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## Letters to My Dead Mom

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Letters to My Dead Mom

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Alexandra McLaughlin  
April 2019

Letters to My Dead Mom

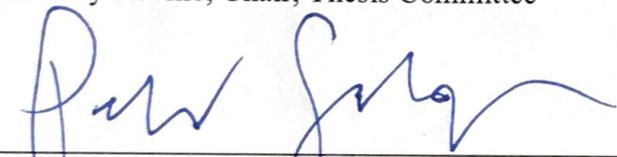
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FALL

Her heart exploded

My mom went for a run and  
her heart exploded,  
she fell and  
that was it.

She had a family, children  
who could hold conversations  
instead of throwing tantrums,  
a steady job, a home with a garden  
in a cul-de-sac,  
a neighborhood book club.

She had just turned 50.

October 27, 2009

On the day you died, I woke to police sirens. It was 6:20 a.m. in late October and the pitch blackness of night still hung heavy. When I walked downstairs, I expected to find you bustling around the kitchen, cheeks flush with exercise. You timed your run so that you'd arrive home before I left for school. That morning, I walked into a dark kitchen. The chairs at the table were pushed in. The coffee pot was off. I opened the cupboard, took a granola bar for school. I usually left for the bus stop at 6:55 am, but that day I lingered for an extra couple of minutes, hoping you'd burst through the door. Usually when I left, you'd be stirring cream into your coffee, opening the newspaper. You'd say, "Have a nice day!" as I walked out the door. That Tuesday, I left behind an empty kitchen.

\*\*\*

When I tell people about that day, it feels important to explain the feeling that something was wrong. To explain how you lived. You lived with precision. You made your bed every day. You served dinner at 5:15 pm. You were not one to take a detour or get distracted.

\*\*\*

It was a clear dark morning. Standing at the top of our driveway, I looked up at the sky. You loved to point out constellations to us: Orion's belt, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper. You looked at the stars every day. I only looked during camping trips; otherwise I was in too much of a rush. I know this sounds melodramatic and sappy, but it's true; on that Tuesday, I looked up at the vivid stars against the inky sky, and thought of you.

\*\*\*

I had no cell phone at the time. This fact startles me now, that I lived without a cell phone, without texting, email, Facebook, and the internet at my fingertips. You died nine years ago. Time pulls us further and further apart, stretches us like a rubber band. Someday it will break. What will I remember of you then? Will it be like reading a history textbook, eyes glossing over events that were once so important but now seem like a backdrop to my life? I have a Georgia driver's license. I have a cat. I have an iPhone 7. Are we already strangers?

\*\*\*

On the bus, I borrowed Nikki's cell phone and called the home phone, hoping to hear your voice. I imagined the conversation. You'd run into our neighbor and gotten to talking about Leslie's pickles. Do I need anything from Cub because you're going to stop by after work today. And don't forget that Jill rescheduled my piano lesson for tomorrow, so make sure to practice after school. The phone rang. Again and again. It rang.

I called Caroline, Michaela, and Dad. I pressed the numbers again with shaky fingers. None of them answered. As I dialed different numbers, Nikki leaned over the back of the seat in front of me, her arms dangling. I pressed the numbers for the home phone again.

Finally, as we stood by my locker, Nikki's phone rang. She handed it to me. It was Michaela. "So Dad called me and Caroline all worried and asked us to check on Mom. So now we're just driving around looking for her." Her voice was not at all worried. It had a bouncy quality to it, like she was playing Barbie's with a child and trying to act serious. Laughter flitted around the edges. The lightness of her tone bothered me. Something was wrong and she wasn't

showing enough concern. When I hung up the phone and relayed the conversation to my friends, sickness gathered in my stomach.

“You’re imagining the worst-case scenario,” Nikki said.

\*\*\*

Those words claw me. I imagined the worst-case scenario and it was true. The worst-case scenario was true. It was true. Before you died, tragedy was a faraway thing, but afterwards, it felt ever-present, an invisible hand wrapped around my ankle, ready to yank.

\*\*\*

I tried to tell myself they were right. I was overreacting. I walked into my Honors Algebra II classroom on the third floor, opened my textbook and took out my calculator and notebook. For about 15 minutes, things felt normal. We were learning about functions. Then the phone rang, a shrill noise at any hour, but especially at 7:45 am. Mr. Fendrich—who knew us all through coaching cross country and was one of my favorite teachers—paused what he was doing at the Smart Board and walked to the corner of the classroom to answer the phone. He looked at me. A screw tightened in my throat. He hung up the phone and said, “Alexandra, Mr. Wollersheim would like to see you.”

The class “oooohed” because Mr. Wollersheim was the principal. I was getting called to the principal’s office. Mr. Fendrich smiled and said, “Oh, I’m sure he just wants to give you some kind of award.”

I stood up. Everything was sprawled across my desk: the textbook opened to the section on functions, my calculator, my notebook. My unzipped backpack sat next to the chair. I left everything and walked out of the classroom.

The hallway was eerily quiet. Everyone was in class. I walked past the blue metal lockers and down A stairwell. I had the unshakeable feeling of something terrible. Instead of walking down the hallway, I imagined myself in a church, walking down the aisle at your funeral. I imagined myself in a black dress, holding flowers. I imagined Michaela and Caroline crying in the front row. My mind was on overdrive, imagining the worst-case scenario. I believed it and didn't believe it at the same time.

Once I got downstairs, I had to stop to think for a minute: where was Mr. Wollersheim's office? I had never been there. I never got in trouble. Then I remembered that his office was a separate room in the back of the main office, where I went once to turn in paperwork.

I opened the door. Michaela and Caroline stood in the foyer of the office, next to the desk. I did not see Mr. Wollersheim. Instead, I saw a cluster of administrative assistants, counselors, and other office ladies. Michaela and Caroline were both crying.

One of the office ladies led us into a small conference room, a room in which Caroline had once served detention.

Caroline said, her voice choked by tears, "Mom died."

I didn't believe it. For all of my imagining of worst-case scenarios and imagining your funeral as I walked down the hallway, I still did not believe those words.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "What? No!"

I was uncharacteristically loud.

"She had a heart attack," Caroline said.

"No," I kept saying. "That's not true."

She kept nodding and crying.

I had to pee. It was like the anxiety sloshing around inside me all morning suddenly needed somewhere to go.

My sisters and the office ladies looked confused when I asked if there was a bathroom. One of the ladies directed me to a small bathroom in the corner of the conference room, and as I relieved myself, I realized I could not have held it any longer. I wondered why I didn't feel the full force of that urge before. As I listened to myself pee (it seemed to last for hours), I thought, "Mom died from a heart attack." The meaning of those words seemed impossible.

One of the counselors, Ms. Hatlei, who also coached track, drove us to United Hospital in St. Paul. That's where the ambulance took you. Since the hospital was near his office, Dad was already there. After hanging up the phone with the police, he was too flustered to deal with the car and sprinted to the hospital in his suit and tie.

\*\*\*

Your death seemed to bring out the most basic characteristics of all of our personalities. Dad didn't give a fuck what people thought of him when he sprinted to the hospital in work clothes; I questioned and refused to believe you died; Caroline wanted to make sure everyone would be okay; Michaela organized "family therapy" emails for us to process your death; Ryan got piercings and tattoos and spray-painted his shoes yellow.

\*\*\*

Caroline, Michaela, and I squeezed into the backseat of Ms. Hatlei's sedan. The drive to the hospital couldn't have been more than 20 minutes, but it felt impossibly long. Caroline and Michaela were crying. Ms. Hatlei said, "I don't mean to sound like a coach, but remember to drink a lot of water today."

She dropped us off in front of the emergency room. We walked through the door. Dad waited in a small waiting area. He jumped from his chair when he saw us. We hugged him. He was crying.

“I wish it had been me instead of Mom,” he said.

No one responded to this. We were all crying.

We pushed back the curtain. You lay motionless on the hospital bed. Your tongue stuck out of your mouth.

“Why’s her tongue like that?” Michaela asked.

Dad explained that the doctors had done CPR and intubated you in efforts to revive you. Just before he arrived at the hospital, they stopped trying. When they pulled out the intubator, your tongue came out.

I went over and touched your shoulder.

“Mom,” I said. I did not believe you were dead. I shook you—gently at first—then by both shoulders. “Wake up.”

Caroline scolded me, pulled me away.

This was when I believed.

After clustering around the bed for what felt like hours, after sliding the wedding ring off your finger, after tracing your face, after memorizing the way you looked and felt, after lifting the blanket to feel the cracked skin of your heels that you moisturized with Udder Cream, after going through multiple boxes of the cheap generic tissues a nurse gave us, after signing the papers to donate your skin and tissues and corneas, we left you in the hospital.

Upon leaving the emergency room, blinking against the sunlight, we walked past a man laying bricks. This task baffled me. How did the world manage to continue without disruption?

And in light of your death, why should anyone waste time on something so mundane? We walked across the hospital grounds, to where Pete waited with his truck to drive us home. The four of us held hands. People stared.

We returned home. The kitchen felt like a model kitchen at Ikea: beautiful, but fake. Sunlight warmed the wood floors. Yellow wallpaper and sun faces surrounded me. The kitchen had belonged to you and now belonged to no one.

Very soon after we got home, the phone started ringing almost nonstop. Relatives wanted to offer condolences, wanted to know the plan, wanted to know when they should come. Dad talked to them. The doorbell also kept ringing. Julia came over with two pizzas from Little Caesar's. Neighbors dropped off casseroles, cheese platters, vegetable trays. I had no appetite. The mountain of food kept growing. We didn't have enough room in the refrigerator.

I took Dakota outside to play in the backyard. I threw the stick for her and felt irritated by the brightness of the sun and the brilliance of the changing leaves. I wanted the skies to open up. I wanted thunderstorms. I wanted a goddamn tornado.

When I returned inside, our family had scattered. Dad was downstairs looking through your secretary. He was trying to find your social security number. I don't know where Michaela and Caroline were.

A few dishes sat in the sink. I squeezed soap and grabbed the sponge. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the window above the sink. As I washed the dishes, I thought of you. You managed to find the perfect water temperature, so much that it felt like a bubble bath for your hands. If I were to describe you with a metaphor, a way to make concrete the person you were, I would reference the warmth of the water you drew from the faucet, the way it eased the tension from fingertips, the safety and satisfaction in the routine, the comfort in making something clean.

I have not been able to replicate this skill. The desired temperature holds for a few seconds before fluctuating between scalding and lukewarm. Out of the many questions I would like to ask you, this arises in my mind with frequency: how did you manage, with such ease, to find the right temperature?

With the dishes clean, I wondered what I was supposed to do. My head pounded. Crying had dehydrated me. I had not listened to Ms. Hatlei's advice about drinking enough water. I didn't care about staying hydrated. It seemed selfish to care about that when you were dead.

I tried to imagine what a sixteen-year-old girl who just lost her mother would do. I carried down a fleece blanket from my bedroom and curled up on the couch. In the movie version of my life, sad music would play and life would unfold around me: a montage of my grief, like the scene in *New Moon* when Edward leaves Bella and she sits in a chair gazing out a bay window. Months flash across the screen. Fall becomes winter. She stares with dead eyes, a statue. I only lasted 20 minutes. The blanket twisted around my legs. Boredom engulfed me. It was early afternoon and I was not tired.

At some point, we picked up Ryan from the airport. In the backseat of the minivan, he kept saying, "Fuck."

Before dinner, we walked as a family to the "spot" on Shannon Parkway where you died. We wanted to put roses there. I think we also wanted to feel you with us, to relive your last few moments. You collapsed while running. A complete blockage of your arteries. The doctors say you died instantly. They say you felt no pain. Is that true? I think even if you did feel pain, you would tell us you didn't, just to make us feel better. A bouquet of flowers lay on the ground already. Someone else put them there. That made me happy and sad at the same time. Dad set roses besides them. We stood for a minute, but there was really nothing to say. We kept walking,

all the way around your running loop, around Shannon Park Elementary School. The sky was still annoyingly blue. Caroline and Michaela walked ahead, arms around each other's shoulders. I stood between Ryan and Dad. We held hands and did not say much. I wondered what the people driving by thought of us.

Aunt Kitty and Uncle Steve arrived around dinnertime. They told funny stories from the early days of your marriage as we nibbled on the mountain of food brought over by neighbors. I liked the distraction. Crying was exhausting. I could only produce so many tears before getting a headache or needing a glass of water or using up all the good tissues. It felt good to laugh.

\*\*\*

Laughter was not something I previously associated with grief. But it happened. We would be sobbing, when all of a sudden and for no clear reason, the sobbing turned to laughter. Hysterical laughter. We were hysterical. A few days after you died, we stood in the upstairs hallway between the bedrooms, modeling various outfits and throwing clothes back and forth. We were trying to decide what to wear to your memorial service. We flung the rejected clothes into haphazard piles on the carpet. The pile kept growing. Should we wear black? Or yellow? You loved yellow. But is wearing yellow to a funeral weird?

Caring so much felt ridiculous, our dedication to dressing appropriately for the occasion seemed bizarre considering what had happened. You had died, and now Caroline held up a black dress and asked if it was too short. Grumbling about the trickiness of picking an outfit (temperature also played a factor because the service was outdoors), the seemingly simple decision proved too great an obstacle for our exhausted brains. Sometime between throwing clothes back and forth and critiquing each other in front of the mirror, we collapsed into laughter, leaning into walls and trying to catch our breath.

It felt good to laugh. For a minute, laughing let us forget the seriousness of the situation. The permanence. But the nagging feeling always returned, the knowledge that you were, in fact, dead. You weren't out for a walk or tending to your garden, and would any minute burst into the kitchen and begin chopping vegetables for dinner.

In these moments of heaviness, when the world felt too unfamiliar and mean to face, we hid in the basement storage room or the upstairs bathroom and cried together. I saw Ryan cry for the first time. After a round of tears, we wiped our faces and returned to our relatives, who pretended not to notice our swollen eyes. We joked about how grief made us experts at crying our eyes out and then reintegrating into normal situations as though nothing had happened. It was a point of bitter pride.

\*\*\*

That night, after Aunt Kitty and Uncle Steve went to their hotel, the five of us gathered in the family room. Michaela, a therapist in-training, decided we needed to process together. She distributed pens and brightly colored construction paper. She gave us writing prompts. We wrote in silence and then shared our writing aloud.

On pink construction paper, I wrote:

October 27: The Day from Hell

Words or phrases that come to mind: terrifying, unreal, tears, hospital, touching, holding, hugging, tears, Mom, death, cold, beautiful, looks from strangers, shaking my head at the counselors, crying, food, lots of food from neighbors, not believing it, still not believing it, sitting on the couch with Germaine, giving anything to see my mom again, phone ringing off the hook, picking up Ryan, talking as a family, crying as a family, prayers around the dinner table, eating barely anything at all but having so much food, not being able to cry because there's no tears left, uncertainty, mom, jealousy of other people's moms

Questions/ doubts / anxieties:

What happens now?

Where is Mom's soul?

How will we survive without her?

Who will I talk to?  
Who will push me to be the best I can be at everything?  
How could this happen to me? To us? To Mom?  
How will I ever be happy again?  
What will Thanksgiving be like? Christmas? Any holiday?  
What will it be like when I go back to school?  
How will Dad be? How will any of us be?  
My heart hurts. I can never stop thinking about Mom. She is in everything I see. She did everything for me. She would do anything for me.  
I just can't believe she's actually gone and I don't know how I will live without her. I need her. She knows me better than anyone. I miss her so much already. How will this ever get better?

Here's what the others wrote under the "questions / doubts / fears" prompt, in age order (I think you would appreciate this way of organizing):

Caroline:

Why did she have to go?  
Why our mom?  
Why did that small piece of her heart be blocked?  
When will this feeling go away?  
What will happen to the garden?  
Will Dad and Alexandra be okay by themselves?

Michaela:

How do we keep mom alive?  
How do we keep Dad happy?  
How does Alexandra feel loved?  
How / when do I come home?  
Do we need family therapy?

Ryan:

There will be no one to send care packages  
I will miss mom forever  
The garden will go untended  
Alexandra and Dad will not be able to function as well  
The house will be messy and undecorated  
I will never hear mom's laugh or kiss her on the cheek  
I will never bike home from Northfield and surprise her while she is in the garden or making dinner

Dad:

Practical stuff—I know nothing about bills and finances  
Able to support A.J.?

Able to enjoy life anymore without my bunj love?  
Will I be able to sleep without her?

\*\*\*

Mom, I want you to know that we are okay. We are okay. You don't have to worry. We wrote these words almost 10 years ago. Your death gutted us and we did fall apart for a while, but you created a resilient family. We are okay. Just yesterday, Caroline wrote an email to Dad, which I think sums it up best:

I see so much of Mom in you...you have taken on a mom and dad role in such a beautiful way and my God she would be so in awe of what you have created in this family.

Your legacy...you live it out every day whether that's by your phone calls, Finbarr emails, flying to CO to be with your eldest daughter in some of the hardest moments, moving in your youngest daughter to GA, visiting the hospital twice a day to check on your son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. It's the way you get our guest rooms ready when we visit and have eggs and coffee prepared in the mornings. It is that calm, reassuring voice on the other end of the phone. It's trips to Ireland, Fargo, the gigantic Christmas house. It is painting, changing light fixtures, fixing holes in the wall creatively, and staining decks. It's the planning of reunions and precious time together. It's the way you look at Dorothy.

You are a fucking phenomenal Dad.

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The night you died, I took a shower. Afterwards I stood in the bathroom in a towel, looking at myself in the mirror. I thought, *I will never be the same person again*. The person I was this morning—the girl who had a mother, the girl who assumed the world was fundamentally safe, the girl who assumed she was immune from tragedy—that girl was gone. I stared at myself for a very long time. I was sixteen. I must have looked so dramatic with my puffy eyes and deadpan expression. I think you probably would have laughed at me. Like the time I laughed at you when we went cross country skiing and you took off your skis and slid down the hills on your butt.

\*\*\*

I slept well that night. That seems cruel to say because you had just died. But I slept “like a rock” as you would say. No ibuprofen. No sleeping pills. Not even melatonin. No dreams. No nightmares. I think you were looking out for me. I think you knew I needed to sleep.

## Flicking the Unpleasant Away

I tell myself you would have approved the decisions we made about your body. You just didn't want to think about it. When you heard something you didn't like, you flicked your fingers, palm up, across your thigh.

Remember that time at the kitchen table when Ryan said, "Mom, did you know it's possible for doctors to sew a severed finger back on the hand?"

We were eating kielbasa for dinner, which just made it worse.

Your face scrunched. Fingers flicked across your thigh. We laughed at you.

"It has to be a clean cut though," Ryan continued. "And you have to keep it in ice."

Your fingers flicked more rapidly. You had no chill when it came to severed body parts.

I inherited this squeamishness. My junior year of college, I enrolled in a class that analyzed text and film about the Vietnam War. We watched *Apocalypse Now* and I shrunk into my seat during the part with the severed heads. Suppressed my gags. Buried my face in my hands.

Now, I too flick my fingers upon hearing something horrifying.

It's a strange gesture. What does it mean? Is it meant to flick away the bad thoughts and energy? To literally "brush off" the unwelcome images?

Once, when we were making Christmas cookies, I brought up the subject of death. Dunking one side of a shortbread cookie into the bowl of melted chocolate, I said, "Do you think burial or cremation is better?"

You loosened cookies from the baking pan with a spatula. “I don’t really know.”

“I always thought cremation was disgusting,” I said. “Burning the body. I thought burial was more dignified. But if you think about it, burying someone is also gross. Like, they’re just rotting underground.”

You brought over more cookies for me to dunk. “Do we need more chocolate?”

“No, not yet.” I said. “But, Mom. What would you want? Would you want to be buried or cremated?”

“I don’t know.”

“But if you had to choose.”

You were no longer looking at me. You were putting dishes in the sink, turning on the warm water. “I don’t want to talk about it,” you said, your voice low and firm.

The painful irony of this swirls my insides. You were the first in our family to die. The least willing to talk about death.

Do you approve the decisions we made after you died? We donated your skin, tissue, and corneas. We cremated you.

Would you have been horrified? The skin peeled from your body, the tissue scraped out, the corneas carved from your eyes. Your body burned.

Cremation. It’s such a beautiful word. Long and dignified. A soft sound. Whoever put a name to the process must have been trying to disguise the disgust.

I had to Google “cremation” because I had no idea how it actually worked. What I found was a clinical series of paragraphs that flowed in my stomach like acid.

Do you want the clean, scientific explanation?

Do you want to hear about how the heat dries the body, burns the skin and hair, chars the muscles, vaporizes the soft tissues, and calcifies the bones so that they eventually crumble?

Do you want to hear about how the skeletal remains and bone fragments are collected in a tray? How they sift through for metal objects like dental gold or surgical screws? How they remove these items through the use of strong magnets or forceps?

Do you want to hear about how they pulverize the dried bone fragments into a consistency of sand?

No. You wouldn't have listened to any of it. Maybe you would have stood up, turned your back to me, stirred a pot on the stove. I only read the description of cremation once. I needed to know what happened to you. I needed to know what happened to your body. We left you in the hospital bed on October 27th, but we did not say goodbye on October 27th.

We said "goodbye" on October 26th. First: when I laughed so hard during dinner that I thought I pulled a muscle in my abdomen. Second: when you watched me carve pumpkins and refused to take the knife. "You can do it," you said. "Just try." Third: when you stood at the top of the stairs and called goodnight to me in the basement.

We said goodbye then. You were that warm voice and watchful gaze. You were not that body in the hospital room.

Those first few days after your death were a blur. One night, Nikki and Germaine came over. We sat on the plush couches in the basement and played Monopoly. We joked around and laughed. Then someone called down to me to come upstairs. They said something about going outside to the garden.

"Oh," I said. "Do you guys want to go the garden?"

Nikki and Germaine looked at each other. “I think this is a family thing,” Germaine said. “For your mom.”

We were going to spread your ashes around the garden. I had somehow missed the memo. I looked outside. It was dark and cold. I didn’t want to deal with it. I didn’t want the dark and cold and sadness. I wanted to keep playing Monopoly with my friends.

But I went outside. We slowly walked around the garden. Dad sprinkled some ashes. I think Michaela did too. I didn’t spread any. I didn’t want to touch them.

You’re not the ashes. I don’t think spreading them around your garden makes a difference. Maybe for us. Maybe for Dad. But you are already everywhere.

I believe the spiritual world and the physical world exist together. When you died, your spirit left your body and settled in the things you loved: the blooming lilies, the smell of pine trees, the chill sunshine of a fall day. Nature evokes both joy and sadness in me. You are here; I miss you.

I feel you with me, with all of us, guiding us through our lives. I carry a love of cooking. A positive attitude. An appreciation for nature. I feel your influence when I make lesson plans or drive down the highway blasting pop music, or stick a post-it to my mirror that says, “Always believe something wonderful is about to happen.”

I think you would have approved of the decisions we made about your body. You would have wanted to donate yourself, to recycle yourself, to continue existing in the wind that carried your ashes, in the eyes of the man who received your corneas, and in the mannerisms of your children, who inherited your devotion to “face-outs” in the cupboards, making the bed every day, greeting coworkers by name, and flicking away the unpleasantness.

# WINTER

## Sonnet

My mood depends on the sun  
rising and falling. I want only the forest,  
everything else, writing or cleaning, feels porous.  
Who cares if my to-do list gets done?

I breathe the sunlight when I feel blue.  
My mom used to call me honey.  
The universe is quick, cunning,  
no apologies. Her death like a tattoo.

Sometimes I wear her class ring,  
my memory like the wind, fickle.  
She saved her wedding dress,  
never expected me to wear it. In that I glean  
a glimpse of our future, a wrinkle  
of what she would be, of what I lost

## Things People Said to Me After You Died

### 1. “I’m sorry for your loss of a family member.”

After you died, while I was absent from school for three days, my AP U.S. History class circulated a little spiral journal in which they wrote condolences. Ms. Erickson, our teacher, was a kind woman with a booming laugh. I remember feeling embarrassed by the attention when I accepted the journal from her, and also suspicious, because I believed it had been Ms. Erickson who not only bought the journal, but had everyone in the class write in it. If there was anything worse than pity, it was coerced pity.

I read the journal only once before tossing it in a shoebox along with the rest of the condolence cards I received. In the past nine years, among the moves out of my childhood home, to college, to various apartments, and to Georgia for grad school, I’ve lost track of it. My classmates’ clichéd condolences blurred together. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” “You and your family are in my thoughts and prayers,” etc.

One note that stood out to me was from Jacob Stern, who lived down the street from us and who I’d known since kindergarten. He wrote, “I’m sorry for your loss of a family member.” I remember staring at the words “family member,” and feeling stunned, then confused, then angry. Did he not know which family member had died? How could that be? If he didn’t know which family member, why didn’t he ask someone? If he did know, how dare he downgrade you to a “family member?” A distant cousin who you’ve seen twice in your life is a “family

member.” You said goodnight to me, made my Halloween costumes by hand, and drove me to tennis practice and piano lessons. You were more than a “family member.”

Another thing that bothered me about the notebook were the number of people who wrote, “I’m here if you want to talk!” These came from people like Becca Newman and Maddie Walker, with whom I’d exchanged maybe 20 words my entire life. Why would I suddenly feel the desire to talk to them about your death? I’m sure they didn’t want to talk to me any more than I wanted to talk to them. We weren’t friends. “I’m here if you want to talk!” seemed like an empty, meaningless promise, words they wrote to make themselves feel better, to do their good deed for the day by comforting the girl whose mom had just died.

I was bitter and immature, twisting every act of kindness into something dark. I held people responsible for not saying or doing the right thing, when nothing would have made it right. There’s a piece of advice I’ve heard about approaching someone you’re interested in, and I think it applies here, too: it doesn’t matter *what* you say, as long as you say something. My classmates were saying something by writing in that spiral notebook. I just didn’t want to listen.

2. “Here’s some spaghetti hot dish.”

I was angry at the people who brought lasagna and pizza and a casserole and banana bread and trays of assorted vegetables. Especially on October 27, the day you died. The last thing I wanted to do was eat or look at food and people kept ringing the doorbell. A lot of food went to waste because we could not eat it all; we could not fit all of it into the refrigerator. Even then, even on October 27, I remember thinking, “This is temporary. This tragedy will soon fade from your mind and you will no longer be ringing our doorbell with green bean casserole, but in a month, in a year, my mom will still be dead, and on a random Tuesday night, I will look into the

refrigerator and feel weighed down and sad and hungry and where will you and your casserole be then?”

Looking back, I realize these people had the best of intentions. They showed love through food. The fact that our refrigerator overflowed meant that people cared about us. Still, if I'm ever faced with a grieving family, I will buy them a gift card to their favorite restaurant. A gift card won't rot in the refrigerator. They could use it whenever works for them—in a month or in a year. Hopefully by then they would enjoy the fettuccine alfredo and soft breadsticks. In the days and weeks after you died, I chewed food without tasting it.

3. “Lisa made the best homemade pizza.”

I figured Laurel would say *something* when you died. Almost every day in elementary school we cut across the backyards with a pillowcase full of stuffed animals. We made up games in which the animals talked to each other and went on adventures. We ate dinner at each other's homes. I knew her home phone number by heart. She told me what sex was. But we'd grown apart in middle school; we hadn't had a real conversation in years. So I did not anticipate the depth of her response.

Germaine had a few classes with Laurel. When the news of your death reached her, Laurel was “freaking out,” according to Germaine, and left the classroom. She stayed home from school the day it happened and the day afterwards. At the memorial service, we had a basket where people could leave cards. Laurel wrote me a long letter about how much she loved and admired you and she also included pictures of all the stuffed animals we used to play with. I was more unsettled than touched by the letter. It struck me as sentimental and dramatic. We were no longer friends; I couldn't fathom reversing time to the part of our lives when we called each other every day and played with stuffed animals. I didn't know what she wanted from me. I just

wanted my current best friends, the ones with whom I obsessed over *Twilight* and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at lunch. Also, Laurel's behavior seemed pathetic. *She* was so distraught that she stayed home from school? Nothing in her life had changed. She still had a mom. Like the girls who wrote, "I'm here if you want to talk!" in that spiral notebook, Laurel also seemed to be overcompensating, trying to assuage her own guilt or discomfort or whatever it was she felt.

I said nothing to Laurel about her letter. Time moved forward. We never became friends again, though we did stay friendly. She attended my high school graduation party two and half years later, even though it was the morning following the all-night party our school threw after the ceremony. She was one of the few people who replied "going" on Facebook who actually came.

Since I read that long letter from Laurel, a lot of time has passed. It still seems impossible to imagine my sixteen-year-old self reaching out to her. In the time immediately following your death, I barely had energy for anything. I went to school and came home and read books for my Honors American Literature class and ate runny omelets that Dad made and watched *American Idol* in the living room and went to bed. But I do regret my reaction toward Laurel, that I labeled her as pathetic. We were sixteen. Neither of us knew anything about death. In the letter, she talked about how kind you were—she called you "Lisa" and I called her mom "Molly"—how she remembers you gardening and making pizza and laughing.

I wish I'd kept the letter. As the years pass, fewer and fewer people in my life know you, a fact that feels both obvious and heartbreaking.

4. "How do you get physical affection?"

A week after you died, I sat in my Honors Algebra II classroom. Mr. Fendrick wrote logarithmic functions on the board. I scribbled the example problems in my notebook. I missed three days of school for your death; I needed to catch up. At 8:15 am, I put my textbook and calculator in my backpack and left the classroom. Everyone else remained seated.

As I walked down three flights of stairs, I felt annoyed. The logarithmic functions confused me. We had a test on Friday. Now I had to miss part of class for a counseling appointment. When the school counselor set up my appointment with Mary, she told me that Mary specialized in grief counseling and met with students from several schools in the district. She also told me that Mary had just graduated college. That made me think she wasn't a real counselor.

I walked into the cramped, fluorescent-lit office. Mary had a pixie cut and spoke with a gentle voice. A box of tissues sat on the table next to me. Mary asked weird questions like, "How do you get physical affection?" I told her that I hugged my sisters. She sat there and nodded. She looked at me with wide eyes.

5.

At the end of the appointment, Mary suggested that I join the school's grief group. I could talk with other students who had lost a parent. It might be helpful to share perspectives with people who had been through a similar experience.

"I'll think about it," I said.

I didn't want to talk to other students about grief. Grief was personal. Private. I would talk about it with my family and close friends and, reluctantly, with Mary. Not with strangers. Who would I see in the group? The cute guy in my gym class? The girl who reads anime? It

would be too awkward, too against the status quo of high school, to sit and cry together and then play dodgeball the next day as if nothing had happened.

Maybe I was wrong. It might have been cathartic to talk to other teenagers who were navigating AP tests and Homecoming and college applications without a parent. Maybe they would have echoed my frustrations or given suggestions or made me laugh.

I don't know what they would have said. I never went.

6. “She was in my dream the other day, dancing in the kitchen :)”

I like when people share specific memories about you. Maureen Huffer, who ran with you in the dark suburban mornings, posted on Facebook on October 21st— “A walk and a honey crisp apple. Remembering Lisa on her birthday.”

On October 27th, Michaela posted a picture on Facebook about the anniversary of your death. Karen McGarrigle commented, “I miss so many things about Lisa and loved when she'd roll those brown eyes. Love to you all.” Kathy Holtz, commented, “Emily just mentioned your mom yesterday and how she always had them grab more Halloween candy! Miss your mom and all of you fabulous neighbors!”

I changed my cover photo to me, you, and Michaela at Barnes & Noble drinking half-priced caramel Frappuccino's. You bought them with your discount. We are smiling. We are a few months from your death. Sarah Hobbie commented, “She was in my dream the other day, dancing in the kitchen :)” Mary Kusske wrote, “LOVE this pic!! I see your mom in you in every picture you take.”

7. “What was she like?”

People don't usually ask about you. I don't blame them. Asking about a dead mother, or husband, or friend, or sibling, is terrifying. People don't want to offend or bring up pain. But mostly I like talking about you. I like describing the salads you made. I like talking about the vigilance I inherited from you. When walking at night, I look over my shoulder to make sure no one is there. I like talking about the camping trips we took to national parks, how you dragged us to those amphitheater shows about birds or edible plants. Simple questions like "What was she like?" mean so much to me. These questions give me permission to tell the world about you, because as much as people hesitate to bring it up, I also hesitate to share things about you because of the same fear of awkwardness. I admit this makes no sense. You were the most important person in my life, and I barely talk about you.

When people ask what you were like, this is what I say:

- She was organized and liked to-do lists. A lot like me in that way. Valued cleanliness: we all had Saturday morning chores and she'd get upset if we didn't do them.
- Loved reading: part of a neighborhood book club and always gave me books for Christmas.
- In the spring and summer, it seemed like she was always outside watering plants and taking care of her garden. She had SO many plants.
- Graceful in social situations, didn't dominate the conversation. A good listener.
- She worked as an accountant until my brother was born, and then was a stay-at-home mom until I entered first grade. Then she worked part-time at Barnes & Noble and started a new trend where the employees greeted each other as they walked by. Before she got there, they just avoided eye contact when they passed in the store. But she started saying, "Hi, Dave!" and it caught on. She was excellent at remembering names.

Experiencing grief makes me more fearless. You lost your dad? How did he die? People worry too much about being polite. I suppose asking questions could offend someone, but I would rather acknowledge the death and offend than ignore. Never ignore.

8. “You gave me a heart attack!”

It has taken me years to not flinch at the casual use of “You gave me a heart attack!” when people really mean “You surprised me!” How could people be so insensitive? How could they not realize how much that phrase hurts me? How could they be so cruel? A heart attack is not something to be joked about. A heart attack took you away from me. It turned you from a healthy 50-year-old to a corpse.

Almost a decade later, I can finally see that these remarks are not meant to be cruel or insensitive. And while the casual use of “heart attack” will always sting, I try not to blame or feel angry at the person who said it. We all carry with us a catalog of past traumas. I’m sure I’ve inadvertently said something cruel to someone, not knowing what they are carrying.

9. “You look the most like your mom.”

People tell me that out of my siblings, I look the most like you. They say it’s the eyes. Maybe that’s the closest thing to “perfect” that someone has said to me. Because it’s something of yours that I was born with, something neutral, something effortless and permanent, a way I can keep you alive without trying.

## What You've Missed

You missed when I turned into the wrong lane and failed my DRIVER'S TEST. You missed the snowy December afternoon when I passed it.

You missed the Vancouver Olympics      winter 2010

London      summer 2012

Sochi      winter 2014

Rio      summer 2016

Pyeongchang      winter 2018

Remember watching the figure skating and the gymnastics? The Twizzlers you ate because you were nervous about them falling?

our ROAD TRIP out west,

the summer after you died.

We visited your favorite national parks. Hiked through the dusty air of BRYCE CANYON. Picnicked on a beach in Washington. Camped in the REDWOODS. Droplets of water clung to leaves. Sun glowed through the trees that stretched toward heaven.

My junior year of high school. Parent-teacher conferences with Ms. Storm.

I got my WISDOM TEETH out.

My cheeks swelled like a chipmunk's. You would have

laughed.

The two times I took the ACTs, the first during a blizzard.

AP Stats, Lang, Euro, Psych, and BC Calc review books.

up

I missed you jumping and in the kitchen when I got my scores.

down

Dad sold the house.

My first apartment. Ryan made dinner. I hung TWINKLY LIGHTS around my room.

We drove to Long Island to visit Aunt Eileen and Uncle Bill when he was sick with cancer. He died two years after you.

Aunt Eileen and I have gotten close. When I visit, we go to BROADWAY shows in the city. We grill salmon. She buys me clothes from Macy's and tries (unsuccessfully) to get me to wear heels. We talk on the phone once a week.

You missed college visits.

The way my eyes lit up during the CREATIVE WRITING class I visited at Macalester. I begged Caroline and Michaela to turn the car around because I was too nervous to stay overnight at Northwestern.

You missed my high school graduation.

I was named "English Student of the Year."

The Harder's threw me a graduation party. All the old neighbors attended.

I

crashed

Ryan's car.

He only cared that I was okay.

Nikki, Germaine, and I watched all the Harry Potter movies  
in a row.

Julia took us to the bakery featured on CUPCAKE WARS because watching that show  
was such a big part of our friendship.

My first real job at a candy store in the Mall of America.

I complained about the long hours

how much my feet hurt

my crazy boss Angela.

I missed all the DARK CHOCOLATE I could have given you.

You missed me learning how to drink wine in Paris.

The day I found out I got into MACALESTER.

I think you said once you could see me there.

You missed moving me into my dorm. Spending way too much time making my bed and  
setting up my room, trying to prolong the goodbye.

You missed Obama's reelection.

My first time ever voting for president.

I made the Dean's List and started wearing MASCARA and eyeliner and sometimes eye shadow,

though I always end up rubbing it off without thinking.

I switched to soft contacts.

I started wearing dresses.

Ryan met KATE.

She can shut Ryan up with one glance.

He needs someone to do that.

Kate gave me blonde HIGHLIGHTS. I know you always said my hair was beautiful natural and that when people dye their hair, it loses its natural shine. But my hair looks so much better than before. She also showed me how to use curly hair gel to accentuate my natural curls.

I started to drink COFFEE

first semester freshman year.

I got addicted.

Less

and

less sugar.

My best friends in college:

RACHEL from the tennis team.

SELENA from my English classes. Says whatever she is thinking and always makes me laugh.

The parties.

The first time I took a TEQUILA shot. My face afterwards.

The Halloween I drank too much rum and apple cider and threw up in the bathroom.

I swore I'd never drink again.

I binge watched *How I Met Your Mother* and *The Office*.

I still miss watching *American Idol* with you.

I stopped playing piano.

A million applications and cover letters.

My job selling bus passes at the INFO DESK

my complaints about rude people.

You missed Facebook.

The links about “Happiest States” and “Why Eating Hummus Every Day is Good for You” that I would have posted on your wall.

You missed hearing about which guys are sweet and which ones are jerks. I missed asking you about SEX.

Infinity scarves and skinny jeans. Jennifer Lawrence is my favorite celebrity.

I only write in pen now.

My handwriting has gotten bad.

I make my bed every day

because of you.

You missed one of the warmest winters I can remember.

And the winter it snowed until May.

I smacked spiders against the wall with textbooks.

My interest in JOURNALISM. The terror and electricity I feel when interviewing people. My first published article in the Mac Weekly.

I studied abroad

London

and

Florence.

Took the Tube on my own.

Learned conversational Italian

The frenzy of applying for grad school. My ACCEPTANCE into Georgia College.

I moved to the SOUTH, where people say “y’all” instead of “you guys” and where

cockroaches crawl on the sidewalk at night.

All the essays and poems I would have emailed you.

I started to drink KOMBUCHA and green juice.

Chickpea crepes

lemon broccoli pasta

crispy quinoa patties

I wish I could cook for you.

Your GRANDDAUGHTERS were born.

Ryan and Kate have a daughter named EllieRoo. She loves pointing to “Big Bird” in her books.

Ryan taught her a game where she puts her hand up for a HIGH-FIVE, but then pulls back.

Too slow!

Caroline and Ben have a daughter named Dorothy. The most adorable laugh.

Loves to organize pencils in different buckets.

Knows how to say “please” and “more” in sign language.

Dorothy and EllieRoo are the same age. We all hope they will be best friends.

I definitely want to be a mother someday.

You missed my love for hiking. I bought a FITBIT and try to get 10,000 steps a day. I hike whenever I can. It’s so warm in Georgia that I can go outside year-round.

I listen to the HAPPIER podcast and make lists like “19 for 2019.” Some of the items, like “No McDonalds at all” and “ask someone out” would truly astonish you.

I miss doing crossword puzzles with you

talking to you while you water the LILIES

the way you laughed.

I miss that time after we saw *The Devil Wears Prada* when we went through the Wendy's drive-through. In the parking lot, I dipped French fries into my Frosty.

I miss how you decorated the house for Christmas. The M&M jar.

I miss your dry skin.

Thin wrists.

Having someone to trace myself back to.

I miss hearing your voice. Seeing your hair turn gray. On your birthday, I miss the pumpkin pie I made when you turned 50. You said,

“I see myself on the young side of 50.”

## Subject Line: Stressed

How did you do it all? How did you manage to raise the four of us, keep the kitchen stocked with groceries, pick us up from piano lessons and tennis practice, work part-time at Barnes & Noble, cook a homemade dinner every night (except Wednesdays, which was Bagel Night), garden, call your parents once a week, run every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, clean and supervise Saturday morning chores, and record our lives through dozens of scrapbooks?

There are days I feel like screaming because I have to read and comment on two pieces for my 5 pm workshop, and the parking lot on Clarke is full, so I have to drive all the way to Irwin and take the shuttle bus to campus. There are days I throw three granola bars into my bag because I haven't grocery shopped in two weeks. There are (many) days I slide a frozen pizza in the oven instead of making the orange tofu and roasted broccoli. Instead these ingredients wait in the refrigerator for weeks until I throw them away.

There are days I gather my belongings to leave in the morning, already late, when I walk past the bathroom where we keep the litter box and a terrible odor assaults me. I peek into the bathroom, see the piles of feces, drop everything, run to get a plastic bag, scoop the feces into the bag, then gather everything and fly out the door. Only to pause as I turn the key in the door. Did I turn the oven off? I never use the oven in the morning. But that doesn't stop me from checking it once, twice, maybe three times before I leave for the day.

There are nights I crawl into bed, exhausted both physically and mentally. Sleep should come, but instead I stare at the ceiling for hours, my mind on hyper speed. Should I have agreed

to the weekend trip to Nashville? Maybe I should stay here and relax and do homework. I haven't even started that paper for Ecocriticism. It's about how the construction of urban highways divided and erased black neighborhoods in cities across America. I'm using the Rondo community in St. Paul as a case study. I'm also looking at highways as a space of political protest. It's all very fascinating, but I have a stack of books and articles to read through. Just looking at the pile makes me nervous. When will I have time to read all of this?

But the trip seems like so much fun and I don't want to miss out on karaoke at the bars or bottomless mimosas at brunch. I don't want to feel excluded from the stories and jokes that will arise from this trip, don't want to scroll through Facebook pictures and taste the acidic regret of opting out. Am I doing the right thing? What if I fail at everything? Tell me what I should do.

This is what I imagine you telling me:

*Alexandra, you're happiest when you're busy. I'm very proud of you. It warms my heart that you're making friends and being social. Are the other people in the program from the south? You should get them to teach you how to make real Southern food, like grits or cornbread.*

*I think the Nashville trip sounds wonderful! Who are you going with and where will you stay? Are you driving or are you carpooling with other people? Make sure you take lots of pictures. Don't worry about Ecocriticism. You'll get the paper done. What is Ecocriticism, by the way? It sounds very fancy. How many pages does the paper have to be? Grad school can be stressful, but now is the time to travel and explore places like Nashville. Years from now, these are things you'll remember.*

*Send me some writing you've done lately. You really do have a way with words. Oh! I almost forgot. I ran into Ms. Storm the other day. She came into Barnes & Noble. She asked*

*about you and she asked about Ryan. She's so glad you're getting your MFA. She said you were quiet in class, but that when you did speak, people paid attention. Did you know she's retiring soon? I think she was one of my favorite teachers at Rosemount. A little wacky, but she really cared.*

*I'm reading a book called The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time for book club. It's about a 15-year old boy who has Asperger's. His neighbor's dog gets murdered and the boy tries to figure out what happened. I just starting reading it, but I like it so far. Liz is hosting the book club this month.*

*We might get our first frost within the next few days, so I've been going around the garden and covering the plants with leaves. I took Dakota outside with me. She thinks it's a fun game to romp around the garden when I'm not throwing the stick for her. But I did get a good picture of her running towards me with the stick in her mouth. An action shot. I'm getting better at working the new camera.*

*Maybe Dad and I will visit for a long weekend. We could rent a place in Savannah. Dad will probably just want to swim (did you know he swam for three hours at the Y yesterday?!) but we could walk around the shops there. I bet they have good seafood in Savannah. And I love those Spanish moss trees.*

*You sound stressed from your email, but just take a deep breath. You'll get through it. Try making a to-do list so you can see what you have to do. That way you don't have to remember everything. Just take it one item at a time and it will get done. Doesn't it feel good to cross things off your list? Try reading before bed to fall asleep. We'll get you started on a multivitamin so you won't be so tired during the day.*

You'd then send me a care package with a bottle of multivitamins, Twizzler's pull-n-peel licorice, glass bottles of Starbucks Frappuccino's, Pringles, dark chocolate caramels with sea salt, and a handwritten note that says:

"Some treats for my busy grad student! You can do it! Love, Mom"

# SPRING

## Ode to CD's

People used to make CD's for each other  
For road trips for parties  
You start blank and they burn  
Songs onto you  
The names  
Scrawled in permanent marker  
Suddenly you belong to a moment in time  
To summer 2006 with chlorine hair  
Grilled brats and sparkling iced tea

## Spotify Playlist

### 1. “Carol of The Bells” | Celtic Woman

*Sweet silver bells,  
All seem to say,  
Throw cares away*

It’s 90 degrees. I’m driving down Carl Vinson Road in Milledgeville, Georgia. “Carol of the Bells” by Celtic Woman plays on Spotify. My passenger laughs. “Who listens to Christmas music in September?”

It’s a wonderful song: the way it builds, the intensity. When I listen to it, anything seems possible. The music literally lifts me up. But the main reason I love this song is because it reminds me of you. It zaps me back to decorating the tree for Christmas, your shiny Christopher Radko ornaments, the M&M jar, those fake candles in every window that you dutifully switched on every night.

I have trouble hearing your voice. Seeing your expressions.

Music helps. I play “Carol of the Bells” and watch a movie of the past. For two minutes and nineteen seconds, you are there, in high definition.

Science explains the link between music and memory. (You know I hate science, but this is actually interesting). The hippocampus and the frontal cortex, two areas of the brain associated with memory, are flooded with information every minute. With all of this data, it can be difficult to retrieve a memory. The rhythm and rhyme of music gives cues to unlock that information.

That's why people remember words set to music (like the ABC's song) better than standard speech.

So the structure of music helps me remember the lyrics to *Carol of the Bells*, but why does this song elicit such strong emotions? Research shows that listening to music increases blood flow to areas of the brain that generate and control emotions. Music also taps into implicit memory, memories outside of conscious awareness. Explicit memory, on the other hand, is a more deliberate recall of the past: what was I doing that summer? Who was I traveling with? Conditions like Alzheimer's disease often damage the explicit memory systems. Located in another part of the brain, implicit memory systems are long-lasting and durable in comparison. Things that affect people from outside of consciousness tend to be powerful. That's why implicit memories make me so emotional.

At home, I play "Carol of the Bells" on repeat. I want to keep watching my memories. But why limit myself to one song? I decide to collect all the songs that make me think of you. A full playlist of movies to watch. So I'm making a playlist on Spotify called "Mom."

## 2. "Hey There Delilah" | Plain White T's

*A thousand miles seems pretty far  
But they've got planes and trains and cars  
I'd walk to you if I had no other way*

Summer 2007. I am thirteen. We drive home from tennis practice. The sun is setting. I am sweaty and tired from running around the court. "Hey There Delilah" plays on the radio. You turn to me and say, "Wouldn't you love if someone sang this to you?" For the first time, I listen to the lyrics.

## 3. "American Pie" | Don McLean

*Do you believe in rock and roll?  
Can music save your mortal soul?  
And can you teach me how to dance real slow?*

We clear dishes from the dinner table and sing “American Pie,” using spatulas as microphones. You know all the words, which is impressive. It’s a long song.

#### **4. “Away in a Manger”**

*Away, away  
He came to this world to make his way*

December 25, 2002. I am nine years old. I stand underneath the bright lights at Woodcrest Church and sing a snazzy version of “Away in a Manger.” A solo. The lights are too bright for me to make out any of the audience members. But you guys come to both services to watch me perform.

My voice comes across angelic and sweet, and I hit even the highest notes, the notes I didn’t hit when practicing in the kitchen countless times. After the second service, you all crowd around me. I am happy, high with endorphins. “That was beautiful,” you say, giving me a hug.

Michaela told me later that you nearly trembled with nervousness for me (Just a few years earlier, I’d forgotten onstage the entire song I memorized for a piano recital and later thrown up in the bathroom). You asked me to sing it later, but each time, my voice seemed to weaken, and I could never hit the highest note. Now I definitely cannot sing. I can’t even whistle. But for that Christmas, underneath those lights, as dozens of people watched, I sang.

You told me later that you were proud of me, not just for singing, but for joining the Christmas pageant. I had been reluctant at first. I didn’t like meeting new people. “It makes me happy that you did this,” you said.

#### **5. “Wake Up” | Hilary Duff**

*Wake up, wake up on a Saturday night,  
Could be New York,  
Maybe Hollywood and Vine,*

Christmas Eve, 2005. We drive to Great Harvest to pick up cherry walnut bread for Christmas morning. “Wake Up” plays on the car radio. I turn up the volume. You tap your hands on the steering wheel.

I love this song the way I love all pop songs. It lets you listen without demanding anything of you. It’s just fun. Dance music.

But pop music may be less frivolous than I realize. A *BBC* article by Tiffany Jenkins explains that pop music often evokes memories more so than other genres. Whether we want it to or not, pop music plays in the backgrounds of our lives. Public places like grocery stores and bars often set the station to contemporary music. As a result, these songs become attached to certain time of our lives.

As we drive along suburban streets, I sing along. I am looking forward to making our favorite appetizers for dinner: shrimp cocktail, pigs in a blanket, soft pretzels. I am looking forward to the “chat pack” game. I am looking forward to waking up the next morning to a million presents scattered around the tree. I am looking forward to the cherry walnut bread sitting on my lap.

Christmas wasn’t the same after you died. Ryan puts it more bluntly: “Christmas died with Mom.” I don’t agree with that. I still enjoy Christmas, but the wonder has dulled. It’s a fun occasion to gather with family. It doesn’t hold the magic it once did. The magic was you. When we played Christmas carols on the piano, you dropped whatever you were in the middle of and sat on the floral printed chair in the piano room. You listened for as long as we would play. “It warms my heart to hear you play,” you said.

The magic was your closet, where for months leading up to Christmas, you stashed gifts. You separated them into piles for each person, counting them to make sure the numbers were equal. The magic was the kitchen, where you let us mix sparkling water and apple juice in the fancy glassware. The magic was the bonfire pit in the backyard, where you encouraged us to tell stories around the circle, each person saying a few sentences, the next person picking up where they left off. You always managed to have marshmallows and graham crackers and Hershey's bars, a fact that I did not appreciate, that I did not realize meant examining the cupboard and writing items on a list and driving to the store. I am constantly running out of items I need—paper towels, cat food—and making last-minute trips to the store. You never seemed harried or agitated, but maybe that's wrong. Maybe you just hid it well.

## 6. “This is My Now” | Jordin Sparks

Spring 2007. We sit next to each other on soft plush couches in the basement. The season 6 finale of *American Idol* plays on TV. It's come down to Jordin Sparks and Blake Lewis. They stand together onstage waiting for Ryan Seacrest to announce the winner. You grab a piece of Twizzler pull-n-peel licorice. When Ryan Seacrest announces Jordin Sparks, we both cheer. Jordin sings “This is My Now.”

*This is my now, and I am breathing in the moment.  
As I look around  
I can't believe the love I see.*

Her performance gives me shivers. I can't remember, but I think you might have cried.

When season 9 of *American Idol* premieres in January 2010, Dad and I watch together. The Twizzlers go stale in the kitchen cupboard. I miss your commentary: “What a beautiful dress!” or “He's not the best singer, but he's adorable.”

Dad and I watch every episode, even when I have too much homework, even when we're both exhausted.

I can't remember who won that year. I had to Google it.

## 7. "Crash and Burn" | Savage Garden

Spring 2008. I am fourteen. You pull up to Fred Wells Tennis Center. I climb in the minivan and slam the door. I shove the earbuds for my iPod Nano in my ears. When you ask, "How was tennis?" I turn up the volume and stare out the window.

You pull out of the parking lot and merge onto the highway. I listen to "Crash on Burn" by Savage Garden on repeat.

*When you feel all alone  
And the world has turned its back on you  
Give me a moment please  
To tame your wild wild heart*

You say something else, but I can't hear you over the music.

A few days earlier, I failed the audition for high school marching band. You thought I did it on purpose. You called the band directors to convince them to let me in. I never wanted to join marching band. You thought I needed marching band to make friends. I told you I hated the trumpet.

In the car, I finally remove the earbuds. They hurt my ears. You say, "Alexandra, I could either be your best friend or your worst enemy."

The fight wasn't about marching band. I realize that now. It was about how I always said "no" to your ideas: volunteer at the Minnesota Zoo, take a downhill ski course, teach a knitting class at a homeless shelter. It was about how I'd rather rent a DVD from Blockbuster on a Friday

night than hang out with friends. I wasn't a normal teenager. You probably would have been overjoyed if I broke curfew.

I think you'd be proud of me now. I just signed up to run a 5k. I joined a meditation group. I teach English Composition to college students. I dream of designing a course that combines kindness, positive psychology, personality profiles, and gratitude. The most important part of this course would be the community. Ancient philosophers and social scientists agree: relationships are the key to the happiness. I want to build a community where people feel safe and able to confide in each other. In this course, we would do a variety of hands-on activities: write thank-you notes, meditate, take walks in the forest, write poetry, detox from technology, explore personality frameworks. I get excited just thinking about the activities I could incorporate. I wish you could help me brainstorm.

#### **8. "Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)" | Beyoncé**

*'Cause if you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it*

September 2009. My birthday weekend. A month before your death. We hover around the computer in the basement. Michaela pulls up the music video for "Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)" on YouTube. She tries to teach us the dance. You have that sneaky smile on your face when you mess up the moves. Like, you probably can do the right moves, but purposefully don't do them right just to get us to laugh at you.

We took pictures and videos of us attempting the Single Ladies dance. I wanted to reference these when writing this letter. I wanted to be more specific. Exactly which moves did you mess up? I texted Caroline and Michaela to ask if they had the photos or videos. Michaela said, "I wish! I know we took video...I just don't know where it is. Probably on a CD somewhere."

If I had known you would die a month after recording the Single Ladies dance, I would have guarded those videos and photos. I would have carefully labeled and organized them. I would have backed them up to the cloud or an external flash drive. I would have emailed them to myself. I would have posted them on Facebook. But I didn't know. I didn't know memories of you would soon become finite, things to collect and cling to.

If I still screamed and threw temper tantrums, this would push me over the edge. These lost memories. The concrete evidence of these memories. I'm left with my imperfect recollection. I can't remember which moves you messed up.

## **9. Annie's Song | John Denver**

October, 2009. A few days after your death. Relatives crowd around the kitchen table. Someone plays a CD. I have never heard "Annie's Song" before. Aunt Kitty sang it at your wedding. Soon, she will sing it at your memorial service.

*You fill up my senses  
Like a night in a forest  
Like the mountains in springtime  
Like a walk in the rain*

I sit on the living room carpet and listen. Really listen. I twist a piece of carpet. I see you and Dad drinking coffee on the deck after dinner. I see Dad in the driver's seat of our minivan, you in the passenger seat with a paper map, as we drive across the country for camping trips. I see you and Dad making a big show of kissing just to get a reaction out of us. When John Denver sings "Let me die in your arms," I can no longer hold back my tears.

I read somewhere that women handle the death of a spouse better than men. That after her spouse dies, a woman functions better in the daily tasks of life—paying a bill, scrubbing a pan, attending a parent-teacher conference—than a man in her situation. That while a widow puts

on lipstick and walks into work, a widower puts on the same pair of forest green overalls, day-after-day, and rips up buckthorn from the backyard. At least, that's what Dad did.

On the day you died, the five of us gathered in the living room and wrote down our worries on sheets of construction paper. Dad wrote, "Will I be able to sleep without her."

I'm not sure if it's useful to compare grief, but if I did, I think Dad's grief would dwarf ours. Us kids, I mean. We loved you and relied on you, but it was different. From the moment we were born, you were preparing to set us free. You told us to bike instead of driving us around. You told us to apply for scholarships so we could pay for college on our own. Someday, we would leave the house and get a job and get married and buy our own house and have our own kids.

But with Dad it was different. You and Dad chose each other, you made your lives together. The idea of an empty nest might sadden some parents, but I think it excited you the same way the first day of school excited you. You wanted us to be on our own so that you and Dad could live out your dreams. You wanted to live in a log cabin. I could see you somewhere remote and beautiful, like Wyoming or Montana. You would grow your own vegetables and heat them in a soup over a wood-burning stove. You and Dad would take off-center selfies while hiking up mountains. You would eat dinner by candlelight.

So when you died, suddenly, at age 50, Dad's entire world shifted. Us kids, we knew that we would grow up and make our own lives and our own futures, but you were Dad's future.

Flash forward nine years. Dad is married to a wonderful woman named Laura. I think you would like her. She makes homemade soup and sends guests home with Tupperware's of the leftovers. She and Dad walk around Lake Harriet and make snow angels. They do yoga in the living room. Laura understands grief. Her first husband got sick and died within a matter of

months. I think people who have experienced this sort of sudden loss go about their lives differently. Not carefree, exactly, but less concerned about things that others might stress over. Or what they themselves might have stressed over in the past.

On the night before you died, I sat at my desk reading my AP Biology textbook. I couldn't understand the concepts, which frustrated me. You called from downstairs, "Alexandra? Alexandra?"

"What?" I shouted back, annoyed that you'd interrupted my concentration. "I'm doing homework."

"Oh, okay," you called back. "I just didn't know where you were."

You, Michaela, and Caroline were downstairs, spreading newspapers across the kitchen table for carving pumpkins. I joined eventually, but my mind lingered on AP biology.

Grief has given me the ability to slam the textbook shut and go downstairs. Grief short-circuited my brain and in the process, reorganized my priorities. I don't think grief erases fear or doubt or anxiety. It just makes them less important. The absolute worst thing that could happen has already happened. This is kind of meta, but I think it fits: I'm trying to finish this letter collection for my thesis in order to graduate from the MFA program. Several of my third-year classmates are panicking about the thesis. Will they finish? Will it be good enough? Sometimes I get swept up in the panic, too. But then I think: worst-case scenario, I don't finish the thesis, or the committee rejects it. I don't graduate. What then? The answer: nothing. Nothing happens. Life continues. I will hike the Appalachian Trail and keep writing and figure something out.

This attitude is different from not caring. You would be horrified at the idea of me throwing away my education. I care a lot about my thesis. I revise and revise, trying to figure out the right words and the right structure. I am grateful for the insightful feedback from my peers

and professors. I am lucky to be here. I believe I have something to say. But I also know that nothing worse than your death could happen. So, in a way, grief is freeing. I will do my best, but if I fail, I know it cannot possibly hurt more than losing you.

When I think about losing you, I think about “Annie’s Song.” Those ragged days after your death. The song makes me cry. But I’m not sad, exactly. I cry because I feel you so powerfully, through the swell of violins, through the images of “a mountain in springtime” and a “walk in the rain.” It’s the purest love song I have ever heard.

#### **10. “Dog Days Are Over” | Florence + the Machine**

*Run fast for your mother and fast for your father  
Run for your children for your sisters and brothers*

August 2010. The summer after you died. Ryan does most of the cooking. Thick Mexican corn cakes. Pesto with fresh basil that he picks from your garden.

The movie *Eat Pray Love* premieres in August. Ryan and I see it together. Inspired by the main character’s journey of food in Italy, Ryan makes a feast. Margherita pizza. Grilled asparagus. Wild mushroom risotto. Spaghetti alla Carbonara. Fried zucchini blossoms.

The afternoon light streams through the blinds. Ryan tears around the kitchen. He makes a mess and never looks at a recipe. The food is delicious.

#### **11. “Wagon Wheel” | Old Crow Medicine Show**

July 2011. Ryan, Michaela, Caroline, and I sit around grandma and grandpa’s kitchen table in Chesapeake, Virginia. Ryan plays a guitar. Cicadas hum outside. It’s after dinner. The smell of grandma’s spaghetti and meatballs lingers in the air. The four of us sing:

*Rock me mamma like the wind and the rain  
Rock me mamma like a south bound train  
Hey, mamma rock me*

Music binds people together. Cretien van Campen, author of *The Proust Effect: The Senses as Doorways to Lost Memories*, researches the ways different senses evoke memories of his childhood. He argues that while smell invokes personal memories, the experience of music tends to be very social. We listen to music together. We hear music at a party while dancing or talking with friends. We go to concerts together. And, in the case of your children, we sing together.

This song brings me back to that road trip. The salty Pacific Ocean. The burning sun. Caroline walking towards the beach with the Winnie-the-Pooh blanket you made so long ago. Happy hours every afternoon with the grandparents and cousins, getting tipsy from mojitos and white russians. Cards around the dinner table. Grandma knocks over her wine glass. Red wine spills on the white tablecloth. She laughs and laughs. Her voice and laugh and ditziness remind me so much of you. She says, “How nice that is!” just like you did.

## 12. “Do You Realize??” | The Flaming Lips

*Do you realize that you have the most beautiful face  
Do you realize we're floating in space,  
Do you realize that happiness makes you cry*

February 24, 2019. I am twenty-five. Rachel and I drive back from hiking in the North Georgia mountains. I watch the trees blur past. My feet hurt in a good way. “Do You Realize??” plays on Spotify. I turn to Rachel and say, “If someone sang this to me, I would probably marry them.”

## 13. “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now” | Starship

*And we can build this thing together  
Stand this stormy weather  
Nothing's gonna stop us now*

I will dance to this song at my wedding. In this imaginary wedding, the dance floor is outside. Twinkly lights twist around trees. It smells like gardenias and lilacs. My husband and I dance. I'm tipsy from red wine and from the love that surrounds us. I spin in circles; I see people from Rosemount, from Macalester, from Georgia. You're dancing, too. I see you, arms bent at your sides, shaking your hips.

## Keeping Records

People keep posting Insta-stories of decorating for Christmas. It made me think of 2006, a few years before you died. Insta-stories did not exist yet. The silver Nikon camera took video as I walked around the Rosemount house. A *Celtic Woman* CD played from the white radio in the kitchen. On the dining room table, you unpacked your collection of Christopher Radko ornaments. We wrapped lights around the tree. I turned the lens around to face us; you wore a wool sweater and I wore a Santa hat. You and Dad always kept the house frigid. Slippers and sweaters. I pressed the stop button and showed you the video. “I like that,” you said when it finished. “That’s very nice.”

A few days later, a message flashed at me when I tried to take a picture. Out of storage. I click. Delete. Click. Delete. The video takes up too much space. Delete.

I don’t believe in regrets. I learn from every experience, especially the ones I screw up. It makes me more compassionate, more human. But I regret deleting that video. I regret deleting your laugh and your voice. It was an ordinary moment, and we were happy.

After you died, I forgot the details that made you real. You stretched your leg on the bathroom counter while you flossed. Your wrists were tiny. You turned all the items in the cupboard face-out.

I forgot the little moments: the ordinary, everyday occurrences that make up a life. What did you make for dinner? What did we talk about? What was that bonfire like? That trip to Gertens? That snowball fight?

About a year ago, I created a Google Doc called “One Good Thing a Day.” It started as a low-pressure way to focus on the positive. No matter how gloomy the day, I tried to find one small bright part: it was 60 degrees and sunny, EllieRoo looked adorable in her hoodie, etc. Research shows that keeping a gratitude journal boosts happiness. Grateful people exercise more, eat healthier, and are less likely to smoke or abuse alcohol.

I also wanted to record my life. For Christmas, you often gave me beautiful patterned journals, but my entries never lasted more than a few weeks. I wanted to write long and lyrical entries, but when I failed to do that, I became discouraged and quit. But I could find time to write one sentence. Looking back through old entries, I’ve discovered that writing a single bullet point does conjure vivid memories of that day. For example, on January 11, 2018, I wrote: “Went rollerskating with Rach and since it was 2 pm on a Thursday, we had the whole rink to ourselves! It was a blast skating around listening to upbeat music. We even played a game of pool.”

I wish I had the Google Doc when you were alive. Time moves fast. The Google Doc is a way of preserving my life now, of compensating for all the memories I don’t remember of you. Recording my life has become a passion. I’ve started to experiment with multimedia as well. For example, I downloaded an app called “One Second Everyday,” in which you film one second each day and the app compiles it into a video collage. The date appears on the bottom left. Some people film every day for a year to document their senior year of college or their baby’s first year of life. Every day, I look for a “one second video,” something small to capture my life right then and there. I learned to hold the phone horizontal instead of vertical, to not move but to capture other subjects moving (otherwise people can get motion sickness from watching), and that one second every day can capture a life. I’ve also tried, and this is difficult, to be honest. In the social

media age, which you never experienced, there is a pressure to glamorize your life. So I film videos of my niece Dorothy laughing, but also videos of her crying. I film one second of a gorgeous hike in the mountains, but also film the copier spitting out paper. Idealization can be as dangerous as condemnation. I have the tendency to idealize you, because you are dead, because you will no longer nag or lecture or fight with me. But I try to remember you as human, as beautiful but flawed. In the one second a day videos, I try to remember my life as it is: mundane and exciting, beautiful and dull, fun and boring. An artifact of truth.

When Michaela, Dad, and I traveled to Iceland and Ireland this summer, I made us record nightly “podcasts.” We spent about ten minutes talking about our adventures that day. At the time, it seemed impossible to forget petting those donkeys or Dad burning his socks in the microwave or the Caesar salad with bacon and lemon chicken we ate in a restaurant overlooking the ocean. But we would forget. By the way, I think you would die laughing at Dad burning his socks in the microwave. He wanted to dry them. If that doesn’t explain Dad in a nutshell, I don’t know what does. Voice recordings are special; they capture the warmth of the moment. It makes the past come alive. It brings people to life. When you died, I inherited your cell phone. It took me a few weeks to change your voicemail message. I couldn’t bring myself to erase your voice and re-record my own. I replayed it dozens of times. It was one of the few recordings I had of you. Does this sense of scarcity fuel my obsession with recording? When I finally hit the button for “erase and re-record,” it was like losing you all over again.

Keeping records not only helps me remember my life, but also pushes me to challenge myself and try new things. For example, I made a Google Doc called “One new hike each month for 2018.” I often go to the same forests around town. I wanted to push myself to get out of my comfort zone and explore new places. The Google Doc gave me a tangible, realistic goal: go on

one new hike each month. Some of my favorite hikes this year include Raven Cliffs Trail in North Georgia, Skógafoss waterfall in Iceland, Arabia Mountain in Georgia, and Crowder Mountain in North Carolina. In the Google Doc, I write the name of the hike under the month and then a paragraph about the experience. When I hiked Arabia Mountain with Rachel, we heard some movement in the forest: “Rachel gasped and said, ‘I think there’s a moose!’ We were both freaked out. I made her go investigate. Turns out it was just a brown barrel.” These details seem indelible at the time. But they fade. I also include pictures from each hike. In addition to appreciating the beautiful scenery, I find it interesting to scroll from month to month and observe my hair getting longer.

These Google Docs provide a wealth of data about my own life. Maybe this is egotistical, but I’m endlessly fascinated by myself. (I also don’t think I’m alone; why else would people zoom in on their own face in group pictures?) I mine the Google Doc for trends. For example, I tend to sleep a lot after breakups. Something like “got 10 hours and 23 minutes of sleep last night!” commonly appears in the days after a breakup. Why? Because even though breakups suck, they also offer relief from the stress, anxiety, and restless nights that consume me before the breakup. I once dated someone who I really liked but wasn’t compatible with: one of those on-again, off-again relationships I needed to figure out for myself would not work out. About a week before a breakup, he sent a text that worried me and so I called him. Five times. In the middle of the night. (I can see you shaking your head. I know. I know. I don’t have the best judgment at night). He called me back the next morning and things were temporarily okay, but the tension kept building until it finally exploded a week later when we started yelling at each other over the phone. The day after, in the Google Doc, I wrote about the breakup: “I know there’s probably good that will come out of this, even though it’s hard to feel that right now. He

cancelled plans twice in a row and sees no problem with that, makes me anxious. It's both a relief and a shock to be done with him."

As you can see, I was trying really, really hard to be positive. But I felt awful. Here's something else I wrote after the breakup:

Last night I went to bed without brushing my teeth or washing my face. I just peeled out my contacts and fell into bed, my head pounding, my mouth dry. I'd been jaggedly crying for a few hours, always on the verge, sometimes sobs, and sometimes a shaky voice I tried to control. My best friend told me I deserve better. Which isn't what I want to hear. I don't want to think about what I deserve with some imaginary future person. I want him.

We broke up on November 21, 2017. I thought I would never get over him. But when I search his name in the Google Doc for 2018, do you know how many times it appears? Once. And now, when I go through a breakup, I hold close the knowledge that eventually his name will fade from my vocabulary. Though he once seemed central to my world, I will build a new world.

The ability to find anything with the "command-f" function on the Mac fascinates me. I track not only relationships, but friendships, interests, and personal growth. I didn't drive in college. When I started grad school, I bought a car, but was too afraid to drive it out of the dealership (Ryan drove it back to my apartment). It took me a long time to work up the courage to drive to the Atlanta airport. But I've driven so much over the past three years that I no longer worry about driving on highways or in unfamiliar areas. When I search variations of "driving," I watch myself become more comfortable. For example, on February 16, 2018, I wrote: "hiked Raven Cliff Falls Trail in North Georgia with Brittany. It was well worth the drive through the curvy mountain roads. I'm getting more comfortable driving in unfamiliar areas." On March 26, 2018: "actually enjoyed the drive home from Atlanta. I liked being alone in my car blasting music and singing along. Going for a drive usually puts me in a better mood, and I think that's because you feel powerful and full of possibilities. Sometimes I'm tempted to just keep driving."

Reading these make me proud. It reminds me that I'm capable of growing and conquering something that once seemed terrifying or impossible. I'd like to think you are proud of me. Maybe these accomplishments seem trivial for you in the spirit world, as you are no longer wrapped up in the daily minutiae of life on Earth. Probably Heaven has no cars. No exhaust-choked highways. Just gardens and winding paths through the woods. But do you remember gripping the seat when I drove with my learner's permit? White knuckles. Now I think we would roll down the windows and blast Celine Dion. For the first time, I would drive you instead of the other way around.

Here's another thing that would surprise you: I actually like hiking. I complained so much during those camping trips we took growing up. I'm sorry. I should have appreciated them more. Sometimes I think I could title every letter to you, "I'm sorry, I should have \_\_\_\_" and just fill in the blank. Anyway, the Google Doc proves my love for nature. In 2018, I've written "hike," "hiking," or "hiked" 139 times. Life is chaotic, but the fact that hiking appears so often tells me I make time for it for a reason. It makes me happy. This seems rather obvious, but in our success-driven culture, it's easy to dismiss something like hiking as selfish or a waste of time. In reality, it's the opposite. Hiking energizes me and makes me more productive. If I'm having a bad day, I know from the Google Doc that going outside into nature will most likely make me feel better.

The Google Doc comes in handy when I write a birthday card or a thank-you note. Instead of writing something vague like, "I appreciate your kindness," I search the person's name to find a more meaningful tidbit. In the Google Doc, specific details abound. On March 7, 2018, I wrote, "Brittany played Taylor Swift's new CD during the car ride home. I miss listening to CDs because you listen to the whole album instead of only the most popular. She let me borrow

it, so now I can keep listening to it!” Then, in her birthday card, I write something like, “Thank you for letting me borrow your Taylor Swift CD. I’m glad we have the same taste in music!”

Sometimes I look back in the Google Doc to see what I wrote on this day a year ago. It puts things in perspective. This is both comforting and sobering. A year after a breakup, I might look back and think, “Wow, I can’t believe I thought I would never get over this person.” But it also reminds me that life is fleeting. For example, a year ago today, on November 8, 2017, I wrote: “EllieRoo was so cute in her Adidas outfit. Kate got it for her for soccer nationals.” In May, they moved back to Minnesota and I’ve only seen EllieRoo twice since then. I used to see her all the time. We’d have Sunday night dinners and take walks around the block. Sometimes they asked me to babysit at seven in the morning. I’d do it, but also wish I could have slept longer. Looking back at the Google Doc, I realize my luck in living close to EllieRoo during her first year of life. Though something might seem unpleasant at the time (waking up early or trying to calm EllieRoo when she cries), the Google Doc reminds me to appreciate what’s in front of me. So much changes in a year. I will miss these moments.

Through sharing the Google Doc, I’ve deepened my relationships with friends and family. It’s actually begun to replace social media for me. I told Rachel about the Google Doc and she was curious, so I shared it with her. She read through it every few days. I told her she should add her own “one good thing a day” underneath mine, since she was looking at the document anyway. When she started doing that, something interesting happened. I began writing longer, more energetic, and more detailed posts, because I knew she would read it. Sometimes I include multiple good things about the day, instead of just one.

On December 18, 2017, I wrote:

- found a cool Southern Food Truck cookbook at the Dollar Store for \$3. Unfortunately, have to give it away at party tonight but will go back to get another for myself
- getting better at planning lessons on the fly
- got a cool new dish soap called “Dawn Hand Renewal” and it’s supposed to soften your hands after three uses. Also smells like pomegranate

I look forward to opening the Google Doc and seeing a block of purple (she uses purple font and I use black). We have a long-distance friendship. She lives in Wyoming and I live in Georgia, so this document gives us a way to connect and learn about the small moments of each other’s lives that we might not know otherwise. I get much more excited to “check the Google Doc” for “posts” than I ever do to check Facebook.

Facebook and Instagram have become diluted with people I no longer see or interact with: former classmates, coworkers, neighbors, etc. Many of the pictures and posts are meaningless to me. Humans need to feel connected. But the superficial interactions that take place over social media do not provide substantial or deep connections.

People also project their fantasy selves on social media. I find that boring. I’d much rather read about the time Rachel went for a hike alone and encountered a group of people who asked her to take their photo. As she did, a man walking by offered to take a picture with her in it, too. “Took all of my willpower not to lose it and die laughing at the awkwardness,” she wrote. Social media pressures us to be perfect and beautiful. But I feel most connected and happy when I’m laughing with others and able to reveal my truest, most awkward self.

Last year, Michaela divorced her husband. You never met him (probably for the best; he’s a loser). I started a separate Google Doc with her. I thought writing something positive about each day might help her through the divorce.

On February 16, 2018, she wrote:

I laughed SO hard in BH supervision (I'm giving supervision to the postdocs and interns). The postdoc was saying how paranoid he was when someone who was just diagnosed with the flu sneezed on his couch and we brainstormed some protective measures we could take: wrap plastic around all the couches and floor and if anyone sneezes or coughs, just spray them with Lysol. Hahaha. It was so funny.

When we talk on the phone, she mentions something like a yoga goodbye party or a household project and I know exactly what she's talking about. Because of the Google Doc, she doesn't have to provide background information or context. She launches into the story.

Happiness expert Gretchen Rubin says, "When you see people all the time, you have a lot to say to them; when you talk to them more rarely, it's easy to fall into a "What's new?" "Not much, what's new with you?" type conversation."

The Google Doc fosters deeper and more meaningful conversations. It also makes me think about good things throughout the day. For example, I might think: "This skillet burger is delicious. It's definitely making the Google Doc!" It's easy to ruminate on the past or worry about the future, but the Google Doc pushes me to think about the present moment. What is happening right now? I'm eating a skillet burger. What do I appreciate about this moment? It's delicious.

There is value in capturing exactly how we feel, exactly in that moment. In June 2012, a few days after we graduated from high school, Nikki and I drove to a graduation party. We were crossing a divided highway when a Chevy truck slammed into us. Everyone was okay, but the cars were wrecked. Afterwards, her stepdad told her to write down everything that happened, even the smallest details that seemed irrelevant, like what was playing on the radio. She wrote it all down hours after the accident. This was for insurance reasons, I think, to have a record of what happened unclouded by time or emotions. But it was also cathartic. I write to get things out

of my head, to stop them from playing over and over again as I try to fall asleep or wash the dishes or drive to school.

I keep records of every first date. I create a Google Doc with my date's name and then spend 10 or 15 minutes writing down anything I remember about the date. Ideally, I do this the same night or the day afterwards. I'm not trying to be literary. It's a bullet-point list of first impressions, conversation topics, details about him, my reactions, etc.

For example, I wrote this after my first (and only) date with "Gunner":

- I ordered fish tacos and he ordered a bleu cheese burger with bacon on top and fried okra. He let me try a piece of okra and it was alright. He said it's a huge southern thing and was surprised I'd never had any.
- talked a lot about himself
- wore a button down long-sleeve shirt. A few of the buttons at the top were open
- talked about hunting, his various injuries from fishing, motocross, four-wheeling, go-kart, and a thumb scar from when he was cutting firewood with a machete and was "very intoxicated."
- Good at spelling and scrabble
- Has an older and younger sister. Showed me a picture of the younger one. I said "she's really pretty!" and he said "she's a bitch."
- owns 18 guns. Keeps them in safe in his closet
- He showed me his pistol and took out the bullets and I held it and pulled the trigger. Made a clicking noise which startled me. It was heavier than I was expecting. Explained the different types of bullets but I didn't really get it.

Sometimes the date goes nowhere and sometimes I date him for a while, in which case it's interesting to look back at my first impressions. Even if I never see him again after the first date, making the list never seems like a waste of time. I've gotten so into the habit of recording first dates that it feels incomplete not to, like all the information and feelings float around without an anchor. In typing them, I no longer feel the pressure to remember.

I even have a Google Doc called "Things Every Girl Wants to Hear" that documents the lousy things guys have said to me. Rachel created the document as a joke after we discussed the callous remarks of guys we've dated. For example, "I'll be less resistant to kissing you," and "I like texting you. I just don't respond if I'm busy or you're bothering me." We both had plenty of things to add. When I shared the document with another friend (who had just been dumped) she added some text messages the guy had sent her. My favorite was "Thank you for being brave." It seems like keeping this list would make a person feel worse instead of better. But every time I look over the list, my mood brightens. There's something about seeing all of those remarks laid out so bare that helps me put things in perspective. Sharing the document with friends and reading what they add comforts me. It creates a kinship. Others deal with this, too. It allows me to reframe these semi-insults into something that makes me laugh.

You'd get a kick out of "Things Every Girl Wants to Hear." I remember you told me about that guy you once dated who said he'd never finished a book in his life. You broke up with him soon after. You died in 2009, before the rise of smartphones, before we could document our lives with ease. I write a lot about distancing myself from technology: block social media, turn my phone off at night, only check my email twice a day. But technology does help me. Keeping a gratitude journal, documenting hikes and first dates, filming one second a day, recording

podcasts with the family—technology calms me down. Recording my life gives me a sense of control over my life.

You died suddenly. I was sixteen. I didn't ask enough questions; I didn't even know what questions to ask. You died nine years ago and my memories are like smoke. I was young. I took you for granted. I didn't think to write down what you made for dinner or what we talked about in the car on the way to tennis practice. I thought these moments would be endless.

Now I pay attention.

## Barnes & Noble

In my Creative Nonfiction seminar, we were given the assignment to write about place. I thought about where I was sitting. You would hate it. A small classroom with no windows. Ugly blue carpet. Fluorescent lights. I tried to dim the lights, to make it look less like an exam room in a hospital, but it just looked creepier. You loved natural light. The first thing you said when you woke me up: “Open the blinds and let the day in!”

Sitting in that ugly room, I thought about windows. I thought about the kitchen in our house in Rosemount, warm from sunlight and from your homemade pizza in the oven. The yellow wallpaper. The sun faces and decorative plates on the walls. White lace curtains. The yellow tea kettle. The floor swept, the counters scrubbed. The window above the sink that looked out onto the deck, onto your gardens. The cuckoo clock that you and dad bought in Germany on your 10th anniversary. I think about pouring tall glasses of milk for dinner, how you trusted us with that gallon jug. I think about sitting at the kitchen table with my algebra textbook as you chopped carrots or dunked chicken breast into eggs and breadcrumbs. I think about singing and dancing to “Single Ladies” as we cleaned up after dinner, or that time we played Guesstures at the kitchen table. Your word was “skin,” and you pulled your shirt up and frantically pointed to your body. None of us could speak we were laughing so hard.

But then I think, I cannot go to that kitchen. Another family lives in that house. Besides, what made the kitchen was you. Your presence.

So I go to Barnes & Noble. You started working at Barnes & Noble when I entered kindergarten. You could have worked as an accountant and made a lot more money, but you wanted part-time hours so you could be home when I got home from school. On days with no school, like President's Day or teacher workshop days, you took me with you to work. I read all morning on the overstuffed chairs and then joined you in the cafe for your 15-minute lunch break. You had a 50 percent discount and let me order whatever I wanted. I loved it.

As a teenager, I accompanied you on errands and we stopped by Barnes and Noble for half-priced caramel fraps. (By the way, those fraps are way too sweet for me now. Now I drink dark roast coffee with a splash of half and half.) I went to Barnes & Noble with my friends to page through magazines. We took personality quizzes and looked at pictures of Nick Jonas, who is one year and one day older than me. I thought he was the cutest Jonas Brother.

This summer, I worked at a camp for middle schoolers in North Carolina. On my day off, I went to Barnes & Noble in Charlotte and sat there for hours reading books about body language, zodiac signs, the five love languages, birth order. I love to read anything to understand myself and others better. At Barnes & Noble, time seems to pause. Everything feels bright and full of possibility. So many books stacked on those shelves. Entire worlds. There's a phrase called "lost time." It refers to being so absorbed in something, you lose track of time. That's how I feel at Barnes & Noble.

You loved books. I can picture the stack of books on your nightstand. You belonged to two different book clubs: one for the neighborhood ladies and the other with your co-workers at Barnes & Noble. You were always reading.

Once, we drove home from a tennis practice or an ice-skating lesson or something that required a lot of time in the car. You were telling me about one of those books on your

nightstand. Sometimes during these monologues, I tuned you out. Your descriptions of the books tended to drag on. But once, I remember listening to every word with fascination, I kept asking questions, I kept probing for more detail.

When you stopped talking, I asked, “So what happens next?”

“Well,” you said. “That’s as far I am.”

I love to read, Mom. Thank you for taking me to work with you at Barnes & Noble and letting me read for hours and hours in those comfy chairs. Thank you for giving me piles of books for Christmas. Thank you for swiping those Advanced Reader Copies from the table in the breakroom for me. I shouldn’t have complained about the covers being ripped off. You saw them and thought of me. I collected many of these coverless books and they spanned many genres—mysteries, choose-your-own-adventure, fantasy, historical fiction—books I never would have considered on my own.

Right now, I’m reading Michelle Obama’s memoir *Becoming*. She writes about her losing her dad in her late 20’s and her experience of grief:

It hurts to live after someone has died. It just does. It can hurt to walk down a hallway or open the fridge. It hurts to put on a pair of socks, to brush your teeth. Food tastes like nothing. Colors go flat. Music hurts, and so do memories. You look at something you'd otherwise find beautiful--a purple sky at sunset or a playground full of kids—and it only somehow deepens the loss. Grief is so lonely this way.

I miss discussing books with you. I miss your 50 percent discount at B&N. I miss the way you thought of me when you saw a book and the way you knew, even when I was a child, that I would fall in love with words.

I am writing this book of letters to you. It may hit the shelves of Barnes & Noble one day. But it’s not about getting published. Or appearing on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Or going on a book tour. Or making a lot of money. (Though all of those things would be nice.) It’s about

reading *The Geography of Bliss* at the kitchen table long after I've finished my coffee. It's about staying up too late to finish Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming*. It's about the afternoon light fading as I write, the room becoming dark without my awareness. It's about my childhood, when I curled next to you on the couch as you read aloud from picture books. It's about how books make me feel: both anchored and free.

# SUMMER

## Aubade

3:45 am and the suburbs sleep under an inky sky.  
We are going somewhere faraway and beautiful.

We merge onto the highway and a semi-truck passes,  
the seat belt digs into me,  
the car smells sour and stuffy.

I cannot sleep.

My yellow pillowcase with blue flowers  
propped against the window of our minivan,  
my legs stretched across my sister's lap,  
I stare at the blur of cornfields,  
the sky lightens little by little.  
A slow rotation through black,  
then gray, then cream.

A sunny-side up egg oozing pink and purple.  
Even at six it makes me sad.

The sky fades into itself,  
becomes blue and boring.

Goodbye sunrise,  
goodbye six-year old self,  
you hate long car rides but look at your family.  
Look at your mom holding her thermos of too-strong coffee,  
look at your sister shuffling through her CD's,  
look at your dad's oversized sunglasses.

All you see are the hours ahead of you,  
the nylon seats and muffin crumbs,  
the hundreds of mile markers,  
this minivan a prison for your cramped legs.

But this minivan holds everyone you love.

Years from now you will be scattered—  
Georgia,  
Colorado,  
Minnesota,  
North Dakota,  
Heaven.

Do not complain about the hours on the road.  
Look out the window.  
You are going somewhere faraway and beautiful.

## Unplugged

Remember that time you went on a garden tour and it was pouring rain, like buckets and buckets of rain? You still went because the garden tour had been scheduled months earlier and because you'd been looking forward to it. You wore a yellow raincoat and, for once, put the phone in your pocket. When you got home, I met you in the garage where you unzipped the raincoat.

“I tried calling you,” I said.

“But I had my phone with me,” you said. “On full volume. Why didn't I hear it?” You pulled the phone from your pocket and the screen was messed up, the front image distorted, the lights hitting and bouncing off each other.

We found a hole in the pocket of your raincoat. The cell phone had gotten wet and was ruined. You seemed more stunned than anything. More like you were thinking, “I wonder why I didn't notice the hole in my pocket?” than, “Oh my God, my life is over because my cell phone broke. I'm so stupid” accompanied by a panic attack that would probably be my reaction now if something like that happened.

To you, the whole incident became a funny story to tell later, a lesson about checking pockets, but never anything that caused you anxiety or distress.

What upset you? If you didn't care about a ruined phone, what did you care about? When I think about the times you were upset, it mostly had to do with us. For instance, the time Ryan grew impatient with taking family photos in the backyard. He and Michaela were both in college

at that point. It was difficult to get everyone together. Ryan left after only a few photos. That was one of the few times I saw you cry.

I also think about the moment at UMORE Park, the summer before you died. That summer, you became a docent for the butterfly garden. You prepared talking points on neon-colored index cards and practiced in front of us. During the open house in August, I watched from afar as you led a group around the garden. Your eyes were bright; your cheeks flushed with nervousness and excitement.

It was a sticky August evening. Mosquitoes buzzed around bowls of egg salad sitting on picnic tables. When you greeted us after the tour, I was complaining about the corn-on-the-cob stuck in my teeth. Caroline was texting. Michaela was late.

I cannot write this without crying. I think about you walking toward us, beaming and excited, finally doing something for yourself. I think of all the piano recitals you sat through, all the tennis practices you drove me to. You cared so much about the small details of our lives. On that sticky August night, we had no interest in yours.

It hurt you. Our distraction. You wanted us to show up on time, to pay attention to your garden tour, to put the phone away. I've been reading about the five love languages lately. I think yours was probably quality time. (The love languages include quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, and gift-giving.) Here is the description of quality time:

In Quality Time, nothing says "I love you" like full, undivided attention. Being there for this type of person is critical, but really being there—with the TV off, fork and knife down, and all chores and tasks on standby—makes you feel truly special and loved. Distractions, postponed activities, or the failure to listen can be especially hurtful. Whether it's spending uninterrupted time talking with someone else or doing activities together, you deepen your connection with others through sharing time.

This is probably why the phone didn't matter that much to you. It takes away from the present moment. You valued deep conversations. You gave your full attention. In case you're

wondering, my love language is also quality time. It annoys me when people are on their phones when we're having a conversation. I can't stand when people are late or cancel plans. I like spending time with people, even if we're not doing anything special. I could spend my birthday running errands. If I'm with someone I love, I have the best time. Maybe that's why I loved grocery shopping with you when I was younger. That and you let me pick my favorite Little Debbie snacks.

Since my love language is quality time, you might think that I likewise don't care about my phone. Unfortunately, you'd be wrong. I have an unhealthy relationship with my phone. It comes with me everywhere—to the classroom, the kitchen table, the bathroom. It charges next to me while I'm sleeping. When I wake up in the middle of the night, anxiety curls inside of me until I press that home button, and the screen lights up with texts, Snapchats, everything I've missed in my sleep.

I guess I should back up. You don't even know what Snapchat is. Phones have changed so much since you died. Smartphones have replaced flip phones. You would be dazzled by how much these smartphones can do. Need directions as you're driving? The GPS tells you exactly where to go. Need to make dinner? Google a recipe. Need to reply to an email on-the-go? There's an app for that. The iPhone is everything in one—camera, computer, calculator, music-player, and phone. There are apps to count steps and apps to track your period. There are apps like Snapchat in which you send pictures that disappear after a few seconds. I imagine you'd find that absurd. Why would the pictures disappear? What is the point of that? A lot of things I do on my phone are pointless. I hate myself for the mindless scrolling, yet find myself opening an app without consciously deciding to. I struggle to reply to texts from close friends yet somehow find the time to scroll through Instagram for hours.

What was life like before all this technology? I'm listening to a song called "Vinyl" by Fly by Midnight: "I wish we met in '78. Oh wouldn't it be great to get your number on a napkin?"

It made me think of how you and Dad met. He told me the story. In February 1980, Dad noticed you from across a crowded bar. "She had on a white sweater and jeans and a lovely, lovely smile," he said. You first noticed his sideburns. It was after a Fordham University basketball game. Dad went his brothers-in-law and you went with your sisters. He asked you to dance. Afterwards you talked and he got your phone number. You were 20 years old. He was 21.

What was life like without texting? If Dad wanted to get in touch with you, he had to call you. He called your home phone, and when Grandpa answered, he asked to speak with you. He spoke to you in real-time, with the awkward pauses and laughter and teasing and warmth that came with it.

In dating nowadays, people rarely call each other. At least not in the beginning. We just text. I guess it's safer. Less potential for embarrassment. You have time to construct a response. But it also creates so much anxiety. You have to wait. Sometimes the response never comes. In what I think is a cruel feature, sometimes you can see when someone has "read" your text and chosen not to respond. Since you always have your phone, you are constantly reminded that the person has not texted you back. It would be nice to go back to home phones and answering machines. You could leave in the morning and go about your day in ignorant bliss, without constantly checking for rejection.

Even if the person does text you back, the nature of texting makes it difficult to decipher tone and meaning. It could lead to so many misunderstandings. And if texting wasn't enough to ruin romance, now there are dating apps! You swipe through people in your area (complete

strangers) and if you “match” (both like each other), you can start messaging. It sometimes leads to a date. The apps make dating more convenient, I guess, but it also makes it more superficial. Since there is no real-life connection, people tend to treat each other worse than if you had a connection through work or school. It’s easy to ignore someone you never interact with in your day-to-day life. Also, dating apps seem to force a sped-up relationship. If you met in person, you could get to know each slowly and more naturally without the pressure of “dating.”

My best friend Rachel and I have decided to no longer use dating apps, which may not seem like a big deal to you, but nearly everyone in my generation uses them. I don’t want to meet my future husband on a dating app. I want a good story. Yesterday I watched a video about hiking the Appalachian Trail. Someone commented, “I met my wife on the AT in 1982 when I fixed her shoe with duct tape. Two grandkids later, here we are!”

I made a “19 for 2019” list and one of the items was “ask someone out.” This would probably astonish you. I know you worried about me as a child, about my shyness. I refused to even answer the phone. But lately I’ve been trying to push myself out of my comfort zone. I think putting this on the list will make me more open and more likely to strike up a conversation with someone I’m interested in. I can’t see myself randomly approaching someone on the street and asking them out, but if I meet someone I seem to click with, putting this on the list will make me more likely to take a risk and ask them out. I decided that even if I get rejected, I can cross “ask someone out” off my list. You always said it feels good to cross things off your list.

Remember the stack of post-it notes you kept by the phone? You made a checklist for each day. I remember looking at your neat cursive handwriting when I answered the phone. You also had a 12-month calendar on the inside of the kitchen cupboard above the phone. This was life before technology. I wonder if you would still use these pen-and-paper systems today. In the

top drawer of your secretary, you had an address book. I think it might please you to know I have a Google doc called “Address Book.” I told Michaela about that once, and she said, “Oh my gosh! That’s such a good idea. I always have to search on Google maps to find Carol and Ben’s address.” After you died, I looked for the first time at the monthly planner you kept in your nightstand. You marked when the lilies first bloomed. You wrote things like when to plant certain flowers and Garden Club duties and appointments. You made sketches of what the backyard would look like with your dream gardens, which plants would go where. I used to have a paper planner as well, but sometime during college I switched to Google Calendar, which syncs to my phone.

I still really like post-it notes. I have an assortment of neon colors—orange, pink, and green. I write tasks on them and stick them to the wall above my desk. Right now, one says “Reach out to sponsors,” another says “meet w/leasing office Thurs,” and a third says, “thank-you cards.” When I finish the task, I get the satisfaction of pulling the post-it from my wall and throwing it in the trash. This in-depth description of my post-it note routine might bore other people, but I think you would find it fascinating. You loved discussing systems of organization. You loved hearing about my life.

I wish I could call you and tell you about my life. Writing these letters makes me feel more connected to you, but nothing can replace the warmth of your voice, your laugh. If we both had iPhones, we could Facetime. You could show me how much snow has piled up on the deck. I could show you the chickpea crepes I made for dinner. I could call you on the way to class. I could tell you about the interventions I’ve staged for myself. I deleted Snapchat. I deleted Instagram. I deleted Facebook. I deleted email. (I still have these accounts, but I deleted the apps from my phone). I put my phone on the top shelf of my closet. I stopped taking pictures for a

day. These things would interest you. You would ask me questions and mail me a *Star Tribune* article you came across with tips on how to “unplug.” You would carefully clip the article from the newspaper, place it in an envelope, write my Georgia address, stick a stamp on it, and drop it in the mailbox.

I think you’d prefer snail mail over email. Just like you’d prefer real books over Kindle. You were old-fashioned like that. When you left the house, you rarely brought your cell phone. Or you’d have it, but you’d have forgotten to charge it. Or you’d have it, but forget to turn the volume on, so when my name flashed across the screen silently, the phone stayed buried in the recesses of your purse. Most of the time, you just left it at home. I told you, “Mom, you need to bring your phone with you. This why you have a cell phone.”

Now, my phone consumes me. I envy your non reliance on it, your “oh well” attitude, your ability to get around without a GPS, to live without constantly checking Facebook, email, Snapchat, etc. I know that part of this stems from the fact that you died in 2009, in an era before the rise of the smartphone, but I like to believe that even today, you’d forget your cell phone because you’re more interested in the brick-and-mortar, in the flesh and blood, in the way that flowers spread their perfume, and you would live in this world, fully, instead of the world of screens.

## I Want to Go Home

When I started college, I didn't get care packages from you. I didn't open a cardboard box with a bottle of multivitamins and a handwritten note. When I studied abroad in Florence, I didn't buy you a pashmina scarf from the San Lorenzo market. When I moved to Georgia, I didn't call you crying about the ants that invaded my kitchen. When I hike the Appalachian Trail in two months, you will not meet me in a trail town. You will not comment on my tan or hug me tightly or take me and Rachel out for a nice dinner.

When I feel homesick, I want to call you. I can never call you. Are homesickness and grief intertwined? Do we think we miss a place when we actually miss a person?

I want to understand this feeling, so I search for what writers, philosophers, psychologists, and even my students have to say about homesickness.

### **Where does homesickness come from?**

*“He breathed in. He breathed out.*

*He forgot how to exhale when he wasn't at home.”*

—Maggie Stiefvater, *The Raven King*

People over the age of 18 don't usually talk about homesickness. They associate it with sleepaway camps and moving into college dorms, not with adulthood. But homesickness affects people of all ages. In fact, homesickness stems from early human society. Mark Leary, professor

of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, points out that unlike other animals, humans do not have the natural defenses (sharp teeth, the ability to run fast) to survive in the wild. So humans cooperated with one another for food, child care, and defense in order to survive. We adapted to become highly sociable and seek belonging in groups. Indifference to relationships would have led people to wander off on their own or be shunned for misbehaving, “resulting in becoming some predator’s dinner,” says Leary.

Joshua Klapow, a clinical psychologist and associate professor of public health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, further explains the evolutionary origin of homesickness:

You feel it in your stomach — you feel uncomfortable, nervous, anxious, stressed, tense because you’re in a place or situation that’s not familiar, that triggers your fight-or-flight response. It’s an evolutionary, adaptive thing that wires us to protect ourselves from danger when something is unknown. When we think about home, we know that the sense of unknown and potential danger is not happening there, so we want to return.”

Studies have shown that homesickness is associated with psychological symptoms such as absentmindedness, anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance. Ricks Warren, an associate professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Michigan, described homesickness as a grief reaction. It feels similar to missing someone who has died, “but what the person is grieving is the loss of a familiar place,” he said. “There’s a yearning and longing for the familiar.”

We deposit ourselves into people and places that get stretched and scattered. Our “homes” multiply. Since we cannot be everywhere at once, we are, by definition, constantly homesick. This is what I long for:

- 4062 137th CT West, Rosemount, MN 55068 with the lilies around the mailbox. The backyard hill we sled down. The sun faces you hung in the kitchen.

- St. Paul, Minnesota, where I attended college, eating falafel wraps at Shish, swinging a tennis racket five times a week, and learning about concepts like “preferred gender pronouns,” and “colorblindness.”
- Fargo, North Dakota, where I held my baby niece, as she wrapped her arms and legs around me like a spider monkey, looking up with wide eyes and flared nostrils, an expression so much like Caroline’s, it astonished me.
- Casper, Wyoming, where my best friend puts me on speaker phone so she can take the lemon roasted broccoli out of the oven. I read aloud a passage about donkeys trampling a group of hikers from a book I’m reading and she dies laughing.

Grief means the person’s gone forever. Homesickness is different from grief in that my best friend, my niece, St. Paul, Minnesota—these things exist, but I cannot have them. At least not right now.

### **When do I feel homesick?**

Homesickness is as small and stupid as calling my eye clinic in St. Paul to order more contacts. I speak to a lady with a thick Minnesota accent and feel a gravitational pull towards this complete stranger. I now live in Georgia, where the accents are different. Homesickness is as big as my niece learning how to sit up, crawl, pull herself to a standing position, while I watch on Facetime from thousands of miles away. Will she recognize me the next time I visit?

### **What does home mean?**

*“These themes coalesce to construct home as a place of ‘comfort,’ where participants could be ‘safe,’ ‘loved,’ and free to be themselves.”*

-A 2015 study on homesickness in *Environment and Behavior*

Three years ago, I moved from St. Paul, Minnesota to small-town Milledgeville, Georgia. The night before I left Minnesota, my best friend and I stood in our empty apartment; Dad and Caroline waited outside. Emptying an apartment—peeling pictures off walls and disassembling furniture—is an inherently somber experience. Our voices echoed in my empty bedroom. We didn't want to say goodbye. Rachel said, "Let's just have one last dance party." The song had only been playing twenty seconds when I burst into tears. At that moment, moving seemed so stupid. I loved the Cities. I loved living with my best friend. In the mornings, I knocked on her door to eat breakfast with me; after breakfast, she came into my room as I was getting ready so we could keep talking. I had a job on campus that I liked and that paid well. I was comfortable there. Why was I giving all of that up to move to *Georgia*, of all places?

Two weeks after the move, I stood in Kroger amidst the unfamiliar brands and felt the most lost and homesick since arriving. I missed the dark roast coffee from Trader Joe's, grinding it in the machine myself, breathing in the rich, deep smell. I missed the 11-minute walk down Grand Avenue to Kowalski's and the overpriced sea salt caramel brownies I bought after a bad day. I missed my Minnesota driver's license; the photo on my Georgia driver's license turned out horrible. I missed the way streets were structured in Minnesota and hated Georgia's fondness for the middle lane.

**When do my students feel homesick?**

*"I miss home the most when I'm hungry."*

It is 8:07 am and 17 first-year students stare at me in the fluorescent-lit classroom. The class normally has 24 students, but seven are out with the flu.

Today, as a writing warm-up, I ask my students to write about homesickness. On the board, I write: 1) when do you feel most homesick?

2) name specific things that make you homesick or that you miss about home, like maybe a certain meal that you love.

3) how do you deal with homesickness? Any tips for others?

4) could homesickness be a form of grief? Why or why not?

They started college five months ago. I want to look into their brains. You know when you discover something weird or unsettling, a small white bump on the inside of your eyelid, for example? The first thing I do is type whatever is happening into Google. I want instruction, explanation, reassurance. I want to read, “This is what happened to me, and I’m okay, and you’ll be okay too.” But Google can only go so far. Sometimes—instead of typing words on a screen—I think we gain more from asking the people around us. The essay below taps into the experience, perspectives, and wisdom of 17 college first-years. Their responses have been spliced together and arranged into what I hope gives a picture of homesickness halfway through the first-year of college, which is to say, several different pictures.

#### Homesickness: A Found Essay from ENGL 1102

People feel homesick when they are alone. For some reason, eating alone is the worst. I miss my mom’s red soup and garlic bread. I feel homesick on Tuesdays, because that’s when my entire family eats dinner at my Nana’s house. I miss home the most when I’m hungry.

I get homesick whenever I see people walking their dogs. I love sleeping with my dog Bella and feeling her curled up next to my legs. I will lay in bed sometimes and miss just reaching down to pet her.

I feel homesick in the morning when I have to wait for the shower or sink, thinking about how much nicer waking up was at home. I miss playing with my little brother. I'm missing him grow up. I miss my dad's sense of humor and my mom's hugs.

Stop thinking about it. Make yourself busy. Go out and do things, hang out with friends, go out to eat. I go hunting and fishing whenever I can find the time. When I keep myself occupied I rarely miss home because I don't ever think about it. Find a group of friends that make you happy.

When I miss home, I call my family—all of them—my mom, dad, grandparents, and sister. You lost that part of your life when you are home 24/7; it is okay to grieve that. It's like when people's homes are in danger of becoming washed away in a storm. It's that feeling that everything is going to change and you won't be able to go home again—at least not how you used to.

### **How do I feel more comfortable in a new place?**

*“Working to really familiarize oneself with the new location will help a little—figuring out the layout of the city, visiting stores and parks, and developing a sense of efficacy in the new place.”*

—Mark Leary, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University

Some people are naturally gifted at directions and orienting themselves in an unfamiliar place. Not me. A month after moving to Milledgeville, I still used my GPS to drive around town.

According to the 2016 count, Milledgeville is a town of 18,933 people. The “downtown” is a square block. Basically everything else—strip malls, fast food restaurants, car dealerships, Walmart—is off a street called North Columbia. Yet, I was so terrified of getting lost that I plugged my destination into my phone and let the robot lady’s voice guide me. For a month.

My best friend told me I should ditch the GPS and drive around town for an hour or two, until I get my bearings. “I think you’ll realize that you don’t really need the GPS,” she said. But I didn’t listen. What was I afraid of? Accidentally getting on a highway and barreling at 80 mph toward Alabama or Florida or South Carolina, with no way to turn around, just destined to drive away from Milledgeville forever? Yes. That’s exactly what I was afraid of.

The GPS is a crutch. It’s like taking roll for my classes. The first day I take attendance on my own, I’m terrified that I’ll miss someone, won’t recognize another. It’s easier to just say the names aloud and have the verbal confirmation. But when I go through roll on my own, I realize that I actually do know who these people are.

Driving is one of my favorite things to do now. Windows slightly down, Kesha or Taylor Swift or M.I.A. blasting at a volume that I’m sure will damage my ears but I just don’t care, one hand on the wheel. Driving makes me feel better if I’ve had a bad day. It’s that feeling of *going* somewhere, the momentum. The power of the gas pedal under my foot. The familiar roads. It’s only taken me a year and a half, but I know the turns around town; they come to me like muscle memory. And I’m still learning new things, like taking Jefferson lets me avoid all the stoplights on campus. I feel an ownership over Milledgeville for the simple fact that I’m able to navigate myself.

**How do I make a new place feel like home?**

*“Build up your home underneath where you are.”*

—Tamar Chansky, a psychologist and author

Gretchen Rubin, of the podcast *Happier*, suggests that whenever we enter a situation of meeting new people to set a target goal of making three new friends. It sounds a little cold and calculating but Rubin explains: “It changes my attitude from, ‘Do I like you? Do you like me? Do we have time to talk?’ to ‘Are you someone who will be one of my three friends?’” This shift in mindset changes her behavior, makes her more open to people, and prompts her to go beyond small talk to build a deeper friendship.

Being homesick is often more about the people and relationships we leave behind than the place. Making friends can make a new place feel like home. We have a natural desire to confide in others and belong.

On January 20, I wrote this in my “One Good Thing a Day” doc:

After Clint canceled, I went downstairs and told Pooja. She was watching a movie and offered me some of her Papa John’s pizza and brownies. I ended up making us peach margaritas. We got tipsy and watched a couple of really cheesy Netflix movies. It helped get my mind off of everything, for a couple of hours at least. At times like these, I feel really grateful to have a roommate and that I didn’t have to make any effort to hang out with her besides walking downstairs. It was so convenient.

January 26: “Jenn invited me to a Pilates class, but there was a last-minute switch and it ended up being a kickboxing class! It was a fun workout though. Gave me a ton of steps!”

January 31:

Took Brittany to Selma and it was nice getting to show off “my place” to someone! She gave me a leftover piece of her birthday cake and some smoothie powders that she didn’t want anymore, which was really sweet. She also remembered to send me a thesis PowerPoint that she’s using in one of her lessons after I asked if I could steal it. Very reliable person.

Besides making friends, how do I make a new place feel like a home? It could be as easy as believing it. Here's what I tell myself: if you believe you'll like a place, you will. If you believe you'll be miserable in a place, you will. Below is a list of things I like about Milledgeville:

- Bartram Forest when it's misty. Gloomy weather gives the forest a magic I love. The aftermath of rain—glistening leaves, rich red dirt—makes the forest feel peaceful and alive.
- In the winter, the temperature rarely dips below 30.
- My niece was born here. Once when I babysat, she was content for the first half hour. Then she screamed bloody murder. I tried feeding her yogurt. She turned away from the spoon and screamed. I tried changing her diaper. She kicked her legs and screamed. I held her. She screamed. On a whim, I started singing “Walking in a Winter Wonderland.” After a minute or so, she stopped crying. She grew heavy in my arms. I sat on the couch, still singing. Eventually she fell asleep in my arms.
- The fudge brownie ice cream with pretzels at SweeTreats.
- In the few minutes before workshop begins, I chat with people about organic peanut butter or daylight savings time. I forget about my phone.
- My students write poetry that makes me cry.
- That time Pooja and I made margaritas and I accidentally poured double the tequila. We sat on the kitchen counter, laughing and laughing about something I don't remember.

## How do I say goodbye?

*“You get a strange feeling when you’re about to leave a place. Like you’ll not only miss the people you love but you’ll miss the person you are now at this time and this place because you’ll never be this way again.”*

—Azar Nafisi, professor and author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

I’m not good with goodbyes. I dread endings long before they’re happening. Twenty pages before the end of the book, I almost stop reading. A few days before leaving anywhere, I feel a sense of affinity for the smallest details. Trees leaning over the sidewalks. The shuffling of people at the salad bar.

I started missing the people on my study abroad program before the program ended. For months, we saw each other every day. We made small talk and rode the Tube and complained about homework and told stories about home and gossiped. We were so *real* to each other. That we could once be so real and then disappear from each other’s lives, this knowledge felt too heavy to bear.

After the program, I forgot how to speak Italian. I forgot the stops on the Underground and which lines took us to school. The truth of something once does not ensure its trueness forever.

I lived in Connecticut for a year, Rosemount, Minnesota for 16 years, Minneapolis for a year, St. Paul for four years, Florence for six weeks, London for six weeks, and Milledgeville for three years.

Nothing can prevent or cure homesickness because nothing stays the same. As I write these words, I am changing: I am becoming a different version of myself. Maybe when I feel homesick, I’m actually missing these past versions of myself, the version who ate a space cookie

in Amsterdam, or the version who stayed up late reading books instead of binge-watching *The Bachelor*.

But here are two things I've found to be true: 1) a place becomes home without me consciously realizing it and 2) I don't have to sacrifice one home for another.

I miss the nature I left behind in St. Paul. I miss running along Summit Avenue to the Mississippi River. After moving to Milledgeville, I attempted to run along the Oconee River. The air was thick and muggy; I could taste the humidity. The temperature climbed to 90 degrees every day. Meanwhile, St. Paul was experiencing mid-70s.

Over time, something shifted. When I visited Fargo for Christmas, rubbed my numb hands together in the passenger seat of Caroline and Ben's Subaru Outback, homesickness for Georgia's humidity and crunchy brown grass washed over me.

I found forests in Georgia. Leaves flutter from the trees. The red clay smells like a thousand years. Like comfort. In the thick of the forest, under the shade, the breeze cuts through the heat. I walk through spider webs. They spin their webs over and over. Invisible and intricate.

In two months, I will say goodbye to Georgia. I will put my belongings in storage and step onto the Appalachian Trail with a backpack and my best friend. For six months, I will fall asleep in a tent. I will wake up in the mountains. Every day I will walk somewhere new. My home will be the canopy of trees overhead. The smell of the earth after rain. My best friend's laugh. The people we meet along the way.

## Heaven

Are you reading these letters from Heaven? What does it look like there? All forests and no parking lots? Do you ever feel hungry or sad? Do you have friends? Do you and Dakota go for lots of walks? Do you miss me?

For a long time, I had no faith. I hated thinking about God and religion and prayer and Heaven. It all seemed abstract. Useless. You were dead. I trusted nothing, not even hope.

Now I let myself wonder.

## God

Remember when you sent me to vacation Bible school? It was the summer before I entered third grade. On the last day, the leaders gathered us on the stage used for worship. A hush fell over the auditorium; the empty chairs and dim lighting felt surreal.

“Please cross the stage if you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior,” the middle-aged woman in charge of the camp instructed. Her voice echoed.

Without hesitation, Laurel marched across the stage. I felt a tingling in my joints; I wanted to follow. Within a minute, all but two other kids had crossed the stage. I stood still as my heartbeat accelerated, telling myself, “Just go. Just walk across the stage.” But my uncertainty ruined it. This was something that you had to do en masse; to lag behind would draw attention.

“Why didn’t you cross over?” Laurel asked me after.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what Savior means.”

That was a lie. I knew what Savior meant, if not the dictionary definition, from context. The magnitude of “accept” struck me, and even at eight years old, I felt uncomfortable deciding on something so big. Maybe Jesus is who they say he is, but I didn’t want to decide. I didn’t want a record of me deciding because I was unsure, and besides, I felt suspicious. We were too young to decide. It felt like peer pressure. If anything, I resisted crossing over because I knew they *wanted* me too. Later, at Sunday morning worship service, the program boasted about the success of the summer Bible camp, based on the majority of children accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (they printed numbers) and I remember feeling unsettled by those numbers (they counted us?) and glad I hadn’t contributed to that. Did we really know? At eight years old, how many of us could really have firm opinions about Jesus?

Now I think I was missing the point. In my quest to figure out whether God was real, I approached it like a detective. I searched for answers. But people believe in God because life doesn’t give us answers. Having faith in something greater than ourselves provides relief from the overwhelming weight of it all.

Besides, you didn’t really care about the technicalities of religion. You sent me to vacation Bible school to keep me busy. You wanted me to make friends instead of watching television. If that involved singing worship songs and reading the Bible, so be it. You also sent me to a weekly youth group when I was in middle school. I think you saw religion as a path to community and a place to remember gratitude. When we were kids and complained about waking up for church on Sunday mornings, you said, “You can take an hour out of your week to thank God for all the good things in your life.”

## Religion

Growing up, it seemed like you and Dad chose churches based on the quality of music at the worship services. We bounced from Catholic to Baptist to Lutheran and I learned to just call myself a Christian. “But which kind?” Laurel asked me once, her eyes wide. It bothered me that I couldn’t answer.

A couple of years ago, a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses knocked on my door. I answered because I thought it might be the guys who spray for cockroaches and I didn’t want them to enter unannounced. Instead, I faced two-middle aged women, dressed in long skirts and button-up blouses. They held iPads and smiled in a way that made me nervous. Normally I never talk to strangers. I don’t make small talk in line at the grocery store. I especially don’t like talking to people who want to sell me something. Sweat prickled my armpits. One of them introduced herself and I half-listened and half wracked my brain for an escape. My cat crept toward us. I tried to shoo her away.

“Aww,” the lady said, pausing to smile at Allie. “What’s your cat’s name?”

“Allie,” I said.

And then, because Allie was glaring at them, I felt a need to apologize. “Sorry, she’s shy with new people.”

The lady started telling me about her cat, who is also shy with new people. We talked for a few minutes about our cats.

Eventually, the lady started reading some Bible verses aloud. Do you read the Bible? She asked me. I said not really. But you grew up Christian, right? She smiled in an encouraging way and I said yes. (I felt like “yes” was the only option.) She left a pamphlet with me and said she’d come back and talk to me again once I had a chance to look it over.

After I closed the door, I texted a bunch of people about it, in the “OMG!” manner of experiencing something out of the ordinary. But I kept the pamphlet on my desk, glancing at it while I brushed my teeth or did homework. A few days later, I read all of it, front and back. Then I went on [jw.org](http://jw.org), like the lady suggested. A lot of the stuff made sense to me. For example, the “dating” section says, “Would you like someone to play with your feelings as if they were some child’s toy—to be picked up for a moment and then quickly abandoned? Then don’t do that to someone else! The Bible says that love ‘does not behave indecently.’”

It made sense, which worried me, because I felt like I was falling prey to some kind of cult. When people talked about Jehovah’s Witnesses, it was always accompanied by an eye roll. Looking at the pamphlet, I felt tempted. It would be nice to choose something and believe in it completely. But I don’t think I could commit. I’m too indecisive. Selecting avocados at the grocery store stresses me out.

That was two years ago, right when I started the MFA program. Dad asks me from time to time, “Alexandra, what do you do for your spiritual needs?”

For a long time, I said, “I don’t know,” and felt sheepish, the way I feel when someone asks, “So, are you guys exclusive?” about the person I’m dating, and I have to respond, “I don’t know,” like an idiot. It’s something you’re supposed to know.

Dad has a pretty bad memory, so he asks about my spiritual life a lot. This used to annoy me. The angsty, angry teenager in me emerged. What do I do for my spiritual needs? You tell me, Dad. Parents are supposed to instill a firm spiritual foundation in their children. But you and Mom dragged us from church to church and fucked it up. You’re supposed to tell us what to believe. You’re supposed to make us feel safe and confident and sure of something.

He asked me about my spirituality a few weeks ago. Instead of saying, “I don’t know,” I said “Hiking is my religion” with an assurance that surprised even me. I was hiking at the time, leaves crunching underfoot, a breeze playing with the treetops, a hawk soaring overhead. Hiking calms me down. Being close to the earth makes me feel loved and whole and full of possibilities. I wish we could hike together. I inherited your love for nature. It just took me a few years to realize it.

I see you everywhere in nature. We all do. Just today, Dad sent an email about spotting a red cardinal on the other side of the bay window in snow-covered Fargo. (They were all at Caroline and Ben’s house for Thanksgiving.) He wrote:

She stayed for what seemed like a while. For a moment, time stood still as this beautiful red bird sat on her branch and looked in on her family. Michaela, Dory, Ben, Dad, Caroline, and Laura watched back. After this generous moment, this bird swooped right at the window and then flew off. Red cardinals outside your window represent a loved one visiting. How fitting for Mom to visit Caroline on Thanksgiving holiday in her new home to give us a cheer for the tradition she held so dear.

## **Church**

I started going to these Sunday morning gatherings that my friends Danielle and Eli host. The gatherings are not strictly religious, though we do talk about God sometimes. More spiritual than religious. It’s a small group, maybe five or six of us any given week. We drink coffee and eat cinnamon rolls and chat. Then we sit in silence for two minutes. (I nicknamed the gatherings “Meditation Group” because of this part.) After that, someone reads a passage to start a discussion about a concept: anything from hope to love to beauty to happiness. We talk about how these relate to our own lives. For example, one week, we talked about love and generosity. I told everyone about spilling water on my laptop over the summer: how I felt like the world’s biggest idiot. How could I make such a stupid, expensive mistake? I’m a writer; I need my

laptop! When I called Caroline in hysterics, she said, without hesitation, “I’m going to mail you my laptop, Ziggy.” To me, this exemplifies love at its purest. Caroline’s reflex is to give.

I joined these gatherings on a whim. Eli sent me a Facebook invitation and I have to admit, I only went because I had nothing else to do that weekend. I craved social interaction. But it quickly became the highlight of my week.

I wrote in my Google Doc journal after one gathering:

I love the routine of this weekly gathering. It feeds my soul to talk to these people, share perspectives and experiences, meditate, read aloud from books about love, compassion, anger, gratitude, prayer, and even pray (at the end, we all read aloud a prayer) and talk about what we’d like people to pray for us in our lives. You know how the Google Doc feels like antisocial media? These gatherings feel like anti-Church. Growing up I didn’t enjoy going to church because it felt so impersonal and dictative. This feels intimate. We talk through things rather than someone telling us exactly what to believe.

## **Prayer**

As a kid, I felt like I failed at praying. You know that image of a child kneeling by their bed, fingers interlocked, eyes closed? What the hell are they thinking? They look so peaceful, so pure, so they must be thinking about world peace or some other noble cause. I tried a few times, but it never felt right. My mind wandered and I thought instead about McDonalds or the outfits that Lizzie McGuire wears. What am I supposed to think about? What does it mean to pray? Does God answer?

“Sometimes,” people said. “Not always in words. Keep talking to Him.”

This seemed ridiculous. In dating, we are told to move on when someone “ghosts” us. If we continue to contact these people, we are perceived as “crazy.” I know I’m not dating God, but shouldn’t the same principle apply?

Remember how we used to recite this prayer before dinner each night? “Thank you God for everything we have, bless this family, may there be peace on earth, amen.” I didn’t even think

about the words as I said them. I was more focused on the bowl of Asian shrimp salad in front of me, imagining the crunch of the snow peas. (I miss your cooking a lot.) Saying prayers before dinner was like saying the Pledge of Allegiance before school: something done out of routine rather than passion.

We eventually stopped reciting that prayer and instead read aloud from the “prayer a day” calendar. Remember the stacked calendar in which we ripped off a page a day like a Post-it note? Some of the prayers seemed profound but others seemed nonsensical, a hit-or-miss, like the notes inside fortune cookies.

I like prayers best when they are personal and spontaneous. Two years ago, Dad drove four hours from Minneapolis to Fargo (in a snowstorm!) to attend a Lifesource banquet with Caroline and Ben. After you died, we donated your skin, tissue, and corneas to Lifesource, and now they invite us to banquets every few months. We’re called a donor family. A portion of the program invited people to share. Dad stood and talked about how proud he was of his children, that you live in us. He motioned to Caroline and Ben and, holding back tears, said that he was about to become a grandfather. At that point, Caroline was early in her pregnancy. She and Ben weren’t telling a lot of people. Caroline felt a flash of annoyance at the announcement. Was Ben annoyed? Ben said no. Why would he be annoyed? Our dad was just so excited. That’s great.

I think it’s sort of a prayer, to announce in a room full of strangers, the things you miss and the things for which you are grateful. As a child, I thought there was a right and wrong way to pray. Now I view prayer through a wider perspective. If hiking is my religion, then prayer is watching a hawk soar. Or listening to the gush of the stream. Prayer is sticking post-it notes with inspirational phrases to my bathroom mirror. “No matter how you feel: get up, dress up, show up, and never give up.” Prayer is hope. It’s what I’m doing right now. Writing a letter to you.

## **Heaven**

4062 137<sup>th</sup> Court West, Rosemount, Minnesota. Lilies sunbathe in the garden. I kick off my sandals in the garage, pull open the door. Tomato sauce simmers on the stove. “Hola Hija!” I walk into the kitchen, into the warmth of afternoon sun, into your voice, asking about my day.