

The Life of Death

By

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“The Life of Death” is a creative nonfiction thesis in three parts. The purpose of this thesis is to explore and understand the importance of place in one’s life, whether it’s in relation to a job, after the loss of parents, or while looking back on childhood. It is a collection of nonfiction stories about my life told through flashbacks, and personal narration. It is a lyrical, moving journey that I take one memory at a time.

The first essay, ‘Sliding into Home’ is set between late 2012 and 2013. Through personal narration, reflection and meditation the parallels between the importance of family, home and the sport of baseball, mainly the significance of home plate. During this journey home, I find out my mother has a rare, incurable cancer and she is given a limited amount of time before she will die.

I find a way to come to terms with her diagnosis and move toward a grief I know will come. I use the game of baseball as a metaphor for my healing. The bat becomes an extension of the hand, the baseball another extension of self, family and home. All the pieces come together like a baseball player rounding the bases on the diamond-shaped field headed for a complete circuit. I use the game of baseball as a guide for my journey to the pre-grief stages of my

mother's looming death. Like a baseball player not ready to give up the run, I am not ready to give up my mom.

The second essay, 'The Landscape of Memory' is set in the fall of 2014, one year after my mother died, a few months after my father's sudden death, and two months after a miscarriage. It starts with a plan and ends with a trip across of the country to a writing and yoga retreat in search of healing and meditation. I use personal narration and reflection while navigating the initial stages of grief. Location plays a vital role in this essay, reminding me as the narrator, that grief cannot be boxed up and buried, but must be set free.

My last essay, 'Losing Michelle,' is about the death of my friend. In this essay, I weave personal narration with flashbacks, while walking through a cemetery looking for her marker. It discusses my first experiences in death and grief.

In preparation for my thesis, I continued to journal my memories, wrote and co-authored a nonfiction book, attended yearly writer's conferences, attended creative writing seminars, and began teaching college English. No matter what research avenue I selected, memories of my parents and death were already at the forefront of my writing. I researched the various stages of death by reading the widely popular nonfiction book, *On Death and Dying*, by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and explored the history of my hometown, Haw River, NC by reading the book, *Down Along the Haw: The History of a North Carolina River* by Anne Melyn Cassebaum. Before and after my mother's death, I educated myself on death in preparation of the inevitable. I dove into reading memoirs on death such as, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, by Cheryl Strayed and the famous *The Last Lecture*, by Professor Randy Pausch.

THE LIFE OF DEATH

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Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art in English

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sliding into Home.....	1
The Landscape of Memory.....	21
Losing Michelle.....	36
References.....	45
Appendix A: Biographical Sketch.....	46

“It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rain comes, it stops, and leaves you to face the fall alone.”

-A. Barlett Giamatti

SLIDING INTO HOME

It's a cool fall afternoon. The sky is mostly clear with only a dusting of cirrus clouds like the ripples of plane contrails. While walking past the baseball stadium at my college campus, I am brought back to the last time I went to a baseball game. I am sitting on cold aluminum bleachers with the full sun slanting toward me. It's a little past two in the afternoon, the perfect time for baseball. The intoxicating smell of hotdogs with yellow mustard, popcorn and boiled peanuts fill the dusty stadium air. It's the bottom of the sixth inning. The bases loaded. The roar of clapping and yelling reverberate in my soul, filling me with familiar warmth. The batter swings his arm up arching toward the fast ball. The bat cracks against the ball as it sails above me, invisible for a moment against the sun. It barrels toward the back of the stadium. It's a home run. The crowd goes wild. Thunderous cheers erupt and vibrations move through the soles of my sneakers and the soul of my heart. This makes me yearn for home. These memories make me miss my family, my home plate. I imagine as the players run the bases toward home plate that I want to be home, with my family surrounding me and cheering me on. I want to jump from the bleachers, hop in my car and drive down the highway, rounding the bases toward home, Mom, who is my umpire, and safety.

I grew up in the middle of the state of North Carolina, smack dab in the middle of everything. If you drive four hours due west, you will find yourself in the middle of peaking, green mountains. If you drive four hours due east, you will find yourself dipping your toes in

cool ocean water on one of the dozens of beaches lining the coast. For the last fifteen years, I have called eastern North Carolina and Greenville home. I moved here to go to college and never left. I carved out a comfortable place to reside in but will always call the area around Burlington, NC home plate.

Burlington sits in the Piedmont region. The land is flat with red clumpy clay and acres of land dotted with layers of dense trees. It surrounds tiny country towns like Snow Camp, Swepsonville, Mebane, Hawfields, and Haw River, my little hometown. Haw River is a tiny mill town dotted by an ever widening river, a tiny bridge and black, metal spider that sits atop an old abandoned hosiery mill. I lived in a town whose mascot is a spider. It sounded strange, but as I round the corner coming off the tiny bridge past the mill, there it is like a beacon telling me I'm almost home.

I grew up in a creaky one-story brick house, lined by crap apple, oak, maple, Frazier fir and prickly trees. Acorns and swirling leaves rained down upon our house like a box of crayons being dumped over us every fall, my favorite time of year. Wet leaves line and cover the walkway, their smell gloriously intoxicating. Animals also peer around every corner: squirrel, raccoon, cat, stray dog, and fox. My mom used to tell me families of baby bears lived in the dense brush across from the house. The street light has dimmed over the years and the porch light on the cracked front cement porch has been out for days. The large oak branches in the front yard hang hostage over the driveway. Full leaves blanket the cracked pavement. I imagine that the large red ants are marching across the driveway searching for fleshed-out acorns. Every time I round the corner and see my house, I feel safe like the baseball player.

My home is like a baseball field, solid and ready for a batter to make a home run. I am the player holding the stitched baseball rounding the bases in my front yard, bare feet rooting in warm summer grass. I can almost smell splintered wood, Old Spice and chewing tobacco.

I am not afraid of bee stings, thunder storms or darkness. The afternoon wind whips through my hair as my hand tightly grips a baseball, feeling that no matter how the game ends, I can always go back to home plate and start over again. It was simple then: just play the game, run and it will all work out.

Now, life is complicated. The field around home plate is covered by stubborn ivy vines that are invading the sides of the house, my imaginary home plate, and sickness has crept into the dugout. I am afraid I have come home too late for a home run this time. It's too late for a safe trip around the bases and there is no way for a ball to crack against the bat, sail across the street and disappear into the sultry summer air. *"I like to look down on a field of green and white, a summertime Land of Oz, a place of dream. I've never been unhappy in a ballpark."* –Writer, Jim Murray (Kahn 637)

Now, I live in a world surrounded by chaos. I was moving along, going to school, working, and enjoying life. Out of nowhere, the baseball hit me in the head and gave me a concussion. The world was fuzzy, things were unclear, and fear has crept into every crevice of my body. It consumes me. It lies and waits for me around the next corner. It follows like a shadow at night, a thick mud deepening as I continue on. As soon as I let my guard down, it swallows me up whole and spits me back out a shred of what I once was before.

"When the pressure builds up, it's like being on a bus in a mud hole. The harder you press on the pedal, the further you sink in the mud." -Yankees star Bob Watson (Kahn 305).

That is how I felt the minute my mom uttered the word *cancer*. I was cooking dinner, watching *Wheel of Fortune* and moments later, my life changed. Mom called to tell me she had cancer. My throat closed up. I hung up the phone, fell to the floor into a fetal position and did not move for a long time. Wailing sobs engulfed me. I thought I would pass out. I became panicked. The moment the C word came out of her mouth would be engrained into my soul like an etched wood carving unable to go back to its tree-state, tall, strong, and rooted. I had been cut from the earth with a chain saw. I had been chopped and my insides would now be loaded on a flatbed truck. I would never be at peace again or surrounded by the lush safety of the forest and surety of a home plate.

That night as I stayed awake crying, the movie reel of my life played over and over again. I was ten years-old swinging from the branches of the oak tree that took up most of the front yard. Many afternoons after school, you could find me high up sitting on a wide branch of the oak tree that still stands witness to the 35 years of my memories. It was a magical spot, high between the droopy leaves and crispy bark. I would drag along a blanket, a newly sharpened pencil and notebook. I surveyed the landscape. I looked for a twig sitting in an odd shape, a pile of leaves, and would wonder what lay underneath it. I wrote a lot about the outside world. I wrote about ants, acorns, tiny strawberries and the civil war fence that crisscrossed between me and my neighbor's house.

Cars seldom went past after five-thirty, so it was fairly quiet except for my neighbor, Madge's black crow. He always welcomed me with a loud squawk. Madge was an old lady who was nearing 80 when I was ten, but could be found many afternoons crouched down low in her garden of cabbage, collard and mustard greens. Her voice was rusty and worn-in like an old silo. She was in a way like my oak in the front yard, a patriarchal mother earth. She talked to her

plants, caressed the leaves between her liver-spotted hands and dug into the earth, deep enough to pull out all the answers.

Many days, you could find Madge sitting in a white rocking chair with my other neighbors, May and Mable on the front porch with wads of snuff in their mouths, holding their spit cans. Madge took care of her younger son, Teddy, who was in a wheelchair unable to walk. Years before, when Teddy was 19, he had way too much to drink and got in a car accident that left him paralyzed. She pushed him out on the porch while she rocked, spit in her tin can and watched her crops grow. I loved to hear her laugh. She had the best collards I ever ate. They reminded me of southern country ham biscuits, hearty, salty and a staple of what it meant to be southern...well, Madge and sweet iced tea.

Madge, Mable, May and Teddy are dead now. I feel as if a part of the earth has died with them and nothing will ever grow there again. Now, it's an empty stretch of grass that once held magic, held hope, that help the sun, moon, stars and a black crow. The grass is now a distant memory of years ago, when those invisible rows of collards and corn were planted life lessons that I was fortunate enough to pull from the earth. I am afraid soon my mother will be gone too.

How do I pull myself up from this quicksand? I feel like Shoeless Joe Jackson when they accused him of trying to throw the World Series and banned him from a sport he loved. It was a sport he cherished. I feel as if the wind has been knocked out of me. I can't stand-up straight. I can't catch my breath. I can't see. My eyes are foggy with worry, with fear, with sadness. Is this game really over? Is my family about to be split apart by death and cancer? I must remain hopeful. I must keep a brave face, put on my helmet and go onto the field. I must play anyway.

Most of all, I must remember the times when the world was good, pure, and full of promise. I must take back these fleeting moments. I must grab on for life and not let go.

One week later, in late January 2013, the eastern NC weather is confused as usual. One day it's 70 degrees and the next week it's sleeting. I am yearning for home more than ever now. The tugging of my heart strings are leading me to home plate again. It has been one week since Mom told me she has cancer. At the end of December when the New Year was to bring resolutions and a fresh start, it has erupted in sadness. It's a sadness that I have never experienced before, a pain that has embedded in the deepest corners of my heart like a sliver of sharp glass tearing at my insides. My mom was walking mountain trails at the beginning of December, had the flu at Christmas, and now just a few short weeks later, has cancer.

My eyes swelled with tears. A mass, larger than a baseball and hard like a baseball was discovered in my mother's uterus. How can this be? I can't accept this. I won't accept this. Maybe this is all a mistake and I'll wake up in a cold sweat. Maybe it will be nothing more than a bad dream. Please let me wake up. I must face this baseball game where I may get to home plate to see her, but she may strike out. My mother may die. She is only 63. She is young. She is vibrant. I have to see her. I have to be with her. I need to hug her and tell her I am here for her. I have to go to home plate. I will put on my baseball helmet, grab a bat and pray if I can just make a home run, she will be saved and cancer will not be the winner.

The following Friday I pack an overnight bag, my box of tissues for the good cry I am soon to have with Mom and hop in the car. I head toward my home in Burlington. It takes two agonizing hours to get there. I pass over bridges, streams that flow from the mountains to the coast, and try to push out my fears with rap music. I wind my way around the Raleigh beltline.

It reminds me of the time I came home when Dad had his heart attack nine years ago. I wasn't sure if he would be alive when I got there. The two-hour drive felt like an eternity. Today it feels the same. I cry multiple times as I drive down the vast stretches of highway, past pink spring buds that are way too early to have sprung. Is this a sign? Maybe this means Mom will be ok. And there will be a new season. The Raleigh beltline is congested, like my eyes. My hands and heart feel heavy. I am lead in the seat. I am just like a batter about to take a swing, but the fear that my mom might actually die paralyzes me.

I know I'm almost at my exit because I pass the batting cages that hug the highway like dangling grown-over ivy. A large aging highway billboard sign reads "Have a Ball." The batting cages are much smaller looking than what I remember as a child. When I was younger, the cages seemed so much taller and intimidating. Even the sounds of balls being whacked and golf clubs whooshing as they are pulled up past hefty man shoulders were all so much bigger then. The cages are rusty now with squeaky hinges. There are smooth spots on the cracked asphalt where hundreds of feet held their position while keeping their eye on the ball. Ivy and overgrown kudzu wind their way up the chain-link fence. I remember Mom taking my brother and me there as children. It was so exciting rounding that corner and pulling into the parking lot. My brother and I would fight over who would get the blue putt putt ball and who would get the red one. Then we would fight over who would score more batting points or what we called our "fake runs." After

two rounds of putt putt golf, in which my brother always cheated on, we headed over to the batting cage, stood in line and waited to take position and hit a home run.

I grab a dark blue baseball hat, a black metal bat, drop the slick, fat quarters in the machine and step into the batting cage. I grip the bat firmly in my right hand, determined that this time I will make that connection with the ball. I slightly bend my knees, tighten my grip on the bat and start to shimmy a bit from side to side. As soon as the first soft ball comes at me, I miss it so terribly, I almost go around in a circle and come back to find my balance. My brother sets his eye on the ball machine and yells at me to “watch this,” and cracks the bat to the ball like a thunder storm. It hits the back netting surrounding the cages with a swishing sound and sails back to the ground. Matt starts chanting making cheering sounds and pretends he is running the bases, cups his hands around his mouth and yells, “That ball is outta here.” I regain my composure and try again to make the connection with the ball this time.

Thirty minutes later we are out of quarters. My bored mom watched us from the fake mini bleachers reading her book, smiling periodically as we yell back and forth to one another between the fence links. My hit was so small in comparison to Matt’s. My ball barely makes it past the ball throwing machine. I don’t think one ball reaches higher than five feet in the air. Nonetheless, I am satisfied. There is something inside me that comes alive while pretending to be an actual baseball player. I feel important when I have the bat in my hand. I feel dignified, like nobility in a strange, conceited kind of way. I feel like people are watching me expecting greatness and even though I totally suck, I don’t care. I love the tingling and reverberations that rip through my shoulder and arm when I hit the ball.

It makes me feel alive. It’s a good hurt, a winning hurt. It makes me think of Mom again. Soon she will have chemotherapy. It will be the hurt she will need to feel like she is winning in

her game of baseball. I understand how a baseball player feels when she takes the field. The player goes into a bubble where the crowd cheers are muffled and it's just her, the ball and her bat. She has one goal and one goal only, make the connection. She can't focus on life's problems, the fight she had with her husband or any other problem that feeds on her brain at night. On the baseball field, none of that matters. Now I understand why coaches would sometimes yell to their players to get their head in the game and focus. That is my problem. I need to focus on Mom, her cancer and healing. I can't focus on my problems. Maybe I'll go to the batting cages and try again to make the connection. Maybe it's just what this aging, restless, pre-grieving soul needs to feel alive again in the midst of all this sickness and talk of death.

“Under pressure, you want to be at peace with yourself. You want your energy to flow, not feel knotted. You don't want to be too sharp. You don't want to be too flat; you just want to be normal.”

–Willie Stargell (Kahn 491).

The next exit past the batting cages is my home exit 150. I know in my deepest soul that as soon as I get there, pull my car up the uneven cracked driveway over red velvet ants and acorns, I can melt into the arms of my family and we can get through this ongoing game together. Home plate is safe. Cancer will not win. If there is one thing I have learned in life, it's that no game is easy. This time I need more than luck. I need a healing miracle for Mom and it looks like no amount of baseball hits and homeruns will get her safely out of the game and on the winning team of remission. *“I had to fight all my life to survive. They were all against me...but I beat the bastards and left them in the ditch.”* -Ty Cobb (Kahn 313).

Once I go in the house, I see my mom for the first time in three months. I smile at her warm and softly. She smiles back. I make a b-line for the kitchen bursting into tears and collapsing into my dad's arms. I still don't feel safe. Home feels awkward, it feels invaded. Mom has lost over 30 pounds since I saw her last and she already looks like the cancer patient even though her first round of chemotherapy hasn't even begun. I am startled by her appearance. Her cheeks are sunken in, eyes hollow and large. Grey bags under her eyes look like the black face paint baseball players put under their eyes to shield the sun. What happened to my mom? Where is she hiding? I must find her. I regain my composure, wipe my running nose on a paper towel and go back in to see her. Dad tells me to be strong for Mom, but I am not sure I can be that right now. I have not even begun to come to terms with her illness. I still do not understand what *has* happened or what I know *will* eventually happen. This idea consumes me like a fire in my throat. My lips chap and I feel like I might vomit. I sit down beside her, grab her frail and withered hand still soft and wrinkled. I start to cry soft sobs at first and then she cries with me. We collapse into one another and cry for a long time.

I must have held onto her for twenty minutes like a baseball player unable to let go of his bat after strike three. I still think if I hold on, I will hit the ball and defeat the opposing team. Mom tells me that first night she will fight until she can't fight anymore. I don't believe her. I want to believe her, but she is weak and can barely sit up. Within two days of visiting her she does not eat, descending into illness. At the same time, I descend into my pre-grief longing for answers. A deep sadness takes over my inner core and will never let go again.

The famous baseball player Mickey Mantle wrote in his book, *The Quality of Courage*, about when he found out his father was dying. Mantle did not find out his father had Hodgkin's Disease until he was playing in the second game of the 1951 World Series, which was his first

World Series. Mantle ended up hurting his knee and his father went with him to the hospital, but then he realized his father could not help him out of the car.

The bravest man I ever knew was my father. He dies the winter after my first year in the major leagues, when I was twenty and he was only forty one. He knew he had it. He knew it for a long time. He was a tremendously strong man but the disease weakened him so much that he was like a shell of what he used to be. He never told me he was sick. He never complained, he never acted scared, and he died like a man. That line from that play fitted him for sure: "Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. (Mantle 3-4).

The following Tuesday, my mom went in for a final evaluation of her PT scan and they gave her the bad news that her cancer was incurable. It was stage 4B and a very rare cancer that the doctors do not see very often. It's called Neuroendocrine Large-Cell Uterine Carcinoma. It had begun metastasis and had spread to both her lungs and her lymph nodes. It originated in her uterus and moved from there. It is a very aggressive cancer, growing fast and furious. Its vicious venom is taking over my mom, home plate and spreading into my heart, which feels as if it may stop. The doctors decided they would give her six days of chemotherapy over the next few months, but only for palliative purposes. They hope the chemotherapy along with a bucket load of pills per day will shrink her tumors and she will get some relief from the severe pain the growing tumors in her body have created.

The prognosis is less than a 15% probability that she will live longer than six months. The moment my brother tells me this that Tuesday evening on the phone, I want to fall to the floor, ball into the fetal position again and scream. Instead, I tell my brother I need to go. I

collapse into my boyfriend's arms and cry like I have never cried before. I cry until I can't see. I cry until my nose becomes clogged for three days. I cry so hard my eyelids will remain swollen for a week. I have never cried like this in my life. Nothing has ever ripped at my soul like this. I feel like I died inside. All the blood and life, all the good parts of me are slowly being sucked out with the tide like a destructive whirlpool. I feel like I am rolling and vertigo of the vortex takes me under, sucking me down below its wrath. I can't breathe. I am sucking in mouthfuls of water. I eventually cry myself to sleep.

"It's like crying for your mother after she's gone. You cry because you love her. I cried, I guess, because I loved baseball and I knew I had to leave it."

-Willie Mays

The week I found out my mom was sick, I went through the motions of life like a canoe rower. I slept very little, drove my car in a fog to the job I hated at a nursing office and for once in a very long time, I was not the out-going one. I was quiet, reserved, and cautious. I could not focus on anything. I was a secretary, so the motions should have been easy, but I couldn't type words right. My dried-out contacts blurred the words on the page. The walls closed in on me and I screamed in my head. Every time I tried to complete another project, I turned my thinking to Mom, to cancer and the words echoing in my mind, "six months to live."

When I was ten or eleven, I read the book *Six Months to Live* by Lurlene McDaniels. The main character, 13-year-old Dawn Rochelle, gets diagnosed with leukemia and is scared and upset. While in the hospital undergoing chemotherapy, Dawn meets Sandy, who also has cancer.

Dawn and Sandy become fast friend and find themselves battling the disease together. They remain best friends even after they both go into remission and return home. Soon, Sandy gets sick again, and Dawn wonders what the future holds for both her and Sandy.

I remember how engrossed I was in the characters, how scared I was for their future. I was about the same age. I began wondering what bucket list I would make or the things I would do if given six months to live. I haven't thought of this idea since that book, but now I am thinking of all the things I would do if doctors told me I was near the end of my life. I would go skydiving, visit Ireland, Italy and the Grand Canyon. Lastly, I would throw myself a dying party, my version of a 1990's prom complete with shades of blushy pinks and creamy lavenders, every flower and sweet treat you could conjure up. I remember telling my mom if I died to put me in a pink dress, bury me with my teddy bear and my journal. That was all I wanted. My death would be quick and I would rest peacefully in heaven. It seemed so simple then. There were no worries. Death was just a quick notion that occasionally passed through my mind. Never once growing up did I ever think about Mom or Dad dying.

I was one of those naive people who believed my parents were immortal, even though my biggest fear in life has always and still is the death of my parents. It was something I used to have nightmares about. I would wake-up covered in sweat screaming in the darkness of the night for them. I was afraid they were dead and I would never get to hug them again. Once I realized it was only a dream, my mom would lie next to me, hold me close and whisper in my ear "don't worry sweetie, I'm not going to leave you for a long time." Then, she would rub my sweaty hair from my head and hum as I fell back to sleep.

Maybe this fear of death is why I was never a good sleeper and slept on the floor in a sleeping bag in my parents' bedroom for more years than I would like to admit. I felt safe next to

them. I knew if they were there, nothing bad could happen to me. It was just not part of the fiber of our family. We were knit like a smooth, leathered catcher's mitt: weathered with age, but filled with memories that would be tarnished and smoothed into a shiny eternity.

The next week before I go home again passes by like a beach bird on the gulf covered in thick oil. I am only able to move a few inches at a time. Every movement is like pulling up a five pound weight, but this time the weight is not in my hand, it's attached to my heart.

Each night I lay awake in the silences of the middle of the night and wonder. I wonder what things I want to tell my mom. I want her to tell me her best memory, about her first kiss, her first crush and her first break-up. I want her to tell me for the two hundredth time about the day I was born, how I came out in fast fury in 30 minutes from start to finish. I tell her everything, my hopes, dreams, secrets, and fears. Her soul holds my heart and without her in my life, I feel as if I would disappear into nothingness. She is my best friend; she is my soul mate. She is everything to me. I wonder what I could tell her now that she doesn't already know. I want to thank her for everything she has ever done for me, for every scrape she washed and bandaged, for hugs, smiles, laughter and for always, no matter what knowing the right thing to say in any situation. I want to apologize for all the times I said bad things to her because she wouldn't let me take the car or go on that blind date for fear he would abduct me. I want to apologize for never giving her a grandchild she could bounce on her knee, snuggle and kiss and bake chocolate chips cookies with.

I want to tell her I am sorry that she will not see me bathed in a white silk wedding gown walking down the aisle holding Daddy's hand and watching crocodile tears fall down her happy face. I want her to give me advice now, even though I didn't always listen to her divine and insightful wisdom in the past. I want to hear her say, "Drive carefully, wear your seatbelt, I love

you,” every time I leave the house, so if anything ever happened to her, the last words she told me was that she loved me. Those words would fill me up and travel with me as I try to navigate a world that may not have her in it.

Now, I want to soak in every word, every clear message, hidden message, and every hug. I want to savor every moment with her. I want to etch them in my brain, write about it on paper and take photos and videos, so I will never forget her voice, her laugh and everything that makes her great. Where do I begin? I am overwhelmed. I don't think I can handle this game. Where is my bat? Where is my glove? Where is my relief pitcher? I need water. I need a break. I need sleep. I need a miracle. I need my mom!

“Any time you think you have the game conquered, the game will turn around and punch you right in the nose.”

–Hall of Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, the main character, farmer Ray Kinsella played by Kevin Costner, built a baseball field at his home in the middle of his Iowa corn crop. Why? He heard a voice telling him, “If you build it, they will come.” He did not know who the “*they*” were. He just knew in his inner gut he had to build that baseball field and he did. When he finally sees his first ghost player step out of the cornfields (heaven) and onto his hand-made field of dreams, it's the famous baseball player Shoeless Joe Jackson from the White Sox, the team his father had loved years earlier. Jackson played for the White Sox in 1919. He was a left handed batter, right-handed thrower and played left field. Jackson was plagued by rumors that he was paid to lose the 1919 World Series and was eventually banned from major league baseball. He played his last

game on September 27, 1920 when he was 33 years old. Jackson had the third highest career batting average in major league baseball history. He couldn't read and got his nickname, Shoeless Joe Jackson, because his spike shoes gave him blisters, so he would take his shoes off and play the outfield in his socks.

Although he was banned from professional baseball, he didn't stop playing, he just played in small amateur leagues and later in his life maintained normalcy by first running a dry cleaning business. After that, he and his wife bought and ran a liquor store. Jackson went from a star baseball player to old man selling liquor. Then he died of a heart attack. To me, it's tragic how he went so far and fell so fast.

The movie was loosely based on the novel *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* by WP Kinsella. In this book, the baseball player Jackson tells Ray that getting thrown out of baseball was like having part of him amputated.

"I'm told that old men wake in the night and scratch itchy legs that have been dust for fifty years. That was me. Years and years later, I'd wake in the night with smell of the ballpark in my nostrils and the cool of the grass on my feet. The thrill of the grass..." (Kinsella 43).

Joe Jackson looks in Ray's eyes and asks "Is this Heaven," Ray Replies, "No, It's Iowa." Just that simple answer makes me understand that *his* home, *his* Iowa, *his* baseball field of dreams, is a field of magic for those that need to come back to it, to find home plate. He built the field, so the lost, wandering souls of baseball could come home, including his dead father.

“I loved the game. It was the game, the parks, the smells, the sounds. Have you ever held a bat or baseball to your face? The varnish, the leather. And it was the crowd, the excitement of them rising as one when the ball was hit deep. The sound was like a chorus.”

- W. P. Kinsela

I like to think that as I travel down vast expanses of highways, past similar corn fields, cotton in rows of bobbing, white buds I am going to my field of dreams. I just hope when I get there my mom is still alive and that she hasn't stepped in the corn field just yet. I am not ready to let her go, to let her walk the dusty red field, round the bases, throw a home run ball and run for it into the tall, billowing corn before her. Let her stay awhile longer. Let her bask in the bright, blue robin's egg light. Let the sun brush her face with memories thick and warm. Let the cool, breeze wash over her face, Let her feel youth, feel free, and alive. She is not ready. I want her to stay on this field to play for the love of the game, for the love of family and for the love of life. *“The memories will be so thick; they will brush them away from their faces.”* (Field of Dreams)

Later in the movie when another one of the baseball players returns, a young Archibald Moonlight Graham comes to his home plate and sets his eyes on the field knowing he has come home. He has made it to heaven. He remarks on the way it was when he played baseball, when he was on the field. He only played one inning of only one minor league game and as swiftly as it started, it was over. He had always wished he could have batted in the major leagues. To him it would have been magical.

You squint at a sky so blue that it hurts your eyes just looking at it. You feel the tingle in your arm when you connect with the ball to run the bases, stretch your double into a

triple, and flop face first into third base and wrap your arms around the bag. Is there enough magic out there in the moonlight to make this dream come true. (Field of Dreams)

In my field of dreams in Burlington in front of a dusty, old rickety house atop red clay, I can forget about the bills I cannot pay, the job I do not like, and the schoolwork that needs to be done. I know that no matter what happens to me now or in the future, I can always come home. This is where I will find the answers to life.

Today, on this bright afternoon in early 2013, I will find answers for Mom. I will find the cure for her cancer. I will heal her, like she has healed me. Baseball players call it “for love of the game,” and I call it “for love of home and Mom.” I think I heard someone quote once that home is like a mom’s hug, warm apple pie and baseball, three things that the world would not work without.

I close my eyes while standing in my front yard. The yard has been filled with weeds, the earth no longer wet and warm beneath my feet. Winter has turned it dry and the Piedmont, North Carolina clay is hard and uninviting. I squeeze my eyes tighter and remember the time the wind whipped through my hair. There were no worries; I knew if my bat connected with the baseball, I could run the bases, round the curve, and watch the baseball sail above me across the street and disappear in the trees. Home and baseball will take the place of what once was good.

The game still moves me, inspires me to take off my shoes and not worry where the road will lead. I know it will lead to where I am supposed to be no matter the hardness of the earth

beneath my feet, the harshness of the sun or the hundreds of miles that lie between me and the next home run.

The first round of chemo mom had in February, 2013 was so bad she was hospitalized for a week. They held off on more chemo to give her time to heal. She lost her hair two weeks later and shaved her head. When I saw the picture I cried like a baby. I wonder if I'll ever see Mom with hair again. When I think of this, my heart aches and feels like it's suffocating me again. I know she is ok now, but I am realistic. Her cancer is aggressive, will be swift and take her from my world. How do you survive the loss of a parent? I fear I will lose a part of myself, a healthy glow that my mom gave me. Without her, will that flame burn out? The pain of pre-grief radiates all around me like a sonic boom. For hours the vibrations feed my rocking fits and cries.

Grief for what I know will come, not today, not tomorrow, but soon it will come and the game will be over. The bases will be loaded with the sick and diseased, the fighters, and the players who gave their all. They will be ready to go home. Mom will come up to bat, grab it tight, take a full, wide crack at the ball and run like a child. She will have no shoes like Shoeless Joe Jackson. She will run with the wind and be free. She will run toward a home in heaven and when she does, the crowd of angelic lost ball players will welcome her with her organs, cheers and beautiful glorious sun so bright it blinds her with its brilliance.

Eight months later at 1:59am on Sunday, November 3, 2013, my mom died. The only person with her was her best friend holding her hand. The soft, quiet still of that morning is where she drew in her last breath. I like to think the wind chimes outside her window clanked and welcomed her home. She had been in a coma for three days. I sat with her the day before

holding her hand, singing “You Are My Sunshine” in her ear and telling her it was ok to go, even though my insides were hardening as I said it. I knew it was coming. I did not want to be there for her last breath. I was afraid of it. I did not want that to be my last memory. Mom was no longer Mom; she had slowly over the last month of her life turned into a shell of who she once was. Cancer robbed her of retirement, growing old with her grandkids, missed trips abroad and it ate at her body for days. It was relentlessly. I watched her wither from me, fall away from herself. She knew deep inside the end was near. I called the priest. She was given the last rites a number of times and the last time he came, Mom said she was ready, she didn’t want to fight any more. The last time I saw her, I kissed her warm head, told her in her ear I loved her more than she will ever know and turned to walk away. I did not look back. I walked off the baseball field and into the dugout. I felt I had struck out. I could not save her. I was ashamed. I could not get her back. I could never feel her warm hug again or stroke the smooth grooves of her veiny hands. I could not hear her tell me she loves me. I walked out of the hospice house that night feeling the most alone I’ve ever felt in my whole life. The day will haunt me for the rest of my life and follow me around like a shadow.

“...the death of my mother was the thing that made me believe the most deeply in my safety: nothing bad could happen to me, I thought. The worst thing already had.”

-Cheryl Strayed, Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail

THE LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY- PART ONE

This is what I know for sure. I am 36 years-old and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Three weeks ago, I contemplated filling my gas tank up, grabbing a few bottles of Diet Sunkist and driving the opposite direction of home with no particular game plan. I was not sure where I would go, but for the first time in my regimented and planned-out life, I was willing to leave it all behind, in order to find myself.

Nine months ago, my mother, who was the most important person in my life, died of a rare uterine cancer. One hundred and eleven days later, I had to take my dad off of life support after he had a catastrophic ruptured aortic aneurysm. Dad had been sick for a long time, but did not tell us. He hid it. He had been battling his own medical demons. As mom lay in a hospital bed dying, dad was dying too. When mom died, he got sicker and doctors said he died of a broken heart. He had been with mom for forty-two years. My dad was a brilliant but lonely man. He needed Mom's guidance and love to sustain him. Without her there to help lead him, he was lost. He did not know how to live without her. I think he gave-up. Grief was too much for him and he let go.

Dad collapsed at home on a Wednesday morning in mid-February. I remember waking up to thunder and wondered why it was thundering in February. Later, I would conclude that it was my mom telling me to check my phone for the missed call from the hospital. The next few days were a blur. Hospital machines, blood draining away from his body so fast, it filled up almost every canister in the hospital. Dialysis, tubes, medications, and vigils followed in those three

days. We had to take dad off life support on the third day. Sometimes, I wonder if it was all just a bad dream.

A few weeks after Dad died, I found out I was expecting my first child. Through all of my grief with Mom and Dad's death, for a brief, fleeting moment, I was elated. I saw hope. However, the hope I had found out in my life was short-lived. Two and a half months into my pregnancy, we found out there was no heart beat and our little baby had died.

Two days before my first Mother's Day without Mom, I had surgery and my little silent baby was lifted to heaven and placed in the loving hands of its grandparents. Grief does not even begin to describe my state of being. I had so many emotions spinning inside me; I felt as if I would fall to the floor and never have the strength to get up again. I was afraid the spinning grief inside my body had killed my child. It was devastating.

I stand at the gas pump, wearing black patent heels and a black dress with tiny white polka dots. I let the soothing waves of wind wash over me. The sky is a soft white with tiny tendrils of pink clouds scattering across the magnificent day like bales of hay waiting to be sent to the grain mill. I smile for a moment feeling the energy of my mom coming down from the heavens patting my cheek with love. The day was so glorious and bright, I wondered how it was possible. How can it be so beautiful all around me, but inside a raging black sky drops down into a tornado of grief? I know I am supposed to be sad. I know I am supposed to hurt, but this is ridiculous.

Just as the tornado of grief was about to drop down and suck me into its core, I remembered what my Reiki healer Kara told me: in order to fully grieve the loss of someone

dear to us, we must "grieve well." Grief should be angry and spinning like a tornado. It should take you, suck you in, roll you around and take your breath away. Grief is not sitting at the base of the cliff and not jumping because of fear. You have to jump and grow your wings on the way down. On the way down is when you learn the lessons of grief.

So, there I was again with a Diet Sunkist in my hand, a full tank of gas, and a heavy heart. I knew what I had to do. I had recently been accepted into the Cambridge Summer Yoga and Writer's retreat in Picardy, France for two weeks. I had declined once I found out I was pregnant and due to my teaching schedule for the fall, but after I lost the baby and my class was cancelled, I took that as a sign. I emailed the director and accepted the invitation that she had kept open for me.

I called my travel agent, booked a flight to Paris, bought a big, white floppy hat and a French phrase book with CD. I decided I need to grieve, and what better place to do that than France. I spoke very little French; my yoga left a lot to be desired (thank you 20 years of dance for some pointers), and my writing submission on death got me accepted. I took that as a sign too. One week from today, I will board my transcontinental flight, try to not run away from grief, but to meet it head on, with a glass of French wine, a notebook and my vast library of memories.

-PART 2-

A COURSE IN DEATH

My parents were everything to me, the two most wonderful people that graced this planet. I have never known two more loving, generous, kind and selfless people. My mom, Linda, was a microbiologist for 42 years, and my dad, Nick, was a Cervical Pathologist and Cell Morphologist. They were educated, smart, inventive, and loved to learn new things.

They taught me so many things. They taught me how to be a better person by helping feed the homeless or getting less at Christmas. They taught me how to show kindness, give to others in need when I could and not judge people because I never know what things they are secretly dealing with. They also taught me to value friendship, how to be respectful, and to be kind to even your worst enemies, because they are probably hurting inside and dealing with things we may not realize. They wanted me and my brother to grow up with love and compassion in our hearts for ourselves and for others. With compassion and love for life and people, we would succeed in this world and that is what they wanted to teach us.

If you were lucky enough to know my dad, Nick, you knew you would never go hungry. This was the Italian way and my dad lived this philosophy until his final days. If you needed food, he would show up with bags of canned chicken, rice, soup, and especially bags of toilet paper. My dad had a little hoarding problem with buying socks and underwear as well. If any of my brother's friends or my boyfriend came over, they always left with a bag of new underwear and socks. I laugh when I think about this. I think I finally understand what Dad was doing.

Not only did Dad want to feed your soul with food, he also wanted to make sure your butt was always clean, and your feet always warm. I guess now that I think about it, this must be the recipe for a good life. I know this sounds strange, but I have been blessed the last 15 years since I moved away for college with never having to buy my own toilet paper. Every time Mom and Dad would come for a visit or I would go home, I always left with canned chicken and toilet paper. I just looked in my pantry last week, and cried when I saw the last 12 pack of toilet paper sitting there, sad and lonely on the bottom shelf. It made me sad to think after it's gone a piece of him will be gone from my home as well. I am contemplating whether I should keep just one roll and encase in a plastic cube with a mini hammer and sign that says "*In case of emergency, break and use- Love Dad.*"

If you were lucky enough to know my mom, Linda, then you knew you had a steadfast friend and supporter for life. Linda was a cheerleader for everyone who was lucky enough to know her. She was generous, kind, loving, protective, supportive, and made sure everyone else's needs were met before she did anything for herself. She was that mother who worked a full-time job and was up until three in the morning frosting 100 cupcakes for the bake sale. Mom loved books and having read a great book, she would often give it away so someone else could enjoy the journey. She would be so tired when she put me to bed for the fifth time, but always had the strength to read me as many bedtime stories as I wanted. As a child, she was poor, and they did not have enough money for books. She spent many of her days huddled in the corners of the library reading everything she could get her hands on. When she had children, she vowed her children would never be denied a book. She told me I could always have a book and many times

I chose a book over a toy, because it meant so much more. I like to think this is why I am a writer, because Mom was generous enough to give me the gift of stories.

Mom was also a skilled multitasker, managing to run a large department with ease and efficiency. Many people told me how much she did for that company and her employees that went above and beyond her role. I was in awe of her every time I watched her in action. She would be sitting in a navy blue chair in her office the size of a closet typing away on one project and talking to a client on her earpiece. Then, she would run to the copier, grab a paper, run back to her computer, and furiously type in one fell swoop. No matter how cluttered her desk, she knew exactly where everything was. She also made sure every employee felt important. She was secret Santa every year to the dozens of workers, making sure they had a little something special in their box for several weeks. She would give them note cards, fuzzy socks, bookmarks, books, mini snow globes or mini stockings filled with the "good chocolate." Mom always wanted people to feel special. She gave gifts that always had meaning behind them. I cherished our shopping trips, which happened often. We would be in a store, and she would be looking for a specific kind of candy or a particular item at Hallmark, because she had overheard a friend/employee say he/she liked that item. She wanted to surprise them with it, even if it was not a special occasion. Mom was also involved in multiple charities and events around town. She spread herself thin, but loved every minute of being a Red Hat member, Dazzling Diva, raising money for the Red Cross and serving on their board. She was even a senior reagent with the Moose Club. I am now a proud member too!

So, as Dad made sure your belly was fed, butt clean, and feet warm, Mom showered you with the warmth of a hug, a special treat, and a warm heart.

The last few months, I have had the daunting task of cleaning out my parents' house. It is a small, modest brick home with very few updates that have been made in the 42 years they lived there. I sift through the boxes of memories and find cards people wrote Mom thanking her for a gift or a note to Dad thanking him for a good deed. I finally realize the answers to so many questions that I had over the years. Why did they not get a new washer and dryer when the old one broke? They knew the lady who owned a local laundromat and supported her business by going to do their laundry there every Saturday. They didn't own nice furnishings, just basic tables and chairs and a non-formal brown couch. My mom and dad shared one car for years so my brother and I had reliable cars when we moved away for college. They wanted to make sure we had money for groceries or enough money to take piano lessons or buy art supplies, drum sticks or enough money to go on the class field trip to DC. This is why they went without getting the dishwasher fixed, instead washing the dishes by hand with no complaining. My parents lived "*without*" many things, so others could live "*with*."

Today, I thank them and remember them every time I pass rows of toilet paper or sock displays in stores or the feeling in my heart when I volunteer at the shelter. As I pack my bags for my up-coming trip to France tomorrow, I make sure to pack a bookmark and the writer's kit Mom gave me and plenty of the socks and underwear Dad gave me. I may still be lacking a proper French vocabulary and my yoga is still a little wobbly, but my soul will be fed by the food of France, my butt will be clean and my feet, toasty warm. Thanks Mom and Dad. Bon Voyage!

-PART 3-

PARIS

I think the most important thing for any new traveler to do, especially one like myself who has decided to run away from her life to a foreign country, is to upgrade to first class. This makes the fear of flying (thanks to the free-flowing champagne) worth the extra money. It sure did the trick for me. I also can say the lobster appetizer, fresh baked olive roll, filet mignon with wine reduction, cloth napkin and butler in the sky was a nice touch. I also enjoyed the bedroom slippers, toiletries bag, rose water to spritz on my face and my fold-out bed with personal television. Those sealed the deal. Let's just say I was not sure I ever needed to leave the airplane. I was already smitten and had not even changed time zones. The flight was perfect. Once we descended, I opened the window shade and a beautiful rainbow spread across the lush, great landscape. Things were falling into place perfectly.

My trip to France was amazing. I meditated, journaled every day and soaked in the clean air. I woke to the calls of roosters, drank wine, laughed and cried. I met a dozen other women who were experiencing similar feelings. We typed on keyboards, stretched our legs on yoga mats and opened up our hearts to the pain. We let grief move us. We laughed over meals and train rides as we strolled through quaint Parisian streets sipping steamy cups of coffee. We toured caves, castles, ruins, and towers. No matter where I went my mom was there, not just around my neck, but in the air. I knew the trip was exactly what I needed. I slept peacefully, exercised, and learned how to be alone with myself and my thoughts. It was the most necessary thing I could have ever done for myself. It was necessary because I needed to be away from life for long enough to learn how to navigate grief and learn it to be ok if it stays with me forever. I cannot allow grief to define me. And yet it does and will.

Right before I went to France, I read the best-selling nonfiction memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed. It's one woman's journey alone on a 1,100 mile hike on the Pacific Crest Trail after the death of her mother. The author starts out as a weary, promiscuous 26 year-old woman four years after her mother's death, and moments from the end of a marriage. She happens across a book at an REI store one day about the Pacific Crest Trail, a mostly desolate stretch of national hiking trails that starts in New Mexico and runs the entire length of the west coast all the way up to Canada. After dabbling in drugs, sleeping around and divorce, Strayed spirals out from grief and makes a decision to hike 1,100 miles alone on the PCT in order to deal with her grief. What she finds in herself, in others and in nature will stay with you long after she puts her brown hiking books away and packs away her writing pen. You will have the opportunity to explore grief, journey with the author, feel the weight of grief in her 40-pound backpack, and might be surprised what you find at the end of the journey. You will find Hope.

I could relate to the author in regards to the loss of her mother and how she realized pretty early on in her journey that the worst thing in life had already happened so why not hike a trail alone. It was an incredible book. It had a hypnotic, cathartic rhythm. It was heartwarming, heartbreaking, and poetic.

The author has a way with words in exploring the past and shedding new light on her life as she hikes through New Mexico all the way up the western seaboard until she reached "The Bridge of the Gods" in Oregon. As I read through the miles with Strayed on the trail, I too was on her journey learning how to take grief and use it to create positivity. The book has many

important lessons for people in life dealing with the death of a loved one, the loss of a loved one to divorce and lastly, the loss of yourself and how to find your way back.

I finished reading the book during the same week in September that Strayed finished her hike some eighteen years earlier. I laughed, cried, sobbed, wailed, and breathed with Strayed. Her prosy narrative was just what the doctor ordered for my weary, grief-stricken soul. The earthly, poetic language washed over me like holy water at church and the words were Band-Aids over my fresh grief wounds. I know a book is fantastic when I cry at the end because not only was it life-altering, but I'm sad it's over.

Before I read this book, I lost my mother, my father, and an unborn child. I was at a crossroads in life. I was not sure where to turn, who to turn to, and not sure what the future without my parents would hold. I may not have hiked a trail for 1,100 miles alone but I also took a journey in order to heal and found myself. I journeyed 3,500 from home alone to join other women on a healing, restorative journey to find myself. But, I found my mother instead.

I found my mother in the trees that were wide-open and full of hope. I found her in the wind. I heard her call to me in the laughter of little children one afternoon as I meditated in the wet, green grass. I found my mother joining me during evening yoga sessions and when I opened up my hips and raised my arms to the sky, I let grief out.

I found her in the photos I took throughout my journey, showing up as a beautiful purple light that swelled around my face and comforted me. I found my mother's spirit in other women on my journey who made me feel the love only women can radiate out from their souls. I found her on the Eiffel Tower in Paris as rain trickled out of the sky and formed goose pimples on my bare arms telling me I should have worn long sleeves. I found my mother staring at me through the deep, charcoal eyes of a French horse named Romeo.

I found her in English breakfast tea at a café in Chantilly, France as the warm, soothing feeling washed over me when I drank it. I found my mother staring back at me when I looked in the mirror after crying and for the first time in my life, I was happy I looked like my mother. I had her soft lines hugging my eyes and the same full blue veins running under the soft skin of my hands. I found my mother in the brilliantly colored vocal rooster that woke me each morning and welcomed me each night. I found her in the yellow and black butterfly that floated into the writing salon and delicately balanced on the wooden coffee table for over eight hours. And, I found my mother literally in the subway station in Paris when the locket containing her ashes fell off. I finally found her laying behind me on the ground. I found out I do not have to let her go, because she never left me.

Thank you Cheryl Strayed for telling your story. Thank you for letting people in, for opening up your hips while falling down and letting grief out. You let your grief run onto the pages of your book and I am so grateful to you for writing every bleak and painful moment that you had the courage to share. You helped me grieve well.

-PART 4-

GRIEF AND THE HOLIDAYS

This past Christmas, I celebrated with Craig. We sat next to our Christmas tree and watched old videos of my childhood. I found several old, dusty, VHS tapes and had them made into DVDs. I came home, popped in the DVDs one after another, laughed, smiled, and shed a few tears. It warmed my heart to hear my parents' voices, to see my mom and Dad open Christmas presents and kiss by the tree in our living room. It was the same living room that last week I stood in alone vacuuming the dust and mold from the room. The same room that once had

my favorite soft pastel green velvet sofa. The same room that long ago held laughter and Christmas trees and now was void of life. Now all that lives there are 1972 rust colored-curtains and green carpet matted down from 45 years of memory. I stood in that living room, closed my eyes and prayed that when I opened my eyes up again, I would be that ten-year old girl opening up my cassette tape player, porcelain doll, and seeing Mom and Dad. When I opened my eyes, I only saw emptiness. I hope one day the house hears laughter again, the rip of wrapping paper on Christmas morning, and is filled with love.

I watched a video of myself putting my great-grandmother, Ada St. George's hair in curlers back in 1990. I also watched a younger me laugh with my Auntie Vilma, Uncle Frank and snuggled on a couch with my Auntie Betty. It was the first time I watched a video where most of the people in the videos have passed. I was blessed that I found such a treasure in my mom and dad's house. I watched my dad driving down the road as we were all huddled in our white, VW van at Emerald Isle Beach. I watched as I swam in a pool and Mom leisurely sat poolside in a lounge chair, soaked in the sun and a book. I saw my dad dressed in his best shirt and Miami Vice white hat with the black rim at my brother's birthday party. I saw myself as a naive, young girl with the world in front of me. I watched as I walked in the Frazier fir trees in a Vermont field behind my uncle's house and soaked in the warm, earthy smell of Lake Champlain and the silly warming laugh of my grandmother.

I only cried a few times during this second Christmas without Mom and the first without Dad. I laughed more than I had in months. It was great to feel my chest full with the coolness that laughter brings. I was afraid that laughter was never going to find me again. It is strange how much death has changed me. It has curved and reshaped the landscape of my memory. The layers of memories are wide and full and trying to help me fill the holes of grief.

Every time a new year rolls around, we make our list for all of the things we want to change or make better. Some people vow to stop eating junk food, exercise more, and some people decide to change their attitudes, or even their jobs. However, there are some people like me, who just wish that sunshine and happiness will find their way into the coming year. The last two years of my life have been filled with bump after bump and shrouded with sadness, death, rebirth, and learning to live a new way of life.

In 2013, I came face-to-face with cancer and watched as it grabbed a hold of my mother and she wilted from me. I quit my job in June of that year and worked part-time, which allowed me more time to spend with her. I savored every adventure that I could with her as cancer ravaged. We drank hot Earl Grey tea at our favorite tea house and laughed. We snuggled under a fleece blanket and watched *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias*. We made homemade ornaments and sat next to each other clicking our crochet needles making blankets for gifts. I saw her the day before she died, squeezed her hand, told her I loved her and that it would be ok.

I could not be with her when she took her final sweet breaths of life. I chose to remember her in the day when her cheeks were pink with happiness and her smile warmed any bad day I had. I chose to keep those memories close to my heart. A few short months after Mom died, my dad left this world tragically to join Mom in heaven. I held his hand and kissed his forehead as I know his mother, Josephine, came down, scooped him up and brought him home. Even after my miscarriage a few months later, I promised myself that I would do the best I could to go on. I promised Mom I would continue my life and make sure that happiness remained no matter what

adversity I was met with. I sustained and moved slowly through the last two years because my parents taught me about courage, how to stand up, not let anything get the best of me.

The last two years have also been a scary time when I feel my wobbly feet start to become firm and planted, shooting up like an oak tree. I realize I am now totally in control of my life and no longer have my parents as my wingmen. It has been during these past few years that I finally realized I may not have my wingmen, but when they left this earth they gave me their wings so I could fly. They gave me a great gift of a future with no boundaries, no nets, just freedom. This year, I added two beautiful memory ornaments to my Christmas tree. I bought silver wings for Mom and gold for Dad.

I learned on my new grief journey last year that I am not alone. I met many people who have taken the same journey through grief. Several other people I met in France at the writing retreat had recently lost their fathers. Somehow, we met thousands of miles from our grief, joined together, and opened up our notebooks to let grief in. When we did, we opened up the battle scar, we examined its uniqueness and saw it had beauty. It had merit, and having it made us warriors for the future. I bonded with my sweet grief warriors and will always hold a special place in my heart for my friends and the beauty of friendship and laughter, which we all really needed.

One of the beautiful ladies I met in France was Nannie Flores. She too had lost her father to cancer last year and has a mother who was diagnosed with cancer as well. As the New Year approached, Nannie made her own reflections on grief the past few years, and has gratefully allowed me to share her message:

“In 2013, both my parents got diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. I painstakingly watched my mother lose her hair, her crowning glory. And I held my dad's skeletal hands as he

slowly drifted away in eternal sleep. I had to be strong for my family, especially my then 10-year-old brother.

2014 was a little less morbid. I met my soulmate, climbed Mount Pulag, bought my first car, traveled Europe alone, went to a writer's retreat in the French countryside and started a new, more challenging career.

I've come to learn that once you've hit rock bottom, there is no way to go but up. May 2015 give us all the driving force to move forward Oh, and hug your parents today, and every day from here on out.”

We should take the beautiful memories of the people we love and imagine the New Year as a promise from our loved ones above to help guide us to good things. “Where there is death, there is life.” I will hang the wings on my tree and know they are with me always.

LOSING MICHELLE

Today I visit your grave. It is the middle of a crazy week at work and I need your serenity. It is mid-April; Libya is in turmoil and in a few weeks Prince William and Kate will marry in what has been called the wedding of the century even though it hasn't happened yet. I head over after work just as the sun is slanting toward dusk. The temperature is a cool, breezy 65. No coat required today. I turn into the familiar drive remembering that three weeks earlier I came here and searched thirty minutes for your marker without luck. I got back in my car and cried all the way home.

Today, I will find you and you will give me the answers that I need to hear. You will tell me to leave him, even though you know I won't. You will tell me to stand up and be a woman, to be the woman you know is hiding inside me right now. I hope you will tell me it's ok to love him because he is my soul mate.

I park my car in the center of the circular drive where I think you might be. I walk back and forth determined that today I will find you. I walk through dried, crunchy left-over leaves, past small Bradford pear trees with fat roots, row after row of fake Dollar Store daisies and admire the trinkets that others have left behind for the ones they lost. I pass a marker that is only a few years old and there in front of it is a full can of Budweiser beer. A simple can of beer, perhaps left for a friend. Or, is it telling me something more? Will he end up here one day too with a beer can as a marker? Another marker has a small wind chime that jingles in the afternoon sun. I close my eyes and let the wind push through my hair and listen to the soothing sound of the chimes. The dead are speaking to me. "Here she is, just go north and you'll find her."

I walk past their graves, past mothers, fathers, children and grandparents. They are all helping me find you. I pass a devoted father, a faithful son who died too young, an infant

mourned by a mother, and a soldier who fought and died defending our country. I salute him.

The graves span the length of a football field, with all colors of the rainbow. Many are adorned with plastic pink and purple hydrangeas. I stare out into the open fields at the hundreds of people who now rest past a busy street, a Food Lion, a Jewish temple and soon, a super Wal-Mart.

Some markers are smooth while others aged and weathered. Some have fresh newly planted flowers. I am alone walking over graves surrounding myself with death. Somehow, I am at peace. Even though the busy road on either side has cars zipping by, I do not hear that once I step onto the flat ground paved in markers, the plotted out families leading me to you.

A few minutes later, while walking down a small paved path, there you are like a glorious beacon of hope. Your grave marker is surrounded by marble with two praying angels on a bronze panel. It reads "Michelle Parker Quick, A Devoted Wife and Mother 1969-2010." Your flowers are pale pink and creamy-white. I know you like the color blue better. Maybe they forgot that. I didn't. I never forget, that is what a friend does for a friend.

You died on a Monday, November 15, 2010. Seven days earlier you collapsed at work after a bad round of chemo. Your body was giving up on you, but you would never give up on it. You were a fighter. You were a lot like my Craig, stubborn too. You got what you wanted when you wanted it. You would not let cancer win. But, it took you anyway at 6:30 on that cold November morning. You were alone, no family praying over you and no one other than the nurse to hold your hand as you took your last breath. The nurse would later tell me that you would probably not want your family to see you like that, so you died before they could be witness to

your end. You knew it would be too much for a mother who lost a daughter, mother, and ex-husband and ex mother-in-law all within seven months. You didn't want your husband or son to see and you didn't want me to see. But, you knew I could take it. I would be there for you.

Seven days earlier when we got the news that there was nothing more we could do, we had to wait. We were packed in the life boat having escaped the Titanic headed out to the unfamiliar; something I knew was coming, but everyone else could not accept. How could I accept this death? We had to accept that this ship was sinking fast and the iceberg of cancer had struck.

For fourteen years, you were my friend, my mentor, and my "soul sister." We met at the hotel so many years ago when we both worked sixty hour weeks as catering mangers. We planned other people's events. We planned their lives and we could not even manage our own sometimes. We told each other our secrets and I held your hand many times as you cried, finding out that another month went by and you would not be pregnant.

Those fifteen years of infertility would lead you down a dark path and you chose addiction after addiction. It numbed your pain. Not alcohol or drugs but something simple, small, deadly... a cigarette. It calmed your nerves, made infertility, fights, bad bosses and bad days disappear in the afternoon through puffs of smoke out your car window on the ride home. You didn't know that it would only years later take over first your lungs, then your brain, your adrenal glands and ultimately turn to your bones. It invaded every fiber of your being until you could take no more. Even during chemo, you could be found huddled on the front porch, alone, rocking in the dark and breathing in its poison, a poison you knew could kill.

You called me one Monday night to tell me the biopsies were cancer and we both cried together and prayed. For two and a half years your life revolved around a dream world filled with

chemotherapy, biopsies, CT scans, MRI's, radiation, gamma knife, and bad news after bad news. Through it all, you remained steadfast in faith and remained hopeful. We were taught that God heals, that prayer chains are real and miracles happen. Now, you rest underneath my feet at peace I am sure. You did not want this. None of us want death.

During your ordeal, I always knew in the back of mind, this monster would win, but I could not, I would not tell you. It took you and one day it will take Craig. Addiction is brutal. Three years earlier, your dream of becoming a mother had happened after a miracle baby boy, Grayson, was brought into this world on January 18th, 2007. This was the happiest day of your life. After your diagnosis, you looked at him with fear. Looking at your son, I know you thought that mothers don't die first, not when you waited for that miracle for so long. It was not fair.

I will never forget the way I felt when you died. The sky was a clear, azure blue and the occasional passing cirrus clouds floated by as I passed out parking passes to patrons at work. I was grateful to be outside. The sound of wind, traffic and work were able to distract me from the searing pain my heart was feeling. The air around me was cool and leaves swirled around me like rain. The cold wind whipped my cheeks, but I held onto my tears. I had work to do, people to greet, a luncheon to plan. I would cry later.

I planned your funeral, picked out your attire, the funeral home and cemetery. Your obituary was the first one I ever wrote. I wanted to write it. It was my final gift to you. A few days later, I wore a black dress, held your son's hand and walked your husband and son down a packed church aisle. I wept then. Not only did I weep for the loss of my best friend, but I wept for your husband and son too. There were so many things that you would never see. You would not see him graduate Pre-K, sing a line from the alphabet song or watch him lose his first tooth.

You would not see him learn to finally ride his bike with no training wheels or catch his first baseball in the soft catcher's glove I bought him for his 6th birthday. You would not see the elation in his face when he finally learned how to write his name. You would not see him grow tall and strong or kiss his first girlfriend.

You would not place his graduation cap on his strong-minded head, watch him graduate or walk off to his college dorm, no longer letting him kiss you on the cheek. You would miss it all in a physical sense and see it only from your floating cloud.

It's a week before Mother's day and you should not be here in this cemetery, the cemetery that I picked. You should be rocking your four-year-old son to sleep singing him a lullaby. Instead, you rest nine spaces from the curb.

For the past twelve years, I have dated an alcoholic who should have died at least ten times from his addictions, but he didn't. He's as healthy as a horse, an alcoholic horse with flaring nostrils, mad at the world. I planned my boyfriend's funeral so many times in my head. I wrote the eulogy fifty times as I sat in ICU waiting rooms, waiting for them to come tell me addiction took him. Every time they were wrong. I imagined his gravestone and what it would say, "free spirit, lover of life, gone but always in our hearts." I picked his flowers every time I went to a flower shop. I picked the funeral hall and for all these years, I waited for his death. One time as he lay unconscious with a ventilator, I even prayed for death to take him. I prayed for it to come quickly, to take him away from pain and addiction. I did not want Craig to die, but he was in so much pain, I did not want him to suffer anymore. Addiction is brutal. It took a mother from her young son; it took a wife from a husband of 17 years, a mother who could not bear the thought burying her only daughter, and a brother who can no longer tell his sister his secrets.

How is that possible that my boyfriend, who I would die for, still drinks like a fish and lives and breathes? He has lungs of steel, a stomach like a rock and a steady heartbeat.

One night, I prayed for death to take my boyfriend and it took Michelle instead. Still, he lived and you, Michelle didn't! You now rest under a marker surrounded by marble, the newest addition to the book of the dead in the Pinewood Cemetery. Today, I come to visit you when I was for sure I would be mourning my boyfriend instead.

We sat over your bedside for seven days, singing to you, praying over you, talking about how great you are and shed so many tears, I could not imagine were possible. Your family could not accept this death, but I could handle it. I waited for death for years and this time I would wait for yours and not leave you. Your family left each night to go home for a shower, a hot meal, or a breakdown and I stayed. I pulled my chair closer to you, grabbed your hand and prayed with you. Maybe God could bring you back from this, but that was not his plan for you. It was a precious, yet tortuous time for me.

I sat with you many nights on the sixth floor of the new state-of-the-art heart center watching as you drifted from us and the windswept the autumn trees outside the window. I leaned back in the stiff hospital chair and watched you fade away. The world was passing you by and you were dying.

A few nights later, I sang "Amazing Grace" and you squeezed my hand. It was a moment I will cherish. I even took the liberty of painting your fingernails and toenails because I knew you would not want to die with them not painted. That would just not do. You would also be mad that you were bald and people would see. You only let a few see you without your wig on. For seven days it was placed in a box and your bald head was there for everyone to see. We didn't care about that.

I waited for hours, waiting for you to sit up and speak to me. I knew what you would say if you did wake up. You would tell me he is not good for me, that I deserve better. I wanted you to tell me it's ok to love an addict because you understand. Yet, you knew that no matter what, I would not leave him, I could never leave him. I didn't want to leave him.

Your family could not watch you drift away and I promised that I would be there. I was there for my boyfriend and I would be there for you. Three days before you died, the cold air outside pushed against the window once again and I sat with you. I talked to you about how great heaven would be and that it was ok to go. I told you I would take care of all the details and make sure that you were given the burial you would want. I would do that because that is what you do for the people you love, even if they choose addition over life. I had never done this before, but within 24 hours I chose your funeral parlor, got all the prices for caskets, lifts, burial fees, grave markers, and all the things that come along with planning a funeral.

I even picked out your burial clothes, the cornflower blue and lilac purple dress. I went to see you in the casket made of oak wood and large handles, its inside lined with crème drape. I placed a picture of your son next to you and placed your clear stone in your hands. It was a clear rock with an angel in it. These two things you carried with you everywhere and you would carry them when you met your maker. I was the last to see your face, then the casket was closed and God brought you home. No matter how much I did for you, Michelle, in planning your funeral and picking your final resting place, I still am brought back to my boyfriend, the one that I thought would have died instead.

Death does not pick and choose. God chooses who he needs and he needed you. The last time I saw you alive was on Saturday, November 13, 2010 and I said goodbye. I kissed your pink cheeks. I smelled death on you. I knew it was coming. I told you I loved you, squeezed your

hand and rubbed the beads of sweat that graced your bald head. Tears streamed down your face. The nurses called them “tears of death.” Even though you could no longer speak, I knew you knew I was there. Walking away from you that night was the hardest thing I had ever had to do. I do not walk away from the people I love. I stay until the end. It’s not a gift, it’s a curse. I kissed your cheek one last time, and told you that God was waiting. I cried all the way home. You died 30 hours later.

So today, I kneel beside your grave, kiss my hand and press it onto your marker and tell you how much I miss you and how wonderful you are. I tell you that I told your son that you are now a bright, shining star in the sky and even though you can’t be on earth, he can always see you in the stars and tell you he loves you. We will wave at you on Friday nights when we leave story time at the bookstore and wave to you when we see you above the house at night.

I know that this is just one death and many more will come. People I care about and love will die. Funeral eulogies will be orated, caskets covered with sprays of Lilies of the Valley and “Amazing Grace” will ring out in vaulted churches. Tears will be shed, graves will be dug and people laid to rest. One day, Craig will not be so lucky and I will pick out his urn, have him cremated and spread his ashes over the Grand Canyon.

Whether it’s in a cemetery with big trees and old stones or cemeteries with markers, fake plastic, flowers and beer cans, people’s memories will live on. The cars will still pass by on the street, the Wal-Mart will be built and soon you will get more neighbors. The trees will eventually grow bigger and your son will too. I continue to walk the paved cemetery path, past the trees with fat roots, the crunchy leaves and the sound of the wind chime. I will get in my car, go home, cook dinner and go on with life.

The ride home is peaceful, no music needed, the wind chime still ringing in my ears and tears still streaming down my face. I head home to Craig, to my living, breathing addict. Who knows when his time will come?

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Appendix A-Biographical Sketch

Christina Ruotolo holds a BA in English Literature and a BA in Communications, Public Relations (2002) from East Carolina University. Ruotolo has been a freelance writer and published poet since 1996. Her first poetry collection, *The Butterfly Net*, was published in 2008 and she co-authored a creative nonfiction book, *The Day the Earth Moved Haiti: from Havoc to Healing* in 2012. In 2009, she won the Wildacres Experience Scholarship, which allowed her to attend a week-long fiction workshop through the Wildacres Writer's Retreat. Ruotolo received an honorable mention for her poem "Diagnosis" and 2nd place in 2010 for her poem "Bayou Bay" through the SC Writer's Workshop. Her poetry and photography has appeared in numerous local magazines as well the *Petigru Review Literary Journal*. Ruotolo is currently at work on a creative nonfiction history book on a Spanish shipwreck, a nonfiction book about death and grief, and a poetry chapbook. Ruotolo is an adjunct English instructor at a community college, writing consultant, maintains a blog, and enjoys reading and cooking.

