

Mother Heart  
(title in progress)

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Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them.

Psalm 139:16

## CHAPTER 1: Remembering to Breathe

I was eleven when I found out my mom was going to die. It was January 15<sup>th</sup>, three days after her forty-ninth birthday. I sat wide-eyed in our living room in Mexico, my mind replaying Dad's words while it muted everything else: "The doctors said your Mom only has three months to live."

The silence around us was heavy. It crashed over my whole body—a strong wave I didn't see coming— and left me breathless. I stared at the green rug on the floor as a steady stream of hot tears rolled down my cheeks. Mom sat in her tan recliner, kitty-corner to me as I sat in her old wooden rocking chair. I rocked back and forth and looked at her face and she stared at the green rug, too, while two of my four older siblings, Matt and Rachel, sat on opposite couches and also stared.

I wanted to be alone so I could scream.

In the days following the news, I kept to myself and thought a lot about the word *liver*, the part of Mom's body that had been invaded with cancer. If I took the "r" off, it spelled "live." The second syllable sounded like "her" whispered, so I pulled the word apart and flipped it—the process gave me: *her live*. I finished by putting the phrase into a sentence: God may let *her live*.

At first, I thought I'd just discovered a secret message, maybe God's secret message. Since Mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer when I was four, I'd spent most of my life wondering the outcome of this battle. Now, six years later, as an eleven-year-old, I dared to hope that maybe inoperable was not the final word. Maybe the cancer wouldn't win. Maybe God would let *her live*. I wrote my conclusions about the secret message down and gave them to Mom in a note.

A month later, on Valentine's Day, we drove through a sleeping Mexico City and made our way to the Benito Juarez Airport. Once news of Mom's diagnosis had spread, one of our family's supporters paid for our family to go on a final vacation to Maui, Hawaii, the number one place Mom wanted to visit before she died.

Once we'd been in Maui for a few days, Dad took me to the hotel pool with a snorkel set and a pair of flippers. At the time, I didn't like that I had to practice something that seemed so easy and inconsequential, but both Mom and Dad thought that snorkeling in the hotel pool was a good idea. The next day, we would snorkel at the last-gasp lava flow, Black Rock.

We got in the water, and I put on the flippers while I sat on one of the steps. Half of my body immersed in the water, half stayed dry. Dad got in. After I put on the fins, he gave me the goggles and mouthpiece. He showed me how to bite the rubber with my molars and told me I would have to breathe out of my mouth. I put on the goggles then bit down. He told me to swim like normal with my head immersed and to breathe out of my mouth.

I pushed myself off of the pool floor with the tip of my fins and let my hair get wet. The water against my scalp was colder than I expected. I looked at the cement of the pool and held my breath like I normally would before realizing that I should use the snorkel mask. I breathed in. My mind faltered since it wanted me to breathe through my nose, not my mouth. I tried again, and my breathing sounded like Darth Vader, but the airflow felt too shallow and weak. I popped back out of the water, gasping, and took the mouthpiece out. It's too weird, I said. Dad told me I just had to get used to it, and he told me it would feel normal after a while.

Since we were close to the beach, I could hear the steady roar of the waves in the background, and I wondered how I would be able to do this the next day in the less steady waters of the ocean.

He had me try again, and again, but I panicked each time. I felt breathless when I resurfaced, heart pounding fast through my pink swimsuit. Eventually, I discovered I could breathe even with my head fully immersed, but the sound of my breath through the water still made me almost choke. I didn't know how to balance the paddling with the open mouth breathing, but with Dad's help, I figured out how to control my breathing.

One morning, five years earlier, I'd plopped onto Mom's bed, and told her how much I loved her clothes. She sat on her black leather chair and buckled her sandals before looking up at me with a smile. The curtains behind her were open, so sunshine flooded the room. The rays reflected off her shoulder-length hair, making the chestnut brown shimmer blonde. I squinted as I looked at her. I was maybe seven, maybe eight, and it was during my I-can't-do-my-own-hair phase, where braids were the only thing that kept it out of my face. And I thought Mom could braid it perfectly.

I sat back on her bed and watched as she grabbed my favorite blouse of hers from the closet. She pulled the white button-up that was spotted with a faint print of light pink roses and green stems off the hanger and covered her bare shoulders with it. The thin white material would ripple soft in the breeze because she never buttoned it. Instead, she always layered it over a light pink tank top that matched the tiny roses. When I was a child, I found the combination magical. As she adjusted her collar, I asked if she would save her clothes for me. Knowing how styles

come and go, she told me I probably wouldn't like them anymore. I shook my head and before she could argue, I rushed to the closet to show her the all the outfits I wanted.

The hangers squeaked against the metal rack as I flipped through the hanging blouses. First, I made her promise to save me the one she was wearing. Then my small hands pulled at the edges of the almost-floating shirts to find my second favorite. She stood behind me as I made her promise to save each shirt and give it to me once I was a mom. My favorites were the ones with intricate designs. Whenever she'd wear them, I was mesmerized. She insisted I wouldn't want them anymore, but I thought otherwise.

Once I couldn't find anymore, she put her arm on my shoulder and led me to face her dresser. Standing behind me, she brushed my hair, the top of my head barely reaching her chest in the reflection. The plastic bristles massaged my scalp and sent shivers up my spine. As I stared at Mom's hands in the mirror, I watched her fingers stroke and part my chestnut brown hair, the hair that matched hers almost exactly in thickness and color. Her nails made a crisp click as they twisted my hair around itself, weaving it almost knitting it. She knew how to braid it so it wouldn't fall out when I'd play outside, and in my mind, Mom always knew what she was doing.

We'd been back from Maui for over a month when I stood in the doorway of Mom and Dad's room in Mexico City and watched as cardboard boxes covered the carpet. Mom sat in the black leather chair as she directed her friends who had come to help pack her clothes. I had tied my hair in a low ponytail like the way Mom had worn hers before chemo. By then, years had passed since the golden mornings when Mom would split my hair into two tight braids. Mom pointed to one box as her friend held up a shirt: summer clothes went in one box, winter clothes in the other. It was late evening so the curtains were closed.

I smiled at Mom and told myself she was just packing for a long trip. Then I watched as Mom's friends taped the boxes shut. The scotch tape screeched in a protest as it was pulled apart and stuck to the cardboard. I wondered when Mom would open them.

In a few days, Mom and Rachel would leave Mexico and fly to Minnesota to see more doctors, but mainly, to prepare for the final weeks and to be Mom's with immediate family. They would stay near Minneapolis with my grandparents, Bumpa and Mackie. During all of this, my two oldest brothers, Jonathan and Luke, were in Chicago finishing up their spring semesters at college. In the meantime, Dad, Matt, and I would stay home and pack up the rest of the house, then drive up with the most important boxes—including the ones filled with Mom's clothes.

On the last Sunday she ever spent in Mexico, her home for the last thirty years, Mom shared a testimony about her seven-year battle with cancer at church. She'd written everything down in a piece titled "Cancer my Teacher." In it, she shared about our trip to Maui. She said she laughed when the pilot, in his end-of-flight announcement, welcomed everyone to paradise. She laughed because she knew that this earth is not paradise. And when she sat on the beach, enjoying the warm sun and the crashing blue waves, she reveled in the thought that Heaven is real, and it's more beautiful than Maui.

The first time I thought about heaven, I cried. As a kid, my foggy image of God was some cloud-man who sat in a dismal grey cloud city. He'd get frustrated if I didn't read my Bible each day, or might punish me for loving anything, even Mom, more than I loved him. He controlled the world with a stern hand. I didn't understand the relationship Mom had with him, though I'm sure I wanted to. My first imaginings of heaven were similarly dismal; the place my mind saw as heaven was as grey-white as the darkest rain clouds. Everyone who went there stood amidst this grey, dim whiteness, wearing similarly dim, greyish white coverings. And no

one smiled. No one laughed. They just stood. And I knew that eternity meant forever, so I pictured standing in this dark glum greyness forever and ever amen. No part of me wanted it. At that age, heaven scared me more than death.

I have little doubt that Mom's picture of heaven was much better than mine, which is why she tried to imagine it when we were in Maui. I know I didn't think about heaven in Maui because I spent most of my time boogie-boarding in the clear saltwater. But now I wish I could have seen what Mom pictured as she watched us ride the waves that crashed on that warm, sandy beach.

After Mom and Rachel had been in Minnesota with our grandparents for a few weeks, Dad, Matt, and I loaded up our van and began our four-day drive from Mexico to Minnesota. We packed the essentials, which included things like our two cocker spaniels. Once we'd been driving for ten hours, Dad's cell phone rang. I'd been sitting in the front seat, entertaining myself by making the semi-trucks honk as we passed them on the right, but when I heard him say "Oh no," I put my arm down and leaned back.

Mom was in the hospital, Dad told us after he hung up. She'd fallen down the stairs at my grandparents' house, and the fall crushed her left shoulder and broke her neck. My aunt Angie, who was a nurse, didn't think we should drive the rest of the way. We needed to get to Minnesota. Fast. After a man from one of our supporting churches in Minnesota heard of our situation, he offered to fly us to Minnesota in his private jet. Two older gentlemen from the same church offered to drive the van for us. So, instead of stopping for the night in Monterrey, Mexico, we drove straight to Texas, turning our twelve-hour drive into sixteen. We crossed the Mexico-U.S. border in the middle of the night.

We had our dogs, King and Dixie, with us, so we spent the night in the van, not a hotel. The next morning, we met up with the drivers and pilot at the private airport. I remember the jet looked no bigger than our van, only it had two wings and propellers on either side. Inside there were two seats at the back, and a cushioned hand rest and drink holder separated them. A single seat faced them.

Matt and I smiled from the two back seats when Dad took a photo of us and our cocker, Dixie, who sat panting on my lap. I stroked her red-brown fur and looked out the window as Texas shrank to miniature beneath us. The engines droned on each side, and the leather seat vibrated beneath me as I watched little cars drive in straight little lines down the highways. I wondered where each person was going, what emergencies they were rushing after. And, I wondered, if their lives, in that moment, were happier than mine.

Just hours after we landed in Minnesota, we learned that the doctor had predicted Mom had three more weeks. Recent blood work showed high calcium levels, which meant the cancer in her bones had progressed. Her body wasn't working properly since the calcium levels had gotten so high, and the hypercalcemia would cause mental confusion and yellowed eyes. Mom spent a few more nights in the hospital before she began hospice at the missionary house we'd been allowed to stay at in Chanhassen, Minnesota. We situated her bed on the first floor in the large family room, and she needed us to help her adjust the backrest up and down. My siblings and I marveled when it shifted with the press of a single button. For those first weeks, Mom asked for low doses of the pain killers because one of the main side effects was significant brain fog. As her pain increased, so did the morphine. The side effects from the drugs also included drowsiness. And soon, Mom slept.

When we closed the curtains of the living room and I saw the glimmering golden sunlight seeping through the cracks, the brightness reminded me that Mom was missing the day. Just months before, she would rise early enough to greet the sun on its ascent in the mornings, then in the afternoons, she would sit outside, inhaling the fresh air. Just months before, she'd sat on the beaches of Maui where she'd soaked up the hot sun or snorkeled. Now, she slept. She slept to the buzz of her oxygen tank that fed her stale air and was as loud as an air conditioning unit, or at least, I remember it that way. Maybe I confused the two and thought the inconsistent tick and pause of the air-conditioning unit was her tank. All I know is that at every pause, I listened for her breath.

I can still see Mom sitting on the floral-patterned couch with a ventilator in her nose. And I remember sky as clear and blue and cloudless when I stepped into the living room with the thoughts I'd written down. When I reached her, I didn't know where to look or what to say, so I put my hand on the armrest of her chair. I unwrapped the yellow notebook paper of the letter I'd written and tried to tell her that I just wished God would hurry up and heal her, but I choked to get the words out. When I finished, our gazes locked, and we said little. I know I told her I loved her, and I know she said that God could still heal her. I know that I doubted.

The painkillers and excessive calcium in her blood dulled her tongue into a stiff rubber that I'll never forget. She stuttered as if she had a speech impediment, and I bent my ear close, but I still couldn't decipher her words. Her bony hand shook as it tucked the clear tube behind her ear. She kept stuttering, and I kept nodding as if we were having a real conversation. I hated the drugs that made her tongue useless, and I hated how she looked at me with wide yellowed eyes. But despite their hue, I could still see the words behind those eyes. I knew a part of her was still there.

I wonder now if that part of her wanted to sing to me like she always did when I was scared. Maybe, despite the brain fog, she was thinking of all the times I'd run into her room in the middle of the night after a scary dream. Maybe she just wanted to remind me that everything would be okay.

Now, I'd like to know if my life flashed before her eyes for those brief minutes when we sat across from each other. Maybe those tears she wiped away were for everything in my life she was going to miss, everything I didn't understand at the time, but everything she knew I'd have to face alone. At the time, all I could sense from her was a frustration at not being able to speak, but I never thought about what else could have frustrated her. As her body slowly crippled, mine slowly developed. My body was changing. She knew I'd need her for that moment when I finally became a woman. We'd talked about it for so long. In the end, Mom feared for what my life would look like without her, and that fear is the part of her that's stayed with me.

One day, one of the last that Mom was alive, her friend Cindy came over to take Rachel and me shopping. I don't remember what Cindy said when she saw Mom and told her she was taking her girls shopping. I don't know if Mom even knew where we went. And I don't remember much about the drive other than the fact that it felt long. But I remember what Cindy said when she parked the car in the mall parking lot. "Girls," she said as she took a breath and faced us. "I wanted to take you shopping so that you could pick out a skirt or dress that you will either wear the first Sunday your mom is healed or that you will wear to her funeral." I stared at the asphalt. Part of me wanted to scream at her for thinking ahead and preparing for what I knew would be the worst day of my life, but the other small part of me knew she was right. As I stared out the window, I tried to imagine the first picture Cindy had given us: Mom smiling as we

walked to church with her. But I don't think I believed it. "I'm not saying that God can't still heal her. Miracles can happen," Cindy continued. "But unless something changes, I want you two to have something nice to wear to her funeral." I nodded as I thought about how smooth the asphalt looked.

We went into Old Navy to find skirts we could pair with black tops. Mine was mostly white with pink and blue flowers at the bottom, and I later found a necklace with pink and blue stones that I wore with it. When we got home, Mom asked to see what we bought. She smiled when we showed her. We didn't say what they were for.

It was raining on the day Mom took her last breath. Dad woke us up earlier than usual that morning to let us know it happened while he and the nurse bathed her. My heart pounded a million times a minute when he told us. I rolled over on the golden sheets; my body felt heavy and like I couldn't walk downstairs, and my arms were flailing and wanting to reach for her because I realized I'd never hug her again.

As much as I'd imagined that Mom might die, and as much as I'd tried to prepare myself that she might soon leave our family forever, I never could have practiced for that morning when Dad told us she died. Sometimes I had wished it would all be over because I didn't want to keep waiting, keep wondering, keep holding my breath. But nothing can quite prepare you for the moment when you lose someone you love. It comes sudden. And it knocks the breath right out of you.

At first, I thought that if I just ignored what I felt and never saw her body, it would be like it never happened. I could pretend that one day soon I would hug her again, but I couldn't ignore the knot in my stomach when I finally made my way downstairs.

My body sank into the green sofa furthest away from the hospice bed where Mom's body lay. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins came over within an hour of each other. At most family gatherings my aunts and uncles would be laughing loud with each other. Now, they circled around their sister's bed, silent. Their gazes focused on their sister, and their mouths stayed straight. Mom's youngest sister arrived last. She burst into sobs the moment she stepped into the living room. I watched as people cried with her and hugged. They pulled out fresh Kleenexes to blow their noses and better catch their breath.

Later that day, my dry eyes searched Dad's face as he paced back and forth while talking on the phone. Even though it was the afternoon, the curtains to Mom's living room were shut. He hung up and told me to find Rachel while he looked for Aunt Angie. We all met back in the living room where I'd been sitting.

The undertaker needed us to find an outfit for Mom to wear for the visitation, and Dad wanted us to decide. I thought of the tall boxes labeled "Tami's Summer Clothes" and "Tami's Winter Clothes" that Mom's friends had packed just a month before.

We decided on the outfit Mom often wore on Easter. It was a tan skirt that she'd pair with a tan tank top and layer under a sheer, long-sleeved, white blouse. Whenever she'd wanted to look her best, she'd worn it. We told Dad our choice, but he shook his head. Mom had made him promise to save that outfit for me. And suddenly I wanted to reach for her again, give her one more hug because I knew she'd remembered that trivial promise I'd asked her to make. I knew she'd heard me.

And as Dad shook his head, I stood in Mom's room again, looking through her clothes and at all the pieces I wanted her to save me. I heard her laughing and saying, "You won't want them anymore, Sweets." Maybe she'd been right.

All I really wanted was for her body to fill those clothes with breath and tissue and soul. Because that skirt became just a skirt when it wasn't really Mom's anymore.

I wore the black shirt and flowered skirt I'd shown Mom just weeks earlier when I sat beside my siblings in the front row of her funeral. I'd tied my hair back in a half ponytail. The shiny wood casket took center stage, and Mom rested inside, wearing a dark blue dress and a yellow cardigan. As I wiped my face dry, I kept telling myself she wasn't there.

Rachel and I walked together as we followed our brothers and uncle who all carried the casket to the hearse. Dad clung to Aunt Angie when we reached the glass doors that opened to the parking lot. His sobs shook his back and shoulders.

At the cemetery, the sun beamed hot on my black shirt while I hid behind my sunglasses, staring and thinking about what came next. The funeral home had prepared everything. The grave was open, and next to it stood the tool for lowering the casket and to me seemed like a mountain of dirt. We gathered around the pit of the grave, and Dad took out his guitar. As he sang, I stared at the long, thin grass that poked up around the open pit, some pieces shining silver in the sunlight. I squinted as I broke the thorns off the white rose I was supposed to throw on the casket. Its dew covered my fingers.

When my turn came, I was sure everyone could see my heart pounding through my shirt as I walked toward the mouth of her grave. I didn't know which I was supposed to throw first, the rose or the dirt. I threw the rose. Then my sweaty hands gripped the shovel's handle and forced it into the mound. The dirt landed with a limp thud across the wood and buried the rose. I handed the shovel to someone else and walked back to Rachel.

As the singing continued, I squinted up at the pale blue cloudless sky. I can't say if it was in that exact moment, but I began to imagine Mom smiling with long, thick hair and staring at

Jesus with clear, green, eyes. She could move her shoulder again and maybe she was running. I saw her surrounded by pure bright white—like one of those dreams where it's too bright to see.

Every Sunday for a year, Dad took us to the grave. The grass grew back, and before long, it was hard to find her plot. I hated to think about her body lying beneath me and how it might look. Since Dad had bought two plots, he joked that whoever died next could go by Mom. For a while, I didn't mind if it was me. Some days, I'd still tell myself she was on a trip and that she'd be back in a few months; but, as her absence grew from weeks to months, I stopped waiting for her to come back, stopped hoping I would see her again someday, stopped holding my breath.

**CHAPTER 2: Filling the Absence**

My eyes would shift from the tan book in Dad's hands to his thick black mustache, to the flowered upholstery of the chair he sat in. Just a month or two before, Mom's hospice bed had filled the now open space of the living room behind Dad's chair. I kept my legs pulled close to my chest as I curled up on the couch and zoned off to Dad's monotone reading. When we'd lived in Mexico, he'd always have the family gather in the living room so he could read us the Proverb of the day. Now, he read from a book about grief that someone had given to him at the funeral. Before he'd start a new chapter, he'd tell us to listen close and be ready to talk about whatever stood out to us. To this day, the only thing that still stands out to me from that book is the idea of developing a "new normal" in the face of loss.

For the first three years after Mom's passing, my new normal became moving houses every summer. The first year without Mom, we lived in a large rental house on Lake Minnetonka, but we'd moved in knowing it was temporary. The following year, we spent in the same missionary house where Mom had passed away. We moved there also knowing it was temporary. Our time at that missionary house was winding down the summer before I would start high school, so we needed to finally buy a place of our own. That summer, I'd often lie in bed and stare up at the shadowy ceiling, trying to figure out if we would be able to buy a house in time to move in that fall. Those nights I'd spend dreaming about finally settling into a house that wasn't only available for one year. And then I'd roll over and stare at the silver moonlight that crept in through the blinds, refusing to let myself think about how my only sister, Rachel, would leave for college that fall, too.

I was five the first time I ever remember moving, and I woke up in my new pink room on a mattress that was still on the floor because we hadn't set up the bunkbeds yet. Since Mom had

just been diagnosed with breast cancer, my parents decided to move to a small town called Tecamac, roughly forty minutes outside of Mexico City. It was a rural area with cleaner, less polluted air than the city. At some point during the first day of living in our new home, I told Mom how it felt like we were on vacation. I probably said that because there was so much to explore and do, especially the big backyard with sidewalks where all of us kids could scooter to our heart's content. But at thirteen, once I'd spent three years living in temporary houses, I stopped feeling any excitement about moving.

At dinners, when Dad set the pan of steaming au gratin potatoes a la Hamburger Helper on the table, I would ask him about calling our realtor. Rachel was usually out with friends, and Matt was usually working, but since I was usually home, I'd talk to him about houses. I wanted to finally live in a nice house, in a nice neighborhood. Even though we'd always had a place to live, a big part of me still worried we wouldn't find a new house in time and that, even though Dad insisted he would, God wouldn't provide one for us. I wanted to use the bedspreads Mom had made for me and Rachel. And I wanted to find all of our dishes, photo albums, movies, and books that had been collecting dust in old cardboard boxes as we'd bounced from house to house. Sometimes, I'd been too curious and started opening boxes to find that one thing I thought I needed. When Dad found me, he'd tell me to pack everything back up because we still had to move. But I was done living in houses that felt empty because they didn't have any of our old things. I was done moving around. As I complained about wanting a permanent house, Dad reminded me of his motto: that this place is not our home, that we're just passing through.

A few days after we dropped Rachel off at college in California, we loaded our van and U-Haul and moved into the house we bought in Shorewood, Minnesota. My grandma, Mackie, helped me unpack and organize the kitchen. I was so excited to find the old canister set that we'd

used in Mexico because I loved to bake, but I hated how the sugar and flour spilled on the counter when I measured them out of their paper bags. I'd been searching for those plastic canisters since our last house, but I'd been unable to find them in any of our kitchen boxes. As I unpacked with Mackie and rediscovered dishes I'd forgotten about, I also found the white, plastic canisters. I let out a loud "finally" and decided to start washing them right away, but I found some black spots on the lids. When I showed Mackie, she told me it was mold and said I should throw them away. I didn't want to get rid of them, so I checked all of the sizes, but each one had sprouted the fuzzy mold and washing them would not get rid of it. They fell with a dull clunk in blue recycle bin outside our garage. I made a mental note to tell Dad we needed new canisters.

After I got locked outside in the cold garage one winter after freshman basketball practice, I told Dad that we should get an electric code for our front door. I also told Dad he should buy metal shelves for the laundry room so that we could move the extra boxes out of the downstairs living room. And that we needed a hutch in the upstairs kitchen so that we could unpack all of our china. And that we could use a high-top table for the basement. And that we could use a small shelf and bench next to the downstairs door to store our winter clothes and boots on. I'd lie in bed thinking about ways to get rid of boxes and better organize our place, so every time I had a new idea for how to improve our house, I told Dad.

I hugged Aunt Angie as I thanked her for my thirteenth birthday present. Dad had been telling her how I'd been trying to make the house look nice, so her birthday present to me consisted of six white candles and a large candle holder to put in the upstairs fireplace. The white candles fit just right and they added a homey touch to everything. Eventually, I bought pinecones

to spread throughout the metal frame, making it more rustic. Those first few days of having the new candle set, I'd come home from school and take a peek at it. I thought the finished fireplace looked like the decorations I saw at my friend's houses. And the more I'd look at it, the more I thought that maybe it meant my life wasn't so different from theirs.

A week before our third Christmas without Mom, Dad tapped softly on my bedroom door. I twisted the handle and clicked it open. His thick black mustache spread across his upper lip as he smiled at me. Since it was evening, he whispered like he was sharing the biggest secret and handed me the plastic grocery bag, reminding me to keep everything hidden until Christmas Eve when I could stuff the stockings. I grabbed the bag through the crack of my door. We said good night and I love you. When I closed the door, I made sure he'd bought everything I'd asked for: Hershey's Kisses and Life Saver mints. Satisfied, I shoved the bag to the back of my closet where I knew none of my siblings would find it.

A few days later, I brought the plastic red bin labeled "Christmas Decorations" upstairs and snapped it open. Since our new house had a fireplace, I could hang our stockings from the white mantle, not from a window like the way we had in Mexico. I pulled out Mom's tan stocking and traced the green letters of her name with my fingers, the velvet soft to my touch. I put her stocking back into the plastic bag and back into the storage bin then hung up the rest. The stockings dangled empty and limp above the fireplace and above the candle set Angie had given me the month before. When I finished, I stepped back. It felt like things were finally falling back into place, finally filling the house like they had in Mexico. I seemed to believe that if I could make this house to reflect the one in Mexico, I wouldn't feel as homesick or as out of place. Maybe I'd actually feel like I had a home again. Maybe my life would feel a bit more normal, a bit more stable.

After decorating the living room, I turned off the lights in the adjacent kitchen and sat on the scratchy second-hand couch. My eyes adjusted to the reds, yellows, and blues that sparkled from our green tree. The fresh pine spread thin throughout the living room, making a dim impression like the twinkling lights. I sat in silence, breathing it all in, letting memories of past Christmases flash to mind.

Lights flickered on Mom's face as she sat alone in our living room in Mexico, soaking up the pine smell and Christmas music. Our home was now filled with Christmas decorations, and Mom cherished every second of it. The ease on her face drew me to her, so I asked what she was doing. She smiled and reached her arm out, welcoming me to join. I sat down and leaned my head into her. My shoulders relaxed as we both stared at the colorful lights, letting the no-cares Christmas feelings sink in. With my head leaning against her chest, I smiled every time she took a breath. Every time her heart thumped steady in my ear. The thumping felt as methodical as the blinking lights, so I nudged my head deeper into her chest as we both squinted at the florescent rainbow. I had no idea it was the last Christmas I'd spend with her.

"I love Christmas," Mom said, her soft voice breaking the silence.

"Me too," I said quietly.

And for a moment, I forgot about her cancer.

That Christmas day, I helped Mom make the lasagna for dinner, layering the pasta on top of meat sauce and cottage cheese. It was a meal Mom only made it on special occasions. Every time Mom cooked, one of us kids would help her by cutting onions or cleaning vegetables, doing any of the small things that took time. Being "Mom's Helper" in the kitchen was one of our

designated weekly chores. Mom had taught us all how to cook and bake, and for the most part, we enjoyed doing both, though my sister and I often baked more than our three brothers.

Rachel would flip through the crisp yellowed pages of the Martha Stewart cookbook to find the recipes while I'd grab the white canisters and set them on our kitchen counter: the flour in the biggest container, the powdered sugar in the smallest. We'd set all of the ingredients on the tile counter and start mixing. After we'd made the sugar cookie dough, we covered the white countertop with flour to keep the dough from sticking as we rolled it out and cut it into snowmen and candy canes. Our noses and hands turned white from the excess flour we dumped on the counter. Although we'd help Mom cook, I can't remember that Mom helped much when we baked, even during Christmas time. Most of my baking memories are of me and Rachel in the kitchen, alone. I do remember, though, how Luke would run into the kitchen and snatch a scoopful of the dough. I remember how we'd chase him, yelling while also trying to recruit him to help us bake, and how he'd go back upstairs to do whatever he'd been doing before. The kitchen slowly warmed with the sweet smell of butter and vanilla as the cookies baked. Once the cookies were ready to be frosted, Mom would maybe come down just to help us mix the food coloring into the frosting, but otherwise we made the cookies without her. Maybe she stayed away from the cookies because she knew she shouldn't have much sugar on her special diet, or maybe she just knew we were old enough to bake on our own.

A few days after I'd set the Christmas tree up in our new house in Minnesota, Luke burst open the door of my basement room and screamed "Merry Christmas!" at me and Rachel. He'd come in late from Chicago the night before, so it was the first time he'd been back to Minnesota since Thanksgiving. I rubbed my eyes and rolled over. Rachel groaned. Luke stayed in the room,

adjusting his Santa hat in my mirror and asking us why we weren't excited for Christmas. Once he left, Rachel and I got out of bed then slogged upstairs in our pajamas and started making our grandma's famous "Mackie Toast": French toast layered into stacks of two and baked in a pan with brown sugar and butter.

Knives clinked against the white glass of our plates as we took buttery bites of the sweet and crunchy bread. Our family squished into the small dining room that was now warmed with the smell of cinnamon as we devoured the two pans of gooeyness. I chewed and snatched a few quick peeks at the tree. Big boxes wrapped in white and red paper peeped out from under the green branches, and I imagined that one held the pair of Ugg boots I'd been wanting, even though I hadn't dared ask for them. We were eating the breakfast that we'd always had on Christmas mornings, and Rachel and I had even managed to bake some cookies a few days before. It hadn't really felt this way since Mom was gone; so, for a moment, I had the sense of family we'd had when Mom was still with us.

For my first present, I opened a thin rectangular box addressed to me from Rachel. Underneath the white tissue paper lay a folded black zip-up sweatshirt from her college. I thanked her, and Luke continued passing out gifts, since he was the one wearing the Santa hat that morning. When Rachel's turn came, he handed her a gift from all of us siblings. It was a scale she'd asked for, which I'd made sure she received. My second gift was a bigger box from Dad. At first I wondered if it was something for my room since I'd been redecorating it all fall. When I tore the wrapping paper, a glossy white cardboard box greeted me. The pictures on the outside were of clear canisters, each filled with something different: one with pasta, another with M&M's, another with rice.

Luke asked what I got, and I lifted the box. Jonathan asked what they were. Dad responded, saying they were canisters, saying that I'd told him we needed them. Skipping our gift-opening order, Luke handed me my other present. I think he wanted to help get my mind off of the canister set, so he handed me a cylinder-shaped package. This time, I wondered if it could be a rolled-up rug for my room. I tore off the wrapping only to hold another canister in my hands. When the clear plastic touched my hand, I heard one of my siblings ask if they'd all forgotten about buying me presents. My eyes filled and a rock lodged itself in my throat. I wanted to be grateful, but I couldn't keep the tears away. I started crying. Luke picked me up and sat me on his lap on Mom's rocking chair, letting me cry on his shoulder as he rocked me back and forth. I felt like telling everyone I didn't care that much about the presents, that I was really crying because I missed Mom, but I just nudged my head into Luke's shoulder and imagined it was Mom who held me instead.

No matter how many Christmas decorations I'd set up, I discovered that I couldn't make the day feel special. And no matter how many boxes I'd emptied by filling the house again with all the things we'd had in Mexico, I hadn't made a home. With a parent missing from the family, nothing quite feels the same again, and it doesn't matter how many old decorations you might fill a new house with because it will never fill the hole their absence has created. Nothing but their soul, their spirit, their breath can do that. But my developing mind didn't understand. I don't think I ever realized what I was doing, or what I was chasing as I tried to rebuild the home that crumbled when we moved to Minnesota, and when we buried Mom.

I should have known I couldn't remake our old house in Mexico since I'd been able to visit it and see how much it had changed when I was in eighth grade. Our family went back to

Mexico City for Spring Break, and one day during our trip, we decided to drive through our old neighborhood to visit our old house. When we drove up, we saw someone walking in. The fifteen-foot walls that surrounded the house were still that orange yellow, and the front door was still black with a jagged number seven taped onto it. Dad stepped out of the car and asked if we could go inside. The old house owner's son let us in.

We walked through that big yard that still had the same strange sidewalks crisscrossing the dusty brown grass. We passed the spot we used to park our cars, and the spot where the dog houses used to be. We stepped inside the kitchen, and I saw the same white counter where we'd baked so many cookies and breads. Most everything looked how I remembered, but it felt dark and dusty. We walked into the dining room, and the table where we'd eaten breakfast, lunch, and dinner together as a family was there, but now bulk cloth was stacked around and on top of it. The owner had closed all the curtains and stuffed the place to the ceiling with materials, turning our old home into a warehouse. We walked past the living room, the place where we'd first heard of Mom's fatal diagnosis, and though our couches were gone, the curtains Mom had made still hung from those windows. As we walked upstairs, the stairs felt flatter and less steep than I remembered. Rachel's and my room was still pink and the same stickers Rachel and I had made stuck to our windows. Our pink curtains, now almost a grey color, still hung to each side. Before we left, I used our bathroom and thought back to the nights Mom would brush my teeth because I was too tired or when she'd make sit me on the toilet lid to clean and bandage a fresh scrape. The front metal door rang when it slammed shut behind us and we made our way back to the car. Through the car window, I stared back at those walls and tried to imagine the house where I'd spent most of my childhood. I didn't want to picture it like a warehouse because it wasn't the place I'd remembered. It wasn't the home where I'd grown up.

The Christmas feeling I'd had in that very house in Mexico was not the same as the one I tried to recreate in Minnesota. Just like the memories of that old house seemed to dissolve as soon as I saw the warehouse it had become, so the Christmas feeling I sought my freshman year of high school dissolved almost as quick as it came. In an instant, the holiday felt just like any other day, only now a tree sat in the house with a few presents beneath its branches. And even though the whole family was together, we couldn't ignore the fact that we weren't whole anymore. We never would be. Our new normal, in a new country and new home, could never echo the past one. It could never house those same feelings and same traditions. Just like the house in Mexico could only live on as I'd remembered it when we'd lived there with Mom, so those traditions and feelings could only live on in my memory because that's all they were: memories.

That Christmas morning my freshman year of high school helped me learn to cherish memories. It made me understand that traditions like Christmas lose their magic once we grow up. It forced me to realize that the magic we feel as kids will often only live on through what we remember, and through the people we share those memories with. Mom's absence made me understand that truth a little sooner than I wanted, maybe made me grow up a bit faster than I wanted. But her absence also forced me to remember all those moments our family had once shared with her, helped me seek after the magic in each one. And I cherished those memories of her, even while living in the present new normal of my life.

**CHAPTER 3: The Other Side of the Tapestry**

I was in my closet, crying. I turned on my radio music and screamed into a pillow. It had been two years since Mom's death, and I was home alone. The empty house in Minnesota reminded me even more of her absence.

As I caught my breath and hugged my knees into the pillow, I noticed Rachel's square notebook, sealed by a dark green ribbon, lying on the floor. Hoping to distract myself, I picked it up. When I pulled apart the green ribbon and opened the journal, a piece of yellow notebook paper fell out. It was folded into a square with a warning not to read it on the front. I knew I shouldn't, but I wiped my nose and unfolded the paper anyway. My name jumped out amidst Rachel's scribbling. She had written down a memory that to this day I don't remember.

She described how, a few days before Mom died, I'd stood next to her hospice bed as Mom asked me who would take care of me when she died. I'd replied with a question and asked if she meant Dad. Mom's reply was certain: "Jesus is going to take care of you, and he'll do a better job than I was ever able to do."

In the immediate months that followed Mom's death, I had to face going to a new school alone. As the new seventh grader, everyone asked me what it had been like to live as a missionary kid in Mexico City. They'd ask me to repeat my name again, and again, and just say one more phrase in Spanish. I did, but I never knew if any of my classmates knew the real reason why I'd moved to Minnesota. Most of them had lived in the same old house since they were little, or so I assumed.

The newness subsided as I grew accustomed to doing homework after school. I started parting my hair in a new way and straightening it every day. Like my peers, I started to wear

makeup, too. But I knew no one else's dad picked them up after school. And as I lived in the alternate universe created by Mom's death, I navigated it by searching for the good that might come from her absence.

The summer before my sophomore year of high school, I continued unpacking boxes in our downstairs office. I wobbled as I carried a dark blue bin into the windowless room. It pulled me to the ground, and it almost smashed my toes when I finally let it slam into the floor. The smell of old plastic and dusty air made me nauseous when I snapped its lid off. Mom's miscellaneous items filled the box: her Wheaton College Mom sweatshirt, her jewelry box, the small bunny Rachel and I had knit for her, her wig, and the outfit she'd saved for me. Mom's spiral ring journals were stacked at the bottom, the metal rings facing up as if they were on a bookshelf. After emptying everything else onto the hard carpet, I reached for the notebooks. She had labeled each by year and number ranging from 2001-2007. Next to the journals lay the blue prayer-binder that she kept on her bookshelf in our downstairs living room in Mexico. I could still picture her in her pink robe sitting on her recliner in the early mornings, reading her Bible, and writing in that binder.

I picked up the binder and opened it, and I began flipping through the pages that housed Mom's prayer-life. In those pages, I discovered her list of answered prayers. The list began in October of 1997, the year after I was born. It progressed a full eleven pages until March of 2008, each entry written in her swoopy but controlled cursive. She had tabs for daily prayers and specific lists for each weekday.

Flipping past the prayer lists, I found where she'd started to journal in 2001, and her handwriting spread over every inch of those lined white pages. My eyes caught Mom's first words from August 18<sup>th</sup>: "I can't believe it! Just 2 days ago life was so different—" I read on,

knowing what I would find but curious to see how she would explain it all. She talked about getting her first mammogram. She'd found a lump in her breast but wasn't concerned. She'd thought it was just an "insignificant growth." While she remained calm, her doctor became concerned.

Then she explained how she finally went to the doctor for a test. The results came within 20 minutes. Now, she was concerned. "I HAVE BREAST CANCER!!" she scratched on the second page. I kept reading.

My world faded as I crouched next to the blue bin with Mom's binder in hand. Her words came alive, and I started to see her at her most vulnerable. While part of me felt like maybe I was violating every mother-daughter contract by reading her journals, I also wondered if maybe she would've wanted me to read them. Some of the stories I read were things she'd already told me and others were of things I'd forgotten. As I fell into her words, I felt like I was learning more about her. I felt like she was talking to me, and I couldn't put the binder down.

The more I read, the more I saw how Mom used her journals. She wrote in a conversational tone, and the entries were honest. Each one addressed God because her journal was a constant prayer. As she wrote about her fears, she battled them with Bible verses. Reading her thoughts, I wondered how she could write with such trust.

Mom then wrote about her continuous sleepless nights. How she'd stare up at the ceiling, second-guessing the path she'd taken. Fears about people's opinions of the treatment she chose kept her eyes from shutting. She and Dad had felt uneasy about doing chemo, so she'd decided to go vegetarian and organic, but now she wondered how she could eat natural and organic as a missionary in Mexico City. She described all the conversations about holistic treatments she'd had with friends as they claimed people could fight cancer through the food choices they made. I

know my grandparents wanted her to do chemo, but she didn't want to live with the quality of life that chemo might give her. She would rather see what happened if she filled her body with vitamins and minerals than pump it full of poison in hopes she survived. Every day was still a battle, so she prayed for strength and wisdom.

I never saw Mom's battle.

I never noticed her worry about what to do or whether the choice of treatment was the best one. I only saw my mom, the woman who smiled and hugged me every morning, who cooked our food, and who taught us everything we knew. I never saw her thoughts. I never knew her fears. She hadn't shared that part of her with me. Probably to protect me.

My aunt Angie once told me I was just like Mom because I often feared the little things. She told me that Mom stressed a lot in college, so she would plan her day down to the exact hour. She wrote scheduled to-do lists and stuck by them. But cancer was something she'd never planned for. And it was something she couldn't control.

Sometimes I've wondered in how many ways Mom's life was different from the one she'd dreamed of living as a kid. She studied business in college in Minnesota, but she became a missionary in Mexico City. Without having any real teaching experience, she became a homeschooling mother who taught her five kids everything they knew. But when she stayed in her home state of Minnesota for a mastectomy, she wrote about the life that, when I was a young kid, I'd never thought she might have wanted. Sitting in our new house in Minnesota, I read through her journal entry from roughly eleven years before: "Today as I went walking—it is so beautiful here—the weather is cool, it's a quiet neighborhood. The grass is so green, the sky is so blue and I thought 'I want to live here and raise my kids here—where we will be safe—' "

I set the binder down.

I sat in silence before I picked up Mom's journal from 2007, the year before she died. Near the end, I discovered that she wrote a prayer for each of her kids for the upcoming year. The entry was dated on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, ten days before her fatal diagnosis. I found her prayer for me, and I smiled when I saw my name written in her cursive handwriting, the E looking like a backwards three, swoopy and round. She thanked God for me, noting, too, that I was growing up. She thanked God that I was a help to her, and then she prayed for the desires of my heart, the ones only God knew. She finished by asking God to bless me that year even though she had no idea what that year would hold for me, for all of us.

Shortly after discovering that bin, I asked Dad to drive me to Target where I searched every school supply shelf for a binder. When I found the right one, I went home and grabbed Mom's from the bin so I could organize mine like hers. In the first entry on my lined pages, with my jagged print handwriting, I confessed to copying Mom's prayer binder. Since Mom knew what she was doing, I would follow her lead, I wrote.

Soon, I started praying for everything because I feared no one would pray for our family in the same way Mom had. I worried and prayed about our new house in Minnesota needing to be fully furnished and unpacked. I worried about things like a hutch and dining room set I knew we needed. My three oldest siblings, Jonathan, Luke, and Rachel, were probably stressed at college, so I prayed for them, too. I'd forgotten about who Mom said would take care of me and our family after her death; and, instead, I tried to take care of us all by praying. Having read how Mom would often write phrases like "give them wisdom," I wrote the same words down, even if I didn't know exactly what they meant— what wisdom was or where I might find it.

In eighth grade, a new girl named Cat joined our small class. Before classes started, I found out that she'd lost her dad to cancer. Immediately, I knew she understood something my friends could not. She'd been through hell and back, and I felt a mutual understanding with her even before we became friends. Eventually, the two of us shared an open hour and we started talking. Cat's dad died the year before Mom, and Cat came from a family of four—our siblings were the same age.

Dad met Cat's mom, Jan, when I had to work on a science project with Cat, and she invited me to stay the night. At first, Dad had been hesitant because he didn't know the family. Having spent thirty years in Mexico, where he'd been robbed and assaulted many times and where he'd known people who got kidnapped or worse, he'd grown more than paranoid about people he didn't know. It took a lot for him to trust families, even if they sent their kids to the same Christian school he did. Whenever I spent the night at a friend's house, he needed me to call him and let him know that everything was OK. It always was. After what felt like a lot of convincing on my end, he let me stay at Cat's house. And as I hung out with Cat more frequently that eighth grade year, our two single parents soon met, talked, and eventually, started dating. The two dated on and off as Cat and I transitioned into high school. When our parents were together, I welcomed what their relationship might mean: buying a new house and living with a stepsister my age. Our family could have a central location, and we would probably never move again. And I thought their relationship meant I wouldn't stand out so much as the girl with a single dad.

Sometimes when Jan picked me up after school, she'd buy me a Starbucks on the way to my house. I'd sit down in the tan leather seat and know that no one was staring at her red Lexus like I was sure they often stared at Dad's grey, boxy van. In the evenings when she'd make

dinner at our house, I'd come home from soccer practice to a warm kitchen bursting with the smell of fresh salmon and pesto. Jan was the first to introduce me to salmon, a dish that would later become one of my favorites. She also showed me how to enjoy and make salads topped with avocados, feta cheese, and a homemade salad dressing. She was the first person to tell me I might have a gift of intercessory prayer, and she always encouraged me to pray more. I could spend hours talking with Jan about so many things. I began seeking her out and picking her brain for advice on life and on cooking. And a part of me likes to imagine that Mom would have liked Jan because she helped me not miss Mom so much.

But Dad often said he just didn't feel right about being with Jan. Since they had first started dating my freshman year of high school, they would talk for a few months and then stop. He often told me their relationship made sense on paper, but he couldn't always see a future with her: Dad hoped to return to Mexico one day, and Jan wanted to work in Israel.

When the two were "talking again," I didn't worry so much about how the house should look or how I should decorate my room. Instead, Jan gave me ideas for how the place could look. She encouraged Dad to buy me the same fur rug that her daughters had in their rooms, and she gave us a couch topper for the second-hand sofa in our upstairs living room. One summer, she helped me and Rachel paint that room, too. When we got lice that same summer, she combed through our hair and dyed it darker for us.

I didn't know if I should believe it when Dad finally proposed, but then they started looking for houses together. Then they set a wedding date and sent out invitations. But that silver promise around her finger didn't last. She'd still sensed Dad's hesitancy and had some of her own, so she returned the ring. At first I didn't tell anyone. Part of me thought that maybe, if I

didn't admit they'd called it off, it would still happen. But instead of getting married the December of my senior year of high school, they broke up in October.

Months later, I was washing my hands in the bathroom of Jan's new house—the one she'd first found with Dad—when I read the story about the backside of a tapestry. (Jan had been clear that she still wanted to be a part of our lives even though she and Dad were not together anymore.) A small picture frame with a square of cloth sat on the counter of her bathroom. I picked up the frame and read the story inside. A museum tour guide showed some guests the back of a famous tapestry. As they looked at the piece, which was full of knots and colors that created no image, the guests could not understand how the piece had gained so much fame. After minutes of letting them search for the beauty in the chaos, the guide took them around to the other side of the tapestry. Once they faced the front, they could see the whole picture, and the knots of color from the back started to make more sense.

When I was nine or ten, I sat next to Mom in our living room in Mexico City and talked to her about college. For every two years since I was eight, our home shrank as one-by-one my four siblings went off to college. As I leaned into Mom, she told me she didn't know what she would do when I went to college, making her and Dad empty nesters. I nudged closer into her shoulder, looked up, and said maybe I wouldn't go to college right away. I don't know if she believed me, and I don't know if I would've kept my promise had the cancer never invaded her liver. In a way, though, I did keep my word because, when my turn for college finally did come, I didn't go. I spent six months at a mission's school in Chile instead.

A week or two before I left for Chile, I ran into Colleen, the mom of one of my close high school friends. When she asked if I was ready to go to South America, I shrugged. Then she

asked if Dad had taken me shopping for everything I needed. Again, I shrugged, saying it was hard to find a time since Dad worked during the day, and I worked at night. She kept asking me if I had everything I needed, and I kept saying I would get to it soon enough. Finally, she asked what I was doing on Thursday. Nothing, I said. “I’ll take you shopping,” she said. And I couldn’t say no.

A few days later, I followed Colleen as she pushed the overflowing cart toward the check-out. The two of us had spent hours sifting through the aisles, picking out things I never would have thought to buy had I gone shopping with Dad. As we unloaded the cart, I felt like I had more than I needed. When the clerk scanned and bagged, she asked where I was going. I kept emptying the items from the cart and onto the conveyer belt as I told her I was about to spend half a year in Chile. Colleen stood on the other side of the checkout lane, separating the few things she’d bought for herself from everything she’d bought for me. From behind the register, the girl looked at me and said, “I don’t think your mom realizes that I was trying to keep all the food together.” Colleen heard nothing as she continued moving things from one plastic bag to the other. I nodded. I remember stopping myself from correcting the girl because, just for one day, I wanted to pretend I was shopping with my mom.

I’d been in Chile for a month when I wrote “Nothing to Fear” at the top of the page in blue bold letters. I was completing a homework assignment about the Psalms, and I’d just hit Psalm 27. I scribbled down my answers to the questions about the Psalm before I went to bed, specifically writing what I could relate to from my reading. My answer was verse 10, which said that even if mother or father forsake me, God will always take me in.

A few weeks later, I stepped into our classroom in Chile on the last day of a week-long seminar, only to find the whole room rearranged. The rows of desks and chairs that normally faced the whiteboard had been pushed together and turned sideways to face the wall and windows. Blankets draped each corner of the room, creating individual tents and makeshift rooms labeled one through seven.

That morning's lecture was about the stages in each person's life. These stages included: conception, pregnancy, birth, childhood, puberty, marriage, and old age. Our leader explained that these stages need to be blessed and celebrated because major internal wounds can develop in a person if not. "We don't know what each of you have been through, but we firmly believe that your lives need blessing, in each and every stage," he told us.

The tents on each corner and every side of the room represented the different life stages. Inside, our other leaders waited to pray for anyone who wanted to receive a blessing over a stage that may not have been blessed.

Once the lecture ended, I sat at my desk. After a few moments of staring ahead, I looked up and noticed Lindsey, one of few American leaders on the base, making her way towards me. Since we were both Americans, she had been my mentor throughout the past few months of training. She was the person I'd cried and laughed with. She knew about Mom, so it wasn't a surprise that she led me to stage five: puberty.

Once inside, she sat me down at a table with a mirror hanging behind. She took my hair out of its bun and picked up a brush. I sat silent, looking at our reflections in the mirror.

"I wish I could've been there when you got your period," Lindsey said.

She set down her brush and began braiding. When I closed my eyes, I saw myself standing in front of Mom and Dad's dresser mirror. The sun glimmering gold through the open

windows of Mom and Dad's room. I was back in Mexico, and Mom was with me, smiling with her green eyes as she braided my hair tight.

Her hands took careful turns to wrap each strand over the other. She continued, "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you graduated high school."

My eyes opened, and I saw Lindsey in the reflection.

Lindsey tied the braid then reached for a stool and sat at the table. She picked up a small bottle of polish and set my hands on the table.

"I wish I could've seen you at the prom," she said and with a stroke of polish colored my nail red.

Mom had been the only person I'd once trusted for smoothly painted nails. When I pictured Mom painting my nails in her room, tears poured from my cheeks. After Lindsey finished, she wrapped her arms around me and let me cry into her shoulder. For a moment, I let myself imagine that I was holding onto Mom just one more time.

A month later, I found myself in the Chilean wilderness in the middle of the night, sinking to my knees in front of a wooden cross. It was the last night of the infamous boot camp for our mission's training where we slept in tents, killed our own chickens, and slaughtered our own lamb. We'd been woken up in the middle of the night and told to pack up our tents and bags. In the darkness, our leaders told us that if we wanted to move forward, we'd have to give up everything. Most of us thought we'd be taken up a mountain and be forced to travel down it all alone, but when I made the decision to step forward, I faced a cross instead. A cardboard sign hung from it with the words "I would do it again for you" written in black.

The nearby campfire crackled as I kneeled and stared at the sign that hung from that cross. Carlos, one of the Chilean leaders who knew my story, kneeled down at my side and put

his hand on my shoulder. Just weeks before, I'd spent Thanksgiving at his house, celebrating with his wife, Lindsey. In a soft whisper, he prayed over all the moments I'd lived without Mom—all the holidays that she'd missed. His voice broke as he prayed that I might come to know the mother heart of God.

The summer after my time in Chile, I lived in Minnesota again, and I sat in Carol Paulson's home, intently watching her hands transfer the thin blue yarn from one needle to the next and unravel the mistakes of my knitting. She was the mother of one of my best friends, Kristin. She was the mother who knit socks and cooked gourmet meals. Ever since I knew Carol could knit socks, I'd been wanting to learn. One summer, she taught me. The pattern proved more confusing than I'd thought, so every time I made a mistake, Carol would take the project from my hands, put on her reading glasses, and pick up my dropped stitch or undo my skipped row. As she fixed my knitting, maneuvering the stitches with a skill and understanding I could only dream of, I'd ask her more questions about knitting.

I'd also ask her the best way to cook asparagus so it tasted good, or what temperature I needed to bake cauliflower so it turn out crispy like the how it tasted the last time I'd been at her house. Carol taught me how to make pasta and ravioli from scratch, how to make roasted vegetables in the oven, and how to bake a delicious but simple chicken. She showed me what it meant to eat organic and still eat meat.

When I lived at Carol's house the summer after my freshman year of college, she and I made a habit of hiking at a nature preserve together. We kept the habit up even once I didn't live with her and sometimes we'd go for easier walks in the winter. One icy day in January, Carol and I went to the arboretum near her house. To keep from slipping, she'd bought a new pair of

ice cleats to go over her hiking boots. The cleats made a harsh click on the ground each time she took a step while my pink tennis shoes crunched the snow beneath my softer tread. I kept my gloveless hands hidden in my winter coat and made sure to step on the less icy spots. We reached a small hill, and as we walked up, an elderly woman with white hair made her way down. I noticed a pair of cleats wrapped around the soles of her shoes, and I pointed them out. As we passed the old woman, Carol said, "They work don't they?" The lady nodded, and I wondered if she knew Carol referred to the cleats. "That'll be me in twenty years," Carol said, once we reached the top of the hill. I looked back and said the lady looked eighty. "Well, I'm sixty," Carol replied. But she didn't seem sixty, I said, noting also how I hoped to be as active when I was her age. She thanked me, and we continued in silence.

As I looked down, making sure not to slip, my mind bounced between that old lady and Mom. It was January, Mom's birth month. By now she'd be sixty-two. If the cancer hadn't eaten her body, she'd be probably be walking with us, maybe even with a pair of ice cleats of her own. My gaze focused on the ice-white concrete as I remembered when the calcium levels had spiked in her blood. Though she'd lost full mobility in her left arm, her back never curved from the many passing years. Her hair never turned silver white. I tried to imagine her face with more wrinkles and loose skin, but a small part of me would like to think that maybe it's a good thing Mom never had to grow old.

In a way, though, Mom's body did grow old from the cancer. Her body and bones crumbled premature before she could help me settle in to my new, developing body. And as her body crumbled so did a large part of the foundation of our home, the part that I had relied on for security. I tried to fill Mom's void with the time I spent with these mothers. And often, I did. More often, though, her absence became stronger in their presence. I'd compare them to the

woman I once called Mom. I'd imagine how she would be good friends with them, and I found myself wishing they could meet her. Other times, I just wanted to hug them and lean my head on their shoulder and close my eyes, but their shoulders were not Mom's. Their bodies didn't house the soul of the woman who raised me.

Before my second year of college, I sat in my older brother's backyard, picking grass, and he sat on a lawn chair. We talked about the recent death of our grandma, Mackie, and how her passing had brought Mom's into sharper focus. Then we started talking about Mom, something our family rarely did.

"You know," Luke said, voice shaking. "I've started to think that maybe if God felt like he needed to take her when she was still so young then maybe he felt like he could do a lot more through her death than through her longer life. And the only conclusion I can draw from that is that all of us who watched her die — and watched her die well — have a lot to learn and to do from that."

We sat in silence, each staring at a different spot of his dark-green lawn, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, I had to keep trusting that God had meant it all for the good. Like that moment when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, and God used it to save Egypt and the rest of the land from a famine. So maybe God does work all things out for the good, even when we can't fully understand it, even when we can't see the picture he's creating on the other side of the tapestry. So maybe God takes care of us in ways that at first feel hurtful and at first don't make much sense.

But if not a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God's consent, then surely he cares for us with the gentleness of a mother. Surely he nurtures our souls and stands ready to embrace

us and all of our emotions. If he is both the lion and the lamb, then he not only has the ability to provide for us, but he also has the ability to cry with us, to join us in our sorrows. And so, Jesus, our lamb, cares for us in everything, and he cares for us better than we can care for ourselves.

**CHAPTER 4: El Patito Feo**

Sitting in the front row next to my siblings, waiting for the ceremony to begin, I felt an eerie déjà vu. Only this time, instead of Mom, Dad took center stage. His face glowed and he wore a black tux. This time, someone wearing white stood across from him. This time, there was no coffin. But I still cried.

The biggest venue they could find in Ojo de Agua, Mexico was a public gymnasium, so a basketball hoop hung stiffly behind the altar. She held the only flowers that I remember. We sat on folding chairs covered in a white cloth, and the metal frame jabbed into the middle of my spine.

As I stared at the backs of the black suit and white dress, all I could think about were the words my friend, Christine, had said to me and Rachel the night before about the woman who stood across from Dad: “She can’t even speak English.” I’d stared up at the ceiling sighing in agreement with what Christine said, wondering how this marriage would work. Christine was like the older sister I never had. She was the same age as Jonathan and our moms had been close friends since before I was born. The last few years we spent in Mexico, our families had grown even closer, sharing lunches and dinners together on Sunday afternoons. Christine’s dad had comforted Dad a lot right after Mom passed, but right before he wedding he actually told Dad not to go through with it. But Dad didn’t listen.

Part of me clung to the possibility that Dad might stop mid-ceremony and realize his mistake. Maybe he’d call everything off like he had with Jan, say never mind. But he didn’t. I kept wiping the tears from my cheeks and making sure that my mascara didn’t smear. Rachel sat next to me wearing a blue dress. She cried, too. Jonathan, Luke, and Matt stared ahead, their faces stoic.

I wore black. The dress was a stretchy cotton material that felt like a soft t-shirt. Maybe it was the only dress I had brought with me to Mexico. I can't say if it was intentional. I'd like to think it was.

When they faced each other to share their love and vows, a knot twisted in my stomach. My heart pounded a million times a minute as the life I'd learned to love in Minnesota slipped away the moment Dad put the ring on her finger then sealed his words with a kiss. I'm sure people cheered when the new couple walked down the aisle, but as my siblings and I talked to people and waited for food to come, I felt like I was at a wake, silently contemplating the life I'd just lost and wondering what my new normal would look like now.

Later it was dark out when the cake was cut and passed around. We kids grouped together while we waited to take a photo with the bride and groom. First they snapped a shot with her family. As they did, the flash reflected off Dad's glasses. He smiled big as he stood next to his new father-in-law, the guy from our old church who used to do odd jobs around the house. When it was our turn, we made sure to speak Spanish and congratulate them. We lined up and squinted as the camera clicked and flashed to capture the moment when the light skinned, blue-eyed Palumbos towered beside Dad's new wife. "Well, this is where Dad leaves us," Luke whispered as the camera's white flash snapped twice.

Once we got back to the house Dad had been watching for the past few months, Luke found some of Dad's hidden wine. He poured us all glasses and raised a toast to being on our own. Even though we were all adults living in separate states— Luke in Chicago, Jonathan in Michigan, Rachel in California, me and Matt in Minnesota—we still felt the chasm that Dad's "I do" created. Ever since we'd moved to Minnesota and Dad bought a house there, that state had been where the family congregated for holidays and summers. Maybe we raised our glasses and

cheered to our newfound orphan hood. Maybe we laughed as we took swigs of cabernet sauvignon. Maybe we didn't know how else to deal with the moment.

I don't think any of us kids really wanted to admit it, but Dad's move and marriage seemed to break our already broken family apart even more. His move to Mexico unraveled the home I'd tried to create at our house in Minnesota. Yet again, I was starting over, learning how to live a new life situation that was laughably different than any of my friends. And like the largely independent family we'd become, each of us kids dealt with the new loss in different ways in the different states we were each now learning to call home.

People say that parents should never bury their child, but it's not easy for a child to watch a parent be buried. It's also not easy for a child to watch a parent get remarried, especially when the child is not excited about the marriage. Both moments are transitions that make life feel flimsy. It would take years for me to appreciate the abrupt transition, years for me to see the good that came from yet again, a new normal.

Dad prepared me for the transition, at least, and for that I was grateful. I'd been in Chile, doing missions before college, when he called me to ask about scheduling his wedding date for March. I sat in an upstairs office, sipping tea and looking out at the blue ocean when he told me he was packing our house in Minnesota so he could house-sit in Mexico. I said yes, but it took me a few months before I realized what I lost by agreeing to a March wedding: my home. When Dad left for Mexico, he rented our house in Minnesota but left my room locked and untouched. Though he could not promise me the life I'd once known for my summer before college, he promised to drop me off at college in the fall, just like he'd done with my siblings.

For the month of April, I had no other place to live but with my Dad in Mexico. Since I wouldn't leave for college until August, and Matt wouldn't graduate college until May, I had to stay in Mexico. The first few nights I stayed with my dad and his wife I didn't bother speaking in Spanish. I figured if she'd chosen to marry an American, then she should learn English, too. One night she made us soup and after serving us, she sat down. I slurped the broth down. Seeing my empty bowl, she looked at me and asked, "Más?" I said no even though I was still hungry. When she went to grab Dad more soup, I got up and put my dish in the sink and asked to leave the table.

Alone in my room, I messaged my friend, Christine. "I don't know if I can stand living here the whole time. Honestly, the whole wedding thing feels like I'm going through the grieving process again. We need to hang out and comfort each other." She responded almost immediately: "My dad says you can live here! This is your house!" I smiled at her response, feeling welcomed but also feeling wrong for wanting to get away from Dad. In December, Christine's mom had passed away from cancer, so I told myself Christine needed me. But I didn't realize how much I needed her. She would help me feel stable again, help me feel like I was with family again.

Later that night, I sat across from Dad as I twirled the strings that came out from the edge of the placemat. I couldn't live with him, I said. We were sitting across from each other at the plastic kitchen table, and his wife was at church. My voiced stopped when I told him it felt like he'd left our family. I imagine I stared at the solid white-gold ring that wrapped around his left ring-finger. He tried to fill the silence by saying that his wife knew she could never replace Mom, and that she only wanted to be my friend. I nodded, but a part of me still felt like she'd stolen Dad.

Dad opened his arms to wrap me in a hug and told me that wherever he lived was home, regardless of the location. My head fell into his shoulder, and I cried into his white, tattered V-neck. His thick black mustache scratched my forehead when he kissed it. I still lived with Christine that April and living with her helped me forget that Dad had remarried. It helped me forget that my life had again changed so much.

In May, I moved back to Minnesota where I spent the summer living with Matt in our old house. Dad stopped renting the place so we could live there, but he had plans to sell it in September. The two of us had fun living without parents and trying to run the place, but our time ended when I needed to start school. Dad kept his promise and came up from Mexico to drive me to college. Rachel also flew up from California to join us on the drive, but before we drove to Virginia, the four of us spent a few days in our house together. For those few days it felt like nothing had changed. I tried to imagine I was back in high school and Dad wasn't married. But my imagination could only do so much. After buying all the college décor we thought I needed, Dad, Rachel, and I started our trek down, driving in the same van that had taken us from Mexico to El Paso nearly seven years before.

We split up the eighteen-hour drive by first stopping in Chicago to see Luke and his wife, Laura. I sat in the backseat like usual as Rachel and Dad drove. I don't remember driving much, but I looked out the window and watched the telephone lines swoop up and down like little waves, not believing that my turn for college had come. If I wasn't staring out the window, I was leaning against it, sitting sideways on the bench and reading. My siblings had seemed so old when they left for college, so sure of what they wanted, and now I sat, seat belt strapped and stomach spinning at the thought that we were making this drive for me.

When we reached my college, Dad booked a hotel for the few nights he and Rachel would stay nearby. The night before he and Rachel drove home, I stayed with them. We decided to celebrate with cheese, crackers, and wine. We went ran to the store to find our snacks and drove back to the hotel. I remember the sky being pitch black that night, everything feeling so new and so foreign. Once in our room, Dad poured the cheap cabernet into the plastic hotel glasses, and we cheered to my first year of college.

The next day, we stood squinting in the parking lot of the campus bookstore to say our final good-byes. Dad's voice cracked as he prayed for me. We hugged, and I walked to my dorm, the sun burning hot on my back. As I crossed the street to my dorm, I realized the last time I remembered Dad crying was at Mom's funeral.

A few months into college, I picked up my phone and pressed the green accept button. It clicked and the screen went black as a small rectangle of my own face zoomed out to the top right. Dad's end stayed black as a small white circle spun around, then an image of his plate came into focus. Four browned taquitos covered his plate. Dad flipped his screen to his face, then smiled and waved. I told him I was jealous, and I smiled, wondering if he was happy he didn't have to plan the dinner menu anymore. I also wondered if he was glad I wasn't there to groan at his pot-roast nights anymore. Her face came on the screen behind Dad. She wore an apron and waved as she asked how school was going.

While at first it felt wrong to admit, a part of me was happy when I would call Dad and he couldn't talk because they had church event. Despite my homesickness, I began to appreciate the independence that came from being far away from Dad; his overprotective arm could not stretch across borders. The moment I turned eighteen, he accepted that I was an adult. Though it

took some time, I learned to accept that he was an adult, too, which mean we had separate lives to live.

Sometimes I would imagine Dad's new life where he had a schedule and random errands to run, and I felt like he was living more than he had in Minnesota. A busy image of Dad at church was far better than the one I often had of him in high school: sitting on the couch, reading in the living room, alone. As the youngest in the family, I'd often feared what would happen to Dad once I went to college. Even though his marriage was different than what I'd imagined or wanted, I didn't have to worry about Dad anymore. And I was grateful.

It was Thanksgiving Day during my freshman year of college when Dad called to wish me a Happy Thanksgiving and a Happy Birthday. My birthday had been a few days before, and he wanted to make sure I'd received the card he'd sent me. We had finished our Thanksgiving meal at my aunt's house, and I sat on her carpeted steps in the half-darkness. I showed him the necklace Rachel gave me for my birthday: a gold, rectangular bar that hung by my collarbone with Mom's birthdate engraved in Roman numerals. I told him how it was gold, and how it matched Mom's ring he'd given me. I didn't tell him the design was something Rachel and I wanted to get as tattoos in the near future. I just showed him the necklace, and he smiled. Then he asked me if I'd gotten my birthday cards from Jonathan. I nodded.

A few days before, Jonathan sat across from each other at a coffee shop and he handed me an envelope from Dad and his wife. He'd visited Mexico just months earlier, and they'd given him my birthday card in advance. I sipped my coffee as I opened envelope with two hand-written notes inside. Dad's wife wrote me a note with a Bible verse and signed, "Tu Amiga, Nancy." I was glad she made the distinction.

The spring of my second semester of college, I was getting ready to go on a hike when Dad called. It was the morning, and we usually talked at night, but he said he wanted me to know first: I was going to be a big sister. My stomach cramped when he told me, and I laughed. The sun shined as I squinted out the window. I said I couldn't believe it. And I wasn't fazed when, just a year later, he told me the same news a second time.

During Nancy's pregnancy, I began to text her and talk to her on the phone, even if Dad wasn't around. She'd send me pictures of her stomach growing, and I'd congratulate her. Sometimes she'd answer Dad's phone for him, and we'd talk for a while and catch up on life. I found myself enjoying my conversations with her, even asking Dad if I could talk to Nancy for a bit. As their firstborn Josiah grew, she'd send me photos of him drinking smoothies, the green liquid all over his little face.

Two years later, when Dad and Nancy were visiting the U.S., I sat on the floor in Matt's house with my other little half-brother Joshua on my lap. He kept saying "ah" as he waved his little arms up and down like little wings. I kissed his shiny black hair then looked up at Nancy who was sitting in Mom's tan recliner. It was my first Thanksgiving break of graduate school and we were all in Minnesota spending the holidays at the house Matt bought nearly two years before. Breaking the silence, I asked Nancy how she felt before she married Dad.

"I always felt like the ugly duckling," she said. And she told me how the guys she liked rarely liked her back, so she often lost patience as she waited for someone. But God gave her hints about the man she would marry. Two different people told her that they had a dream she married someone older. Someone else had a dream that her husband was a foreigner.

She told me about the dream she had just a few months before Mom died. She said she was watching all of us kids when an earthquake hit the house. She'd brought all of us outside and

protected us from the wind and falling rock. She said that once the storm subsided, she'd found my mom lying on the stairs, hurt from the impact. When she ran over, she looked at Mom and told her, "Don't worry, Tami, I'm going to finish what you started."

No dream she's ever had has impacted her as much. For years she tried to figure out what it meant. She tried starting a church in our old town, thinking that that's what my mom always wanted. When the church plant failed, she started praying for each of us kids, intensely.

I thought about those moments when I'd sit in the back of the car and daydream and pray for a younger sibling. I thought about all the times I'd asked Mom about it, and I could still hear her reply, "If God decides to heal me, Elisa." The two things I'd prayed for most were that Mom would be healed and that I might have a little sibling. Once Mom died, I forgot about the second prayer.

Nancy kept talking as Joshua turned around and looked at me with an open mouth and wide, brown eyes. Her deep brown eyes and smile drew me to her, and she gave wise advice, so I sought her to talk about life. Though she wasn't Jan's age, she'd experienced a lot, and I wanted to hear all about it. She told me she didn't feel she deserved to fill Mom's shoes, and I found myself shaking my head. She wasn't Mom, and she wasn't Jan, but she was Nancy, someone I'd learned to love and cherish over the past four years.

Often, she told me that she didn't understand how all us kids could smile and laugh despite everything we'd lived through. I'd half-shrug and tell her I didn't know how either, and when she'd smile at me, I began to understand why Dad had fallen in love with her.

As our days together continued, I taught Nancy how to fill and use a dishwasher. I showed her how to use Matt's electric stove and Keurig. Sometimes I made her coffee while she took care of the boys. I helped her in the kitchen, and she taught me how to make Mexican eggs

and a strong chicken broth. She showed me that onions are fully cooked when they turn translucent and that salsa tastes best when the tomatoes are lightly roasted before they're blended.

I never imagined our broken family would become mixed, or that Dad's wife after Mom wouldn't speak English, or that I would have two younger brothers be born when I was in college. But as I grew used to the new members of our family, I found myself unable to imagine it any other way.

As I watched Nancy insist that Dad speak English to their little boys because she knew how much their worlds would open if they could speak two languages, I found myself wanting her world to be opened, too. I'd sit down at the kitchen table and try to teach her a few words. She'd often shake her head, saying it was too hard, but she needed to speak English in order to pass the American citizenship test. And citizenship meant that she and Dad would be able to travel to and from Mexico and the U.S. with ease, something I found myself wanting more and more.

At dinners, Nancy served everyone before she served herself, and she kept her eye on everyone's plate, eager to refill it when they finished. Even if she'd only taken two bites of her food, she would give us second helpings as soon as our plates were empty. No one asked her to do it, but she did it nonetheless, always with a beaming smile. We'd slowly learn how to navigate the difference between our two cultures, as she always tried to serve us, and we always tried to help her.

One day, Nancy came out of her room holding something behind her back. She grinned as she inched forward towards me, then she pulled out a grey gift bag, saying it was a late birthday present and a late college graduation gift from her and Dad, since she wasn't able to be

there. We sat down on the sofa in Matt's upstairs living room, and Dad sat on Mom's tan recliner, rocking one of the babies to sleep. I opened the cushioned box and inside a tiny gold heart hung on a thin chain with a capitalized E engraved on it. I hugged her and said it felt too fancy for me, but she smiled and shook her head. People in my family didn't normally give me gold necklaces, especially not Dad. In the bathroom, I clasped the chain around my neck. The little heart paired well with the gold rectangle necklace Rachel had given me four years before. And I thought the two gold chains looked better together than apart.

That Christmas, toddlers stomped around and cried for their moms as our whole family tried to situate ourselves amidst the baby toys and multi-colored building blocks sprawled over Matt's living room floor. It was the first time the whole family had been under the same roof since Dad and Nancy's wedding four years earlier. Now, there were babies running around, two of them Dad's, one Luke's. Now, there were significant others, a wife, and two soon-to-be fiancés. Crammed in the upstairs living room with an artificial Christmas tree, we tried to exchange gifts and recreate the Christmases we used to know.

Dad went to the tree and grabbed the biggest and heaviest box for Nancy. She opened it and pulled out an assortment of various kitchen necessities: a salt grinder, an onion chopper, a Pyrex measuring cup. She laughed as she kept pulling out the things she'd picked out with him or told him that she needed while they stayed at Matt's house. He'd wrapped them all as a joke, I think. When she thanked him, he smiled and called her his amor. I smiled, too. Then they kissed, and I saw him kissing Mom again like he always had in the mornings when they'd greet each other in the kitchen, sun shining bright through the windows. And part of me wondered if Dad even noticed that Mom was still gone. But a part of me also knew that that woman who Dad now called his wife was now a Palumbo, like us. The age didn't matter anymore. The talking in

Spanish didn't matter anymore. She wasn't who I'd expected Dad to marry, but seeing him smile so big at her, I knew no one else could make his heart feel so at home.

Seeing that Dad had found the stability I'd been seeking for so long, I also realized that his home was somehow apart from me. Apart from us who sat in that living room together, a family once connected now splitting into our own families, now bursting out of Matt's small red home. And seeing Dad's happiness made me happy. But it hurt, too.

It took years for me to see that Dad's remarriage was not a loss but more of something like a gain. He had someone to take care of him, and he had a life to live apart from us, even if that meant he lived in a different country. And maybe those two little boys God gave to Dad and Nancy were special and maybe their lives had a specific purpose. I wouldn't trade those little half-brothers for the world, but I couldn't deny that I'd lost a lot to have them. Sometimes, when they'd laugh, I'd think about how Mom would love them, too. I'd think about how they'd make Mom laugh, and I'd squeeze them even tighter.

My eyes still burned when I watched Dad kiss Nancy. A single tear fell down my cheek, and no one noticed when I wiped it away. I wasn't mad at her or Dad anymore, but I still couldn't keep from thinking about Mom, about how now her absence seemed filled. And while our family was not whole in its original sense anymore, it was patched together, and it was growing.

## CHAPTER 5: Taking Control

“I’m concerned about you,” Amber, the trainer and nutritionist, said as she looked at me from across the high top, wide brown eyes staring into mine. We were meeting for a preliminary appointment at the health club to see if I wanted to do nutrition coaching the summer before my last year of college. She asked me what I’d eaten the day before, so I listed off everything I could remember. When she added up the hypothetical calories, she said I was probably eating about 1100 calories a day. That wasn’t enough, she said. My bodyfat was low, she continued. I didn’t really understand the issue since I could run a lot and not tire easily. But I didn’t tell her that I was still waiting for my period to come back since I’d been off birth control for almost a year. I didn’t tell her that, as a soon-to-be senior in college, I weighed almost eight pounds less than I had in high school.

Suggesting that I needed more protein, Amber showed me a protein bar to try for a snack. I reminded her that I originally wanted to meet to see about going vegetarian. She brushed the idea aside. I needed the protein. The machine we’d used to measure me said my body fat was at 13%, but I didn’t think I looked like my bodyfat was so low. I also didn’t know that the bodyfat percentage necessary for a woman to have her period is at least 18%. After discussing my low body fat, Amber again showed me the protein bar. I checked the ingredients, as I did with all the food I bought, and noticed that it had sugar alcohols and other artificial sweeteners, things Mom never would have eaten.

When Amber saw me read the ingredient label, she told me not to sweat the small stuff. I nodded and squinted at her while I remembered all the “small stuff” that Mom had researched and avoided. Remembered that Mom had bought natural shampoo, natural deodorant, and natural

toothpaste. And I didn't want to mention that I too had natural deodorant and toothpaste and makeup, and that I always checked the all the ingredients on almost everything I bought.

My memory tells me I was nine or ten when I laid down on Mom's bed with my bare chest exposed, and she looked down at me through her reading glasses. From what I remember, she didn't look concerned. But I remember taking a sharp breath when her cold, soft hands rubbed gently against the pale skin of my chest. My heart kept thumping until I felt the palpitations in my neck as I thought about what she might discover on my chest. When she finished, she took off her reading glasses. I pulled my shirt back down and looked at her with wide eyes as she said she would have to do some research. She was pretty sure the lumps were normal. I nodded and pushed my palms down into her cushioned King-sized bed. The old pink and blue comforter felt scratchy to my touch. The next day, Mom assured me that everything really was normal. She told me I was just developing.

Years later, we sat at the kitchen counter in Mexico, and Mom admitted why she thought she may have developed cancer. She'd been talking about how she'd felt pretty healthy her whole life, and she'd never known why she got cancer. "Sometimes in high school I ate ice-cream sandwiches for lunch," she said. "Maybe that had been it," she concluded, and stared ahead with eyes wide. I will never forget that moment. Her response told me that her diagnosis had shown no clear cause because she'd done most things "right," had made mostly wise choices in life. But her response also made me think that maybe, if she'd just tried a little harder, and had been a little stricter with what she ate, she could have prevented herself from getting cancer in the first place.

Only after she was diagnosed did Mom start following a strict diet. She and Dad had mutually decided that the best cancer treatment was to go wholly organic and vegetarian. But Mom did a lot of research before she made that decision. She bought books upon books about the benefits of the vegetarian diet, and she followed a doctor who had successfully beat her own breast cancer by changing the food she ate. This doctor argued that chemotherapy and radiation would affect the immune system, which is crucial for helping the body fight disease. Mom didn't make her decision lightly. She prayed about it for a long time. In the end, she and Dad agreed that a change of diet would be the smartest thing to do.

When I was twenty-two, I sat across from my aunt at dinner and asked her about Mom's decision to go vegetarian instead of chemo. I was visiting Minnesota for my cousin's wedding, and I'd decided to spend one of my nights home talking to Mom's sister. As the two of us shared an appetizer of roasted brussel sprouts, I asked her the specifics about my mom's treatment that I'd forgotten or that I'd been too young to understand or remember. She told me that my grandparents thought Mom should have started with chemo right away, but she thought differently.

"I remember your mom calling me after she'd been on her diet for a few months," Angie said as she picked at the appetizers on our table. "She was so excited when she told me that she'd gone for a bike ride that day and felt like she was twenty again. I remember she said to me, 'Angie, I can't believe it. I feel great. I don't even feel like I have cancer.' I think it was better for you kids that she did her diet. She could have been sick if she'd stuck with chemo," my aunt concluded. And I nodded as I thought about how active we'd been with Mom during those first five years of her battle with cancer.

In conjunction with all the schoolwork she planned for us every day, Mom also had us kids follow an exercise regimen, which included biking in the local nature preserve a few times a week. Having been a track athlete in high school, I think she wanted us to learn to enjoy moving our bodies. One time we switched up our routine and went rollerblading instead. Mom had us all put on our helmets, wrist guards, elbow pads, and knee pads. Dad wasn't home, but all of us kids were, so we shoved on our rollerblades and filed out of the front gate of our house one by one. I don't remember falling, though I'm sure I did. But I remember Mom laughing and leading the five of us around our neighborhood and down a street that had too many speedbumps for rollerblading. Mom kept in stride with us, her blades whirling and buzzing to the same speed of ours on the concrete. She may have even gone ahead of us as we rolled around the street, skating around and working up a sweat.

But, despite the energy she had while being a vegetarian, Mom's cancer came back the fifth year. It came back in a little lump she found in her left armpit, and it came back in her bones. My aunt explained to me that typically, cancer-patients are declared cancer-free once they reach that fifth year of remission. This means that if the disease is going to come back, it'll come back after five years. Angie said that maybe, even if Mom had started with chemo instead of the holistic diet, her cancer still would have come back after those years. Then again, maybe not. None of us will ever know, but I do know that during those five years of a strict diet change, Mom had energy from eating so well, and she could be the mother our family needed at the time. When Mom stuck to her vegetarian routine, she was the healthiest person I knew. She never got sick. Chemo, which significantly weakens the immune system, might not have been so kind. She may have been sick all the time, weak and bedridden. Once Mom did start chemo to battle the cancer that invaded her bones, she lost her energy. She slept more and she cooked less. She

stopped riding her bike, and she went on fewer walks. While I can't know if my parents' original decision to do a diet change was the right one, I can say that I wouldn't change those five good years I had with Mom.

Those first five years of Mom's battle, our whole family experienced the diet. The holistic treatment also meant a change of environment, so we moved to a smaller town outside of Mexico City with less air pollution. A major part of Mom's holistic diet included drinking carrot juice mixed with the green barley powder every morning. Daily carrot peeling soon became another household chore as important as washing dishes or sweeping.

Just before we moved houses in Mexico, a friend of Mom's came to visit us. She and Mom sat outside, talking in our small backyard and soaking up the sun. When I went out to ask Mom a question, her friend asked me to stand next to Mom because she wanted to point out the difference in our skin tones. Mom had been drinking orange juice consistently for a few months by then, and her friend, who also believed in holistic methods, wanted to show us how the beta-carotene was making Mom's skin orange. "Put your hand next to Elisa's," she told Mom. We both stretched out our arms and Mom's skin looked orange while mine glowed pale in the sunlight.

Mom's orange skin meant that something was working, so she kept drinking the sweet juice and we kept peeling the organic carrots that arrived in massive bags that probably weighed more than I did at the time. I remember peeling at least ten carrots each day, the slices of the carrot filling the sink with each swish and click of the black peeler. Mom drank the stuff like water, so one evening after a fresh batch had been juiced, I asked Mom if I could have some, too. The white juicer vibrated and dripped the orange liquid out from the front spigot. She filled one of my plastic cups halfway, and I took a sip. I winced. Mom probably laughed. I wanted to drink

the juice because I figured if Mom could, I could, too. But only if I plugged my nose could I get the liquid down. I carried the cup around the house with me, determined to finish the whole thing. Dad took a glass and drank it down with ease, but it took me a long time to empty my cup. I don't remember ever asking Mom for another sip.

On the days our family would cut from the diet, we'd order Domino's pizzas and soda. I would take a bite of my warm pepperoni pizza and wash it down with a fizzy gulp of Coca Cola. Mom usually ate a big plate of salad and tomatoes with cucumbers, onions, and carrots. A tall glass of distilled water sat just within her reach. The rest of us would smack our pizza down, often forgetting to have a salad before. Some days I would be sure to eat a big salad and every so often I'd opt out of drinking Coke and just drink water like Mom. During holidays or birthdays, Mom would sneak a small bite of a lemon bar or cake and lick her fingers, savoring every sweet taste. I'd watch her and then eat a complete lemon bar, maybe two.

In her journals, Mom wrote about how difficult it was to stay healthy when all of us kids wanted to eat hot dogs or burgers at our birthday parties. She wanted us to eat well, but sometimes we just didn't like the food she made, especially if it was vegetable stir-fry. When Dad cooked all of our dinners once we lived in Minnesota, he'd often comment how Mom would shoot him if she saw him feeding us things like brats, meatloaf, and Hamburger Helper. And when I got my period as a twelve-year old, I wondered if the conventional meat I'd been eating had sped-up my hormonal development. Rachel hadn't gotten her period until she was almost fifteen, and that was when our family wasn't really eating meat. I only knew this could be the case because I remembered Mom saying how surprised she was that my cousin got her period so young, and I remembered her blaming it on the added hormones in conventional meat and dairy.

A month after Mom died, I stood in a grocery store in Northern Minnesota, thinking long and hard about what I wanted for a snack that week. I wandered down the small, grey aisles of the snack section where Rachel and Matt decided to grab their jumbo orange cheese puffs. The three of us were staying at Cindy's cabin in Northern Minnesota while Dad went back to Mexico to pack up the remainder of our house. And our two oldest brothers, Jonathan and Luke, were working summer their jobs in the Minnesota suburbs. Most eleven-year olds probably would have chosen Twinkies or Pop Tarts, but after watching my siblings shove the massive plastic jug of unnaturally orange cheese puffs into the cart, I made my way to the produce section. I didn't bother to look for anything other than Granny Smith apples because those were Mom's favorite.

A few evenings later, I approached Cindy while everyone was playing by the dock. I'd had a headache all day, even after eating my apple, and I'd never gotten headaches before. I was probably suffering whiplash from the excessive tubing we'd been doing on the lake that week, or from dehydration since we played outside and usually forgot to drink water. Ignoring any of the rational explanations for the pulsing in my skull, I imaged the worst: me, lying in an adjustable hospice bed with a ventilator tube in my nose and dying from an aggressive brain tumor. I lost my appetite at the image, so I decided to ask Cindy. Surely she would know why I was getting these headaches. But she didn't have an answer, and she didn't seem concerned. She assured me it was probably nothing—that the pain would go away. I nodded and I went back to hang out with my siblings and her son. At the time, I wouldn't have understood, but those headaches were probably a physical manifestation of my grief.

When I was seventeen, the image of Mom pulling her hair out in clumps rushed to my mind as I rinsed the conditioner from my head and pulled out hair. Just a day after she'd gotten a

haircut to celebrate that she'd survived three weeks without losing her hair on chemo (typically, if someone doesn't lose hair after three weeks of chemo, they won't lose their hair at all), she showed her two daughters that she was going bald. And we watched her pulled out hair. And more hair. And more hair. As the warm water ran over my scalp, I pulled out hair. And more hair. And more hair. And when I stuck the clumps to the white wall of my shower and watched the ball get bigger as warm water rinsed through my hair, I could also see those endless moments when Mom's fingers wrapped around my shiny, undamaged hair as they braided it tight. I could hear her saying that I had her same hair. When I threw the wet hair away, the bunch had grown to the size of my palm. The normal post-shower hairballs I'd slap on the shower wall were roughly the size of my thumb. When I dropped the wet, hair-filled tissue into the trash-bin, I told myself it was only thicker because I hadn't showered or brushed my hair in a few days. But then every time I took a shower I'd pull out hair-clumps the size of my palm. It was my senior year of high school, and I really didn't want to imagine starting college with what seemed to be a receding hairline. After a few months of pulling out too much hair and noticing my ponytail thickness decrease, I went to the doctor.

I walked into the tan office building and signed in. The stiff leather seat made me sit upright while I filled out forms and checked off boxes. When I finished, I sat and waited, my leg bouncing up and down.

The gynecologist nodded and scribbled down notes while I told her about my hair loss and how my general doctor had just suggested I take vitamins for it. "Let's take some bloodwork and check your hormone levels, OK?" she said, adjusting the papers on her clip board.

A few minutes later, the nurse wrapped my arm with a rubber tie and told me to extend. Out of habit, I looked in the opposite direction. Whenever I got my blood taken as a kid, Mom

would tell me to look away from the needle. In that moment, I could almost see her beside me, saying, “It’s just a pinch,” like how she did when we were at the doctor in Mexico. But even if I wasn’t looking, I felt the pinch every time. So I closed my eyes and looked away, as the nurse pricked my vein.

A week or two later, the doctor explained the inconsistencies in my lab results with a smooth, matter-of-fact tone. I was sure she’d tell me I had some untreatable disease that caused premature baldness, but she just said my cortisol levels were high.

“You’re probably stressed,” she said over the phone. “I recommend you try yoga or meditation to help ease your stress levels,” she continued. I nodded as I rocked back and forth on Mom’s tan recliner in the living room. My stomach sank as I stroked my hair and caught a few of them in my palm. “You’re sure I don’t have any imbalances?” I asked again and heard the same answer she told me before: try yoga. I didn’t understand how an exercise could make my hair stop falling out, but I also didn’t know how much stress could affect my body. At the time I thought yoga was mystical, so I didn’t like the idea of practicing it. The concept of practicing yoga didn’t feel tangible enough for me because I really didn’t know that breathing and mindfulness could help my hair from falling out. I would do anything to keep my hair, and medicine seemed like the best answer. But at the time, I also didn’t realize how choosing a college and the fact that Dad was getting remarried and moving back to Mexico really freaked me out. The changes I was experiencing and the uncertainty that came with them put my body in defense mode.

When the chemo ate Mom’s brown hair, I watched her lose the part of her that she shared with me. From a distance, I wondered what it would be like to lose hair. But I didn’t imagine how hard it must have been to search for wigs online or how defeated she must have felt when

she finally bought one. For weeks she looked for different ways to cover her naked head, but only once she got the wig made from my friends' hair did she look like she'd never lost it. When I saw her smile with hair that looked like her own, I promised myself that I would donate my hair one day.

It wasn't until my freshman year of high school that the metal scissors screeched with each clip as they severed my ponytail. Lisa, the mother of my newest friend in high school, sat me down on her black salon chair in her basement and pulled my hair into a low ponytail. "Are you ready?" she asked after tying my hair with two black bands. I nodded. Her lips pursed tight as she pulled my hair toward her chest and snipped. When I'd told my friend Tressa that I wanted to donate my hair a few weeks before, she'd said her mom had a small salon in their basement and would be willing to cut it. I took up the offer and scheduled the time with Lisa, who agreed to chop my hair after school one day. With the final snip, my hair fell loose around my face. "Here it is!" Lisa said with a smile as she held my ponytail up in the reflection of the mirror and smiled. "Oh my gosh!" I said, as she handed it to me. "I can't believe this was just on my head," I continued as my fingers rubbed the soft ends that popped out, just inches above where she'd tied it. The tip of the tail felt like a makeup brush, and I waved it back and forth in disbelief. Lisa pumped the bottom of the salon chair and sat me up to finish my haircut while I continued stroking the hair. A few days later, I put the tail into a Ziplock bag and mailed it to a wig donation center. Even though Lisa cut off over twelve inches that day, I wasn't sad because I knew it would grow back. Hair always grew back.

By my senior year of high school, my hair had grown back to the length it was before I'd donated it my freshman year. By the time it started to fall out, it was almost touching my bellybutton. But even though it was just as long as before, it was much thinner and much limper.

I wanted to tell myself it would grow back and thicken like Mom's hair had returned after chemo, but when Mom went bald, the chemo was to blame. And I wasn't on chemo.

Hairs kept falling each time I stroked my hair, and I started wishing I could save them all and somehow stick them back to my head. When I pulled out more hairs and threw them into the trash, I felt like I was pulling out something that had always connected me to Mom. I started to wonder that maybe if I just cut my hair again, my ponytail wouldn't feel so limp anymore. Maybe shorter hair would let my scalp relax and help my hair thicken again. So, after graduating high school and before spending my gap year in Chile, I had Lisa cut twelve inches off, and I donated my ponytail again. I knew no one could notice that my hair had thinned, but I hoped no one could tell how much the hairs by my scalp had lessened.

In hopes that my hair might thicken and that my acne might clear up, I also started taking birth control. After meeting with more doctors, I learned that my symptoms and blood tests could be indicative of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, meaning I had too much testosterone and other hormonal imbalances. "What if you try a natural estrogen treatment?" Dad asked me one night when we talked about the medication I wanted to take for my hair. "I don't want to try something natural if the doctor said birth control will fix my hair, Dad," I said. "I need to do something to stop my hair from falling out, Dad, you don't know what it's like to lose your hair as a girl," I told him. He asked me to reconsider, but I told him I was set. I started taking birth control the month before I left for Chile. When I look back now, I wonder if I would've done the holistic route if Mom had suggested it, not Dad. But, I can almost guarantee that if Mom had still been there, my hair wouldn't have been falling out in the first place.

After I'd been in Chile for three or four months, my friend commented that she noticed my stomach and boobs had gotten bigger. Some of my friends, who were also taking birth control at the time, had warned me I would probably gain weight as my hormones changed. The pills would give me an insatiable appetite, they said. But Mom had once told me everyone in our family had fast metabolisms, so I shrugged off their warnings. I defended my weight gain to my Chilean friend by saying that it may have been from the medication I'd started to take, but I knew I hadn't been exercising or running like I had in high school. My also body wasn't used to eating white bread with a caramel spread on it every morning. I could feel the muscles on my calves and thighs disappearing from not playing soccer anymore. In high school, I'd been used to daily compliments about my thick hair and small body, and I didn't know how to react when someone commented the opposite. That's when I started to think that if I just tried a little harder, became a little stricter with what I ate, maybe I wouldn't feel or look this way.

I was back in Minnesota for the summer before my freshman year of college when I woke up to find a clump of hair on my pillow. I walked to the bathroom and looked at my reflection in the mirror. The back of my pajama shirt had hairs sticking out from it as if from electric static. I rubbed my back and collected the stray hairs, the clump growing, growing, growing. As I threw the ball of hair into the empty trash, I pictured myself walking around with a glistening naked head like Mom. By then, I'd been on birth control for eight months.

As I lost more hair, I found myself missing Mom more, too.

"Rachel," I said between sobs, as I called her on the phone a few weeks later. "I'm balding."

Part of me felt like a drama queen for crying over my hair, but another part of me felt a genuine concern for my health because I didn't know what any of the hair loss meant. Clearly the medication hadn't helped, and I was sure the lack of improvement only meant I was doomed with some unsolvable health problem.

"Elisa," Rachel said, voice calm. "You're telling yourself that you're balding and you're focusing on it so much that you're making your hair fall out."

"Rachel, if this was happening to you, you'd freak out way more than I am freaking out right now."

"Maybe," she said, and laughed. "But seriously. You need to stop telling yourself you're balding. Stop imagining all of that into existence. You're not balding."

And so each night when the metal crinkled as I pushed a circular white pill into my palm, I wondered if I'd made the right choice. Even after brushing my hair through, I'd still throw a big clump of hair away. While I wrestled with the decisions I'd made about my body and the medicine I'd begun to take, I thought about what Mom would have done. She never took birth control, did she? One part of me wondered this while another part of me wondered if she'd be disappointed with me for filling my body with artificial hormones. Dad was then settled in Mexico, and it was the first summer I'd lived without him. Since I was living with my brother, Matt, it meant we were in charge of what groceries we bought and everything we ate. More than anything, I wished I could ask Mom what to do.

I decided to do what I imaged Mom might have done and searched Amazon for the green powder she had taken every morning with her carrot juice. The mixture always smelled like dirt, but Mom drank it every day without a grimace. I found the familiar glass container: Barley Green Premium. The descriptions promised to promote digestive regularity and healthy hair,

skin, and nails. I knew it was the right one when I saw an endorsement from the doctor Mom followed during her holistic cancer treatment. I ordered it, sure I was doing what Mom would have advised, sure that I was doing something that would make her proud. I couldn't wait for it to arrive and make my hair better.

Once it came, I mixed the Barley Green in water and watched as the powder turned the clear water into a dark green with every turn of my metal spoon. I assumed that being older meant I could drink the dark liquid with more ease than I could as a kid. When I brought the glass to my mouth and took a gulp, the mixture tasted just as horrible as I'd remembered. I couldn't swallow any of it, and I had no idea how Mom had taken that stuff for so long. It was good for me and good for my hair, I tried to tell myself, but my gag reflexes couldn't be rationalized. If Mom could take it, I could too, I thought as I pinched my nose and put the thick green liquid to my mouth. But I still couldn't swallow. Eventually, I mixed the powder in smoothies where its taste became somewhat tolerable hidden amidst berries and bananas. And when my smoothies turned dark green because of the powder, Mom somehow felt closer.

As I continued cooking and baking the things I had chosen to eat, I also Googled foods that were best for hair health and wrote them down. I decided to combat this hair loss with a controlled diet and exercise. My breakfasts would never again be something like the Eggo waffles I'd often eaten in high school. I would eat oatmeal, like Mom used to, but now I would add Chia seeds, Flaxseeds, and walnuts—all things with Omega 3s, which I'd read were great for hair health. I also started researching old recipes Mom had made when we were vegetarians. And as I started to eat certain foods to save my hair, I also started to eat certain foods to save myself from cancer, a choice that felt like instinct. For as long as I knew what cancer was, I'd assumed it ran in our family, and my reasonings didn't need explanation. Plus, after eating so badly during

my time in South America, I could finally see the difference that eating well could have on my energy levels and digestion. To me it didn't matter that a healthy diet hadn't healed Mom's cancer because, like a person who has lost a parent to alcoholism and will refuse to touch the strong drink, so I started refusing to touch the things that might make me slip into the same fate as Mom.

My oldest brother, Jonathan, and I have often talked about how Mom's death has made us fear that we will also get cancer one day. The two of us seem to think that we will be the one out of the five siblings who gets diagnosed. I'm not sure what made us feel that way, but I know that fear has been around for as long as I can remember. I also know that I felt like I could control the fear when I so carefully chose what I put into my body. I'd convinced myself that if I followed specific guidelines—ones I'd made up in my head—I would not get cancer, and I would not gain weight. Looking back, I can see how many of my guidelines and rules were irrational, but I followed them mercilessly because I thought they would save me from ending up like Mom. In fact, I was sure they would save me.

In my mind, people who didn't have a family member with cancer were lucky because they didn't have to worry about getting cancer like I did. My friends could eat whatever they wanted without having to think twice about how that food could affect their bodies. I often wished for that same peace of mind. But since our family became vegetarians from the time I was five until I was ten, it felt nearly impossible for me not to think about food and how it could affect my body. From a young age I learned that food could change your future, and I found myself wondering what it might feel like not to see certain foods with a “cancer-causing” sign flashing in red lights above them. I found myself wondering what it was like not to have this perpetual fear of developing cancer filling my mind at almost every moment of every day.

It was the spring of my first year of college, and the sun reflected off the turf, making it sparkle silver as I stood on the white line of the Lacrosse field near my dorm. I squinted as I crouched down. On the count of one, I bolted across the field three times. Breathless, and on the other side from where I'd started, I put my hands on my knees and waited for two minutes before doing the sprint two or three, maybe four more times. The salty sweat built up around my upper lip and near my eyes, so I wiped it off before starting again. Though tired and hot, I would keep the goal I'd made when I'd started college: eat only the things I wanted to eat and get back in shape by running. I would run myself healthy and away from cancer in any way that I could. Often when I ran those sprints or miles, I imagined Mom and when she had run track in high school, when she had been the athlete I'd never known her to be.

Later that night, I sat around the circular table with my friends and flipped through the menu. To celebrate our friend's birthday, everyone had planned to eat at the Mexican restaurant near campus. I flipped through the greasy pages, ignoring any entrees wrapped in a tortilla or served on a bed of rice. Veggies were what I needed. The server asked us what we wanted to drink, and I asked for water. Others ordered Coke and Sprite. He also brought a basket of crisp and greasy tortilla chips along with a few bowls of homemade salsa. My mouth watered, but I only ate only a few of the salty chips because I didn't want to ruin the progress from my sprints that morning. I drank water, because dehydration could often mask itself as hunger, and I didn't want to overeat. When I went to the restroom, I checked my reflection in the mirror. My thighs looked slim in my black jeans, and I could see a nearly perfect space between them when I stood with my feet together. My bi-weekly bike sprint routine had made size two jeans fit again, and all of my bras were getting too big. I pushed open the bathroom door and walked back to the

table where I ordered the chicken fajitas. Though the meal came with tortillas and rice, I only ate the vegetables and chicken. I tried to ignore thinking about whatever oils the food had been cooked in, or about all of the added hormones pumped into the chicken.

The more research I did, the less I wanted to take an artificial hormone. So the August before my second year of college, I stopped taking birth control. I didn't ask my doctor. I just stopped. Even if I ate really well each day, I felt like a liar when I put that white pill on my tongue and swallowed it before bed. After two years of taking the pill, I realized that maybe I should have listened to Dad's initial thoughts about pursuing a more holistic treatment. Birth control was something that probably had more chance of causing cancer than anything I ate. I knew this because I'd read studies that showed how a woman's chance of getting breast cancer upped significantly if she used the pill or any other artificial hormones. My acne had disappeared, and my hair was falling out less, but it still didn't feel the same as it used to.

I tried to tell myself I wasn't balding when I continued to throw clumps of hair into the black trash bin, but it was hard to change a thought pattern that had been with me for over two years. Determined to stop obsessing over my hair like Rachel had told me, I decided to cut it to my shoulders again before my second year of college. This time, I even asked Lisa to dye it two shades darker. She encouraged me to start blow drying it after my showers. And I did, trying and trying to not let myself worry or think about the hairs that flew to the floor as the hot air reddened my scalp. And, it did seem like when I finally stopped obsessing over the loss, my hair started coming back. I think that the first doctor I talked to nearly three years before had been right when she said stress had caused a lot of my hair loss. It seemed that once I got used to my new life at college, my hormones adjusted. And my strict diet did, in fact, help.

It was the fall of my second year of college, and my heart thumped in my chest and in my ears while my roommate and I ascended part of the Blue Ridge Parkway. My thighs burned, and I smelled like wet leaves and sweat, but being in nature made me feel clean. The two of us had started going on hikes in the mountains almost every weekend. In order to burn more fat, I knew I needed to do more low-intensity cardio, and hiking was just the thing. Our weekly trips seemed to do the trick because I lost more weight that year. But, every time we'd walk through the fresh air, I'd think of Mom. "You would like this," I'd say to her in my head with each steady step to the peak. The leaves were so green and the sky so bright. All of nature became blinding, and we felt so small beneath those towering trees. When I looked at the tops of their branches, I saw Mom that summer we visited the Redwoods in California. I saw her looking up at the trees, most likely contemplating her own finitude. And as the leaves turned from green to red, to brown, to yellow, I could hear Mom saying how much she loved seasons, especially fall. Since I knew that Mom loved walks, I made myself love them, too. And I started spending more time outside, not so much for me, but for her. Because somehow, my memories of her felt brighter, crisper, more real in the fresh, outdoor air.

That spring, I sat on the edge of the leather examination bench covered by a thin sheet of white paper, and my feet dangled from side to side. My friends had finally convinced me to go to the on-campus doctor to see what she thought about my missing periods. I sat and rubbed my sweaty hands against my thighs, squinting in the florescent light of the doctor's office. I didn't think it was a big deal that I'd been off birth control for almost eight months and my period still hadn't shown up. My body was still adjusting, I thought. When the doctor checked my charts and heard my story, she looked me straight in the eye and said I was probably exercising too much,

burning too many calories and not replenishing them. She said I should decrease my cardio. Then she wanted me to take a blood test to check my hormone levels and track what I ate. In a week, I'd come back and discuss my blood tests and food tracking with her.

When the nurse wiped my arm with the disinfectant, I looked to my right. My legs bounced up and down. "Just a pinch," I imagined Mom saying again, and I grimaced as the needle went into my thick vein. "Can I still workout," I asked the nurse and kept looking at the tan wall while my legs bounced up and down even faster. "If you still have the energy," she said.

The office door clicked as I walked out of the on-campus clinic with a cotton ball taped to my arm. I walked fast to the gym for a late-afternoon bike sprint. For dinner, I ate a salad. I had finally come to understand why Mom had enjoyed being a vegetarian for so long, and I wanted to keep following the route she had paved. While I still ate chicken and yogurt, I still often thought that she'd be proud of the food choices I'd begun to make on my own. My decisions showed her I hadn't forgotten what she'd taught me about food and taking care of my body. But I also didn't know at the time how my decisions showed I that I was re-grieving her seven and even eight years after her death.

A week or two after my first appointment, the doctor said everything in my blood tests looked normal. I was just eating too little. She encouraged me to try eating an extra granola bar every day, and I nodded, surprised she'd suggested I eat something so processed and filled with sugar. I started to eat more of the natural peanut butter on campus instead, thinking that more healthy fats in my diet would be good thing. That summer, I would figure everything out with my doctor in Minnesota.

It was mid-summer when the nurses pushed me into the MRI. The imaging would take some time, they told me, so they asked what music I wanted to listen to. After no period had

come when my gynecologist prescribed a pill that was supposed to induce a bleed, he ordered the MRI. He wanted to make sure my pituitary gland was working well and that my lack of period didn't have to do with some malfunction in my brain. I stared past the two nurses who looked down at me with their mouths covered by blue masks and thought about my music options. Images of Mom getting an MRI flashed to mind, and I thought about what she would've listened to. I asked them to search for my favorite worship band, then put the headphones on and adjusted my head as they eased my upper body into the blinding, plastic whiteness. Stay still, they told me. My muscles tensed. The music was all I could hear when I closed my eyes and wondered how many times Mom had had an MRI.

I knew what Mom would do during her treatments and tests because she'd written about it in her final testimony, "Cancer, My Teacher." I'd read and re-read her words that described the moments when the infrared markings lined up on her body, and the technicians ran from the room closing a foot-thick concrete door behind them. She shared about the moments when she lay alone in the cold, sterile room, half-naked on the stainless-steel bed, and she prayed. Though she could have thought of herself and cried at her own discomfort, she thought of Jesus' misery and humiliation on the cross. She thought about how she was fighting cancer not by choice and then thought of the one who fought for her sin by choice. She wrote that thinking of him gave her courage to continue.

When they eased me inside the white tunnel, I didn't feel very courageous. I didn't want to stay stiff on my back for an hour, biting down a plastic mouthpiece and barely breathing. I didn't want to find out I had a tumor in my head that was making my periods disappear. Once I lay in the whiteness, I wanted to scream, but I took small breaths and tried to calm myself and close my eyes and sing and pray like Mom. Thinking of her gave me the strength to continue.

According to the MRI, my pituitary gland was normal. Everything, in fact, was normal. Everything except my BMI. So my gynecologist diagnosed me with the same thing the doctor at school had: amenorrhea, a fancy word for an absent period. He suggested I take birth control again, but I didn't want to take any artificial medication. I hated that I had to rely on a doctor to figure out my problems. I had wanted to follow what Mom would have suggested, and I had been sure that I could control my problems through the food I so carefully ate. My actions made sense to me, but they made more sense when I read about the common physical reactions that may emerge in young adult girls who lost their mothers at a young age. Hope Edelman, an author who spent years researching and compiling studies about girls who have lost their moms, noted that a daughter who watches her sick mother battle a drastic physical change may later seek control over her body—in various seemingly irrational ways—because her mother never had it; and, that young woman will believe that “to slip [. . .] means to move one step closer to death” (74).

Later that fall, I also learned about orthorexia, a type of disordered eating that can take place in many health-focused individuals. Often, unintentionally, such individuals will develop a skewed relationship with food by obsessing over its quality and preparation. This obsession can leave the orthorexic no different than a bulimic or anorexic in terms of how food often controls their eating patterns.

“I started worrying about you when you kept looking smaller every time you'd come home for breaks,” Kristin told me just weeks after that MRI and just weeks before my final year at college. My bag of new makeup products sat on the floor by my feet while we sat in her parked car in the mall parking lot. I nodded and looked away from her and out the window to my

right. “It’s just—I—mean. I never thought—I—I’m just trying to eat well,” I let out. And I tried to explain how the nutritionist told me I had a problem, but how I also wasn’t sure I actually did, but the diagnosis also scared me. I didn’t understand how I’d made it to that unhealthy weight when I really had just wanted to help my hair. “It’s just weird how this is something people struggle with and everyone can see it from the outside,” I said, still questioning if I really did struggle with an eating disorder. “I mean, it’s probably something that’s never fully going to go away, but I’ll never think of you any different if your face starts to look a little rounder,” Kristin said, and my stomach knotted. She continued: “Maybe it helped you feel in control?”

I always thought Mom would be proud of my diet choices, but I never thought about what she might have said about my absent period. Looking back, I know she would’ve rather I enjoy my life than worry so much about the possibility that it might turn out like hers. In reality, she probably wouldn’t have been proud of the fact that my body had gotten so thin. I stopped living when I started focusing too much on the possible outcome that food could have on me. It’s not worth it to worry so much about what can happen when the only certainty we have is the present moment. Too often I spent my present focused on the “what if” and I lost myself in those hypothetical possibilities. It took time but I eventually realized how I could choose to have that fear of developing cancer run my life, or I could choose to disregard my paranoid thoughts while eating healthy but not eating too healthy. I learned the power of my thoughts and how I could control them.

Three years later, I sat in Lisa’s kitchen after she’d just cut hair for the first time in almost six months. “What do you want for dinner?” she asked from across the table. I looked back at her tan face that was framed by long, caramel-blond hair. “I’ve been craving pizza,” I

admitted, surprised to hear myself saying those words. “Pizza does sound good,” she said. “And I can make a salad.” As her husband, Lee, ordered the pizzas, I stroked my hair that was now three inches shorter. The ends no longer reached past my bellybutton, but they felt softer and healthier. My hair was starting to dry and curl from the new layers. “I think we cut it just right,” I told her, twisting my hair toward my nose to smell it. Her face tightened as she focused at my curling, brown waves. “It looks so good,” she said. And it felt so good, I thought as I ran my hand through my hair. Its thickness was back to normal, and people complimented me on it again. Almost six years had passed since I first noticed my hair thinning in high school, and I didn’t feel like I was balding anymore.

When the pizza arrived, I put two slices on my plate along with a salad. Though the thought crossed my mind, I didn’t stop myself from eating because of the calories I was consuming. I also didn’t think about the chemicals, artificial flavors, or preservatives in what I ate, though I knew there were many. We chewed together in silence, opening and closing the cardboard box to get more servings while the smell of garlic and pepperoni wafted through the dining room. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Lisa said. “Me neither,” I admitted as I finished my third slice. “I think I want a fourth slice,” I said, looking at her and Lee. “Go for it,” they both said. We smiled at each other, and I popped the cardboard box up to pull out another slice dotted with little red pepperonis. After I drizzled hot sauce on it, I took a bite and wiped my plate clean.

## CHAPTER 6: This is Going to Sting

I was twenty-one when I chose my first scar. It was January 15<sup>th</sup>, three days after what would have been Mom’s fifty-ninth birthday. I stared without flinching and held my breath while a steady buzz that sounded like a mosquito etched those lines on my ribs: I. XII. LIX. Mom’s birthdate. I wanted the markings in black, beneath my skin. Maybe to keep a part of her on me. Maybe to keep her close.

Before letting me decide on the placement of the design, James the tattooist rubbed my ribs with alcohol. As the disinfectant burned my skin, I could almost hear Mom saying, “This is going to sting,” like she always did when she’d grab the methylyate to clean another scrape of mine. I’d flinch when she’d put the disinfectant on the bleeding gash. “You’ll be fine,” she’d continue between gentle blows. “It always hurts a little before it gets better.”

After writing down the date and my thoughts about it, I closed my notebook and stepped out of the car. My shoes sloshed on the wet grass as I walked toward the gravestone. Eleven years later and the grass had no scars of having once been torn up. I stood on the thick grass and stared down at the light grey marker:

Tami Lea Palumbo

January 12, 1959 - May 19, 2008

Beloved wife, mother, daughter, sister

Faithful servant of Jesus Christ

We miss you—Revelation 21:4

I didn’t cry.

After leaving the cemetery, I drove to Aunt Angie's house. Earlier in the day, I'd asked if I could come over. She'd said yes, assuming I just wanted to catch up. At first, we talked about school, and not until she looked at her watch did she realize the date. "That's why you told me you went to the cemetery today," she said. I nodded.

We remained silent before Angie looked at me and asked, "What's the favorite thing you remember about your mom?" She rocked in her recliner, and I shifted on her couch then looked up at the ceiling. Soft rain fell outside, and the sky was grey both from the rain and because the sun had set.

Moments rushed back to mind: Mom dancing like a hula dancer when she said we might go to a luau in Hawaii. Mom cooking while listening to a sermon or worship music. Mom reading in her tan recliner before anyone else was awake. Mom talking on the phone to people for hours. Mom laughing.

"I liked how she laughed big, and how she would hit her hand on her thigh when she laughed really hard," I continued. And I remembered that laugh that came from the bottom of her soul, even in the worst of times. It always made me laugh, too. The first time I noticed how she slapped her thigh when she laughed really hard I thought it was weird. Then one time, as I laughed, my hand began to automatically hit my thigh.

"I remember that she was really organized," I said again, and thought about how she'd run our house. She'd made raising and teaching five kids—all while battling cancer—look easy. I dug into my distant memories and only saw fading glimpses of Mom. I couldn't think of one characteristic or favorite thing, and I hated it.

“Maybe as an eleven-year old you weren’t aware enough to notice that certain actions were ‘characteristics,’ ” Angie said. But I didn’t like being told that I didn’t remember something or didn’t notice it.

We sat in silence as I wondered if my favorite thing about her was that she was my mom. Or did that not count because that’s what everyone says about their mom? But there was something about Mom’s touch that could always calm me down. If I was ever nervous or scared, I knew that by telling her what was going on, everything would be okay. I knew that if I just sat in her lap, I’d be safe.

When I first started writing about Mom, I thought I could help myself remember her by keeping my memories permanent and on the page. I knew I could preserve what I remembered each time I revisited those moments I’d worked so hard to describe so well. And I thought she’d feel closer each time I read about her when I felt sad. Sometimes, I think I felt like if I could tell her how I was feeling, she’d help me not feel so sad. But as much as I did write her down, Mom still feels like the breath I take on a cold day.

I see her for split second, and then she’s gone. Our time together was like that split second, and now I struggle to remember it. And the older I get, I feel her slipping more and more from my mind, almost like a dream I wake up hardly remembering.

But a month after Mom died, I tried to write that half-remembered dream of her down in my bold-blue journal with bright pink, yellow, and purple flowers on it. I picked it up and grabbed a pencil and wrote the only thing that was on my mind that day: “I can’t believe it has already been a whole month since Mom died.”

The journal felt stiff in my hands and the fat lines were too far apart for my liking, but I kept writing. Hot tears slipped from my eyes. The notebook had sat untouched in my junk drawer for years because I always thought it was too ugly to actually write in. Let it sit for another time, I thought, maybe use it to write a list. But that June, the ugly blue notebook felt like the perfect place to write what I didn't want to tell anyone. So I sat alone on my floor, back against the wooden drawers of my trundle bed, legs folded up by my chest so I could rest my head on my knees. I sat alone and wrote in the perfect white space that would listen to each and every one of my thoughts about Mom. I really didn't want to think about her absence, but I also wondered if maybe she wanted me to.

When we'd lived in Mexico, I would raise my hand at the dinner table if I had something to say, but often, no one noticed. Growing up with three older brothers, I struggled to share my thoughts since my voice often drown in the cacophony of theirs as the Italian in them came out and they argued their opinions. I grew up with my family telling me I was easy to tune out. Everyone would talk over me, so I became used my thoughts being ignored. I've often wondered if that's why I started writing. Maybe that's why my blue journal became so welcoming.

"I never want to forget Mom, even if I get Alzheimer's," I scribbled, and started writing down the most vivid moments I remembered spending with her. I knew I would forget parts of her, and I knew I had to keep those parts alive by putting them down somewhere outside of my head. I described those moments with all of the monotonous details, exactly how I wanted to forever picture them in my mind. Since this was the ugly notebook, I wrote down the best moments and the worst— every word came out unashamed and honest, just as I felt it. So I questioned why good people die young, and I asked if maybe I'd loved Mom just a little too much.

The lead marks would fade over time, getting blurred as they rubbed against similar marks on other pages. But I still wrote because it made me feel like I could solidify my memories, make them permanent.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of each month, I'd write in that little blue journal. I'd close my wet eyes and see myself sitting across from Mom at the dinner table. She was wearing a green shirt. When she took a bite of her dinner, she smiled big at me. "I miss her smile with crooked teeth," I wrote down. And, as I again sat across from her at dinner, I saw her toothy smile. I remembered that her two younger sisters had braces but she hadn't because her family couldn't afford them for all the kids. She was jealous of Angie's straight teeth, and she'd never liked hers, but I never thought twice about them. Would I think they looked weird now?

Most of the only solid memories I have of Mom are the ones I wrote down. Now I wonder why I remember so well how awkwardly she danced in excitement for the luau we never went to. Is that a meaningful moment, or is it just something I remember? Sometimes I think my memories of Mom are like miscellaneous digital photos stored in an old box. When I flip through those moments, they don't fit together, they don't tell a full story. But I remember those snapshots, and I know that for some reason nothing in me wants to forget.

In May 2020, a few days after the twelfth anniversary of Mom's death, I texted Luke and we talked about Mom. At some point in our conversation, I told him how lucky he was to have so many more memories of Mom than I did because he'd lived so much more time with her. By then, we'd hit twelve years since Mom passed, meaning I'd lived more years without her than I had with her.

A few minutes after I sent the message, Luke replied: “Memories are not necessarily measured in years but in importance. And for you, your memories are probably the most important of all.”

“Maybe so,” I told him.

A part of me likes to think he was right.

I lost my ugly blue journal when Dad moved back to Mexico and our stuff sat in a storage unit before Matt bought his own house. I knew it was somewhere inside that unit, somewhere in a box of all my things. But even though I couldn't write in my journal, it didn't mean I stopped writing. Often, I wrote notes to Mom. On my computer, on my phone, in my other journals.

One time I sat on the back porch of the missionary house we stayed in my eighth-grade year and wrote Mom a text. I closed my eyes to the golden sunlight and leaned my head back on the porch chair as I imagined what it would be like to talk to her on the phone, what it would be like to have “Mom” in my contact list. For years I kept that text drafted to a numberless contact. Only when I got a new phone did my thoughts to her erase.

When I started going to school, I tried to erase my acne with foundation. But since Mom wasn't there to show me how to blend my foundation, my face often looked tri-toned. She didn't get the chance to teach me because she only ever knew perfect-skinned Elisa. She would also never see me straighten my hair, dye or donate it. She would never teach me how to iron or sew. I would not experience my first manicure with her. I would never talk with the mom of the sixteen-year old who needed a prom dress. Never talk to the mom of the girl who just moved into college and feels like home and God are so far away. Never talk to the mother of the young bride getting ready for her big day.

I also realized that I would never get to the point in life when Mom would treat me like an adult. My relationship with her would never be strained by dramatic teenage years. And my memories of her became precious not only because she was gone, but also because I had so few of them. It took time to understand how each memory was only a partial portrait of the whole woman I once called Mom. That I could only ever remember the woman she let her eleven-year old daughter see.

Though I wrote about her and told myself I remembered her, everything I wrote was colored through that eleven-year old perspective. To this day, I still see Mom as nearly perfect. My head knows she was not, but faded memories tell me otherwise.

But Mom would wake up before the rest of us and sit on her tan recliner, wearing her pink bathrobe and slippers, that I do remember. And I do remember how she wrote her prayers down in her journal. On August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001, two days after her diagnosis, she wrote in big, bold letters that she had breast cancer.

And on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, she wrote, “The hardest thing for me is the thought of my kids w/o a Mom.”

“I look at my children and my heart breaks. I want to be here for them—I know there are no guarantees in this life—with cancer or without—but I want to do all I can to live a long life to enjoy my family,” she wrote on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2001, as she continued to wrestle with her diagnosis.

When she’d wake up early and journal, she’d usually write about her day, about her feelings. The feelings she’d share only with the page. Often, she’d write all of her prayers, especially her prayers for others.

“God is still answering all of your Mom’s prayers for all of you,” Cindy, mom’s friend from high school, said as the smell of smoked barbeque wafted around us at Famous Dave’s. By then I was in high school, learning how to pray on my own and learning how to journal like Mom.

As I dipped my chicken strip into the honey mustard sauce, I thought about prayers—these sentences we speak out loud or in our minds for ourselves or for others to someone we cannot see. I chewed down the crunchy sweetness of my chicken tender and thought about how I’d prayed so many times for Mom to be healed but how she never got better, just worse. It seemed that God had always answered my prayers with a steady and constant ‘No.’ I sipped the ice water from my straw and wondered if it could be that God stores each prayer somewhere and that they don’t just melt off into nothingness, but that he remembers each. I’d never really thought about Mom’s prayers for us still being answered because I’d never really thought that prayers could outlast the person who prayed them.

My car’s windshield wipers squeaked as they brushed the rain off my windshield when I turned onto the freeway, leaving my aunt’s house. “Your mom always prayed before she did anything,” Angie had said as she rocked back in her chair. White lines flashed by on the road below while I kept searching my memories for the characteristic I loved most about Mom. She’d once told Jonathan that her greatest wish was for all of her kids to go to heaven, and I realized, I loved her faith.

When I got home to Matt’s house, I sat on my bed and pulled out my computer. I opened a blank Word Document and typed up that moment with my aunt. My fingers jumped fast from black key to black key, click-clicking as I transferred the moment from my mind to the white

page. Even when Mom lay half-conscious on her hospice bed, she knew where she was going, I wrote. And I wished I had that kind of faith. “My Favorite Thing About Mom,” I titled it and saved it in a folder with all the other countless little notes I’d written about Mom over the years. I slapped my grey laptop cover down before finally laying my head on my pillow.

A few months later, I read C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, and I discovered that he and I both grieved the same way: we wrote. But as someone older and wiser, he could articulate his feelings and frustrations in a way that I could not. And because he was older and wiser than me, he wrote, “if I don’t stop writing that history [of sorrow] at some quite arbitrary point, there’s no reason why I should ever stop” (59-60). I have often read and re-read that sentence because I realize that he understood something profoundly important about grief that I am still learning.

Since Mom’s death, I’ve thought often about heaven. Knowing someone who is there has made it feel like a tangible place, though still distant and mystical. “Cancer has made me long for heaven,” Mom wrote, and I’ve often felt like I could respond to her words, saying her absence has made me long for heaven. My image of heaven is no longer a cloudy dim-grey space that I saw as a child. I now see it as a place with more colors than I could ever imagine, a tropical place like Maui; it exists, but it’s impossible to reach on this side of eternity. I can’t imagine that her soul has been snuffed into nothingness or that she stopped existing altogether. Rather, as I picture her in the real place I now envision as heaven, I also picture her watching me from above. It’s like a one-way window—from my perspective it’s a mirror and I can’t see her, but on her side, she can see everything clear as through a window.

I’ve listened to countless sermons and I’ve read books where pastors encourage a daily practice of meditation on Heaven. They say it’s important because eternal thinking helps us remember that this place is not our home. It helps us remember that our days are numbered.

Sometimes I'd like to know if Mom thought often about heaven before she got cancer or if it only came to mind once death became more imminent.

One evening when I was still in high school, Dad outstretched his arms as he motioned up to show how he felt like he was floating. We were eating dinner, and Dad was talking about how just a few days before Mom died, he'd had a dream that he was dying. He said that he had the strongest sense of peace, and that nothing in him wanted to come back. That image never left my mind; the body and soul separating after the heart beats its last. I thought about what Mom must have felt when she took her last flight, when her soul broke free from the constraints of bone and muscle, when her soul finally went home. And I wondered if maybe dying wasn't so bad.

I was falling asleep when sentences started popping into my head. I had been thinking about Mom again and about Dad's dream, and as I drifted between consciousness and deep sleep, images started coming to mind of what Mom might have experienced on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

I thought about what she'd shared with all of us after her first time in Minnesota, after her first procedure in 2001.

“When I lay in the hospital room after my first surgery, I felt Jesus hold my hand. I felt his presence so strongly that I put my arm up to grab his. As I did, he reminded me that he is the Good Shepherd and said,

‘Take my hand, Tami—I will lead you. I will lead you slowly so you won't fall and I don't expect you to go quickly because you don't know the way or what lies ahead. But I will tenderly and lovingly lead you.’

I closed my hand around his and closed my eyes believing that he would lead me.”

I opened my journal and flipped to one of the last blank pages: “Her green eyes opened and quickly adjusted to the brightness around her.”

Mom was running on green, soft grass that turned to cool gold streets under her bare feet. As she ran to Jesus, her hair grew long and thick again. She had full mobility in her shoulder and in all of her limbs. Her tongue wasn’t stiff from pain medications. The brain fog was gone. She could breathe without a ventilator, and she’d never have to sleep during the day again, or at all.

I released her onto the page with a stroke of blue ink as I described when her soul broke free from her body, and she was okay. Her grave became the tangible mark she made on this earth. It became the period etched in dirt, ending the sentence that was her life. But my blue book and all my stories about her became the places where I tried to change the punctuation, and I spent years trying to extend that sentence through the memories I wrote of her.

That’s the moment when my soul first understood that Mom is happier and doing better in heaven than she would be on our side of the reflective glass in her cancer-stricken body. I feel this strong sense that God has healed her by taking her away. That maybe sometimes God’s yes to our prayers can feel like a strong no at first.

We’d like to think that God would heal his missionary because she’d done so much in service for him, given up so much for him. But God didn’t heal Mom. It’s taken time, but I’ve learned that Mom’s death doesn’t mean he’s not God. It doesn’t mean he’s not good. And it doesn’t mean that he doesn’t heal. Because in truth, God’s ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. And faith wouldn’t be called faith if it didn’t mean that sometimes it’s hard to believe.

I breathed in and closed my eyes.

“I bet you had a lot of things in life that you just had to suck up and deal with like now,”  
The tattooist, James, commented as he noticed how relaxed I was. The buzz of his tattoo gun stayed steady, and with each line and zing, he etched those moments in my life when I slowly lost her. I wanted the black lines to sear my skin with the pain I’d felt.

When he finished, James let me sit up so he could bandage the tattoo. Taping a cloth to my side, he gave me instructions on how to clean the black ink. I pulled my shirt down and stepped off the bench. It stung in the moment, but I knew the pain would only last for a little while. Because when I stood up, it already started to subside.

## Epilogue

My mom wrote me a letter the summer she spent in Cleveland, Ohio at a holistic fasting clinic. In it she told me to be strong and courageous, despite everything that I was experiencing at the time as our family traveled through Mexico and the U.S. without her. She also encouraged me to talk to Jesus about my fears and feelings, especially when I missed her most. She promised that he would comfort me and give me all the strength I needed to keep going. Near the end of the letter, she told me to keep writing in my journal because she wanted me to tell her everything I did while she was gone.

When we traveled over the U.S. for Mom's cancer treatments, I journaled for the whole year, but I stopped writing after that year. It became monotonous to take a tally of what I'd done every day, so I quit. I only started writing again once Mom died.

I was twelve when I rediscovered this letter. It was hidden inside a box of notes I'd kept in my junk drawer. At the time, I'd been journaling my feelings about grief and Mom's death for almost a year. Having no memory of reading this note before, I read it as if she'd written it to me from heaven. And I believed that even if she was with Jesus, she still missed me like the note said. And when she told me to pray if I missed her or felt sad, I felt that she was pushing me to ask God to help me get through my grief.

Fifteen years have passed since my mom wrote me that letter and roughly ten of those years I've kept journaling, kept writing. At this point, I can't read that letter without imagining Mom in heaven and that she's encouraging me forward from up there. I've kept writing just as she encouraged me to. One day, I hope I can share with her more of what I've written and let her know of all she's missed and all that I've done since she's left. Until then, I'll keep writing.

“So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Psalm 90:12

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