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HOW TO REBUILD HOME: LESSONS FROM LOSS

by

AMELIE LEE

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Introduction

I have known my entire life that my mom would die of cancer.

My mom was sick for almost as long as I've been alive, first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003. From as early as I began to conceptualize death as something real, that it would eventually befall myself and everyone I knew in the world, I knew that my mother's life would be taken by disease. Of course, I did not know the day, the time, or the exact details of this fate, but I knew this truth nonetheless—a truth that only solidified as I grew older and my mother grew sicker. This knowledge of my mom's future, the anticipatory grief I faced as a teen and young adult, defined my life in the years leading up to my mom's death.

My mother died on June 26, 2022. It was the summer before my senior year of college. I had spent my junior year commuting from my childhood home in Diamond Bar, twenty five minutes away from Scripps College, located in Claremont CA, taking classes part-time while taking care of my mother as she underwent chemo and radiation treatments. I spent my days driving from Claremont to Diamond Bar to UCI Medical Center in Orange, and spent my weekend nights planning medical treatments with my father and administering medication to my mother—a drastically different college experience than most of my peers.

Yet while my day-to-day life was fundamentally different from that of the average Scripps student's, I was still experiencing the coming-of-age and identity formation that came from being in my early twenties, attending a predominantly white institution, and dipping my toes into the Writing and Rhetoric and Asian American studies departments at the 5C's. I was taking classes

that encouraged self reflection and exploration, figuring out how to express myself through language and tell my story in a way that was cathartic. I was reading about generational trauma, about cultural standards for obedience and filial piety in the Chinese American community. I explored the art of memoir— reading immigration stories and grief memoirs alike in classes—that each attempted to capture an author’s experiences, weaving meaning and symbolism into core stories in people’s life. I was trying to figure out who I was, all in the midst of taking care of and grieving my mother.

Grappling with this conjunction of grief and identity is hardly a novel endeavor. There certainly isn’t a dearth of works in the “grief memoir” or even the “battling terminal illness memoir” genre. Many authors speak on how the genre has normalized feelings of trauma and grief, making the grieving process accessible to others and creating a community around common human experiences. Other scholars deem the popularity of grief and trauma related memoirs as “misery lit,” arguing that stories of intense trauma give readers a way to experience heightened empathy and imbues the authors with the ability to find significance in the loss they’ve experienced.¹ Regardless of the reason these books resonate with people, the impact of these memoirs is clear. Personal narrative provides a pathway to make meaning out of pain and grief for both the author and reader, exploring identity formation and human nature by diving into someone’s emotions.

Famous recent examples of this exploration include Paul Kalanithi’s posthumously published memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, which told the story of his painful deterioration due to metastasized lung cancer and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. *Crying in H-Mart: A Memoir*—

¹ Tesla Schaeffer, “Grief as It Is: Genre and Narrative Withholding in the Miserable Memoir,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 14, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 13-30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa015>.

which tells the story of Michelle Zauner’s loss of her mother to cancer as she examines her mixed Korean identity and relationship with her father— debuted at number 2 on the New York Times best seller list when it came out in 2021, and remained on the list for 50 weeks.² While much of the fervor around the memoir might be attributed to Michelle Zauner’s celebrity status as lead singer of the band Japanese Breakfast, reviews raved of the cultural analysis and complexity of Zauner’s story— how it weaves together the overwhelming nature of parental grief with Zauner’s relationship to her Koreanness. Race and culture come to the forefront in this analysis, weaving a crisp thread between what it means to grieve and what it means to be a second generation immigrant.

I read *Crying in H Mart* when it came out, in the midst of coming to terms with the imminence of my mother’s passing. While so much of Zauner’s experience looked like my own, my brain sifted through the commonalities of our experience to lock on the ways our stories differed. I left the book feeling empathy for Zauner, but also a sense of dissonance between my own reflection of grief and the one reflected in the memoir, my mind juxtaposing every aspect of our stories.

There’s something in that dissonance of experience that is core to the idea of grief. Grief has touched the life of almost every person, and yet, there is no universal grieving experience. The famous five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance do not hold true for many grappling with the loss of someone they love— rarely taking the form of a predictable linear process. The common piece of advice that I’ve received from every single therapist I’ve ever met is that “grief looks different on everyone.”

²“Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction - Best Sellers - Books - Sept. 25, 2022,” The New York Times (The New York Times), accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2022/09/25/combined-print-and-e-book-nonfiction/>.

In her reflection of grief, Joan Didion begins *The Year of Magical Thinking* with the phrase “the ordinary instant,” tracking the moment where life as she knew it—the state of “ordinary” that she knew in the world, was changed in an instant— when her husband died of a sudden heart attack one evening in 2003. Through metaphor and memory, in witty and poignant Didion fashion, she constructs a story of grief that attempts to make sense of her life post-loss. And while the book brought me to tears in almost every chapter, my feelings were more out of empathy for Didion than a reflection of my own experience being expressed in the book. I could only think about the ways my story diverged from Didion’s: How I lost a mother, not a husband, how Chinese culture was absent from Didion’s story but sculpted my own, and how different an abrupt sudden death is from a gradual informed one.

When I lost my mom this last summer, there was no “ordinary instant.” For the majority of my life, “ordinary” life was predicated on my mom’s illness. There was not one moment where everything changed, when I realized that my life was never going to be the same again, where my journey of grief began in one painful instance. Rather, there were years of trying to navigate my mother’s slow, painful deterioration, the cultural standards and expectations placed on me as a Chinese American daughter, a changing and strained relationship with my father— all as I tried to grow up. These are the circumstances that make my experience different from Zauner’s or Didion’s, a unique story of grief that is specific to my life, a path of grieving that is different than even my father’s— despite losing the same person.

And this, perhaps, is the universal experience of grief: Grief leaves individuals feeling wildly alone, faced with grappling with the unique circumstances of one’s loved one’s death, the unique

relationship with the loved one who left them, and the unique combinations of emotions and identity that make each of us human. My experience with anticipatory grief, always knowing that my relationship with my mother would inevitably be prematurely taken away from me by cancer, has fundamentally shaped who I am.

It always feels strange to me when I have to tell people that my mom died. In my head, it seems like an obvious part of me— just as apparent to who I am as my race or gender. I have struggled with how to express this loss to others, feeling like the depth and sheer volume of experience of what I have encountered is far too much to tackle with my words or in casual conversation with friends and peers.

In my time as an undergraduate, I have practiced using my words, growing comfortable with the rhythm of academic writing. I'm drawing on the courses I've taken in the Writing and Rhetoric department— memoirs read in Dr. Kimberly Drake's Creative Nonfiction, and scene-writing techniques learned in fiction classes with Adam Novy and Jean Chen Ho. I've tried to incorporate research and analysis skills learned from Dr. Glenn Simshaw's Newspaper Op-ed class. I have grown familiar with the world of argumentation, with how sentences fit together to tell a story. Yet I've still struggled to put words to my story of loss, trying to tell stories of painful moments with my family, the feelings behind them, how they've shaped the way I think. I have been struggling to find meaning in my decision making, the grieving process, and the pain in loss. In this project, I want to use my words to honor and remember my mom— to create a recollection of the pieces of her that I no longer have access to. I want to capture the story of me and my dad, the pain we've shared and the pain we've caused one another, and how we have survived the last few years.

Often, I imagine talking to a younger version of myself. I have received so much support these last few years— a patient therapist, loving cousins, an attentive partner, friends who may not know what is going on in my life but support me nonetheless, professors who have extended arms of support— all of whom have held me up these past few years. Yet, there is no one else in the world who has experienced exactly what eighteen-year old Amelie will endure. I am the only person that can relay the lessons and secrets she will need to know in order to survive.

In this project, I alternate from telling my story from a first-person perspective and writing to my past self. Much like Zauner's, my story belongs somewhere in between the intersection of grief memoir and immigration memoir. In this piece, I explore the lessons I've learned from loss and grief, and along the way, I'll be talking to my eighteen-year-old self. Parts of my piece will be in the style of an epistolary memoir, in the same vein of works like "Breathe" by Imani Perry.

These short letters are the advice I wish I had, the perspective that none of my peers or family members could provide me, the lessons I wish I knew earlier, the reassurance that things will be okay. I want to do more than create "misery-lit;" I aim to write more than just "a sad story."

Through my storytelling, I want to capture my own unique experience from grief, trying to analyze and deconstruct how anticipatory grief, family and cultural dynamics, and my coming-of-age play into how I processed my mother's death. Through my lessons to my past self, I hope to reassure my past and present self that things will be okay.

I know that past-me will be able to live through this. Her resilience inspires me. The story has not been an easy one to tell, but 媽媽³ I hope you are proud of me for trying.

³ Mama

Abstract:

“How to Rebuild Home: Lessons from Loss” is a memoir that tells the story of my loss of my mother to cancer the summer before my senior year of college. In the piece, I utilize epistolary and creative nonfiction styles to grapple with what it means to grieve a mother both before and after she’s gone and what a daughter’s duty is to her parents in a Chinese American family. Through letters to my eighteen-year-old self and memoir-style storytelling, I’ve tried to create a coming-of-age story that dives into an emotional and nuanced relationship with family, love, and grief.

Lesson: How to grow up with two loving parents and know you will lose one of them

媽媽 taught you how to bathe.

Her hand on your child-hand, reaching into the tepid bath where you sat, lifting your chubby arm out of the water. Pressing down on your arm, rubbing into the damp skin, rolling fingers back and forth as little shreds of dead skin emerged from friction.

Remember how you called them “goji,” like the berry? I have no idea why, for they certainly did not resemble the red tart bits of goji that you saw in your soup, eaten reluctantly after 奶奶⁴ insisted they would make your eyes bright and pretty (亮). Rather these bits of skin looked like eraser shreds that you remember so vividly from childhood, the type you carefully retrieved from your desk at school after a vigorous question set, squishing them together in your fingers to form bits of putty, accumulated into a ball meticulously kept in your pencil box.

媽媽’s lesson on bathing centered around these eraser shreds that rubbed off your skin. She showed you how they’re easier to remove after you have been pre-soaked for a few minutes, taking a body part out of the water for a few moments before scrubbing with fingertips or a damp towel. Remember how, even as you enjoyed this time with 媽媽 looking after you in the bathtub, you knew that bathing would be an activity that you would be expected to conduct alone, without the guidance of your mother’s comforting hand.

⁴ Grandma

You will need to remember this lesson on bathing when you clean 媽媽 once a week, as she sits on the living room couch as you hoist a bucket of hot water and a series of small towels from the bathroom. You will squat by her feet and ask her gently if she will take off her shirt, nakedness still embarrassing to your conservative immigrant mother, regardless of context.

This is when you must confront her body, when you must look at her thinness, her skin. The wet towel scrubs her arms, her shoulders, the knitted stitches on her back, the scars on her chest under where her breasts used to be. Eventually, you will be numb to jarring it is to look at her, at her frame that barely weighs eighty pounds, at her shaved head, at her steroid-swollen face, but it is in these moments that her deterioration is impossible to ignore. But later—no, *After*, when you close your eyes and picture 媽媽, you will only be able to bear bringing up the image of her when she was your *mother*, young, bright, and round.

Step 1: Let your parents take care of you

Looking at home photo albums from when I was three or four— pictures of our family travels to Shanghai, my mom volunteering in my kindergarten classroom, me and her playing with dolls upstairs with my cousins— you can see evidence of illness in my mom’s hair: cropped curls that differ drastically in texture to the straight long hair I grew up seeing.

These photographs of my mom’s short hair are the only evidence of my mom’s illness from my early childhood. After that first round of chemo in 2003, my mom went into remission for seven years.

She had a recurrence in 2010, when I was in the third grade. I wasn't privy to the details; my parents were very intentional about shielding me from the gritty realities of her illness. I was never told exactly what was happening—I don't remember them ever sitting me down and having a conversation about what it meant to have a mom be diagnosed with cancer or what a recurrence was. And being ten years old, I remained naive to what my parents were going through—the weight of every doctor's visit, the decision for my mom to have a double mastectomy.

To some extent, my parents' shielding was incredibly effective: I had a very happy and coddled childhood, filled with playing pretend and devouring fantasy novels, escaping into worlds of fairies, friendship, and starlight.

I must have known that my mom was seeing the doctor a lot, yet in elementary and middle school, I wasn't worried about my mom being sick, or thinking about whether she would die. I guess they held that burden together, my mom and my dad, lifting the fear of loss on their own shoulders, above their only daughter.

I remember two moments that year pierced through my veil of ignorance. My third grade teacher, Mrs. Stark⁵, pulled me out of class one day. She said that she knew my family was going through a hard time, and wanted to know if I was all right. This was the first time that I realized that something of significance was happening to my family.

⁵ My least favorite teacher from elementary school. She would always make me pull a card for reading in class. And she called me "chatty" in the notes section of the report card.

Another moment I remember: for about a week— probably when we first found out about my mom’s recurrence, my dad would come into my room to cry. Every night, after my mom had tucked me in, we had said our prayers, and said goodnight, my dad would come into my room and lie down in bed next to me, hold me, and cry silently. Before he left my room, he would always say he loved me, and that he was sorry. Back then, I wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for. Maybe he was sorry that he had pulled back the curtain on the pain that he and my mom were experiencing. I suppose even then, I was a pillar of emotional support for him.

After my mom’s double mastectomy in 2010, things went back to normal— no more doctor’s appointments, no more weird teacher pull-asides, no more midnight weeping.

My mom’s next recurrence was four years later, in 2014. The cancer had metastasized to her lungs. In the eight years after, there was never a point where my mom didn’t have cancer— where we weren’t actively fighting the rapid progression of tumors throughout her body. The cancer she had was a fast moving one, in just a few years, it metastasized from her breasts to her lungs. In the last five years of her life, the tumors grew into back, kidney, liver, and brain.

The morning my parents found out the cancer had metastasized to her lungs, I woke up to my father sitting on the bench in my room after they had come home from the hospital. I remember that I was learning about Edgar Allen Poe in eighth grade honors English, and a boy in my class kept calling me Annabel Lee after we read the poem— maybe my name sounded similar to Poe’s lost wife.

That morning in 2014, when my dad told me what had happened, I didn't know what "metastasized" meant, but I saw that his eyes were red and his face was swollen, so I cried too. For the first time, it registered to me that my mom might die. My dad hugged me and I remember him saying he had to go back to the hospital. After he left, I cried for three hours straight, pacing the living room with my face wet and my head throbbing until my parents got home. I went to my mom immediately. She wasn't crying. She hugged me, allowing me to shove my face into her stomach as she *tsked* at my heaving sobs. "Sweetie, 別哭了⁶. It's okay. Go wash your face and take a nap 啦."

When my mom had her recurrence in 2014, my parents were told that the cancer would metastasize quickly. I imagine that if those oncologists were told that she would survive for another eight years, they would've been shocked.

I have no doubt that the reason behind those eight years of life is my father. My dad was never willing to let things lay where they fell. His first and foremost priority was to help my mom, and he committed himself to doing everything humanly possible to do so.

My dad was always an attentive father. As an only child, I was incredibly pampered— not with material items but with my parents' affection and depth of care. My parents always made me feel taken care of. My father in particular never failed to demonstrate to me that I was special. He always saved the best morsels of food for me: the fatty pieces of pork or the tender pieces of cheek scooped out of steamed fish. He always helped me put my jacket on, stopping me as my stubby left arm struggled to reach the second sleeve behind me, helping to pull the clothing

⁶ Don't cry anymore

forward so I wouldn't have to stretch. Years later, I would watch him do the same for my mother as she got dressed every morning.

After my mother's recurrence in 2014, my father began to change. When the doctors told them that the cancer had metastasized, he kicked a hospital chair so hard he broke it. Fear that he would lose his wife transformed him into someone solely focused on keeping my mom alive. When oncologists told us that we were out of treatment options— that it was chemo or nothing— my dad did not accept that as an answer. He would spend entire nights awake, slowly reading and translating scientific articles about the newest clinical trials for cancer treatment. He'd wake me up in the morning to ask me if his interpretation of the article was correct. He would call hospitals across the country that were instituting new techniques and medications, asking if they were taking new patients. He was not willing to lose her.

My dad was navigating a medical system that was not made for our family. I translated countless websites and articles— eventually sitting into every doctor's appointment to make sure my parents didn't miss any information communicated too quickly, or in vocabulary they didn't understand. In his desperation, he was often susceptible to scammy alternative medicine, spending thousands of dollars on snake oil supplements and treatments with no real medical backing or payoff. I once got into a near screaming match with a predatory clinician who was claiming a \$10,000 immunotherapy treatment to return our deposit.⁷

Despite the obstacles, and institutional communication barriers, my dad did eventually strike gold. In Guangzhou, China— the city in which he attended high school— Fuda Cancer Hospital

⁷ Fuck you, Dr. Bryn J. Henderson of Regenerative Medical Group

offered a series of highly effective treatments that were not yet FDA approved in the United States. From 2014 to 2022, my parents traveled to Guangzhou a total of ten times— every six to nine months or so, when the tumors in my mom’s body progressed to a point where her physical symptoms were too difficult to control, or her bodily functions were endangered. Through cryoablation, the tumors were cut away, and my mom’s life was extended another year, over and over again. There were countless times where CT scans and MRI’s showed rapid progression, new tumors that showed up in new parts of her body. There were five million moments of panic, moments our lives were uprooted and reorganized around new medications, new treatments, more travel to China.

Even after my parents began telling me about the cancer progression and subsequent treatments, as a preteen, I was still somewhat shielded from the pain they were experiencing. While I knew that my parents were fighting this immense battle, I was never expected to play soldier. I did not bear witness to their decision making— and other than my occasional eavesdropping hearing them cry together— I didn’t bear the emotional weight of what was occurring. They never told me about their fears, never acted like we were about to lose her. While they traveled to China, I stayed at home, with my cousin or grandma, focused on Algebra 2 and Harry Potter fanfiction, disconnected from the terror my parents were facing an ocean away.

My parents confided in me more as I grew older, and I occasionally tagged along to visits in the hospital, but for the most part I was allowed to be a child. To be honest, after seeing my mother recover over and over— coming home from China a little tired but able to pick me up from Mock Trial practice every day at 5:00 pm— part of me believed that I would never actually lose her. I would always have 媽媽 to guide me.

Past-me,

媽媽 and 爸爸⁸ have taken care of you. They have given everything they have for you and this family. It is how you have survived thus far. Now, you must learn to take care of them in return. Wash 媽媽 carefully. Talk to her as you do. Tell her you love her. Make sure the water is warm and that she is comfortable.

Step 2: Learn how to take care of your parents

In August of 2021, you and Dad will be waiting for Mom to come out of surgery for the removal of a spinal tumor. Our surgeon, Dr. Hashmi, promised that he'd call us after the surgery was complete, which he estimated would be two and a half hours after she entered the OR. Four hours later, you won't have heard from him yet. You and 爸爸 will assume the worst, sitting in a waiting room in silence. This is it, you'll think.

Suddenly, Dad will begin hyperventilating, his entire body shivering and heaving. It'll be his first panic attack. He'll sink to the floor, and shake so tremendously, you'll pull your Mock Trial crewneck sweater over his head, comically small on his torso. You'll hold him, telling him to take deep breaths. You'll feel eight years old again— like we're watching Dad cry in our bed—and simultaneously like the only adult in the room.

In that moment, you'll see a glimpse of what the next few months will look like leading up to 媽媽's death, the late nights in which he will weep on the floor of my room, inconsolable for hours. You will have to take charge when he is rendered completely useless when Mom is put on a

⁸ Baba

ventilator, you will have to consult doctors about end-of-life decisions as he sits in the car, screaming endlessly that he doesn't want to live anymore. You'll sit on the floor next to him everyday for weeks following her passing, trying to persuade him that it wasn't his fault, that he still has reasons left to live. Your emotions will be shelved, filed behind his in the organization of priorities in the cabinets in your brain. You will do all of this and survive.

Later, that afternoon in August, after Dr. Hashmi comes back in, telling us that the procedure went smoothly and that he was unable to call after being whisked into another emergency operation— his nurse must have forgotten to send us the message— 爸爸 will hold your hand. “I'm so sorry. I'm supposed to be your dad. I couldn't do it.”

In October 2019, my mother developed a brain tumor. I had turned eighteen, now a legal adult. I was living at school, visiting home on weekends, where I would sift through readings with words I didn't know the Chinese translations to and didn't know how to explain to my parents. Perhaps my dad began to no longer see me as a child, someone he needed to shelter and protect, but someone who he could rely on for advice and decision making. At the same time, the brain tumor marked a turning point for my mother— the start of mental deterioration that meant that she soon would not be able to participate in equal decision making in her own medical treatment. My father now expected me to take on a duty of care for my family. I attended every appointment, discussed every treatment decision with my father, advised him every step of the way, and held his hand through every cry. We split responsibilities, with him still holding the majority of the burden of caretaking, but with me sacrificing my life on campus, my social life and extracurriculars, to do as much as I could to help out.

My dad and I have been incredibly close for my whole life, but in the two years before my mom passed, he didn't know what classes I was taking, where I was interning, or who my friends were. Our relationship became strained, and all our conversations were about my mom: whether she had taken her medicine today, if she had used the bathroom, how much she ate for breakfast.

His only coping mechanism for dealing with his overwhelming fear and grief was to look for solutions to continue searching for answers and treatments that could extend the time we had with her, to postpone the inevitability of her death for as long as possible. He was incredibly functional, always action-oriented, thinking of the next step and keeping track of the day-to-day necessities to take care of her.

But as my mother got increasingly sick, he would break down as we discussed treatment options, weeping into the armchair of the one-seater couch in the corner of my room, before pulling himself together to continue problem solving. As my mom got sicker and sicker, I began to see glimpses of how deep the unresolved grief and fear was rooted in him— and I, his daughter, held his emotional weight on my shoulders. As we faced the imminence of my mother's deterioration, my father's emotional state became more and more fragile. At the same time, he was giving up more and more of himself to take care of her, while watching me maintain my friendships and classwork.

I was simultaneously his only emotional support and greatest source of resentment.

The US legal system prescribes that parents owe a duty of care to their children, fulfilling their basic physical needs. In the way most people view parenthood, a parent is meant to do much

more than provide food and shelter, they create a home, supporting their child's emotional and physical needs, and *love* them. From alphabet to adulthood, parents are our examples of what it means to be a functioning member of society, to grow into a Capital P Person. For those of us who were lucky enough to grow up with loving, affectionate parents, the word parent can be synonymous with comfort, with the thought of your mom scrambled eggs on the breakfast table, long hugs when your dad came home from work, incessant laughter at the dinner table.

Not every parent can always play the role of a source of stability and comfort for their child. When faced with a tumultuous environment— financial stress, issues with mental health, or a serious medical condition — a parent might rely on their child for emotional or physical support, placing responsibilities onto the shoulders of one not usually prescribed a role of duty of care. When child and parent reverse roles, when a child is expected to take care of the physical or emotional needs of their parent, psychologists call this “parentification.”

On the occasions that a child or teenager is expected to take on the burden of a household— whether in physical responsibilities or handling the emotional weight— they can struggle with guilt, anxiety, and a disconnect from their own emotions, putting their own feelings on the back burner to support their parents or siblings.

I was eighteen when I took on a duty of care for our family and the emotional weight of two people. I can't claim parentification— at least not in the traditional definition of it. And yet, even though I was a young adult, I grappled with so much of the resentment, guilt, and anxiety that comes with the parental-child role reversal that I experienced.

Past me,

I know it feels impossible right now, but you should try to be a kid as much as possible. Take up some hobbies. Spend time with your friends. Argue with tall men at Mock Trial. Haven't you always wanted to compete in a college tournament? Stay up at night. Keep writing. You deserve the opportunity to make mistakes. Just do your best.

Step 3: You know what needs to be done, so learn how to do it

Here's what being perfect looks like: You'll wake up an hour before your parents. You'll put three vegetable buns in the steamer, scramble eggs, warm up porridge, turn on the coffee machine—wiping splashes of water with a dish towel as you go. You'll measure out medication: 5 milliliters of anti-seizure medication, 6 milligrams of anti-inflammatory steroid, two pills of proton-pump inhibitor, one vitamin C capsule, two probiotics. You'll line them up neatly in the order of which they are meant to be consumed. You can eat one of the vegetable buns as you cook.

When 媽媽 wakes up, help her walk to the bathroom. She is a bit less coordinated in the morning, so hold her arms as she uses the walker. Make the most of the two minutes she spends on the toilet by collecting clothes from her closet for her to wear that day. As you help her get dressed, 爸爸 will wake up.

In order to go downstairs, Mom needs to put both hands on the stair handrail. Then, Dad stands behind her, and holds the handrail with both hands as well, placing his arms under her armpits as support. She steps down with her left foot first—it's stronger, since the nerves in her right leg were affected by her brain surgery in 2019. As she steps down, my dad places his knee behind

her right thigh, supporting her foot as it steps down. It's almost like their two bodies are taped against each other, with his limbs beneath hers. They descend the stairs attached like this slowly, step by step. The whole affair takes fifteen minutes. Going upstairs in the evenings takes twenty five minutes.

You will try to learn my father's system of stair travel, to no avail. When you support my mom with my arms and legs, she laughs nervously. When she tries to take a step, with your leg beneath hers, she cries out that she thinks she is going to fall. She needs the solidity of my dad's body to feel safe.

My mom makes it downstairs, and begins eating her breakfast.

Lesson: How to be a good Chinese daughter in America

Step 1: Learn about sacrifice

Let me tell you a story. In 1993, four years after 奶奶, 爺爺, 爸爸, and 伯伯⁹ immigrated to California, 奶奶 began coughing up blood.

At the time, our family was barely making a living for themselves, with all four members of the family working to afford rent in an apartment in Rosemead. 奶奶, once a literature professor at Huazhong Normal University, worked two jobs, from ten in the morning to two at night, as an assistant chef, cooking in one Taiwanese and one Chinese restaurant in LA County. 爸爸, twenty two at the time, spent his mornings delivering Panda Express around LA and his evenings in class as a part-time student at Pasadena City College. When a tumor was found in his mother's

⁹Grandma, Grandpa, Dad, and your uncle

left lung, he felt guilty. Perhaps, he thought, if he had been working full time rather than splitting time as a student, his mother wouldn't have had to spend 16 hours a day breathing the smoke of a kitchen range hood, and would not have developed cancer.

爸爸 dropped out of school and brought my 奶奶 home to Guangzhou, where she received surgery. When he tells this story, he emphasizes how impressive my 奶奶 is, how she was rescued from the brink of death, made a full recovery, and moved back to California after one year. He does not tell me how he felt when he thought his mother would die. My uncle once told me that one night when they were in Guangzhou, he found my dad sitting in 奶奶's closet in the middle of the night, weeping into her clothes.

Step 2: Grieve, the Chinese way

In April of 2021, Dr. Longoria will tell us that 媽媽's trachea are clogged by rapidly growing tumors, and within the next two weeks she will be left unable to breathe. You will look for a grief therapist.

You won't yet know that it will be more than another year before Mom actually comes to stop breathing. You will not know that it would not be a clogged trachea to do so, but rather her lungs failing after contracting COVID-19. At that moment, you will not know that she will continue to live for another year, first on one type of chemo, and then another, both chipping away at her memory and cognitive function until she'll hardly remember what she had for breakfast that morning.

At the time, what you will think is true is that Mom will die within the next two weeks. The next few days will be spent in constant terror, the three of us hyperconscious of her every breath, uncertain if it will be the last one.

You and 爸爸 will spend a lot of time listening to her breathe. In the last year of her life, in the mornings, when you ask if Dad slept well, he'll often tell you that it kept him up at night, being too focused on the sound of her breathing. When Mom naps, you'll watch her chest rising up and down slowly on the couch, glancing up every so often as you do homework at the kitchen table.

It will be in these moments, as you and Dad listen to her breathe, in deep sleep, that you will hold hushed discussions around what to do next.

As you face complication after complication, how to manage her symptoms of physical pain, new tumors growing in her lungs, her dwindling appetite, your every decision will be one that holds the weight of her livelihood. As if our house is a war room, on a daily basis, you'll receive new information from her doctors and specialists, analyzing potential options, trying to figure out which treatment or medication we should prioritize, assessing what her body could handle, cross-referencing lists of medications and treatments. At this stage of the disease progression, it'll feel like only you and Dad knew everything— her oncologist, neurologist, and radiation experts only holding pieces of the puzzle as you try to figure out the best decisions for survival.

You'll have to be perfect. 爸爸's perspective is that anything could upset the balance that was keeping Mom alive— one missed dose of medication, a meal without enough nutrients, muscle atrophy caused by a lack of movement. One of your worst arguments with him will begin when

you let her nap in a position that is conducive to bed sores. If you aren't spending your days and nights downstairs with Mom and Dad, it'll feel like an indictment of how much you care about the details of her health, intrinsically intertwined with how much you love the family. Every time you leave the house— whether it is to make the thirty minute drive to Claremont three times a week, or to see a friend for a brief hour-long lunch—you'll feel like you're demonstrating to him your skewed priorities.

Past me, I know you love journalism, the connections you make when talking to an interviewee, the rush of seeing your name on the byline of the page. I know you love school, taking writing, and politics courses that critically engage your sense of self and view of the world. I know you love Mock Trial, the adrenaline of winning an objection battle, the authority you hold when you speak to a judge on the court floor. I know you love these things, and I'm sorry you won't be able to experience them for a while. You have to live at home, drop your extracurriculars, take less classes. They need you. You will need to give yourself up as much as you can.

The Duke of She said to Confucius, "In my land there is an upright man. His father stole a sheep, and the man turned him in to the authorities." Confucius replied, "The upright men of my land are different. The father will shelter the son and the son will shelter the father. Righteousness lies precisely in this.

In 2013, the Chinese government passed a law called the “老年人權益保障法,” which directly translate to the “Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly.” The law declares that children with parents over the age of 60 must visit their parents “often” and attend

to their “spiritual needs.” It also states that companies must provide workers enough family leave to visit their parents.

Of course, other than the element of regulation of corporate policy, there is pretty much no tangible way for the government to enforce this law— the police aren’t rounding up citizens on the street to interrogate the last time they stopped by their childhood home. There’s no specific language for how often is “often,” no guiding statute on what it means to care for your fathers’ spiritual needs. Rather the law serves a primarily symbolic role, an example of how the PRC is an exemplar of traditional Chinese values of filial piety.

Traditional Confucianism dictates a strict familial hierarchy, one where every individual must take care of their parents into old age and be obedient to their demands and expectations. A millennium later, values of filial piety and parental hierarchy are still baked deeply into Chinese culture, as generations of Chinese parents continue to raise children with the expectation of future care and obedience.

Growing up, I viewed the concept of filial piety with a critical and resentful eye, a stark contrast from the individualist American perspective that I saw on TV and at school, where children moved out at age eighteen, coming home for Christmas if their parents were lucky. The idea of filial piety was heavily linked to the idea of sacrifice, with filial piety taking away pieces of an individual’s sense of identity and self in order to adhere to their parents demands and restrictions.

My father was no stranger to sacrifice. In the year leading up to my mother’s death, he woke up twice in the middle of the night, once at 2:00 am, and another at 6:00 am, to help my mom use

the bathroom, her bladder no longer equipped to hold in the fluids from her nightly medication overnight. He drove her to every check in with a specialist, radiation appointment, and chemo treatment. He watched television with her every night before lifting her onto her bed, pillows perfectly laid out so that she wouldn't develop bedsores. When she was hospitalized, he spent days and nights in the hospital, only going home after complete physical exhaustion. Loving my mom, to him, meant that he would not accept defeat—that he would put her life before his own. He was not ready to grieve, he would live in denial—that is, until it was impossible to look away.

The overwhelming fear my dad had of losing her was funneled into a deeply unhealthy need for control, and the fact that I was unable to match his level of sacrifice to do anything and everything possible to ensure my mom's livelihood created a deep and painful resentment towards me. There was a stark imbalance in how much we each were giving to take care of my mom— my dad had given up on his job, his friendships, his maintenance of who he was as a person, in order to dedicate his entire life to her well being. In his head, his life no longer held purpose but to save her.

After she died, my father was stuck firmly in the “bargaining” stage of grief for months, unable to handle the overwhelming guilt that came with failing the impossible task of saving her that he had set for himself. He had to grapple with the fact that he could not, in fact, exchange his life for hers— could no longer trade in the elements of who he was to save her. He was unable to begin grieving her because he was unable to accept she would die.

The therapist I found, Jill Johnson-Young, wanted us to grieve. She had lost two wives (two!) to disease, and wrote two books: “Your own path through grief: A workbook for your journey to recovery,” and “The Rebellious Widow: A Practical Guide to Love and Life After Loss.”

While Jill was undoubtedly credentialed, I felt like her idea of what it meant to grieve fundamentally opposed my father’s. Where my dad was guarded, Jill wanted us to be vulnerable. When his strategy was bulldozing forward, Jill wanted us to sit down and reflect. According to Jill, when a family has the knowledge that a member of their family is going to pass, there’s a blessing in grieving before the death occurs, or “anticipatory grief.”

Is there anything you want to say to your mom before she’s gone? Maybe you should talk to your mom about what she wants from her end-of-life process. Have you engaged in a family dialogue about where each of you are in the grieving process? Maybe you and your dad should write down what you need to let go and read that to each other.

Jill said that grieving looked different for everyone— but there wasn’t exactly a lesson plan for how to communicate and compromise fundamental values about the dying process. I didn’t know how to explain that my dad would never be able to “let go.” In an attempt to bridge the cultural gap, she once told me a story about her childhood best friend “Ming,” whose family didn’t tell her dying grandmother she had cancer.¹⁰ And yet, despite Jill being unable to understand how filial piety and sacrifice were playing a role in my family’s dynamics, I desperately wanted to be having the conversations Jill was telling me to have. I desperately wanted to be dealing with our emotions and grief rather than pushing forward in an endless battle. It felt like there was a thick

¹⁰ Now that I’m thinking about, I’m fairly sure that’s just the plot for the 2019 award winning movie “The Farewell” starring Awkwafina

glass wall between myself and the ability to execute the type of preparatory work Jill said would help our family come to terms with my mother's death.

In 2017, the Journal of Clinical Nursing published an article on how Chinese culture influenced the families of stroke survivors:

“Three themes reflecting the influence of Chinese culture on stroke caregiving emerged from the interviews. (i) Caregiving role perception. Informants accepted caregiving for the sick family member as an expected part of life, a culturally prescribed obligation and an expression of reciprocal love. (ii) Coping strategies. Connecting with family resources and connecting with inner strength were frequently reported coping strategies. (iii) Self-sacrifice. Informants identified self-reliance and feelings of restraint in their utilization or access to formal caregiving service. Chinese caregivers sacrifice themselves for the care recipients regardless of the hardships and the neglect of their own health.”

Our family, I thought, was too Chinese, too sacrificial, to handle grief in a healthy way.

Step 3: Rid yourself of Americanization

Remember when you were on vacation with your parents in the early 2000's? I imagine that if someone was to overhear the conversations you had with 媽媽 and 爸爸, it might sound something like this.

Mom: 妳餓了嗎？¹¹

¹¹ Are you hungry?

Dad: Oh no, 她一定不餓啦，才吃了這麼多gelato.¹²

Me: I could eat again, I didn't even have that much gelato! I had a perfectly reasonable amount.

Your need to respond in English was hardly due to lackluster Mandarin skills. At home, you switched seamlessly from language to language, blending Mandarin and English sentences that make up the Chinglish we spoke to one another. Yet, when you were visiting the East Coast or in Europe, outside the familiarity of Southern California, you responded to every sentence your parents spoke to you in clear, unaccented English— in your best vocabulary.

I'm not sure if this was a conscious or subconscious decision, but I'm sure it was rooted in fear— fear that my family would be seen as outsiders, that we would be judged as inferior or foreign, that even as tourists, we did not belong in this space among white people and English speakers. Somewhere, deeply rooted in our eight year old ideas of identity, we felt that proving my family's American-ness to the public would be a way to “prove” ourselves into a sense of belonging and safety.

As a second generation Asian American, you have been taught to concede to the assimilation paradigm, to rid yourself of your parent's accents, to believe that hard work will bring you upward mobility, to believe that your parents' values are inferior to those of your white classmates' families. You do not know this is a lie. You believe that if you speak English just like everyone else, if you attend their schools and sports, if you commit your soul to a corporation and actually contribute something to society, then you will be just as American as your neighbor— then you will belong here, that America will grant you safety and protection.

¹² She definitely isn't. She just ate too much gelato.

When you get to college and finally learn the story of Chinese immigrants, how this country has treated your father and mother and those who have tried to become Americans for the last hundred years, you will no longer want your title of American. You will want to build community, to find a new identity that embraces the way Chinese American history has made you who you are.

And yet, when you are hurt by Dad, you will find something to hate about him. You'll search for some reason that he is acting the way that he is, and you will place that hatred in your own culture and race.

Past me, when will you stop blaming his Chinese-ness for his grief?

Lesson: How to meet your parents

Step 1: Talk to your dad

One night in October of 2021, Mom and Dad will come home from a radiation appointment. You'll help her get out of the car, seating her on the couch. Usually, you'd do more. You'll think about helping Mom get ready for bed, but that night, you'll get a text from a couple childhood friends, who are planning to call that night. Just this once, you'll decide, you should have a fun night in. You'll spend the rest of the night playing Stardew Valley over Zoom and gossiping about people from high school.

What you won't know is that Dad will have had a particularly exhausting day, and at that point in the night, they won't have eaten for hours. After you go to your room, he will have to cook them

both a meal, administer all my mom's medications, and begin the difficult task of taking her upstairs. Nauseous and tired from radiation, Mom will throw up her dinner. Sheets will have to be cleaned, food re-cooked, and medications readministered. They won't get into bed until 1:30 am that night, frustrated and tired from complication after complication.

When you wake up the next morning, Dad won't be speaking to you.

Like most of your arguments with Dad, this one will start like this: As you eat your eggs and bun and try to make eye contact with him, you'll realize he's pissed. You'll notice that Dad was angry: the clipped responses, the lack of eye contact, the cold demeanor. You'll attempt to engage in conversation to no avail— minimal back and forth as you'll broach innocuous topics to talk about: the timing of the appointment for the following day, whether you should take the dog out on a walk, or how Grandma was doing this week.

Finally, anxious and upset, you'll push, asking dad what was wrong or whether he was mad at you, attempting to start a conversation where you could work towards figuring out the issue and repairing the relationship.

As usual, your attempts at seeking reconciliation will be fraught with guilt— guilt at your decision to prioritize friends over family, guilt that you weren't there for your mother, guilt that you've failed to alleviate his burden. And at the same time that guilt manifests in your anxious attempts to talk to Dad over breakfast, you'll be angry. You'll think about how Dad could have just knocked on the door and asked for help. You shouldn't be expected to anticipate the every

need of her family, to preempt problems before they are told to you. You should be able to be twenty years old and have a night to yourself.

Dad, initially cold and uncommunicative, will begin to recount the events of the night before with a bitter edge, barely making eye contact with you through his scorn. You'll apologize—you should have helped them—but you'll feel months of anger and resentment rise to the surface. You'll think about how he never asks how school or my friends are, how he can barely look at you when you tell him you're going out to dinner with your boyfriend, how you know without a doubt that the maintenance of your life and happiness does not compare to his overwhelming fear of losing her.

You'll try to defend yourself, saying that it was unreasonable for him to expect you to guess at whether or not they need your help—your entire life can not revolve around meeting my parents' needs and taking care of my mom. In the heat of the argument, all Dad will hear is that you're unwilling to prioritize them.

So as is common when you argue—when a needle of conflict pierces through the thin skin that stood in the way of the depths of our feelings rising to the surface—it'll be explosive. He'll scream at you, throwing pillows and hitting a remote control on the couch furiously like a petulant child throwing a tantrum. You'll sob, begging him to try and understand. The words he'll say to you will stay in your heart for months.

I just want to have part of my life for myself. I need to have a life. *If you can't give 100% to this family, then you should just leave.*

I'm just trying my best to balance school and caretaking. You don't understand how hard it is for me. *I dropped out of school to take care of 奶奶 when she was sick.*

I'm just trying to think about my life and my future. Don't you care about my career? *How could you possibly care about any of that when she's sick? When she's gone, you'll regret how selfish you were.*

I don't think you see that you're not being a good father to me, *You know how much I love you, don't try to paint me as someone I'm not.*

It just doesn't feel like you're able to care about me at all. *Sometimes I hate you.*

Baba, please. *No, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this.*

Past me, I'm sorry.

Step 2: Talk to your mom

How many stories can you hold in one person? How much can you remember from a hundred nights spent on the couch, asking 媽媽 to tell you more, more, *more* about her childhood in Malaysia or her time attending college in Taiwan. How long can you listen?

I know that you think that you know 媽媽 well. I know that you think you've heard every story, that you can anticipate how she'll react to things, that her personality and life trajectory seem so

clear to you. I know that you've tried really hard to make the most of your time with Mom, to tell her you love her every opportunity you have, to lie by her side and breathe her in. I know you feel like you've extracted every story and asked every question.

You will need all of this. When she's gone, you'll no longer have access to her stories, her quirks, her comfort. You'll have to pull from what you remember, the bits and pieces you've held on to. The little you have won't be enough.

My mom was idealistic to a fault, engulfed in a family of eight, she spent so much of her childhood and teenhood lost in romance novels and the bits of Hollywood movies she had seen. In elementary school, she stood outside her neighbor's window, trying to catch a glimpse of the small television her family did not own. She had ambitions for her life—ones that would make her town and community proud, and satisfy her urge to be doing something big in the world. Most of those dreams faded away when she married my dad, settling in our Southern California suburb and working as his secretary until I was in third grade.

Together, they built a home. Every morning, she would grind coffee and boil water for my dad's morning cup, simultaneously whipping up fried eggs and turnip cakes before taking me to school. Many of my childhood memories take place in the car, my mother picking me up and chauffeuring me to piano class, math tutoring, badminton training— usually with a sweet cake or pastry in hand for me to eat during the commute. When my dad got home from work in the evening, our dinners were filled with my parent's vivid conversations, the three of us at the table, laughing. On the nights I was overwhelmed by school, or got into an argument with my dad, my evening ended with my face in her shoulder, the comfort of my mother's embrace mediating my

frustration with my father. As I entered my late teenage years, my mom and I gossiped in the evenings, just the two of us. I learned about the financial struggles of her siblings in Malaysia, how she taught middle schoolers in Taiwan after college, the ambitions in her life she gave up when she met my dad. “Of course,” she would preface, “I love the life we have very much.”

She was a gentle mother. I remember her smell before she got sick. It smelled like home.

Past me, what does 媽媽’s laugh sound like again? Can you ask her what her favorite flower is? How does her voice catch when she’s mad? Buy her a jar of that durian jello from Rowland Heights, it’s her favorite flavor. Play her that Carpenters song on the piano. Can you record her saying “Hi Sweetie!” when you get home? What’s the name of that cooking YouTube channel you watch with her sometimes? Write down every detail, please.

Step 3: Look for yourself in them

Now that my mom has passed, for the first time, really, I am getting to know my dad. Certainly, this isn’t the exact same man who raised me, now burdened with a grief I can only begin to understand, and a sense of self that has been imbued with loss. But apart from the life we have had these last few years, constructed from the years of battle and pain, comes a man I am just beginning to know. We talk about animals, we gossip about family, we talk about values and life and what it means to be a part of a family. We talk about how we feel about career, school, and community. For the first time, I am learning about his values, his interests, what he finds fascinating and funny, what touches him, what speaks to and appeals to his humanhood, untainted by the pain of living a life dedicated to keeping another person alive. My dad is smart and curious, always watching YouTube videos to learn more Chinese history or true crime

statistics. My dad is compassionate and kind, tucking in our ten year old goldendoodle into bed every night with a fluffy blanket, sympathizing with animals that become prey in National Geographic documentaries. My dad is silly, constantly blocking me from walking through our home's hallways, while daring me to get through like a troll under a bridge. He makes faces at my grandma when she talks to him about the groceries we need to buy. He recently bought a pack of sponge balls to "practice a magic trick he saw on the internet."

Now that I am getting to know him again, I see all the parts of me that have been shaped by him. My personality and extroversion, my critical eye and tendency to analyze. My argumentativeness and obstinate nature. My silliness and capacity to enjoy life in every moment. Those are the parts of me that are my father's. And now I am learning to grieve in an entirely new way. For I have no mother to compare the shape of my being to. What elements of mine are her's? I can only grasp onto what I remember through the blurry self-centered lens of childhood. I wish I could give younger me the maturity I have now, if only for a moment, so that she may see her mom with clarity to find the bits of her that are built into who I am.

Occasionally, I'll get a glimpse of her in myself. When a cold breeze fills the room, and the sound of my startled yelp sounds exactly like the noise she made when she was surprised by a chill. The way I also pull my pants down to rub my stomach when I have a bellyache. These are the only moments I have of her, the way I can see her in myself—my involuntary and instinctual reactions to the world in her image, whether nature, nurture, or imitation. It's these moments that I miss her to the fullest extent, moments where I'm forced to confront the fact that there are dozens of little habits of hers that I don't remember, that I cannot pull up in my head and replay perfectly, that I cannot describe in a way that does her justice. The ones I can recall feel fleeting,

little videos in my mind of the way she used to be when I could hold her hand, feel her warmth, be with my mom. I feel like I have so little. It's impossible to replicate a person in description, and even harder when it feels like I have a loose grasp on the pieces of her that I still remember. I wish I could see her again, just to see her smile, to hear her laugh, to remember what it was like to know her. Sometimes, I'll rewatch the video that I made for her funeral, replaying the clips of her voice and her laugh, reveling in the pain and joy I feel from remembering, in fear that the memory will one day falter away through the leaks of my brain. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I'll pad over to my dad's room—what used to be my *parents'* room—feeling like a little kid complaining about a nightmare. I'll sit in my mom's closet, put my face into her clothes that still sit folded in the shelves, trying to smell home again.

Step 4: They were young once, just like you

You know, when Mom and Dad were dating, they'd come home from a date and immediately call each other. They'd talk for hours before going to bed. Sometimes, before they'd hang up, Dad would get upset.

“You didn't say ‘I love you!’ You *have* to say it. I'm not hanging up until you say it.”

They fought a lot too. When they first moved in together, they'd argue about everything. The color of the furniture, who was supposed to clean the kitchen, 爸爸's lack of timeliness. Dad says there were times that Mom got jealous when they hung out with a group of friends, complaining that my Dad didn't pay enough attention to her in the group setting.

You know how Mom gives the silent treatment when she's mad? I know Mom has never been mad at you for more than a day, but Dad says that sometimes, she wouldn't talk to him for days. After work, he'd sit in his car at a park, needing some time to himself before coming home and trying to talk to her. After a few days, they'd make up. Dad says they'd lie in bed together, and he would hold her and apologize.

“Sorry honey, 我愛你.¹³”

They never really *talked it out*, at least, not in the way you would consider healthy communication. But at the end of the day, they knew how much they loved each other, and that was enough to forgive and move on.

After Mom's gone, you'll be the only person Dad has left. You'll still argue—there will be moments where he feels abandoned as you explore adulthood on your own, travel with friends, take steps in your career and relationship. You'll still feel like you're navigating a complicated maze of hurt feelings and grief, trying to become your own person while knowing that home will never be the same—you and Dad will have to build a new version of home, just the two of you.

But I promise you'll be closer than you've ever been before. There's so much about Mom that you don't know, that you'll have to learn from his stories. At the end of the day, you know how much you love each other, and maybe that will be enough.

¹³ I love you.

Step 5: Learn to forgive

For the next few years, Dad will be defined by grief. His resentment towards you is not because of his Chineseness or his stubbornness or a lack of care for you, but rather due to his overwhelming fear of losing Mom and his love for her. He does not *want* to assign you a role that a child should never have to take on for their parent. He would never *want* to hurt you.

When you are here, and when you look back on it, you will be in such deep awe of my father's profound love. He loves 媽媽 so deeply, so devotedly, that none of his personal needs or desires come before his desperation to save her and his dedication to take care of her. A Reuter's study from 2009 showed that 20.8% of men left their wives when they developed cancer, compared to 2.9% of women when their partner was ill.¹⁴ 爸爸 never once considered not taking on the burden of caretaking, the sacrifice of his own livelihood for her. You cannot begin to fathom the depths of his unconditional love— and you should know that if it was *you* on that hospital bed, his only child, the depths of his love and grief would be just as deep.

Of course, knowing this does not erase the deep feelings of anger, abandonment, and guilt that will be deeply rooted in your being. Almost every therapy session you will attend in the two years leading up to 媽媽's death will be spent trying to understand him, working to reconcile his treatment of you with the deep love that you knew he has but cannot see.

¹⁴ Life, Reuters. "Men More Likely than Women to Leave Partner with Cancer." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, November 12, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-partners-health-idUSTRE5AB0C520091112>.

Now, while she's gone, while you have lost your mother, and your dad has lost his life partner, you will have found the love that we have for each other. You will have learned to see what we could not when we were fighting, struggling day by day to survive, broken.

Without her, we are no longer whole, no longer mom, dad and child, no longer the family that you recognize from childhood. We are also no longer a family enmeshed in battle, constantly fighting against known and unknown forces of terror that threaten to tear my mother away from us. Gradually, as the months pass, and the nights where you hear your father wailing from his room become fewer and fewer, we will become something entirely different, just two people who have undergone the unimaginable, the threads of your love for each other not completely shredded. Eventually, Dad will tell you about the work he's doing in therapy, how he is able to say goodnight and goodmorning to the photo of my mother on the wall without crying now, how he uses her bowl to eat dinner to feel closer to her. Slowly, your dad will learn how to be a parent to his daughter again, comforting you when you burst into tears remembering her smell when the two of us eat breakfast without her, asking you about your plans after graduation.

It will be hard to reconcile this man with the father you have resented for the last few years. You will learn how to absolve yourself of the guilt, to process the experiences that you should have never had to have. You will relearning who he is, what kind of man he is when he is no longer lost in grief and hopelessness. Rebuilding is not a smooth process, there are still moments of tension where you will still be pulling apart the boundaries between my obligations to yourself and the obligations you hold to your family. There will still be tenuous moments in your relationship when you feel like you still have to hold the burden of his emotional weight.

Resentment does not cease to exist, there are days where it comes to the surface for both of you,

bitter that the other will never experience the exact grief and emotional experience that pains you.

To be honest, most days, you will choose to let go of that resentment. You will savor the moments where we laugh about my mom's idiosyncrasies and habits over dinner instead of you having to pull him out of the depths of despondency at the mention of her favorite vegetable dish of green string beans. You will just be happy to have your father back, to reunite with the father of your childhood. Most days, you will be simply happy we have both somehow survived. You will be all too eager to grow to love him again, to forgive. Now, I believe, perhaps, you can repair.

Step 6: Spend time with your dad

On the weekends, in between Mock Trial tournaments and afternoons spent at the Scripps pool, you'll take the I-10 and the 57 back to Diamond Bar.

Try to get home by Saturday morning, because Saturday afternoons will be spent honing your badminton skills, you and 爸爸 playfully bickering over whether you hit the birdie outside or not. On the car ride home, you'll talk about how worried you are about graduation, about finding a career direction that feels fulfilling. He doesn't think you should be stressed. After all, he immigrated here so that you could build a happy life for yourself. He thinks you'd make a good teacher—he's impressed by how you talk about your work at the Writing Center.

"I think you could be really good at it. Plus, you'll have lots of time in the summer to spend with family."

In the evening, you'll help 奶奶 with dinner, mixing garlicky sauces in little bowls and making sure the rice is steamed a little too long—just how Dad likes it. Parts of dinner are quieter, tears running down both our faces as we reminisce about the way Mom scolded us for putting dirty feet on the couch. It hurts most when you ask Dad a question about her—her favorite fruit perhaps—and he pauses before admitting, “I don't know.” Other times, you won't be able to stop laughing as Dad excitedly tells you about how he's just purchased a harmonica—how there are four different types and he's bought one that's conducive for beginners. He'll pull out his phone with the list of English words he heard this week that he wants you to define. You'll learn the Chinese translations, trying to write the characters with pencil on scratch paper on the dining table.

Past me, you'll be happy you've made it here. Things will be okay, I promise.

Last weekend, my dad and I had a picnic on my mom's grave. We ate sandwiches that we had prepared that morning while cutting down the stems of white roses we had bought her. We laughed about the flower shop owner, how his dog yipped at our feet as we bought the bouquet. We talked about my future, discussing what I should do after graduation.

“You should travel,” he told me. “You need to go out, live life, experience things while you're young. The most important thing to me is that you're happy.”

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