against the background of a full face with rosy red blushed cheeks. It is the happiest I have ever seen her in a picture, and I'd like to think that this would be the expression she'd have right now, watching the events of the evening unfolding.

A pleasant chill goes up the back of my neck when I spot a framed message behind all of the pictures. It says, next to an image of a heart, "We know you would be here today if heaven wasn't so far away."

"But I know you're here Mom," I softly say to myself. "I miss you."

As I look back at the dance floor and see all of the fun my family is having tonight, I wonder if perhaps Heaven could be conceptualized outside of the parameters of a metaphysical space. Maybe instead of Heaven existing above us in some invisible mysterious spiritual realm, it is the ability to fully embrace life and to love and feel deeply with others. To understand that while the human experience can be filled with many disappointments and devastation—there is

life after a loss. I will never know for sure if there is a God or an afterlife. But there are a few things I am certain of.

My mother, even though she died young, led a good and full existence on this earth. She tried to teach me many things in my youth, but one lesson that is prominent in my mind is that if you touch just one person in this lifetime you've fulfilled your purpose. It is apparent from this project that she touched many lives—her family, friends, clients, community members. She was not some grand public figure but an everyday woman, a proud mother and beautician with a small salon in her home.

Through re-membering her back into my life, I have re-membered myself back into a space I had largely neglected. Through continuing a relationship with her, I have been able to continue relationships with those in my life I had left behind. Broken bonds have been restored, and I no longer walk in shame.

It feels good to hold joy and sorrow together.

It feels good to know that many people love and accept me—several who I feared never would.

It is good to feel at home with grief.

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Appendix: Methodology and Analysis as Mourning

Spinning Selves Autoethnographically

Geertz (1973) said, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning " (p. 5). I have always been appreciative of his argument because it aligns with my academic values and my belief that communication is a process of social construction. When I teach my classes, I tell students that experts in popular culture often misinform them about communication and personal relationships. In order to attempt "better" communication with one another, we have to look at relationships happening *within communication* rather than looking at *communication within* personal relationships.

Our relationships, both with the living and the dead, could be considered cultural artifacts. We can learn much about the norms and values of a given community by looking at how these types of relationships work. In this dissertation, I had many "webs" of culture to sort through in order to better understand my mother's community of grievers' relationship with her: the culture of my family, the culture of a town, and an American culture of bereavement, among a few of these cultures. These, along with my own acquired academic background, resulted in complex relational interplays between researcher and participants. While I originally did not consider this project an intervention, I do believe that through the research process, my participants and I were able to spin a culture of bereavement together—one that would help us cope with future instances of trauma and loss.

Furthermore, I wanted to provide an autoethnographic account to show these processes of spinning—up close and personal. On spinning stories autoethnographically, Berry (2013) writes:

> The processes are too complex, the stakes are too high, to examine from a distance. I offer my story as a voice for others immersed in their own negotiations, and perhaps in need of a story to cling. I convey this story, my spin on spinning, knowing that across our lives, some spins are encouraged and others discouraged, and some spinners are deemed more worthy of inclusion and love than others. I spin knowing that we are always already spinning, and sometimes in distressing ways. (p. 211)

Before the research process, I was spinning my bereavement process and community involvement in unproductive ways. The town of DuQuoin represented a space of pain from my mother's death and a fear of possible rejection because of my sexual orientation. These unproductive spinning processes were so frequent and consistent that they seemed to create a tight web of negativity over time. This kind of web made me ponder several questions: How was I to ever feel comfortable in my hometown again and live there for six weeks? How was I to mindfully engage in the research process and make sure I respected each participant's mourning process and privacy? Would I find myself being stuck once again in the trauma of my mother's death? Before entering the field, my mind was haunted by the thought of offending my mother's community of grievers and not doing its narrative representation justice. I also worried about my own emotional well being.

I did not have my university's IRB to cling to for reassurance that I was doing the right things. After submitting my application for review, I received the following response via email:

> Dear Mr. Paxton, The IRB has determined that the activities described in the application are not designed to be a systemic investigation that will contribute to generalizable

> knowledge under the criteria required by Health and Human Services. The activities therefore do not constitute research per USF IRB criteria. As a result, IRB approval is not required for this activity. The study is marked closed – never approved. Please see the attached letter from the IRB Chairperson.

I was flabbergasted (as were my committee members). In my research project, I was interviewing human subjects about my mother's death. I was asking them questions that would possibly evoke strong emotions of grief and sadness. Even though my goals did not relate to the generalizability of knowledge, why did this exclude my project as legitimate research in the eyes of my university's IRB?

And so, unsure of the answer, I turned to my advisors and their knowledge about relational ethics in the field. The memory of Ellis's (1995) words ruminated in my mind:

> My sense is that people often do make decisions similarly to the way they choose among options for the rest of their lives, although they are constrained by current ethnographic practices and social science training. In the same way we decide to conduct fieldwork by thinking about how we conduct the rest of our lives, we can learn about the rest of our lives by examining how we act and think in fieldwork settings. (p. 89-90)

I did not have a bureaucratic paper trail to wrap myself in for safety. I had to make decisions in the field as I did when attempting to be an ethical relational being (Gergen, 2009) in everyday life. Thus, I had to acknowledge the fact that I may even learn something about myself in the process.

It occurred to me that several lingering questions might finally be answered. These questions were on issues such as whether some of my family and friends would accept me as a gay man, whether my mother truly thought she was going to die and planned for the end of her

life, whether there was anything left unsaid among her and her community of grievers, whether people really had learned to live with the grief from her death in the best way possible. While this whole research endeavor excited me, I deeply and profoundly felt fear from it. What if I found out information I did not want to hear? What if I harmed a relationship instead of strengthened it? With one mistake, one slip up, would I be able to return to my town again? While these haunting questions swarmed around in my head for weeks, I found comfort in Berry's words. He writes:

> We ask through this reflexive spinning a pivotal question: How willing are we to let go of the self we thought we once knew, a self we knew to be "true," to explore learn about ourselves afresh, indeed, to encounter selves we might not even like? Our brave work will show the answer. (p. 223)

Under his view and other fellow autoethnographers, my work could be seen as brave. It was an inevitable truth (the one truth I could claim definitively) that this project would be messy. However, I was determined to emerge from the field and create webs of culture that would empower and inspire others. Or, at the very least, unweave and loosen the tight web of negativity I had previously spun about my place in my hometown.

The Involved and Vulnerable Observer

In several contexts of the research process, I considered myself an "involved observer" in which the researcher is required "to be a part of what is being observed, to join in the lives of the people while at the same time seek to understand them and the forces which mold them and to which they respond" (Clark, 1989 as cited in Boylorn, 2013, p. 117). It was not difficult for me to take part in the events of my participants' lives and gain entrée to the field, as I had grown up in the community. However, attempting to see my hometown's culture academically was an

entirely different endeavor. There were many times I felt my sense of self was divided (Bochner, 1997)—the academic and relationally neutral theorist was sometimes at odds with myself as the family member and friend. My participants probably saw me in many different ways: Blake as the researcher, Blake as the student, Blake as the gay man, and Blake as the son of my parents could have been among several identity labels. Some identity labels I was fully comfortable embracing during my time in the field, and others, I was somewhat hesitant about disclosing. This made me feel not only like an involved observer but also a vulnerable one (Behar, 1996).

Often, during interviews I sensed that I was engaging in processes of covering certain aspects of my identity. To cover, as Yoshino (2007) defines the act, is to "tone down a disfavored identity" (p. ix). As depicted earlier in the dissertation, I was surprised about how straightforward some people were when asking questions about my sexual orientation. The interviews made me realize that there were certain aspects of my identity that I didn't need to cover like I originally thought I had to. However, one aspect of my identity I still felt I needed to cover was in regards to my religion. I was raised Catholic but currently I do not affiliate with any particular religion. I believe in a higher power and afterlife, but I claim to be a more spiritual person than a religious person. When asking questions about continuing bonds and re-membering, religious and spiritual topics would often come up. I would downplay any past questioning I had ever had about Christianity since leaving my hometown. Ultimately, I felt that rewards for building relationships with participants outweighed the costs of me not being able to express my views on some forms of contemporary Christianity.

Similar to what Berry (2012) found in his work on covering in the classroom, I found that the spaces of the field heightened my awareness of various covering processes I was engaging in. Through the interactive interviews, I found that I had many preconceived notions about what

residents in DuQuoin would think about me in the past. Many times, because of this research process, I discovered disappointment about some aspects of the self I was at a previous time. Doing the interviews and reflecting on my role as a researcher allowed me to see that "reflexivity entails taking seriously the self's location in culture and scholarship, circumspectly exploring our relationship to/in autoethnography, to make research and cultural life *better* and *more meaningful*" (Berry 2013, p. 212). This life can be better and more meaningful because of autoethnographic reflexivity, even though we may not be happy with certain aspects of our past or former selves. My specific methodologies, autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004), meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2008), interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997), and friendship as method (Tillman-Healy, 2001; 2003) aided me in being my best reflexive and researching self—during my fieldwork but also in my future interactions with the residents of my hometown.

Before entering the field, I had to engage in processes of meta-autoethnography. Autoethnography connects the personal lived experience of the researcher to cultural phenomena. By engaging in autoethnography, researchers transform their personal experiences into topics of investigation to invite readers to live vicariously through them. For example, Ellis (1993) has written about experiencing the sudden death of her brother in a plane crash, thereby showing readers her own emotions but also the differences in her family members' ways of coping and small town community rituals for bereavement. The "validity" of autoethnographic research is not in the positivist sense of accuracy in measurement of observable phenomena but rather if the research seeks verisimilitude (Ellis, 2004). Ellis argues that an autoethnography should evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. She argues, "You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with

others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers—or even your own" (p. 124). In order for this validity to be achieved, I believe the researcher must thoroughly study and analyze his or her own emotional processes. Ellis does outline the proper techniques for doing autoethnography and part of this is using emotional recall. This technique is similar to Strasberg's "method acting," but also comes from Ellis's (1991) foundational work on the sociological introspection of emotions.

Thus far in my academic career, I have used emotional recall to construct autoethnographic accounts of my continued relationship with my mother (Paxton, 2013; Paxton, in press; Rennels & Paxton, 2013). When I first started doing autoethnographic research on this topic, it was also the first time that I had ever written about my mother's illness and the day of her death. In order to create data for narrative scenes, I first had to spend time free writing about my memories of her illness, death, and our moments together in my childhood. Questions I asked myself when writing and trying to put myself back in certain emotional spaces included: How did I feel in this moment? What was I thinking? What was said between individuals? What was the setting? What did I see, smell, and touch? Since the death happened 10 years ago, there were also times I needed to ask family members questions about the events in order to aid in my process of embodied remembering.

Furthermore, I chose to incorporate these past articles into my process in order to assess how my feelings of grief had changed and what other feelings these works evoked in myself, other readers, and our engagement with the texts together. I was doing meta-autoethnographic work, and several steps were involved in these processes. First, I read all of my autoethnographic pieces about my mother and took notes on which parts of the narratives would fit within the larger story of my dissertation. A few examples include: scenes from observing my mother's

illness, the day of her death, and moments of emotionally engaging with artifacts that represented her. So while some scenes about my mother's death may look similar to ones in former published pieces, they are not replicas. Rather, they include expanded dialogue and setting descriptions. For example, in chapter one, I give a fuller description of my time working in the Italian restaurant during high school. In my original article, I did not describe the type of relationships I had with my co-workers. I chose to do this in the revised narrative to give readers a sense of masculine gender norms and the interactions I had with men my age during that tense time period of my life. It also helps build dramatic tension about my mother's impending death because the reader is able to see that my co-workers are acting much differently than they usually had before.

Next, after reading these pieces, I created journal entries that explored whether any of my feelings or memories had changed (or whether I remembered new details) about the events of my mother's illness and death. I took notes about how reading scenes of these experiences helped trigger memories for new narrative scenes in the dissertation. For example, I found that many of my feelings during my mother's visitation and funeral were consistent with how I remembered feeling at the time (as depicted in chapter one). However, I had forgotten that I had felt some resentment toward a few attendees at her visitation. These were young men around my age who had often been verbally abusive growing up. I also had forgotten about a young woman (who I thought I was romantically interested in) attending my mother's visitation. It was important for me to include this detail because it helps show readers how I was continuing to struggling with being gay while grieving my mother's death.

Finally, I shared these works with participants during interactive interviews. This was done to help me produce a more evocative and vivid account of the events of my mother's illness

and death, but also to help guide the conversation during the interview. I did not remember how my mother and father broke the news to my brother and me about my mother's tumor. Interviewing my father helped fill in the gaps about this event. Of course, there were times where I chose to not include a detail I had forgotten about an event—one that a participant had remembered. For example, my brother remembers seeing medical staff try to revive my mother with shock treatments. I'm assuming I did not remember this because it was too painful. Even though I chose not to include this detail in the narrative, it did provide some interest insights into how my brother's coping process may have been different than mine. Decisions on whether to include these forgotten details had to constantly be made during the research process. I found speaking with participants was helpful in making these types of decisions.

As stated, my former published articles also helped aid conversations during interactive interviews. Sometimes my past work would come up organically in the interviews. Other times, I would request that a participant read one of my articles before an interview. One example where this proved to be extremely beneficial was when I asked my stepmother Kelly to read my article on transforming minor bodily stigmas through continuing bonds (Paxton, 2013). In this article, I discuss how re-membering my mother helps me cope with my self-consciousness about having excess body hair. This article shared former scenes of my mother's illness and death (newly adapted in chapter one). Kelly did know my mother when she was alive. However, she was not aware of certain information about my mother's illness or her death. Having her read the article helped her understand my grief and the overall dissertation project better.

Not only was meta-autoethnography necessary for my dissertation research, but I also found that interactive interviewing and friendship as method were needed to produce new data and enhance relational intimacy with participants. Interactive interviewing is an approach used to

gain intimate and new understandings of people's experiences with sensitive topics. Interactive interviews take place in small group settings and require sufficient time, as well as specific attention to communication and emotions. Because the goal is to gain intimate and new understandings, several sessions often are required. It is also ideal that participants have history together or be open to developing strong ties. In addition, both researchers and participants should have personal experience with the topic under investigation. All of these requirements coincide with my project as I interviewed individuals with whom I shared a particular relationship—that of my deceased mother.

I conducted a total of 16 interviews, some were one-on-one (examples include an interview with my father, brother, and stepmother) and others were conducted in groups (examples include my mother's sisters, a couple who were family friends, and a former client mother-daughter pair). Interviews lasted between two and three hours, and my participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods—including the use of Facebook messaging, email, and word of mouth from other participants. When requesting an interview, I gave a brief written description of the project and requirements for participating. Individuals were given at least two weeks to ask questions and make a decision. Although I would not deem them as interviews, some informal conversations occurred during fieldwork, which were beneficial for the research. Most often these were conversations with family members and friends that I had already formally interviewed for the project. Rather than disrupt mores of personal conversation, I would consult with participants after speaking with them. This was to ensure that I could use information they provided me for certain narrative scenes.

For the 16 interactive interviews, I found it best to structure questions similarly to the questions Hedtke (2012) asks individuals in her re-membering bereavement support groups. As

was one of the founding scholars of re-membering processes for the deceased, Hedtke (2012) constructed a guidebook for professionals or lay individuals who wish to construct bereavement support groups that use re-membering rituals and conversations. She recommends that it is important for the bereaved to speak in the subjunctive voice rather than with indicative verbs. She argues, "The subjunctive frees one from the limits of 'reality' to speak about what would or could be, to dwell in possibilities rather than in new realities. It offers the deceased a continuous, linguistic and symbolic presence" (p. 95). The bereaved are able to speak about what the deceased "would" say without appearing delusional. Hedtke concludes, "This form of languaging, that of imagined possibility, enables the deceased to become gentle and loving guides" (p. 95). She recommends that facilitators start re-membering conversations in these groups with the question, "Can you introduce me to your loved one?" (p. 56). Facilitators are then instructed to ask follow-up questions such as: "Who were they? What things did they enjoy in life? What were their professions? What were their hobbies and interests? What kinds of things did you enjoy about them? What did it mean to have them in your life?"

Once the relationship with the deceased has been re-established, Hedtke states that the bereaved may begin to think about other more in-depth questions such as: "If your loved one were here, what would he say that he valued about you? What would she say she appreciated about how you were during their illness? What would he say he appreciated about how you have handled things since he died?" (p. 96). Hedtke also recommends that participants bring in artifacts once belonging to and photographs of the deceased. I asked participants do the same to help facilitate and enrich our re-membering conversations. I also reviewed artifacts on my own that I collected from participants—including, but not limited to my mother's obituary, the funeral

guest book, and items from private memorials done since the funeral. Sometimes I would bring items of my own to the interviews to stimulate memories and conversation.

Of course, the amount of established intimacy varied in my relationships with participants. Some of the participants were family members. Others were friends or former clients of my mother whom I knew growing up but with whom I had lost contact. I also interviewed friends of my mother whom I had never met. In order to effectively navigate through these relational differences of closeness, I incorporated friendship as method. This methodology does not require the researcher to have an already existing friendship with participants. Rather, it entails "researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship" (Tillman-Healy, 2003, p. 729). This methodology requires more personal involvement with participants than most traditional social scientific approaches to research. I wanted these interviews to be something from which both researcher and participants might benefit, and I suggested to participants that they conceptualize these interviews as memorial rituals for my mother. Suggesting natural settings for the interviews to occur (in people's homes or in restaurants over a meal) helped create a more comfortable atmosphere. Participants expressed to me that they felt like the interview was more of an informal conversation, and I believe they felt that power dynamics associated with a social science researcher were minimized.

Some of my interview questions were planned ahead of time in order to fulfill the main objectives of the research. However, the interactive interview situations were flexible enough for new questions to emerge. The lines between researcher and participant tended to blur in these types of interviews, and these situations empowered participants to engage in their own processes of knowledge production. For example, during an interview with my mother's closest

friends from her graduating class, many of them began discussing several behaviors they do in their everyday lives that they never conceptualized as re-membering. Since completing the project, these women and other participants expressed to me rituals they have either started doing or recognize routine activities as ways of continuing bonds with the deceased.

Since we were discussing past experiences of loss, I worried that there would be a possibility of re-traumatizing participants. However, with every methodological approach one can never completely predict how participants will react to a research study. Doing this type of research allowed me (and required me) to go above and beyond basic IRB protocols to protect my participants. Not only do I want to continue bonds with my deceased mother, but I also wanted to continue bonds with those in my life now as well. Since I treated my participants with an ethic of friendship, I did not just interview them, leave the field, and never interact with them again. Friendship as method required me to continue to have conversations with participants—not just to further the research but to make sure they are doing okay and they agreed with the way I was approaching the dissertation work.

Ellis (1995) has discussed at length the ethical dilemmas she faced when bringing work back to the participants in the Fisher Folk community involved with her dissertation. Some of these individuals were angry with Ellis and how she represented them—even though she was only attempting to write descriptions of their lives from direct fieldwork observations. She developed deep friendships with many of these community members and felt pain when she returned to the field after the completion of her dissertation and found many of them were hurt and disappointed with her writings. Sometimes participants will react negatively to your work even when as a researcher you believe nothing in your descriptions could be threatening or damaging to their lives. Narrative truth can be tricky to navigate because no matter how much

you try to write an experience "as it actually happened," you will never accomplish this feat. And, the representations you craft of specific people or events may be in direct contradiction with another's perceptions. In the next section, I outline some of these relational quandaries while representing transcript data.

Finding the Narrative Truth of Experience and the Representation of Transcript Data

The traditional colloquialism many of us know is, "We cannot change our pasts." However, when recounting a past event it is never the same as it originally happened. As Maxwell (1980) argues:

> What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw. (p. 27)

This does not mean autoethnographers or memoirists should not care about the past or how we represent it. Every representation of my own personal experience and the experience of others will never be completely "accurate." However, "it is important to be able to story ourselves, to have a story to tell, and to tell it as well as we can" (Ellis, 2008, p. 15).

In autoethnographic projects, researchers can consult participants about how the narrative scenes should be written up (not just descriptions of people or experiences but also whether pseudonyms should be used). Researchers and participants do not always agree on every written representation, but it is necessary that researchers do everything in their power to minimize harm

to participants. In rare instances, it may not be best to share scenes to protect a particular relationship or ensure the safety of a participant. If the researcher is faced with these types of scenarios, he or she may change particular details of an event or use pseudonyms. This type of literary license is commonly practiced in ethnographic studies. However, the process of adapting interview transcripts into narrative scenes should be done with great care.

In my adaptation process, I transcribed all 16 interviews and chose which ones I thought would best serve as narrative scenes for the autoethnographic story. During this decision making process, I thought about which interviews would provide material for the most evocative scenes but also represent the depth and breadth of re-membering practices among members in my mother's community of grievers. In the scene with Sarah depicted in chapter three, I combined information from three interviews and created a scene with a composite character. I did this because I felt that including too many scenes of individual interviews would slow down the narrative and readers would lose interest in my story. By creating the composite character of Sarah, I was able to stay true to the essence of how several former clients re-membered my mother. In my interview with my mother's sisters, one of the sisters could not attend the scheduled time. I did a one-on-one interview with this sister and adapted her interview into the scene of the group interview.

All of the other scenes did not include composite characters, and I tried to stay as "true" to my memories of the events as possible. When I say that I stayed "true to my memory," I do not mean that the narrative scenes are exact replicas of the interview transcripts or that scenes occurred during the exact time periods expressed. To ensure a coherent narrative, I had to collapse time periods and in some instances write events one year ahead of when they "actually" occurred. Also, I eliminated side interview conversations that were not related to the project.

Transcripts that were not used for narrative scenes were included in my grounded theory analysis.

After writing up narrative scenes, I emailed attachments of drafts and asked for participant feedback. The reactions to my narratives were varied. Some participants were affirming in their responses (for example, see the end of chapter five). One participant stated, "What a great paper! It made me cry all over again! Ann was one in a million!" She then told me about an upcoming family trip to Tampa, and she asked me if I would want to meet her family for dinner one evening. Other participants enjoyed their narrative scenes, but they were particular about certain details. For instance, in the scene with my mother's friends from high school (depicted in chapter three), I mistakenly mixed up a few of the participants' statements. A couple of her friends informed me of this. I apologized and fixed my mistake.

Of course, participants also enjoyed giving feedback on scenes where they were not depicted. Many stated that after reading parts of my story they remembered things about my mother and her experiences they had forgotten. Some also gained insight on other participants' grieving experiences. For example, one of my aunts did not realize my father felt so much guilt about my mother's death. My scene visiting my grandmother (depicted in chapter three) also greatly touched one of my mother's best friends. "I didn't realize it was still that difficult for Jo-Ann. Reading your work makes me appreciate of the time I have with my daughters now," she had said. After he read several of my narrative scenes, my brother shared with me that he felt closer to me. "I knew you were going through a lot when Mom died, but I didn't realize how afraid you were of being rejected," he had stated. While highly emotional, I believe the adaptation process was an enjoyable experience for all involved.

As with most autoethnographic projects, I still grapple with some issues of narrative representation. For example, I wondered how the narrative scene with my mother's sisters (depicted in chapter three) would impact the relationship between my Aunt Cindy and Aunt Patty. After reading the scene, neither of them said anything specific about the section where I describe their troubled relationship. I assume they were both already aware of their problems. However, during a recent trip home, I heard from my father that he ran into them eating dinner together at a local restaurant. This was very surprising to us considering the continuing strife we always heard about between them.

I also considered how this work would impact my relationship with my stepmother. After having her read certain selections and conversing about them, I truly believe it did not have much of a positive or negative affect on our relationship (although, our relationship really was not problematic to begin with). There was a recent change in holiday family traditions that I believe may have been influenced by the research. Typically, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, I attend functions for all three sides of my family (my father's, mother's, and stepmother's). My brother accompanies me, and my father usually only goes to his side and Kelly's side of the family. During this year's Christmas festivities, my father went with my brother and me to my mother's family after visiting with Kelly's family. I hope that reading my work facilitated a better understanding about how to negotiate my father's continued involvement with my mother's family.

While some interview transcripts were useful for developing narrative scenes for my autoethnographic story, these and the remaining transcripts provided data for a grounded theory analysis. Charmaz (2006) argues, "Grounded theorists start with data. We construct these data through our observations, interactions, and materials that we gather about the topic or setting.

We study empirical events and experiences and pursue our hunches and potential analytical ideas about them" (p. 3). I tried to pursue hunches that would help me answer these research questions: RQ1.) What does the experience of continuing a relationship with the deceased at an individual and collective level look and feel like in everyday life? RQ2.) In exploring the emotional complexities of these experiences, what are ways in which feeling rules for grief and loss are challenged? RQ3.) How do continuing bonds with the deceased help us continue bonds with individuals who are still alive?

For RQ1, every time a participant would say something that either explicitly or implicitly represented a way to re-member or continue a bond with the deceased, I highlighted the statement. I then divided these statements into two groups: those strategies already identified in the literature and those that were not identified. This is how I constructed the section in chapter four on specific re-membering practices for Ann Paxton.

For RQ2, I highlighted every statement that related to an emotion or a mourning practice (attending a funeral, visiting a grave, etc.). These statements were then divided into the two subcategories: 1.) observations of participant's own emotions and 2.) observations of others emotions. In these subcategories, I analyzed when the observations were consistent and inconsistent with cultural feeling rules for grief. This process provided me information for constructing chapter four's sections on challenges and failures of continuing bonds and emotional challenges during interviews.

Finally, for RQ 3, I used transcript data from interactive interviews and other data as well: field notes from my informal conversations and meta-autoethnographic analyses, emailed responses from participants about my work, and the Facebook page I made for my mother's 50th birthday. I highlighted statements from participants that were affirming in nature about a current

re-membering practice (e.g. posts on my page) or expressing a positive outcome from doing a past re-membering practice or ritual (whether it was for my mother or another family member). It was from these analyses that inspired the material for chapter five: future directions for continuing bonds research.

After many days reviewing the interview transcripts, I found that the analysis of ethnographic data could be an arduous process. Not only did I wonder if I was representing everything in the most ethical way, but I wondered if I had captured all the information available to me. Could there be a theme left that I hadn't found in the data? Was there more a participant could have said about a particular experience? Should I interview more participants or do more follow up interviews? These and other questions lingered while finishing this project. However, I realized that, just as with the death of a loved one, there would not be a complete resolution to these troubled thoughts. Just as I would continue a relationship with the dead, I would also continue a relationship with this project. Even after the last draft of the dissertation was turned in, after I orally defended it, and after it was published, my analytical work (as well as my mourning process) would never be completely done.

In his comparison of analysis to mourning, Astrachan (2013) argues, "Mourning in this sense is to be understood not as the usual grieving and sorrow following a loss, but—rather paradoxically—as a continuous preserving and safeguarding of the disappearance, absence, and hiddenness of god" (p. 243). I would add this preserving is for the dead as well. Through several etymological tracings, Astrachan argues that an effective way of conceptualizing the definition of analysis is an unweaving or a loosening process. Many individuals think of analytic processes as a way to come up with a definitive answer about human existence. However, in Astrachan's view, analysis as unweaving can be an "un-working of soul material" (p. 244). Whether we are

analyzing data or dreaming at night, we are creating a space to grapple with the uncertainties of our lives—a space to free the soul from the objective psyche. We are opening up a space to loosen the plaguing sorrow brought upon us by a loved one's death. In my case, I was also loosening a tight web of negativity I had previously spun in my life—about the culture of a space to which I was afraid of returning.

Furthermore, Astrachan concludes that when we try to make sense of our lives we continue to return to "nodal points of conflict, to the holes created in the past and to the past where the fabric has become forgotten, knotted, damaged, tangled or torn, where the material lies open and gaping" (p. 252). He continues:

> In the oscillations of the analytic relationship, in the back and forth, we try to piece the material back together, to see where there are fits, joinings, meetings, and meanings. That is, perhaps, the alchemical *opus magnum*, the great work: attempting to create something solid, physical, tangible and material, like gold, like a fabric, a soft purple shawl the color of grapes, or like the philosopher's stone, rough and weighty: and yet also and at the same time, to construct something entirely immaterial, ineffable, and invisible. (p. 252)

In this dissertation, you see the "great work" of analysis through my exploration of continuing bonds with the living through bonds with the deceased. Holding on and letting go of the dead are not mutually exclusive processes, and Astrachan's explanations on the process of analysis definitely support this idea.

A loved one's death is a rupture in time—a rupture in which we realize the work of mourning and analysis is always occurring. As we attempt to understand and let go of sadness, we find that we may reach for these feelings again. I believe we do this in an attempt to feel closer to the deceased but also to the living individuals who mourn with us. We hold onto these

feelings of grief to help us realize that there is more to life than the material reality before us. Many religious teachings bring up the prospect of reuniting with the dead in the afterlife. By having information about continuing bonds, we can go to bed confidently at night knowing that we can reunite with the dead in the physical world—whether it's through re-membering, autoethnography, or the process of analysis itself. Perhaps we can go to bed not feeling guilty about our desire to meet the dead in our dreams.