



a memoir



by
Merrill Matthews

Thank you to my family and my friends.
Thank you to Stephanie for her beautiful artwork.



Mom and Dad

it almost feels like normal
like nothing changed
like it's just a regular day
I'm enveloped in those two seconds
so i wake up and do what i have to do
and the day progresses
and i watch something on tv
and i'm distracted
and yeah it is a regular day
if i close my eyes hard enough
because an era has ended
i can't be quiet enough
as much as when people want me to
and not leave it
but i want to feel it, and be in it
sometimes i feel alone
and as much as i am surrounded by love
and that i have no parents on earth anymore
and you realize that things have changed
then the two seconds pass

I'm a frayed thread
Swept up in the wind
Torn away and left to figure out
How to remain connected to the
Needle that I was sewn from.

This was a poem I wrote about two days after my mom died.
It was the first words that came out of my head.

Ever since I was a kid, I've always been a bit of a serial documenter. Film has always been the medium which I've deeply connected with. But truly I connected with anything that would leave me with a lasting mark: taking photographs, recording tv programs, recording voices, listening to albums over and over again, writing words down, getting excited if a video camera was ever in my hands.

I have always thought about why I've been so into this, like in such a possessed kind of way. And I think it comes from having pieces of my parents going undocumented, almost having lost information that for years we've been trying to piece together. So many holes to fall through. I didn't want to repeat any cycles where that was concerned.

As soon as my mother died, I started frantically writing things down because I didn't want to forget anything: any moment, any color, any feelings, any moment. I wanted to write down reality to preserve it.

Serial documenter.

I document the things that don't exist anymore in real life but exist in memory.

Moments to linger.

I'm in my head a lot. Pandemic life made it worse, but I'm trying to lean into it as a positive.

I'm constantly trying to find ways to decompress, to be quiet, to not talk. The world outside is noisy. I don't avoid the noise - in fact there are times where I welcome it. I mean, get me laughing, and I've been told that I am deafening. But it was important for me to be reflective and mark it all in my own way.

Building, rebuilding.

This is a story about my mom. It's a story that couldn't have happened without the sacrifice and drive and love of my Dad. But this is about her and how her passing has made me reflect on her life, and all that she did, overcame, and survived.

This is one story of a woman who started out one way but ended in an entirely different life.

It is *July 17, 2022*.

I'm on day 2 with having COVID. I managed to avoid it for 2.5 years, and kind of thought that it wouldn't end up happening to me, but here we are. Today is better than yesterday so I am hoping that tomorrow will be better than today and so on.

But the one thing I keep thinking about today, is how my mom was so worried about me catching COVID in those early days. She would have told me that she was praying for my recovery. And she would call multiple times over the course of the day to check up on me, to see how I was.

The phone is quiet now.

It hit me how much I took for granted that kind of ongoing looking after.

It is *August 31, 2022*.

My 46th birthday.

I wake up and do the tasks that I normally would do on a weekday: get Lea ready for school, make sure both my ladies have their smoothies and breakfast to start things right. But I am a little quieter, a bit more insular. Usually by 8AM at the latest, my phone would ring, and my mom would say "Happy Birthday" and sometimes I would reply "Thanks for having me.", which would make her laugh a little.

I'm now starting a new year, and my mom won't be physically there. The person who gave birth to me, who's been there for all my birthdays. She's not here for me to banter, argue and joke with. Life is different now.

"Go give Nana hug and kiss."

I'd say this every time I'd go visit Mom with Lea. And without a moment's hesitation, Lea would go over and kiss and hug my mom, and Mom would wrap her arms around her and give her a big smooch on the cheek.

"How she listens to you every time you tell her.", Mom would say to me.

Lea kept doing this all the time. The last two years were a bit more difficult what with COVID, but Lea never failed to always physically show my mom that she loved her, by phone, in person, by Facetime.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Wondering what got into my head that I always insisted that Lea did that act for my mom. Whenever we'd speak to her every night on the phone, I'd tell Lea to say, "I love you, Nana", which Lea would repeat.

"I love you too, my sweetheart.", my mom would say back to her, on speaker phone for all of us to hear. The sweetheart was interchangeable: sometimes it would be "I love you too, my beauty." or, "I love you too, my darling."

I don't remember my mom verbally ever saying she loved me. Ever. I struggled with that for a long time. I would see other parents of my friends be so affectionate and touchy feely with each other. My mom didn't do that. She liked having a tough resolve, so being vulnerable like that would mean taking her armour down.

(I am the opposite with my daughter. I tell her I love her about 500 times a day. I exaggerate but you get the idea.)

It was only during my sister Mary Lou's eulogy for my mother that I realized: yeah, she never said it, but she showed her love by doing.

The more I kept getting Lea to tell my mom that she loved her, it was probably a bit of subconscious way of me telling my mom that I loved her – but without saying it.

Maybe Lea was my own armour allowing me to be emotionally exposed like that to Mom.

Having Lea say it to her each time, was me wanting her to know that we collectively loved her.

That little act that Lea did each time, made my mom happy.

When Mary Lou read her eulogy at Mom's funeral, it hit me: Mom was always *showing us* that she loved us. I just didn't realize it entirely until that very moment.

Yeah, she never said it, but she showed her love by doing. You needed money? Here it is. You wanted new CD or new clothes to wear? Boom. No questioning.

Leave it to me to get hung up on words as usual, but in this case, words not said.

Every morning, on my walk with my dog, I speak to my mom. And I tell her about my day and what's coming up. And I tell her that I love her. My morning reflection.

It is *September 30, 2022*.

My family is all back together again and coming to my house for dinner. My brother Marvin and his wife Kristy have flown in from Calgary, and my sister Melanie has flown in from Toronto. It will be the first time we're all in the same room together since Mom died.

We all sit down for dinner together, and it's clear that we all know why we're here, why we've come back as a unit. My nephew Benjamin and I lock eyes at one point as we remember where we were, what we were doing with Mom a year ago at that time. We all talk about what we wished we could have done differently in our decision making, and how we all truly thought that Mom's health was nothing out of the ordinary and nothing to be alarmed about.

Little did we know....

On Thursday, September 30th, 2021, my sister Mary Lou texted me at around 8:30am telling me she got a call from Mom the evening before (September 29th) saying she had fallen. The nurses came into her place and checked her vitals, and everything was okay.

I called Mom shortly after that text, asking if she was okay. She sounded groggy, a bit out of it. I attributed it to it being early in the morning still, and knowing her, probably hadn't slept properly thinking about all the activity that had happened.

Mom proceeded to call me off and on in the morning, saying "she didn't feel well'. I asked her what she needed, saying that I couldn't come to her during the day, but I could come in the evening. As her words continued to be a bit slow and scattered, I again thought that maybe she was just tired.

Both my wife Mara and Mary Lou by text had mentioned that perhaps Mom was having another urinary tract infection episode. We had gone down this road before. And we learned the hard way that when "an old person" gets a UTI, one of the side effects is their speech is very out of sorts, and non sensical.

Bingo – clearly that's exactly what it was.

I called her and told her that perhaps this was happening. She sounded a bit doubtful about it, but Mara and I coordinated that when I came in the evening, I would bring some cranberry juice, some Ensure and other things she might need. It would be a change for her to drink something flavorful instead of the forced glasses of water she compelled herself to drink every day. She hated drinking water. It was a punishment for her.

Mara uber-d over some chicken soup for Mom (Mom kept saying that she didn't feel like eating, but perhaps some soup might help). She confirmed when the soup arrived, and thanked Mara for it.

She called a few moments later, saying she didn't have the strength to put the soup away because she didn't finish it. I told her that it was okay, and that I would clean everything up when I came in the evening.

At around 6pm, I finally was able to make my way over to Mom's place.

When I arrived, and opened her door, I found Mom sitting in the dark.

"Mom, why are you sitting in the dark", I said.

"I don't feel well.", she said.

I turn on all the lights, and I notice that she's not wearing her glasses.

"Mom, why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

She doesn't say anything.

I brought over the cranberry juice that Mara had bought her and put it in the fridge.

I find her glasses in her room, and I put them on her.

She's incredibly weak and can't move. The soup that Mara has uber-ed to her in the afternoon is sitting on her dining table barely touched.

"Now that you're here, help me to the bathroom.", she said.

She takes both my arms, and we slowly move towards the bathroom.

She was walking towards me, holding my arms, and I was holding hers, walking backwards in this little shuffle. In that moment, her vulnerability was so apparent.

My mom was always a commanding presence when she walked in a room. Whether she was in a business suit and high heels, or just in her loafers and capri pants, Mom always got attention from others. And she loved it.

But in that shuffle moment with her, she was small, tired, and fragile.

I was holding her up (not the first time - more on that later).

We got to the door of the bathroom.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

“Well, if I poop, I don’t think you’ll be very happy.”

I laughed.

I get her in the bathroom, close the door, text Mara and say *Well, her sense of humor is intact.*

At that point, I thought that maybe she just had a gastro bug.

The toilet flushes, and she comes out.

“We have to go to the hospital. I just peed, and all blood came out.”

I’m not good in crisis.

I get anxious, so to compensate, I move slower to think clearly. I fully admit that.

So, I call Mary Lou because she’s taken Mom to the hospital before. I tell Mary Lou that she wants to go and that she peed blood. Mary Lou wonders why we must go because she clearly has a UTI and maybe it might be better for her to go tomorrow, considering the COVID factor.

I tell her that I don’t feel comfortable leaving her, so we’re going to go.

“Taking Mom is more of a two-person operation. Come to my house, and I’ll go with you.”, Mary Lou said.

I start packing up Mom’s things, and Mom is totally coherent and tells me what to bring: pajamas, her pills, her Medicare card, her underwear. Very methodical.

She tells me she can’t walk so I have to push her in her walker.

I push her out of her room, into the residence lobby.

Mom tells the two people at reception that she’s going to the hospital and she’s not sure when she’ll be back. I tell them that I’ll call them when I know what’s going on.

I bring Mom to the entrance of the residence, I go get my car, put Mom in the car and we go to Mary Lou’s house.

Mary Lou is waiting outside, and she comes to the car and says to leave my car here, that she’ll drive us to the hospital and that I can text her when I want to be relieved.

We go in her car, get to the hospital, I run to get a wheelchair, and put Mom in. I wheel her to the entrance, which is now tarped off with plastic for COVID purposes. They take Mom’s info, and we go in the waiting area to be called.

My mom was born on June 14, 1936, in Karachi, Pakistan in the Catholic Colony. She was the second youngest of 5 and named after a sister who had died before her very young. My mother’s parents, Beryl and Philip D’Cunha were wealthy and well known around Karachi. Mom grew up without having a care in the world.

Throughout her life, I never heard her say a bad thing about her father. She loved him and respected him always. Decades later, whenever other family members had critical things to say about Philip D’Cunha and his authoritarian ways, Mom always retorted back saying that her father was not those things.

Mom had a very privileged upbringing, especially being on younger side of the family chain. Her and her sister Lucy were the babies in their family, with their siblings being a fair bit older than them. Once they reached young adulthood, marriage was the obvious next step.

When Lucy started dating my uncle Irwin (her eventual husband), Philip D'Cunha would ask Mom to chaperone their dates. You could imagine for Irwin and Lucy that that would have cramped their style after a while.

My Dad, Ronald Matthews, came from a good and noble family, but not of the same economic status as Mom's. Ron was known for his singing voice and would often sing songs on the local radio station. On one of Lucy and Irwin's chaperoned dates, I think my mom told Irwin that she would love to meet Ron Matthews and that she loved his singing so much. Irwin, being a resourceful person and seeing a way out of this 'chaperone situation,' told Mom that not only did he know him and could get him to meet her, but that he was also his colleague and friend. And thus, that's how my parents got together. I'm sure that there was more to this story, but the gist of it is that.

Mom loved when my Dad sang. That's what snagged her from day one.

The two couples got married in 1957. Yep, a double wedding. Apparently, the saying is that a double wedding is bad luck. Philip D'Cunha probably saw it as a cost-effective measure, but maybe there was a bit of bad luck: my Dad died at 48, and Irwin and Lucy ended up divorcing in the 1990s. Regardless, from the pictures of the wedding, it looks like it was a huge party, and I'm sure one that was filled with hours of singing and dancing.

It wasn't long before Mom and Dad became parents. Melanie was born in 1958, and then Marvin in 1959.

In the early 60s, Dad got a work transfer to move to England. So, the family of four moved to Manchester. Mom took care of her young family while Dad worked. They reconnected with some of their Karachi friends, the Griffiths family, who had moved to England a few years earlier. Mom told me that her stay in England only made her miss Karachi. The homesickness made her quite depressed that she pleaded with Dad about moving back. He listened and they were back in Karachi in 1962.

This might have been one of the first indications that Mom was prone to depression. Something that would come in and out of her life over the years.

Meanwhile, the family continued to grow: Michele was born in 1963, and then Mary Lou in 1966. Around this time, Dad saw how Pakistan was rapidly changing both politically and religiously. He was adamant that he wanted his children to grow up in a Christian country.

In 1966, he got the opportunity to move to Montreal, Quebec, and work for Canadian Pacific. I cannot imagine the heartbreak both he and Mom must have felt when they left their families for a strange and very distant land.

Dad arrived in Montreal, found a small apartment, and eventually gave Mom the word to come join him in Canada. Mom has often told us the story of her flying to Canada with four children under 8 years old. Marvin, and maybe even Melanie, says he has vague memories of that trip, and of Mom having her hands full. Literally.

I marvel at the immigrant experience, especially now in these days and times we live in. As I get older, I am in awe of the struggle and work my parents handled to come to Canada: new country, new climate, trying to make a living, finding a new home, getting their kids into a new school – everything. Also being welcoming and hospitable to family who wanted to visit or even follow suit and move to Montreal. My grandmother (my mom's mom) also joined them a few years after and stayed with us until her passing in 1993.

They kept the door open – the door to their roots and the door to making a new life.

Being a newcomer requires an act of rebuilding.

I honour their fight and their tenacity.

I think I always did, but of course as us silly mortals do, it hits more when everything is gone.

The pre triage nurse sees Mom, I explain the entire thing about how we think she has a UTI. Mary Lou had mentioned that there was a clinic affiliated with the hospital across the street. So, I mention that to the nurse and would it be better to make an appointment there, maybe tomorrow.

The nurse said for sure we could, but then she looked over at Mom who had gotten very pale, and her head was in her hands.

The nurse felt very uncomfortable sending Mom home and said that while it would be a long wait in the hospital, it would be better than going home.

So, I repeated everything to Mom and said that the nurse wants us to stay, and she agreed. We went back to the waiting area. Mom said that she had to go to the bathroom, so I brought her. She wanted me to come in with her. I had to help with her pants, and then left her in the bathroom. When she was done, she called me again to pull her pants back up. She didn't have the energy to do it.

We went back to the waiting room area. By then it was 8:30.

8:30 became 9:30.

9:30 became 10:30.

By 11PM, Mom was asleep.

She started to moan in her sleep. Very loudly. I didn't think anything was wrong because I thought "Maybe she makes noises in her sleep?" Occasionally, she would open her eyes looking upward and make this moaning sound. Not knowing what she was doing, I would try to calm her down, hold her hand and tell her that it was okay. The moaning would stop and then it would happen again. Never sounded violent, but just loud and a bit odd.

(Now when I think about it, how she moaned while looking up, was she talking to God? Was she saying she was ready to go? My therapist told me that she used to work in palliative care and a lot of her patients also moaned as I had described.

"She saw your Dad", the therapist said to me.)

Mary Lou had texted me a bit before saying that Benjamin would be relieving me, and she would come in the morning to relieve him. So, I told her that if I could be relieved at around midnight that would be great. I told ML that I would relieve her in the late morning if needed.

At about 12:15AM, Benjamin found us and said I could go. I held Mom's hand and said "Mom, look who's here?" She opened her eyes a little and mumbled softly "My sweetheart".

I took her hand, and I told her that I would come back in the morning, and she said okay.

And I left.

And that was the last thing I ever said to her.

(Strangely enough, 4 months later, I realized that I didn't remember how I got back to my car. I knew I got into the car that had dropped Benjamin off.

I texted Mary Lou and asked whether it was Paul (her husband) who drove me back to her house, and she said it was her. I am completely blank around this.)

I got home around 12:45am, showered and went to bed.

I texted Benjamin around 1:30am asking if all was well, but I didn't hear from him and didn't think anything of it.

As a kid, I obsessed over my Father. Because he had died when I was so young, I would lap up any shred of information about him from anyone. Because it would maybe add another piece to the elusive puzzle that he was, and continues to be, for me.

(It blows my mind that I am only a couple of years away to being the age my Dad was when he passed.)

I've resolved to believe that he will always be incomplete in my mind, but that I can live with that.

However, the last few years, I've been thinking about my mother a lot: the parent who had been with me in my life. It had been a reality check of sorts to see her on the decline, and really become a shadow of the vibrant and active woman that she was. It's always romanticized in my mind whenever anyone would speak about my father. I have nothing to base him on, so he's magical to me. But it's a lot more real when it comes to talking about my mother.

I don't have to think hard when I write about her. I am flooded with so many memories, I can get bowled over by all of them. I think I realized lately that while my Dad was an enigma and something I was always wanting to grab hold of my mother was always there, always tangible.

I've been holding on to her the entire time.
I'll always be holding on.

From Benjamin:

I remember arriving at the hospital sometime around midnight. (Merrill) told me that we were waiting for her name to be called. He told me that she was sleeping, but she was making a lot of noise in her sleep, moaning quite loudly. She didn't seem to be in pain. She would wake up every once in a while and ask me to put her slipper back on her foot, or ask for some water. She felt nauseous once and asked for a bag to vomit in (she didn't vomit).

Any time a name was called, she would suddenly wake up, telling me she was sure her name had been called. I told her that I was listening, and it wasn't her name called, but she was skeptical.

Eventually, her name was called. I brought her to the wrong triage room, but eventually stuck my head into the right one in time to get her seen by the nurse. The nurse was asking her a lot of questions about her fall the previous day, what she remembered. Nana was having a hard time staying awake to answer the questions. The nurse was concerned by her inability to stay awake to which Nana exclaimed "I'm sleepy!" Nana wasn't concerned with her fall and was more interested in asking about taking her medication. The nurse found a big bruise on the top of her head, which I hadn't seen. The bruise, combined with her inability to really stay awake, led the nurse to send us right to the doctor.

In the next room, we lifted Nana from her wheelchair into a bed, with the help of a few nurses. She couldn't stand on her own. A nurse and I removed her clothes and put a hospital gown on her. We rolled Nana onto her side for the nurse to take her temperature with a rectal thermometer. At this time, I looked to her eyes, which were open wide, and looked completely blank. I asked her if she was okay, and there was no response. The nurse looked at her face, and she immediately called for help. We needed to rush her to the emergency room to try to revive her.

Once I wheeled her there to be looked at by doctors, I was taken into a smaller room for family members. There was an older couple there, I wasn't alone. I called my mom and told her she needed to come right away.

A few minutes (?) later, a doctor came in to talk to me. He told me that they were trying to revive her, but that there was a good chance that she would pass away that night, given her age and her heart. He told me I had the option of waiting in that separate room, or I could watch all the doctors work. He told me it would be better for me to watch them try, so I followed him.

There were about five doctors in the room, circling around her trying to revive her.

My mom arrived while I was there.

It is Saturday, October 1, 2021.

At around 2:30am, my phone dinged with a text, and I thought it was Benj. It was Mary Lou who said she was back in the hospital with Benj. Mom had had a cardiac arrest. She died, but they took 10 minutes to resuscitate her. They got her heart beating again but punctured her lung while doing so.

"You should come back."

I put my phone back and stayed silent for a minute in darkness. For a brief second, I thought "this is it".

I turned to Mara and said what Mary Lou wrote in her text.

"I don't know what to do.", I plaintively said to her.

Mara took a minute to assess the situation and then said, "Give me a minute, and I'll figure this out."

After a couple of unanswered calls, we got through to our friend Manue. Mara told her what happened to Mom, and whether she could come here to be with Lea.

Manue responded with "Give me 25 minutes."

I threw on some sweats and a hoodie, while Mara jumped in the shower.

(When I think about this now, I also remember that I didn't shave. I shave every morning, and I remember touching my face during the afternoon and feeling the stubble on my face. It had been years since I hadn't shaved, and I remember being conscious of the feeling of it.)

We drove back to the Shore, and I called my sister Melanie and my brother Marvin from the car and updated them. We picked up Michele from her place and got to the hospital ER waiting room where Mary Lou and Benjamin were.

By this point it was about 4am.

Mary Lou said that a nurse asked whether Mom expressed what her wishes would be: whether she had a DNR request.

"Are we really at this point?", I thought to myself.

All of us in the room were all in agreement that while Mom may not have officially expressed her feelings about this, we all knew that she would never want to be on machines.

By 5:30am, no one had come to see us still. I recognized the security guard from the night before and asked him whether a nurse could speak to us. He got one, and she brought us to the ICU.

There was Mom, hooked up to a ventilator. In a coma.

I burst into tears and told Mom we were there, and that everything would be okay.

The nurse told us that the doctor who was preceding over Mom will be back by 8am and he'll be able to talk to us.

The doctor (Dr. Yao) was so kind to us and asked us each to introduce ourselves first.

He told us very quietly and carefully that Mom had had a cardiac arrest and had died. They took ten minutes to resuscitate her. In doing so, they punctured her lung. Since then, her organs (her

kidneys, her liver) had begun to shut down. The ventilator was helping her breathe as she couldn't breathe on her own.

"You guys need to get here.", someone had said to Mel and Marvin on speakerphone.

We asked the doctor whether she could stay on the ventilator until Mel and Marvin got there.

He said she could but couldn't guarantee that Mom would remain stable by then. Anything could happen, he said. By this point it was 9am and it was going to be evening before everyone got here.

We understood the deal. We said we'd try.

What followed was probably the most emotional, surreal, and yet magical day I have ever lived. We literally took the entire day to say goodbye to my mom. We took turns holding her hand, talking to her, crying, sitting in silence.

The nurses at the hospital were unbelievably kind to all of us. There were restrictions in place because of COVID, allowing a limited amount of people at a time in a room. But they let us be, and while we never took advantage of anything, the times where there were the whole bunch of us together at a time, no one said anything.

Mel arrived at around 1pm. She immediately went to Mom's bed and said "Mom, I'm here."

As the afternoon progressed, nurses would tell us that her blood pressure was really all over the place and there were points where what the doctor had said - about there being no guarantee that Mom would make it all the way into the evening- was ringing true. I remember at one point turning to Michele when it was just us in the room, saying "She seems so tired."

At one point when I was holding her hand, I felt Mom holding onto mine. I turned to Michele and said suddenly "She's holding my hand!". And Michele told me that that was a common thing with coma patients.

“Play her a Charley Pride song.”

I found a song of his on my phone and I played it while sitting next to her.

Charley Pride was one of the country singers that Mom loved.

And as the song played, and I watched her face, her eyes closed, tube in her mouth helping her breathe, I wondered if she could hear the song.

Was this real?

Our friend David arrived at around 5pm. Mary Lou had told him what was going on. He was in full police uniform, and I remember crying a lot when I hugged him. He loved my mom a lot, and Mom adored him. And seeing him in his big uniform, sitting so gently next to my small, frail Mom and holding her hand made me so sad. I remember him touching her head and kissing her forehead and saying thank you for everything she had done for him in his life.

Marvin arrived at around 7pm at night. He collapsed in tears when he saw her, and that destroyed me.

We gave Marvin some time alone with Mom, and then I walked back into the room, and I put my arm on his shoulder. Slowly everyone else came back in. By this point we realized that it was time, so one of us got a nurse's attention and we said it was okay to remove the ventilator.

We all stepped out of the room and into the hallway for a few minutes. They called us back in when it was done.

We all came back into Mom's room, and there she was, her body. The nurse told us that it could take a while before her heart and everything else would stop. We understood.

We all gathered around her and took a picture of us holding her hand. We said our last few words to her. I remember saying “It's okay – you can go with Dad now. We'll be okay.”

I think a few of us said a variation of those words.

Not even five minutes had gone by when the nurse came back in and said her heart had stopped.

She was gone.

It was 7:38pm.

She left us so fast. Kind of her style: quick, didn't linger, got to the point. That was Mom.

But as fast as she left, grief is a slow, snail like thing that will linger and permeate everything I do for the rest of my life.

The first few days and weeks after she died, mornings were hard. There was always a two second reaction where I would think she's still here. But then I'd realize that she's not and the wave of knots in my stomach rose and I had to remember to breathe deeply.

That feeling would happen during those first few days especially, and then over the first few weeks.

That's stopped now.

I keep wondering if Mom is hiding somewhere. We saw her in the hospital and then we left her there. Did she walk out when we weren't looking?

If you're 10 years old, you shouldn't know what the word hysterectomy is. But I did. I didn't know the specifics were, but I knew that it would help my mom get better.

My mom was rushed to the hospital in the mid 80s because she was bleeding. I had super vague memories of her being whisked away. I remember being inconsolable watching her leave, and knowing she wasn't going to be home. I remember visiting her in the hospital after the procedure was done and crying so much when it was time to leave.

And in those days, you stayed in the hospital for like a week, so I knew she'd be gone for a while. It scared me if she was to leave me.

My relationship with my mom was a bit different than with the others. I felt like she could always say whatever she was feeling to me, like she didn't have to censor herself. And I always let her have it whenever she would say something narrow minded. Sometimes I'd let it go, but most of the time I didn't - which either would lead to more arguments or a funny back and forth.

I made her laugh on many occasions.

In July of 2000, Mom and I flew to Calgary to visit Marvin and Kristy and their son Evan. Their daughter Cara wasn't born yet. If you knew my mom, you knew that she hated to fly. She was mortified of planes, but because I was flying with her, she was a bit more at ease with going.

Me being the dumb 23-year-old that I was, I didn't have time for anxiety about planes, or flying. My mentality was (at that time) if the plane had to go down with me in it, then so be it. I can't control that.

Mom was nervous in the air. While I was watching *Erin Brockovich* on the TV, she was praying and had her eyes closed. She befriended the passenger next to her, who calmed her nerves about flying while I smiled and rolled my eyes at her need to connect to someone who was as nervous as she was.

When at one point, the plane made a weird crunchy noise, Mom was startled.

She turned to me and said, "What was that?"

I replied, "How am I supposed to know - I'm here with you!"

That line made her laugh so hard; I can still see her laughing with a little wheeze. She said that story for years afterwards. I'm pretty sure she still remembered it.

I remember always as a kid that Sundays used to make my mom sad. She tended to feel a bit more down on Sundays. This carried on into most of her life. Something about Sundays for her made her low.

I remember Mom had a small cassette player that she used to have on her dresser in her room. On Sundays, she would make me bring it into the living room (or the kitchen) and have me play her country cassettes while she was either sitting or cooking. The music would always make her feel better. Back in the late 80s, and early 90s, she loved Randy Travis and Billy Ray Cyrus.

Man, did she used to love *Achy Breaky Heart*.

She used to sing it in the house, hum it under her breath. She loved it. I can still remember certain tunes from Randy Travis that she loved too. *Digging Up Bones*, *Forever and Ever, Amen*.

I guess it's a funny visual seeing a South Asian woman in her fifties loving country music as she did. That was my Dad's influence on her. I guess there was something in the twang, in the sadness of the words that she connected to. And I think in some ways, it still made her feel closer to my Dad.

Behind that stern and serious demeanor, was a woman who had a dry sense of humor and who could not only make people laugh in surprise – but she would laugh too. If you made her laugh, it was genuine because Dorothy Matthews wouldn't voluntarily offer you a laugh if she didn't mean it.

My mom hated fiction movies, only true stories. She thought they were all a waste of time. Ironically, she let me follow the path down the road to film and only once told me that I would be better off getting a business degree. When I objected, she never brought it up again.

I called my mom every day and tried to visit her once a week. Some days I didn't want to visit because it was a pain, but I always left feeling better that I ended up going. Our visits would be made up of me showing her my phone and updating her on pictures from the week, Facebook updates or if there was a video she needed to see. And then we'd chat a little about anything new.

Mara and I had moved to Toronto in 2005 and lived there for 7 years. Fate brought us back to Montreal in 2012, and I am so grateful that Lea had her for these 9 years. Dinners, visits, Christmases, Easters, Thanksgivings...blessings in retrospect that we got to share those, and more specifically that Lea had those times with her. And that she'll be able to legitimately remember them still.

Mom once told me in confidence that one time, my Dad hit her. Slapped her across the face.

And he profusely apologized for it afterwards and never did it again. She told me this a long time ago.

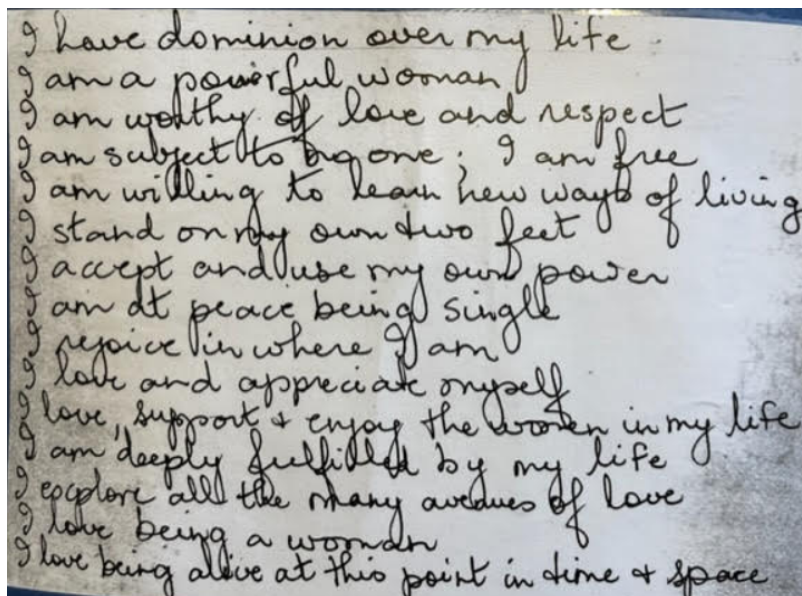
My mother was never super forthcoming about things about my Dad. If I ever asked her something about him, sometimes I would get "I can't remember anymore", or "I don't know". But the things she did remember and would tell me, she would say a lot: how good of a dancer he was, how strict he could be, how he loved to write and how he would write her cards and letters, how he seemed renewed with parental life when I was born, how faithful and pious he was, how generous he could be with those he loved.

It was always clear to me that she loved him. It was always clear to me that he swept her off her feet, and she never looked back. And then when he was gone, and much as she plowed forward, she missed him every day.

About two weeks after Mom died, my sister was looking through a small Ziploc bag that my mom used to keep all her prayers. She shared with us some of the handwritten verses. I've seen her many times, sitting in her chair whispering prayers to herself. She would tuck the Ziploc bag into the crevice of her chair or balance it on the arm rest. The prayers were never far away from her hands.

I never thought about it until now, how she probably needed those verses at quick grab whenever she was feeling low or needing a boost of God to help her feel better about herself. She was someone who turned to God rather than a therapist (though she did do the therapy route for a stretch).

We were all in awe when we got to see the prayers that she had with her. Not only were they affirmative words, but one might even say that they were progressive:



I have dominion over my life | I am a powerful woman.
I am worthy of love and respect | I am subject to no one; I am free.
I am willing to learn new ways of living. | I stand on my own two feet.
I accept and use my own power. | I am at peace being single.
I rejoice in where I am. | I love and appreciate myself.
I love, support, and enjoy the women in my life. | I am deeply fulfilled by my life.
I explore all the many avenues of love. | I love being a woman.
I love being alive at this point in time and space.

My mother, full of hidden surprises.

She had lots of prayers in that bag, including one that mentioned all her kids. My eyes water just thinking about her hope for all of us.

I remember whenever Mom would have one of her famous get togethers at our house, it was a big deal. The tablecloth would come out, the sofa covers in the living room would come off, the chairs around the dining table would be pushed back to make room for people to serve themselves off the bountiful table. People would find themselves all over our house eating: in the living room, on the floor, around the table, sitting in our basement.

People would be everywhere. At a given time, I can remember there being 30 people at a time. If you were fortunate enough to attend one of Dorothy Matthews's parties at the house, you knew you were being taken care of real nice and made to feel comfortable.

Biryani, tandoori chicken, meat curry, deviled eggs, potato salad, chicken fingers...there were all kinds of Indian food that she made all herself. That was food in our house: it was regular meals all the time. It was always good, always so tasty. While she would act like she was non artistic, it was clear that her art was her cooking. You could see who she was as a person based on how she presented and made her food. That was her identity, her pride as an Indian woman – she showed it more than ever in her cooking.

Years later, in 2001, when we weren't at our childhood home on Blackwood street in Greenfield Park anymore but living in the condo on Victoria (on the other end of Greenfield Park), I had asked Mom to make my friends one of her Indian food dinners. I had just finished producing one of my shows at the Fringe Festival, and as a thank you for our small crew, I wanted them to come to my house and taste what it was like to have a home cooked meal from my mom. Everyone came, and everyone ate. Mom talked to my friends and served everyone.

I loved that my friends got to see through food where I had come from.

When I was 19 years old, I got my first tattoo. I did it in secret and was consumed with guilt the entire day because I wasn't being honest with my mom.

When I finally got home later that evening, she asked "Where were you all day?"

"I got a tattoo", I said as the words spilled out of my mouth.

She paused.

"Where?"

"On my shoulder."

"Show me", she said.

I knelt and pulled down the collar of my shirt so that she could see the small Japanese character on my shoulder blade.

"Looks nice.", she said and never batted another eye about it.

She once told me that I was the most ungrateful of all her kids – on my birthday. I think it was because I was insistent that I wanted to keep a low profile that specific birthday (36th? 37th?) and didn't feel the need to spend it with family and this made her angry.

Maybe it was an ungrateful move on my part, telling my mother that I didn't want to see her. I stuck to my guns about it, and when she said that to me, I think I erupted like a crazy volcano. I couldn't restrain just how angry she had now made me.

Yeah, that birthday sucked.

But we'd always go back and talk it out and go through the shit to come out the other side.

For some things we'd agree to disagree. For other things, we'd leave it.

I have to say that most of the time when a conversation with Mom ended badly, it was always Mara who would say "you need to call her back and apologize". I'd say, "I SHOULD APOLOGIZE?? SHE'S THE ONE WHO SAID THE DUMB THINGS TO ME!!", Mara would always say it didn't matter, that she was older, that I had to be the bigger person.

Of course, that would make me more annoyed, but after taking a few breaths, I would be the one to call back and of course Mom would be happy that I did, would never apologize outright if she had done anything wrong, but before we knew it, normal conversation flow would resume. Swept under the rug, but we knew where we stood with each other.

Mom was almost insistent to avoid any kind of conflict because I think for her it felt better to just be quiet and not make a fuss if something was bothering her. She also would rather be in misery than ask someone for help. This proved to be a tough habit to break for her, especially as she got older.

In the later years of her life, all of us rallied together and would insist that it was our turn to help now, and that she should feel comfortable to call on us. She got the idea a bit here and there, but I guess asking for help meant you were helpless, and she never wanted people to know that.

In a recent therapy session, I remembered when Mom was forced into retirement in 1996, and how shaken she was from it. Work had been her life, and with that piece not there anymore, she didn't know what to do with herself. One Saturday morning, she was standing in our house, in the main hallway and fainted into my arms. We were alone in the house.

I suddenly remembered that memory because I was telling the therapist about when I got laid off, and how I didn't know what to do with myself because like her, I had made work my life.

The therapist also remarked about another thing that joins my mom and I – that my mom went through a cataclysmic change in her 40s with the loss of my Dad, and I'm going through the same now as a then 45-year-old.

And she also mentioned how in those last few hours when I was holding Mom up and leading her into the bathroom – how it was like this moment when she fainted in my arms.

“You held her up again.”, the therapist said.

Then, that reminded me of another time when Marvin held her up too. I was 16, and it was the first instance where Mom threw out her back. I don't remember a lot from that, but I remember that it was early morning, and Mom couldn't move out of her bed. And I remember Marvin carrying her in his arms and bringing her into the car so that he could take her to the doctor.

She battled chronic back pain from that moment forward. The words sciatica and spinal stenosis will be ingrained in my head always. It never left her all the way until the end. It got bad the last few years, the way she was slow in her movements and how she had to rely on a walker to go places. COVID life had a lot to do with it as she was relegated to being just in her room for many months, to be isolated.

My mom lived an incredible life of service to her family, even to extended family. There are many stories of how she, with my Dad, sponsored cousins and aunts and uncles to come to Canada.

I was thinking about what she's lived through: the birth of television, Trudeau's Canada, the October crisis in Quebec, the internet, Y2K, social media, cell phones, and even lived through one year of a pandemic.

Back in 2002, I remember walking home from the bus and saw Mom at the front stoop. I asked where she was going, and she replied “I found a lump on my breast. I'm going to the doctor to have it checked out.” Point blank. I was stunned. She wasn't. She was a fighter. I remember crying when I heard she had cancer, and her saying to me “I can't have you crying for me. You need to be strong for me.”

I remember how I went to every chemo and radiation appointment she had.

I sat with her and watched her valiantly fight through cancer and beat it.

Mom never liked when I cried. I think she mellowed with it as time went on, when she saw that I basically cry at everything. The last time she saw me cry was at the end of August 2021, for Lea's bat mitzvah. I literally cried through my entire speech, as I spoke about time passing and Lea entering yet another life phase.

When I saw my mom moments after, she said "you're emotional like me." She also said that to me at my 40th birthday when my cousin Dale put me on the spot and asked me to make a speech to the family and friends that were there.

Yep. Tears. Part of my DNA.

Mom hid anything vulnerable from us – or at least tried to. I know in her private moments she cried to herself but when she was with us – she was solid. And tough. She had God, so she could handle anything. Sometimes I was annoyed at how many things she placed in the hands of God, when I would be like "you can be the master of your own fate. Not everything is up to God."

But she was unwavering. God brought her through everything that happened to her. She believed hard. I used to say that Mom had a 'direct line' to the Man Upstairs. I believed that. For all my questioning, she never wavered.

Mom was a tough broad. She didn't take rubbish from anyone. She often would say things like "Jesus, have mercy on me.", when she was exasperated. She always wanted to make sure that the fridge was closed, or that lights were off. She never wanted to waste money, but always spent it on things that she loved. She loved clothes and loved to splurge when she could. She always said that money was meant to be spent because life was short.

But she was a huge saver and lived simply. She took hold of her finances beautifully. She was in absolute control.

When she bought herself a mink coat in the mid 80s, it was a HUGE SPLURGE for herself. It was a huge status thing for her to have one of those. She kept that coat all this time. Marvin used to say to watch out in case some animal rights activist threw paint at her when she would walk on the street. She didn't cave. She wore that mink coat for as long as she could, especially when she was working. I remember her saying she would wear it on days if the power had gone out in her apartment and she felt cold. It came in handy.

She dealt with me growing out my hair, shaving off all my hair, getting more tattoos, when I needed money when I was first starting out, moving to Toronto, living with my girlfriend before marriage....and she always was there. I'm sure a lot of the time it was against her better judgment because most of my decisions probably countered her religious beliefs. But she never left me. As much as I thought she would on occasion, she didn't.

She loved how I drove, and often said she felt comfortable whenever I was behind the wheel. She never learned how to drive herself, but she knew the ins and outs of how a good driver should be.

She watched CTV News every night and loved the Country Music Awards. She used to love Entertainment Tonight and Access Hollywood and eTalk. She loved Charley Pride and Merle Haggard. She loved Dancing With The Stars. She loved the way Sarah McLachlan presented herself and loved Shania Twain's music.

As the year after her death wore on, a lot of people that Mom loved passed as well: Betty White, Naomi Judd, Olivia Newton John. I would think about how she would have reacted to their deaths.

Growing up I found that Mom never pushed our South Asian identity on us: I think in some ways, she was of the mentality that it was better to assimilate with Canadians than separate. And we did. All our friends were Canadian, and they accepted our family without any issue.

To this day, my siblings and I have friends that we made during our formative years that are still around. It was only as I got older, however, that I realized just how "westernized" we all were: we didn't speak anything other than English, we always listened to North American music and were influenced by pop culture, we went to church and did the same things that everyone else in our peer group was doing.

Mom always said she still understood Urdu but couldn't speak it anymore.

I feel like that part got lost in us.

I remember when I was much younger that we hung around South Asian community groups and went to functions – but those all faded away as we got older. That connection to identity I found went missing at a certain point. Not anyone's fault. It just happened. And I think as a young person, the last thing you want is to stick out and be different.

I think my Dad was the one who kept the tether to culture and the ways of home strong. And when he passed, my mom had a million other things to handle and manage.

There were objects around the house that reminded us of where we came from. I mentioned the sofa covers. Sofa covers came from that immigrant mentality of protecting the things that you paid for to keep them in good condition. It made sense to her; it made sense to us while we lived there.

There were wood elephants signifying India and Pakistan around the house. She had her handyman build a wooded enclosed area in the front entrance that would compel people to take off their shoes before entering. We used to joke that it was like a mini prison. You always took your shoes off before entering the house. Mom loved to be clean. That saying - cleanliness is next to godliness. Mom believed that. EVERYTHING had to be clean.

I recently saw a picture of my mom holding three of her grandchildren when they were all babies. And she had a look of total pride on her face. And when I was looking at that picture, I realized again, she maintained this family of hers on her own.

I often mentioned in social media posts that she was a survivor, but I think I truly only felt that word after she died.

I've been thinking about the strength it must have taken to take the lead of our family the way she did. When she got married, she very much assumed the "wife role" - taking the backseat of whatever my father did. That was what was expected of her. In that regard, she was a bit of a renaissance woman in that in the late 70s she became both parents and worked full time and took control of how she was going to live her life.

2020 was a bad year for her.

With COVID making its memorable entrance into global society, her residence was in total lockdown, so no one was able to visit her for the first little while.

Then the residence allowed people who took a quick 10-minute training on what to do if your loved one contracted COVID. Mary Lou and I took the course.

The isolation didn't do well for her. As much as she liked to be a loner, she always liked it when people visited her. So, she felt it in her bones when no one could come in.

When we were finally able to do a full cleaning of her place in May of that year, her place was clearly a reflection of the chaos and mental health struggles she was dealing with throughout the last few months of truly being isolated. And for someone who loved to be clean, to see her place in such a state was tough.

It became clear to me that COVID wasn't just about catching a virus, but it was proving detrimental to the elderly mentally.

The last few years, she'd say to me that she didn't have the taste or desire for meals anymore. She ate to live, rather than the other way around.

She also didn't like to listen to music anymore either – which in retrospect was a huge sign that things were on a downward slant.

My mom had soft hands, and a soft face. Her skin was always moisturized and low on the wrinkle side. I never held her hands that often, but as I held it on that last day in the hospital, the softness registered to me once more.

Whenever we would go to Plattsburgh, Mom would always want to stop at the CVS to get Vitamin E oil for her face. She swore by it for years. 10,000 IU. That was her balm of choice for her face. She used to buy it in bulk so that she would have for a while. I remember as a kid how she would store it at the bottom of her top drawer under her clothes. There would be tons of bottles, her treasure chest of sorts.

It is *December 2021*.

Christmas is just around the corner now, and I'm scared.

My therapist asked what I would usually do on Christmas Day. Christmas Eve would be at Mary Lou's house, and Christmas Day would be at mine. Normally, I would wake up early in the morning and go to the South Shore and pick up Mom. She would come back to our house, and we would have big breakfast together: eggs, sausages, toast, you name it. And then she would watch Lea open her presents. And then she would just hang out with us the whole day. Christmas was always a time that was sad for her, as my Dad died on the 26th of December. So, she always felt melancholy. Hanging out at our house and seeing Christmas through a kid again I think made her happy.

She told me once that she thought she was done being a grandmother once her 5 grandchildren had gotten older. When Lea was born (her 6th), she never thought she would have the chance to be a grandmother again. She was excited. A bit of a harkening back to my Dad being a Dad again with me, I guess.

As much as my mom could love someone, she could also hold a grudge like it was nobody's business. Like a computer program, my mom's mind was with it all the way until the end, and she could download a memory of someone's wrongdoing at the drop of a hat. She could remember the people who wronged her for years and years and tell you when they did it and sometimes even remember the date. She couldn't explain what it is I did at work, but she could talk to you about when so and so did something bad to her, and how from that day forward, she had written that person off.

She remembered all the bad things.

We had to remind her about the good things sometimes.

Even though Mom had ended up living in Canada longer than she did in Pakistan, she always considered the latter "home" versus here. She longed for the mentality and lifestyle of "back home" and really didn't like North American culture.

She always missed the intimacy of her life in Karachi. She missed the way people interacted there versus here. North American life.

And no matter how Westernized she became, she still held onto that.

She raised 5 kids singlehandedly, and not one of us really fell off the path. Not one of us fell prey to drugs or any kind of vice. God remained a huge influence in my youth. Going to church was as much a religious thing as a social thing. Some of my good friends as a teen were made at church. I think now, as someone who isn't practicing, about how that experience was bigger than I thought: we were church people, devout people, and as much as I wanted to shake that off as I got older, I think that was probably the thing that kept us on the path and kept everyone strong.

I can remember two incidences as a kid where my mom disciplined me though it's very fuzzy.

We used to have a meter stick ruler in our cupboard: I remember that clear as day. I don't remember what I was doing - I was maybe like 4 years old. And I can remember Mom facing me, holding that meter stick, and threatening me that she would hit me if I didn't listen.

She never did, she never would. But it probably put a fear in me at that age to listen.

The other thing I can remember, also dealt with my behaviour. I must have been a challenging kid, but I remember my mom bringing me to the parish priest to be blessed so that I would stop acting the way I did. Mom being who she was, obviously saw the priest's blessing as a last resort to get through to me somehow.

There's a chance it might have worked. Again – she had a direct line.

And the more I think about it, the more I believe that my Dad probably was walking her through her life and her choices. Making sure that she didn't fall.

Another memory I have is crying as a kid, knowing that my mom was going to go out for a party late at night and there would be a babysitter looking after me. I remember a friend of my sister's trying to console me, and reason that it was only for a couple of hours that Mom would be gone. I didn't budge. I didn't want my mom to leave me.

She ended up staying back and didn't go out.

I recently came across a picture I took of my mom from Christmas 2020. She's standing alone, standing straight. Not smiling as usual. I suddenly came to the realization that she was alone: not just in that moment, but how she was solo most of the time in her last few years.

It's not that I didn't know that before, but it made me a bit sad thinking about how she had to reconcile herself that she was someone who was alone.

I don't know whether she was totally okay with it, but she accepted it.

My cousin and I were texting each other last night, about grief and how I look at everything completely differently now. He made a beautiful metaphor saying that maybe grief is like a state of rebuilding like a muscle – it needs to be broken down to build and grow again.

I do feel broken in some ways, but I do feel growth in others.

Mom was a walker. I remember sometime in the mid 80s, she just decided she was going to walk all the time. I think she was thinking about her weight, her health, her diabetes. So, she would without fail go for a walk every evening for half an hour. And if I am not mistaken, she would also walk in the afternoon on her lunch break from work. In our house at night, Mom used to walk the hallway back and forth to get in her exercise every evening as well. I remember Mary Lou putting her headphones on in the basement, because she hated hearing the creaks of Mom's footsteps above her while she studied.

Mom was so active and really used her willpower to do it.

Mom never smiles in pictures. She always thought that she didn't look good when she smiled. So, in mostly every picture taken of her, her lips are pursed together. I remember sometimes taking pics of Mom and saying "Mom.... teeth! TEEETH! SMILE!! TEETH!" and she would kind of chuckle to herself, but never relented.

She would get furious if someone was critical about her not smiling. Over the last couple of years, her teeth were not in good shape, and she lost a few in the front so she was very self-conscious about it. A few weeks before she died, she managed to get a denture that would go in the front. I remember when Mom died, that Mara said that the denture needed to go with her because she had wanted it so much.

Knowing what I know now, I wish I had not left the hospital and I had stayed with her. My heart breaks that Benjamin had to see her in that last state of cardiac arrest all on his own, but I wished I could have stayed.

I know I can't change that, and I know that everything played out the way it was supposed to. We all had our roles to play.

The therapist said to me that I was still one of the last people to be with her, and I should hold onto that. We had talked a lot about how as a kid I was really protected by my siblings and my mom to the extent of not speaking or connecting with my father's death. I spoke about the classic story of when I was 5 years old and how I walked home from school including crossing an extremely busy highway. My mom always said that my Dad was walking with me that day. And that he was protecting me.

When I told the therapist that story after speaking of my mini sadness of not being with my mom all the way until the end, she astutely said "Did you think you left when you did, because your Father again was protecting you once more?"

Mind. Blown.

I think about Mom sitting in the dark that last evening. Maybe she knew. How long was she sitting like that for? Was she already gearing herself up? Did she know?

I was so quick to turning on the lights when I came in. I was so mortal. So, in that moment.

Maybe she was preparing herself.

Sometimes I still find myself staring at the ceiling wondering how this all happened.

I will miss the way Mom used to grit her teeth whenever she would see a cute chubby baby, and how she would say “Sweetheart” at the same time whenever her grandbabies were in her view. She loved babies, she loved knowing people she knew were having babies.

She adored her grandchildren.

Her Ryan, her Benjamin, her Jonah, her Evan, her Cara, her Lea.

Her eyes would just brighten whenever she was around them.

They each taught her something new, something about herself.

Her legacy.

I’ll miss the sound of my voice calling her “Ma”.

As time goes on, I wonder if I will forget how the word falls onto my lips. How they would part to say that word. As my life continues and becomes more packed with routines and life stories and work and love and all, “Ma” will no longer be a word I use in my vocabulary.

I’ll miss how she liked to egg me on whenever talk would be about her finding a new man to be with. How she jokingly wanted to get a profile set up on Christian Mingle (thanks to my cousin Dale), to which I would get increasingly annoyed by the conversation. And she’d laugh.

She ate well and took care of herself. She had the strongest willpower and discipline of anyone I know. She always loved a home cooked meal and would never want to eat from out. But sometimes she would get a craving for Kentucky Fried Chicken and would ask for it. But her go to take-out food, if she really had to choose, was Chinese food. She LOVED Chinese food.

She loved vanilla ice cream, and never passed up a chance to have some. I'm reminded of the times where she'd say when Lea and I would visit "Come - let's go to the depanneur and get some ice cream", and I would say "No, Ma. It's okay. We don't have to get any."

Why I would stop her from indulging in ice cream, I will never know.

I hope the day won't come when I won't remember the sound of her voice.

About 3 years ago, Lea had her first theatre show that she put on with her troupe that had been working on the show for 6 months. Family came, friends came - it was a big deal. And for *this kid* who used to love being on a stage, I was beaming. Mom came. I always loved when she was able to mingle with my friends, and for them to know her, see her.

I was talking with a friend, and from a distance, I saw my mom speaking with my friend Dana as well, and I remember smiling to myself.

When I ran into Dana after, she told me "I just was speaking to your Mom. She just told me the story of when she went into labour with you."

WHAT?

As far as historical stories go, Mom had an easy labour for all my other siblings - except for me. A delayed caesarean, labour was hours, and there I was.

"She decided to tell you this story tonight?!"

This remains so funny to me.

Our family story has changed.

For all these years where we amplified my Dad for all that he did, it was my mom who finished the story and kept it alive.

There's been a lot of heavy talk, heavy reading and unravelling with a lot of me and a lot of family. I guess that's what grief does. It sheds a light on all the holes.

I've been thinking a lot about silence. Mom had a lot of silence the last couple of years. COVID aside, she retreated a lot. She would sit sometimes in her chair in her living room, pray, and stay quiet. There were times when I would walk in, like the whirling dervish that I am, saying "Ma, you'd feel better if you listened to some music to pass your time." But sometimes there wouldn't be any interest to do so.

I think Mom had checked out a while ago. She was ready to leave. She was tired. She was in pain. I think a lot of it she didn't even tell us about: I think she struggled in ways that we'll never know because she kept it to herself. "Do you know how many times I've fallen down, and I've never told you?", she had said to me on many occasions.

Something occurred to me today that both comforted me and made me weirdly sad. All my life I realized that I was surrounded by people who would talk about Dad or remember him and mourn him, and I couldn't share because I didn't know. Even to this day when he's mentioned, it kind of reverts me back to that little kid being protected, in the not knowing but also by default of being too young to share in anything.

Now, with Mom, I'm on the same level as my siblings as we're both going through this process together, and I can bring something to the conversation.

I feel a part of this odd, morbid club in a way that I didn't or couldn't before.

Mom's funeral happened exactly a week after she died – October 8th. It was a Friday. It was like a hot summer day – very unlike Montreal October weather. I had planned to wear a proper shirt, a tie, and nice pants. I want to look exactly how I wanted to. Obviously being preoccupied by a lot of things that week, I didn't bother to try anything on, nor take into consideration that COVID weight gain is a real thing.

The morning arrives, and I start to put everything on, and nothing fits.

Nothing. Fits.

And I proceed to have a full-on panic attack in front of Mara, in front of our closet, in front of our dog. I'm a Virgo so I always need to control my every move, my every action...so this happening was so not in my cards. And in typical crisis mode fashion, Mara took out another shirt and another pair of pants that would be just fine, and we continued.

I appreciated when the priest (Fr. Manus) suggested that we eulogize Mom early into the service so that it would get done, and we could be fully present. At first, I didn't want to speak but I followed the lead with my siblings that it made sense if we all did.

I wanted mine to be funny, and it was. I wanted it to show that there was a side to Mom that more than religion and food and reservedness. I wanted to show the woman that I knew: the one who was slyly funny, who was obsessed with celebrity culture, who loved country music, who got annoyed at things I said and who frustrated me many times, who fiercely loved her grandchildren.

I remember feeling wobbly as I picked up the boxed urn from the little table at the church and passing it over to Mel.

I remember when the lot of us – us 5, 3 in-laws, and 4 of her grandchildren – all group hugged outside after the service, me saying “I love you, guys” through choked tears.

The day was beyond beautiful – it was warm and sunny. Mom called it in for us.

At the cemetery, Fr. Manus asked me if I could lower her urn into the ground. When the time came, I didn't realize how deep the hole in the ground was. I placed that box in the ground, put my hand one last time on it, and whispered “Bye, Ma”. Mara helped me get my balance back standing.

I'll always miss her.

She built everything. And made it strong. And made it real for each of us. She did that. Renaissance woman.

And not only did she build us up, but she rebuilt herself. She was a carpenter on herself.

I don't think she even realized it. I know I didn't when she was alive.

It is *September 30, 2022*.

I am sitting here, wearing my orange T Shirt to commemorate the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.

One year later.

I choked back tears this morning right after Mara and Lea left for school.

I feel a weight in my stomach.

How did we get here, in such speeding time?

By this morning, a year ago, the messages were starting about how Mom had fallen down the night before and how she wasn't feeling well the next day.

I can't believe it. Can't believe that for each month that passed, I kept seeing this brass ring of reaching the year mark, incredulously wondering if we'd make it there.

And now it's here.

I close my eyes and they are burning from thoughts and dried tears.

The sun is shining today and it's cold in the house.

The sun tells me that we do keep going, but also reminds me that moving forward, though Mom existed physically in the past, from now on she exists as an energy force, as a memory that will float through my subconscious whenever she sees fit.

I'll grieve for her for as long as I am here.

But I promise to never let it consume me as big or as wide as it can.

Because I am a carpenter too and that's what Mom taught all of us: that we can build ourselves FOR ourselves.

I've spent this year trying to see how things fit for me now.

I think I needed to see if I could survive a year without my mother.

I'm feeling how I am rebuilding myself.

Rebuilding my own person who doesn't have earthly parents but superhero spirit ones.

Mom was the anchor for all of us, but in this year of her passing, I've realized I've had other anchors that also steady me and keep me from being lost in the waves.

I've also realized that I can be my own anchor – the way Mom was for herself.

It is *October 2, 2022*.

I survived a year without her. I think I wanted to see if I could do it, doubting that I ever could.

Thinking about that kid who didn't want her to go out to a party but to stay here with me.

I suddenly feel softer about all of this. It doesn't knock me to the ground like it had this whole year. My brain has suddenly told me that I can take it, I can move forward.

But I have my triggers: songs will remind me of something random, a certain smell in the air, the clouds in the sky. Anything. It'll just happen out of nowhere, and it reminds me how fresh the wound will always be.

And I know it's a struggle that I will carry with me forever. This isn't something that's going away, but rather it's set up shop in my heart for the long haul. My heart may be broken in parts, but I'm learning to accept its irregular, wacky shape.

All the things I've read about grief – that people will start to feel uncomfortable with it being brought up when it's not as recent anymore – is happening. So, that's probably why I wanted to write something down: as something to show that my grief will remain, and a reminder of how love keeps going even when someone isn't around anymore.

Here I am with these words I've written, these memories randomly collected from my head, scattered around me now.

Why did I do this? Why was it these memories that came to the surface for this story?

I look at everything entirely different now: like a new filter that's been put over my eyes that changes the hue and depth of what's in front of me.

So, I go. Writing it all down. Telling the story, using words to bring to life this disjointed film in my head. Because that's how memory works. So, I write it down in fragments, and then hoping to build something new in its place.

I seem to have taken them and reframed her a little, fashioning it into something new. The version in these pages is my take on my mother, through another lens that's been influenced from watching lots of movies and listening to lots of music.

It's an interpretation of her – something to mark her time with me in my mind.

This story doesn't encompass who she was on a day-to-day basis, nor who she was with my siblings or her nieces and nephews, or her small group of friends. They could each write their own story, and it would be entirely different than what I've done.

Maybe that was the point of this: taking a fragment of her story – a true story – and building it into something that can assure its life, show the scope of what a warrior she was, a warrior she is. It's a way to keep her alive.

I don't know how any of this new life without her here will go, but I know that I will continue.

All of us who loved her will continue.

She wouldn't have wanted it any other way.



Mom, her last Christmas.
We had just done a virtual call with everyone, and
then I asked to take a picture of her.
December 25, 2020.



All of us, Summer 2018



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