

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

27 BYE-BYES: AN ELEGY

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SUMMER 2015

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree in English  
with honors in English

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## ABSTRACT

For my honors thesis, I have written a lyric essay about my mother's death in 2010. Combining elements of research writing, creative nonfiction and the personal essay, the lyric essay is written in fragmented, sometimes seemingly unrelated sections. My essay tells the story of my mother's death and its aftermath through anecdotes about her life, my memories of her, and facts about her disease and treatment. As reflected in its title, "27 Bye-Byes," this essay is comprised of twenty-seven entries.

By the time I am finished with my thesis, I hope to have created an essay that is not only a piece of writing but also a piece of art. With this project, I hope to add my voice to the relatively new yet expanding sub-genre of lyric essays.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis not only represents a huge academic endeavor and the culmination of my undergraduate career but also a highly personal and demanding project that I could not have completed on my own. I'm enormously grateful to my thesis supervisor, Professor Elizabeth Kadetsky, for her expertise and guidance. Thank you for lighting the spark that led to this essay. Additionally, many thanks to Dr. Marcy North for stepping in at the eleventh hour and diligently ensuring that I met every deadline and requirement.

Thank you, Christopher for listening to my endless complaints and solving my 4 AM dilemmas.

Thank you, Mary Cate for tolerating my clutter, for reassuring me that I'm not insane and for being my best friend.

Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Jordan for your unwavering support, enlightened advice and unfailing love. I'm so incredibly lucky to have both of you in my life. (And Mrs. Jordan, thank you for "bugging" me with your phone calls every week).

And finally, to my family: thank you for loving me unconditionally and supporting me wholeheartedly, even when I make it difficult. Uncle Tommy, thank you for your patience, understanding and encouragement. Just like Pop-Pop, you're my guy. Meghan and Colin, thank you for reminding me not to take myself too seriously and for loving me in spite of yourselves. And Daddy, thank you for my education. Thank you for pushing me to do my best. Thank you for never saying no, even when it meant allowing me to major in English.

Without all of you, none of this would have been possible. I am forever grateful.

## Chapter 1

### The End

My mom died on May 11, 2010. It was a Tuesday. It was unseasonably cold and rainy. The hospital called our house at 6:19 that morning to tell my father that we had better come quickly if we wanted a chance to say goodbye— my mom’s heart rate was slowing down as was her breathing. He roused my sister, brother and me from our beds, and instead of rushing to the high school like we did every morning, we sped along Interstate 81 South toward Scranton. During the ride, my dad tried to make jokes and keep the mood light, but it didn’t work. We could anticipate the heartbreak that would almost certainly greet at us at our destination.

(We didn’t know that when the nurse had told my father that my mom’s heart had slowed down she really meant that it had stopped. She was gone before we left our house).

Despite the urgency of our trip, my dad still made sure to stop at the Dunkin’ Donuts several blocks from the hospital. (We had skipped breakfast, after all). While we waited for our iced coffees and bagel sandwiches, my uncle texted my father and told him we needed to get to the hospital immediately. Running from our car to the hospital’s entrance, Colin, my eight-year- old brother, tripped and spilled his drink. It was hilarious in a totally absurd way—our mom was dead, and Colin was covered in hot chocolate.

Upstairs, a grave looking doctor and a sympathetic nurse whisked my father away. My siblings and I waited with our uncle and his fiancée in a brightly lit, sterile waiting room. They sat across from us, silently avoiding eye contact.

My father and the nurse returned. He was crying, and she had her arm around him, rubbing his back and whispering soft, soothing words.

I knew it was over.

They led us through the double doors and down a hallway. Everyone we passed seemed to know what had happened and gave us that look of pity and sadness that I have come to despise.

We reached my mom's room. Her dedicated, caring nurses had removed the tubes and monitors that had been connected to her body. She appeared to be sleeping; her head slightly tilted to the left and her mouth barely open, the same pose that she had when she dozed off every Friday night while watching *Monk*. It seemed like she would jolt awake at any moment, irritated that she had missed the scene in which Monk comically apprehended the criminal and revealed how he had committed the crime. But she didn't even stir. We had one last opportunity to spend time with her, to hold her soft hands and inhale her sweet, motherly perfume. But it was too late—her hands were already cold and felt like wax, and she smelled like salty hospital food, not Dove soap and Calvin Klein Obsession.

A nondescript nurse ushered us into another waiting room, this one private and filled with tissue boxes and pictures of the Virgin Mary. Someone asked who we should call, who needed to know first. Soon, my dad was on his phone, back in executive mode, and making plans. My uncle, taxed with the mission of telling his father that his only daughter had died, left and headed north to Montrose.

My dad's brother and sister arrived shortly thereafter. They took us to the cafeteria for a second breakfast while my father talked to my mom's doctors and tried to figure out what exactly had happened. Once in the cafeteria, my sister and I began to take care of our brother, making sure he had enough to eat and didn't try to sneak candy onto his tray. How easily and naturally we assumed this maternal role—at seventeen and fourteen, respectively, we had aged decades in a matter of minutes. Over dry eggs and burnt toast, our aunt and uncle asked us how school was going, if we were playing any sports and if we had big plans for the upcoming summer. Neither of them brought up what had just happened—as if ignoring it could make it go away.

Sitting in that vinyl-lined corner booth, I wondered if passersby could tell that our mom had just died, that our lives had irrevocably changed. Was it clear from the look in our eyes or had we had already learned to hide it?

My dad met us outside of the cafeteria, and we headed toward our car. There was nothing more for us to do here; the funeral home had been contacted, and its director was on his way to pick-up my mom and bring her body back home.



## Chapter 2

### The Obituary

After a courageous six year battle with illness, our mother, daughter, sister and wife, Jane B. Spellman passed away on May 11, 2010, at Mercy Hospital in Scranton.

She was born in Berwick, to Albert T. Belinsky, Montrose, and the late Mary (Scheno) Belinsky. She is survived by her husband of 19 years D.J. Spellman; three children Katelyn, Meghan and Colin Spellman; brother and fiancé Tom and (Fran) Belinsky, Wilkes Barre; nieces and nephews. She is predeceased by a sister, Rosemary Belinsky.

Jane was a member of the Holy Name of Mary Church and worked for many years at Donald Dean & Sons. Her three children, Katelyn, Meghan and Colin, were the center of her life; her life revolved around her children and their activities. She was their biggest fan and attended every game, recital and concert despite how badly she felt. A lifelong dog lover, she loved spending time with her golden retriever, Cody.

Jane taught us the true meaning of courage in her battle to live and always looked to make the best out of every day. She always believed that butterflies were gifts from God and an indication of good things to come. Jane will be sorely missed by all who knew her; she was a wonderful, considerate and beautiful woman.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at the Holy Name of Mary Church, with the Rev. Gerard F. Safko officiating. Visitation will be held Friday from 2 to 4 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. at the Daniel K. Regan Funeral Home, Montrose, Pa. In lieu of flowers, donations in Jane's name can be made to the Endless Mountains Medical Care Foundation, Burial Fund, 78 Grow Ave., Montrose, PA 18801.

## Chapter 3

### Revisits and Revisions

The hours immediately following my mom's death were a blur, not because I was blinded by grief but because there was so much that needed to be done. In this whirlwind, I volunteered to write her obituary. I was the only one capable of writing it, I thought. I was the editor of my high school's newspaper, an aspiring journalist. I knew how to write, and I knew my mom, so how hard could it be to write several paragraphs about her for the local newspaper?

I had been reading the obituaries for years and modeled hers after some of my favorites. I used words like "courageous" and "predeceased" and mentioned her employment history and devotion to her children. I discouraged readers from sending flowers and urged them to donate to the fundraiser for the new local hospital instead. I considered mentioning her addiction to Diet Coke and love of shopping but decided against it because I didn't want to deviate from the format put forth by the other obituaries. So I wrote what I thought was a concise yet moving tribute to my mom.

I was wrong.

I wrote a generic obituary—a formulaic, paint by numbers piece that could have been for anyone. Nowhere in the obit's 290 words did I mention what made my mom so remarkable; nowhere did I provide any clue as to who she was.

I should have mentioned the Diet Coke and the shopping; I should have mentioned a lot of other things, too.

Reading the obituary now, five years after I wrote it, I realize that I did the best I could. I was seventeen, a child, and attempting to process the impossible and incomprehensible: my mom was dead. By ignoring what made my mom's life special and her death tragic, I was able to disassociate myself from

her death; I could pretend that it had happened to someone else. In what would become typical of my behavior in the months immediately following, I only skimmed the surface of my grief and refused to delve into the more complex and painful aspects of mourning. To acknowledge how extraordinary she was would have been too painful and too sharp a reminder of what I had lost.

I wish I could issue a retraction for that original obituary and have the newspaper print a rewritten version of it. I wish I could print a thousand copies of this new obituary of it and stuff it in every mailbox in my hometown. Or better yet, I wish I could erect a billboard right on the border of Montrose so that everyone who enters the town would know that on May 11, 2010, someone very important and extraordinary died.

I realize that I'm being hyperbolic and ridiculous, and I don't really want to do any of those things. I do feel compelled to tell my mom's story, however. It's a cliché among writers that revisiting and writing about something helps one to understand it, and there is some truth to that statement. Since my mom's death, I've written compulsively, and it has helped me make sense of my feelings toward her death and make my way through the grieving process. But I know that no matter how many pages I devote to it, I will never fully understand or be at peace with my mom's death.

Similarly, I know I'll never write the perfect obituary for her. Yet, I need to try. Like someone looking at an old photo album, I need to revisit my mom's life and death so that I don't forget her.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Beginning**

My mom was born on October 12, 1960 to Al and Mary Belinsky. She was their second child. Their first, a daughter named Rosemary, was born on October 10, 1957 but died three days later from complications of spina bifida. My grandmother was too weak to attend her burial, and my grandfather held her tiny casket on his lap during the ride from the hospital to the cemetery. They treasured my mom; they had longed for another child, and she was their perfect, healthy daughter.

My grandparents were incredible people. They had grown up together in Berwick, a coal mining and industrial town in central Pennsylvania, during the Great Depression. My grandmother lived on LaSalle Street, the Italian neighborhood, and was the youngest of ten. My grandfather was from First Avenue, where the Ukrainians and other Eastern Europeans lived, and was the youngest of six. Neither learned English until elementary school.

My Aunt Theresa claims that when my grandmother saw my grandfather walk into a dance at the Maria Assunta Society, she turned to her friends and declared that he was the man that she was going to marry. After being introduced later that night, they started dating and wed five years later in February 1953.

Following his graduation from Bloomsburg State Teachers' College in May 1955, my grandfather took a job teaching junior history and coaching baseball at Montrose Area High School, some two hours northeast of Berwick. The move was supposed to be temporary—he and

my grandmother would return to Berwick in a couple of years. But they never did. Soon, my grandmother also got a job at the high school as the principal's secretary. My mom was born several years later, and eighteen months after her birth, my uncle followed. Montrose became their home.

Someone once called my grandparents the Jack and Jackie of Montrose, alluding to the fact that they were as admired and beloved as the Kennedys. They were local celebrities; everyone knew Mr. and Mrs. Belinsky. Montrose is a small town, and nearly every person who graduated from the high school between 1955 and 1995 had a class with him or received an early dismissal note from her. People still stop me in the grocery store or at the Montrose Inn to tell me stories of how my grandfather once paddled them in eighth grade or how my grandmother convinced the principal to be more lenient when doling out punishments. People have told me that it was my grandfather who prevented them from dropping out of high school and motivated them to go to college. Others have said that my grandmother was like a second mother to them; that they felt comfortable talking to her about anything.

My grandfather retired in 1990, and my grandmother followed in 1993, several months after my birth. They planned to spend their retirement with me and any other grandchildren that might come along. They had worked hard all their lives, and now it was time to relax.

My parents both worked full-time, but instead of sending me to a babysitter every day, I went to my grandparents' house across town. I was so spoiled. My grandmother gave me coffee every morning, despite my mom's protests—"She's too young for coffee! She's not even three." "You're never too young for coffee. Besides, it's mostly milk." My grandfather took me on adventures around town. Sometimes, we'd visit a farm and see horses and pigs. During the spring, we'd check the water level at Snake Creek and see if the conditions were favorable for

trout fishing. My favorite were trips to the beer distributor; I was amazed by the walk-in refrigerator. Once my mom was done working for the day, she'd come to their house for dinner, and on Saturday nights, we'd all dance around the living room to the *Pennsylvania Polka* on PBS.

Then my grandmother got sick. What began as a nagging sore throat turned into esophageal cancer. Soon, she and my grandfather were spending extended periods of time at Geisinger Health Center in Danville, and in early 1996, she underwent a total laryngectomy. This procedure removed her entire larynx and separated her airway from her mouth, nose and esophagus. Coupled with radiation and chemotherapy, the surgery successfully eradicated the cancer from her body but left her unable to breathe and eat normally. She also completely lost her ability to speak, and for the last five years of her life, relied on notes written in her looping cursive to communicate.

This wasn't supposed to happen. My grandmother wasn't supposed to get sick; she and my grandfather were supposed to grow old together and spend their retirement with their family, not in and out of the hospital.

But that was their reality. My grandmother was sick for six years, and during that time, my grandfather never left her side. "I've never seen a love as pure and unconditional as theirs," a nurse told my family when we were assembled in my grandmother's room one night near the end of her life.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Multiple Myeloma**

Multiple myeloma is a cancer of the plasma cells, which are a type of immune cells responsible for creating disease fighting anti-bodies. Located primarily in the bone marrow, plasma cells produce antibodies and protect the body from infection and disease. Sometimes, one of these cells can become malignant, causing uncontrolled growth and reproduction of plasma cells and leading to a diagnosis of multiple myeloma.

Between 20,000-25,000 people are diagnosed with multiple myeloma each year. It is more common in men than women and in African-Americans than European-Americans. It is treatable but incurable; with treatment, most people can expect to live for three to four years following their diagnosis.

My mom was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in June 2004. She was a forty-four year old white woman. She had no family history of the disease. In other words, her chances of developing multiple myeloma were exceedingly low, almost non-existent.

## Chapter 6

### The Prom

The last time I saw my mom alive was on Saturday, May 8, 2010. It was the night of the prom, and I was leaving to go to my date's house for pictures and dinner. Exhausted by the day's activities, she had retreated to the couch, where she had spent the majority of her time during the past couple of weeks. An old, green floral quilt was pulled up to her chin, and her maroon knit hat covered her fine, graying hair. "Go without me," she said from underneath the covers. "I look like crap, and I don't want to go out in public like this. I'll get a picture with you next year."

She died three days later.

I hadn't planned on going to the dance, even though I had bought a dress three months before. Finding the perfect dress had been the easy part, I realized; finding the perfect date proved to be considerably more difficult. I had hoped that the boy I had liked since elementary school would ask me. He didn't and asked a sophomore cheerleader instead. Feeling rejected and insecure, I busied myself with school and sports, attempting to forget about the prom altogether. "If someone asks me, I'll go, I told myself. "But I'm not going to be one of those girls who is obsessed with finding a date."

My mom, however, had other ideas and took a more active approach to finding me a date. For several weeks before the dance, the majority of our conversations revolved around potential candidates. She had a long list of suggestions, ranging from the boys I played pick-up basketball with to the sons of her friends. She even went so far as to ask her college roommate if her son was available that weekend (he wasn't). I ignored all of these suggestions and silently willed her to leave me alone. When she persisted, I tried my best to avoid her.



“You need to find a date,” she told me the Friday before the dance. “You can’t go by yourself. It’s not like homecoming or any other dance. It’s the *prom*.”

“I know, I know. I’ll figure something out,” I grumbled, even though I didn’t understand what the big deal was. I thought she was being ridiculous. Besides, I had more important things to worry about that day: I was taking the Advanced Placement European history exam that afternoon and needed to do well to earn college credit. I couldn’t focus on finding a date.

But I did find a date, or rather, a date found me. After we had finished the exam, my classmates and I milled around the library, waiting to be dismissed. Naturally, our conversation turned to the prom. Tom Jordan, one of my good friends, remarked that his date had bailed on him that morning, so he didn’t think he’d be going to the dance.

“You could go with Katelyn,” Emily, another good friend of mine, said. “She doesn’t have a date either.”

I was mortified. Poor Tom probably didn’t want to go with me, but now he had no choice but to ask me. I wasn’t too keen on being taken to the prom out of pity, either, but I knew that I couldn’t say no.

“Okay. Well, Katelyn...Since I don’t have a date, and you don’t have a date, do you want to go together?”

“Sure,” I heard myself say. “That’ll be nice.”

I was happy, but my mom was thrilled. She immediately made a hair appointment for me for the next morning at a fancy salon and spa in nearby Scranton, and we spent the rest of the night looking at pictures of updos and talking about nail polish colors and corsages. She accompanied me to the salon the next morning, sitting in a chair next to mine while I got my hair done and offering suggestions to the hairdresser.

“I wouldn’t pin it quite like that. She has a nasty cowlick, and you’ll never get it to lay flat if you try to pin it there,” she told the hairdresser. “Katelyn, you’re slouching. Stop slouching.”

She was in her element.

(As I write this, I realize that my memories have blurred. I can no longer remember what we talked about on our way to and from the salon or at lunch. I don't know if my mom wore her wig, or if she was confident enough to go without it and sport her short, curly, gray hair. These details themselves are insignificant but what they represent is huge: I am moving away from my mom. She is fading farther and farther into my past.)

Once we returned home, my mom helped me get dressed and attempted to coerce me into wearing make-up. When her best attempts at persuasion failed, she resorted to physical force, enlisting my sister to pin my hands behind my back while she applied my eyeliner and lipstick. I was not pleased—I hated wearing make-up—and I made sure she knew it. Our last conversation was an argument over eyeliner.

## Chapter 7

### Bonding

I was seventeen when my mom died, no longer a child but not quite an adult yet either. I'm lucky—she and I were close, and in the months leading up to her death, I had the chance to get to know her not just as my mother but as an adult and as a friend. Multiple myeloma and the grueling treatments intended to combat it had left her weak and thin. The muscles in her legs had atrophied, and she needed assistance just to stand up from the couch and used a walker to maneuver around our house. After she had finished going to the bathroom, she'd call me into the room, and I'd lift her off of the toilet. She also needed help getting dressed and styling what little hair she had left. It was an odd role reversal—the mother had become the child.

We spent a Friday night in late April 2010 in the emergency room because her nose wouldn't stop bleeding. I came home from school and found her on the couch, surrounded by blood-soaked tissues with cotton stuffed in her nostrils. "The damn thing just keeps going," she said in a frustrated attempt at humor. "I think I might need to go to the hospital." So, instead of going shopping like we had planned, we spent the next six hours in the cramped ER. I don't remember why her nose kept bleeding or what the doctor did to finally make it stop, but I do remember that she and I fought about my prom date (or lack thereof) and planned what colleges I would visit during the upcoming summer.

Hospitals were frequently the setting for this kind of mother/daughter bonding. Several weeks prior, my mom had been at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, where she had gone for the majority of her care. It was the weekend before Easter Sunday, the end of March. We hadn't planned on visiting her that weekend—she was supposed to come home within the next few days, and even if she didn't, we'd visit her the next weekend for Easter. But that Saturday, something went wrong. She was incoherent all day, and her doctors weren't sure if she'd make it through the night. My father called and made plans

with my uncle to get my sister, brother and I down to Baltimore the next morning, hoping that she could hold on long enough for us to have the chance to say good-bye.

The next morning things were back to “normal.” A steroid injection the night before had stabilized her condition, and by the time we arrived at the hospital in the early afternoon, she was sitting up in bed and eating a meatball hoagie. “I don’t know why you all rushed down,” she said to my siblings and me as we filed into her dim, hot room. “I wasn’t going to die or anything.”

This was the first time that I realized that my mom might die. Until that afternoon, I had believed that she would get better and that soon, she would be healthy again. I knew that the prognosis for those diagnosed with stage three multiple myeloma was not good (the median survival rate is 29 months), but my mom would outlive that statistic. She couldn’t possibly die.

Yet, there I was, facing the very real prospect of a life without her.

No one else seemed upset about this. My dad and uncle joked around, and Meghan and Colin were focused on going to the aquarium after lunch. Was I the only one who realized what was happening? “Stop worrying about stupid things!” I wanted to scream at them. “Mommy’s dying, and all you care about is whether or not we’re going to make it to the dolphin show.”

Soon, it was time for lunch. I didn’t want to go. Convinced that my mom’s death was imminent, I never wanted to leave her side again. So when my dad, my uncle and my siblings went downstairs to the cafeteria, I hung back.

“Katelyn, why don’t you get something to eat?” my mom asked. “I’m going to take a nap, and we can visit some more when you get back.”

“I’d...um... well... can I just stay up here with you?” I answered. I was crying now.

“Of course. Why don’t you come sit here?” she said, patting the small empty space next to her on the bed.

I crawled into bed with her for the first time in years. Even though I was seventeen and several inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than her, she held me and stroked my hair, quietly consoling me in

that way only mothers know how. However, she never told me that everything would be okay or that everything would work out. The events of the previous day had scared her, too.

(This hurts to think about).

## Chapter 8

### The Grieving Process

We are uncomfortable with grief. As Meghan O'Rourke details in *The Long Goodbye*, her beautiful memoir of her late mother, our society discourages public mourning and forces the bereaved to deal with their pain in private. "[It is] difficult to confront head-on, [and] when we do, it's usually in the form of self-help: we want to heal our grief," O'Rourke writes. Mourners no longer wear black for several months following a loved one's death, and those who cry in front of others are regarded as weak and overdramatic.

Grief is all around us, yet we rarely acknowledge it.

My mom died early in the morning, and by that afternoon, I was back at school, working on the newspaper. I didn't know what else to do. It's a small school, and everyone I passed in the hallway knew what had happened that morning, but no one mentioned it; they acted as if nothing had changed. When I went by the guidance office, a counselor stopped me and awkwardly asked if I wanted to talk. I didn't. This was the only time any of the guidance counselors attempted to talk to me about what had happened to my mom, and even if they had called me down to the guidance office and had been more persistent, I wouldn't have opened up to them.

In the eighteen months immediately following my mom's death, I did my best to ignore my grief. I was afraid that if I even paid the least bit of attention to it, I would unravel completely. My family didn't talk about it. My father claimed he had done his grieving as he watched my mom die and assumed that we had, too. (Looking back, he was probably also in denial). My grandfather was old-school; he had endured hardship and loss his entire life and believed that despite whatever terrible things life may throw at you, you have to continue living, no matter how badly you are hurting. At fourteen and nine, respectively,

Meghan and Colin followed their examples, and I felt compelled to do the same. “You’re handling this so well,” people said. “You’re all so strong.”

I actively avoided books or articles on grieving until my freshman year of college. By ignoring my grief, I could pretend that I was fine, that my mom wasn’t dead. Then the senior I had a crush on told me that it takes people two years to stop grieving, two years to “get over” losing someone. The implication was that after two years of mourning, I should be ready to move on. The second anniversary of my mom’s death had already passed, and it was clear that I wasn’t “over it.” But I didn’t want to be over it. Because to stop grieving would mean that I had stopped missing her, that I had stopped loving her.

Not content with his explanation of the grieving process, I began to do my own research. Almost immediately, I found the Küber-Ross Model, better known as the five stages of grief. Developed in the late 1960s by Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Küber-Ross, it is a series of emotional stages one experiences when faced with impending death or the death of someone. The stages are not meant to be a complete list of all of the possible emotions that can be felt during the grieving process, and they can occur in any order, with some overlapping one another and some occurring more than once. Its validity has yet to be consistently supported by the numerous studies that have tested it. However, the model has been accepted by the general public and is often utilized by a variety of people, ranging from distraught and concerned friends to highly-trained school counselors. The five steps are as follows:

1) Denial: The reality of loss is hard to accept, so the individual chooses to ignore it.

*That’s impossible—my mom cannot be dead. This is just an elaborate joke. Soon, my dad will start laughing instead of crying, and my mom will wake-up. She isn’t dead. She cannot be dead.*

*(May 11, 2010)*

2) Anger: The individual seeks an outlet for her pain through hostility and blame.

*Why would a supposedly loving, benevolent God take my mom from me when I need her most? Why didn't my dad do more to save her? He didn't do enough. He was tired of having to take care of his sick wife. He didn't want to save her. There must have been more that could have been done; more treatments or medicines that her doctors didn't try. This isn't fair. She didn't deserve this. I don't deserve this.*  
*(May 11, 2010-present)*

3) Bargaining: The individual thinks she can somehow undo the cause of her grief.

*I will do anything to have my mom back. I will give up everything I have just to spend another day or even another hour with her. I will trade my own health for hers. I'll go to Mass every Sunday, and I'll never swear again.*  
*(May 11, 2010-December 2011)*

4) Depression: The individual begins to understand the certainty of death, and the idea of living becomes pointless.

*I will never again speak to my mom or hear her voice. Our relationship has ended. She is gone, and I am here. How will I survive the rest of my life without her?*  
*(May 11, 2010-present)*

5) Acceptance: The individual comes to terms with her loss.  
*(to be determined)*

I find comfort in the tidy steps of the Kübler-Ross model. I know that it is flawed. Just based on my own limited experience, I know that grief isn't neatly compartmentalized into five stages; it's messy, things overlap, and you pass through some stages more than once and skip others altogether. I know that there are better explanations of the grieving process, but I like this one. It's helped me put words to what I've felt; it's made me realize that I'm not abnormal.



## Chapter 9

### New Place, New Identity

I grew up in Montrose, Pennsylvania, a one stoplight town of 1500 people located in the state's northeast corner. My mom grew up in Montrose, too, and her parents worked at the local high school for almost forty years.

When my mom was first diagnosed, it seemed like the entire town knew. Friends and strangers brought meals to our house almost every night and offered to babysit my siblings and me. People approached us after Mass to ask how my mom was doing and to let us know they were keeping her in their prayers. After she died, the meals kept coming, but people treated us differently. They regarded us with pity and fear, as if having a dead mom was contagious. I became "the girl whose mom died;" her death was my defining characteristic. And what's worse is that because everyone seemed to know about it, there was no way I could pretend that my life was normal, that my mom was alive.

At Penn State, very few people know about my mom. Some of my best friends have no idea that my mom has been dead for five years. Initially, I did not consciously keep it a secret; it just never came up in conversation. Now, however, I go to great lengths to ensure that no one learns the truth. I've created a whole different background for myself. I've told people that my mom does medical research at the University of Maryland and specializes in hematology and oncology. In reality, she was treated at Maryland for many years and saw doctors based in the hematology and oncology department. I've said that she is a second grade teacher whose students struggle to understand basic math and the concept of time (that's what my step-mom does). I've fabricated stories about her crying when I went off to college for the first time or calling me and encouraging me to try out Greek life. When telling stories about my

family, I depict my father, sister, brother and I as these rambunctious, ridiculous goons whose mishaps are comical and easily remedied. I don't mention my mom and hope that people don't notice her absence.

"Your poor mother," one of my friends commented after hearing a recent story that involved my brother shaving off his eyebrows and my father dying his beard. "You people must drive her crazy. What's she like anyway?"

"Um, she's pretty quiet. Not really amused with our antics. She gets exasperated with us quickly," I sputtered. "She's pretty great though."

"Cool. I can't wait to meet all of them when they visit next."

I have lied to people I care about and discouraged my family from visiting in order to avoid awkward questions. It's wrong and weird, and I wish I didn't do it, but I can't stop myself. For the first time since my mom's death, I am in control of how people see me. Instead of being Katelyn Spellman, the girl without a mom, I can just be Katelyn Spellman. I can pretend that my mom calls me to tell me that I'm spending too much money on clothes or at the bars downtown; I can pretend that my mom sends me care packages during finals week; I can pretend that I'm a normal college student.

## Chapter 10

### Déjà Vu

Kristin was the mother of my brother's best friend. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer when they were five, just beginning kindergarten. By the time they were twelve and finishing sixth grade, it was clear that her disease could not be stopped; it had metastasized to her vital organs and spine. Her deterioration was eerily reminiscent of my mom's—she had lost the ability to stand up on her own and could only walk several feet before becoming winded and exhausted. Soon, she was confined to her rambling farmhouse, only leaving for trips to the doctor's office. Dropping off her son after a day of golf on a sunny Saturday in July marked the first time I had seen her since his and my brother's sixth-grade graduation in June. She looked thinner than she had a month before, but her face was puffy and swollen, a side-effect caused by one of her many medications. Her eyes appeared murky and distant and unable to focus. I realized that she was dying.

Always the gracious hostess, she invited me in for coffee while Isaac (her son) and Colin worked on their chipping and putting in the yard.

I had babysat Isaac while I was in high school and had spent many Friday and Saturday nights at their house. It's the quintessential old farmhouse—sloping wood floors, a blazing woodstove and a big, sunlit kitchen. My favorite space is the cozy living room. Bookshelves filled with poetry anthologies, organic farming how-to's and complex French literature line three walls of the room and Kristen's own dissertation on the role of gender in James Joyce was visible from where I sat on the couch. Tangible proof of her life's work, it represented just one of many award-winning articles she had published. Her talents had taken her to England and Italy for conferences and gained her tenure at a small liberal arts college not far from Montrose.

Our conversation started out typically, and we made small talk about my family's new puppy, her upcoming trip to Ireland for a conference on Joyce and the boys' impending transition from the elementary school to the high school. Soon, however, our conversation had shifted to her illness. "I don't know how much more I can take," she said when talking about her grueling chemotherapy treatments. "I've done everything right, and yet nothing seems to work." She asked me pointed questions about my mom's death—what was it like at the end? At what point did we realize that she was going to die? Or were we shocked by her death? When Colin and Isaac came inside for something to drink, they found us facing one another on the couch, crying uncontrollably. We quickly regained control of our emotions and promised to finish the conversation the next time we saw one another. We never got the chance; she died two weeks later.

(I saw my mom on that couch that afternoon. I saw another woman who would die too young; another mother robbed of the chance to see her son grow-up. I wanted to console her, to tell her that she would be fine, but I couldn't. I couldn't do anything. Once again, I was helpless.)

Kristin's funeral was difficult. It was held at the same funeral home as my mom's and just stepping inside the building hurled me back to May 2010. I was not only sad because my friend had died, but I was also mourning for my mom all over again. At the dinner following the services, Kristin's mother-in-law approached me. She told me about how fond both Kristin and her son were of me; how they had told her what a great job I was doing with my younger sister and brother. She told me how her own mother had died when she was eleven. It wasn't easy, she said, but you do survive this; it is possible to have good, fulfilling life despite your loss.

I had only spoken to her several times before that conversation, nothing more than exchanging pleasantries. Yet, she knew exactly what I needed to hear. We were both members of the same exclusive, terrible club, and our losses provided us with an instantaneous bond.

## Chapter 11

### Dialysis

Kidney failure, the inability of the kidneys to properly expel waste from the body, is a relatively common complication of multiple myeloma; between twenty and forty percent of all myeloma patients develop kidney failure during the course of their disease. Most commonly, kidney failure in myeloma patients is caused by an excess of calcium or protein in the blood.

An elevated calcium level, called hypercalcemia, is caused when a patient's damaged bone dissolves and is released into the bloodstream. (Bone damage is another common complication of multiple myeloma). This excess calcium taxes the kidneys, causing them to overwork when filtering blood and leaving them permanently damaged.

Multiple myeloma can also cause light chain deposition disease. Light chains are small protein segments that make up antibodies. Multiple myeloma causes uncontrolled reproduction of antibodies, which means it also causes uncontrolled reproduction of light chains. These excess light chains circulate in the blood and are then deposited in various organs, always the kidneys and sometimes others. These deposits incapacitate the kidneys, causing swelling, decreased function and permanent damage.

Kidney failure is irreversible but can be managed. Dialysis, a procedure that helps filter the patient's blood, is almost always used. The patient is intravenously connected to a dialyzer, which contains two fluid compartments, with blood flowing through one compartment, and a solution called dialysate flowing through the other in the opposite direction. As the two liquids flow in opposite directions, a semi-permeable membrane allows the excess water and solutes to diffuse out of the blood and into the dialysate. The purified, filtered blood then reenters the body.

Dialysis requires a strict schedule—patients are typically dialyzed for three to five hours, three times a week.

My mom was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in June 2004 and began dialysis almost immediately as her kidneys were barely functioning, leaving her body swollen and full of waste.

She attended dialysis every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, including holidays and vacations, for four hours at a hospital almost an hour away from our house. She was the youngest person in her dialysis unit, and while her fellow patients napped or watched television, she was productive—making lists, returning phone calls and buying birthday gifts online. She befriended her nurses, giving them birthday cards, learning the names of their spouses and children and offering them book, movie and television recommendations. After she died, they came to her viewing and offered their condolences. “I make it a point to never go to these things. They’re too sad,” Big Amy, one of her nurses, told me in the receiving line. “But I had to come today. Your mom is so special.”

## Chapter 12

### Mother's Day

I'm still mourning the loss of my mom, but in the five years since her death, this pain has changed. It is no longer a sharp, stabbing pain that manifested itself in anger and lashing out. Instead, it has transformed into a quiet ache that I always carry with me. It is not readily visible but exists just below the surface, making itself known at unexpected times.

For the first couple of years after my mom's death, I felt as if Mother's Day was mocking me, like it was a personal affront staged by the rest of the world to remind me that everyone else has a mom and is happy. It was especially difficult because the anniversary of her death falls on or near the holiday. Advertisements reminding me to "Call Mom" or to "treat" her on her special day taunted me. Friends' posts on social media declaring their love for their moms and her superiority over every other mom highlighted what I've lost.

However, I've realized that even though I'll never be able to completely ignore the holiday (its omnipresence and the commercialization of love make that impossible), I don't have to spend the day focusing on what I no longer have. I can celebrate my mom's life despite her absence. I plant purple and pink flowers at her grave; I try not to criticize or fight with my siblings; I wear mascara, eyeliner and lipstick instead of my usual Cherry Chapstick; I eat chocolate marshmallow ice cream; I listen to the "70s on 7" station on SiriusXM Satellite Radio. I know that these small gestures will not bring my mom back or physically connect us in any way, but I feel closer to her all the same.

It's strange what we find comforting.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Red Pea Coat**

I still wear my mom's red pea coat. Its wool has started to pill and there are several stains on it, including something that looks like dried Dentene Ice chewing gum on the lower right sleeve. It doesn't fit me quite right; the sleeves hit just above my wrist bone and the wool struggles to fit across my broad shoulders. I have a closet full of newer coats that fit me perfectly, but I prefer this one.



## Chapter 14

### Letters

I crave more information about my mom. I want to hear stories about her life that show the sides of her that I didn't know. My experience with her was so limited—I only knew her as “Mommy.” With every new thing I learn about her, I feel, for a fleeting instant, like she is alive again. I can pretend that she is telling me these stories, not her friends or relatives.

When I graduated from high school, Cathy, my mom's best childhood friend gave me a box of letters that my mom had sent her during their college days. “We always talked about digging these out and rereading them,” the accompanying card read. “Since your mom isn't here to give you advice or tell you stories, I hope you can gain some wisdom and have some laughs from these.”

The letters are great. Written on kitschy 1970s stationery, they have given me the opportunity to get to know my mom before she was my mom. “I made it through the weekend without getting arrested. What an accomplishment!” reads one from the spring of 1979. (How I wish I could hear the story behind that!) “Summer goals: 1. Get a great tan. 2. Stop smoking. 3. Start running. I look like a whale,” says another.

I've learned about her wild nights at the soccer house, her relationship with Bill, the senior basketball star, and her adventures with her cousins in Miami. I'm sure she never thought that her daughter would be reading these letters someday, and if she were still alive, I don't think I would have ever heard these stories. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she would have told me about the time a group of guys cheered for her after she fell while walking back from a frat after I disclosed her that I had done something similar during my sophomore year. We could have bonded over these memories and shared experiences.

While reading these letters, there are times when her voice rings startlingly clear from the tattered paper, and it seems like she is sitting right beside me, instead of in some far-off, unreachable land. Woven throughout these tales of drunken debauchery are her hopes, dreams and fears, which are not unlike my own. She also worried that she wouldn't be successful; that she'd never figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life; that she'd never find love. At these points, I feel like I'm reading entries from my own journals. Her words come from within my own mind, our voices mingling together, forming that sweet, golden, melodious babble that late night chat sessions are made of.

## Chapter 15

### Summerhouse

It was a busy night at Summerhouse Grill. It was the night before July 4, Montrose's busiest, most bustling day of the year, and the restaurant was packed with locals and their guests and former residents back in town for the holiday weekend. The three middle-aged women were my last table of the night. Tucked into a quiet corner on the second floor, they took their time ordering and didn't mind the long wait for their food. It was clear that they were old friends who hadn't seen each other in years and relished the opportunity to catch up.

Finally, their food was ready. As I brought them their entrees (grilled trout, woodfire-roasted chicken and a spinach salad, dressing on the side), I overheard their conversation.

"The reunion will be fun, but I can't believe Janie won't be there," the blonde told her friends.

They nodded in agreement. "It's just so sad," the brunette said while salting her fish. "If it happened to her, it could happen to anyone, I guess."

The weight of the ceramic salad dishes in my hands tripled, and they felt like they were going to tumble toward the floor. I set them down on a neighboring table and tried to regain my composure. They were talking about my mother. I needed to get back downstairs—I was afraid that they would recognize me as her daughter and would offer their condolences while regarding me with that dreaded and all too familiar look of pity. But I couldn't tear myself away; I needed to hear what they said next. With my back to them, I busied myself clearing tables near theirs, careful not to make too much noise so I could follow their conversation. They quickly moved on to who else would be at their thirty-fifth reunion the next day, giggling like high school students whenever Aymon DeMauro's name was mentioned and forgetting about their dead classmate.

This is what my mother has been reduced to, I thought to myself later as I counted my tips. A few sad sentences and looks over dinner, quickly forgotten when thoughts of her became too depressing or reminded them of their own mortality. These women had no idea who I was, no idea that the passing sadness they felt regarding my mother's death colors everything I think, say or do.

## Chapter 16

### The Beatles

In seventh grade, I “discovered” the Beatles. My dad had borrowed my (then) state-of-the-art iPod Nano to use on a business trip to San Francisco, and when he got home and returned it to me, he casually mentioned that he had added some new music. Naturally, I was excited, and I immediately donned my headphones and began to scroll through my “Recently Added” playlist. However, instead of finding new music stylings from Justin Timberlake or Ashlee Simpson, I was met with strange titles like “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” “Maxwell’s Silver Hammer” and “Yellow Submarine.” Worse yet, it seemed that he had deleted my music to make room for his.

I wasted no time and called my dad at work. He shamelessly admitted to replacing Hilary Duff and N\*SYNC with this Beatles crap.

“Just listen to it for now, and I’ll try to fix it as soon as I can,” he told me, the patronizing tone of his voice making it clear that he had more important things to attend to and that I was stuck with the iPod full of oldies forever. “Who knows? You might even enjoy it.”

“Maybe,” I said dejectedly. “Talk to you later.”

I could have easily plugged my iPod into the computer, wiping it clean of my dad’s music and reloading mine. However, something prevented me from doing so. Like most teenagers, I was searching for my “thing,” something to make me stand out from the crowd. I desperately wanted to be different than my peers and needed something to set me apart. For some reason, I felt that the Beatles provided me with an opportunity to do just that. None of my friends listened to them; some hadn’t even heard of them. If I became a Beatles fan, I would be unique and memorable.

The weeks wore on and my playlists remained “polluted” with the Beatles, and I found myself listening to them more and more, and —oddly enough— I really liked what I heard. Their music was unlike anything I had ever heard before. A raw and palpable energy radiated from their music. They were happy but not in that clean, cheesy auto-tuned way so many current pop artists were. Their music was simple yet striking. After listening to the Beatles, I realized that I didn’t like the music that I had been listening to previously and wondered why I had forced myself to listen to it for so long. It truly was an epiphany.

As I learned more Beatles’ songs, I wanted to learn more about the band and its members.

Searching the Internet late into the night, I read anything I could find about them. I scoured the shelves of my high school and local libraries searching for books that had anything to do with the Beatles; whether it was a simplistic children’s book that gave a very basic history of the band or a lengthy biography of John Lennon, I checked it out and read it at a feverish pace, returning it a few days later eager for another one. I spent countless hours on YouTube clicking through page after page for video clips of the band. I saw them perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and watched their press conferences with the American press. With every new fact I learned, I felt my affection for this group of guys from post-World War II Liverpool swell.

Despite the fact that their music was over 40 years old, I felt as though I had “discovered” the Beatles, and it was my duty to inform everyone in my life of this wonderful occurrence. I became a Beatles evangelist. My family, especially my younger sister and brother, were the recipients of this knowledge and became the most Beatles knowledgeable not-Beatles fans. I showered them with totally useless Beatles trivia— like the fact that contrary to popular belief,

Paul was not the only left-handed member of the group; Ringo was as well, or that “Dear Prudence” was written about Mia Farrow’s sister whom they had met on a retreat to India. I felt that it was imperative for them to hear the Beatles’ because it was so much better and different than anything they’d heard before, and often forced them to listen. Soon I was banned from playing music in the car.

“No one needs to listen to the Beatles that much,” my mom said, and if I wanted to listen to them in my house, I had to use headphones. No exceptions.

Even with these limitations, I still found ways to indoctrinate my family and friends; no one was safe from my Beatles’ rampage. Eventually, my family gave up trying to subdue my love for the Beatles. My mom began to search for any Beatles related paraphernalia to get me for my birthday, Christmas and any other event. Over the years, she helped me to accrue a collection that includes posters, nesting dolls, a lunch box, key chains, Beatleoppoly, Trivial Pursuit: Beatles Edition, a mug, a pint glass, books, numerous pieces of apparel and all of their albums in both CD and vinyl form.

For my fifteenth birthday in March 2008, my mom even surprised me with tickets to see Rain: The Beatles Experience. Billed as the top Beatles tribute band in America, Rain promised a show full of accurately recreated Beatles’ favorites, portraying the band as they had been when they first landed in America in 1964 up until their acrimonious break-up in 1970. On the appointed Friday night, my parents and I sat front row center at the FM Kirby Center, ready to be transported back in time. Soon, the band took to the stage, sporting the black suits, pointy-toed boots and mop-top haircuts the Beatles had worn when they were introduced to the American public on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. They launched into their first set, a song for song recreation of the Beatles first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on February 9, 1964; even the stage decoration were identical to those on Sullivan’s show. During the next two hours, Rain portrayed every phase of the Beatles’ storied career, changing their costumes and hairstyles as the band evolved. They even played songs the band itself had never played live (they stopped touring in 1966).

Rain wasn’t that bad, but it was painfully obvious that they were not the real Beatles: the overweight, sweaty man whose balding head was adorned with a mop top wig did not resemble John Lennon in the slightest, and his counterpart on the other side of the mic lacked Paul McCartney’s signature boyish enthusiasm and charm. The man tasked with portraying George Harrison had bad knees

and struggled to keep up with the younger McCartney's dancing, and the drummer failed to mimic Ringo Starr's goofy yet proficient drumming movements, instead sitting stiffly behind his drum set.

But that didn't matter—I was enthralled, overjoyed to finally have the opportunity to see my favorite band perform live (well, sort of). Realizing how happy that concert had made me, my mom found other tribute concerts and Beatle-related shows for us to attend. In August 2008, we went to Abbey Road on the River, a Beatles fan festival that featured numerous tribute performances during its twelve-hour duration. While vacationing in Disney World in November of that year, she found the British Invasion, a tribute band that played some of the most popular music in history from the confines of a small gazebo in Epcot's United Kingdom section. She even tried to get tickets to see Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr perform together at Radio City Music Hall in April 2009. However, all but the \$1000-plus tickets were sold in a matter of seconds (but she did consider buying these outrageously expensive seats), so we didn't go.

I took all of this for granted. I didn't realize or understand that my mom spent hours searching for Beatles-related gifts not because she didn't know what else to get me for my birthday or Christmas but because she wanted me to be happy. She didn't particularly like the Beatles, so I can't imagine that she liked going to tribute band concerts that much either. But she did. Who would do that for me today?



## Chapter 17

### Nostalgia

I sometimes find myself wishing I had lived during a different time, convincing myself that if I had been born in 1953 instead of 1993, everything would be so much better. I could have seen the Beatles (and so many other bands) in concert; I could have even met them. My likes and hobbies differ from so many of my peers—I prefer record players to iPods, letter writing to email and bell bottoms to skinny jeans—but align perfectly with 1960s/70s fads. When visiting friends,

I spend more time in the kitchen talking to their mom about the Carole King concert she attended the previous month than actually hanging out with my friend. I feel as if I do not belong in the twenty-first century. I long to turn back time and experience life in the 1960s.

The above is an example of historical nostalgia. Nostalgia is derived from the Ancient Greek words *nostos*, meaning return home and *algos*, meaning pain, grief and distress. It first appears in medical literature in the eighteenth century and was defined as a pathological homesickness that turned those afflicted with it indifferent to their surroundings and aching for the past. The definition has evolved over time and is now split into two distinct categories: historical and personal nostalgia. Historical nostalgia is defined by psychologists as a yearning for a time in the past one hasn't experienced; it is a defense mechanism that allows someone to lose themselves and block out the bad.

“Nostalgia is denial; denial of the painful present,” a smug pedantic named Paul tells Gil, the main character in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*. “[It is] the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in. It's a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present.”

Personal nostalgia, on the other hand, occurs when one misses or feels emotions toward the past she herself has lived through.

I experience personal nostalgia far more frequently than I experience historical nostalgia.

Some days, it threatens to crush me.

## Chapter 18

### Untitled

On Saturday, April 12, 2014, I was in Princeton, New Jersey for the Knecht Cup Regatta. I was scheduled to race at 2:47, so my boatmates and I spent the morning prepping our boat—we made sure the riggers were tightened and our seats were well-oiled. About an hour before we were set to launch, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. It was my dad.

“So I’m going to ask Aileen to marry me. I’m on my way to Salt Springs now to meet her. I had your sister and brother set-up a picnic, and we’re going to finish our run there. That’s when I’m going to propose,” he explained quickly.

“Oh. Okay,” I stuttered.

“Well, I gotta go. Wish me luck!”

He hung up before I had a chance to respond.

A week ago, he had told me that he thought they were going to break-up. Now, they were going to get married.

However, I couldn’t dwell on his news now. I had to focus on the race; it was important and would help determine our seed for the upcoming Dad Vail Regatta. Doing well was essential. So, I ignored the weight in my gut and got ready to row.

The race did not go well. A poor stroke during our starting sequence had thrown us off for the rest of the race, and we weren’t able to catch-up to the other crews. We came in last. After carrying our boat back to the trailer and strapping it down, I grabbed my phone from my backpack. “One new message from Daddy,” the screen glowed. I entered my passcode. “AILEEN SAID YES!!!” his message blared.

I quickly excused myself from our team meeting and made my way to a shady spot several hundred yards away. “Help!” was playing in a nearby car, and the air smelled faintly of the acidic odor from the port-o-potties next to the race course. Making sure my teammates couldn’t see me, I sat down in the soft grass and started to cry.

## Chapter 19

### Shopping

My family is Catholic, and growing up, we attended Mass every Sunday at Holy Name of Mary Roman Catholic Church several blocks from our house. Catholic Mass is highly ritualistic: sit-down, stand-up, say the creed, confess your sins, put money in the collection, receive Communion, sing a hymn, thanks for coming, we'll see you next week.

But the real Sunday ritual in our house occurred hours after communion and twenty- some miles away from the church. On our way home from Mass, my mom would pick up a copy of the Press & Sun Bulletin, the Binghamton, NY newspaper, at the gas station and scour its advertisements, searching for the best deals. She'd make a list of all the stores and their sales, carefully formulating a plan of attack. Seated around our dining room table, surrounded by the paper and armed with scissors, she'd ask my sister and me for input and give us sections of the paper to make sure she didn't miss something. Finally, when she was sure that every ad had been read and every coupon clipped, we'd head to the Oakdale Mall.

My mom was a great shopper. It was a skill she had learned from her mother and had perfected during their weekly shopping trips. "The two of them deserve a memorial at Boscov's for all the time and money they spent there," a friend of my mom's told me once. Before my grandmother died in 2001, she'd accompany us on our Sunday excursions. When she was with us, you got the sense that you were in the presence of a real legend. Every clerk knew her name, and she always had some sort of exclusive coupon that was reserved for the store's best and most loyal customers.

My grandmother had cancer, too. Even at her sickest, she was still the best-dressed person I knew. When she died, she not only left behind beloved family and friends but also four closets full of clothes and over a hundred pairs of shoes.

My mom gallantly continued my grandmother's legacy. No matter how sick she was or how badly she felt, she dressed well and made sure her three children looked nice, too. Once, right after Christmas 2009, she vomited in the bathroom of the Gap. Rather than go home, she simply rinsed out her mouth and kept shopping. We still had a lot of shopping left to do, she reasoned, and it'd be stupid to miss out on all of the good sales just because she got sick.

That sort of behavior was typical of my mom. Oftentimes, people had no idea that she was battling a terminal disease. She didn't look or act like someone whose life had a very clear expiration date. From the time she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in June 2004 to the time she died on May 11, 2010, she did her best to continue on with business as usual. We went to Disney World twice and to our condo in North Carolina every summer. She went to dance recitals, band concerts and softball games. (Two weeks before she died, we spent the weekend in Ithaca, NY at an AAU basketball tournament that my sister and I were playing in. My mom watched every game courtside from her wheelchair. She even heckled the referees).

And we went shopping every Sunday. Cancer and the grueling treatments used to fight it had caused my mom to drop several dress sizes, which meant she needed a new wardrobe. Her underwear and bras were especially bad—her white satin “granny panties” hung off of her skinny frame, and her bras provided no support or structure. “I’m happy to lose the weight, but I just wish there was an easier way,” she said in the dressing room at Macy’s. “Though it’s nice to be skinny again.”

At first, she was hesitant to buy anything nice or expensive because she was convinced that she'd soon regain the weight and not be able to wear it. (At least that's what she told us, but I think she was worried that she'd die before she got to wear anything more than once). However, she soon overcame these misgivings and bought some beautiful clothes that would have made my grandmother proud. She even bought running clothes and sneakers, determined to keep the weight off. Shopping with her was a fun adventure and a bonding experience.

I've inherited my mom and grandmother's love of shopping. I love clothes, shoes, purses and a great deal. However, shopping is a bittersweet experience now. I can't go to the local mall without remembering the hours we spent there. I struggle to buy things without my mom's input—does this shirt match this skirt? Do I need a necklace with this dress or is it ornate enough to go without? Last summer, I paid fifty-seven cents for a wool plaid skirt from the Gap. It had originally cost \$60; I was ecstatic. But I had no one to share it with.

## Chapter 20

### Unmoored

Sometimes it happens like this: I'm wandering the aisles of Ulta, a makeup superstore, looking for new eyeshadow and eyeliner. I feel like a tourist in a foreign country; I don't speak the language of makeup and womanhood. Surrounded by hundreds of options, I have no idea which one best compliments my coloring. I'm too shy and too proud to ask an associate for assistance, so I just buy the same eyeshadow my mom first bought for me when I was thirteen.

Sometimes it happens like this: I return to my apartment after class, and my roommate is on the phone. She's talking to her mom. They're on the phone for several hours, talking about nothing in particular and just enjoying each other's company. I call my dad. He tells me about the five-mile run he did that morning and chastises me for spending too much money. We're on the phone for less than five minutes.

And sometimes it happens like this: I flop on my bed, unmoored and melancholy. I'm not sure why I'm upset—it is a myriad of things, not one particular incident—and I don't know how to feel better.

Since my mom's death, there have been countless times when I've longed for her. It could be a something as trivial as figuring out what to bring to a friend's birthday party or something deeper, like deciding when it is time to give up on a relationship, and I need her guidance. I'm an anxious person by nature, and in these moments, only my mom's calm reassurance that I am okay, that everything is okay, can satiate me.

In these instances, I want to pick up the phone and call her, but I know that I can't. I know that I must figure it out on my own.



## Chapter 21

### Other Mothers

My dad got remarried on August 8, 2014. That summer was spent preparing for his upcoming wedding and life with his new wife and her children. We cleaned out our house, making room for them and took “family” pictures that would be displayed at their wedding reception and later on, hung in our dining room. It was a difficult summer. It was hard not to feel like my dad had forgotten my mom in his rush down the aisle. He said that he had finally found true love and showered his fiancée with romantic gifts, like jewelry from Tiffany & Co. and roses. I had already lost my mom, and now it felt as if I was losing my dad, too.

I felt angry and alone. I wished that my parents were divorced and that my mom was still alive so I could complain to her.

“He’s making us take dance lessons because we’re all doing a ‘family’ dance at the reception,” I’d tell her. “It’s like he thinks we’re the Brady Bunch or something like that.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she’d answer, looking up from her book. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

But that wasn’t the case, and I was forced to keep my frustrations to myself.

I ran into Maureen Jordan at the grocery store one afternoon in early May. I was getting food for dinner before I had to pick up my brother from school when I saw her in the produce section. Her sons are two of my best friends, and I’m always at their house for solstice parties and bonfires. She asked me how school was going, and if I had heard about Christopher’s latest mishap at West Point. Several minutes into our conversation, I awkwardly blurted out that my dad was getting remarried. “Oh, sweetie,” Mrs. Jordan said

Soon, she was calling me once or twice a week just to check in and make sure I was okay. If things got to be too much at my house, I'd have dinner with her family. If I needed to complain about my dad, she'd listen and offer advice. When I needed to pick out a dress for the wedding, I asked her for help. It was the logical choice. She is a mother who only has sons, and I am a daughter who needs a mother.

The psychologist Walter Toman says the best replacement for a loved one is someone who's as similar to the lost person as possible.

I don't think my mom and Mrs. Jordan ever met, and if they did, it was only in passing, but I like to think that they would have been friends. They're very similar. They both have a remarkable unconditional love for their families and would do anything for their children. Both are kind and tender but tough and no nonsense when they need to be. They share an affinity for seventies music and dancing with their girlfriends (how I wish I could have known them they were in college). And they're both hopelessly addicted to Diet Coke.

I love Mrs. Jordan, and she loves me. I think we've told each other that once, maybe twice. But it's in her doting, her insistence that I call when I get home.

No one will ever replace my mom, but Mrs. Jordan helps fill the void she left behind.

There's also Sandy Kaub. She provides me with a connection to my past. She knew my mom and was good friends with my grandmother. I didn't realize that taking her journalism class during my freshman year of high school would be one of the best decisions I ever made. I never thought I'd count her as one of my closest friends or that she'd be the person I'd run to immediately after my mom died. On that Tuesday afternoon, I met her in the computer lab at the high school, making something up about needing to finish an article before the deadline at the end of the week. In reality, I needed to see her. I needed a hug. She was also the first person I called after my grandfather died. Even though she was a hundred miles away, just talking to her made me feel better. She taught me how to write and encouraged me to pursue English at Penn State. She sends me a card on my birthday and takes me shopping whenever I'm home.

## Chapter 22

### Dreams

I stopped dreaming after my mom died. Sleep was black, blank and heavy. I did not feel rested when I woke up. But sleep did provide a respite— for several hours, I could escape my unfathomable reality. When I woke up, I'd forget that she had died, but after a few seconds, I'd remember.

I'm not sure when I started dreaming again. I dream about my mom often. In these dreams, she is alive, but they are haunted by a sense of impending doom—I know that she is destined to die, and there is nothing I can do to prevent it.

Sometimes, I wish I could have the blank sleep again. It was easier.

## Chapter 23

### The Cure

The wall above my desk is cluttered with pictures and mementos—a brightly-colored painting of a gorilla my brother made in fifth grade, a limited edition Beatles poster released with the *White Album* and bow numbers from the Head of the Charles and Dad Vail regattas. Barely noticeable among these larger items is a tiny slip of paper from a fortune cookie. It reads: “The cure for grief is motion.” I can’t remember when I got that fortune or which Chinese restaurant it came from, but I’ve carried it with me since my sophomore year of college, hanging it above my desk every year. It’s become my mantra: The cure for grief is motion. If I keep moving, it can’t catch me. If I stay busy, it won’t bother me. If I’m exhausted, I won’t have the energy to be sad.

Although I was only seventeen, I felt much older following my mom’s death. My life had changed immeasurably. I assumed many of her responsibilities and was not only my sibling’s older sister but also their maternal figure. I was responsible for waking them up in the morning, feeding them breakfast and dropping them off at school. I drove them to soccer practice and piano lessons and made sure there was dinner on the table every night. I even had a Volvo SUV that solidified my status as a “soccer mom.” I came to relish my new role. It gave me a sense of purpose and kept me busy, allowing me to ignore my own grief and sadness. As a friend of mine recently said, I was on autopilot and just doing what I needed to do in order to survive.

*The cure for grief is motion.*

It wasn’t that my father wasn’t neglectful or paralyzed by his own grief, but rather, he was consumed by his career. As an executive at HarperCollins Publishers, he has a demanding job that requires him to frequently travel to their offices in New York, Nashville and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

During my mom's illness, he had devoted himself to taking care of her; he accompanied her to every appointment and remained in Baltimore during her extended hospital stays at the University of Maryland. He still worked, but his professional ambitions and responsibilities were not his priority. Following her death, he was able to focus on his career again and quickly gained a promotion that had been eluding him for several years.

*The cure for grief is motion.*

But I wasn't okay, not really. The weight of my mom's death coupled with the stress of everyday life had left me burned out, angry and sad. I wasn't sleeping very much, and when I did manage to doze off for a few hours, I was often plagued by nightmares. I was mentally tired as well and had trouble remembering words and names. There were days when I struggled to get out of bed in the morning. I'd spend the school day listlessly going through the motions. A star athlete, my performance on the soccer field and basketball court suffered as I lost my passion and desire to win. I coasted in school, doing the minimum amount of work to get by. I was still very much grieving my mom's death, unable to continue on in a world in which she no longer existed. I was living in a fog— fixated on my dead mom and unable to connect with the real world.

At the same time, however, I was excited for life. I was visiting and applying to colleges and meeting with coaches who wanted me to continue my athletic career at their respective schools. I was eager to go away to college and see what existed beyond the confines of Montrose. I wanted to take as many classes as possible, to study abroad and to experience all that college and the world had to offer.

*The cure for grief is motion.*

Instead of providing me with a respite from my grief, college heightened it. When I started at Penn State in August 2011, my mom had been dead for a little over a year. I was still self-conscious about her death, and my family was still awkward without her. It felt like we were anticipating her return from a long trip, and her flight kept getting delayed. Watching my new classmates move in with the help of their

happy, complete families highlighted the gaping hole in mine. Everyone else seemed excited and overjoyed; I got in a fight with my dad and cried during lunch at the Allen Street Grill.

I struggled during my freshman year. Crippled by shyness and social anxiety, I didn't join any clubs or teams. I did a stint at *The Daily Collegian* but abandoned it before I became a full-fledged staff member. I befriended some of the people on my floor, but I didn't establish a strong bond or connection with any of them—I felt that they didn't really know me or understand me. I couldn't wait for the year to end so I could go home, and I was already dreading returning for my sophomore year in August.

But I couldn't admit that to anyone; they wouldn't understand, I thought. I was at Penn State—living the collegiate dream—why wasn't I happy? My dad had mentioned that my mom had been homesick during college, too. I longed to talk to her about it.

I needed to make a change. I perused Penn State's club directory, hoping to find something. I found the contact information for the vice-president of the crew (rowing) team. On a whim, I emailed him and inquired about joining the team. He responded almost immediately, telling me that practices would resume once classes began in August and that they'd be happy to have me.

I almost didn't go to that initial practice. Beginning at 6:15 AM, it was much earlier than my usual wake-up time, and I was intimidated at the thought of walking into a gym full of strangers. But I forced myself to go. Within a couple of weeks, I had picked up the basics of the rowing stroke and had learned to properly use the erg (rowing machine). At the first six kilometer test in early October, I pulled the fastest time of all the women, novice or varsity. I was also making friends. I was happy.

*The cure for grief is motion.*

I joined the crew team because of my mom. She regretted not playing sports in high school or college. "I missed out on a lot because I was scared," she told me. "It's okay to be scared but don't let it control you." Her memory motivates me to push myself on the erg and in the weight room. During excruciating races, I think of all the pain she had endured during her illness, telling myself that a little

muscle fatigue is nothing compared to a bone marrow biopsy. I imagine that she was in the grandstands, cheering me on and getting nervous at the end of a close race.

I've stayed on the crew team for myself. We leave campus every morning at 4:35 to practice on the lake at Bald Eagle State Park in nearby Howard. At that time of day, the water is flat, the sky is dark and the only sounds are the click of the oars in their locks and the hull of the boat gliding through the water. The sun rises while we're on the water; pink, purple and red rays peak out above the dam and soon, the whole sky is illuminated. Sitting in my boat— cold, tired and soaked with sweat and lake water— I'm content.

*The cure for grief is motion.*

## Chapter 24

### Yesterday Once More

My mom always listened to music in the car. Even if we were going somewhere as close as the grocery store, less than ten minutes away from our house, the radio was playing. She listened almost exclusively to seventies soft rock: the Eagles, Carole King and the Bee Gees, among many others. But the Carpenters were her favorite. I learned to sing by listening to Karen Carpenter on our way to preschool. My mom would sing along, and I'd join in. Although I was only four, I knew every word to every song on *Love Songs*. ("Superstar" was my favorite). My mom played that cassette until it wore out. Then she bought the CD.

Since my mom's death, I've found myself returning to things from my childhood and teenage years. I've rewatched episodes of *The Brady Bunch* on YouTube and reread all of the *Harry Potter* books. I cook myself meals that my mom once cooked for me—crispy ranch chicken, tomato rice pork chops and my grandmother's meatballs and sauce. I want to go back to the places we visited, especially Rehoboth Beach, Delaware or Pine Knoll Shores, North Carolina. (My mom was happiest at the beach. Standing next to the ocean, I can sense her presence; I can feel her joy.)

I've revisited the Carpenters as well. Prior to August 2014, I hadn't listened to them in years as my taste had shifted away from my mom's saccharine seventies favorites and toward bluegrass and Americana. But when I was moving into my new apartment, I made the three and a half hour drive from Montrose to State College many times and exhausted my playlists in the process. So, I searched Spotify for something else, hoping to find music to make the tedious drive seem shorter. Somehow, I ended up listening the Carpenters. I started off with "Superstar." As the opening notes from a clarinet filled the car, my eyes began to fill up and my nose got tight, and by the time Karen Carpenter started singing several



beats later, I was crying. I had heard this song constantly as a child; Karen Carpenter's velvety voice is as familiar to me as my mom's. But I wasn't hearing Karen's voice that afternoon— it felt like my mom's voice was coming through the speakers, like she was in the car singing along with me.

I've started listening to the Carpenters regularly. I've realized that Karen Carpenter's voice not only reminded me of my mom but also her physical appearance: both were petite with dark brown hair, high cheekbones and big, earnest brown eyes. Additionally, this was the music my mom had listened to when she was in college, and by listening to it, I feel like I'm connecting with her in some way, like we're occupying the same space and time.

I listen to the Carpenters when I miss my mom. Hearing their songs, which she and I had listened to countless times when everything was still "normal," feels like coming home. Their music transports me back to my life before my mom's death. I am reminded of countless hours spent in the car with her, traveling to and from basketball practices and tournaments. I remember days when my biggest worry was making it home in time to watch my favorite television show. (Now, my biggest worries are making sure my brother and sister do not forget who are mom was and that I live a life she would be proud of.)

## Chapter 25

### Big Al

My grandfather was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer in March 2013. He didn't smoke. Soon, his broad, 6'2" frame became bony and hunched as if the weight of his diagnosis was crushing him. Big Al, the former paratrooper and minor league baseball player, had been reduced to a frail old man.

I spent nearly every day with him that summer. I made his breakfast, ran errands, cooked his dinner and shut the shades and turned off the lights when he was ready for bed. We filled the time in between breakfast and bed with hours of television—the *Andy Griffith Show*, *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* in the mornings; *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Person of Interest* and *Blue Bloods* at night. He sat in his recliner (the worn blue one and later a motorized one made of tan leather), and I occupied the plaid loveseat directly to his left, underneath the antique mirror that had hung on the wall since my mom was a child.

Night after night, we sat less than five feet away from one another, exchanging limited conversation. We talked sports or complained about my dad's new girlfriend but rarely said anything of substance. I never once told him how important he was to me. Often, I felt as if I should make some grand declaration and proclaim how much I loved him; how grateful I was for everything he had done for me; how I couldn't comprehend a world without him.

But I never did. To have done so would have been to admit defeat, to accept that this disease would get the best of him. We pretended that everything was normal and ignored our reality: he had been given several months to live, so I had a deadline. We had a limited amount of time left together, and we spent it watching TV Land.

I tell myself that it didn't need to be said, that my actions demonstrated how much I love and respect him. I hope that when he died on September 24, 2013, he knew that.

I hope that when my mom died on May 11, 2010, she knew it, too.

## Chapter 26

### Lessons

My mom was the best teacher I ever had. She taught me how to read and introduced me to the world of literature. She filled our house with books, from *Goodnight Moon* to *Jane Eyre*. She got me a library card before I was five years old and read to my siblings and me every night before bed. Because of my mom, I love to read; because of her, I'm majoring in English.

But the greatest lessons my mom ever taught me extend far beyond the realm of books. Rather, they were the virtues that she demonstrated every day of her life.

My mom taught me how to be kind. After her death, my family received hundreds of sympathy cards from many different people, ranging from elementary school classmates to doctors from at the University of Maryland. But no matter who wrote the card, they all mentioned her kindness. A man who graduated from high school with her wrote that she made him feel included and important even when their classmates would make fun of him for his speech impediment. A woman who worked with her for many years told us how she kept track of everyone's birthdays and always made a cake for them.

My mom taught me how to be brave. She battled multiple myeloma for nearly six years and endured countless bone marrow biopsies, two stem cell transplants and a kidney transplant. Her body often ached and the treatments left her weak and frail. Yet, she didn't complain. She didn't give up. She refused to believe that this disease would beat her. She would undergo any treatment if it meant that she could have more time with her kids, more time with her family and friends, more time to live.

Most importantly, my mom taught me how to love. I only had her for seventeen years, but in those seventeen years, she gave me enough unconditional love to last a lifetime.

## **Chapter 27**

### **Conclusion**

The inside of the card from my beloved government teacher simply said, “Maybe if we read enough, we will find the right words.” He was referring to our unique friendship and the special bond we had forged over crossword puzzles and Beatles records. At the time, I thought of it as a throwaway line, something he had quickly scrawled in the card only minutes before my graduation party. But in the five years since, I have come to appreciate its beautiful truth. There are some moments and situations in life that defy description. Words, despite their supreme power, are inadequate and fail to convey the strongest, most important emotions and information.

I will never be able to write the perfect obituary for my mom. I have revisited those 290 words countless times in the past five years, two months and sixteen days, and each time, I cannot find a single thing to change. I’ve also tried to expand it. This essay is over 15,000 words long, but I still feel like there’s more to be said. I could spend the rest of my life writing about my mom, and I still wouldn’t be satisfied.

There are no words that can describe how my mom’s life and death have shaped me, but they are all I have, so I must try to do the impossible.

As my life moves farther away from hers, I find myself clinging to my memories of her and the physical objects she left behind. I’m scared that one day, I will wake-up, and I won’t hurt anymore. I’m scared that she will fade, that I will leave her behind. I do not want to get over her death; I do not want to let her go.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

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### Academic Vita of Katelyn Spellman

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**EDUCATION:** The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
Schreyer Honors College  
Bachelor of Arts in English  
Minor in History  
Dean's List

**EXPERIENCE:** **Relevant Coursework**

- Writing the Southern Gothic
- Writing the Lyric Essay
- Beat Writing/Writing Beat
- The Life of Bob Dylan

**ACTIVITIES:** **The GLOBE**

- Developed a global perspective through a variety of events and activities
- Discussed global issues, such as education, the environment and women's rights, with speakers and professors from around the world
- Honors College sponsored Special Living Option

**Penn State Crew Team**

- Practiced six times a week and competed in five to seven weekend-long regattas in both the fall and spring semesters
- Attended and participated in weekly officer board meetings
- Second Team Academic All-American (2014-2015)
- American Collegiate Rowing Association National Championship Grand Finalist in Women's 2- (sixth place finish)
- Team Historian (Fall 2014-Spring 2015)