Honoring Your Wishes
Love Letters
Part II

Love Letters Part II: Writing Contest Winners

Sharyl Cartmill

1st Place

Sharyl Cartmill, MA, LMSW, received her graduate degrees in English and social work at the University of Iowa and lives in Des Moines. In her professional career, Sharyl has worked and volunteered in a variety of fields, including testing and social work. In addition to pursuing entrance into the Secular Franciscan Order, Sharyl enjoys reading and writing.

David Duer

2nd Place

David Duer lives in Iowa City and teaches English language arts at Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, where he also serves as the adviser for the Washington Literary Press. His work has been published in Ascent, Exquisite Corpse, North American Review, Poetry and other literary journals.

Bonnie Murphey

3rd Place

Bonnie Murphy is an Iowa native, retired educator and lifelong learner. She enjoys being Mom to Erin and Meredith and Grandma to Ben and Allie, as well as singing, reading, practicing mindfulness and living in the cultural abundance of the Iowa City area.

An Uninvited Journey

SHARYL CARTMILL
1st Place

Family road trips were usually eventful for my family and me when I was younger. If Dad knew where he was going, fine. However, if it was somewhere we had never been before, he would hand the map to Mom and ask her to navigate. Mom would pore over the map, her finger traveling down the line, never as fast as Dad would like.

"Let me see." Dad would grow impatient, then grab the map — "Give me the map, Rose" — and try to read and drive at the same time.

My sister and I would snicker, because we knew what would inevitably follow: Mom insisting that Dad needed to pull over. "Al, why don't you ask someone at the next filling station." Sometimes Dad would say, "I think I know where we need to go—" and take a wrong turn before finally listening to Mom.

But Alzheimer's/dementia introduced my family to a new landscape we were forced to traverse. It was not part of the original plan. The plan was that my parents, who had worked hard all their lives, would enjoy their retirement. Mom's heart attack in 1997 and subsequent seven-bypass surgery was a setback, which she overcame with her usual grace and gratitude. This was entirely different.

When Dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, my parents moved into a facility near me in October 2013. It was the first of many challenges my parents faced. Having to relinquish your home and most of your belongings is one thing. But how do you tell an 83-year-old man who has taken care of his wife for more than 60 years that he must stop — that someone must accompany him when he wants to spend any time with her?

Yet what began as inaccurate valuation of my mother's condition (she was assessed as advanced-stage dementia when she was early-stage), coupled with culturally uninformed care snowballed into a perfect storm, culminating in dwindling finances, separate living arrangements, a sharp decline in Dad's health and multiple moves from one facility to the next. Dad no longer trusted anyone in health care. I shared his misgivings.

Language became a minefield. You want to reminisce, but you must step lightly. "Remember" was a word we hesitated to say. The word was once like the warm watermelon we rolled on our tongues to savor its sticky sweetness, a word batted back and forth breezily. When Alzheimer's loomed, "remember" had to be rationed according to Dad's mood.

But Mom, in her wisdom, still held the map. A "daddy's girl," Mom clung to old stories, especially those about her father. One story that endured involved an accident. Mom's father worked on the Santa Fe railroad, one of the few jobs available to black men in Fort Madison during the Depression. A train ran over Grandpa, and,

according to Mom, the doctors wanted to give up on him because he had lost so much blood. "'You might as well knock him in the head,'" Mom recalled people saying. One doctor disagreed. "'I'll take the case.'" Mom said that the doctor amputated Grandpa's leg, but saved his life.

Mom told us the story more frequently as time passed. For her, it represented the importance of steadfastness. And I wonder if, subconsciously, she recalled that story during the more difficult moments with Dad as his Alzheimer's progressed. She, more than anyone, would stand by her husband, no matter what.

"Hold onto God's unchanging Hand," she advised my sister and me time and again. That advice carried us, as Dad became someone we hardly knew anymore.

It carried us again in our grief, when Dad died in July 2016.

It also carried us as we watched Mom slowly shrink away. Dementia taught me to shift my gaze, to look sideways at the people I love, because I didn't want to see them as they had become. Mom's skin was thin folds that I was reticent to touch for fear of tearing it. Daddy's Rosie was dying.

So rather than cling to her hands, I clung to her words. During the final stages of Dad's disease, my parents had moved to Michigan to be near my sister. Mom remained there after Dad died. I phoned Mom frequently and visited as often as possible. We talked about everything, especially the past. I marveled that with all that she lost, she held no resentment. She had let everything go and encouraged me to do likewise. This was a woman who endured — loving unreservedly, grateful for her family, friends and little things that came her way.

I felt that if she would not be angry, then I could be angry for her. After all, this was a woman who loved me, who advocated for me when I was bullied at school. She was the one who listened to my meanderings on the piano, encouraged my dreams and admonished me when I needed that, too.

This was a woman who prayed every night for her children — who prayed her wayward daughter into the Church, and who, I believe, still prays for me now.

I think clarity came for me after exploring old photos sometime after Mom died in April 2018. When choosing a picture for the funeral program, my sister found one of Mom as a young woman. My mother is sitting on the front stoop before the house my parents shared in the early days of their 63-year marriage. She is clasping her hands around her knees, her toes wriggling in anticipation through her sandals. Her expression informs me, "I am ready for all that life has to hold for me," as joy and hope chase each other across my mother's face.

When I look closer, I detect, at last, a secret so profound, moving me to tears. The joy in her face reflects one holding on to God's Hand, with no intention of ever letting go.

Keep That Which Brings You Joy

DAVID DUER
2nd Place

I
Flawless seashells tiny as fingernails —
prickly cockle and calico scallop
keyhole limpet and kitten's paw —
we found while walking Florida beaches
the Christmas we shared a house
with our three kids and their friends.
She found the most exquisite shells —
delicate and understated. Gazing at the
steady succession of steel blue waves
she would get that faraway look — as calm
and peaceful as I would ever see her.

II
The yellow cat's-eye marble, an
archaeological treasure discovered while
excavating the gnarled yew that had
taken over the northeast corner
of our yard. The swirling dance of yellow
trapped in glass was entwined in the roots,
left over from some game of marbles
like those she played on hard-packed
rings of dirt in childhood Santa Clara,
pulling out her cinch bag full of
colorful cat's-eyes, puries, steelies,
and her best shooter. Knuckling down
in the dirt, she always played for keepsies.

III
Corks from the bottles of Tempranillo
or Rioja — the hearty Spanish reds
we grew to love, fit to uncork
on a Friday after a week of nursing
the elderly or teaching teenagers,
the wine in our glasses a ruby sunset.
Only the corks remain — bark harvested
from live oaks, carved and stamped
to serve as stoppers for these bottles of wine
whose cost was not dear — 10 bucks? —
a simple pleasure we took with cheese
and crackers on our bed in winter
or back porch in summer
as we talked through our lives.

for Pat

Four Goodbyes

BONNIE MURPHEY

3rd Place

My father died 25 years ago of an illness no one in our family knew existed. He was diagnosed a few weeks before his death as having frontal lobe atrophy with motor neuron disease, a 13-syllable death sentence that had ravaged his mind and body for several months. My mother, sister, brother and I watched his unremitting deterioration, first with denial and then desperation.

He was brilliant, fit, opinionated, sometimes tender, sometimes harshly pragmatic. He'd survived the Great Depression and World War II. We put our energies into willing him to survive this. By the time I knelt beside his bed, sensing it was the last time I would see him alive and stumbling through sentence fragments about how I loved him and was proud to be his daughter, his mind was mostly gone. I still wonder if he was able to take in any of my goodbye.

As inevitable as death is, it is still, paradoxically, a surprise. "You always think you'll get one more day," my brother said to me as we sat side by side at the funeral home, alone with Dad's body. Grief is universal, yet personal, and uniquely difficult to prepare for. What if those months spent frantically searching for a cure held more time for seeking acceptance, and healing?

At the time, I taught a unit on Death and Dying in my eighth-grade reading class. We vicariously examined the emotional states common in response to loss through the characters of adolescent fiction. My students learned that grief wasn't limited to a time table or an "acceptable" set of feelings. Now, we know even more about the importance of what can be said and done before the "one more day" that everyone hopes for and no one gets!

Mom died eight years later of congestive heart failure. Ours was what would probably be called a close family, but my relationship with both Mom and Dad bore many stresses. Disagreements or attempts to broach difficult subjects seemed unwelcome and unproductive, so after a few attempts over the years, I had stopped trying.

In my mother's last weeks, though, she initiated reconciliation. "I'm sorry I made you mad all those times," she declared one day when it was just the two of us. Surprised, but moved, I found myself replying, "And I'm sorry I could be such a self-righteous bitch!" Hardly eloquent, our reciprocal, single-sentence efforts still opened a space large enough for forgiveness to squeeze through.

On her last day, extended family gathered knowing time was short. Lying still, eyes closed, in the hospital bed, she seemed to know she was surrounded by love, and even follow conversations. When music came on, she moved her foot a little under the covers, and my brother asked her if she wanted to dance. She loved dancing. Later, only my sister and I were present when she breathed her last. Always a person of deep faith, she lifted off the pillow at the end, arms extended as if being lifted into the beyond.

"We love you, Mom. Go with God." Being present for that moment is a constant gratitude in my life.

The sadness of losing my parents was profound, but I felt it to be in the natural order of things. My younger brother dying three and a half years ago was not. I'm grateful for the privilege of accompanying him on every aspect of his last journey, including talking with him every day the last 15 months of his life. That's when the love of his life died unexpectedly. For most of the 10 years prior, they, together, had been raising her three grandchildren, whose mother was mostly unavailable. Grief-fueled animosity between my brother and the kids' mom resulted in him soon losing contact with them as well. He was inconsolable.

My sister and I and our respective families did all we could to offer support; for my part, daily calls during which he and I would sometimes rage, often cry, but frequently laugh together as well. Beneath his suffering survived a sarcastic wit and self-deprecating humor that helped us all.

Our sign-off was always, "I love you." One day, his voice was staccato with pain. I drove him to the hospital. He had an abdominal blood clot. He was in liver failure. He was dying. Two and half weeks later he was gone. He wanted to try everything possible to survive, so we did, at the same time filling his life with what matters most as if each day were his last. Finally, one was. Being able to share those last days was an honor.

On Memorial Day last year, my husband of 46 years, 11 months and 23 days died in our home under hospice care, as was his choice. He'd courageously battled numerous health issues, beginning with a heart transplant 27 years ago. Each new challenge (countless, often painful, procedures and tests; grueling hospital stays, sobering diagnoses and potentially risky treatments) weakened him, but also revealed more of his deep love of life. He forgave the hardships thrown his way and often expressed gratitude for being alive.

In his last weeks, he met with family and friends, wrote some final thoughts, sat in his favorite chair listening to music our daughters had picked from his favorites, and offered up snippets of loving memories of our life together. The night before he died, our small faith community and visiting family gathered around our bed where he lay peacefully and prayed over him.

His death was the most personally impactful of the ones I've written about. Yet, the way it unfolded brings me a deep sense of peace. I found these words from him, tucked away, shortly after he passed: "The last … days of my life I feel like I have already experienced heaven surrounded by loving family members, friends … what a wonderful journey, what a wonderful life…"

Life is a mystery; its end, even more so — poignant, yes, but not without its blessings.

Remember Me

TRISH BANES

The sparkle which was in your eyes,

Seemed to fade away, saying goodbye,

Hands that held, cared and taught me,

….. now grow cold,

Things are changing I am told,

With each breath and beat that seem to drain,

My heart beats with sadness and pain,

Don't be sad to let me go

.....for this is not how I want to be,

I want to smile, laugh and walk with wings

.....to be set free,

Read these words as I slip away

...remember me

Sadness is with you from the start,

Soon memories and love will fill your heart,

Up in Heaven is where I'll be,

Watching over you when things get dark,

My heart beats in yours while we're apart

Remember Me

Untitled

ANNA BEERY

Dear Bohanna,

All I want for you is what you've given to me:

Everything. You have changed me fundamentally, on a cellular level, and no words I could write on this page could ever express the supreme gratitude I feel for your existence every time I smell your hair, or feel the plush skin of your cheek beneath lips, but I'm going to try because I need you to know just how much you fill my life.

I'll admit that when I watched that little blue line bubble up out of the ether, it wasn't elation I felt, it was crippling terror. How was I expected to be responsible for another being's life? To give over my identity, to become something new? But as you sprouted inside me, so too, my courage grew. It didn't take long for me to see that I could do this thing, and I was ready. That I had, in fact, been waiting for you for my whole life. Thank you, Baby. Now I can't give you courage, you have to find that for yourself, but I can tell you how I know that you can do anything you set your mind to, because you're brilliant and you're mine. I can tell you how whatever chances you take, I'll always be there, and I'll never let you fall.

Before you, there was nothing. Nothing that tethered me to this life, nothing that really and truly mattered. I was floating aimlessly through my days, waiting for opportunity to sweep me up in its fortunate current, or for some calling on high. Then you came along and gave me that extraordinary gift, purpose. My hours, my minutes, once empty, now full with activity, light, and love. Thank you, Baby. Now I can't give you purpose, because to me you are already filled with it, but I can tell you whatever course your life travels, I know it will be great. You are so very bright, and I know the world can only benefit from illumination of your caliber.

I used to believe that time was constant, ticking away at the same speed no matter what. But when my lucky self plucked your soul from the heavens, I instantly learned that time is relative. I blinked, and days flew off the month. I went to sleep and woke to find you were no longer confined to crawling, but had began to walk, and also CLIMB. I turned my head for just one second, and you began spouting out whole sentences, like you might give a lecture that evening. And some day soon, I'll set you down, because you're getting heavy, my big girl, and I'll never pick you back up. They say it goes by fast, and they're right, of course, but I never realized how invaluable every ounce of my time on this earth was until I had you. Thank you, Baby. Now this is a lesson I can't teach you, and one you may not learn until you have children of your own, but I can tell you that not a single breath you take will be wasted because your life is my most precious achievement.

This little letter doesn't even begin to relate the depth of my gratitude for all you've given me, all you've taught me. Nor does it broach the wealth of knowledge you have yet to instill in me. I'm sure I'll learn a new happy sadness when you go off to kindergarten, and I'll learn how to cope with it. You'll teach me true pride and patience as I watch you grow into a kind, but willful teenager. And I pray I'm around to watch you develop into the exquisite woman I know in my bones that you'll become. Now I can't know what's coming, you'll just have to wait and see, but I can tell you one thing:

Thank you, Baby.

-Your Mama

Untitled

JOSIE CELLONE

First times are scary. The first time we heard the word malignant. The first time the nurse said chemo. The first time walking into the oncology ward. The first time Mom lost her hair, her eyelashes, her brows. And yet we persisted. We kept putting one foot in front of the other, as they say. We woke up and took on a new day, a new week, and blessedly another 18 months together.

This past week when my mom went back in the hospital, I felt the familiar panic, the sudden urge to do something, to fix her, to save her, to grasp on. But this time I wasn't as frightened walking into that oncology ward. There was a comfort, a familiarity, a gratefulness for the care given and received in those halls. Of course there's still fear, the anger at the unfairness and the inequity. But in the place of shock, let there also be grace.

This week was the first time we heard the words palliative care. Tonight, Hospice.

My dad and brother were able to be at the hospital with her all day through a pretty scary fever that antibiotics seem to have calmed. The hope is for her to go home tomorrow under the care of Hospice.

What we do know is the chemo has stopped working, and the once stable CT scans show new growth. We know her liver is not functioning, but that the procedure to lower her enzyme levels worked and has given us another window of time. I find myself simultaneously praying, Please Lord, don't take her so soon, not yet, and please don't let her suffer.

We know she has persistent pain in her chest, and that morphine works best. We know she's fighting shooting pain in her leg and back. But I also know my mom is the most resilient person I've ever met. She's bullheaded and sassy. She gets her meds and forces herself out of that bed to walk around the halls and visit the rooftop garden.

She deserves more fresh air. More hugs from her family. Less pain. A bigger appetite and some gourmet food. But my mom's spirit is not broken. She's focused on healing despite the odds.

Her biggest demand is that we don't treat her like a sick person. She's never been sick her whole life. She exercised, ate well, took care of herself. She doesn't want to be treated preciously. She wants to talk about normal things. The Pope's visit. The crazy Volkswagen recall, my first car. Funny dog videos on YouTube. And of course, granddaughter photos.

She won't let this sickness define her life. She's starting to make some concessions. An oxygen tank at home. Letting us cook dinner for her. She's been a caretaker her whole life, giving so much love to her family and friends. It's almost harder for her to accept help than to doggedly fight the cancer itself.

She knows what she has to live for, and we know what she's given all of us.

Please Lord, don't take her too soon, and please don't let her suffer.

Untitled

BLAKE CHENEY

Leo William Cheney, will forever be a beautiful spring day. Born unexpectedly at 22 weeks gestation on the first gorgeous spring Saturday of the year; April 20th, 2019; he broke my bounds of happiness and fear. Fear of loss, of pain, of the unknown. Leo gave me unmatched love, joy, and hope. As quickly as he came into the world, Mara and I had to learn to be parents. My heart grew every time he raised a hand or stretched a foot. Despite countless heel pricks, ultrasounds, and x-rays his heart kept beating, and beating, and beating.

While the our household grew by one, it felt like the entire NICU team became our new extended family. Each staff member provided a level of care that I previously didn't believe existed. I mean no slight by calling the staff by their first names, without title. It represents the comfort and familial feeling that they provided. Do you address your siblings, parents, aunts and uncles by their professional title?

Pearl: Pearl resuscitated Leo the day he was born. Pearl administered Leo's ventilator in the ER and IV in the halls of UIHC while transferring him up to the NICU. I followed the NICU team and watched as Pearl worked on Leo. She never lost focus for over 2 hours while working under a heat lamp. Pearl wore a mask because she had a cold, but you would have never known by her concentration and determination to save Leo. Pearl gave us 13 extra days with Leo that we didn't anticipate,and a chance to hold him as he passed.

Regan: Provided a calm, data driven approach. Regan strikes an incredible balance of scientific technique with a comforting personal touch. She was Leo's first attending physician. She was our teacher in the new world of the NICU. Regan's approach to Neonatal Medicine will surely become the new standard in years to come.

Natalie: One word; Spitfire. Natalie stalked Leo like a cat watches a mouse. Anytime Leo showed signs of distress, Natalie would swiftly make adjustments for him. She was the only one that could change his diaper, take his temperature, adjust cuffs, and fix his leads without causing a disruption. Natalie was relatable to Mara and I being only one year older. We managed to giggle and be silly and talk about life outside this stressful environment despite the constant tension and fear.

Tim: Tim was the doctor I hated to see come to Leo's room, but was terrified when he left. His holistic approach to care for both Leo, Mara, and I was exactly what we needed our time of crisis. I will never forget Tim commanding a room full of doctors and nurses to turn the lights down, speak softly, and stop touching Leo. Tim

knew when to let Leo fight his own battles and medicine was only going to get in the way. Mara fondly recalls how soothing his presence was to her. In the weeks after Leo's loss, until the day we saw Tim again, she thought so often of being able to see him, hug him, and thank him

Patrick: Calmly watching Leo in the background, he knew every detail. He spoke honestly about Leo's health, but reaffirmed Leo's nickname "lion heart", given by a best friend's mother. Patrick explained that Leo's heart was extraordinary. Leo's heart would continue beating despite extremely low oxygen saturation, and continued to beat long after the oxygen support was removed during Leo's last hours, Patrick ensured Leo passed lovingly.

There are countless others to be thanked. The ambulance team who safely and compassionately transported Mara to the Emergency Department at UIHC. Dan, who held Mara's hand while she delivered Leo in the emergency room that morning. Lastascia, the midwife on staff at the hospital that day who monitored Mara's care for weeks following delivery. The rest of the midwife team. All of Leo's other nurses who answered all of our questions and late night phone calls wondering how our baby was doing. His nutritionists, the respiratory care staff. Our families, our friends.

Leo, you taught me to give myself and others grace. How to give and receive help. To be better to others in their time of need. You reaffirmed my belief in Mara as a mother and gave me unequaled drive to be a dad. Stopping by your room at 5:30 in the morning before work was never a chore. It was the best part of my day. I loved to watch quietly, read a book, and whisper "I love you" before leaving.

Leo, you belong in Iowa City, buried amongst the trees and wildlife. Iowa City is where I transitioned from young adult, to husband, to dad. You are a part of this great community and deserves to rest here. Mom and I may not live here forever, but you deserve to. This city provided us support when we needed it most. That's a kind of place I want my son to rest.

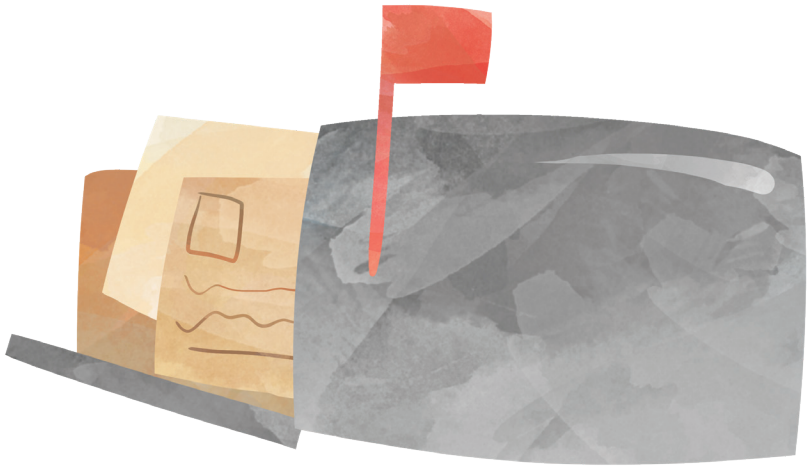
Leo, my grief and mourning will never completely subside. But to honor you is to celebrate you. I must enjoy the life I have. I must be the person that will make you proud. I will say your name and tell your story for the rest of my life.

Leo, I'll wear you on my chest. When I pause, take a deep breath, look at the sky, I'll think of you. I'll think of your perfect ears, nose, chin, fingers, and toes. My perfect baby boy. Your determination and fight is endless. I'll always remember getting to kiss head and hold you. Lastly, you have taught me to say goodbye.

Leo, thank you. I'm proud of you. Your heart will continue beating, and beating, and beating in mine. I love you.

You are my sunshine,

Dad



Untitled

ROBIN COWEN

Dear Mother,

Love, forgiveness, and gratitude are all things you've taught me, without us ever setting eyes on each other since the day you gave birth. Since the day you selflessly, generously gave me away to another family. I wonder how you felt that day? I wonder if they let you hold me? If you whispered anything in my ear, before I was whisked away?

Love. Love is patient, love is kind. The patience of waiting nine months, carrying me inside of you. Getting sick, maybe. Eating strange foods. Swelling. Getting fat. Expanding, before your time. Feeling me kick. Going through perhaps a difficult birth or recovery. Without the reward of a sweet baby to cuddle with, while she latches on to your bosom. The love it took you to give me away takes my breath away. The kindness it took you to choose to give me away instead of doing away with me is extraordinary.

Forgiveness. Despite the love, there is still a need to forgive. I forgive you for not being able to keep me. I forgive you for giving me away. You probably had to forgive yourself for getting pregnant with me. You likely had to forgive me for putting you through pregnancy and its' attendant sickness and pain.

Gratitude. My cup overflows! Without you, I wouldn't be me. I wouldn't exist. Without your choice to have me and give me away, I could have died. But, I have lived! Forty-four years of life. Of love and joy and friendship and family. You made the right choice, and I hope you know that. You sacrificed nine months of being pregnant and perhaps feeling empty and lonesome after I was gone. You made the good, moral choice, which gave new life a chance: mine.

Now, I am married, with two kids, and a baby on the way. And, thanks to a little investigative work, I know with quite a bit of certainty that you also married and had two of your own, for keeps. I hope when you go to sleep at night you feel at peace, knowing that I went to a good home, where I was loved and cared for. I hope you didn't worry too much about me over the years, as parents tend to do, despite the legalities of adoptions.

People always ask whether I've ever felt compelled to "find" you. Of course, I am curious. But, I understand the complexities and risks of "finding" you, so I defer. The only thing I've ever been compelled to do is to thank you. And, here that is. Thank you so much. You can't even imagine how much your gift has meant to me. But, perhaps now you know.

I love you, I forgive you, I'm sorry, and thank you.

Your daughter,

Born June 24, 1975 in Cleveland, Ohio

Untitled

KRISTINE CRANE

It feels strange to mourn someone you've never met, but this is how I feel about the daughter that I carried for thirteen weeks.

I was a little shocked to learn that I was pregnant. Even though I'd felt some symptoms in early summer, I'd written them off. I was visiting my dad in Iowa, where I figured the plots of manure caused my nausea. And that being home was making me moody—especially since "home" was not the house in the city that I'd known for three decades, but my dad's new cabin in the countryside, amidst the largest Amish settlement West of the Mississippi.

The prospect of pregnancy left my mind as soon as it entered. After all, what were the odds? I'd just turned 43, and there was only that one time we hadn't been careful. If I was pregnant with anything, it was the book I'd been trying to write the past decade, I thought.

"Well, you're definitely pregnant," my doctor told me, when I got back to Florida. Eleven weeks pregnant. On the ultrasound, he pointed out the head, heart, limbs, hands. "See, he's waving at you. 'Hi, mom.'"

I'd been tense the whole appointment, but I finally broke into a smile. "I think it's a boy," I said.

"Well, I know it's a boy. Or a girl," the doctor teased. "I also know it has a heartbeat. And it can dance."

When I got back to the parking lot, I found three large white ducks pecking at food left near my car. The sun was just beginning to set, and I marveled at nature's ways. You're a Mother Hen, I told myself.

I wasn't actually thrilled to be pregnant. My partner and I certainly hadn't been trying, and a second baby wasn't in our plans. I responded breaking-news style, quickly forming a game plan and finding my own joy in the surprise.

But a week later, everything changed. As I was driving to my appointment with the nurse—the routine welcome to pregnancy visit—I got a phone call from the doctor's office. The blood work had come back abnormal. The fetus had a genetic abnormality called trisomy 13, a rare and severely debilitating genetic condition that's caused by an extra chromosome 13. Only about half of affected fetuses survive in utero; many of those that are born die within a few days. About ninety percent die within the first year.

Later that day, I had an in-depth ultra-sound of the fetus. The doctor pointed out its unusually wide neck, and how the brain hadn't divided properly into two regions. "It's amazing that there are more than seven billion of us on the planet," she said, dramatically flinging her head back. "So much can go wrong."

She was the same doctor I'd seen when I was pregnant with my daughter Julia, who looked so perfect on the scan that the doctor said she could be a model for GE.

I was stunned by the bad news, but not entirely surprised. I knew things could go wrong with advanced maternal (and paternal) age. I considered myself lucky to have had a healthy natural pregnancy at 41. Anything beyond that would have been pressing my luck.

I spent the next two days doing two things: reading as much as I could about trisomy 13, and figuring out the logistics of termination, which the doctors strongly advised. Although some babies born with trisomy 13 do live

through childhood, they have many conditions, and don't often develop cognition beyond that of a six-month-old. Yet, some children develop a wide emotional range—expressing laughter, jealousy, joy. If they sense you are sad, they might take your hand or rub your cheek. Reading this, I couldn't stop crying.

Suddenly I felt connected to this creature whom I would never meet, and intensely protective of her (the same bloodwork that detected the abnormality determined it was a girl). I felt helpless that I couldn't save her against what the doctors called "an incompatibility with life." She was still part of me, perhaps the part of me that's incompatible (as perhaps we all are in some way) with life—the part that's broken, angry, unmothered. The part that wants to escape.

Una parte di me se ne va is an Italian phrase that I heard when a colleague of mine in Italy was killed tragically on her scooter. It means a part of me is leaving…The phrase had resurfaced in my mind when my mother died, and again, as I thought about my unknown daughter leaving my womb.

"Go with God," I whispered, the day of the procedure, my hands folded over my belly. Then the same doctor that had delivered Julia deleted my second daughter from the world—exactly eighteen months to the day.

I woke up to a nurse fussing over me. She asked me if I was in pain or nauseous; if I wanted pretzels, Saltines, or graham crackers. She wrapped warm blankets around me and gave me sips of Ginger Ale. I felt both sad and relieved, a sense of both longing and of being so well cared for that I could have cried.

Later that night, we ate my partner's uneaten birthday cake from a few days before. It was also Julia's eighteen-month birthday, so we had something to celebrate. I'd never felt more grateful for the miracle that she is.

Untitled

BETH FIELDER

I joined the club on December 30, 2014. I said goodbye to my mom, my idol, my friend. This was the hardest days of my life but in some ways, I already knew she had given me the tools to get through this tough time. Knowing that I had those gifts gave me strength and courage to say goodbye to her forever.

Love was given freely and endlessly to us five kids growing up. Somehow, she had enough to keep our cups full daily. Her and my dad shared their own special love and we were witness to it daily for 37 years. She showed us how you could be a great wife, a wonderful mother and a caring friend by how she gave love. She taught us if you have your family and friends and surround yourself in love, everything would be ok. As the oldest of us five kids, oldest of 21 grandkids on one side and one of 13 on the other side, I had hit the jackpot of a family. I knew I would always have love around me. It didn't hurt that she showed her love in small tokens or gifts. She was able to listen to you and find the perfect gift and she always loved a good "themed" gift! In fact, after she died, there was still enough new clothes in the "Carter's Closet" to provide for her ever growing number of grandchildren. Grandchildren that she never met were still able to get clothes (from Carter's, a favorite store of hers) picked out from their grandma years before. A love that I can still see and feel when I am with my family. I love I feel when I find someone the perfect gift just like her.

As a young girl in a Catholic grade school, I was frequently reminded about forgiving others. However, I didn't quite know how **forgiveness** truly looked like until my mom surrendered her body and soul that night. I knew she had struggled with things like being mad at why she was going to die before others or why would God do this to her? Why wouldn't she be around to see all her grandkids grow? This anger eventually turned into forgiveness and acceptance of things being out of her control (her mantra). If this person who has gone through five excruciating years of pain, chemo, surgeries and heartache can forgive and accept, why should I stumble on the littlest things? But forgiveness gives us peace and I felt that peace too as we prayed around her on the night of her death. I now realize I too can forgive to be free.

"Please" and "Thank You" were common around our house growing up. Something my mom instilled in us. People would comment how well behaved her five kids were sitting in the front pew at mass. But "thank you" would not be enough to describe what this woman has given others or has given me. I was one of the lucky ones who got to know her humor, hear her laugh, she her dance in the kitchen and surround her as she took her last breath. I couldn't help but feel **grateful** for everything she had given me. And just as she had been to all my important dates and activities through out my life, I was grateful to be able to be there for her last day. Instead of feeling sorry for only having her for thirty-five years, I was grateful for having her in my life at all as I now realize what I thought was a normal childhood was actually very abnormal. I had everything I needed and more compared to others.

As I sit at her old vanity looking into the same mirror she looked at daily, I wonder, do I look like her? Is she proud of me? She told me before she died, "Cry one day and then get over it". The obedient child in my tries to listen and hears this in my head. I was able to say goodbye that night because I was surrounded in love. I forgave God and the world for taking her from this earth because I knew she was in a better place. Finally, I was overwhelmed with gratitude that I was lucky enough to call her mom. As my dad and siblings watched an old video of her smiling and waving to the camera during a family outing, she took her last breath and we said goodbye to her the last time. Just like all those tokens and thoughtful gifts I unwrapped throughout my life she had already given me the themes of love, forgiveness and gratitude and that was the most thoughtful gift of all.

Saying Goodbye: A Note of Gratitude to Hospice Workers

ANGEL MARSH

Life comes to an end. We all know it. But I don't think we are ever fully prepared for it even when it is the "natural" time for it to happen. My grandmother was 93. She had lived a full and wonderful life. But we weren't ready to say good-bye. Are you ever? She had been the cornerstone of our family; the person who brought you "back to center" if you had veered off life's path.

After learning at the hospital that her body was simply too frail to go through lengthy procedures, she resigned herself – and her family – to entering into hospice care. We all knew – SHE knew – what that meant. Comfort would be provided as she died in a dignified way. So we all were forced to begin the "letting go" process – like it or not.

She was moved from the hospital to hospice care in the state of Iowa's only actual HOUSE for hospice care. There are plenty of hospice FACILITIES, but only one actual HOUSE. It was here that she – and her loved ones – were cared for in the most dignified and gentle way. The staff taught us that her loved ones' care was important, too, during this time. We couldn't be strong and supportive if we were breaking down in any way. So they made sure we were getting food, water, sunshine, exercise, companionship – all the basics to be able to function. At the same time they attended to grandma's comfort - giving her ice chips, cold compresses, and that wonderful morphine.

It is easy to lose sight of the date, time, and simply the things going on outside when you are in the midst of the dying process. The timing is never ideal. Your life is put on hold for the duration. The staff became our family. They would cook us meals, bring us groceries, and make us beds. They really did focus on keeping us well. This was so appreciated, but – in the moment – we simply took it for granted. Looking back, we can see the value this added to a tough experience. Grandma was set up beside a window so she could see the birds and the wood-like setting that was out her window. This was a wonderful replica of "home". If you couldn't be in your own home, this was certainly the next best thing. It was relaxing and comfortable for the family, too. There wasn't the constant interruption of doctors coming and going such as you'd have in a hospital and we were able to walk directly

into a kitchen, dining room, and sun porch. Comfort – so valuable!

Grandma's main focus was for all of us to "just be happy." There is a good lesson in that simple thought. We tend to let life's activities get to us in ways that really aren't necessary or good for us. And she was a firm believer in God. She always encouraged us to strengthen our faith and showed obvious pride when we took steps that showed we were doing just that.

And the care givers at the hospice house were the same way. They helped us to focus on what really mattered and to put life in perspective. They encouraged us to talk with grandma as much as we could and to actually HEAR her when she spoke to us - because she was quite lucid for awhile. And they didn't make us feel that any request was too big or that they were being put out in any way. They also didn't act like this was just a "job". They all seemed to truly care about the whole of this end of life event and approached us all with compassion and care.

It wasn't until well after my grandma passed that we were able to take a step back and spend some time truly appreciating the gift we were given. We got comfortable and peaceful time in grandma's last days with her. You can't get that time back. You only get one shot. The hospice care team knew that and truly embraced and embodied life and happiness.

We are truly grateful for the love, support, and compassion that was shown during my grandma's end of life care.

Untitled

CORY SKEERS

Brynne,

On days like today I am reminded how important it is to take it slow at times, let your heart take the lead as your mind meanders through memory.

I remember the first time really noticing the red in your hair and the way it pulls the sun in; exhausted and exhilarated, sealing your smile away as you told me to keep my eyes on the road, pulling it back out each time the difficult days show up.

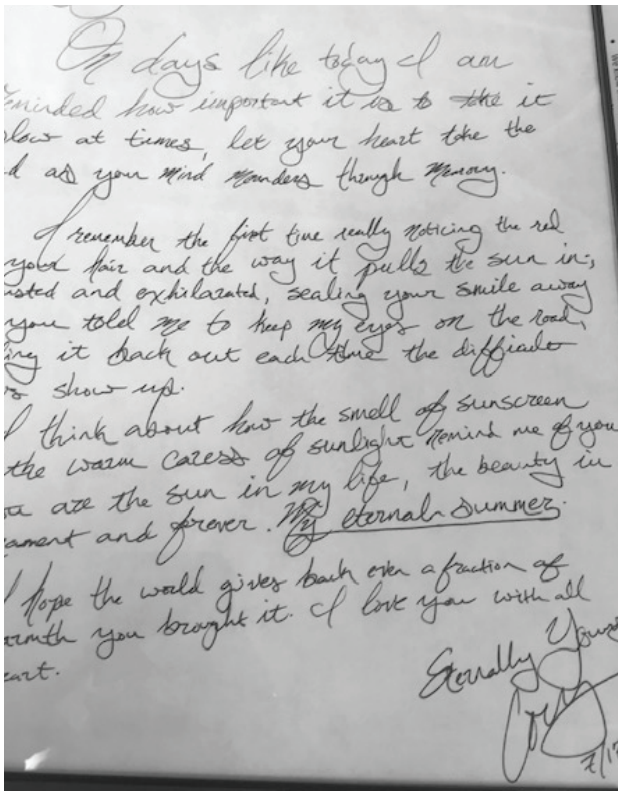
I think about how the smell of sunscreen and the warm caress of sunlight remind me of you.

You are the sun in my life, the beauty in the moment and forever. My eternal summer.

I hope the world gives back even a fraction of the warmth you brought it. I love you with all my heart.

Eternally yours,

Cory



The Blues Aren't Blue: An Un-Suicide Note

MARGALEA WARNER

Unlike an individual who leaves a suicide note to announce their fierce goodbye, I am choosing to write an un-suicide note. I write to express my relief for ultimately not ending my life, and my gratitude for overcoming the chaos that triggered my suicide attempt. I write now, because, with my 60th birthday fast approaching, I feel an urgency for life review and reconciliation. It is an open letter, but If I had to address it to just one person, it would be Marnetta Shetler Bradford. When I moved to Iowa City in 1984, she was a next-door neighbor who knew me from First Mennonite Church. She was the kind of neighbor who wouldn't look away from a stranger preyed upon by bandits of depression and psychosis. She stopped and helped. In the late '80's, she and her family moved away, but like the Good Samaritan taking the wounded one to the inn, Marnetta arranged for others to assist me. We still stay in touch by phone, letters and email.

I picture Marnetta's calm, steady gaze as I tell her (and you readers) this story, set in Iowa City in 1986 when I was 27 and living in my own apartment:

When I emerged from the gray cloud of near death, the color I woke to was blue. It was an artificial blue, akin to chlorinated pool water or blue Jell-O or Smurfs. It was a long tube with ridges that seemed to be coming from my face. I couldn't use my mind well enough to know it was a respirator tube. I stared at this blue with bewildered wonder.

I tried to remember what caused the gray. Did I really walk away from my job at ten in the morning without asking for time off? Had I gone through my closets and thrown everything in the dumpster? What did I have left to wear?

Deep inside my mind, I re-lived a room of flickering shadows where I was on trial for witchcraft and for being a bad daughter. Voices growled that I must be executed. I remembered Narrator Voice whispering, "The prisoner is walking into Reliable Drug. She is walking through Health and Beauty. She is walking through First Aid. She is picking up a bottle of rubbing alcohol. Now she must go home and administer the punishment."

But what happened next? I couldn't remember if I obeyed the Voices. I wish I could remember if I challenged their distorted thinking. All this forgetting makes perfect sense when you consider the confusion I was in.

But there was something important I forgot. I should never have forgotten, Marnetta, that you said, "Call me before you hurt yourself." I chose to misinterpret it, "Don't hurt yourself in a way that will hurt you." This way of hurting myself wouldn't hurt, I would just fall into sleep without dreams. I went with the half truth that was a whole lie. I made a choice that could have ended all choices. And that choice did hurt, exquisitely, more hearts than I could ever imagine.

Later I learned, Marnetta, that you broke into my apartment, found my unconscious body, and called 911, getting me to the hospital where that beautiful blue respirator tube kept me alive.

In and out of the gray, I woke a second time and the blue tube was gone. I was sitting up in my hospital bed. I looked down at the blue flowered print of my hospital gown, which pleased me enormously. Then the nurse

brought me a toothbrush and tooth paste and wouldn't you know it, the toothbrush was blue too. Blue. Blue. Blue. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Wanting to die isn't just "the blues." And neither is blue, for me, the color of depression or of psychosis. Because I lived beyond that attempt to end my pain, my body remembered all the colors and chose to pay attention to the beauty in each one. Blue is still my favorite.

In 2006, while in the Blue Ridge mountains celebrating my father's 91st birthday, I was walking down a mountain path to meet him when a solid mass of white air approached. It moved slowly like a large boat in deep water. Then it surrounded me and I could only see whiteness, like paper without words. And then it passed. I was released back to color. That is what it's like to survive an attempt at ending your life and to remember how much you love what you nearly lost.

Nowadays I have a closet full of clothing in every color of the rainbow. Tomorrow I will wear the turquoise blouse with the indigo pants and the blue bead earrings. I'll be ready to go to work, both at my job as hospital secretary and the work of looking back at what got me to the place of recovery where I am now.

This isn't a suicide note; it's a life letter. Marnetta, I love you for saving my life, for getting me medical care for my horribly broken brain and prayer for my broken spirit. I ask your forgiveness for not calling for help as I had promised you, God, and my best self. You met me where I was and summoned out what I could be. You restored me to blue, in all its delight.

Love and e-hugs, Margalea

I attached the letter in an email to Marnetta, took a breath, and hit send.

Marnetta emailed back around bedtime: "Wow Margalea. I am so honored and humbled by this beautiful piece that you wrote. You're totally forgiven. Your life has unfolded in a beautiful, miraculous way with all its twists and turns. And you've been able to discover, uncover and recover your life with all the keys that unlock the joys, sorrows, mysteries and gifts of life. Sweet dreams."

Grateful, forgiven, and loved, I slept very well indeed.

Expressing Love

JANE DOHRMANN

My mother died last summer. She was diagnosed with metastatic liver cancer at age 59. She lived until the age of 75 and was able to watch her grandchildren grow, celebrate her 55th wedding anniversary, travel around the world, volunteer for various organizations, and make the world a better place. She had multiple surgeries, rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, and some experimental treatments during her journey with cancer. She had endless decisions to make about treatment and care along the way, and she made the ones that were right for her. Through the years, I did my best to support her, many times wondering "How much more can she endure?" She finally answered the question during a palliative care consultation in late spring. She had developed an aggressive wound due to radiation that would not heal. She was offered surgery, but felt that she was not strong enough. The palliative care provider then asked "What do you want?" She replied, "I want to go home. I want to be with my friends. When I die, I want to be surrounded by family." The plan of care changed and she was fortunate to receive palliative care.

My mother's initial prognosis was six weeks to six months life expectancy. My husband and I were living in Minnesota, and we had a four-year old daughter. We had just celebrated my mother's early retirement. Her plan was to garden, be with her grandchildren, volunteer, and travel. I had been dreaming about spending more time with my mother, as well as having her spend more time with her granddaughter. The day after her official retirement, I received a call that she had been rushed by ambulance to Rochester, Minnesota.

During the next sixteen years, I questioned many times when my mother would die. Another tumor developed, and then another, and another. Each time, they wondered if she could endure another treatment. And then another treatment was offered which she chose to try, and the treatment worked. We often called her the energizer bunny because we could not keep up with her. She flitted around the country and world like a hummingbird. Her greatest joy was spending time with people, learning their stories, and providing as much love and support as she could.

Growing up, love was abundant in our home, but we did not say the words "I love you." After my mother's diagnosis, and the subsequent years later thereafter, that changed. At the end of almost every phone conversation and at every parting, including the last, she told me that she loved me. Her expressions of love throughout her life and especially at the end, allowed her and others the sacred space to say goodbye. I ponder: Will I live each day saying what matters most to those I love? Will I demonstrate love through my daily actions? I hope to follow my mother's example and do so. She taught me many things, and one of the greatest lessons was the importance of expressing love.