

## THE FIRST LETTER

Dear Mom,

Even though we weren't that close for most of our lives, I miss you. Some might think that sentence a tad cruel. Knowing you and remembering the conversation we had that last day -- the last supper of your life (melodramatic but true!) -- I sense you'd understand what I'm trying to say.

Do you know the timing of your death made sense to me even though there were no glaring signs? You hadn't appeared sick, but for over a year I sensed your end was coming and spent every holiday with you. At our last Christmas you handed me a forty-year-old manila folder that you had kept in your gray metal filing cabinet next to the desk in your bedroom. "Look at it," you said, parting your bright-red lipsticked lips in a chummy half-smile. You gestured with your hand, "Sit," and we both sat side by side at your scratched wooden kitchen table, your

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gray-haired head close to my almost shoulder length blonde while I fingered the documents. In your slender, slanted script the folder title said, "Katie." In the folder was my birth certificate, old report cards and honor role certificates. As I touched this history, oddly, I felt nothing, no connection to my own past; what did this stack of dusty, fading documents have to do with the chaos, eight siblings without a referee, of my childhood? But what I did feel was your undivided attention on me, which maybe was a first, and that felt wonderful. As I watched you watching me, with your elbows resting on the table -- once a big no-no for us kids -- I realized that this moment wasn't about me. So I mustered up some oohs and ahhs at the old documents, and that night I wrote in my journal, "My mother is going to die soon. Is there anything I need to ask or tell her?" Fifteen days later you did die, quietly, in your sleep, at home.

Now I am eager to begin our after-death-dialogues (even though it's really a monologue) with a moment when I felt happy. I notice those fleeting moments more as I get older. Happiness flickered in on a recent Sunday morning while I was at my stove making scrambled eggs for my two kids. You loved leisurely Sunday morning rituals. Dad would make you breakfast while you sat at the dining room table in your robe and slippers with your *New York Times Magazine* crossword puzzle, a pen (a pen!) and black coffee. I never got that black-only thing. Both you and Dad drank it that way. Did you know that your daughter is a sissy coffee drinker? Buckets of cream, lots of sugar and when available, chocolate syrup. Did you know that I am a sissy gin drinker too, cosmos instead of martinis.

Well, while I was cooking those eggs for Rhapsody

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and Bucky (who are now eleven and nine years old) they had a mini Beanie Baby war in my living room. This instantly made me think of the two over-stuffed baskets of Beanie Babies that sat in your living room. At every holiday celebration those animals, over a hundred of them, ended up strewn across the room after your grandchildren used them, with your approval, as ammunition in one of their all-out family mêlées.

In my memory I see a dozen adults sitting on sofas in the long rectangular living room with full happy bellies. (You were such a good cook in the end! In your last two decades you went from Hamburger Helper to four star cassoulet.) There were three couches for kids to hide behind, and one grandchild would pop up from behind a couch to fling a small animal at a cousin across the room, then hunker down in anticipation of return fire. The animal would always be flung back. Then, all of a sudden it seemed, a bunch of kids were out in the middle of the room, whacking each other with stuffed horses, elephants, zebras, ducks -- all with their bright red TY tags still attached. You trained them to never take the tag off because if they did, the potential collectible lost its value. Uncles would join in, my husband was always in the thick of it, and you would be too, with your cheeks rosy from too many gin with a whiff of vermouth silver bullets. What surprises me as I look back is that these battles were never brought to a halt by Dad's baritone "No," (a syllable known to freeze the ten-year old me like a deer in headlights and at forty-four years-old still retains its power!) there were never any tears or shouldn'ts and in all those fracasés never a lamp or a glass broken.

After the evening wound down, you would let the kids select an animal to take home. You were the stuffed

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animal library. You'd have them sign an index card with a date of return (which got them to practice printing their name) or an X if they could not write their name yet. You'd place this card on your refrigerator until the animals were returned. The kids felt hugely special, "I can take one? Really? But I can't choose. Can I have two?"

Well, I have to tell you that yesterday the living room where those memories were made, the home with 1 ½-baths where you raised seven girls and one boy, welcomed thirteen grandchildren, and for over fifty years loved, fought and danced like Ginger Rogers with your own Fred Astaire was sold. Dad finally felt it was time and leased a two bedroom apartment in the center of town with the other old folks. He seems happy. I'm mad at him and that is why I write you, but I was so happy when I saw the Beanie Baby baskets sitting on the floor in his new apartment.

You've been gone for three years and seven months now, and more than ever I wish we could talk. Some days I feel so lost. How did you raise eight kids and not lose your mind? Were you who you wanted to be? I'm OK you died when you did. Sure, I wanted more time with you, but in your last year I felt directly connected to you. I stopped judging you. I can't say that about Dad and I don't want him to die before I figure him and me out.

On a lighter note, guess what? Eighty-one year-old Dad has a girlfriend and is enjoying sex. He and I talked about sex for the first time ever! He said, "I just discovered I never knew how to please your mother." I was shocked but tried not to show it. Can you believe that, Mom? Maybe you can. We'll cover this topic later. I just want you to know that all the kids are happy about

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his new relationship. I think you would be too. Can you guess who the lucky lady is?

Love,  
Me

## THE SECOND LETTER

Dear Mom,

Boxing Day, a year before your departure, is when I first felt that your days were numbered. Again, you weren't sick. Sure, you'd had knee surgery, shoulder surgery and back surgery (just like all the other old people who never worked out). But what struck me as ominous on that day, and I know this will sound odd, is the way your speaking changed.

The holidays were hard without my Bob. Almost three years earlier the complications from colon cancer had taken him from Rhapsody, Bucky and me, and every year since, I had taken pains not to spend Christmas at home. The first year I was with you and Dad at Booie's home in Arizona, and the second I went to my in-laws in Hilton Head. The following year I told Rhapsody and Bucky: "We're going to the Bahamas for Christmas."

They seemed fine with that. They believed anything I told them with a smile and a few head nods. Then I said

that it was too much work for Santa to bring all of our presents to the island, so we would get only one each on Christmas morning and the rest at home afterwards, with Grandma and Papoo to watch us open.

Rhapsody understood: “Yeah, Santa will get all sweaty.”

Bucky nodded and said, “Yeah.”

We spent three days and four nights having fun on the beach. On Christmas Eve at a nice island restaurant we watched sharks eat in the ocean through a glass window. We flew home on the 26th and I had prearranged for you and Dad to meet us at our apartment for a mini celebration. Your Christmases with ten people opening presents was always a tough act to follow.

Nothing could ever be anything like the Christmases we enjoyed when I was little. You were the one who always bought all our presents, using your Christmas Club money. You’d begin shopping in October and spend at least two months getting everything right. That left Dad with only you to shop for and he always waited until Christmas Eve, rushing out with one of the girls to buy something cheap, like costume jewelry, at one of the last-minute sales.

While you orchestrated the entire event, Dad had the job of setting it in motion. (He says now, “It was all Barbara. I was just the mechanic who could do what she needed.”) On Christmas morning he would go downstairs alone and say in this goofy voice feigning surprise, “Looks like somebody’s been here,” turn on the tree lights, get the Super 8 camera ready and put on the coffee. We would form a line from youngest to oldest, which put me first, and on his go-ahead I’d march us down the beige carpeted stairs in our long, pink pajama gowns that Grandma sent from Chicago every year. We

girls would have those hard pink teathy rollers with Dippity-do in our hair. (When I think about those curlers now, thirty-years later, I still can feel them pushing on my skull, ouch! as I tried to fall asleep the night before Christmas, my heart racing with almost unbearable anticipation of the morning to come.)

When I would first see your tree after “Santa” had been there, Dad’s video (and in later years a Polaroid) would catch my blue eyes wide and my huge gummy grin from seeing the mounds of presents, two feet high and three feet deep surrounding the tree. We had been trained not to open the gifts right away and I only goofed one year when I saw the shape of the Barbie Airplane and tore the paper away immediately. We had to sort the helter-skelter presents into piles. For a good fifteen to twenty minutes you’d hear, “Kate!” “Yes!” Gerry!” “Over here!” “Booie!” “Here!” Each person would stack their pile of loot on a couch or a spot on the floor in the living room. Then the family would sit in a giant oval. We would open gifts one at a time beginning with me, as the youngest; Dad told me this tradition came from your side of the family. For me it was torture, always waiting for my next turn. I’d sit there with the next present in my lap, fingers on the tape ready to Rip! Rip! each time Dad was done opening his.

Now that I’m a parent I can imagine how satisfying it must have been for you to see each present opened in turn and each child’s reaction to each gift. We usually received some toys, some clothes and always a book. We weren’t rich, but this was a day you were a little extravagant with us. So many of the things we owned were second or third hand: clothes, furniture, even cars. But this day, thanks to you, everything was new and wonderful.

So let’s fast forward to my apartment complex on

Boxing Day 2003. A yellow taxi pulls into the parking lot and who is standing outside my glass doors, but you, Dad and my sister Liz with leftover appetizers and a traveling bar of Beefeaters Gin and Chardonnay. You all had celebrated Christmas the day before in your home, where six of your eight children were gathered with their spouses and your grandchildren. (Another reason I went away for the holiday was so I didn't have to deal with one of my sisters. We were still bickering after renting a summer house together in Rhode Island. Well, she was -- I had let it go and I never told you this, because with eight of us, I never could ask you to pick sides.) And even though you were expected at my home that day, I was surprised at how much joy I felt seeing the three of you waving at me (tears now as I remember). Did I say being alone on the holidays is hard? (You had eight children and died first. So -- you don't know!)

Well, we all rode the elevator up to my third floor apartment with views of Manhattan, where Rhapsody and Bucky were ecstatic to discover that Santa had remembered them. I'd had a neighbor put the presents out while we were away. On the taxi ride home from the airport Rhapsody had tried to bribe Bucky to let her open first and I said, "No. It's a Hahn tradition. The youngest goes first." They opened their gifts while we drank, ate, and watched. It was very merry and when I asked you, "So how was your Christmas, Mom?" you answered, "Oh Katie it was wonderful. I wish you could have been there. Everyone got along!"

I looked out my windows at the Manhattan skyline, which at dawn looks like the ups and downs of an EKG reading. I felt a little pang of jealousy, but mostly felt happy for you. You deserved at least one joyous Christmas. In our large family, no one fighting on a

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holiday was a rarity, but my mind quickly focused on your voice; its sound was different. There was a lilt to it that was light and loving. Your usual speaking voice was more resigned, heavier, like your favorite A.A. Milne character, Eeyore. Then you said, “Katie, I do want to live and see what happens in the grandchildren’s stories.”

Your sentence struck me hard because I had been feeling that I’d missed key moments, telling signals in my own husband’s death. Twelve days before Bob died he said, “I saw a book on the Today Show, Don’t Let Death Ruin Your Life. Don’t take this the wrong way, but buy the book.” At that point his imminent death wasn’t on my radar, or anyone else’s. I was present but in denial. The morning he died I bought the book and found it informative and comforting.

When I became a widow my listening changed. It was as if decades of noise and wax buildup had been vacuumed out and I was given a newborn’s ears. Words felt alive. I paid close attention to what other people said and how honest, how sincere their words felt to me. Did they mean what they just said? Did you mean what you’d just said? You said that you wanted to live. Who says that in normal conversation, right? It felt like a line that Jimmy Stewart would have said in *It’s A Wonderful Life*, after visiting the other side and coming home again.

So that night after you left I wrote in my journal: “Don’t miss another holiday with Mom.”

Love,  
Me