

2014

## At the Edge of the Yard: A Dying Mother Tells Her Daughter, "The Woods Were Calling You"

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### Recommended Citation

Manikian, Sally (2014) "At the Edge of the Yard: A Dying Mother Tells Her Daughter, "The Woods Were Calling You"," *Appalachia*: Vol. 65: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol65/iss1/3>

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# At the Edge of the Yard

*A dying mother tells her daughter,  
“The woods were calling you”*

**Sally Manikian**



I used to go for these long walks with the dog, and then come home and write.

—*My mother, on her life as a poet, an artist, and a woman before she had me.*

ONE WINTER EVENING, A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS a daughter home for the holidays from graduate school, my mother sent me out to get the newspaper from the end of the driveway. We had forgotten to pick it up earlier, and in the post-dinner warmth of a woodstove and her leather couch, my mother wanted to read the *New York Times*. In a daughter's service to her mother, I put on a heavy coat and winter boots and went outside.

In my mind, the driveway at my childhood home was always very long, a stretch of asphalt leading underneath and through dark white pines toward the beacon of light at the barn and from the house windows. Until only a few years before, I used to fear the darkness around the driveway. Returning after dark, I would clutch my car keys and walk faster, refusing to look around. If I made eye contact with the darkness, the unknown dangers and threats would manifest out of the woods.

On this night, I picked up the newspaper from the ice dam at the end of the driveway and turned back toward the house. I lingered as I passed into the shadows of the white pines, I paused at the edge of the circle of light cast by the exterior light of the barn. With a few more steps, I'd be inside that circle, and a few more steps would bring me safely inside, where it was warm, and where my mother sat waiting.

It was a clear night, and cold. Light snow dusted the grass, and I had been inside all day. This night, I had a different idea of where I wanted to go. So, instead of continuing my path up the driveway, I turned from the yellow lights of doors and windows and headed toward the dark blacks and blues and silvery snow of the backyard.

Everything felt whole and complete. I had no fear, no thickening rush of a heartbeat, no desire to flee. When I realized that I had to return to somewhere, I didn't feel a draw to the house and its lighted windows and warm glow. I wanted to go into the woods. I wanted to be where I felt comfortable. I wasn't ready to go inside.

*Sally Manikian's mother, Jamie Stephenson, with her dog, in 1979 or 1980.* MANIKIAN FAMILY

But, I had dawdled long enough. My mother was waiting, and I had taken much longer than I should have to get the newspaper. When I told her about the walk into the backyard, and how I'd felt at the edge of the yard, she said, with a mother's joyful amusement, "Oh, Sally, the woods were calling you." I listened as she confirmed my emerging identity, comforted that she understood. I handed her the newspaper and joined her on the couch.

The reason I had gone out to retrieve that newspaper was not only that I wanted to help my mother, but that my mother couldn't walk.

BETWEEN 2002 AND 2011, LOU GEHRIG'S DISEASE (AMYOTROPHIC lateral sclerosis, or ALS) pulled my mother through a series of changes, each small, and together, fatal. The disease started in her right leg, progressed through her extremities, and reached her torso and lungs. It killed her fingers, slowed her speech, consumed her muscles, exposed the ridge of her spine and the sharp angles of her shoulder blades, and rendered her legs thin and knobby. After nine years, she depended on a ventilator, a feeding tube, and the care of a small army of aides and nurses and family. She did not leave her room on her own for two years.

While this beautiful person who had created and guided me into a rule-breaking life of adventure and strength lay ill and confined, I spent most of my days outside. Two years after her diagnosis, I finished my graduate work and moved back to New Hampshire, taking the only job I saw myself doing: working in the northern end of the White Mountains as a backcountry caretaker at Carter Notch Hut. I spent two years as a caretaker year-round, at campsites, cabins, and roving around the rugged Mahoosuc Range on the New Hampshire–Maine border. I settled into the rhythm of life in New Hampshire's Coos County. I skied on logging roads, helped friends with maple sugaring season, and became a dog musher. I found summer fieldwork jobs. I scraped together a living from adjunct professorships and community outreach work. I spent most of my time outside: As my mother had said, the woods were calling me.

But so was my mother. Every two weeks at first, and eventually every week, I committed myself to a six-hour-round-trip drive back to where my mother lay in her bed. I would sit by her side for anywhere from one to four days at a time. We would watch a stream of movies. I would work in her room and around the house from a list of tasks she gave me. I would tell her which mountains I'd climbed, stories I'd written, bread I'd baked. I ran her finances,



*Sally Manikian with her dog, Quid, at the Mount Washington Observatory when she was working as a winter caretaker at the Randolph Mountain Club's Gray Knob cabin.* EDITH TUCKER

managed her health care, cooked food for my siblings, and occasionally took my younger, developmentally disabled sister, Caroline, out shopping.

I felt a pull every time I drove down there. I felt a pull away from my friends, my house, and away from the mountains and woods I needed. Leaving for Mom's bedside hit me the hardest during glorious moments like a February's new snow, a sunny day in May, a bright orange September, or the winter's first major snow. Those were the times I wanted to be outside. My selfish emotions then smacked into reality: My mother was dying ever so slowly. She herself had formed a life around the natural world. She was losing her ability not just to go outside, but to breathe.

I felt frustrated at everything at home: that I could not understand what she needed, that I could not halt time or the progression of her illness, and—selfish daughter that I was—that I wanted to be doing something else other than caring for her. Immediately, I felt guilty for feeling that way.

My mother and I—like all mothers and growing-up daughters—navigated constant change in our relationship. She had taught me to explore and create my adult self. A dichotomy developed between my love of her life and her wisdom and my love of escape into the woods, trees, and fresh air. Whittle away those nine years of my life to a core, and this was what was left:

that I simply wanted to live a wild life. But another drive and directing force lay at the very baseline of those years of caretaking and growth: the love I felt for my mother, slowly dying in her house. When she smiled at me, I was captivated. My world paused. It didn't matter, then, that I'd just driven three hours south, I had left my friends behind, or that I was about to spend the next several days helping her write, talk, bathe, eat, and stay alive.

I felt the pull to stay.

MY MOTHER'S DECLINE AND MY DAY-TO-DAY LIFE IN THE WOODS OF the North Country merged in cell phone messages.

When I went into the woods, whether for a single day or an eleven-day hitch, I was always ambivalent toward my cell phone. I would leave it at my house, or in my truck, or, sometimes, turned off in a plastic bag buried in my pack. Cell service is spotty in the Mahoosucs, where I spent two years, and elsewhere in the Whites, where I still range, now as a supervisor of field staff.

I started to view my cell phone as a source of stress and fear. It would come with the beep of a new voice mail or missed call from my mother or my aunt. Before I would press the button to listen, I would do a quick recap, a speedy evaluation, of the last time I had seen my mother. I would remember how upset she had been or that she had looked scared, her face contorted in tears and her body uncomfortable. When a call would come, unexpectedly, anytime other than directly before my next visit (usually her figuring out when I would be at the house), I knew it was bad.

The message might say she'd been hospitalized, had an emotional breakdown, or suffered a rugged infection that wouldn't let go. All of them were requests for me to come home, to see her, to spend days and hours inside at her bedside giving over to serving her needs and only her needs, while the outside and my independent life continued on.

I've received these messages after a morning spent doing hard trail reconstruction, a body tired from wrestling with rock. I've received them at the end of an adrenaline-rush day of felling trees with a chain saw. I've received them while driving down a rutted potholed backwoods road, shoulders slick with sweat from running the last two miles down the trail. I've received them in the setting sunlight of dusk toward the end of an eleven-day stint in the woods.

The common thread I draw out is that I remember the ones I received at a moment when I feel I've controlled something. The rock went in the ground, the tree fell right where I wanted it to, I made it down the trail faster than

I thought I would, and I made my work plan for the next four days in the woods. Finding my way in life, a life now driven by the field for my work and a woodlot and a dog team for my home, I feel a sense of satisfaction when something goes right. It was a sense of confidence, that firm alignment of my vision of life with the work I did on the ground. It was my identity forming, that identity of my 20s. This was often punctuated by a phone call from my mother, calling me back, derailing the fine balance I deluded myself I'd achieved by building a rock staircase or climbing a craggy alpine summit in the dead of winter.

IN DECEMBER 2010, MY MOTHER FELL UNCONSCIOUS. HER HEART wasn't pumping enough blood to her head. She was unresponsive and barely breathing. Her nurse made the call to take her to the hospital.

Her nurse also called me. I was, of course, in the woods completing the second day of my chain-saw certification course. I was fueled that day by the focus of the puzzle and dangers of tree felling and chain-saw operation. I had spent the day outside in the blistering cold of Maine, experiencing the poetry of a chain saw and reading the binds of tall trees.<sup>1</sup> I returned home with a piece of the first tree I had cut with the chain saw, and I returned home to find the message from the nurse.

My mother had been hospitalized before. It grew no less scary each time. I felt drained and terrified. I had a house to shut down and a sick dog to care for. I left—as always when these calls came—not sure when I'd be back. I would pack the essence of my life when I flew to my mother's side: books, journals, a warm sweater, a bottle of wine, and always something to wear outside. A pair of running shoes and a Windbreaker, perhaps, but sometimes gear for working out in my mother's backyard.

My family's home sat on 6 acres that are mostly wooded. I had played in the wetlands as a child, and I climbed the trees as an adult. I became my mother's groundskeeper early in her illness, raking the leaves in the fall and mulching the shrubs in the spring. As she needed me at her bedside more and more, I found less time to maintain her land. But, although it meant time away from her side, my guilt always lessened slightly when I worked in her yard, because I still, in some way, served her and not (selfishly) myself. It was a compromise.

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1 "Binds" are areas in a fallen or leaning tree where tree cutters perceive a chain saw might get stuck, or bound, in the trunk.





*Sally Manikian in the field, overseeing the construction of the Appalachian Mountain Club's Garfield Ridge Shelter in the White Mountains.* JOHN NININGER

So for that visit in December 2010, when my mother lay unresponsive in a hospital in Lawrence, Massachusetts, I packed my leather boots, heavy workpants, and a chain saw. I wanted, I needed, to spend time outside and away from the hospital felling trees, opening up trails, doing something.

It turned out I didn't have the time to run the saw. My mother went home the next day. Over the next 48 hours, I sat with her for ten hours each day. We watched movies, I did her Christmas wrapping and card writing, and I performed all those attendant tasks of caring for the very sick: changing her clothes and sheets, wiping the crust from her lips, and trying to keep her from crying. I watched the winter sun move across the sky. She watched the birds at the birdfeeder by her window.

I carved out a small hour on Saturday when I could go outside. My goal that day was to work on my developing ski-trail network on the 6 acres. I spent that brief hour before the sun set marking trees to cut and clipping brush for another loop in the trail.

Inside that day, I'd felt pushed to the point of tears as I'd shifted my mother's body on pillows, set up her feeding tube, suctioned mucus from the hole in her throat to which her ventilator attached, and took her on and off the toilet. I still felt emotionally hung over from the day before, when I had spent



three hours on the road wondering what she would look like in the hospital bed. A thick film of fear and grief and exhaustion covered me.

After that hour working on the loop trail, I was hungry for the first time in three days. I knew what I wanted for dinner—I can't recall what that was, now—and I was even inspired to cook it. I had a stick in my hair and a scratch on my thumb. The thick film was wiped clean. I was able to breathe deep. I had found life, a brief spot of life within her death.

THIS IS ALSO A STORY OF GRIEF AND LOSS, OF WHAT THIS KIND OF grief and loss does to change and mold and terrify a young woman, of what it did to me as I searched for what made me feel better. I walked through dark nighttime softwoods, plunging my hands deep into new powdery snow, my chest wracked with deep heaving sobs. I cried surrounded by autumn's golden carpet, I relaxed into a calm under dark starry nights. Carrying a heavy load up a steep trail, I burst into tears from the weight of something heavier. In multiple seasons over years, I lived in the backcountry as a caretaker, where I could address my grief in a place that felt safe.

The grief was uncontrollable and isolating. Initially, I believed my feelings didn't belong, that they didn't have a place in a world driven by careers, education, and consumption. I wasn't comfortable talking about them casually. How could I talk about my mother dying in her bed, my two disabled siblings who would be my responsibility when she died, and my absent father who, many years before, had left the picture completely and violently? I wasn't sure how to explain it to people whose parents were alive, whole, still married, and supportive of each other. I wasn't sure how to explain my life to people who still could feel that they had a full spectrum of independent choice in front of them. I wasn't sure how to explain this weight I carried.

Eventually I decided I did not have to explain anything. Eventually I felt that I had become part of something beautiful and powerful. Something about the life's spirit, something about doing more and doing differently



*Sally Manikian with her mother in Maine in 1983.*

MANIKIAN FAMILY

than merely choosing to endure. Part of this was the process of growing, changing, thriving—a process that my mother, in her illness, guided.

On my birthday each year, that grief was so close, so loud and glaring that I couldn't just put it away for a different day. On my 25th birthday, she gave me a card written with wobbly handwriting, and I quietly let tears go in front of her as I read it. On my 26th birthday, she called me, and in the dark cold of Gray Knob, she told me about the day I was born, but her vocal muscles couldn't form words, only harsh whispers and exhalations, and I couldn't understand what she was saying. I stood silent and weeping, my fingers frozen and numb with cold around my cell phone, alone in a cabin on the edge of timberline in January.

On my 27th birthday, I wandered through the day waiting for something. I felt as if I had something to say, but I couldn't say it. Conversation was hard. I would start crying, releasing my heartbreak as I climbed a mountain behind my house in the evening darkness, sliding in new slippery snow.

On my 28th birthday, I spent the day supporting my mother as she cried, uncomfortable in her bed. I ignored voice mails and emails from friends wishing me a birthday filled with snowy hikes and happiness. The only phone call I took was from my friend Matt, as I drove quickly to buy food for my siblings' dinner, and he gave me the greatest birthday gift, which was to ask how I was and what I was doing, instead of assuming I had the day for myself. He made me laugh.

On my 29th birthday, I knew my mother had chosen to end her life and would do so in a matter of weeks. And I knew that it was my job to help her.

And over the course of that trail of birthdays, passing through my 20s, the grief and all the attendant feelings of frustration and sadness and difference and vulnerability and commitment just became who I was.

But something has changed, shifted, in the years since her death. On my 30th birthday, my first birthday without her, I spent the day unafraid of being yanked by a dying mother's needs. I ate cake for breakfast and went for a 25-mile dogsled run on trails I'd never seen before. I felt her presence, and I felt her absence. My 31st birthday was a day like any other, as I went to work and fed my dogs. Since my mother's death, that day, the day I was born, has started to become alive to me again.

IN MY JOURNALS, AS I FOUND MY OWN WRITING VOICE, A RHYTHM OF patterns and themes and images develops. The strongest and most constant theme is the juxtaposition, often in the same entry, of breathing deeply of a

woods experience and considering my mother's illness. Of a sky gone black at night, of open birch forests, of rocky summits. And, of course, of my mother's legs gone numb, her gait grown unsteady, and how our relationship had begun to change. The world I chose to interpret, that I chose to capture on a page, became wholly those two things.

Over time, my mother's voice disappears from my journals. She was always a strong presence, offering comments, guidance, and appearing in quotes as I worked through problems. The vignette that opens this essay is an example of how I narrated her wisdom into the world I wanted to live in.

As she stopped talking, stopped communicating, and was left with a list of commands to choose from by blinking, she began to disappear. Those bright moments when she was still a mother became different, rarer, more precious. The times, even when spelled out by blinking, she introduced me with the pride of a mother as a writer, a bartender, a dog musher, and adjunct professor (depending on the job I had at the time). The time she bought me a new winter coat. The time, the very day she died, she laughed because I did not know what a roach clip was.

She became a list of commands, of the things I had to do for her. Pages and pages describing the stages of death and physical dependence. No longer were my journal entries about her as a talking and insightful and creative person, they were gut-wrenchingly painful paragraphs describing the physical discomfort she and I experienced during the tough times of her illness.

As I began to lose my mother, or, at least, lose what I had known as my mother, I became overwhelmed with what I did not know about her.

I AM CONVINCED THAT MY MOTHER WAS AT HER MOST STUNNINGLY beautiful between the ages of 25 and 30. Some of my favorite photos of my mother are from when she was in her late 20s. Photos of her walking dogs in new snow, staring out to the sea from the shore's edge, and holding a rifle with a steady arm. She wore tight jeans, long hair, and plaid shirts with puffy down vests. She was the most gorgeous thing on the planet.

She, too, was drawn to the outdoors. She wanted and acquired a farmhouse and a garden. She loved growing things and tending animals. She believed in glass jars, co-op orders, and the natural world. She made our own bread and granola and always tried to trick us into thinking that carob was chocolate. She was a child of the 1960s, attending Woodstock and leaving her industrial New Jersey suburb for Boston University and then a California commune. I wore her clothes, I told proud stories about her, all those things



*Jamie Stephenson, age 28, at her niece's college graduation in 1978.* MANIKIAN FAMILY

that made her unique among the suburban mothers I met. I loved her, and idolized her, in her wild nature and intelligence.

At boarding school, I began talking to my mother on the phone—constantly, it seemed. She read every single essay I wrote. She gave me books, she came to my James Joyce class for her favorite chapters of *Ulysses*. She sent me to Yosemite, to Alaska, and to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Like a good mother, she patiently gave me the confidence to make my own decisions.

In 2001, when I was in college, she told me she had multiple sclerosis. It was then I began to wonder about my mother's unfathomableness, about all the things she did not talk about: her divorce from my father, her relationships with old college flames, her time in Mill Valley as a musician's girlfriend in the 1970s, the years of research on the sand dunes of Plum Island, Massachusetts, for her master's degree, and how it was that she had found her way through her 20s to her 30s, to a marriage and four children in Atkinson, New Hampshire. She drew from a weight of experience. I wanted to learn from her.

In winter 2002 she broke her leg. It was a simple accident, walking through a parking lot. Her leg was reinforced with surgical steel and a series of bolts. She still came to Ireland to stay with me on my 21st birthday. We ate out a lot and took taxis to movie theaters.

Before that break in 2002 was the last time my mother was able to walk freely on two legs. As the broken leg slowly healed, her other leg, the right one, became weaker. Floppier. It became an unreliable prop. After two and a

half years of tests, MRIs, and my mother staggering around her house with a walker and a cane, she was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. On top of her existing condition of multiple sclerosis. This was December 2004.

"I've tried so hard to protect you," her voice quaked. She had taken me into a front room of the house to explain why she needed me to go with her to a lawyer's office the next day: so that I could sign papers that established me as the trustee for the special needs trusts of my younger disabled siblings, Caroline and David.

"But I am the one who is going to hurt you," she finished.

I was 22 years old. I was living in California and considering becoming a lawyer, a professor, a student of international political theory. The news did not derail me, but it altered how I thought I could direct my life, choose a career path and a place to live. The idea of living far away from New Hampshire, or of developing full-time commitments and long-term goals, seemed irrelevant in its selfishness. I felt I couldn't make decisions to serve only myself anymore.

I have to dig deep to remember those in-between years between the first crushing blow of her diagnosis and the last crushing years of her physical decline. In those in-between years, she could drive, she could talk, she could move about the house, and she could cook dinner for the family. She could get on an airplane, travel to Ireland to see her friends, or go to New Orleans



*Rachel, left, and Sally Manikian, right, with their mother at her 50th birthday party in 2000. MANIKIAN FAMILY*

to watch my sister Rachel graduate from Tulane. We would go out to dinner, my mother and her children. She could dress herself and pick out her jewelry. Her requests of me were simple. I shaved her legs, helped her up the stairs, took her tea and oatmeal in the morning, and eased her into bed at night.

I can't remember when she stopped talking and started using a computer as her voice. I lay in her lap one evening before Christmas, as she tried to pick out wool socks for me, and I can't remember now if she and I were communicating by talking or typing. When she could type via clicking on letters with her mouse, she could form sentences and vocalize opinions and thoughts. In the later years, reduced to blinking at certain words, extricating sentences took so long that she focused mainly on her physical needs.

I became her voice as I spelled out words letter by letter for her. I trace this shift also to a change in how she worked as a writer for the *NH Challenge*, a New Hampshire journal on disabilities from a family perspective. She needed that job to remain on Medicaid, which is what made it possible for her to live at home and receive care for her illness. As my mother lost the ability to type and write, I started contributing stories. I also began to write her pieces, and she would edit them. We submitted multiple stories together. For the last one we wrote together, she started with the subject matter and the first sentence, which she had picked out painfully letter by letter over the course of a few days, moving her mouse with her numbing hand.

THE DAY MY MOTHER TOLD ME SHE WANTED TO DIE, SHE SPELLED IT out letter by letter, and I said the words aloud. She was having difficulty breathing, and my sister Rachel and I had been struggling with her ventilator and making her body comfortable. She could not draw enough air into her lungs, and her eyes bugged with fear of slipping into unconsciousness. We were all tired and afraid. It was December 2010, or perhaps it was New Year's Eve—or thereabouts. When I picked up the cards we used to communicate and started writing down words she spelled, I thought it was going to be about anything other than ending her life—perhaps pillows to prop her head, or oxygen, which we hand-bagged directly into her throat.

This is the way we spelled. We held up an image of a keyboard on a piece of paper, and we would choose a row of letters. If she blinked at "First Row," we would go letter by letter through the row. Sometimes, the row was wrong and my mother would start silently crying halfway through, unable to scream the words out herself, or even tell us that we were leading her down the wrong



row. I too would cry in frustration. We would miss letters and then would start a new stage of confusion as we tried to guess the words, half spelled.

I stood before my mother that bright winter's day. Rachel was elsewhere in the house trying to find another way to help my mother. I started off with, "First row, second row, third row." My mother chose the third row and then picked out the letter *c*. We continued on, spelling the word "cremated." Flushed with fear, courage, love, shock, and surprise, I let her describe the rest of her wishes. The service would be in our house. She chose the priest.

I wasn't sure what to do with all this information. Her breathing slowed and she calmed down. We fixed the ventilator and our day continued, as we watched TV and cared for her. I didn't tell Rachel, but I did call my aunt, my mother's sister, and she told me that my mother had considered ending her life six months before. I realized exactly when she meant: I had spent a vivid set of days with her, a painful time of tears and heat and frustration, and during that week in May or June, I had expected her to spell out, "I want to die."

She had tried to hide it that time, but I had sensed it.

So now, that conversation about cremation and a service set so much in motion. The actions we would take after her death, those nuts and bolts of settling affairs. I started looking at houses to buy for David, Caroline, and me to call home. I started moving my mother's trust funds into my siblings' trust accounts. I closed her checking account.

But a great deal of what those four months involved were unlike any other kind of death. I supported her in her decision, showed her the house I had chosen for our family, and continued living normally. I flew to Nevada for a wilderness conference. I interviewed and hired my seasonal summer staff. I had to be the strongest version of myself I had ever been. I had to be stronger than the weight of sadness and grief I felt, and I also had to be strong in my understanding that it was time for this to happen. I had to be confident that I had been involved in this process from beginning to end. I wanted her pain to end, and I wanted our family to grow alive again. I spent so much time with her.

The feeling of love overwhelmed me. I felt it every time I looked at her face and her eyes would smile, and I would cry as I stood at the edge of the deepest exhaustion I've felt before or since. It was the love of the unique relationship between a mother and daughter. It's the closest I've come to spiritual transformation. It's the closest I've come to God.

THE DATE MY MOTHER CHOSE TO DIE WAS THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING. She said she wanted to see the birds, the snowmelt, the new ground, and rebirth.

It made sense. Heat would trigger my mother's migraines and inflame her MS, and would bake her in the sun when ALS rendered her bedridden. Summer was not a favorite season of hers, in the thick muggy damp of July. Cold was not her favorite either because of snow on flat roofs, a long driveway, firewood to haul, and an oil bill to pay. Winter meant work and cold to her. But she did love spring, which brought flowers to the front yard, and ducks out back. Clothes that dried in the sun instead of froze. Flocks of robins on the ground and the return of the nesting red-tailed hawk in the trees.

It was sunny on the day she died, and the air was warm and clean. Birds visited her birdfeeder that morning. The moment she died, we witnessed a release of energy so strong that my sister Rachel scrambled into my arms and we let go of our mother, grasped at each other, breathed together, and opened our eyes.

I SEE WHAT I WANT TO SEE WHEN I LOOK BACK AT MY MOTHER. I want to see the times she noticed the trees and the birds, the sky and the wind. Those were the things I noticed that she noticed. I can see her taking deep breaths of spruce trees while driving up the Mount Washington Auto Road. I once watched her slowly drive her wheelchair to the backyard pond, where she checked the water level. I remember her watching and telling stories of chipmunks and red-tailed hawks to me when I was away at high school, college, and graduate school. That was the life that filled her backyard.

While packing for our move to northern New Hampshire after she died, I found some photos she'd once told me about when I was waxing poetic about woods and trees and showing her my photos of the alpine zone in winter. Hers were of flowers and mushrooms, her garden, and the sand dunes of Plum Island. In this box, I also found photos of my mother at her point of extraordinary beauty, when she had long legs, dark hair, and that mature poise that I'm convinced I'll never have.

To lose my mother to a long illness, I had to see her as alive and dead, as something other than the person who gave me life. I was not greeted with the jerk of sudden loss, but I had to incorporate loss into my daily life. To ask my mother about her life became a weighted question, searching for information while I still could. So I often avoided it, unless she felt like talking.

Also unearthed after we moved were my mother's journals, her letters, printouts of her emails. In the months after the move, with gray November skies outside my window, I lay in bed for days reading and devouring these last pieces of her words, her mind. These pieces of her were her own, they weren't retold through my own journals or letters or comments that I had already ingrained into my psyche. These were fresh and new and in her own words, not channeled through my purposeful agenda of remembering and reincarnating and telling the story I wanted to tell. They were *her* fears, *her* uncertainties, and *her* loves. They weren't just what I chose to remember. It is the closest thing to my mother I own.

I missed her. I still turn to those journals, for guidance and reassurance and connection. In the weeks before she died, she would cry as she spelled that she wanted to spend more time with us. In response, at the time, I would reassure her that we had led a good long life together. I said that because I wanted to make her feel strong. I didn't allow myself to feel that I still wanted to learn so much from her.

BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LIVING THE STORY THAT EVERYONE says is so beautiful, so fascinating? The story of my mother, but also of my disabled siblings, my 70 acres of woodlands, and my sled dog team? Of my fieldwork and my backcountry experiences, but also my world travel and education?

In 2009, I recorded my thoughts about my mother for the oral history project called StoryCorps. Staffers for the project came to Berlin, where I was living then, for three weeks. My friend Pam interviewed me, because, in Pam's mind, I had a fascinating story. In the course of an hour, I barely covered the story. I talked fast as if I were talking to a stranger. I didn't feel I shared anything special.

A few weeks later, I took part in a three-day work trip overnight in the woods of the Mahoosuc Range. I turned my phone on during lunch break. I had two voice mails. The first one was from one of the producers of New Hampshire Public Radio, who wanted to air part of my interview. He referred to my "remarkable" story, although I remembered a static narrative captured in a radio booth that hadn't felt like the whole story as I had told it.

The second voice mail stood as evidence of how the story was sometimes, and still is, impossible to narrate. The unpolished stuff. It was from my aunt, my mother's sister, saying that my mother's caregivers were unpredictable and

unable to meet her needs, that my mother was in an unsafe situation and that I needed to move home to take care of her.

I was dripping in mud and rain. I had made a work plan for the next week in the woods, had started coming up with thoughts for the next season's job. I had made a grocery list. The selfish steps of creating and dreaming up a life of my own. In these moments of ordinary independence, I would get one of these messages reminding me that the story—the love and the grief—were uncontrollable. I felt that I could not tell my mother's story, either in a radio booth, on a friend's couch, or on a journal page. I could not narrate the disorientation and the spinning feeling I had. My reality constantly shifted from grief to love. That's difficult to narrate. I tried desperately to develop my own independent life in these traumatic years, when I reached the edge of my own ability to narrate emotion. I even questioned why we tell ourselves stories. The reasons I kept (and keep) doing the things I do lay outside the ability to capture the story.

After I got out of the woods, before I went to my mother's house, I listened to that hour-long StoryCorps interview three times. The first time through, I was captivated by the presentation. I sat on the couch, with a glass of wine, one shoe had dropped onto the ground, and one on my foot. I didn't move. I listened to it two more times, slowly, relaxing into the evening as I unpacked from three days in the woods and repacked for an unknown period of time at my mother's side.

I was seeking something. The story, but also that remarkable part.

I was looking for inspiration.

I'm still not sure what I heard.

What that means is that my life is nothing more than a meaningful one, and it continues to ground me and guide me into right-minded decisions. It is not about getting caught up in the story, in the unique parts, but on insisting that I live a life that is perfectly ordinary.

Since my mother died, in April 2011, all of her children have done so much. Some of what's happened has unrolled in the ways I laid out for her, as I eased her into death during those last few months. Caroline, my disabled sister, works in our new town, where she votes at the town hall. My brother David has become healthier and more active. All of us pull together to keep our house clean, ourselves fed, and to support my racing sled dog team—dogs that my mother never met but I know she would have loved. My sister Rachel, who is engaged to be married, visits from New York City. What I notice now is the absence of that thick film of grief and fear and uncertainty; I notice now that I have time

for myself. I find I still need to take deep breaths of cold air, strong strides, and move wood and rock by hand. Create a visible change. I live now with a responsibility of a different kind than caring for a dying mother, but which can become consuming, a responsibility that I continue to adapt to and grow into.

So, even now, sometimes I stay outside as dusk fades to night, instead of coming into the lighted warmth of the house. These are times when I find one more log to split, a tarp to tie down, or a dog to check. When I tell Caroline to feed herself and David from the leftovers in the fridge, I might don heavy boots and a work coat to be outside. The trees, dark air, and calm wholeness of my dog yard draw me in.

When I do come inside, at last, into that lighted warmth of home, a new home that my mother never saw, and I hear my brother and my sister, the cats, and the house dogs, I feel the home we've created. I feel the slow establishment of normality. And I sometimes expect an acknowledgement, maybe from my mother or maybe just in general, that I've come back inside.

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