

**G**rieving

**F**utures

Surviving  
the deaths of  
my parents

KimBoo  
YORK



## Dedication

To my parents:

Lt. Col. Garland Alvin York (ret.), 1923-1996  
Sue Gale Cooke York, 1943-1994

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**Lee's Place – A Grief and Loss Counseling Center**

Tallahassee, Florida

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## Preface

This book was fifteen years in the making, although in the end it took several months of intense writing and editing and *reliving the past* to make it happen. Everything in this book is true to my life, although my opinions and reactions to events are probably (hopefully?) not universal.

This book is about dealing with the death of a parent when you are somewhere in your 20s. However, since I use the term “young adults” a lot, I need to clarify what I mean by that as most people usually think that phrase implies teenagers (as in, “YA literature”, etc.). I specifically mean an age group ranging from late teens to about 30 years old. I know some people in that age group might bristle at being called a young adult, but in modern society someone who is under 30 is still, in many ways, considered young and “just starting out.”

I also tend to use the terms “our culture” and “our society” quite a bit but that is limited to American, Westernized society. That is the only culture I can speak for comfortably and on the whole I am assuming I am addressing fellow members of that society through this book. It is more a matter of familiarity than any purposeful exclusion of any other world views, so I welcome hearing from people in other cultures/parts of the world in regards to this subject.

I need to give special thanks to Debbie Wiles, LCSW, of [Lee's Place Grief and Loss Counseling Center](#) in Tallahassee, FL. She helped me pick myself up from where I had plastered myself to the ground, dusted me off, and gave me a strong push on the road to salvaging what is left of my life. She is intelligent, witty, insightful, and straightforward, and just the person I desperately needed when we met. Without her, this book would never have been written, either. Hopefully she will accept the "blame" gracefully!

## Introduction

I have started this book many times over. I never know where to begin, even though the most basic advice given to any writer is “begin at the beginning.” When you are talking about the death of your parents, though, where is the beginning? When you were born? When you first remember them in your childhood? When you realized they were mortal, or dying, or already dead? Where is the beginning of the end to your whole life?

Yet, I always come back to trying to start this book, because back in 1996 I really needed it and it did not exist. I was 26 and had lost everything, which is not quite hyperbole: at the end of the most trying three years of my life I had lost my mother, my father, one of my cats, my home and nearly everything in it, and both of my dogs. It was more than a little traumatic, the description of which words utterly fail to convey.

Using my usual method of dealing with anything I do not understand, I read about it. I read a lot of books on grief, and I cannot say that was wasted effort. Books such as C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* and Stephanie Ericsson’s *A Companion through the Darkness* were important to me, and remain so after all these years. But I was 26 and I had not lost my spouse or my child or a friend, but my parents. There is no way to claim that one type of death is more catastrophic than another (although personally I will always suspect losing a child to be the worst), but they each have different dynamics. As most grief survivors know, there is nothing more affirming than meeting someone who has been through what you went through and recognizing the shared experiences of it.

I am not a mental health professional, though, and this book is specifically about my own experiences. I hope that by writing it others who are going through the loss of their parents might find some common ground. What I needed back then was not just the usual bywords given to mourners (“it takes time,” “take care of yourself”, “don’t judge your grief process”, etc.), but also the particular observations of a young adult facing the rest of her life with her safety harness, her life raft, and her foundations ripped away. Everyone says “you can’t go

home again” and they usually mean some deep, metaphorical statement by it. For me it was literally true: home was dead and gone.

I have found books over the years about losing parents aimed towards young children and alternately towards “mature” adults over 50. Honestly, I could never even read the ones aimed at the mature adults because I would become livid with jealousy: how unfair that they were only dealing with this after having their parents around *their whole lives!* It was, admittedly, uncharitable and unfair of me. I know that. Still, it was my gut reaction whenever I picked up one of those books in an effort to look for companionship. The books for young children were at least acceptable to my sensibilities, yet on the other hand made me depressed and guilty because at least my parents got to see me graduate from college and know me as an adult. I was lucky, comparatively.

Caught between the two extremes, I felt very alone.

Of course I was not completely alone. I had friends and a couple of family members who tried to stay in touch, both before and after my parents’ deaths. In retrospect I realize that they were all desperately trying to help me. They were unsure of how to do that and I was always damned and determined to be “doing just fine” whenever they asked how I was dealing with my loss. When I wrote to them about the events in my life I always tried to project some overall sense of wholeness; although I was in despair and thunderstruck by events, I was still functioning. But it did not feel that way. I felt sectioned. A piece of me was here, another there. I lived the role of daughter, caretaker, maid, and free spirit but these roles did not mix well, especially after my parents died since they were the reasons I played those parts in the first place. It felt impossible to explain myself to anyone without coming off as overly dramatic or depressed, and indeed I am sure it was impossible. The fact is that the events I lived through were incredibly traumatic and I had good reason to be depressed; all the messages I got from society at large were geared toward recovery: *You’re young, it should be easy to move on! You still have your whole life ahead of you! Your parents would not want you to waste your life grieving for them!*

It was a message of encouragement, of optimism, and more importantly of *denial*. I bought it and then turned around and sold it to everyone who asked me how I was doing because,

despite the many books about the grieving process I devoured, nothing penetrated the false promise of “youthful resilience.” I wanted it to be true. I wanted to prove to the people who were worried about me that it was true. I also grew tired of trying to explain myself to those who were in no way able to truly relate to my experiences. It was a double edged sword of false promise + feeling isolated and it = ten years of emotional misdirection.

Which is another reason I kept stalling on continuing this project. I knew it was important and that it was something I wanted to finish, but given how messed up I felt and how poorly I handled, well, *everything*, I did not believe that anything I had to say was important, much less helpful. It seemed inappropriate to engage in an act that might be construed as celebrating my fucked-upedness.

I am not shy about admitting to going into therapy, and so I am not ashamed to say that it took two years and a damn good counselor for me to realize that the whole point of *Grieving Futures* is not to show how well I dealt with everything or to give directions on how others can succeed at grief. No, the purpose is the act of sharing what I went through. As in the Buddhist tradition, the goal is the process itself, and anyway there is no “there” to get to in mourning. It happens every day. We carry our grief for the rest of our lives, so what is important is not “doing it right” (as I spent years worrying about) but in understanding that however you manage to survive, the important thing is to stay present. Sometimes that means crying your eyes out, sometimes that means doing the laundry, and sometimes that might even involve ignoring the whole damn mess until you are emotionally stable enough to face it. The people you loved and relied on most are dead, so now your job is to take care of yourself.

I forgot that, if I ever knew it at all. I do not consider this a cautionary tale, but I do hope that sharing my experiences might give people tools for dealing with their own grief, or at the very least allow them to understand that they are not alone. My issues are not your issues and my experiences are in some ways extreme and in other ways not so much, but they are all I have. I just hope my story helps you with yours.

## Circumstances

I often relive moments of destruction. I cannot call them moments of fear or sadness or even grief, which, as words, fail to convey the feeling of being emotionally shattered. Destruction, on the other hand, is perfect. It beats you down for no reason and makes your heart thump wildly and painfully while you try to breathe.

The first moment I replay is the phone call from my father that I got in early 1993. I had graduated from college less than a year before, and for all intents and purposes I was taking a gap year before going to graduate school. I had my GREs under my belt and my letters of recommendations lined up, and a few nebulous ideas about what I wanted to do for a career. It was pretty obvious even to me that I was not really committed to continuing on with graduate school any time soon. Instead I was living in Sarasota, FL, working shitty secretarial jobs while hoping that inspiration would strike.

What struck, instead, was colon-rectal cancer. My mother had been very sick for months, and uncharacteristically did not tell me about it. On the other hand, she very characteristically decided not to see a doctor until it was to the point of my father driving her to the emergency room while she was bleeding out and delirious in pain. I knew nothing of this until I got the call from my father, a message he left on my answering machine that afternoon. I remember this moment of destruction clearly because it was like watching a car plow into a crowd of pedestrians: you know it is going to be horrible, and that there is absolutely nothing you can do to stop it.

My father was a retired military officer and so made it a point not to use the phone after 30+ years of constantly being on call. He hated phones, and while he would agree to talk to me on the phone, he never, ever initiated a call for any reason. I think that call might have been the first and last time my father ever dialed me directly. It was Mother's job to call, and the fact that it was Poppa's voice on the phone was a dead give away that something



was wrong, terribly awfully tragically *wrong*, and I knew it the moment I heard him on the answering machine.

He did not really say much other than, “Hey honey, hope you are doing okay. Things got interesting here, call home.” I remember it almost verbatim sixteen years later.

I called, of course, and neither of us bothered with pleasantries. We both knew the universe had tipped sideways. Poppa filled me in quickly that Mother was at the hospital, that she had been in pain for a while, and that the doctors were holding her for tests. (To this day I do not know what tests were run, or how they stopped the immediate problem of bleeding; I still have the hospital paperwork, so I could find out any time I want, but I prefer to hold those dark days in a blur of indistinct memories as much as I can). I told him I was on the way and hung up. I am sure I asked friends to watch my cats and called my job supervisor at her home about being MIA for the rest of the week. I did not know I was already on the list to be fired within a month, but it was just as well, as I knew I was going to have to move home to take care of Mother. There was no question in my mind about it. What I do not remember clearly is the time between hanging up on Poppa and walking into Mother’s hospital room the following day.

As moments of destruction go, that one was pretty complete. I knew instinctively that everything had changed, and I suspect everyone comes up against that terrible awareness at the point when they least expect it. The insight did not hit when mother died, or father died, or when I gave up the house; it hit years before, during that one incredibly short and unforeseen phone call.

The resulting three years was, in many ways, more about caretaking, which is a different story altogether. I do not want to delve too deeply into it because this story is about grief, and while taking care of people you love who are dying is to live in suspended mourning for long and exhausting periods of time, it is not the same experience as surviving the death of

a loved one. Honestly, they were about equally traumatic in my case, but still, they were and are different experiences.

The death of my mother was slow and protracted and agonizing, literally. She was in pain all the time and I was helpless in the face of her pain and her death. I did everything I could, despite her basic refusal to consciously accept the fact she was dying while at the same time crumbling under the weight of the knowledge. For her, the future simply stopped existing, good or bad. For us as a family it was a blood bath of medicine, surgery, and treatments. In the end just getting her off life support was a goddamn fight in the hospital hallways, which as a metaphor stands pretty well for the whole experience start to finish. She had her own triumph in the fact that they gave her three months to live and she survived for thirteen, but nonetheless she died on September 15, 1994, one month after her fifty-second birthday.

I was one month into being twenty-four years old.

My father had suffered a major stroke that same year on Father's Day, whenever it was in June. So while my mother entered her declining final four months, my father's health nosedived creating a significant impact on his quality of life. I remember sitting in the living room with my parents, my mother sickly and bloated and drugged to the gills and my father stroking out, begging them to let me call for paramedics for him. I should have done it anyway, something I'll never forgive myself for, but I think it shows how muddled my own brain was by exhaustion and stress that it did not occur to me at all. I went back to my bedroom and cried for hours, refusing to come out – quite the rebellion in my household—although it had little impact. From that point on, Poppa was crippled by the effects of the stroke and somewhat (in his words) “addlebrained” about things like leaving the stove on, or doors open. I was on constant watch.

Poppa was twenty years older than my mother (yes yes, cradle robber!), so at 71 he was suffering from a lifetime of post-war PTSD and alcoholism (neither ever diagnosed, but I assure you both conditions were real) and chain smoking. His family generally lived to 100 (literally) so while I accepted his declining health, I did not fear it as much as I should have. As the saying goes, "denial is not just a river in Egypt."

During preparation for an angioplasty surgery on Poppa's left leg, heart flutters showed up and the surgeon called off the operation in order to monitor Poppa's condition. That was in February, 1996, and kicked off three months of Poppa shuffling off this mortal coil in defeat. Nothing I did nor said gave him the will power to keep going; he was tired and sick and worried about me, and finally his body collapsed on April 25, 1996. I drove two hours to get to him. The nurses at the out-of-town V.A. hospital had sent me home that afternoon for fear that I was driving myself to collapse, a plan that backfired on all of us spectacularly, I think. By the time I arrived, it was after midnight and I had to "call it," although he was pretty much already gone by the time I got there. His official death day is April 26 because he was taken off life support at around 2am in the morning. I still get it mixed up, thinking he died on the 25<sup>th</sup>, because to me it was just one long day. I was shocked when he died because despite all evidence to the contrary, I really had expected Poppa to keep going for another decade or more. My denial about what I had been facing was tremendous, and in hindsight fairly embarrassing.

I was 25, just shy of 26.

For me, this was the end of my whole immediate family. All of my grandparents were already dead (the last survivor, my paternal grandmother Granny, died in 1992), and I have no brothers or sisters. My parents worked long and hard to alienate their own siblings (they were the black sheep of their respective families by choice) and while Mother's whole tribe showed up for her final days, they did not stick around or have much to offer me. I do not throw that out as an accusation; after years of training, I only knew how to alienate

them myself, and they did not know me at all. There were overtures, which I let fall dead at my feet, and after that a respectful distance was maintained by all parties. When my mother's older sister, Aunt Barbara, died two years later from breast cancer, I cried but did not bother going to the funeral. I did not feel that I belonged there, or that I would be welcome. A fallacy on both counts, I think, but what is done is done.

In the background, Aunt Sheila (mother's younger sister) and Cousin Jimbo (and his partner Paul) shadowed me for years, sending holiday cards and irregular emails. They seemed desperate to at least stay in touch, something I did not put much thought toward because I felt I had nothing to offer them. My immediate family unit was destroyed, and without it I was not sure why anyone else who is related to me would care about my life. Part of that stemmed from a feeling that I needed to prove myself worthy of their attention, and an even larger part of that came from an ignorance of how extended families work. It was unfortunate and sometimes I still wonder what the heck I was thinking, but that was my mentality at the time. I just did not know any better.

I was fortunate to be able to move home and devote myself to taking care of my folks\*. Many children, especially adult children, do not get that kind of opportunity, and while being their caretaker was a Hell I would not wish on my worst enemies, I am glad I was there as much as I was. In the end that was all I had to take with me: memories.

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\* In retrospect I think someone should have insisted I get at least a part time job if only to socialize outside of the house. Again, this is an issue having to do with being a caretaker, so is not really pertinent except to show how completely isolated I was and how my entire life was wrapped around two people who were terminally ill. In a way, it put a deadline on my own life, in that I had no concept of a world outside taking care of my parents. It is, sadly, a compulsion many caretakers feel.

## Reflection – Myths and History

After my parents died, I ended up losing the house too. Father had a very small life insurance policy that paid off my 1990 Toyota Corolla and a few credit cards, and gave me about three months living expenses to exist on before I hit a severe financial crisis.

The house had been re-mortgaged several times (my mother's financial issues were epic) and with neither equity nor a job, I had no way to pay the \$800/mo mortgage, or the \$300 electric bill or any other utilities, much less property taxes. I was fundamentally screwed, so my only option was to let my father's estate languish in probate (i.e. never claim his property) and let the bank foreclose on it. So I held an estate sale (aka fire sale), packed what I wanted to salvage into a storage unit, and walked away.

In the process of going through *every damn thing my family owned*, I revisited the stories about Troy that I read in my youth. They were hard to miss. We had a lot of books about them because when I was young, my greatest fascination was for dead things: dead dinosaurs, dead species, dead civilizations (in my adult years, the obsession crystallized in the form of an undergraduate degree in anthropology). With my love of writing and reading, I might easily have gone into the Classics...except for the fact that I was annoyed by mythology.

Myths may or may not have happened (and probably did not happen). To me, that did not make a story mysterious and wonderful; to me, it was a handicap. No fossilized evidence? No Rosetta stone? No buried cities? Then what, I wondered, was the point? I loved the stories that actually transpired, the ones where the tragedy was not symbolic, but real.

I drove my mother to distraction by this fascination with 'reality' which I inherited from my ever-pragmatic father. The only fiction books he owned were by Jack London, Zane Gray

and Arthur Conan Doyle, along with a set of William Shakespeare's plays; everything else was non-fiction. A lover of great literature and particularly the classic myths of Greece, Rome, and the Norse, Mother worshiped the glorious epics of love and adventure which to her represented the genesis of modern literature. I, on the other hand, found all of that boring because *it never happened*. The irony that I later became a huge fan of science fiction stories is not lost on me at all. Not one to give up until she got the last word, Mother resorted to the story of Troy, which was not only mythology, but an actual, ancient city exhumed from the dirt.

It was a personal triumph for her when I devoured it. Every fragment of my being was obsessed with the story of Troy, both the classic epic by Homer and the classic excavation by Schiller. Troy! The mysterious, long forgotten land of fierce warriors and clashing monarchies, with its brilliant gold and ancient alleyways! The story was captured in poetry while the city was forgotten by succeeding civilizations, its truth laid buried for centuries, waiting to see the light of day to prove once and for all that some myths are real.

As I sifted through the sands of my parents' belongings, I realized that a *myth is just history with no one left to remember it*. I was Homer writing the epic poem of my childhood, with only a few ruins to help me tell the story.

Since I am an only child, I have no brothers or sisters to share childhood memories with. I do have mountains of photos of my family, the most resilient of which might last a century. I have the reel-to-reel tapes, delicate and badly damaged by time, that my parents recorded and sent to each other as 'spoken letters' throughout the dark years of Poppa's service in South-East Asia during the Viet Nam conflict. I have a couple of portraits and a few boxes of letters. That is my Troy. My childhood is nothing but transitory pieces of brittle paper and tape that, when gone, will leave no trace of us, of my family.

There are a few people who can remember patches here and there (the aforementioned Aunt Sheila and Cousin Jimbo), but the individuals who knew every waking moment of my life from birth until I left for college are gone. I make reference to things that no one who is alive was there for, events for which I am the only survivor, times and places that I and no one else can remember. It is not simply the disappearance of one cherished relationship from my time frame; it is the majority of my entire childhood—gone. All I am now is all I have ever been and all I will ever be.

Few people remain who can look at my current existence as simply a part of a greater whole, because the *history* was lost when my parents died. That makes my origin seem very transitory and ephemeral, ruins that suggest a history that few know, and no one can believe. My childhood is a myth now; this is my new Troy.

I keep digging but that will not bring the city back to life.

## Aftermath – Logistics

It is easy to just *do something* when a person dies, because there is certainly enough to do. After Mother died I was tied up in financial paperwork from all her medical and credit card bills, eventually helping my father declare bankruptcy in the face of a quarter-million dollars' worth of debt on a retired officer's income. Yes, dying is expensive.

As I wrote earlier, after Poppa died his small \$10,000 life insurance policy barely got me out the door of the house before the bank took possession. The economy was sailing in the mid-1990s so I was not particularly worried about a job, even though I had been a de-facto homemaker for three years right out of college (it made for a very grim resume). I had my car, a few months' worth of living expenses in the bank, and a garage-full of inheritance left from after the estate sale. Also two dogs and a cat, which I will talk about later.

I allowed people to help me after Poppa died because I knew I could not do everything on my own. I could not watch the estate sale, could not productively participate in it. Those people were generous souls who offered their time and advice simply because they liked my parents. They stood guard in the house while dozens of strangers traipsed through it, picking up my family's belongings to decide if they were worth a dollar or five. I had tried to price things the week before but only got through one room before retreating to my safe space (more on that later) and refusing to do anything. So, most of the items were wagered for on the spot, and I know I let many precious things go at a steal because I refused to haggle. I stood out in front of the open garage door with my back to the house, the money box near me, and my heart and soul screaming in pain. The cash I made off that sale helped a lot, but it felt like blood money.

I set myself up in an apartment I could not really afford, clueless to my financial realities and still riding on the optimism of the economic high of the 90s as well as being a sheltered



only child. I was floundering, utterly derailed in my projected life track, thinking I could just get back in the groove if I tried hard enough.

The lesson that trying hard does not always ensure success had not sunk in. You would think I would have learned it already over the course of three years as I watched the people I loved most in the world – and who loved me most in the world – die. I’m not entirely sure if that lesson was supposed to be learned and there was a failing on my part. It is probably very common after a crisis for people to attempt to return to normal using the same techniques they have always used. You know what you know, and even hard lessons are often not enough to get us to change our ways.

There I was in an ugly apartment with a car, two dogs, a cat, a storage unit, and so much grief and rage that I could not even think about it without fear of shutting down completely. Sometimes I wonder how I ever kept moving.

## Aftermath – Waste Disposal

There was another aspect of death I had not considered. I lost the house and most everything in it but I did not, in fact, actually lose the physical presence of my parents. I did not realize that when a person dies, their body does not magically disintegrate a la Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*. Let this be a lesson to young adults everywhere: do not base your conception of reality on your favorite movie.

My parents left no instructions other than that they wanted to be cremated. I never asked how they wanted their cremains to be disposed, despite the approach of the inevitable. The few times Poppa mentioned it he rather sardonically suggested dumping him at the county trash heap—which is illegal in case you ever considered it. So for each of them I signed for the body to be picked up by our local mortuary, arranged for the cheapest cremation possible, and arranged to pick them up later. When cremains are not in an outrageously expensive fancy urn, they are in a cardboard box. The ashes are, actually, in a sealed heavy-weight plastic bag inside the box, which in both of my parents' cases measures all of 6" x 9" x 4". Very small boxes for a whole person, but trust me, they are damn heavy.

I called this section “waste disposal” because the laws surrounding dead human bodies are stricter than most government rules for toxic runoff. Mother’s ashes rode around with me in the car for three days, as I did not have the heart to bring them back to Poppa right away. That was probably illegal. In fact, that sentimental scattering of ashes at your father’s favorite fishing spot or your mother’s beloved national park is *totally illegal*. I think most people do not know this for of two reasons: 1) depictions in movies/television of such events are romanticized and simplified; and 2) most law enforcement officials have a benign, somewhat compassionate and unofficial, “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in place. As

long as you are not spreading ashes in a major traffic intersection or at your father's favorite coffee shop, you can get away with it.

In my case it was less a matter of concern about legalities than simply a lack of any ideas. My mother loved the beach, but I did not want to spread her ashes where people would walk around in them, for their sake as much as hers. Poppa and I discussed renting a boat to tip her into the ocean, where presumably she would wash up on the beach in some form or another, but that never sat well with either of us as mother hated being on a boat. Such is the logic of mourning. Rinse and repeat for Poppa's ashes: after I picked up his box, I was rather flummoxed. With no family plot at a cemetery and no concrete suggestions via the deceased, I had no idea what to do.

This dilemma was not about whether the body is sacred or not sacred (a philosophical and religious debate I am not prepared to enter), but rather the more practical considerations of what to do with it. It is not something taught to you in high school, much less in college, although I would love to see that on a curriculum ("The Disposal of Your Loved One 101"). It is something that people assume the family will handle, with some vague perception that the adults will guide the process along. I suppose if a family has a family plot, or bought grave sites prior, or whatever else they might do, such decisions would be gratefully taken out of the hands of the young adult trying to figure out what to do. In my experience, the adults in my family (parents or other relatives) did not want to deal with it at all. My mother's family offered no advice on what to do with her ashes; no one even mentioned it. I suspect this was out of deference to my father however at that point he was a stroke victim. I wish someone would have approached me about it, if only to force me to think ahead address it as an important problem. Likewise no one asked about my plans for father's cremains, either. To be fair, I did not ask for advice either.

I am not sure that pre-made burial plans would have made these decisions particularly *easier*. Words cannot express how surreal the whole issue is, how disconnected it feels to

have to act on, much less decide, where your parents' bodies are going to be "at rest" when your entire life is anything but restful, or even logical.

## Aftermath – Pets I Have Known

A glaring hole in this narrative is the story of the family pets. I grew up with dogs in the house all the time, so it was natural for me to have animals around and I missed them when they were not there. I moved out of the dorms in my second year of college but I knew I did not have the time to spend on dogs so got a twin-set of kittens from a co-worker who found an abandoned litter by her house. They were both black and I called them Thing One and Thing Two, which was convenient because even I could not always tell them apart. Eventually I figured out that the girl twin was a little rounder-faced and had a profile lower to the ground, but most people just called whichever one was present “Thing”. As I said, convenient!

They moved with me when I went home to take care of my parents, who had two dogs of their own. One was a cairn terrier named Ruffles (although Mother claimed it was a play on *Raffles*) whom we had adopted when I was about fifteen, after our previous cairn terrier died. The other dog was a standard poodle mix that Mother found alongside the road side, took in and named Tiffany (I have concluded simply that Mother liked fluffy names).

Ruffles was as stupid as a rock and barely had a grasp of the whole house-broken issue, but was funny and lovable and happily oblivious to any problems in the world outside his head. He had major knee issues that would eventually morph into arthritis and back problems.

Tiffany was smart and sweet, and bonded to Mother like glue. She had a naughty habit of petting herself by walking under low-hanging clothes in the closet, and always looked hysterically guilty when caught at it. Otherwise she stayed on Mother’s bed, and I think contributed a lot to Mother’s mental well-being during her final year.

When I moved back in, the cats were renamed because my parents rebelled against the whole “Thing & Thing” thing, becoming Princess and Pirate (accurate reflections of their personalities, to be honest). Poppa, who did not like cats in principle, eventually warmed to them, often holding Pirate on his lap while they watched TV.

Unfortunately, due to his stroke, Poppa could not open and close doors quickly and often left them partially open out of forgetfulness. After a lifetime of being indoor pets, the cats got out and short of locking them in my bedroom there was no way I could stop it. Pirate took this as his opportunity to lounge in the back yard playing with squirrels and rolling in the sand. Princess, however, had wanderlust. A few months after Mother died, the inevitable happened and Princess was struck down late one night by a car when she tried crossing the road. She had been on her way home, and the impact threw her body far into the side yard of our corner lot. Poppa helped me pick her up and we both cried like children as I dug her little grave by our dinky orange trees. I know Poppa felt guilty, but I could not ever blame him. He loved her too.

After Mother died Tiffany aged very quickly, losing bladder control and seeming doing a doggie version of senility. We had no idea of Tiffany’s actual age, but she was very likely at least ten years old when Mother died. By the time Father died Ruffles was twelve, and it was honestly hard to tell if he went further downhill at that point because there was always something about him that was mentally lacking.

The upshot is that when I moved into the apartment after Poppa’s death, I had all three animals with me, each with varying degrees of trauma. Pirate was still acting weird after his sister’s death (they had never, ever spent a day apart since they were born) by licking his skin raw; Tiffany wet the bed, floor and couch all the time; and Ruffles could barely walk.

It was less than a year later that I had to put down both dogs; I had delayed it far longer than I should have. My only excuse is selfishness. They were my parents' pets, and as such were simply another aspect of my lost past that I did not want to let go of.

Pirate eventually stopped the crazy licking affliction and kept going until July 29, 2009. I call him the Last York, although technically that would be me. I feel he deserves the honorific more than I do.

It is bad enough to be forced to deal with the feelings of death and destruction from losing one or both parents; to lose even non-human members of the family is an additional devastation. It is easy for other people to see your pet as a pet and not put any meaning to that. Anyone who has invested part of their heart and soul into living with pets, though, knows that these animals are more than furniture to be shuffled around. Mother's death literally shattered Tiffany, who started life as a filthy and seriously ill stray before being taken in and given the protection and love she had never known before. Pirate went a little crazy after his sister died, and spent a lot of time sitting in Poppa's chair waiting for him to come back after Poppa's death. Ruffles was an idiot and constantly ran back to Mother's room to see her, or asked to go outside to sit with Poppa on the porch, even though both people were no longer there. I am not convinced Ruffles ever really grasped the idea of their deaths, and thus suffered a real depression when put into my new, parent-less apartment. He slept on the couch for a week, morose, utterly convinced that he was being punished for something.

This all might seem like so much anthropomorphizing, and I cannot actually say it is not just that. But for me counts at the emotional level, and dealing with the pets after my parents died was just the beginning of my realization that grief was not just something that hit me at night, in the dark under the covers: it reached out into every mundane aspect of my life. I was surprised by this realization although logically I should have known better. Of course, logic has nothing to do with it.

## Aftermath – Furniture and Defiance

As a child, when things went wrong or I felt sad or scared, I would hide under my father's desk. He had a large, executive IBM desk (literally, it was made by or for IBM) from the late 60s that weighed as much as a small car and could easily hide a baby elephant in the chair well. It was my cave, my basement, my safe place in a world of confusion and uncertainty. I never hid under mother's matching IBM desk, which is probably representative of the many problems we had with each other.

The desks were on the block at the estate sale in 1996, because I could not conceive of how to even move the bastards. No one else could either, I think, as they were not purchased by anyone who traipsed through the house. When I left home for the final time, there were some old clothes remaining in the front hall closet and the two IBM desks in the living room.

Before the fire sale, though, there were several months of just me, alone, in the house.

After Poppa's death, I did not even hold a funeral because I could not bear the thought of a service with me, a priest, and a few strangers. Poppa was not that keen on funerals anyway, so I was not too worried about betraying his final wishes. Had he ever requested any kind of memorialization, I would have done it, no questions asked.

Still, there was a week of shock and paperwork and calling distant relatives and then...nothing. It was just me, the pets, the furniture, and memories. The second week after Poppa's death, I spent most of the time asleep on the couch in the front room or curled up under Poppa's desk. That chair well was huge and as a full-grown woman I could still crawl under the desk with room for pillows and blankets and dogs to join me — and they did.



The only reason I did not go insane was because my friends Tim and Phi noticed that I was particularly unstable during phone conversations and fetched me from my oblivion. I think I was under the desk when Tim knocked on the door unexpectedly and pulled me out to stay with them for a few days.

As with so many other aspects of the Aftermath, it never occurred to me, preceding the deaths of my parents, that I would not have that space to crawl into. Like the more general idea of life without my parents, it was a concept utterly foreign to me. It was an act of defiance as much as fear and grief that drove me under that desk. I could pretend, sometimes, that they were still “out there”: Mother sitting on the couch reading obscure feminist literature with the TV on the American Movie Classics channel and my father in the garage, tinkering with some project or another while chain smoking.

People react in strange ways after a loved one dies: parents do not touch a child’s room, a spouse refuses to clean the last cup their loved one used, a friend wears a friendship bracelet until it falls off. I locked Mother’s room in stasis for nearly nine months, including leaving her final can of Sprite sitting on her bedside table. For many years I put a peg by the front door of where ever I lived and hung my parents’ key rings there.

I am sure these psychological behaviors have been explained in textbooks somewhere, but personally I put them under the umbrella of “defiance”. Denial is considered one of the stages of grief, and defiance is a part of that I suppose. I tend to expand defiance to include more than just denial of the death(s). Defiance is continuing the personal traditions; it is putting the world back together in a way that makes sense after it has been torn asunder. It is standing up to tragedy and saying, “You can and will change my life, but I will keep what I value, no matter how much else you tear from my arms.” For me, it was hiding under the desk.

Sometimes that is a good thing, and sometimes it becomes self-destructive. I pretended that it did not matter either way.

## Aftermath – Friends and Freak-outs

After Mother died, I stood at the liquor store with my friend Shawn who had traveled over to visit me in my hours of confusion. She was experienced with the grief process herself, and was tolerant of my rather dissociated condition (I took to referring to myself in the third person for most of that year), so when I pointed at the lime green drink mix and said, “That looks like something they drained out of Mother,” she just laughed with me. It was a minor freakout on my part, but its low wattage hardly changed the nature of my reaction. I was disturbed and disconnected and very far off track.

My behavior was strange. There are a lot of mourners who spend a lot of time beating themselves up for doing what comes naturally, because what comes naturally to us in times of stress is often far off the beaten track from previous behavior patterns or actions. I never, ever thought that my behavior was strange during those times right after the deaths, though. I was too busy not thinking at all, honestly, so who knows what I would have concluded about myself had I bothered with introspection. I suppose I am lucky in that sense, or perhaps I was so far off the map, I would not have cared even if I knew.

We often do not like what we see about ourselves in that “moment of truth” in the wake of destruction. No matter how heroic, stoic, and mature we behave, there is always *something* that we do which is horrifyingly disappointing. Making jokes about the abdominal fluid drained out of Mother when she was sick falls into that category, I think. It was, however, a method of dealing with a system shock so great that if I did not find a way to deal with it – no matter how superficial – I would have just sat down and crumbled apart.

Most of what I call freak-outs fall into this category. It is not about falling down in the middle of the store sobbing (although that happens) or anything quite so dramatic. A freak-out for mourners can be as simple as a bad joke, or a fugue state. They are moments where we are out-of-sync with our own personality, those times when those who know us best

give us strange looks followed by "how are you doing?" And we do not understand why they are asking.

There is nothing worse than a lonely freak-out, though, and in that particular case I was lucky to have a good friend who understood and even got the joke. Shawn was an incredibly rare exception, though; and while a few friends (notably Tim and Phi, but also Colin and a few others) tried to reach out to me, every freak-out proved to me just how of sync I was with, well, everything.

The thing is, losing a parent during the young adult years is the equivalent of not taking that left turn at Albuquerque that Bugs Bunny always bitches about. It throws a person completely out of step in their own lives—a complaint that can be lodged against any death in the family, I suppose, but affects the progression of young adults in particular ways. The most glaring, and the most profound, is that it creates an insurmountable gulf between the mourner and her peers.

I do not meant to imply that just because someone did *not* lose a parent when they were young that they did not have some hard times. One of my best friends has severe Type II Diabetes and part of her foot was surgically removed before she turned thirty, which was a lesson to me in how bad it can be even without the death of a parent.

Losing a parent is just *different*, and it makes you different if it has happened to you.

I used to write long letters to my friends about my life during my parents' final years and after their deaths. I know I tried to make it seem like I was doing okay, but I did not shy away from the issues I was facing. One friend who received those letters commented on how she had to brace herself before she read them, because they were so intense and depressing. That she read them at all is a testament to her friendship with me, but nonetheless, I was mortified that my rambling dialogues were such a burden— even if it was a burden she was glad to bear for my sake. I stopped writing letters after that to

anyone. It felt like another bit of proof of how out of sync I was, so much so that my supposedly easygoing (I thought) letters were a source of anxiety and worry for my close friends. Which is like reversing a friendship: “Right-o, my friends want to help me in my hour of despair, so to spare their feelings I’ll just ignore them.” Seriously, it seemed logical at the time...

In a way, grief is all about the illogic, and that took me a while many years to figure out. It seems so very straightforward: your parent has died, and you grieve. But it is a case of appearances being deceiving, because what happens under the skin is that emotions, reactions, goals, dreams, *everything* gets knotted up into a mass of confusion and pain. Even when things go right, they do not feel right; when friends offer to help, it hurts to accept; when a day goes by without some kind of freakout, you are off balance. It is easier, in the short run, to shove the difficult things away and deal with grief as if it is not even really there, although doing so for too long acts like a backflow valve on shutdown. Pressure builds whether you acknowledge it or not.

My own path was to live pretty obliviously until the pressure finally cracked me, which took over ten years. I learned the hard way that “it is what it is” regarding the grieving process.

## Aftermath – Disintegration

While I was a full-time caretaker, I snuck out at night once or twice a week after putting my charges to bed and went clubbing. This was in the early to mid 90s, and the club scene was full of alt-rock and new wave and, after 1am, rave. It was a dance nirvana and I was a disciple. I still enjoy dancing even though I never actually studied it very much; my joy is in letting loose to the music, feeling the beat and moving my body freely. It was the only “me” time I really had, because if either parent was awake, I was on duty and that always came first. They might have figured out I was not home during those late, late nights but if so, they never mentioned it (and my mother was the kind who *would* mention it, just to prove that she knew what was going on). I rarely drank alcohol and I never did drugs or casual sex, I just danced. It was all I really had that was mine.

After Mother died I became a little more flagrant with my clubbing. Poppa did not actually care, and even encouraged me to go out, which was a surprise to me and one of the many aspects about him that I learned during that time after Mother’s death.

I also started doing drugs.

This is not a sordid tale of weed and cocaine and heroin and youthful folly, though. This is about the drugs left on Mother’s bedside table.

To back track a bit: Mother’s primary doctor was a nice guy, a small-town family physician who was not very used to having his patients die on him, unless they were of advanced age. He adored my mother (she had that effect on people; my parents were nothing if not charismatic) and refused to give up on her, even to the very last when her own oncologist said that she was one step away from death. The primary doctor was the reason we had to fight to get a comatose woman off life support despite having a living will, a DNR order, and complete power of attorney on file; and he was the reason we did not qualify for Hospice.

Hospice has very specific standards about when they can swoop in and help a family, and the primary qualification is that someone must be on their deathbed, literally. They provide palliative care, not treatment, and since their resources are limited they have to hold that line very firmly. Since her primary physician refused to accept that Mother had less than six months to live (which was our local hospice's primary requirement), Poppa and I were unqualified to ask them for help. I did anyway. I *begged* for help: we could not afford to hire nurses, Poppa was suffering from his major stroke a few months prior, and I was just this side of a nervous breakdown. I can think of maybe three times in my life I cried on the phone, and that was one of them. Our desperate straits did not matter. In the end, Hospice could not help us, even if the individual Hospice representatives I talked to (cried at) wanted to.

The result is that when Mother's condition became critical, she was at home, in bed, with just me and Poppa for company. She was taken to the hospital by ambulance where she died a few days later. Her drugs, however, did not go anywhere. I think I signed something at the hospital saying that I had properly disposed of them; I'm not sure. In any case, it was one hell of a loophole.

Typically when a critically ill patient dies, it is standard operating procedure for the nurses (at the hospital) or the registered caretakers (Hospice workers) to nab the controlled substances. There is often a deadly host of pain killers and assorted toxins in the bottles next to a deceased person's bed, and so I do not have an ethical or moral argument against the practice. There is no sound medical reason for anyone to keep those meds once the person for whom they were prescribed is dead.

That does not mean I was unwilling to take advantage of the situation. I knew her drugs intimately, as I had been the one forcing them down her throat for over a year. The prescriptions changed sometimes but I always knew what was what, and I had no problem throwing away the high-powered antibiotics and exotic cancer-related pills. The pain meds,

though—I knew exactly what to do with them. I even knew which ones to take on a full stomach and how to measure the doses of the codeine-laced cough syrup.

I like to think it says something for me that I took roughly a month’s worth of painkillers and stretched them out over six months, and that once they were gone I did not try to obtain any more from any source. What that says, I think, is that I am very fucking lucky not to have an addictive personality.

I also delved into the world of really casual sex. This might disturb some people more than the drugs, I guess, because there is heavy cultural baggage that goes along with sex. I do not mean to offend anyone, but I have to be honest in describing my lifestyle choice in that time period as “slutty.” I essentially had sex with strangers at least once a week, usually in their car or home. I still had Poppa back at the house and I was not actually dating so there was no way in Hell I was bringing any of my tricks home.

I do not think it was a behavior based on how I really wanted to live my life; I did not even lose my virginity until I was twenty and I think I had sex in college about five times, total. Every person is different and I am not judging myself or anyone for their choices, I am bringing this up to illustrate how out of sync I was with my own basic personality, and how that made me obviously self-destructive. In our society negative habits and behaviors can masquerade as “lifestyle choices”, which is how I labeled them in justification. Of course a *true* lifestyle choice is carefully considered, explored thoroughly, and reflected upon; that was too much for me to even contemplate. I just ran with away.

As I [wrote earlier](#), I think that losing a parent (much less all of them) during the young adult stage of life throws you out of sync with your peers in some very fundamental ways. Every solid, long-term friend I had at that time was in the post-college, career-managing, and dating/marrying/reproducing stage of life. The people I knew who were not living that life were the fellow misfits I met at the clubs (although I do mean “misfit” as a true

endearment). I had tried dating a couple of times, playing up the “I want to get to know you” angle but it was a disaster every time because the people I liked were living the life I had lost. It was not an insurmountable difference, of course, but it *hurt* and I felt so very, very worthless.

Personally I am very sex-positive and I do not consider having sex with lots of people wrong in any way, if that is what you want to do. My problem was that at the time, I was doing it for the wrong reasons. Not because I particularly desired the people I had sex with, or because it was an experience I wanted to explore, but because I felt disempowered and worthless and lonely.

Between the sex and the drugs, the first six months after mother’s death are mostly lost time for me. I’m fortunate that I was living with Poppa, as that stability (however high a price it cost) kept me from spiraling out of control in every direction.

After Poppa died, though, my last anchor was gone. I fortunately had no convenient access to drugs I was willing to take.\* I did start drinking more regularly, and more heavily, but then I met MiKE. He was a club kid too, and a nice guy, and I think I just wanted someone in my life I could revolve around without too much sacrifice. He became my anchor in lieu of my parents and while we were never in love and it was more a marriage of friendship and convenience, we lasted nearly fourteen years as a couple.

Personally the behavior—sex, drugs, marriage—looks disjointed in retrospect, but there was a certain emotional constant in my attempt to distract myself. My defiance took the form of clinging to habits and objects and ideas from Before as proof that the tragic

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\* I have always had a genuine fear of “recreational drugs” like cocaine, LSD and heroine, and I saw brilliant lives and minds ruined by them at college in some pretty spectacular ways which did nothing to increase their allure. There was always pot but the last thing I ever wanted was to make myself *more* stupid, which in my observation is marijuana’s main purpose. That pretty much left ecstasy, but I knew from fellow clubbers that the street quality was dicey and dared not try it. It was less a concern about legal consequences than a terror that I would somehow damage my brain, which is about the only thing I had going for me, lacking both money and looks!



changes in my life had not destroyed me. My denial actualized itself through finding ways to not acknowledge anything important out of fear that I had nothing left. Those distractions were, in some ways, opposing forces, and that conflicting energy had the effect of creating an emotional perpetual motion machine that kept me flopping in circles like a flat tire for nearly ten years.

## Aftermath – Life, Death, and Taxes (or, ‘It’s All About the Money’)

Substance abuse and emotional breakdowns are not lightweight problems. Pretty much every aspect of the grieving process can cause the sufferer to take a wrong turn towards self-destructive behavior, especially during a bad week. Finances were another way I performed the dance of denial. Of all the long-lasting effects the early death of a parent can have on a young adult, money is quite possibly one of the most complex and damning.

Money earned or not earned during a person’s twenties can impact them well up into retirement. There are ways to get rich past the age of thirty, over course, and ways to lose everything when at fifty. What I am trying to get at is that money is powerful not just during a person’s day to day life but within the myriad of relationships and choices a person makes over the course of decades; its influence is, in a word, insidious.

Unless you are a profoundly well-balanced, mature individual, derailing a career in your twenties may lead to making decisions for the next ten years or so based on *panic*. You end up bouncing around, trying to find what sticks, or maybe you just jump ship every time a career option demands serious commitment. I am not talking about a logical, well-considered choice to change careers, but a situation where choices that once made sense are either impossible or ill-considered, and options that might be smart to follow through on are disregarded out of fear or a feeling of hopelessness.

I have already mentioned that after I graduated, I was floating along rudderless. I did not have a clear career path picked out, but I *did* have a path-of-sorts, in that I knew I was going to grad school. Given the economy of the era and my age, I could have just picked a specialty out of the hat and made a decent living at it. I had, in fact, narrowed my choices down to about three separate grad programs (each was a reach, as they were all top-of-the-

field types of programs, but given my own alma mater I did at least have a shot). I did not have much of a plan but I was at least headed in the right direction. Then, I got derailed.

Remember that my parents' deaths were protracted affairs; I did not wake up one morning, as some people do, and end the day as an orphan. I had a lot of time to watch the train wreck, but as I was watching from somewhere near the baggage car I was distracted from dealing with my own fate. I was not fortunate enough to live near a university with a good graduate program in any of my fields, and honestly I would not have made time for it if I had. I was entirely devoted to the role of caretaker, almost destructively so, and I stayed home. That is a separate issue, but probably common in the sense that whatever the circumstances, during the death and subsequent grieving process for a parent, children tend to put themselves last on the hierarchy of importance.

In a perfect universe, my parents would not have been so terrified of their mortality to the point of disregarding what was in my best interest. But they were dying and often in pain or confuzzled by drugs, so I do not blame them at all. There was no support group available to me and, anyway, I was too busy being strong for my family to even admit that I had needs or weaknesses. The result was that my crucial post-college phase was not spent working (gaining experience) or getting a higher degree (gaining credentials). When I finally turned back to that paradigm, I was so psychologically broken that it was like reading a familiar book in a foreign language: I knew the plot and the characters, but I still had no idea what was going on.

After Mother died I took a few courses at the local community college with a vague and uncertain thought toward an architectural degree. It was a complete change of plans from all prior career tracks and was both ill-advised and doomed to fail. It was something, though, and it got me out of the house a little during Poppa's final year, although of course it went up in smoke when he died.

In the end, although I did not have a home anymore or any reason *not* to move on to do whatever I wanted, where ever I wanted, still I did not do it. I cannot stress how *unimportant* something like a “career plan” is in that situation, and how normal that unimportance is under those circumstances. As a young woman the expectation was that I would just keep moving forward, pick up where I left off, or perhaps start over. The gut punch is that grief takes away a lot of self-purpose. Grief made me forget that there was any reason for me to exist. I was not even anyone’s daughter anymore; how meaningless was it to be an employee? Or a student? Or anything?

I floated from job to job, aimlessly and without direction, for over ten years. It felt right in a comfortable, mindless way. It cost me dearly.

## Aftermath – Paperwork and Ribbons

A friend of mine once commented disparagingly on car memorial stickers (where someone puts a tombstone text on the window of their car, e.g. “Sue York, 1942-1994, Loving Wife and Mother”), saying they were tacky and cheap. It is not something I would do but I understand the motivation better than my friend did.

For one thing, even in highly religious environments, there is not much memorializing going on these days. There are religious ceremonies within a certain time frame of the death, usually, but after that the dead person’s life and death become invisible to the world at large. Culturally, outside of specific religions, mourning just is not done anymore, and while I think forcing people to wear all-black for five years or something (unless they are a goth!) is a little much, it is a shame that we do not do anything that counts as mourning. We have not been given options to replace the crutches of mourning traditions, and by crutches I do not mean anything derogatory, but rather akin to the medical necessity of having a form of support after something important has broken.

There is a part of the grieving process that is intensely private, and I am sure there are people who would not want any kind of public acknowledgement of what they are going through. On the whole though, many people want their loss to be recognized at some level, and the car memorial stickers are one modern way of doing that, in practice not that much different than hanging a black wreath on the front door after a death in the household. Back in the day, everyone in town would know whom the wreath was for; these days, we stick the name onto our cars to fight the anonymity of modern death.

The only real ongoing mourning practice we have these days is an unofficial one: paperwork – death certificates, hospital bills, legal papers, financial documents and nauseum. My father, a former pilot with the U.S. Air Force, once said that in the military you could not get off the runway until the weight of the paperwork equaled the weight of the

plane. I've always remembered that witticism, especially after my parents died and I was neck-deep in papers. Perhaps the equivalent saying is that you cannot bury your dead until the height of the paperwork equals the depth of the grave?

Anyone who has had the role of trustee for a loved one knows the horrors associated with trying to tie up all the loose ends of a person's life: acquiring copies of the death certificate, closing bank accounts, dealing with outstand credit balances, figuring out insurance coverage and payouts, arranging for the transfer of property/assets to the legal heir(s). And that is if there is no one contesting the will, which with more propertied families is sometimes a huge trauma. Dealing with all of the paperwork that resulted from the deaths of my modestly middle class parents was daunting, and in my mother's case, with all of her credit card debt, took over a year to finally just *end*.

By that time, I had grown used to always carrying her death certificate with me. I had it tucked into the day planner that I took everywhere, and I would often find myself turning to that folder to look at the certificate. When my father died it was second nature to add his death certificate to hers in my planner, and I continued carrying the certificates with me for at least the following five years. It was a form of on-going mourning that worked its way into my daily routine and was profoundly comforting. When I felt totally alone and drifting in a big, bright world, I would look at those papers and remember that I did have a history, that my parents had lived and died and loved me.

It remained a private mourning tradition, for I learned quickly that other people, those who had not lost anyone close, for the most part, found the practice creepy. I kept it my secret, but that did not reduce the importance of having those papers close by. By the time a year had passed from Poppa's Death Day, I had nothing else to mark me as "in mourning" and certainly nothing publicly visible or recognized as official mourning.

For me this “anonymous mourning” was worsened by the age-group factor, because a mid-twenties-something is not culturally expected to be dealing with these issues. Statistically, many are, as they are with issues such as spouse abuse, drug addiction and all sorts of heavy-weight things. No age group is immune. However the young adult is supposed to be reveling in her glory years, having fun and starting off her life and career and relationships with few burdens. I often wonder how much easier it would have been for me to face up to my defiance and denial demons if I had been given some public avenue for mourning.

But our society works hard to avoid, deny, and cheat death. Mourning is de facto an open acknowledgement of peoples’ deepest fears, and it is uncomfortable for them to even think about it. I know some folks who will detour just to avoid driving past a cemetery. And to think, back in the Victorian era, families used to picnic after church at the graves of loved ones as a form of memorial and mourning! Many people find that idea morbid but personally, I would love to share my life with the dead in such a straightforward, familial way.

For a few months in 1999 I worked on an idea I called the Black Ribbon Project; the red AIDS ribbon was ubiquitous in those years, and other colored-ribbon causes had not been fully born yet. My idea was to champion the wearing of small black ribbons to symbolize mourning. I made up a flier and faxed it around to newspapers but I did not really know what I was doing. It is hard to drum up interest in something that is not an actual *cause* needing money; ironically, by asking for nothing I insured that my concept would get nothing, including attention. I still like the idea, as it is a simple and unobtrusive way to be in mourning that does not have any particular religious significance yet carries the gravity of tradition.

I honestly do not know what other traditions might work these days. There are so many different religious beliefs and customs that a generic mourning tradition is needed, but is already fighting an uphill battle for recognition, not to mention fighting our collective knee-

jerk horror at anything to do with our mortality. I wish I had a way to advance the black ribbon campaign again, but the same hurdles are still in place, and at this point the deaths I am mourning are so far distant that it would feel pretentious to mark them visibly.

Yet I firmly believe we are all cheated by not marking grief in a public way. It might not be helpful for everybody, but for those of us who crave that kind of acknowledgement, it can be crucial to our whole mourning process. It is why car sticker memorials came into being in the first place. I often wonder what secret traditions other people have, similar to my own desperate clinging to the paperwork of my parents' deaths.



## Reflection – The Lonely Codependent

As they say, every unhappy family is miserable in their own unique way. While I was blessed with parents who truly loved and treasured me, they themselves were cursed with serious demons that impacted how they lived their lives, how they raised me, and even how they died.

I mentioned Poppa's PTSD and alcoholism earlier, born not just out of a history of alcoholism in his family but through surviving World War II as a reconnaissance pilot and the Southeast Asia Conflict (aka Viet Nam) as a rescue helicopter pilot. As far as I know, Poppa never received any serious counseling or psychotherapy to deal with his issues as a war veteran and survivor, and it showed.

Mother, on the other hand, was randomly bipolar and a hypochondriac. When I was young it was not "bipolar" yet, it was "manic-depressive" and to be honest, that was a better description of her life given her extreme mood swings. Her hypochondria was the kind based on actual health problems. For example, she really did have adult-onset severe asthma that almost killed her when I was about seven, and she did suffer from recurrent, severe migraines. On top of her legitimate health concerns, though, she piled on so many other undiagnosed disorders that it was hard to keep track of it all. I can, in retrospect, armchair quarterback (so to speak) her health issues but in the end, they were real enough to her.

Without going into too many details about my childhood, I want to establish that there were *problems*, serious problems that negatively impacted the relationships among the three of us from the time I was born until today, over a decade after their deaths.

There is a strange dichotomy at work in this kind of situation: I miss my parents, as I loved them very much and they loved me, but I would be lying if I did not admit to being glad sometimes that my mother is dead and that my father is out of his misery.

If that sounds a little shocking, consider that for many years as I thought about writing this book, the subtitle for this section was “How to Hate Your Mother When She’s Dead”. That is the kind of statement that gets you strange looks in conversation. Early query letters for this book were forcefully rejected because of the tone of that particular phrase, although agents were otherwise interested in the idea.

But honestly, the elephant in the room after a parent dies is made up of all the issues you had with them while they were still alive. Maybe your mother was religious, and disapproved of your changing churches or going agnostic; maybe your father never forgave you for marrying the person you chose; maybe one or the other parent suffered an addiction to alcohol or drugs; maybe one or the other or both were just kind of lousy parents. Worst case scenario is that the parent who died abused you, physically or mentally, or stood by while someone else did. Who in their right mind really believes that those kinds of issues die with the deceased? Actually, a lot of people do.

I got the “she’s dead, move on” speech in every flavor under the Sun so many times I could (still) scream. I got the “he’s dead, best to remember the good times” speech too. It always made me *furious* because those kinds of attitudes essentially invalidate my experiences, my regrets, and my anger. I never got the chance to resolve or address my feelings with my parents while they were alive, but that does not mean those feelings just went away on the day they died. Believe me, I really, really wish they had.

It is not about how much you love them, or how much they loved you, it is about the fact that everyone involved is merely human. We are complex emotional creatures and yes, it is entirely possible to love someone you hate. It is possible to be angry at someone and still miss them. It is possible, and indeed probable, that for however much an important part of our lives our parents played, we are sometimes glad they are not around.

I had to contort myself for years to avoid these conflicted feelings, much less address them. It felt weird to discuss problems I had with my mother, since she was dead. As my therapist often reminded me, Mother's influence in my life did not end with her death and her impact on my emotional development cannot be escaped.

In that sense, we are never truly alone...and that is what will drive you crazy if you do not acknowledge it somehow.

## Aftermath – Recuperation

I have avoided using the word “recover” in this book for several reasons. First, I do not want to present grief as some sort of temporary illness that will eventually go away with no lasting effects. Second, recovery in common usage is often linked to illnesses like addiction and eating disorders. I think it is false advertising to place grief into that same category, even if parallels can be drawn, and even if such an illness can be linked to a person’s grief. Third, recovery always implies that the afflicted will “get back to normal”.

Grief will never go away, it is not a mental illness, and it is a guarantee that you will never “get back to normal.” Yet, it is true that over time the emotional extremes decrease in frequency and even intensity, and there is a point where most mourners turn that corner of “this is hell” to “I’m doing okay.” So, I feel a better term is recuperate, which is honestly a synonym of recover with an almost identical dictionary definition. However it is subtly different in its implication that the effects of the damages are not quite going away even if they mend. You recover from a common cold; you recuperate from trauma.

For me, recuperation began when I finally hit system meltdown. I hope no one else ever has to go through the years of self-imposed stalling tactics I employed that lead to that catastrophe. My father died in 1996; my slow-motion collapse began in late 2007. I find that ten-year gap enormously frustrating, but then I suspect it would have been just as frustrating at two years or twenty. I still sometimes view it as a personal failure that I did not “bounce back” after my parents died, and my therapist has to constantly remind me to be reasonable with myself.

It happened like this: I saw the movie *Hot Fuzz* in late 2007, and the realization hit me that had my life gone any differently, it was exactly the kind of movie I would have made. The movie itself is not important to discuss here (you can look it up, or watch it if you are curious), other than to say that I believed it reflected a type of film that I think I would have

made, in a different life. That is discounting a variety of factors, of course, since my life is vastly different than Edgar Wright's (the director of *Hot Fuzz*). The point is not that I easily dodged a lifetime directing movies, but that my life was so far off course from anything I had ever dreamed about or hoped for or even planned that I did not recognize it. I was a stranger in my own life.

Nonetheless, using tried-and-true tactics of avoidance, I kept the wheels turning in my life up until April 2008 when I was going through a box of my father's belongings. There was one small wooden lockbox that was, surprisingly, *locked* and I knew I did not have the key. I unscrewed the base of the box and out fell a lifetime of mementos and keepsakes, the small detritus of my father's life that he found so precious and rare that he had to lock them away. I will never know why he did that, nor what the majority of the little trinkets meant to him (e.g. a name plate badge; a set of USAF wings which were clearly off his uniform but not visibly different from the other twenty I have; pieces of jewelry). I broke down, completely and unfathomably, going to bed and crying for 24 hours straight.

From that point on I could not avoid the fact that I was in crisis, but I had no way of dealing with it. I simply did not know how. All through that summer I trudged along, terrified and uncertain, until I tried calling Lee's Place Grief Counseling Center. I say "tried calling" because the first two times I called, I hung up on whoever answered the phone (I am sure I sounded like a prank call. I would like to take this moment to apologize for that). I do not understand why it was so scary, but it was, and on the third try I finally kept myself on the phone although I was reduced to crying hiccups. Somehow the secretary managed to make my appointment anyway.

All of which proves that I am stubbornly slow to change. It took several cracks in my amour and a year of blinking at the world in shock before I sought the help I needed. It is no lie to say that after that, things got really difficult, but it is no less true that they also got better. I

worked at it because I knew I was at a point of “make or break”, even if I was doing it in slow motion.

Although therapy is not for everyone, it worked for me. There are, I am sure, as many different ways to recuperate as there are people in mourning, and I know I do not have all the answers. What seems universally true is that you know what you are able to deal with, and when. I hate the ten years I lost to doing nothing more than mere survival, but it is quite probable that I needed that much time just to recover from the extensive system shocks I experienced.

For anyone who is in mourning, I hammer home not to set expectations or levy judgments against their individual recuperation process. It is wise to keep a weather eye out for self-destructive behaviors, of course, but never *ever* forget that losing a parent is nothing less than a form of personal apocalypse. Own your recuperation, and respect the process.

## Reflection – Grieving Futures

I am always at a loss to explain the title of this book. It has had the same title, for the same reason, since I first toyed with the idea of writing it back in the late 90s. I have explained the title more times than I can count, and everyone likes it, and the reasoning behind it, but that does not mean that I feel as if I have truly related it properly.

My idea is not bold nor particularly original. However it is an aspect of grief that gets glossed over because it is on first reflection a selfish one: *that a large part of what we are grieving is not what was, but what will never be*. I think parents dealing with the loss of a child feel this most keenly: that they will never see their baby grow up, graduate, marry, see the world. When a parent dies, it is the reverse: that they will not meet our future spouse, or know their grandchildren, or see us accomplish our heart's desire. We are grieving for the future that will never be, which is as dead as the person we have lost.

I think, though, that it is not an unreasonably selfish response and deserves more respect. We are not only grieving for what we will never share with that person, but also for what they, themselves, will never experience. In my mother's case, I grieve for the fact that she died just when medications for bi-polar disorder were becoming advanced enough to actually *help* her. She suffered the majority of her adult life from crippling emotional swings, which shredded her massive potential. She lived as if she was locked her in a cage of fear, anger, remorse, and shame that she could only look out from, never escape. It is enough to make me weep that at the point when she was finally, *finally* able to construct a life outside of her mental illness, she died. Yes, I would have loved to see that evolution, to be a part of it; it seems that mostly my grief is in on her behalf. It was so *unfair*.

In my father's case, it comes back to that lock box full of mementoes. He has no more chances to tell me about important times and places in his life. Poppa was a natural born storyteller, and even at 72 years old and stroke-ridden, he loved to spin a good yarn. We

were just getting to really know each other as *adults*, and he had started to remember and tell me the stories that clearly weighed on his mind, good and bad. His military career, marriages, childhood were all experiences he wanted to share, and it was obvious that he had waited years to finally have a chance to talk to me as an equal. He died with many stories untold, so much left unsaid.

It is shattering to sit in a room full of the things that mattered to your parents and realize that any lessons your parents had to teach or learn or live with are over, that anything they wanted to explain will forever be a mystery. We certainly mourn for what was – those picture perfect moments of memory, traces of the lives we once lived with the people we still love – and rage at what was taken away from us. To me, though, the loss of their futures is the bitterest pill.

I will always want what might have been.



## The Happy Ending

We all want the Happy Ending, no matter how unlikely. I am still looking for it, and in the meantime, I own boxes and boxes of my parents' keepsakes that I do not know what to do with. They were a unique pair of pack rats, keeping documents more than things. I have my father's entire military career documented all the way back to World War II (carbon paper! It is not an urban myth!) and all of their tax returns. Yes, *all* of their tax returns. From the 1950s on up. No denying it is a daunting legacy\* and that does not particularly make me happy. It also feels quite endless, whenever I am sorting through it!

There is, of course, always an *ending* though—every life ends, because everybody dies. No one is particularly happy about that, even if they find a way to make peace with it, so what makes a “Happy Ending”, then?

When a story ends, the implication is that the characters live on. Even a “Happy Ending” presupposes not that everyone actually ends (dies), but that they continue on contentedly for the rest of their lives. “The End” means the end of the story, not the end of life, and so a happy ending is one where the characters live blessed and personally fulfilling lives. Similarly, in real life, we tend to separate parts of our lives into disparate stories: the high school years, the college years, the newlywed years, the parental years, the retirement years, etc. Something goes wrong when we cannot end one story and move on to begin the next. It is like the friend who never left the glory years of high school or college, forever bemoaning the loss of youth and how miserable life is now compared to then. It can become a dangerous pastime to be stuck at the “The End”, and never move on to “In the beginning...” In my case, it was catastrophic.

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\* My goal is to eventually organize all the paperwork, properly archive it, digitally scan it, and then turn it into a documentary editing project that reveals the complexity of their lives. I envision it as something more than a simple biography of either, more like a history of their lives and times as reflected through the documents that tracked them. I figure that will be my memorial to them.

I spent a long time living at The End of “My Family”, figuring there was nothing for me past surviving that particular story. I decided that my parents’ deaths were also my own ending, and that the best I could do was simply survive, happiness be damned. Although I hoped that eventually I would move past the worst pangs of grief, I did not understand that happiness is not the absence of misery. It is its own tangible emotion that must be cultivated and pursued. It can be gifted upon you, but never demanded, and it is most easily crushed by indifference (which is the opposite of love).

After ten years, when I finally started unraveling, the worst part was not how much I missed my parents but how much I missed *me*. I was barely a person. I had few characteristics I could recognize as genuinely myself. Physically, I was unhealthy and out of shape and not eating nutritiously. I had shuffled through convenient but uninspiring career options, leading me in turn to a series of dead-end jobs. Socially, I hid in a marriage that was comfortable and friendly but in many ways loveless, physically and emotionally. I got up and lived from day to day with no sense of purpose or self-worth.

Obviously, I was not happy either.

What took me a while to figure out (amidst other issues completely unrelated to my grief process), is that *being happy is the goal, not an end in itself*. Teaching myself the art of happiness is something I have to address every day, one way or another, much as I have to face my grief. Avoiding my emotions, hoping for a stalemate, led to even bigger problems. I certainly do not have all the answers I need and probably never will, but most days, I am genuinely happy. My “happy ending” is waking up every day remembering who I am, who my parents were, and where I want to go with my life. It is being able to write this book without falling apart.

In a way, I guess I would say that my “Happy Ending” is simply a perpetual state of “In the beginning...”

## APPENDIX

### Independence Day, 1996 (Being a Letter to a Dead Man)

Dear Poppa,

It is Independence Day, 1996, and I am independent. I am on my own at last, after all these years. It was a mutual dependence, I concede, but it is hard for me to be without it. The dogs keep me from being lonely, but they cannot replace a family that has disappeared. In a few days, I will be moving out of our old house, and with that move, my whole life will be left behind. You, Mother, the house, the bills....I have the dogs, the cat, my car, and entirely too much furniture.

Speaking of which, I have laid on the couch in the den for 10 days. It all boils down to the same chore: staying alive. If I could just come to the conclusion that it is not worth the effort, I might be better off by killing myself. No such luck, though: if nothing else, you taught me the value of every day as it is lived. You had an indefatigable way of assuming that, good or bad or worse, tomorrow will come anyway, so you just might as well be prepared for it...or unprepared, but with your eyes open. I am not preparing myself for anything, but I am at least acknowledging that I will be around tomorrow. Lying here, I can almost pretend (as if most of the furniture had not been sold in the estate sale) that you are still at your desk in the living room. That is actually a delusion worth living for.

I know you always hoped I would find a good, worthy man to share this burden with, but I am afraid I have let you down there too. Like you, I have a tendency to trust a veneer as the truth. I also want a man strong enough not to need me, although those are also the ones who don't want me. The strength I am attracted to is nothing more than a veneer over emotionally shallow boys. You fell for a woman whose warmth and charm was genuine to the bone, but whose common sense and self-confidence was a rouse, and she financially

ruined you. And you loved her anyway. After seeing what her death did to you, I think I might just be better off never falling in love at all.

This year, July 4th means more to me than a holiday that upsets the terrier. I do want to celebrate for once (we so rarely did, didn't we?), and have a grill-out and listen to you lecture me about my vegetarianism. I want to hear you tell me how exciting my life is, and how many mistakes I am going to make - now I want those insufferable, fatherly lectures on how bad my life isn't. We could eat salted watermelon for dessert on the back porch during the afternoon rain, and talk about how much Mother loved lazy afternoons and hated summer days.

On these patriotic holidays, everyone talks teary-eyed about our "American Heroes." How many of them held the hand of a hero while he died? I did, by God, I saw a good man die: You. It is true that living heroes are mostly overlooked, and spend the rest of their lives wondering where their 15 minutes of fame went. Perhaps the only good hero is a dead one; eulogies are more impressive than checks to pay the grocery bills with.

You were a hero, Poppa, one of the top. How many men did you save during your stint in SAR during Viet Nam? And those victims you tried to help at that concentration camp during WWII - I am sure they saw you for the angel you are. How many remember you today? More than you would guess, you with your fatal humble pie. So your name is not being shouted from signs and billboards - hell, I don't even have a flag to fly at half-mast - but it is inscribed deeply into the hearts of those who knew you. Like me. I miss you.

~ Love, Miss Boo.

## Wedding 1966



My favorite photo from their “elopement”. The redhead on the right is my maternal grandmother, Memaw.



I don't doubt this was one of the happiest days of their lives.

Troy 1973



My father, me, and my mother on base housing in Florida.