

There's news, there's history, and there's memory. History is a text, but memory, that's something inside us. History records what it considers important. Memory has no such requirement. What deserves to be remembered is the same as what's remembered, however unimportant, or even untrue.

Dolores died on a Sunday morning. The day after her death, O.J. Simpson's home in Brentwood was offered for sale at an auction. That was the lead story, above the fold and upper right, in Monday's *Dallas Morning News* where Dolores's obituary appeared. And the Associated Press reported that Bosnian Serbs had given a hero's funeral to war criminal Radovan Karadzic. Dallas County was tackling a worse-than-usual mosquito problem. The paper also delivered a single-page insert on heavy stock for VoiceNet, which was a paging service.

The news of the day can disconnect us from what is actually new in our life. But only at first. Gradually or suddenly, we take it in, and we come to understand what has happened to us. In my case, however significant the experience of that day was for me, I understood it was common. As I stood at the window in our upstairs bedroom on a Monday morning, I could only see rooftops and treetops, and I knew that out in the neighborhood, in the city, and under however far the skies extended, people were breathing their last. And those who cared were keeping them company.

After Dolores died, what I wanted most was her continued presence. Since that was impossible, I settled for substitutes. Her voice continued to answer the phone in our house when no one was home for months after the funeral. The storage boxes with her papers and keepsakes, the trunks that preserved her clothing, the Hon filing cabinets with albums of photographs, the newspaper from Monday, July 14, 1997, these made it much further; in fact, all the way until a few months ago, some twenty-five years later, when I decided it was long past the time to clean it all out.

The months I spent going through these leftovers in the storage room off my garage, my purpose was double-sided. There was the task of discarding. As much as possible, everything needed to go. But there was also the prospecting, the sifting through for a glimmer, a gold flake, a nugget.

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When I found a *TIME Annual 1997 The Year in Review* in the storage room, I removed its bright jacket. The full cover photograph of Princess Diana's funeral in Westminster Abbey shows a coffin covered with blooming flowers, carried by guards wearing colorful uniforms. What was left was the slate grey hard cover, as somber as a headstone. The editors of *TIME* had it right, I suppose, even if they exaggerated when they said that the entire world mourned after the Princess of Wales, died in a car wreck on August 13, 1997. And they confessed the reason, though overstating it, when they asserted that "people everywhere" had been exposed to years of media coverage of Diana.

“Princess Diana’s death was one of those large events that happen in an instant....” So the editors of *TIME* put it. The instants of the deaths of Diana and Dolores had only been separated by fifty days, a gap from July 13 to August 31. That summer, I found it hard not to resent, however irrationally, how the earlier instant seemed to be caught in my mind in a backwash from the later one. Diana certainly isn’t on the cover of *my* year in review. But I don’t need to take it too personally. Mother Teresa also had her notice in *TIME*’s *1997 The Year in Review*. She died on September 5, less than a week after Diana and only a day before the royal funeral. Mourning for her was mostly confined to a crowd in Calcutta.

Truly, no need to take it personally. Over fifty million people died in 1997, and *TIME*’s *1997 The Year In Review* has a paragraph for only a handful of them. The *Milestones* section comes at the end of the book, after the tribute pages for Diana, two pages for Mother Teresa, and a single page for Jacques Cousteau. The editors of *TIME*’s “honor role of other notables” unspools from Eddie Arcaro to Fred Zinnemann. It includes Colonel Tom Parker, a carnival barker who discovered Elvis, and Richard Berry, the composer of *Louie Louie*. Schoichi Yokoi also died in 1997. He was the Japanese soldier found defending his cave on Guam, nearly thirty years after the end of World War II. Gerda Christian died in 1997. Young Gerda was Hitler’s devoted secretary. She had made it all the way to eighty-three, after declining the poison pills that the Fuhrer gave her in 1945 as his parting gift.

*TIME 1997 The Year in Review* is a coffee table book. Its authorship is collective, attributed to “the editors.” I sat with it on the floor of the storage room off my garage, reading from the jacket cover flap. “Years, like people, have personalities,” it says. It says the year 1997 was notable for its “highly emotional tone.” It declares with confidence that “the keystone event of the year was certainly the unexpected death of Diana, Princess of Wales....” It takes no great sensitivity to understand that *certainly* is an adverb easily misused. Or to acknowledge that a collective truth simply may not apply to the individual. On the back of the jacket, I saw a montage. Six photos. Only one is Diana. The other five have simple captions, all in present tense from the editors of *TIME*, as though these events from twenty-five years ago were somehow still happening: *Mother Teresa dies. Tiger Woods wins the Masters. The comet Hale-Bopp passes. Pathfinder lands on Mars. A sheep is cloned.*

I must have bought this book. Did I actually buy this book? I must have, in 1998, I don’t remember. It had been buried for twenty some years under the lid of the same plastic trunk that hid the July 14, 1997 edition of *The Dallas Morning News*, the get well cards bound with rubber bands, the sympathy cards, the high school annual from Our Lady of Victory in Fort Worth, and dozens of faded manilla folders. I was finally going through the storage trunks, the Hon cabinets, and the bankers boxes on refrigerator shelving in my storage room. This was not a labor meant to spark joy. I was not moving into assisted living or otherwise downsizing. The intention is to throw things away, but the point is to remember, if only for an instant.

“What’s in *your* wallet?” Haven’t you heard that question asked a thousand times in the commercials for a bank credit card? A few days after the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death, I came out of the storeroom with Dolores’s red wallet. Its cracked and peeling plastic skin was not doing well. Inside, the multiple pockets were as she left them, full. I found the white business card, blue type, all lower case, for Dolores’s clinical psychology practice. Laminated photos of Ben and Eden, our son and daughter, who were thirteen and eleven in 1997; they were half those ages in the photos. Also, a folded prescription from an ophthalmologist, and a baker’s dozen of other cards -- from an interior designer, a PPO, a blood donor identification, a Museum of Art membership. Our son’s player’s card from Mavericks Basketball Camp. A membership card for the American Psychological Association. There were receipts from The Children’s Collection for four pairs of khaki pants, and for trousers and shorts paid to Circle Ten Council, Boy Scouts of America. A library card, a health club card, more photos of Ben and Eden, a business card of the Director, Hotel Metropole, Lisboa, Portugal. A driver’s license that expired “on birthday 1982.” Her mother’s driver’s license, which had expired in 1977. A folded note for *Robaxisal – 2 tabs 4x/day and Utram, 1 every 4-6 hrs for pain.*

I did find a nugget in one of the pockets. It was a scrap torn out of a *New Yorker* from the *Goings On About Town* section. *The Magnificent Andersons* was playing July 11 and July 13 at the Museum of Modern Art on W. 53<sup>rd</sup> in Midtown. There was no year in the text that Dolores had torn out, but she had underlined the phrase *Dolores Costello, the fragile blond beauty of the silent era*. She told me once that her star-struck mother had named her after Dolores del Rio, but I may have misheard. She could have said *Costello*, that fragile blond beauty. The dates of the two screenings were coincidences almost mystical – July 11, which is Dolores’s birthday, and July 13, a day she died.

And there was some actual gold in the wallet. In a tiny manila envelope no bigger than a business card, I found a gold cap from one of her teeth. Why she had been carrying it with her in her wallet, I have no idea.

iii

“Just scan it all, digitize it.”

That’s what a friend told me over dinner. We were discussing this project of mine, to throw away the papers that Dolores left behind, and the records I saved from the months of her illness, and whatever else I had kept safe for the past twenty-five years. I remarked how difficult it was, both to keep it or to discard it.

“Just scan it all.”

My friend seemed to think my problem was the physical space the materials occupied. But the problem was metaphysical.

He suggested I consider how much people a thousand years from now might learn if we archived our personal papers, even our store receipts, tax records, love letters. He said I should take a boxload to the public library, as a contribution to history.

“They’ll take it,” he said, “That’s what they do.”

The archiving of ephemera makes no sense to me. Instead, I want to believe the opposite. Don't we need to have the sense to leave the room, and to take our things with us, if only to make room for others? When we hike in the wilderness, isn't the rule to pack out whatever we bring in, to leave no trace? Why leave anything behind?

Archive is an ugly word. Noun and verb, it is what's kept and also the place of the keeping. It has an odor of the historical. It is covered in dust or preserved in amber. Yes, there are National Archives, which sounds important. But then again, my everyday email can also be archived.

One side effect of the digital pill we have swallowed is that anything can be archived. We are no longer hampered by the limitations of shelf space. So our judgment of what to save is clouded by the Cloud. Is everything online now, or does it only seem that way? At one site, *Archives of Our Own*, we are invited to "store memories, create collections, and more." That *and more* is a mysterious quantity, vague but limitless, like infinity plus one.

What of mine, then, is not worth archiving?

What qualifies to be thrown away?

iv

It's a Saturday morning. I am opening up another banker's box in the storage room, one of many stuffed with Dolores's manila folders.

Dolores kept manilla folders with five-year plans and official papers that had her signature on them above a typed *Dolores Dyer, Ph.D.* There were minutes from committee meetings and reports prepared for task forces. She had meetings, speaking engagements, symposia, programs and presentations. All of them came with flyers – handouts on a sheet of colored paper, sometimes a pamphlet. She presented at the YMCA Wednesday Noon Forum. Free of charge, brown baggers welcome, bring a friend. At a 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Singles Fair in 1987, she provided an answer to a question that might have been equally puzzling to anyone married: *How to Know And Get What You Want Sexually.*

Dolores favored Ziploc bags for keepsakes. Not the sandwich size, but the quart bags. I know we attended the symphony on May 14, 1994, because I found tickets stubs she had sealed in a Ziploc. And not just the tickets (Section B, Row B, Seat 23 and 24), but the program as well, and a newspaper clipping about the concert. On page 52 of the program, Louis Lane, the conductor that evening, stared at me from his black and white headshot. Dolores knew Louis, he was a friend, and she had asked him to sign on page 52. She must have then "shown the kids," who would have been nine and eight, before bagging the program, because one of them had drawn a moustache on the photo.

Speak, Dolores. What did you think the future wanted with your ticket stubs and concert program? You saved a *Weekly TV Magazine* from our local paper, also in a Ziploc. I tried to tune into your thoughts about the week beginning August 15, 1976. Did you keep the magazine for the faces of David Brinkley and John Chancellor on its cover? The story inside complains about “those familiar voices telling us what we already know.” Live coverage of the Republican National Convention was starting on Monday, on all three networks. Tuesday night, for those in need of a respite, the local ABC affiliate offered *The Captain and Tennille*, with special guest Art Carney.

In a thousand years, maybe our descendants would in fact value some of this as evidence of the lives we led. The Ziploc bag might be a museum piece, labeled a disparaged byproduct from the age of fossil fuel.

*Catalogue raisonne* is a more handsome phrase than archive. It belongs to the world of art and scholarship, indicating a list of an artist’s known works, the titles, dimensions, and what is called provenance. The International Foundation for Art Research even maintains a comprehensive list of catalogue raisonnés. A catalogue of the catalogues.

Other than what I am writing now, there will be no catalog of what Dolores put in her manilla folders or her Ziploc bags. The flyers and the ticket stubs are not works of art. Still, I think there was a creative impulse behind all of it. Her art was conceptual, the notion that the events in her life were worth remembering.

v

The people we spend our lives with also have lives without us. That much is obvious. In addition to our daily separations, we have our separate pasts. With Dolores, that truth seemed even truer, because she was a generation older than I was. We had a twenty-two-year difference between us. Nonetheless, she facilitated the illusion that whatever preceded me didn’t matter. It was flattery, I suppose.

So it was with surprise as I worked in the storage room that I found clues to the time before my time in her life. They were hidden in one of her folders, or sealed in her Ziploc bags or within one of the dozens of her discolored kraft envelopes. Photos, letters, a legal document, a discolored postcard.

It was 2022, twenty-five years after Dolores had died of cancer. She still seemed to require further attention from me. Not only our life together, but her life apart.

The first part of Dolores’s life fell in a chronological space between my parents’ childhood and my own. She had come into her teens during the 1940s. There was war in Europe and the Pacific, but if it left an impression, she never said a word about it. I found a kraft envelope with photos of her from those days, some with unidentified strangers in the picture. Black and whites, old times, cars that belonged to long-ago roads.

I wonder who she thought she was saving these photos for. Perhaps if someone told us exactly when to do it, we would be able to dispose of all our keepsakes ourselves, presumably right before the end. Maybe the day before. We could do without them for that one last day of our lives.

I knew that Dolores had been an only child. I knew, though with no clarity, that her father had disappeared early on. She had also told me that Frances, her mother, had shipped her off to Oklahoma to live with another family for months at a time. No details, and nothing more about the mystery of those days in Oklahoma. But at the bottom of a banker's box I found a clue, a pale green numbered receipt that had the watermark of a financial instrument. It was time-stamped, June 14, 1942. *Receipt For Remitter, to detach and hold.* In handwritten script from the days when penmanship was prized, someone had filled the spaces alongside *Sent to, Address, and For.* A payment for Dolores Dyer's board had been assigned to Mrs. Chester Halley, Minco, Oklahoma. It was possible, I suppose, that the Halleys were relatives, and that Frances had paid a relative for boarding her twelve-year-old daughter. I saw a handwritten end-of-term date, June 14, 1943. One year.

It wasn't too difficult to look up Mrs. Chester Halley in Minco, Oklahoma. The late Chester Halley and his wife, Lucile, both appeared in the online obituary of their older son, Wayne Baker Halley, who had graduated from Minco High School and went on from there to Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee and then to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky. Wayne spent his life in the church. He served as a music minister in Baptist churches in Kentucky and Florida. He had been a charter member of *The Centurymen*, a male chorus of Ministers of Music, all Baptist, performing throughout the country.

Wayne would have been 17 in 1942. Dolores might have had a crush on him. Just as likely, he on her. No mention in the obituary though about any of that. Or about Wayne going off to war, no landing at Normandy or fighting on one of the smaller islands in the Pacific. Among his survivors, a brother, James, was still alive and still in Minco. Eleven years younger than Wayne, James would have been six in the summer of 1942. Would he remember Dolores from eighty years before? She had her thirteenth birthday that summer in Minco; he might recall her blowing out the candles on a cake, if that had ever happened.

I could call him and ask. It was 2022, and James is a wheat farmer in Minco, though the operations are now in his son's hands. At 86, he would have time to talk, especially this year, when heavy rains have left the wheat harvest at a standstill.

I could call James, but calling would be crazy.

The blue plastic trunk, as big as a footlocker, had red side latches that snap into place. They had not been unlatched since whatever was inside had been put there. No treasure in this chest, but I did find clear plastic boxes of costume jewelry. And lots of clothing, all of which I recognized, even after so many years. The clothing was folded neatly, if a little compressed, the jackets and blouses still on hangers. I piled it in front of me on the concrete floor.

My hours in the storage room off the garage had dwindled to only two or three a week. Like many projects that start full speed ahead, this one was losing momentum. My discarding required more energy than I had. And no matter how far I went, there was always further to go. There were days when I was convinced that the only way to get to the end of this journey was to abandon it. Also, it was August, and my windowless storage room sweltered, a sweatbox even with the garage door open.

I told myself I had arrived at a new understanding. I wanted nothing more to do with yesterday, I was done with it. I would seize the day and let go of the day before.

This was a feeling that came and went.

For the search term *hoarding*, Google offers a *People also ask* feature on its results page. People ask what is the main cause of hoarding, is hoarding a mental illness, and how do you fix a hoarder. These questions that people also ask do not produce definitions of the disorder. And some of the online descriptions of hoarding are so gentle, hoarding hardly seems disorderly. For example, "People with hoarding disorder have persistent difficulty parting with possessions." Who *doesn't* have that difficulty, I might ask. "Attempts to part with possessions lead to decisions to save them." So far, not so bad. But then the description fattens, with the appearance of the phrase "compulsive hoarding," and that tips the scales. Make an appointment with a doctor, I was advised online, "if you often trip or fall over materials in your home."

My hoard of Dolores's papers, photos, clothing, and other artifacts of her life, illness, and death was not actually in the house. The storage room off the garage was not underfoot. So, there was no risk of tripping. And since the room off the garage had a solid door, what is stored could also be kept out of sight. I had never minded the plastic trunks or the storage bins that are sized by the fluid gallons. Likewise the Hon two-drawer filing cabinets that were stacked one on top of the other. Or the twenty banker boxes, most on shiny refrigerator shelving, some on the concrete floor.

Truth be told, more than twenty banker boxes.

I suppose I didn't want to throw things away because, you know, memories.

"Life is a ball of yarn."

A therapist told me that, when we were talking about my difficulty throwing things away, since everything seems to be connected to everything else.

"Life is a ball of yarn."

Fair enough, I thought, it's a ball of yarn. But it's also the cat playing with it. And sometimes it's not yarn, it's something thinner, a thread. And best not to pull on a loose one, because things can unravel.

What did I need to get rid of now? Maybe the albums of photographs that were in eight horizontal drawers of file cabinets. Hundreds, thousands of them, from those days when we actually had our rolls of film developed and printed at the drugstore.

I decided to never mind the photographs.

Then there was the clothing from the blue plastic chest. I had already given some of Dolores's clothing to the Genesis Women's Shelter, along with her purses of all sizes and materials. Shoulder bags, clutches, plastic, leather, hide, suede, felt, straw. Some weeks ago, after going through a different plastic tub, I drove two full bags to the shelter, waiting in the lines of cars at the rear entrance; people were using charity as a way to clean their closets, and I suppose I was, too.

The pile of clothing on the floor in front of me now was the clothing of the dead. Ferragamo boots, spikey purple heels, a mink hat from an era before mine, a knitted black shawl, a golden Ann Taylor jacket. There were blouses with pads sewn into their shoulders.

It's a phrase that can be taken two different ways, the clothing of the dead. There is what was worn in life, but also what is worn in death, in place of a shroud. Dolores had certainly been clothed in her coffin, and I must have chosen what, but all these years later I don't remember what. Maybe her night gown, for that longest night ahead. On the other hand, the clothing that I was discarding felt very much alive.

It was like touching a shed skin. And astonishing, how the fragrance of it had remained behind. Could this be a hallucination? Olfactory hallucination is indeed a thing. It has technical synonyms and near synonyms, which is typical in medical science, where you cannot piss, you have to micturate. *Phantosmia* – hallucinating a smell – can be caused by a head injury or an upper respiratory infection, other trauma, brain tumors, or simply by aging. But phantosmia is smelling what isn't there. *Parosmia* is similar, yet not exactly the same. It's smelling something that is there, but doesn't smell the way it should. As when you put your nose to garlic and smell rose or lilac. None of that was what I was experiencing in the storage room. When I buried my face in the familiar sweater of a woman long gone, it smelled as if she were still alive.

A coat, a sweater, a blouse, a snood. Discarding the clothing of the dead feels far more personal than putting papers in the trash. It bordered on creepiness. In the pocket of one jacket, her eyeglasses, for eyes that no longer see. I put both jacket and glasses in a trash bag, one of the thicker, bigger bags that I use for the brown leaves in winter, after they fall from the red oaks and the sycamores in my yard. There were scarves and belts, one of the belts still with a store tag on it and never worn. Would the women who used the Genesis shelter ever wear



one of these tops with shoulder pads? Maybe so. It was a fashion that had returned before, and might well again.

The article of clothing I associate most with Dolores isn't a blouse with shoulder pads, or a scarf, or a jacket. It is as the pillbox hat was to Jackie Kennedy, but it isn't a hat, either. It's her slippers. I found a pair in the storage room, still kept in its shoebox. The box was branded *Jacques Levine* on its pale purple top, *Made in Spain*. Dolores bought them over and over throughout the years of our marriage. You can find their current incarnation on [jacqueslevine.com](http://jacqueslevine.com), where they are pretty much unchanged. According to [jacqueslevine.com](http://jacqueslevine.com), Jacques Levine "has created fashion slippers for women of all ages" since 1936. The pair in the box may have had some rot, but it had not gone out of style. Time has not passed. Click on *Classics* at [jacqueslevine.com](http://jacqueslevine.com), and there they are, seemingly the same, "pleasantly pleated for a classic look." Leather upper, leather lining, suede sole, a wedge heel. White, and available for \$138, tax included. According to Jacques Levine, the slippers are still made in Spain. Maybe today by the grandchildren of someone who made the pair in my storage room, or by a more recent immigrant from North Africa.

I can tell myself there is absolutely no need for me to keep the white slippers. Or the pair of she-wore-them-all-the-time Ferragamo boots that were buried under some blouses. Or Dolores's rarely worn spikey high heels in a clear plastic shoe box on a shelf in the storage room. I get it, they need to go. Still, it is a struggle. And I don't really want an answer to the questions *people also ask*. I don't want the answer applied to me.

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"You shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new." So God tells us in Leviticus, chapter 26, referring to grain, and promising both leftovers and an abundant harvest as a reward for obedience. A medieval commentator explained it this way, "The threshing floors will be full of the new grain, but the storehouses will still be so full of the old grain that you will have to move it somewhere else to put the new grain into them." It makes sense. But what does it mean when you clear out the old and have nothing new to replace it? I had no new grain, so to speak, for the threshing floor of my storage room. All I was going to have would be empty boxes and shelves and trunks. Eventually I will hear the echoing call to move into smaller spaces that I could fill. I will move from this house to a condominium, from condominium to hospital room, and from there into my own permanent storage, a box in the ground. Maybe that was the underlying explanation for my desire to keep so many things, unseen in storage. Keeping them was keeping death at bay.

Death is certainly a way of clearing space for something new.

vii

When I met Dolores in 1974, she was already Dolores Dyer, Ph.D. But there was an earlier time when Dr. Dyer was only one of many possibilities. She was a Catholic school girl at Our Lady of

Victory in Fort Worth as a teenager. She was a pregnant high school dropout at fifteen, a newlywed for a year, a divorced single mother, a wife again for seventeen years, and then a thirty-three-year-old getting her high school diploma around the same time her child did. In 1966, with a B.A. in English from North Texas State, she was a thirty-seven-year-old grandmother. It seems that she was undecided about where to go from there, judging by the number of vocational interest tests she took in 1966 that I found in a manila folder in the storage room, inside a banker's box crowded with her manila folders. There were four of them. Five, if I count the one she took twice.

The Kuder Preference is meant to measure what an individual likes or dislikes and to compare it to the preferences of those in various careers. Dolores learned that her interests were shared by lab techs, meteorologists, and officers in the Marine Corp. The Strong Interest Inventory boasts that it's backed by more than eighty years of research into how people with similar interests are employed. When Dolores took the Strong, it had only twenty years behind it and listed thirty-one occupations, starting with Artist and ending with Sister Teacher. Dolores took the Strong test twice, the second time using a form labeled "for men." That form had nearly twice as many career options on it, including "advertising man." The Profile Sheet for the California Psychological Inventory had 462 true or false questions that were meant to produce a description of the test-taker's personality. There were scales to measure dominance, capacity for status, sociability, social presence, self-acceptance, independence, empathy, responsibility, socialization, self-control, good impression, communality sense of well-being, tolerance, achievement via independence, intellectual efficiency, psychological-mindedness, flexibility, and femininity – masculinity. Dolores scored above female norms, except for self-control and good impression. On the Minnesota Vocational Interest Inventory, one of her highest scores was for Milk Wagon Driver.

The Minnesota Vocational Interest Inventory, meant "to help you decide if you are interested in the same things as men in various jobs," was the most fascinating, mostly because Dolores preserved both the form with its questions and the actual filled-in circles of her answers. I sat on the floor of the storage room with its pages in my hand, as though I had found papyrus from Tutankhamun's tomb.

Like the impossible riddles the hero might be asked in a fairy tale, each question presented three potential tasks, and Dolores had to fill in a circle for two of them. An L circle for Like, a D circle for Dislike. For example, the first question offered these three options: a. Catch up on your letter writing; b. Try to fix a kitchen clock; c. Discuss your philosophy of life with someone. Dolores liked discussing her philosophy of life and disliked trying to fix a kitchen clock. For question two, she disliked typing a letter for a friend and liked taking a broken lock apart to see what was wrong with it. On question five, she liked watching an appendicitis operation and disliked attending a lecture. On question twelve she disliked making a model train and liked making a radio set. The third option of question twelve was repairing a clock again; Dolores seemed consistently opposed to working on devices that kept time. On question twenty-six, she was unwilling to conduct research on improving airplane design but happy to do an experiment to prove the earth is round. She preferring making drawings for a newspaper to

checking stock in a storeroom, writing a novel rather than fixing a wristwatch. A course in biology was better than one in cost accounting, and she would learn to use a slide rule before she would varnish a floor, fix a doorbell instead of sorting mail, cook a meal rather than change a tire on an automobile. So it went, often if not always mysteriously. Why would she like replacing shorted wires but dislike reading gas meters? I suppose it's hard to make sense of the choices on this test just as it is in life. On question fifty-seven, Dolores disliked repairing clothing but liked adjusting a carburetor. Her only other option on that question was polishing an automobile. This, too, is how life is. Sometimes bad choices are all you have, but choices must still be made.

At first, she seemed to pick the more physically demanding choice, but by the time she got to question eighty-eight she may have been tired. By then, she preferred lifting weights to addressing envelopes. And by question one hundred and eleven, she even changed her mind and liked repairing a clock. But why did she think it would be better to re-upholster an old davenport than to work in a laundry or to develop better recipes for baked goods, which were the three options for question one hundred and thirty-nine? In total, there were one hundred and fifty-eight questions on the Minnesota Vocational Interest Inventory in 1933, each with three choices – one to like, one to dislike, one to never mind. If only life were so simple.

When Dolores took all these tests, she was already in her thirties. Maybe she thought she had no time to choose the wrong occupation and start over; she needed science, or something quantitative. I discarded the tests, and I tore up the manila folder, too.

viii

A memory: Dolores and I were at a party. It might have been New Year's Eve, I don't know what year, I don't remember where. Someone at the party informed Dolores that a former husband, Sam Geeteh, had passed away.

End of conversation.

Dolores and Sam had been married for seventeen years. No matter. She didn't ask any further questions, nothing about when, the cause, nothing. Whether Sam was alive or dead seemed to require no further attention from her.

Going through photographs and letters Dolores saved in her manila folders reminded me that my knowledge of her was incomplete. About prior marriages or boyfriends, if any, I was in the dark. She had permitted me the presumption that none of it mattered, but all of us will allow ourselves our secrets and their mementos. Exhibit A, found in a faded kraft envelope in a manila folder in a banker's box, a souvenir photo from Pappy's Showland. Undated, but from the era when strip clubs used to be burlesque clubs, and an evening out that might have begun with Henny Youngman would conclude with a woman in costume getting nearly naked on a stage. Dolores was of that era.

Pappy was Pappy Dolson, who opened Pappy's Showland with Abe Weinstein at 500 W. Commerce in Oak Cliff across the river from downtown Dallas in 1946. It was a showy club, towering over the street. Henny Youngman did play at Pappy's. Bob Hope did, too, along with the strippers, part of burlesque, as it was called. In the souvenir photo, two couples are sharing a table. The men wear suits and smoke cigarettes. And there's Dolores, leaning into the man she's with, her arms around his neck. She looks no older than a teenager and may not have been. Nobody looks all that happy. They seem somewhat resigned, caught by the camera, the men accepting that the Showland photographer is going to sell them an overpriced souvenir.

Dolores's keepsake was in a cardboard sleeve with Pappy's logo on its cover. You can see the same sleeve and more or less the same photo – though of course the couples are different – posted by the nostalgic on Pinterest and Instagram. Abe Weinstein has his history as well. He appears in the Warren Commission report, though not because of any connection to Pappy or the Showroom. Weinstein also owned the Colony Club, two doors down from Jack Ruby's seedier Carousel Club.

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I found old postcards collected on long ago trips to Rome, Mexico City, and Las Vegas in the same Mead clasp envelope that had hidden the Showland souvenir. Also, two love letters. Or, one was a letter, the other was just a note. This note, signed *Joe* on a blue prescription pad, came from the offices of Drs. Rothschild & Somer, Diagnosis and Internal Medicine - Diseases of the Heart. "Darling," Dr. Rothchild wrote on the blank line after *For*. He then filled in the space next to *Rx*: "Just a quick line – I am always under pressure around here. I hope you have some use for the enclosed odds & ends. They are terribly costly!" Dr. Rothchild had turned his prescription pad into the equivalent of a gift card.

Who was this Dr. Rothschild who specialized in diseases of the heart? The waters of the past are murky at best, but when I type and click, his obituary rises to the surface: Joseph Eli Rothschild, 1912 – 1978. Son of Abram, or Abrasha, born in 1882 in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. Married to Miriam Rothschild (born Zesmer in 1916). Four children.

Dolores had kept a note from a doctor. The letter she had saved, in an envelope postmarked Australia, was more effusive. And its two pages must have been part of some even longer message, because they began, "But now, after 2 hours on this letter, I must go." It then went on. It mentioned a wife, five children, and the need to "overcome all the practical problems." It declared, "I love you. I need you. If you come here, I won't let you go back." The sign off also had drama. "Please love me, Peter." This Peter had sent his mix of pleading and demanding via airmail to Miss Dolores Dyer in 1972. Fifty years later, I put his letter back in its envelope and noticed the P.O. Box return address. If Peter in Australia was using a P.O. Box to correspond with Dolores, that might have been his solution to one of the practical problems of having a wife and five children.

So Dolores had or seemed to have had affairs, in two cases with men already married. One in the neighborhood and one in a different hemisphere. I wonder, is it easier sometimes to unravel the mysteries of the dead than of the living, since you are free to rummage in their past and come to conclusions, and the object of your inquiry has no ability either to correct you or to misdirect you? It's all supposition, I suppose.

It's also a cliché, the discovery of love letters after the deaths of sender or receiver. It's a human interest story and always good for a popular feature. "She found long-lost love letters hidden in her attic..." (*Washington Post*). "Vancouver man finds 80-year-old love letter in wall" (*Globalnews.ca*). "Found! A 200-year-old love letter" (*Glamour*). And there are also the variant stories, which are mostly about a lover letter that finally reaches its destination. "A love letter finds its recipient after 72 years..." (*cnn.com*). "Love letter lost for years returned to 90-year-old widow." (*ABC7.com*).

A related genre, the advice in magazines, blogs, social forums, and elsewhere about what to do with such letters. "Should We Keep Old Love Letters?" Natalie Perez-Gonzalez provides guidance in her blog. Another teasing headline, this one on *quora.com*: "I found a hidden box of love letters written to my wife before..." People weighed in on the hidden box. From the seventeen responses, only six voted for "put the box back in the closet."

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Dolores saved two other letters the manila folder. When the Elvis Presley stamp came out in 1993, she mailed letters to our own address – actually, she sealed two empty envelopes, there were no letters - one addressed to our daughter and one to our son,. Each of the envelopes bore an Elvis stamp, cancelled and postmarked January 8, which was the date it was released after the first day of issue ceremonies at Graceland. Dolores may have thought it would become a collectible. It turns out, the Elvis stamp isn't rare. In fact, Elvis is the top selling commemorative postage stamp "of all time" according to the U.S. Postal Service. As an actual stamp, it's worth the twenty-nine-cents face value. If you try selling it on Ebay, it's worth even less than face value, despite its depiction of the famous face of Elvis, tilting toward a microphone. In the same folder, she also preserved a receipt that said "Bear." It was from Art Restoration, a business that repaired broken Wedgewood vases or Lladro figurines. "Brown Teddy Bear," the receipt said. The specific job: "Reconstruct nose – may not match surface exactly." Our son had a favorite stuffed animal. Its repair must have been urgent, since a five-dollar rush charge was added to the twenty-dollar estimate.

Elvis envelopes, Bear receipt, Dr. Rothchild's prescription pad note and the pages from Peter's letter—it all went into the trash.

ix

Nothing in the room off my garage had the breath of life, but much of it seemed nonetheless to have a life of its own. It resisted its own destruction. In this regard it displayed some of the

characteristics of those malevolent dolls in a horror movie. When the inanimate has a will, it's terrifying; or, at the least, creepy. Take the bankers boxes for example. There was nothing of use in them, mostly papers in manila folders. So where was my sense coming from that I was losing something by emptying them? The boxes were a weight. Perhaps I was afraid some part of me would float away without them.

I took my time with it. It was an uncomfortable task, even as the swelter of August turned into fall weather, when it seemed even more unreasonable to be buried inside a storage room. I would work at it for an hour and then take refuge in the backyard. Outside, resting on the cushion of a chaise, I might look up into the outstretched arms of a red oak tree. I could see birds half hidden in the branches. What did these birds possess? What did the squirrels, who chased each other around the tree trunk? Were they holding on to nothing because they had no ability to do so, or because they had more understanding, or more faith, or whatever the equivalent might be, for birds and squirrels?

In October I stopped completely. It was too nice outside to return to boxes and bins that had already waited twenty-five years and could wait a little longer. The task had become like many other projects. It seemed necessary, but it was a fragile necessity. Stop for a while, and the obligation loosens, the determination softens. There's always an arbitrariness in what I decide to do. It's easy to lose purpose, which becomes a proof of purposelessness.

The year turned. I returned to the task. I brought two manila folders into the house and placed them on the dining room table. Both were stuffed with papers, pages of email correspondence from a "colon cancer discussion list," print outs of my research on diets and treatments, communications with doctors, and progress reports from the five months after the initial diagnosis. These folders looked their age; they were brown around the edges and spotted on the covers.

\*

Found in the first folder: a sheet of plastic, the size of standard paper. It showed four skeletal images, right and left anterior, left and right posterior, taken at Baylor University Medical Center on February 18, 1997, at 10:47 in the morning. Dyer Dolores, code letters, and, at the bottom, "output" produced at 12:32:59 by a Polaroid Helios Laser System. These pictures may be the ones that come closest to depicting what the body, formerly Dolores's, looks like today in its place at the cemetery on Howell Street. She had been in a tube for the scan. The two images on the left, top and bottom, showed an outline of her flesh. She looked heavier than I remembered, certainly fleshier than she would be five months later. On the right, two images that were skeletal, almost ghostly. Her spine, which seemed to be curving to the left, was pictured from the back, arching up to her skull.

Time has tentacles, the years touching backwards and forwards as well. If only this 1997 diagnostic had been done years earlier. It could have been. Polaroid had shipped its first Helios

dry processing laser in 1993. In 1999, it sold its Helios imaging system business “for an undisclosed price” to another company, which shut it down.

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Those months of 1997 from the middle of February to the middle of July were full of science. The two manila folders were full of it as well.

I found a physician’s progress report, the faxed copy so faded it could hardly be read. And an endoscopy report from February 1997, faxed and faded. And then the February report from the operation, separate from the initial colonoscopy that had produced the initial diagnosis of colon cancer, and less hopeful. *Preoperative diagnosis:* Abdominal pain, left ovarian cyst, and an obstructing mid transverse colon cancer. *Postoperative diagnosis:* left ovarian cyst, endometriosis of the uterus, intra-abdominal pelvic adhesions and obstructing mid transverse colon cancer with metastatic disease to the mesentery, retroperitoneum, going up to the pancreatic area.

It went on to name components of the operation, using language that carries its own kind of dread: laparotomy, lysis of adhesions, removal of left tube and ovary, extended right colectomy and mobilizations of the splenic flexure with an ileotransverse colic anastomosis. It named the surgeon and the assistant. I paused over the names. The anesthesiologist was Sigurdur S. Sigurdson, MD. Sigurdur Sigurdson was someone’s little boy, all grown up now, a doctor. I read the three-page, single-spaced description of *Findings and Technique:* “intubated...Foley catheter...abdomen and vagina and perianal and perirectal area prepped with iodine...knife went through...it was felt we would be completely unable to resect all these, because it was wrapping completely around the superior hemorrhoidal vessels and going up into the pancreatic areas as well...Bookwalter retractor...the mesentery was closed...good anastomosis was noted....”

On it went, in a fog of precision:

“...the knife went through the subcu as well as most of the fascia. Some of the bleeders were then coagulated with electrocautery and then entered into the abdominal cavity.... Right at the mid transverse colon was a large long cancer through the wall. Also, it was down the root of the mesentery, going along the middle colic vessels, down to the superior hemorrhoidal vessels as well and then going retroperitoneally all the way up to the pancreas. There was a large area of conglomerate of metastatic disease in this area, beginning to look like lymph nodes. If it was lymph nodes, it was totally taken over by cancer. It was felt we would be completely unable to resect all these...”

The use of “felt” seemed off to me.

Departments of Radiology and Medical Imaging had their say. The heart size was normal. The lungs were clear. The bones were intact. The Department of Pathology reported. There was chemistry, parasitology, virology, hematology, all the math of the dying body, within the normal

ranges or outside them. It was as though the impersonal had been multiplied by the indifferent to produce the inevitable.

After Dolores received them, I faxed the pages of reports to two doctors who were at UT Southwestern. My note is on the fax cover page: "Sending you this information in hopes you will be available for a consultation. Referred to you by Melanie Cobb." Melanie was Ian's mother. Ian Cobb was one of our son's best friends, both of them odd boys, bullied by classmates at the middle school they attended for children with "learning differences." I always thought Melanie was odd herself. But she was also a scientist, a biochemist of some distinction and on the faculty at UT Southwestern.

I don't remember any subsequent consultation though and found no paper record of one. It's possible the facts didn't merit one.

\*

In March, Dolores began chemotherapy. She was passed from the surgeon to the oncologist and also to a pain specialist. Dolores had never used my last name, but I notice that on notes to Dr. Vera, the pain doctor, she presented herself as Dolores Dyer Perkins. A xerox of a handwritten note was in the folder. "I have not had to use the Dilaudid prescribed on Saturday, along with Lortab #10," she wrote to Dr. Vera. "I try to stay a little ahead of the pain with the Lortab #10s. Consistently the pain is greater at night. I started the chemotherapy, 5 Fluorouracil Leucovorin, this Monday."

We collected information on the chemicals. We read all the "drug sheets" as though they were prophetic scripture. From the sheet on Fluorouracil – Adrucil, or 5-FU: "Fluorouracil disrupts the growth of cancer cells, which are then destroyed." Fluorouracil belonged to the group of drugs known as antimetabolites. Lots of side effects, some more common, some less. "Leucovorin may be given to stop the action of Methotrexate or to increase the effects of 5-Fluorouracil." On the drug sheets, leucovorin was sometimes called folinic acid. Everything had its name, its market name, and even a nickname.

Under the umbrella of a desk lamp and in the glow of a screen, I looked up the locations of clinical trials for "colon malignancies" around the country. That were nine in Texas that February. Dolores was bedridden after her initial surgery, so travel other than local for chemotherapy would not have been easy, and there seemed to be no good alternatives anyway. Still, I printed out the information. Twenty-five years later I was finally getting around to discarding it.

I threw out the abstract "Altered Metabolism and Mortality in Patients with Colon Cancer Receiving Chemotherapy," from the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. The Center for Alternative Medicine Research in Cancer at the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center had something appealing enough to send to my printer; it was probably the word "Alternative." So did an article about hydrazine sulfate. "Since hydrazine sulfate provides relief



of a spectrum of cancer symptoms..." I wrote down the source on my print out: Syracuse Cancer Research, Dr. Joseph Gold, 600 East Genesee St. Syracuse, NY 13202.

The manila folder was full of such alternatives, all roads not taken. The "selenium summary" began with the reassurance that selenium had been used for treating cancers as far back as the 1940s. Nonetheless, the best it could report after a "review of the literature" was that selenium "may play a role." Pages were written in the language of a country so foreign no tourist would ever be able to learn it; antineoplastons, peptides, amino acid derivatives, and carboxylic acids were on the vocabulary list. A Dr. Burzynski was treating "only those patients that can be enrolled in protocols and clinical trials" after an initial deposit of \$6,000, which was required before consultation, followed by twelve monthly deposits of \$1,000 "for miscellaneous supplies."

My print out from Infoseek, one of the rivals for Google's market in 1997, reminded me that I had searched for thymic protein A. Among the leads on its results page: "Pig skin graft on a mouse, made tolerant through a thymic transplant."

*Drug & Market Development* listed seven drugs under *New Approaches in the Treatment of Advanced Colorectal Cancer*. Its promising slogan: "Bridging the gap between R&D and marketing in the pharmaceutical industry." But Dolores had already agreed to a clinical trial of 5-Fluorouracil with Dr. Pippin and Texas Oncology. And fluorouracil was on the *New Approaches* list anyway. I wondered about the other six on the list -- Irinotecan, Marimastat, Oxaliplatin, Raltitrexed, Tegafur, and Zidovudine. Three paragraphs in the *New Approaches* text reported on a single 5-Fluorouracil study with 14 patients. "In the 14 patients, all of whom were evaluable, the overall objective response rate was 36%, with one complete response and four partial responses. Median duration of response was nine months and median survival was 16 months, with a one-year survival rate of 64%. To date, six patients have died." It was not a ringing endorsement.

The truth of it is, the folder was full of dead ends. After the discovery of her stage four colon cancer, the most reasonably optimistic expectation that Dolores had was for another five years—to be, as her surgeon Dr. Jacobson had put it when he came to visit her in recovery at the hospital after the initial surgery, "at the far end of the bell curve." That five-year hope turned out to be five months. The first month bedridden after a surgery, and the last month bedridden from increases in lorazepam and morphine.

x

As the stream of science became a trickle, it emptied into a cesspool of miracle cures and promotions that I also collected. Dr. Julian Whitaker's *Health & Healing* newsletter informed me that *Dr. Burzynski's Trial Is A Farce*. Dr. Burzynski had legal troubles, either for treating patients with "antineoplastons" or perhaps for his business practices. *Health & Healing* was sticking up for him. The screamer on the back cover of the newsletter hinted that the trial was part of a conspiracy: *Antineoplastons, and Why the Cancer Industry is Threatened*.

I don't know how I got on the Whitaker list, but I know why. When there are no realistic alternatives, fantasies are appealing. The envelopes with Whitaker's newsletters arrived with my name printed on the mailing label; they were not addressed to "resident". Same with a sales sheet from Bishop Enterprises, *BeHealthy-USA*, which was pitching the One Life formula. Like all good direct marketing, it used the word *free* and made a very special offer. Thanks to "a generous benefactor" who had provided funding, new customers could receive their first bottle of the One Life formula absolutely free ("one per family"). Another letter promoting "the all-natural healing secrets of Dr. David Williams" had its own "fantastic deal" (12 monthly issues of the newsletter at \$39.95, marked down from \$69.95); if this wasn't good enough, then its "best deal" was even better (\$79.95 for 24 monthly issues, marked down from \$139.95). I had circled the headline from Dr. David Williams: "The safe and proven all-natural cancer cure from the ocean." His letter was about shark cartilage. I have no idea what cartilage is made of, or what its medicinal properties are, or how much of it the average shark has. As I discarded these pages, I was casting away sin, if only the sin of false hope and foolishness.

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Cancer was caused by parasites according to an article published by Sterling Rose Press, P.O. Box 14331, Berkeley CA. The article was an interview with Hulda Clark, author of *The Cure for All Cancers*. Hulda Clark had found "the combination of herbs that will kill all the parasite stages." That was the critical challenge, killing every one of the stages. "Clinically," according to Hulda Clark, "drugs don't do that. Eggs need one kind of treatment and the larvae need another kind. Also, you need three herbs together to kill all the different stages."

And so on. I had indeed printed out and saved pages of this interview, including excerpts from *The Cure for All Cancers*, which was for sale. Here they were, in the manila folder.

One paragraph had the bold title *You May Not Have Time*:

"You may not have time to read this entire book first if you have cancer and are scheduled for surgery, chemotherapy or radiation treatment. You may wish to skip the first pages which describe how a parasite and a solvent cause cancer to develop. Go directly to the instructions on eliminating the parasite with herbs (*Cancer Curing Recipe*, page 19) or with electricity (*Zapping Parasites*, page 30). Using the herbal recipe along with the zapper is best. It only takes days to be cured of cancer regardless of the type you have. It does not matter how far progressed the cancer is—you can still stop it immediately."

With their names of herbs and specific procedures, they pages read like incantations out of Shakespeare, either from the witches in *MacBeth*, or Prospero on his magic island:

"Take the green hull surrounding the nut of the black walnut tree...a tincture extracted using grain alcohol, not the ordinary extract, which uses water. While waiting for it to arrive, get the two other herbs ready: wormwood and cloves."

Hulda Clark insisted that wormwood was a necessity. “The amount you need to cure a cancer is very small, yet you cannot do without it.”

And the cure?

“One 30 cc bottle of pale green Black Walnut Hull Tincture Extra Strength. One bottle of wormwood capsules, or a cup of Artemisia leaves gathered from a friendly neighbor’s shrub. One bottle of freshly ground cloves. These are the essential herbs you must have to cure your cancer.”

There were a few other ingredients that might also be used “to kill the intestinal fluke” -- red clover blossoms, pau d’arco, laetrile, and wheat grass juice. Ornithine, Hulda Clark wrote, “improves the recipe.” And she cautioned that the parasite produces a lot of ammonia as its waste product, and this was toxic, “especially to the brain.”

Yes, there is the futility or clinging to hope, but also the impossibility of doing otherwise. This is some of what I did when I was helpless but wanted to help anyway. I stayed up late under a circle of lamplight reading about the hulls of walnuts and shark cartilage and selenium. Ultimately, for no reason – or, for the same reason that Dolores began taking lorazepam, which was to control the anxiety that is one of the side effects of being alive.

Finished with the two manila folders I had brought into the house, I decided to look into Hulda Clark. I wondered what had she had been up to these past twenty-five years? It was easy enough to find her at drclarkstore.com. That’s the exclusive store for her cleanses. *The Cure for All Cancers* had been published in 1993. After that, Hulda Clark went one better and published *The Cure for All Diseases*. On Wikipedia, Dr. Clark is a Canadian naturopath, author and practitioner of alternative medicine, who claimed that all human disease was related to parasitic infection and asserted that she knew how to cure cancer by “zapping” it with an electrical device that she marketed. Wikipedia also noted the string of lawsuits and an eventual action by the Federal Trade Commission, after which Dr. Clark relocated to Tijuana, where she ran a nutrition clinic. Not that it’s a disproof of anything, but Dr. Clark died in 2009, in Chula Vista, California. The cause of death? Cancer.

xi

Dolores had no interest in wormwood or intestinal flukes. Instead, she spent time during March and April making notes on the remodeling project that had been going on intermittently at our home. She remained in the day to day, on both the work of managing her physical discomfort and participating, as much as possible, in the life of the household. She must have known she was going to die, but didn’t consider this a reason to not go about everyday life. This may have been courage; it could have been she didn’t know what else to do.

Her notes about the remodeling were in another manila folder, in a different bankers box. They were detailed. She had seven separate comments for the contractor on one of the bathrooms. For example, *Switches for heat lamp and shower and light will be above sink on right as enter bathroom, one for light above sink, second for light above shower, third for heat lamp. And, Shower to have two tile walls and two glass walls, with opening at top of door for air.* And, *A band of green around the tile walls of shower – four tiles high – the top is at five feet from the floor.*

She didn't neglect the kitchen, either, or the room behind the garage, which she labeled the cabana, following our architect's usage. Its woodwork would be terra cotta colored, its walls a blue #753, the trim color for baseboards in the adjacent bathroom would be #035, with white rods for curtains. She was specific.

Living or dying, she was making plans, if only for others.

On April 1, 1997, Dolores wrote three pages of remodeling notes I was to fax to the architect. *Nick, she wrote, check out these please.*

What followed were numbered handwritten comments for various areas of the house – *Family Room – Bar – Cabana – Bath*. Each section started over with a new number one. At the end of the areas by name, a category called *Leftover*, with a single, unnumbered comment: *That ironing board!!*

Dolores concluded page three saying that she'll fax anything else she thinks of later.

*Later?* When could that be?

I found a faxed sheet with an architectural plan. The faxed plan was a blur, but her comments in colored marker are clear. *Be sure light good for reading over couches. 2 flush medicine cabinets with mirror doors. Subzero, decent size sink with disposal – hot water dispenser. Check boxes of tile in the garage.* She offered such wisdom as *watch height of faucet – too high splashes over counter.* She was into it.

Under the heading *Bar*, this comment:

*Bookshelf to left by TV – need doors or part doors – do not want to look at shelves of videos on display.*

Then, *Add door into garage – plan opening carefully & door must be tight against bugs and cold or hot air.*

There were drawings labeled *Now* and one labeled *Better*, as she detailed what she wanted as a work surface in an office.

All this in April, after surgery and chemotherapy with no good result; and, I thought, after the vanishing of any realistic hope as well. Dolores would be dead a hundred days after these written comments. So the effort was either wishful thinking on her part, or caretaking; delusion, or the healthy behavior any of us might engage in if we are unwilling to stop living as long as we are alive. Given that all of us are under a sentence of death, perhaps we are all mirroring her behavior.

Dolores's notes to the interior designer were equally detailed. They covered such issues as whether or not there should be a small cabinet above the microwave, how far the microwave might stick out, and whether appliance surfaces should be brushed aluminum, polished, or black.

She picked the pulls on cabinet drawers, chose wall colors, and decided on fabric for reupholstering a sofa. She wrote out a furniture list, with budget numbers alongside couches, chairs, benches, a console, a table, a buffet, lamps, the carpet upstairs, and a rug under a dining room table.

She kept tear outs from architectural magazines, those publications where the full page photograph is opposite two additional color photos that are stacked and separated by a double caption: *ABOVE: "Splashes of indigo play off the soft, sandy background colors and evoke the impressive ocean views," says Hallberg of the master bedroom. On the side table, left, is a Persian bowl from Quatrain. BELOW: Adding tranquility to the center courtyard is a reflecting pond filled with koi.*

It's a vision of paradise, and perhaps a distraction, which is what imaginings of Paradise have always been.

A get well soon drawing by our eleven-year-old daughter had somehow found its way into the same folder. Whatever Eden made of her mother's illness during those months, this was as close as she got to expressing it out loud.

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It isn't true that the end of life necessarily prompts a person to think about eternity, or higher matters. How high the band of green tile would be in our shower seemed to be as far as Dolores needed to go. She did have friends who worried for her, and told her so, since she had converted to Judaism for my sake and was less connected to Christianity than she might have been in two of her prior lives, first as a Catholic schoolgirl and later an Episcopal housewife. Early on, her responses to their "what about eternity" fears were of the "it's above my paygrade" variety. One of those girlfriends came to visit Dolores in late June, when Dolores was bedridden again. She encouraged Dolores to pray. She was concerned for her afterlife, because Dolores did not know Jesus.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked. "Do you believe God can do anything?" She was sitting on the side of the bed, holding Dolores's hand.

Dolores changed the subject. She may have been following the philosopher's advice – whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent. Just as likely, knew she wasn't going to survive colon cancer and understood that thoughts about life after death would be of no practical use. I never discussed it with her. Her voice was never like an echo from someone faraway, further up the mountain. All of our conversations were down to earth, some literally so. After the initial surgery, when she was stuck in bed recovering, and well before starting any clinical trial, she asked me to secure a burial spot for her at a cemetery on Howell Street. She also requested that I purchase my own spot next to hers, which I did. "Show me what it will look like," she asked "I can't do that," I said. "I can only show what it looks like now." I went to the cemetery and took pictures of the ground.

xii

Dolores was delighted to be Dr. Dyer. Surely I could not throw out her Doctor of Philosophy diploma, which she had professionally framed, encasing it in a fat lucite rectangle. Ditto her identically framed "license to practice" from the Texas State Board of Examiners, and the fifteen-inch square of needlepoint, framed the same way, all three of them in a pile on the storage room floor.

This needlepoint keepsake was nothing institutional. Someone had done a lot of work stitching or needlepointing or embroidering or whatever it was. They had stitched the name of her business on a homey sign: *Dr. Dolores Dyer, Psychologist*. Below that, four other embroidered images that represented the tools of her trade. A stack of books with the word *Freud* on one of the spines. A maze that a rat might have run. Two circle faces, one smiling, one frowning. Last, a yellow telephone and a Kleenex box with tissue protruding from it. Someone had done a lot of work. Whether this was a gift or Dolores had commissioned it, I don't know. It was a keepsake I have no reason to keep. I should discard it. But Like Bartleby, I would prefer not to. Throwing it out is one of those decisions that will eventually be made, but not now, and probably never, at least by me.

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Dolores's doctoral dissertation, one hundred and eighty-four pages, waited its turn on a shelf in the storage room. It was a hardbound volume. It was even harder to imagine why anyone would ever want to read it again. *Family Interaction Research: A Methodological Study Utilizing The Family Interaction Q-Sort* has already had its fifty-year shelf life. The five members of the Committee that approved and signed it in 1971 were its only fit audience. It's possible that David S. Buell had read it as well. He was the "very special person" named on the dedication page, which was otherwise blank.

I looked through some of the dissertation. It began with an overview. "The emphasis in psychology and psychiatry has been shifting from the study of the individual to the story of processes in family systems, in which the individual's attitudes and behaviors are learned." So,

shifting from individuals and relying more on the direct observation of families – in a way, the approach of the Kardashians. Dolores’s dissertation presented a “measuring device” for this new research: The Family Interaction Q-Sort. It was a name with all the resonance of the Flux Capacitor in the *Back to the Future* movies.

In her dissertation, Appendix C was the actual Q-Sort tool. There are 113 statements that an observer is to use, ranking each statement in the order of how perfectly it describes the family being observed. They went from Item 1, *Family is generally relaxed* to Item 113, *Conflicts are openly discussed*. There are stops along the way at Item 13, *Family mood is fundamentally hostile*; 71, *Child is the most seductive person in the family*; 98, *Nobody recognizes or interacts with anyone else*; 109, *Family is normal*; and 110, *Family is psychotic*. Two therapists had been asked to observe twelve families and evaluate them, using the Q-Sort statements. For her thesis, Dolores reported the results in Appendix D: *Ranking of Items from Most Descriptive to Least Descriptive for the Twelve Families as Determined by the Q-Sorts of the Two Criterion Judges*. The final report was an aggregated result for all twelve families.

So, what ranked number one overall? It was Item 23, *Family is confused*.

That certainly works as a description of family life after Dolores’s death. I flipped through a few other pages in her dissertation, glancing at the charts. By the time I saw the words *Kendall’s tau*, I had seen enough. The dissertation went into the trash. There I was, in an ocean of paper in the storage room off the garage; the only way to reach the shore was to keep on swimming. To keep reading would only be treading water; it would lead nowhere, other than to fatigue.

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Did Dolores ever use the Q-Sort tool to describe our own interactions? No. That said, there was plenty of observation, testing and measurement to be found in her manila folders. Most often, our son was the subject.

Our two children, adopted at birth one year apart, were as unlike as two different species. Our daughter was that clever, early reader, an articulate little monkey who won the hearts of every adult. Our son was otherwise. Dolores saved the four-page Burks’ Behavior Rating Scales that Cynthia and Stacey, the two teachers in his pre-kindergarten class, had filled out to provide us a report. I pulled it from one of the bankers boxes. Burks’ Behavior Rating Scales provides 105 “descriptive statements” and ratings from one to five. One means that the teacher has not noticed the behavior at all. Five means the behavior was noticed “to a very large degree.” For the descriptive statement *Is overobedient*, both teachers gave it a one. They had not noticed this behavior at all. Both wrote a five in the boxes beside the descriptive statements *Follows directions poorly, Cannot finish what he is doing, Is easily distracted, Lacks continuity of effort, Is impulsive, Shows explosive and unpredictable behavior, Hits or pushes others, Shows little respect for authority, Displays a don’t care attitude, Attention span not increased by punishment or reward, Is rebellious if disciplined, Deliberately puts himself in position of being reprimanded, Will not take suggestions from other, and Does not try to make*

*friends by acting like other children. Also getting a five: Drawings and paintings are messy. There were descriptive statements that only on their way to a five. Emotional reactions wrong (laugh when should be sad, etc.). Cynthia rated this a three, which meant she "noticed the behavior to a considerable degree." Stacey gave it a four. She had "noticed the behavior to a large degree." Appears unhappy was noticed "to a slight degree." Our son was four-and-a-half at the time. The following year he went to a school that specialized in children with "learning differences."*

Our daughter's earliest reports were typically songs of praise. Her indifference to pleasing anyone in authority came later. Her teacher evaluations wavered then, between expressions of encouragement and disappointment.

In the new school Ben attended, he was "working on skills for slowing down, organizing his materials and working independently." He "especially enjoys music." He was "learning to use his language in an appropriate social manner. He has shown improvement in this area. We will continue to reinforce appropriate behavior."

Thank you, Miss Banker.

Dolores filled pages of her own with notes on learning differences, poorly coordinated infants, and hyperactive and accident-prone toddlers. The curves of her handwriting curtsied down the sheets of paper. She may have been taking notes from a lecture – the phrases were full of abbreviations - *Can get into probs of trust May interact poorly w/ peers Probs w/being like dad – can't do sports or what daddy wants...*

She was either continuing her education in order to be more valuable in her therapy practice or was looking for insight into the behavior at home. It was probably the latter, since Dolores didn't see children in her practice.

We did test and retest Ben in subsequent years. Not looking for signs, because we could see those ourselves, but for diagnoses. Nothing however was all that clear. At seven years eight months, he was tested before admission to another school. He was "very cooperative." The letter from the school's educational diagnostician reports that he "exhibited good concentration." His evaluations included the vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Beery's Development Test of Visual-Motor Integration, selected subtests of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistics Abilities, the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, motor subtests of the Santa Clara Inventory, and other perceptual exercises, auditory discrimination checks, recognitions of colors and shapes and numbers and letters, sequencing tasks, and tasks involving dictation. There were "some issues," but in the Knowledge Cluster he scored in the 98% percentile for grade level. A summary conclusion: "He appears to be a very nice young man who would profit from our educational program." Deal closed. In all of this, what Ben did have going for him was Dolores's love. That had been tested and retested, too, and he always scored in the highest percentile.



Dolores also saved the records of interviews that Ben sat through in the offices of therapists and educational specialists when he was six years old. There were handwritten interpretations of his scores by professionals. Measures of this and that, in nine by twelve envelopes. All of them needed to be tossed, finding it would do nobody any good.

\*

In one of Ann Patchett's essays she tells the story of *The Nightstand*. In it she receives a call on her birthday from a young man who has bought a nightstand at an estate sale and found in its drawer some of the writer's memorabilia, including an award from the Veterans of Foreign Wars for an essay she wrote in high school. Ann Patchett is disinterested. She tells the caller he can throw the papers away. "Had I found them in my own nightstand," she writes, "that's what I would have done."

It is possible that this story is related to another of her essays. She had never wanted children and had none, as she explains in *There Are No Children Here*. It could be that this lack of interest in children and their future goes well with a disinterest in the past. Many of the things Dolores saved had perhaps been saved for Ben and Eden. Obviously, their baby clothes, their toys. But also family photos, all the photos, hundreds of them, that no one ever looked at. Even if these children, now approaching forty, claim they can no longer remember their mother, or barely can, here in the storage room were the reassuring messages of her love for them on Valentines and birthday cards she had preserved

Their "art work" and earliest school work took up two entire boxes. This oeuvre started in pre-school, with stick figures and lollipop trees, then progressed to fill-in-the-blank quizzes and maps with Africa or the thirteen colonies colored in. The holidays were over-represented, both secular and from Sunday school. Thanksgiving had its turkey on craft paper, the feathers made with a handprint. Valentine's Day hearts were cut out and pasted. There were rainbows of construction paper. I threw them out. Also, the portraits of heroes and villains equally. Mario from Nintendo appeared on page after page of our son's lined notebook, along with ninjas, Batman, and characters that belonged to his more obscure personal mythology. Our daughter's icons were odder and alien, circles with antennae, and cockroaches from outer space. Lots of the drawings seemed to be little more than scribbles. They had been turned in without embarrassment to first and second grade teachers, who then allowed the work to come home for further praise.

It was time to clear all these things out. It was past time, for boxes that were packed with homework assignments, all of which Dolores kept. These children aren't in school any longer. They aren't at home either.

Then there were the stacks of monthly planners that Dolores had maintained, the squares of the days filled in with appointments, playdates, lessons, after school soccer, piano lessons, teachers' phone numbers and names.

Useful reminders once, no use now.

Reading the Ann Patchett essay *How To Practice*, which appeared first in *The New Yorker* and is now neatly stored in *These Precious Days*, a book of her selected essays, I am struck by how sunny and untroubled it is, how mature she is, how healthy. The essay deals with paring down, discarding, or giving away household and other items that she has no use for. In a word, decluttering, though most of her things are in closets or within drawers, and she is in no danger of stumbling over them. It might also bespeak an untroubled life, or a writer prioritizing the pleasures of craft and the comfort of her readers over the truth, which is that objects from our past are often kept, and kept out of sight, because they are soaked from their surface down with our feelings. We may even have put some of our sins on them, as though they were the goat in ancient Jerusalem, and we had not quite yet found the time or the resolve to send them into the wilderness to die.

xiii

In 1997, years before there was Facebook, the Colon Cancer Discussion List was an online forum. It offered the wisdom of strangers, though their names became familiar over the months of Dolores's illness. Night after night, I eavesdropped on Angel Howse, Allison McDermott, Nurse Pam, Dick Theriaque, Carleton Birch, Chistopher Carfi, and dozens of others. They were both cast members and people I almost knew. Marshall Kragan rarely commented. He was the list manager. I would print out the discussions that seemed relevant. And so I collected hundreds of pages of guidance, pleas for help, opinions, and descriptions of treatments. Most of these conversations had sober personalities, but the list itself identified its virtual location as [colon@maelstrom.stjohns.edu](mailto:colon@maelstrom.stjohns.edu). Maelstrom seemed appropriate.

I looked at the list every night for three months. After that, I must have thought there was nothing more to learn. Or I had given up. But at the start, a Sunday night in early March when I first contacted the list, it was all new.

"My wife was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer two weeks ago," I wrote. I told the list that Dolores was recovering from the surgery at Baylor Hospital in Dallas, and that chemotherapy might begin soon. I let them know that her cancer was in the abdomen and scattered and could not be removed by surgery other than what had already been removed. "Where in your opinion are the best institutions for a colon cancer patient?" I asked. "Where is the most progressive work being done with colon cancer treatment?"

The next day, the driest answer, from Marshall Kragan: "Baylor is an excellent hospital."

A half dozen other messages arrived. Allison McDermott replied that Panorex is being clinically tried by an oncologist that her father saw in Austin and Dr. Padzur is running a Phase III Trial, 5FU with Levamisole and Panorex. Lori Hope sent a long message about P53, "a gene therapy that should be available for clinical trial in the next month." She included a link to clinical trials. Nurse Pam said there are lots of places with treatment, but "very few will tackle intraperitoneal

mets with anything that has an effect on them.” She recommended Dr. Paul Sugarbaker at Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C. She provided his phone number. “He removes a lot that other surgeons won’t touch.” Other than that, “Any standard therapy is as good as any other,” she wrote. Linda T also touted Paul Sugarbaker, and she provided the same phone number. Someone wished me good luck.

Twenty-five years later all of it -- Allison and Lori, Nurse Pam and Linda T -- is going into the trash. When look up P53, the research begun a quarter center ago does seem to have led somewhere. Studies have shown that the P53 gene is mutated in a high percentage of colorectal cancer cases, perhaps as high as seventy percent. So it may have some use for prognosis, although not as much for treatment.

Kathleen Allen was more practical. Her advice was to factor in convenience. I should be aware that many colon cancer “recipes” are given weekly, so travel from home can be a dealbreaker. Angel Howse recommended MD Anderson in Houston to me, since it’s “in your neck of the woods.”

That was day one on the Colon Cancer Discussion List.

So it went, for the rest of March and April and May. I was printing out conversations between Jerome and Pam and Jim and Benita and Martha and Ellen and Julie. They asked each other about the virtues of IP heated chemo and what, if anything, can accomplish “the full debulking of tumors.” Others wrote that they would of course defer to the more knowledgeable, but then go on to say that they had in front of them an article from the University of Chicago medical school on the use of surgery plus intraperitoneal chemotherapy for peritoneal mets, based on the successful treatment for pseudomyxoma peritonei, at least with “those patients in whom definitive cytoreduction is complete.” Someone else would concur that IP heated chemo is recommended “for high volume, as Ellen said,” and was also most successful for those who can accomplish “full debulking.”

What was a civilian reading this by himself late at night supposed to make of it? What I could not make were decisions, other than the decision to defer, as Dolores did from the very start, to guidance from the doctors at Baylor. And there was nothing from Dr. Pippin, Dolores’s oncologist at Baylor, about going elsewhere, traveling for treatment, P53, Dr. Sugarbaker, or full debulking. I did tell him about black walnuts, wormwood, and cloves. He thought it was hilarious.

Almost no one on the colon cancer discussion line was a patient. Most seemed to be wives. Dear Julie, Martha Ward wrote to Julie Edell, “In reviewing past postings I noted that you discussed a Duke study requiring HLA AZ+. Did Alan qualify for this study? We are still waiting for news from Vanderbilt regarding Joe getting into the P53 vaccine trial there. In the meantime he qualified instantly for a phase one KSA vaccine trial at UAB Birmingham. KSA, like CEA, is an antigen expressed on the surface of color cancer cells...” Everyone was on a first name basis. Togetherness might have been the most therapeutic impact of the discussions.

For spouses and caretakers, certainly. For the few who actually had the disease, it must have been palliative.

One night, Arvil Stephens weighed in. He was the Director of Research and Development for Sugarbaker Oncology Associates, which specialized in cancers that had spread to abdominal surfaces. "If I can be of service," he said. He provided his email address. At the end of March, I asked the group a question. How do I talk to our children about what's happening to their mother? Julie Edell, from mail.duke.edu, responded. She recommended another list that she said would help. I didn't use it. I didn't talk much to either Ben or Eden about what was happening. Dolores handled that, she talked to them. In July, when she died at two in the morning, I woke them up, one at a time. The funeral home transport was on its way to pick up the body. I asked each of them if they wanted to get up, to say goodbye, but neither of them got out of bed. They were just too sleepy, or maybe too frightened.

\*

Dick Theriaque wrote to the group about the risk of buying tickets to fly to Cleveland, where he hoped to participate in a trial using Temozolomide. "It will be a bummer if I get knocked out of the trial before using the tickets," he wrote. "They're non-refundable." Christopher Carfi said his father had tried non-Western therapies. His dad was using vitamin and mineral supplements, doing Tai Chi, visualization, and working with a therapist. He recommended Michael Lerner's *Choices in Healing* as the best source of information on alternative therapies. Lerner was the head of a cancer support group called Commonweal, in Bolinas, a hippie-famous town outside San Francisco.

Linda Thomas provided a link to an article in the *Washington Post* summarizing the current state of colon cancer research. Bobbie wrote to Kelly about Epoetin Alfa; also, that a scientist from San Antonio has discovered "how to make cold viruses attach to tumors and grow so fast inside of the tumor that it explodes." Crellin Pauling, who was being treated at Stanford, replied to a query about the side effects of high-dose 5FU: fatigue, dry skin, and diarrhea, controlled with Lomotil. Dolores had her Lomotil as well. Toni Deonier elaborated about side effects. One time his hands peeled; he had the hiccups for two weeks. He also reported that since his diagnosis he has gone fishing in Canada for a week. He wrote about his very positive attitude. On the page that I had printed out, I had underlined "very positive attitude." At the end of Toni's message, there's was catchphrase from Proverbs – *A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.*

My print out of a very long message from James Burness began, "Hi, gang. Since several of you have asked how my decision-making process was going, I thought I'd bring you up to date." James described his fifteen months of trial and perseverance. His psu.edu email also ended with a catchphrase, from Herbert Spencer: *Those who have never entered upon scientific pursuits know not a tithe of the poetry by which they are surrounded.*

I printed Pablo Lewin's "encouraging piece of information" – a press release from University Hospitals of Cleveland, titled *New Technology Used to Destroy Cancerous Tumors*. It was RFA – radio frequency waves. Angel Howse wrote about funding statistics, complaining that "the breast and lung people have associations that lobby for them." Her emails had their catchphrase, too: *This is from the real angel, accept no substitutes*. In early June, Tom Gray encouraged us to call our U.S. Representative about the research budget for colon cancer. Nurse Pam, who by this time I had figured out was a chemotherapy nurse, sent a message about "cachexia," medical terminology for the weakness and wasting of the body from chronic illness. Penny and Oscar continued exchanging emails debating the math on how much is spent per person on research for various kinds of cancer.

Peter Reali wrote that he has been "lurking in the background reading the mail" and urged us to lobby for more research dollars. Toni Deonier offered his opinion on RFA ("it is not the magic bullet") and hepatic pumps. Silvio Caoluongo responded to Gloria, "I looked at the pump over a year ago. I ruled it out for a number of reasons. First, let me introduce myself." He went on to discuss his Stage IV diagnosis from 1995, his colostomy, his Phase II trial of 5FU. He had the authority of someone who was alive eighteen months after diagnosis. He namechecked Sloan Kettering, and, at the end of his message, referenced Michael Lerner's *Choices in Healing*.

On June 12, the last day I looked at the list, Julie Edell at Duke wrote to say what trial her husband, Alan, was in. "A Phase I Study of Active Immunotherapy with Carcinoembryonic Antigen (CEA) RNA Pulsed, Autologous Human Cultured Dendritic Cells in Patients with Metastatic Malignancies Expressing CEA." Kate Murphy wrote in support of Ellen Frank, who had written that "wonderful things can happen to us spiritually through these difficulties." Kate commented on this. "The pastor of our church told me something very surprising the other day. In the Middle Ages, cancer was considered a blessing because it gave you a chance to prepare for death. With lives that were often suddenly ended by violence, cancer brought a different death. This gave me a great deal of pause."

The Middle Ages may not offer much as a reference for coping with disease, but I came to understand Kate's point. After Dolores's death, I took my daughter and less willing son to The Warm Place, a social service agency in Fort Worth, where they participated in peer group meetings for very young children who had lost a parent. We went for a year and a half. Twice monthly, on weekday evenings. While Ben and Eden were in their age-separated sessions, surviving parents would gather over a potluck meal and snacks. I was in a roomful of unexpected losses. A relatively young wife had left the house one morning and not returned – fatal car crash. Or, at home one Saturday in the middle of yard work, a husband had a coronary. These sudden losses did seem to provoke the greatest distress, while I had had the good fortune to live through a five-month process.

\*

After staying on the colon cancer discussion line every night in March, less in April, and then less and less in May, I stopped June 12. Now that I have discarded all the pages, and with them all the old names, do you wonder what happened?

You can find James Burness online. He was the professor of chemistry at Penn State, on the York campus. The James H. Burness teaching award at Penn State York is named "in honor of the late James H. Burness in recognition of his outstanding teaching and service to the campus." He died in 1999.

Commonweal is still in Bolinas. It has its website and its slogan, "healing people, healing the planet." Michael Lerner is still there, too, President and Co-founder. There's a board of directors, a large staff, and dozens of programs now, from Youth Empowerment to the Integrative Law Institute. Its Retreat Center is located "on a beautiful 60-acre site on the edge of the Pacific Ocean in the Point Reyes National Seashore." Michael Lerner and Commonweal have not only survived, they've prospered.

Marshall Kragan, who managed the list, didn't stay on it much longer than I did. He died in 1998, the year after Dolores. A link took me to the website of the Colorectal Cancer Alliance, which started "as a simple online support group" and became the Alliance "through the efforts of forty survivors, caregivers and friends, following the death of Marshall Kragen." Maybe that was what Nurse Pam, Julie and a number of the rest of them got up to, in what was then the future. In fact it was. You can see their names on the Alliance website.

xiv

Dolores was a frequent invited speaker at noon forums hosted by civic and professional groups, women's organizations, the YMCA, the Unitarian Church. Stress was often the topic, or a related subcategory, such as divorce. So I wasn't surprised to find pages of notes on the subject of stress in one of her manila folders. "Why do some people expect life changes to be frequent and stimulating, whereas others expect stability and regard change as disruptive of security?" she either wrote or copied. "What determines whether change is regarded as richness or as chaos?"

Tax accountants, according to her notes, are susceptible to heart attacks around April 15. Widowers in England studied for six months after the deaths of their wives had an overall mortality rate forty percent higher than the average for men their age. I found her xerox of the Holmes Stress Scale, which was developed to measure the relative stress caused -- or "induced," as it says -- by changes in a person's life. Its scale measured stress in "life-change units" -- with the death of a spouse assigned 100 points at the very top, followed by divorce for 73 points, then all the way down to taking a vacation, 13 points, Christmas at 12, and minor violations of the law at 11. Get more than 200 points in a single year, that's real trouble -- your life has been disrupted enough to make you sick. Her xerox was out of date. It assigned 31 points to having a mortgage of \$10,000.

Dolores's notes referenced the Holmes test as a predictor of illness; but then she wrote that the association of life changes and illness is "a dismal view of change," which it is. She quoted some researcher named Lazarus for the wisdom that stress resides neither in the person nor in the situation, but in how that person appraises the situation.

In other words, in how you look at it.

Her notes also mentioned a study claiming that the most stress-resistant people were Mormons, nuns, symphony conductors, and women in *Who's Who*.

It had been a very stressful time from diagnosis in February to death in July. Were there other ways to look at it? Maybe so, but only in hindsight.

\*

Much of what I found in the storage room came from those months of 1997. Going through it was mind clearing as much as housecleaning. I had never disposed of the leftover medications from 1997 and discovered them in a shoebox marked *Dolores Illness*. Who decides on the shape and color of the pills we are asked to swallow? There were lots of them, preserved in tinted plastic cylinders with lids that instructed Dolores to *Turn Down While Pushing*. These pills were long expired, although nothing in their appearance suggested it. They looked as collectible as postage stamps. The Compazine capsule, 10 mg, was an exotic beauty; half marine blue, the other half perfectly clear and revealing a hundred tiny white globes of medicine. The Relafen was a fat, solid pink lozenge. The Roboxin, or methocarbamol, for muscle spasms, had the same lozenge body, only slimmer and white.

The one Dilaudid was a controlled substance. It had required more than the ordinary prescription. And I remember going to Daugherty's, the compounding pharmacy on Royal Lane, not to the nearest drugstore, to pick it up. Dilaudid, pale yellow, which leaves its taker deluded. I was in a state of delusion myself those months of at-home care. Not about the final outcome. That it would end in death was really never in doubt. The delusion was more in my understanding of the aftermath. I imagined that things would be okay, or, although changed, not changed that much.

I had saved pills from each of the medications that Dolores took for nausea, anxiety, and pain. The white – lorazepam, promethazine, prednisone, dexamethasone. The pink – Lortab, strictly for pain. Also, a dropper that was still attached to an empty jar of Roxanol, which is a trade name for morphine sulfate. The outliers in my collection were red darvocet tablets, hotter than pink, but for milder pain. There were three dozen darvocet in two different bottles. These were pills that Dolores had saved herself, after a hospitalization for breast cancer. She had had a mastectomy ten years before colon cancer.

The pills in their bottles went to a "take-back" bin for unused medications at the CVS on Lemmon Avenue.

\*

One might hope to go through life with no experience of oncologists, but that had not been Dolores's fate. She was not one of those people who think that nothing bad can happen to them. She had had cancer twice before. Breast cancer, and then a squamous cell cancer on the tip of her nose. After her death, one of her doctors remarked in passing that Dolores had a "shitty deck of genetic cards."

Her manila folder labeled *Cancer* held the pathology reports from 1987, when she was a young fifty-eight years old. *Nature of Specimen: Left breast mass. Infiltrating carcinoma, anterior margin involved. Microscopic Description: Permanent sections of the frozen tissue confirm the frozen section diagnosis showing infiltrating duct cell carcinoma.* A second document, about the right breast biopsy, reported more of the same: *intraductal and infiltrating duct carcinoma, associated with calcification.* The language is what it is. A kind of gobbledygook, with its *epithelial hyperplasia.* Dolores kept five copies of a report on each breast. Both breasts were removed. Breast cancer was the cancer she had "beaten." What came in 1997 was declared to be unrelated. But who knows. What she had in her just would not let go.

The squamous cell cancer was removed by Dr. David Whiting, M.D., in 1994. A simple office visit. She kept the report from that, too, in the *Cancer* folder. What I remember: Dr. Whiting upset her by using a tool that looked no more sophisticated than a hobbyist's woodburning pen. It left a red dot on her nose.

On her death certificate in 1997, the onset of the colon cancer that was the cause of Dolores's death is "at least five years" prior. Five years is in fact the recommended interval for colon cancer screenings. And in her *Cancer* folder, I found a letter from December 1992, from the office of Drs. R.M. Jacobson & P. Tulanon, Colon & Rectal Surgery. Dr. Jacobson reported that a barium enema colon x-ray "looks normal." As did the sigmoidoscopy, or flexible sig, which showed nothing to worry about. "I did see some diverticula," he wrote, but "everyone gets those," and "no polyps or tumors could be seen." An included report from Todd Guinn, M.D., on the letterhead of Radiology Associates of Dallas, P.A., was also reassuring. "Unremarkable barium enema." And, to the office of Drs. Jacobson and Tulanon, "Thank you for the privilege of seeing this patient."

xv

Milestones, millstones. Winter ended, easy weather returned. The twenty-sixth anniversary of Dolores's death was four months away. Maybe I could finish by then. I would be done going through bankers boxes, refrigerator shelves, plastic tubs, Hon cabinets. All, or most of it, would have been put in large black trash bags and picked up by Dallas Sanitation. The storage room would no longer be my personal *genizah.*

There have been communal genizahs for a thousand years. They are typically the repositories for sacred manuscripts past their sell-by date, worn and faded. Tradition forbade the



destruction of manuscripts that contained the name of God, and so those scrolls, books, and scraps, those that were not buried with the remains of the pious, were placed in a genizah, to gather dust and disintegrate. That was the fitting way of disposing of them. Most often, the genizah would be in the attic or the cellar of a synagogue. *Genizah* is a Hebrew word, or comes from one, meaning “hiding place.” I suppose that is what the storage room off the garage had been for me. It was a place to hide objects - newspapers, amber pill bottles, framed certificates, receipts, photographs - and the memory that adhered to them.

A genizah that Solomon Schechter rediscovered at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo became famous enough among biblical scholars to become known as “The Genizah.” Some 300,000 manuscripts and fragments – legal, liturgical, personal – were found there. Going through bankers boxes and Dolores’s manila folders, that number of three hundred thousand doesn’t seem very high, given that it represents the accumulation of ten centuries. The guardians of the Ben Ezra synagogue were more selective than Dolores had been. The name of God never needed to appear on anything she saved. Neither did I have any higher principles to guide me in the preservation or disposal of her secular scraps.

You can find a black and white photo of Professor Schechter online. It’s an image from the next to last year of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The professor is at Cambridge University in a room that looks more like an artist’s loft, where a long wooden table serves as a platform for piles of manuscripts. A box on the floor near him and a second table are both covered with scraps. He wears a suit. He sits on a wooden chair, his right elbow on a table, his forehead propped against his hand. He doesn’t look discouraged by the mess, he seems resolute.

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Found and discarded, a selection:

Folders with executive summaries, five-year plans, and official papers that had Dolores’s signature on them.

Minutes from committee meetings and reports prepared for task forces she was on.

A half dozen copies of *The Dallas Model*, issued by the Adult Mental Health Task Force of the Mental Health Association of Dallas County. Dolores was the chair. “This proposal is only a beginning,” she wrote in the introduction. True enough. The problems the Model dealt with have had no end.

Dozens of flyers, pamphlets, and brochures from meetings, speaking engagements, symposia, seminars, programs and presentations.

If Dolores had been one of the speakers, or a “facilitator” for one of the “table topics,” there would be a paragraph about her. She was an expert at *A Conference On Parenting* and at the Routh Street Center *Program on Psychotropic Drugs*. At The Women’s Center of Dallas, her

workshop was *Divorce: Legal and Psychological Aspects*. She served on the Planning Committee for *The Buck Stops Here*, yet another conference about care of the chronically mentally ill.

She presented regularly at the YMCA Wednesday Noon Forum and saved the colored paper flyers. Free of charge, brown baggers welcome, bring a friend. A typical topic: *What Women Have Learned from the "Good Ole Boys" about Networking*.

At the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Singles Fair in 1983, she was one of two dozen speakers who made presentations at the Richardson Civic Center. At one in the afternoon in Room E, she provided the answer to a question that would have been as puzzling to the married as to the singles: *How to Know And Get What You Want Sexually*.

She spoke on panels for NTARAL, the North Texas Abortion Rights Action League. These presentations were usually at the Unitarian Church. Her paragraph bio on the flyer said she was someone who "has long been an advocate of women's rights." It was the eighties. Debates over abortion and appointments to the Supreme Court or actions by state legislatures were the same then as today.

The time to trash the pink flyer was long past.

\*

Found and discarded, continued:

"Stuff" is the right word for what filled the folders and Ziploc bags.

Dolores had saved a ticket stub to Siegfried & Roy, a delegate's badge for the 1982 Texas Democratic Party convention, and a two-dollar Lotto ticket.

A letter from Frances, Dolores's mother, asking for money. "My house insurance has expired ..." etc. Frances had enclosed three drugstore receipts to demonstrate the cost of the medicines she was taking every day.

Five verses of *Amazing Grace* typed on a sheet of paper, and a General Admission ticket stub for Mount Vernon.

A receipt for a Sister Corita Kent print, "Feelin' Groovy," \$75, from 1970.

The names of the middle school teachers for different subjects for our children, on two index cards.

A receipt for \$300 from Dallas Crematory Service, for the May 1983 cremation of Blufird Burch, Dolores's mother's last husband.

An Affidavit of Heirship, stating that Frances Burch, deceased on December 24, 1985, left surviving her “one child, a daughter.”

Index cards with notes for a presentation she gave titled *Paint Your Own Rainbow, Taking Care of the Whole You*.

Lists of her spending, month by month, one month per page, for 1976 and 1977. Apartment rent, insurance, Texas Opportunity Plan, phone, laundry, gasoline credit cards, doctors, Neiman’s, Master Charge. Also, a carefully kept checkbook register, and a Master Charge statement from 1977.

Ticket stub, An Evening Honoring Governor Michael Dukakis and Senator and Mrs. Lloyd Bentsen. A form letter to Dolores from Walter F. Mondale, “Gerry and I want you to know how much we appreciate...”

Dolores saved “predictions for the 80s” that friends had made at a New Year’s Eve party. One prediction: “The ‘80s will bring a change from the ‘me’ generation to the ‘you’ generation. No longer will women’s liberation be responsible for the breakdown of life in America. ‘You’ will now be responsible.”

A postcard from David Warrington, one of Dolores’s patients. Both David and his partner Michael died of AIDS in the ‘80s, when they were in their twenties.

Dolores also left a bag of campaign buttons. She had *Vote The Rascals Out*, among other campaigns and causes. I threw them all out, except one, a large metal disc the color of brown mustard and coated with celluloid. It promoted the Golden 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dolores Drive-In, so of course Dolores kept it. What wasn’t obvious is where the drive-in was. Its story belonged to the past before I knew her.

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There is something perfunctory about a thank you. But however performative, it still seems necessary. It’s good social hygiene. What isn’t necessary is to respond to a written thank you; once it’s received, the interaction ends there. And retaining a written thank you seems like one step too many. And yet, Dolores seemed to think there was a future reader for any expressions of appreciation that she received, because she saved them. Some of them were fifty years old.

Dolores was thanked for speaking, for presenting, for serving.

“Dear Dr. Dyer: It is very difficult to express on paper the appreciation I feel for your caring response after the unfortunate Delta 1141 accident...” This was from the local chapter of

American Red Cross, which had requested volunteer therapists to meet with the survivors of a plane crash.

Every noon forum presentation she made at the YMCA also merited a thank you, most of them from the executive director.

Dallas Women Against Rape thanked Dolores after she spoke on *The Impact of Significant Others in the Victim's Life*.

"Dear Dolores," a city councilwoman wrote, "I wanted to express my appreciation for all your efforts in helping pass the swimming pool fence ordinance..."

"Dear Dolores, Thanks so much for coming to speak at High Hopes on Monday." High Hopes, a rehab center, used the motto *Sobriety, Dignity, Independence*. As I looked at the names of board members on its letterhead, they rang faint bells – the wives of the wealthy, the attorneys who might serve them, and educated experts.

Katherine Reed, program director of the Mental Health Association, thanked Dolores for her help putting a seminar together in 1970. The topic: *Changing Morality and Its Implications for the Family*. The roll call of the Board of Directors in the left margin of the letter is like the chart of characters in a Russian novel with multigenerational stories. Mrs. Edmond M. Hoffman; her son co-founded the *National Lampoon*, inherited the local Coca Cola Bottling franchise, and built an art museum in his back yard. Mrs. Fred Wiedemann; her son worked as a male model and was married for a time to Isabella Rossellini.

Klee Dobra, station manager, KLIF, sent Dolores a thank you for her appearance on a Sunday public affairs program. Klee Dobra? I found his obituary in an online version of *Martha's Vinyard Magazine*, with the headline *Klee Dobra, Fixture at Edgartown Yacht Club and Reading Room*. Klee Dobra had marched with the U.S. Coast Guard band in John F. Kennedy's inaugural parade. He played the trombone. His career in broadcasting placed him in radio stations around the country, including Dallas. The comments in his obituary online are generous, even radiant with warmth and longing. *Farewell, old friend. So long, dear pal.*

From Jim Hightower, Commissioner of Agriculture, on the official stationery: "Dear Dr. Dyer: The Open House in Dallas was a big hit. Your presence meant a lot to me personally and greatly added to the success of the day." This thank you was from 1985. Our son Ben was a year old when Dolores's "presence meant a lot" to the Commissioner of Agriculture. Our daughter Eden was ninety days away from being born. This is the daughter who hasn't spoken to me in seven years. Ours is a broken relationship, a story about an inability to connect, and thankless isolation. That is one thought that recurred as I tore up and threw away these pieces of paper from the past. No one sees the future. Mostly you can't change it, either.

\*

You may think this is all too much. In truth, I'm only telling you a fraction of what Dolores never threw away. She kept stuff. And stuff is the right word for most of what spilled out of her manila folders. These were things that Dolores deliberately saved. I would call them memories, except she forgot all about them.

Have I mentioned the yellow strip of paper with a homespun message from H.L. Hunt warning about communism and urging shoppers to patronize companies that oppose communism? It was from the early 1960s. Or the two Flo-Thru bags of Lipton tea that somehow made their way into a bankers box? Pull up gently, they instructed, for the perfect cup of tea. Aside from the moustache and yachtsman's cap, the drawing of Sir Thomas Lipton on these tea bags looked nothing like his picture on the Lipton website.

Feature stories in the local papers with quotes from "Dr. Dolores Dyer, a Dallas psychologist" were a category of their own. There was a folder with nothing but clippings. Usually, her quoted wisdom was a cup of common sense, sometimes with a bromide added. The science behind it was whatever the journalist could elicit, though Dolores never spent a day in a laboratory or cited a study.

"Tempers seem to flare more in the heat," she was quoted as saying, in an article by Linda Little, July 4, 1980, *The Dallas Morning News*

That summer of 1980 was indeed a very hot one. Temperatures in the city exceeded one hundred degrees for forty-two consecutive days, from June 23 to August 3. Twenty-eight of those days it was above 105; five of those, above 110. Linda Little's opening line, "Dallas's unending heat wave not only has sent temperatures soaring, but tempers as well," came only eleven days into the record heat. There was another month of it ahead. She reported the opinions of child welfare workers who were very worried about fretful children and short-tempered mothers.

Dolores was quoted again a week later, but not about the heat. Marcia Smith's article in the *Dallas Times Herald* was about bias against women doctors. Dolores was Marcia Smith's go-to expert psychologist. She was also a patient. In another article, this one on fans devoted to Annette Funicello and Barry Manilow, Marcia quoted Dolores on the dangers of fandom: "Some of us try to identify with the rich and beautiful in hopes it will rub off," she said. "Problems arise when fans identify so strongly that they lose touch with themselves." And then Dolores provided the aphorism. "It's okay to build air castles, but don't move into them."

*Will your little girl grow up to be just like Barbie?* This one from *The Morning News* had been published on a December 23, for Christmas shoppers. Quoted first, a male psychologist answered, "Beats the hell out of me." Dolores was quoted throughout, and she also had the last word: "'Will playing with Barbies do any harm?' Dr. Dyer wondered aloud. 'Well, only to Mommy and Daddy's pocketbooks.'"

Dolores was a frequent resource in *Times Herald* or *Morning News* stories about “women’s issues.” One time, she was also the subject. That clipping was an “older woman younger man” story, where “all names and ages have been disguised.” Dolores was “Betty” in the article. She was a woman who had started a new family in her forties with a younger husband. “Men do this all the time,” Betty says, “and no one pays attention.”

So that’s what I was doing that afternoon in April in the storage room. I was paying attention, if only for a moment, before throwing the articles away.

\*

What else?

Certificates. Dolores had received many and kept many. Possibly every one she ever received, to judge by the thickness of a manila folder labeled *Certificates*.

Almost all had gold seals and signatures. They had borders of engravings, patterns and geometric repetitions. The typefaces were often Germanic, or heraldic, as if the Women’s Issues Committee, which recognized Dolores for chairing an event, was memorializing something that had happened in a past of pennants and ceremony, rather than the week before.

Phrases that were stillborn at the time of their birth lived again on Dolores’s certificates. A certificate isn’t simply dated; instead, it is “given this day.” Often there is a “hereby.” Or a “be it known to all by these presents,” or a “duly” and some other adverb. Typically, an organization – for example, The Strategic Therapy Training Center or The Marquis Who’s Who Publications Board, “certifies that...” Less often, certifiers are aloof. Their names are at the top, away from a statement that begins, “This is to certify that...” The American Association of Suicidology took that approach. So did a local community college, after Dolores had completed a workshop in neuro-linguistic programming.

Almost all the certificates in Dolores’s folder had something else in common, aside from gold seals and lots of capitalization. They were “in recognition.” “In Recognition of Distinguished Service and Lasting Contributions to the Dallas Psychological Association.” “In Recognition of Your Unique and Exceptional Contributions to Suicide Prevention and Crisis Intervention.” “In Recognition of Exemplary Personal Service to the Survivors, Families and Emergency Workers of Flight 1141.” What is recognition? It can be as simple as knowing who someone is. Everyone wants to be recognized in that sense. It was dreadful when dementia came for my father and took his ability to recognize his family. We disappear a little ourselves, when the minds of those who love us disappear. But certified recognition is something different. Dolores received it, and she kept the certificates to prove it.

I threw out twenty, thirty, forty of them. I don’t know what value Dolores attributed to all this, how seriously she took it. In the same manila folder with the rest of the gold seals and

engraved borders, I found a certificate from the Imperial Palace, a Chinese-themed casino in Las Vegas. Its borders were not engravings, they were drawings of bamboo shoots. It certified that Dolores “has completed our highly esteemed course in gaming and is a number one, most honorable player.” Instead of a “hereby” or a “duly,” the Palace offered bad grammar: “Confucius say, ‘Having gaming certificate in hand like having dragon by tail.’” Still, its gold seal with ribbed edges was as shiny as any of them.

Dolores also kept her *To the World’s Greatest Mother on Mother’s Day*, with #1 Mom embossed in the center of its seal. “This is to certify,” it says. “Dolores Dyer has been named World’s Greatest Mother in recognition of her fantastic fortitude, plentiful patience, and wonderful wisdom.” It was a certificate “signed” by our children in May, 1989. I must have bought it, since they were three and four years old at the time. I have my own version somewhere, though not in a folder or a bankers box in the storage room. It’s a *World’s Greatest Dad*, which I certainly wasn’t.

xvi

TIME’s 1997 *The Year in Review* wasn’t the only place that Princess Diana appeared in the storage room. I also unearthed a Diana and Charles Royal Wedding tea towel that someone must have given Dolores. She had sealed this coarse, folded Irish linen towel in one of her Ziploc bags, and the towel was also in its own cellophane wrap, with a “Made in Ireland” sticker on it. Prescient, the color images of Diana and Charles were separated, each in a gilded oval frame. Date and location of their televised royal wedding had been screen printed on the linen in curvy script. *29 July, 1981 – St. Paul’s Cathedral, London*. There must have been millions of these souvenirs sold. Forty some years later they can still be bought for under ten dollars on eBay. As a memento, a tea towel; for practical use, maybe a dishcloth.

xvii

*This is to certify that*, the Certificate of Conversion stated, ahead of the blank space where *Dolores Dyer* was filled in. Her Certificate of Conversion wasn’t from the certificates folder, but from one labeled *Conversion*. I found her letter, probably required, that traced the steps that had led to her decision to convert to Judaism, including being baptized at age six under the guidance of a Southern Baptist aunt and boarding in a Catholic convent. Those two details were new to me. Episcopal services followed the birth of her first son. Then ten years of marriage to a second husband who discouraged any interest in religion. I came years after that. Her conversion was dated November 6, 1984; so, five months after Ben was born. I suppose adopting a child allowed her to see the two of us as a permanent structure. Or at least, the bricks were there. Converting was part of the mix in the mortar.

\*

If you had asked me, I would have said there wasn’t much to the conversion process in the Reform tradition that Dolores went through for my sake. I knew there was a class. As I threw

things away, it seemed there was more to it than I realized. Her folder was fat with course materials she had saved. Reprints, handouts, a reading list. And she made notes on most of them.

The class syllabus covered Birth, Death, Marriage, and Conversion. Did Dolores take it more seriously than being Baptist, Catholic, or Episcopalian? I don't know, but she made notes as if she were studying for the test. Some notes were historical (*Abraham 1st Jew*). Some were linguistic (*Shemot/Exodus, first word used as name of book*). Some seemed random (*792,000 letters in Bible*). I found a full page of her notes on keeping Kosher (*Fleishman's unsalted doesn't have whey, Oreo cookie has lard*), which we never did.

If I placed her notes like stones on a path, they would lead in no one direction. *Blue and white are the colors of Israel*, she noted. And also, *Levites, the high priests, have no land of their own. Confirmation began in Kassel Germany 1810. Maccabees Sadducees Pharisees. Kiddush, Kiddushin, Kadosh, Kaddish –holiness equals set apart. Elijah's chair.*

Dolores kept the reprints of eight pamphlets in a series called *The Jewish Home*. They covered holidays, Sabbath candle lighting, and other basics. She saved the calendar that provided the hour and minute to light Sabbath candles in time zones across the United States, beginning September 1984. This may have been overkill for our household, where Sabbath candles were never lit. Still, she held on to it, along with the stapled *Vocabulary of Jewish Life* handout that provided transliterations and definitions (*chah-zahn, Cantor*). The *Patriarchal Family Tree* handout began with Terah, Abraham's father. It was relatively simple, but still a mouthful, with questions and answers on it that would stump most assimilated Jews. *What tribe did Moses belong to? Who was King David's great-grandfather?*

The question of who was born Jewish and who required conversion merited its own page in the folder. Under *Reform*, Dolores wrote *Very good case in Bible for patrilineal descent. Moses married a non-Jew*. For the Orthodox, it was all about the mother. *If the child is the Pope and mother is Jewish, Pope is Jewish*. One of her handouts compiled the comments of the Sages on conversion. *Rav Lakish said, Oppressing the proselyte is like oppressing God*. The Sages were overwhelmingly positive about it. She noted that some saw the convert as in a different category than one born into the tribe – a higher one.

Dolores also kept course assignments that she had turned in and received back with comments from the teacher. One assignment asked her to name aspects of her life she thought belonged under *Ordinary* and to make a second list under *Extraordinary*. Under *Ordinary*, Dolores wrote: *my life span, getting married, having children, my work*. And for *Extraordinary*: *my life experiences, my marriage, my children, my potential for impacting my community*. She lined up the two lists so life span was across from life experiences, marriage across from marriage, having children across from children, and work across from impact. Her ordinary things and her extraordinary things were essentially the same things. She saw the extraordinary in the ordinary. The teacher noticed. "That's lovely," she commented, drawing red arrows that pointed to the parallels.



\*

The class schedule and list of participants in the folder presented two mysteries. First, Dolores wasn't on the participant list. Second, the classes were Wednesday evenings from mid-September 1984 through March 1985. Dolores's Certificate of Conversion certifies that she "has completed a course of instruction in Judaism," but date of conversion was in November only six weeks after the start of class. Perhaps Dolores got course credit without staying until the end. Her second husband had been Jewish as well. She may have received credit for time served.

In the end, the process was as informal as the welcome the rabbi in charge gave her at the ceremony in his office. "If you want us," he said, "we want you." The *Conversion* folder suggested she was serious enough, and what it held can have the last word on its way to the trash --syllabus and pamphlets, notes and assignments.

xviii

From the spillage of manila folders:

Two letters from The University of Texas Austin, one from June 6, 1966, the second from November 3, 1966. The first began, "Dear Miss Dyer, I am very sorry to report that the faculty of the Department of Psychology has voted that your performance on the Qualifying Examination was not satisfactory." The second began, "Dear Miss Dyer: I am pleased to report that the faculty of the Department of Psychology has voted that you have passed the Qualifying Examination without condition." Both conclude with "Cordially yours".

A receipt from 1996 with details of our charges at the Blanceneaux Lodge, in the Cayo District of Belize. Arrive, March 7; depart March 9, two adults, two children. The room charge had been paid for in advance, so the bill only listed bar and restaurant purchases: *two Cokes, one ice tea, two Sprites, one ice tea, one bottle of beer, one draft beer, one glass Cabernet, three ham sandwiches, one chicken sandwich, one special, one pomodoro, hot chocolate, glass milk, Caribbean coffee, two desserts, milk.*

A sheet of paper dated August 1994 with nothing on it other than heights and weights. *Fifty pounds, three feet eleven and half inches. Seventy-seven and a half pounds, four feet seven and a half inches.*

Two one day passport tickets to Disneyland. Child tickets, "Good for unlimited use of attractions." These tickets are pink.

Three yellow index cards. On one side, typed sentences from the Family Interaction Q-sort work. (*The child is most like his mother. Mother is the family scapegoat. Many defensive maneuvers requiring much energy.*) On the other side of all three cards, lists of names that

Dolores must have been considering in 1984 (*Asher, Elia, Micah, Simon...*). For some of them, she added “meanings” (*Devin- a poet; Eben – a stone*).

A receipt from May 19, 1997, Baylor Medical Center Cafeteria. *1 tuna sandwich, 1 chips assorted, 1 fountain drink large*. The same day, a receipt from Prince’s, the Prince of Hamburgers. Prince’s was a neighborhood drive-in. To say it was an institution is an understatement. Founded in 1929 by Doug Prince, a hat salesman who lost his job in the Great Depression, it’s gone now. It has been replaced by a strip shopping center. But it was still on Lemmon Avenue in May of 1997 when Dolores went back into Baylor Hospital for “further testing.” She was confined to the room while I ate a tuna sandwich in the cafeteria. She requested a hamburger from Prince’s. So I went and got it for her.

Seven business cards: Larry Larkin, Broker, specializing in acreage in Santa Cruz; David Lipsky, Attorney at Law, Law Office of Lipsky, Blickenstaff & Fenton; Kikuchi Corporation Apparel and Cosmetic Products; Southwest II Gallery, Susan Jaffe, Director; Jed Riffe Rolling Thunder Skates, Inc.; Marvin Saul, Juniors Restaurant Delicatessen Catering; Bill Smith, East Dallas Automotive, Mike Smith President. Why were any of these cards kept? What were they doing in her manila folders?

*Gone but not forgotten* is a formula of praise on markers for the dead. In so many cases, the things that the living keep represent the opposite: *Forgotten, but not gone*.

A St. Patrick’s Day card from one of Dolores’s patients. Inside the card, an uncashed check for forty dollars. The check, from 1979, was not the only uncashed check tumbling out of Dolores’s folders. I found one for \$500 dated 1983. In a sense, much of what Dolores saved was an uncashed check, an attempt to pay the future in the currency of the past.

Ticket stubs, Dallas Symphony, May 14, 1994, Louis Lane, Conductor, Earl Wild, Piano. A postcard from Louis, who was conducting in South Africa. It was a picture of a white rhinoceros. “Things are still lovely here for the right people,” he wrote on the back. An honest comment, but in his voice, a compound of sarcasm, weariness and acceptance.

Dolores kept a form letter from 1977 sent to her from the Congress of the United States House of Representatives, James M. Collins, Third District, Texas, whose office received notice of any marriages in the district and followed up with a letter of congratulations. We were married that year. This form letter could win the prize for most likely to be discarded immediately, but it had survived for nearly five decades.

A handwritten letter to *Dear Dolores* came on the official Texas State Senator letterhead from Lloyd Doggett’s wife, Libby. Dolores was thanked for raising money in 1983. I also found the invitation to the fundraiser. Dolores was listed as a “Hot Doggett” sponsor. Her effort to “unseat” incumbent Republican Senator John Tower failed, but Lloyd Doggett did get himself elected to Congress in 1985. Forty years later he was still there. Like the egg-sucking dog, those who have a taste for political office rarely lose it.

A flyer for a program on *Adolescence – Making Sense Out of Chaos*. On that same program, in 1976, Leonard Kirby presented *Biofeedback, the Yoga of The West*. Dolores shared offices with Leonard. One day when I was there, Marshall McLuhan visited the office. I can't remember why he was in Dallas, and why at Dolores's office. Leonard wanted to hook him up on biofeedback. McLuhan refused.

A program for the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Association of Suicidology in 1983. Dolores was listed on the host committee.

A newsletter from the Women's Issues Congress. Dolores was a steering committee member and a task force chairwoman. The newsletter reported that "Dolores Dyer convened the Legislative Committee ..."

A letter welcomed Dolores to the Advisory Board of the Women's Center of Dallas. "Your term is three years and officially begins on..."

I get it, Dolores. If it has your name on it, you kept it. Forgive me for not doing the same.

\*

A full-page newspaper ad in 1983 included Dolores's name, along with hundreds of others, marking the tenth anniversary of the Roe v Wade decision.

In September that year, she appeared on "The Human Factor with Dr. Fred Labowitz." This was a television show on the new local cable service. She kept the promo.

Her name appeared on a temporary committee for "an important new women's political group." This was the Dallas Area Women's Political Caucus. She agreed to "join us in welcoming to Dallas First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton" in 1996.

Flyers for events that were years apart crashed on the floor of the storage room. Many of them had carried the same topics. The YMCA Noon Forum *Holding Down Two Jobs – Career and Home*, was echoed by a Women Meeting Women event, *Dividing The Pie, or How to Handle Home and Career*. Titles from fifty years ago could easily be reused. In 1976, there was *Positive Approaches to Crisis Intervention*. You can be positive there will be crisis and the need for intervention tomorrow.

Businesses wanted speakers on *Male/Female Business Relations: Wonderful or Exasperating*, or on *The Emotional impact of AIDS on the Family*. Church locations were popular. *Loving Relationships Woman's Seminar* was a program at Highland Park United Methodist Church. *Church Women United Leadership Day* at East Dallas Christian Church. *Growth as a Person, a Partner, and a Parent*, at Mount Olive Lutheran Church. Anything that mentioned homosexuality was usually at the Unitarian Church.

Divorce was an evergreen topic. Titles varied. *The Question of Custody: When Parents Disagree*. Or *Separation & Divorce Crisis*. Mary Miller, Dean, Southern Methodist University, mailed Dolores about *Yes, There Is Life After Divorce*, the adult ed class she taught in 1977, the year we were married.

Another folder contained more rosters of the committees Dolores had served on. Most were advisory. There was the Advisory Board Sub-Committee for Suicide and Crisis Management, the Advisory Council of Oak Lawn Community Services, the Advisory Board of the Dallas Regional Chamber. Her name appeared on rosters of the Dallas Civil Liberties Union and the Mental Health Association. She kept the lists where her title was simple "member" -- the AIDS subcommittee, the Human Services Commission, the Women's Issues Committee of the Dallas Psychological Association, the Dallas Women's Coalition.

Anything with her name on it. Was it a sense of self-importance, a need for affirmation, a fear of anonymity, an insecurity? All the saved rosters that I threw out. Maybe Dolores was like the proud mother who keeps every blue ribbon, report card, school honor and local mention that her child ever received. That may be the secret to it. Her own mother had shipped her off to relatives in Oklahoma, and Dolores had learned to be her own proud parent.

xix

Among her papers in another bankers box:

Page after page of quotations, written out on unlined paper in the perfect handwriting that a young woman used to practice in Catholic school. This kind of thing:

*Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction.*  
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

There was Pearl Buck and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Helen Hayes. The horses' mouths included Madame Chiang Kai-shek. Even more improbably, a quote from Marcel Marceau.

This one, also, next to last:

Rainer Maria Rilke – *Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.*

And the very last, attributed to Thornton Wilder:

*There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love.*

There is a market for inspirational quotes. Also, a subgenre of motivational quotes, which are mostly for salespeople.

Dolores had her own pet sayings. She liked the rhetoric of “Don’t let hanging back hold you back,” which was unattributed. She also cribbed from Brother Dave Gardner. Her “Let those as not want any not get any, and let that be both their punishment and their reward” came from Brother Dave. So did her “Never stand between a martyr and his cross.” Brother Dave, who studied one semester at a Southern Baptist college and made his first of eight comedy albums in 1959 with RCA, turned to drugs and alcohol after his career declined; they were both his punishment and his reward.

Dolores also wrote down the lyrics to a song from the musical *Mame* on three pages of a pocket-size spiral notebook. I found it sealed in a Ziploc bag. She had copied every word, including the promise that *on the last day of your life you’ll be smiling the same young smile you’re smiling now. All you had to do was open a new window, open a new door, travel a new highway that’s never been tried before.*

And so on.

\*

Dolores saved playbills and programs. Her *Mame* playbill was from the performance with Angela Lansbury at the Winter Garden Theater in Manhattan. That was in 1967. I was a high school freshman while Dolores was learning that “Life is a banquet and most poor sons-of-bitches are starving to death.”

She must have been in Los Angeles to see *Hair* at the Aquarius Theater on Sunset Boulevard in 1969, the year I graduated at Westchester High School. She had the playbill. I could read *Trends for Twelve Signs for 1969* on its inside back page, with horoscopes from Aries through Pisces.

She saved *Beauty and the Beast* at the Palace Theater in New York and *Andrea Chenier* at the Metropolitan Opera. Bobby Short was still playing at the Café Carlyle, when she heard Tosca at the Met. The memory existed only in the *Stagebill* that I was discarding. She saw Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child* at Theatre de Lys, with Marie Louise Wilson, a star from the sitcom *One Day at a Time*. Also, *Nicholas Nickleby* at the Broadhurst Theatre in 1986. I was there with her for those last two. I didn’t remember driving to Houston for *Turandot*, but Dolores kept the *Stagebill* as evidence. In a folder of its own: a twenty-eight page plus cover brochure for *Siegfried & Roy, Superstars of Magic, in Beyond Belief, An Amazing Spectacle*. I don’t remember going to that either, but I must have, wide-eyed, at the Frontier Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. The brochure still had its gate-fold tear-off postcard order form for souvenirs, available via Sells-Floto Inc.

For Dolores, the ordinary act of attendance was worthy of commemoration. In the *Stagebill* for a Dallas Symphony concert with the violinist Midori, Dolores crossed out *Midori, Violin*, and

wrote “Didn’t show” on the program. From the Dallas Theater Center, she saved the *Stagebill* from *The Oldest Living Graduate*. The play was part of the *Texas Trilogy* by Preston Jones, a member of the local resident company who became a local sensation after the trilogy was picked up for performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and went from there to Broadway. The same might have explained the program from a Theater Center production of D.L. Coburn’s *The Gin Game*. His play had already won a Pulitzer, but the sensation was the playwright, who lived in Dallas. Dallas was preening. The city’s marketing materials were never without the phrase “world-class” somewhere in the paragraphs.

I tossed dozens of saved programs from the Dallas Opera. One for *Tosca* in in the 1970s; another for *Tosca* in 1996. That was the last opera we attended together. Dolores was devoted to opera and I went along. She said opera was the only music that made the hair stand on her arm, which is peculiar praise. On a program for *Carmen* she wrote *Victoria Vergara substituted for Teresa Berganza*. Sitting on the floor of the storage room, I had to wonder, why? Why did she save it? And why record the substitution? She wasn’t the historian of mezzo-sopranos, unofficial or otherwise. There was no reason for her to note who did or didn’t appear in a production of *Carmen* in 1983. But she must have had her reasons.

xx

Of all the common instructions, “remember” may be the one least followed, and “remember me” the variation least obeyed. Some would deny it, pointing to their children or to their grandchildren. But what about in a hundred years? Surely being forgotten later rather than sooner is a difference without a distinction. Almost nobody is remembered for long, though most want to be. The reasons for a desire that is almost certain to be frustrated is a subject for much speculation by psychologists. Some say it’s “death anxiety” that drives the desire to be remembered. That could be why people write memoirs, and leave heirlooms, and fund the capital campaigns that put their names over the entrance of the new natatorium at a private school. It could be the reason I’m writing this now. An article in the journal *New Ideas In Psychology* offers an explanation. It says that people want to be the hero of the story they tell themselves. Since it’s impossible to actually experience the permanent loss of consciousness that is one of death’s side effects, no one can imagine it. Sleep is not the perfect analogy, though many have made it. With sleep, we have dreams. We also wake up. But death? It’s the perfect pairing of the unimaginable with the inevitable. So, leaving our story behind becomes a crutch we use to imagine the future without us. We keep old receipts, certificates, and print outs. If we can’t be remembered, we can still picture the full manila folders that might be found, even if by a stranger.

I have another question. What permits one life to be forgotten and another remembered? Someone leaves without a trace, another does everything she can to be tracked.

During the months I was going through boxes in storage, an article from the ghostwriter of a book about the life of Gloria Swanson appeared in *Vanity Fair*. Gloria Swanson was a somebody – a star, at one time the biggest in Hollywood. Her lovers were as famous as she

was. It was a life big enough that *Swanson on Swanson*, her “autobiography,” could be written by somebody else. Swanson was also a pack rack. “She had saved every article, interview, clipping, program, invitation, and letter, enough to fill hundreds of boxes, which she kept in storage.” And her “stuff” was saleable. She did sell it, to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. So, no different in kind from the clippings, programs, invitations and letters in Dolores’s manila folders, but much different in how it was valued.

On the other hand, there are memoirs of nobodies. I have a softbound book on my desk that was written by one. *These Things I Remember* is an edited translation of a notebook that had been handwritten in Hebrew by Eliezer Mordechai Altschuler, a Jew from Suwalki in northeastern Poland. Born before electricity, married at fifteen, earning a living in the cloth and shoe trades, trips to “the Holy Land,” and a visit to London once; and for the most part his story recounts little more than the series of his complaints about difficult relatives, the inadequacies of his employees, and the shady dealings of his competitors. He died at home in Suwalki, “an impoverished and lonely death in 1920,” as the blurb on the back cover says. Nothing notable, except maybe this: the society and the way of life Eliezer Mordechai Altschuler describes was extinguished by the Nazis. And so, like all rare commodities, it has accrued value that it might not otherwise have. The telling is not for everyone, which is why the paperback on my desk was published by Lulu.com, and not by Random House, publisher of *Swanson on Swanson*.

Memory is a kind of fiction. It’s a reimagination of our past. We make it up, whether it’s distant or recent, and whether the make-up is applied to enhance the beauty of the past or, like some Halloween masks, to simulate our monsters. Almost the same times that Altschuler was recapturing the arguments and Sabbaths in a small Jewish town, Proust pretended to remember life in fictional Combray. He layered a thousand and one details, writing sentences that take nearly as long to read as the events they describe might have taken to happen, had any of them actually happened. The characters in Proust are also nobodies. Swann, Odette, Mme Verdurin, Dr. Cottard – what did any of them do to deserve being memorialized? People may question almost every aspect of reality – is it all a dream, does any of it matter, and, if so, to what end? I may believe that Gloria Swanson’s life was more interesting than Eliezer Mordechai Altschuler’s. But one thing it would be foolish to assert is that Altschuler would agree. Just so, Dolores never needed a justification for thinking that any mention of her name on a flyer, an agenda, a thank you note, or in an article in a local newspaper deserved to be saved.

xxi

Dolores was neither famous nor almost famous, but because of a custody battle between Mary Jo Risher and ex-husband Doug, she came closer than most of us will. Her name is in a book. There was a character based on her in a Movie of the Week. For three years, from 1975 to 1978, Dolores was limelight adjacent.

Dolores's notes from her therapy sessions with Mary Jo, her partner Ann, Mary Jo's younger son and Ann's daughter remained in the folder labeled *Risher Case*. I tore them up. Also in the folder, an ink drawing of a shark chasing a swimming woman with a request for contributions to the Mary Jo Risher Fund at the National Organization for Women. Dolores had saved the *Friends of Mary Jo Risher* tee shirt and the photo button. And a *Love Is For All* booklet, with a "Dear Troy" note from the author handwritten on the inside cover. Folded inside the booklet, a letter to Dolores from Troy Perry, founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. Reverend Perry requested the booklet's return, since it was a personal gift. Any return would be almost fifty years overdue.

I found a pristine *People* magazine in the Risher folder, too, which I haven't thrown away, though there must be hundreds of them "in the archives." Farrah Fawcett and Lee Majors are glossy on the cover of this January 19, 1976 edition. *The \$6 Million Couple! TV's bionic beefcake and wife*. Also making headlines, though not so large: *Holy Vibes from Seals & Crofts* and *Tracking the La Guardia Bomber*.

Photos of Mary Jo and Ann were on pages 51 and 52, alongside the story. "Mary Jo Risher, in the eyes of her friends, is an attentive and loving mother," it begins, "but a Dallas jury of ten men and two women awarded custody of the former Sunday school teacher's 9-year-old adopted son, Richard, to his father, Doug. The reason: Mary Jo is a lesbian."

Dolores had taken the stand at the trial. She was as an expert witness for Mary Jo. She testified that homosexuality was "just another lifestyle." Doug Risher's attorney had his expert as well, who had a different point of view. And by the time Mary Jo and Ann had broken up three years later, someone we knew had written *By Her Own Admission*, a book about the case, and ABC had turned it into *A Question of Love, The ABC Sunday Night Movie*, with Gena Rowlands and Jane Alexander portraying Mary Jo and Ann, despite ABC's disclaiming any connection to the trial. According to the network's press release that Dolores kept in her *Risher* folder, ABC's televised drama was only "based on factual events," and, naturally, "names have been changed."

That was how Dolores became "Dr. Tippit," played by Gwen Arner, who was also almost famous and maybe more than that. Gwen Arner testified as Dr. Tippit in *A Question of Love*. She played a judge in an episode of *Falcon Crest*. She directed episodes of *The Bionic Woman*, *The Paper Chase*, *The Waltons*, *Fame*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Law and Order*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, and *Homicide: Life on the Street*. She was a professional. Her last directing credit came a year after Dolores's death, when Gwen was sixty-three. It was for the last of the twelve episodes she directed of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*.

In the press release for "The ABC Sunday Night Movie" of November 26, 1978, the entire cast was named. The release was on the kind of coated paper that used to arrive through a fax machine. So the names were faded, but there was plenty of fame still clinging to them. Ned Beatty played ex-husband Doug's attorney. He cross-examined Dr. Tippit six years after he was abused by hillbillies in *Deliverance* and two years after personifying corporate amorality in



*Network*. He was listed under “starring”. So was Clu Gulager, who played Doug, and Bonnie Bedelia, who was Mary Jo’s attorney ten years before she was Bruce Willis’s wife Holly in those *Die Hard* movies.

Gwen Arner was only a co-star. She had distinguished company though. Marlon Brando’s older sister played one of the characters. Jocelyn Brando, one of the first members of Actors Studio in New York, where she studied with Elia Kazan. She played on Broadway in Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* and in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. She was Glenn Ford’s wife in *The Big Heat*, directed by Fritz Lang. Acting royalty, in a way. She even appeared in *The Virginian*, alongside Clu Gulager.

Into the trash, the press release, the *People*, and their folder. Tossed as well, a review that was also in Dolores’s folder.

*Sexual Medicine*, a serious medical journal that seemed to have no business commenting on an ABC Sunday Night made-for-TV movie, reviewed *A Question of Love*. It disparaged Dr. Tippit, citing this cross-examination:

Husband’s attorney, played by Ned Beatty: “Would you want your child to be raised in a homosexual family?”

Dr. Tippit: “I couldn’t answer.”

In the reviewer’s opinion, Dr. Tippit’s effectiveness as an expert was destroyed by “her inner ambivalence” about homosexuality. She was “unreliable.”

There’s still a signed copy of *By Her Own Admission* in the storage room. It is inscribed *For Dolores*. As for Gifford Guy Gibson, who wrote the book and the inscription, he is buried in the Beit Olam section of Sparkman Hillcrest. Dead at 52 in 1995, two years before Dolores. While Guy was working on the book, Dolores and I used to visit him and his Hungarian wife Ildi at their place in the Manor House, the first “apartment high rise” in downtown Dallas. That was when living downtown and in a high rise were novel and signified that you were either poor or sophisticated.

I did see Guy’s book for sale in paperback once. It was in a bookstall on the street in Mexico City, with a blurry color photograph on its cover and a much spicier-sounding title, *Juicio a una madre lesbiana*.

xxii

One of Dolores’s manila folders was labeled “material related to Dallas Psychological Association complaint correspondence.” A former patient had made an eight-page, single spaced, typed report to the Ethics Committee of the Dallas Psychological Association, claiming that Dolores had crossed an ethical boundary by involving her in “social, personal and family” activities, all of which was true. Dolores did that routinely. She invited patients on shopping trips or to public events, joined them at their parties, even welcomed them in our home. She would talk to them about her own life as much as theirs. She was a therapist who didn’t see the harm in that. Patients who met me sometimes acted as if they already knew me, because

they had heard my name in their fifty-minute sessions. I thought it was strange. But then I am reticent. Dolores, on the other hand, was unafraid of engagement. She befriended the pharmacy assistant at the drug store, she knew the family at the dry cleaners. Her former patient had left Dolores and gone into therapy with a someone new who did not share Dolores's approach to the therapeutic relationship.

There was no result from the complaint other than an instruction from the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists. It told Dolores to "familiarize yourself with your ethical responsibilities as a psychologist." She was further instructed to review Board Rule 465.36 (c) (1) (Q). For my review in the storage room, there was a cover letter, a letter from the complainant, and some savory supporting material, including statements from the former patient's former husband, her lover, and her mother, all of which had been provided to Dolores as part of the process.

"These are serious allegations," according to the cover letter from the Chair of the Ethics Committee. The folder also had Dolores's response to the Ethics Committee. "I want to express my extreme distress about the way a client complaint was handled," it began. The prize for drama goes to a letter the former patient sent to the Committee in support of the formal complaint. It recounted years of dysfunction, severe anxiety, two hospitalizations for depression, and then, out of the blue, "One thing I am worried about," she wrote, "is receiving a call from her husband. He will be extremely irate about this, and this man does have a temper."

I had no idea I had appeared in the cast of characters, even though I had no role.

xxiii

*Keep those cards and letters coming in.* In an earlier time, the hosts of radio shows would say that on air. They would read postcards and letters from listeners as free material, filling the air time between paid messages from Winston or Chevrolet. The cards and letters rolled in. That usage, too, might puzzle learners of English as a second language. Pieces of paper are not usually rolling.

For Dolores, cards came rolling in both before and after her death.

There were hundreds of them in the bankers boxes. The majority were get well cards and sympathy cards, but I also threw away the few birthday cards she received in July from people who didn't know the situation – from the dentist's office, for example.

Many of the get well cards came with handwritten notes, which were added to the wishes printed by American Greetings or other card companies. After word got out about the seriousness of her diagnosis, there was cheerleading ("you are the strongest woman I know"), requests to be told how to help ("If there's anything I can do"), and language about the inadequacy of language ("I don't have the words").

Cards offered old-fashioned sentiment. They were straightforward. Get well cards that were jokes were also common, with the set up on the cover and the punch line on the inside. Laughter was not the best medicine. It's not medicine of any kind, although the senders meant well. To wit: "To help speed your recovery, I wanted to send you some chicken-noodle soup!" The cover is a cartoon of a smiling chef holding a soup bowl and spoon. Then, on the inside: "But the stupid chicken hasn't laid a single noodle!" Drawing of a hen, beads of sweat above a reddish comb. "Anyway, hope you'll get well real soon!" Maybe this does comfort the sick. It is a confession not of dopiness on the part of the sender, but of helplessness, and in that it is truthful.

"An Apple A Day Keeps the Doctor Away", according to American Greetings, from its Forget Me Not series; then, on the inside: "...if you throw hard and your aim is accurate."

All of them had their bar codes, pricing, and the card's provenance on the back. They told of the graphic designer in house at Gibson Greetings in Cincinnati, or the writer, freelance, a stay-at-home mom. They also shared in the mystery of international trade, with pricing gaps between U.S.A. \$2.85 and Canada \$4.15.

Cards from married women never came just from them. They came from their husbands and the children, too. Though of course not really. So Sue B's *We love you* wasn't entirely true; whether Sue really loved Dolores or not, surely Craig and their two boys, who were both under ten, did not. There's no reason they would. And when people *have faith that you will come through*, do they? It's meant as encouragement, it's saying, *I want to encourage you*. I do understand that approach. I used to tell both of my children how capable they were, even though they might not have been. In terms of having the character and good habits that determine success in so many endeavors, they actually had less than they needed. They may even have been below average in that combination of qualities. Still, encouragement seemed better than silence. It felt like the right thing to do.

Is it fair for catastrophic misfortune to provide a "teachable moment" for the children of friends and neighbors? I could force myself to smile at the childish printing on a note that came with a flower arrangement left on our doorstep. *Dear Dr. Dyer, we hope your cheer and joy return soon*. I could also resent it. If a mother down the block wants to send her neighbor flowers, do it as a mature woman, not as the opportunity for your ten-year-old to earn a gold star. But then I might not have been the best parent so am probably wrong about this.

Ana, the fifteen-year-old daughter of friends, had asked her mother to drop off a card with a Frida Kahlo painting on its cover, *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*. Ana's message, "I hope you can get back on your feet soon." Dolores was confined to bed for the rest of February, but she did get back on her feet in March and April, and from then from time to time. Ana included a P.S., saying she would love to babysit our children. "They are lots of fun," she lied.

A card from a different friend's teenage daughter, another pretend adult, came in the mail. This girl wrote, "Everything will work out just fine."

On a card with a handwritten note from our own daughter's advisory class, her eleven-year-old classmates wrote their names down in two columns. One child added a smiley face.

A day after the funeral, our home was open for a prayer service. After the prayers, friends were invited to say something if they chose. One couple had brought their fourteen-year-old, who decided to demonstrate her thoughtfulness. If we had to choose between a world where no one dies, she said, and a world where no child is born, we would choose the new child. That may be so in the abstract. At the time, however, I would have preferred this chubby fourteen-year-old never to have been born, if that could have kept Dolores alive.

I discarded a card from Rosemary at the Verandah Club, where Dolores exercised in the indoor pool. *We miss you in class. Hope you're back with us soon.* Also, the card from Tina, who did Dolores's nails. In addition to the *you are in my prayers*, Tina wrote, "This card is good for a pedicure. Call me."

Charlotte Taft sent a card with photos of her place in New Mexico, inviting Dolores "if you ever want to get away..." But Dolores wanted exactly the opposite in those months. What she wanted was to stay.

Cards came with gifts. An envelope had *tenderloin* written on it, and there was a gift notice from Kuby's Sausage House inside.

Before the school year ended in May, the teachers at our children's private schools still received the gifts that mothers always gave. I don't remember, but Dolores must have somehow gotten it done. In return, she received a card. "*Dear Dolores, Thank you so much for the beautifully fragrant tuberose soaps....* The note concluded "*...you and your entire family are in my prayers.*"

Some of the cards had messages with a "what about me" sensibility, which I did find strangely comforting. One of the next-door neighbors, a doctor's wife who was hovering in her late eighties, wrote: "Dear Dolores: Just to let you know that I am thinking about you daily. It will soon be six months since my accident. I am now using a walker but it is hard to get around, and will be months before I can drive. Fondly – " Another neighbor brought over a lasagna but then mailed a follow-up card to apologize for it. It seems she had made two lasagnas, kept one for herself, and then discovered "it did NOT taste good." Her note was an apology "to Dolores and family." "This is very embarrassing," she wrote, on a card received in July.

I found a "thinking of you" card that declared, "You are being remembered in a mass at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows." It promised that a votive candle would be lit at the shrine. Signed *Fond memories, Linda and Tom*, it was addressed to Dolores and postmarked

July 3, ten days before she died. Do you tell someone before the end that you know it's the end?

Obviously, it isn't always obvious how to say get well, especially if you don't know enough about the situation. I would think a get well card would only go to someone who is seriously ill. But the recommendations for messaging don't seem to support that. *Seventeen Magazine* promotes "67 Get Well Wishes to Show Them How Much You Care." *Looks like you forgot to eat an apple a day* is among the sixty-seven. So is *You're so great even germs like you*. Such phrases might do exactly the opposite of what they are intended to do. An outfit calling itself spoonfulofcomfort.com advises "How To Say Get Well Soon Professionally." *Hope your recovery is short and sweet, stay strong, take extra good care of yourself, get some rest, you have my thoughts and prayers, let me know if you need anything, and feel better soon*. Those aren't terrible. But spoonfulofcomfort.com also includes a phrase that would not be very thoughtful to say to someone who has been diagnosed with stage-four color cancer: *You've got this*.

\*

I went through the collection. There seemed to be a natural sequence to the sentiments. First came the notes that had accompanied flowers brought into the room at Baylor Hospital. Then the commercial get well cards that arrived at the house during the five months between surgery and funeral. Most of those came in the first two months. These included the ones intended as humor, the wisdoms in rhyme, the get-well-soons, the you're in-our-thoughts-and-prayer, and the tell-us-what-we-can-dos. Last, the cards that came after. That pile was smaller. But altogether, and bound with rubber bands, the stacks were as large as a stumbling block on the floor of the storage room.

The count:

Thirteen notes, the size of business cards, to the hospital room with deliveries of flowers -- *thinking of you, with wishes for a speedy recovery, thinking of you with love*.

Sent to the house, one hundred and twenty-two get well cards.

After the funeral, one hundred and six more, In sympathy.

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Letters received during the months of illness merited a pile of their own. Sentences from any of them could be pulled out and inserted into others, like beads on the same necklace. *My fond thoughts are going out to you, one says. Another, I want to join all those others who are sending you warm wishes. Or I was shocked and saddened to hear of how serious your health problems are. And, I am praying that a change for the better comes to you very soon. Not everything was stock. Someone who must have been in therapy with Dolores revealed, "Over*

the past two years I have learned quite a bit about your sadness as well as your joys." What sadness, I wondered. He also wrote, "I feel as if I know Mark and the kids," and then in italics added, "*if you weren't making them up as you went!*" This patient and his wife were both praying for Dolores.

My sister, Patti, sent a long letter with a formulaic start. *Just wanted to let you know my thoughts are with you.* Patti "just wants," as if she isn't making too much of a claim for herself, or on Dolores's time, which may be short. Another writer's goal was for Dolores to "just know" that she was praying for her. This letter had come from a former daughter-in-law, whose teenage marriage to Dolores's older son was thirty-five years in the past.

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Dolores just wanted to answer all of the cards and letters. Also, the missed phone calls, and the food deliveries. She did her best. In between surgery and a clinical trial, and again in the month before her discomfort increased and had to be countered by higher, fog-inducing doses of morphine and lorazepam. I found her *Add to 'Thank you' sack* instruction on a post-it note that was still stuck to the UPS delivery card that had arrived with a Harry & David basket. Also needing to be tossed: the leftover printed thank you message she had dictated. It was a justified paragraph on a small rectangle of grey paper. Stacks of them were inside a bankers box, bundled in disintegrating rubber bands.

*I hope to thank each of you personally when I am better, for the prayers, the cards, the gifts, the flowers, the food, the crystals, the helpful information, the Chinese good luck pieces, the herbs, the books, the words of encouragement and all the good wishes you have sent to me. For now, I am sending this note to tell you how very much your thoughtfulness and your warm wishes have comforted me and brightened my days. With love...*

I don't know who helped enclose them in the thank you cards that Dolores wanted mailed, or how many went out. Maybe I did, I can't remember. She intended them to go to everyone who had written, called, or come to visit in those months. Her note was sent "for now," as a stop gap, ahead of a future "when I am better." But I don't take that as evidence that Dolores was hopeful of recovery. More likely it was something simpler and more durable, a signature of her character.

Dolores made other efforts to communicate in writing, throwing off as best she could the covers of medication. Mostly, those letters were never delivered. "Dear Joan," she wrote on lined notebook paper. She was addressing a friend who had brought flowers. "I'm watching your struggling lilies that everyone admires. I'm not able to write well because of the morphine, but the choice is either to take it and stay pain free and hasten my death, or .... Every day brings more clarity to my life and helps all of us accept the finality of it." So, despite the deteriorated penmanship, misspellings and cross-outs, this was clarity.

I found an earlier version of this same “watching the struggling lilies” letter, too. It was incoherent. She did manage an instruction, probably to me. “Clean this letter up,” she wrote, and “I can’t think well this morning...”

An unopened envelope, unable to forward, return to sender. On the front, a 3 May 1997 postmark and a cancelled 32-cent stamp. The stamp is a stunner. One of the very first triangle stamps, it was issued to commemorate a stamp exhibition, San Francisco’s Pacific 97, and shows a mid-nineteenth century clipper ship. The envelope was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Peter Lau on Monterrey in Renton, Washington. Either a wrong address, or a past address, since the Lau’s were Malaysian Chinese in the States on student visas. I opened it to read the note inside. *Do pray for us, Dolores wrote. I am seriously ill with colon cancer.* She was addressing Peter’s wife, Jasmine, who babysat for us years before, when Peter was a theology student at Southern Methodist.

You hear sometimes of people who have cancer hiding it. Dolores did the opposite. She wanted to contact everyone she could to tell them the news of her illness. I found lists of the messages left on our answering machine. Each name with a time of call and the call-back number.

Dolores managed to make phone calls until the end of her illness. Some of them might have been drug-addled or slurry, which somehow led to rumors spread by our daughter’s classmates that she was either an addict or a drunk. It seemed best at the time to ignore the cruelty of pre-teen girls.

She left a post-it note *Talk to Nicky’s mom.* Ann P., Nicky’s mom, was taking Nicky and his brother Clayton to her lake house for a weekend and had asked if our son might also need to get away. I haven’t thought of Nicky in a while. He was a wild one, even at thirteen, never one of Ben’s best friends, just another neighborhood kid. He left Dallas a year or two later to live with his father and died at twenty of a heroin overdose.

xxiv

There was no cure, but also no timetable, and a murky difference between hope and wishful thinking. What was the right thing to do, what was the best thing to do, what was the only thing to do? How much time do you devote to looking for answers? If like Dolores you thought of yourself as a scientist, you took the booklet the oncology office gave you, *Chemotherapy and You: A Guide to Self-Help During Treatment*, and spent a percentage of your precious last hours reading it. The booklet was in the box marked *Dolores Illness*. I could see that she used it, because she had written on the cover: *Call MD temp above 100.5, chills, bleeding, no aspirin, Tylenol OK.* She listed a 24-hour phone number for Dr. Pippen, or his nurse, or the answering service, *ext 8377*. She wrote a recipe for mouthwash on the inside cover. Also, the instruction *rinse mouth 4-5 times daily*. On second thought, maybe she didn’t use up any of her time reading this booklet, which was produced by the National Institutes of Health National Cancer Institute. She only used it for scratch paper.

She had bedside visitors. There were home healthcare nurses as well, though she never formerly entered hospice, remaining instead on the experimental protocol through Dr. Pippin, the oncologist, until the end. There was also Dr. Vera, the “pain doctor,” who shared that common concern about the overuse of medication. Luckily, one of my fellow dads in Indian Princesses was a physician who was also a pain specialist, and he advised and interceded to help Dolores get the pain relief she needed. You might hope to go through life with no personal connection to a pain specialist, but it can be useful.

So this was the course of action. Dolores would work with Dr. Pippin at Texas Oncology. She would do a course of eight treatments of 5 FU and Leucovorin. Then, a CT scan to see if tumors were shrinking. If not, there was another trial to sign up for. That was the plan.

I continued to make compilations of others possibilities anyway. As a result, I had another seven pages to discard of handwritten alternatives, none of them taken. These seven pages were a dogpile of drug names, doctors, cities, tips, and book titles. They were a stream of consciousness, but the water is no deeper than puddle, even if too muddy to show any bottom. Temodal, Temozolomide, Tomvoex, Hycamptin, Topotecan, Tomudex, Capsitabcen –the drug names I wrote down had the strange syllables of Mesoamerican deities. A colon cancer vaccine via Johns Hopkins. Dr. Devine at Mayo Clinic. Tomas Andresson, ginger tea bags, interferon, panorex. I wrote down advice that no one would want to follow. Seven helpings of fruit and vegetables daily, eight glasses of water daily. And, always, recommendations for further readings. Michael Lerner’s *Choices in Healing*. Patrick Quillan’s *Beating Cancer with Nutrition*. Anne and David Frahm’s *A Cancer Battle Plan*. All these books are still for sale twenty-five years later and still selling.

This was a fraction of it, and only page one.

Other actions on other pages included refraining from the news or any bad news, never drinking chlorinated water, visiting a park to reconnect with nature, clearing the mind by concentrating on the breath, and listening to music. Also, eating broccoli, adding garlic, and replacing meat with soy protein. I had put asterisks beside refraining from the news or any bad news, just to add emphasis, the way a student might color a certain sentence in a text book with yellow marker to prep for the test.

There’s healthfinder.gov, and bcm.tmc.edu, and icsi.net. Anything with a web address seemed authoritative in 1997. It seemed leading edge. I jotted down *Call 1-800-4-CANCER* for the latest in diagnosis, treatment, clinical trials and support.

I wrote “see ISIS Pharmaceuticals,” which had nothing to do with Islam. I added monoclonal antibodies, therapeutic vaccines, and antisense drugs to the list. Anti-sense describes so well the hopes of those five months.



Introgen Corp in Austin and P53 therapy were on the seven-page list. So was matrix metalloprotenase inhibitors, British Biotech PLC, Agouron Pharmaceuticals. And Canseaneit, vaccine status report Dr. Puck, Immunotherapy Corporation.

As I tore up these pages in the storage room, one by one, it was obvious, they were gibberish. But had any of it meant more then?

BE POSITIVE was on the list – I had written it in all caps.

The next line items: Endostatin, UFT, Emily's friend in LA -- whatever and whoever that was.

On these seven pages I was still falling for Julian Whitaker, who sold his supplements and other alternatives. Radio therapy was associated with John MacDonald in Philadelphia; I had the phone number with a 215 area code by his name. And hydrazine sulfate, Dr. Joseph Gold, Syracuse. And antineoplastins, Dr. Burcynski.

On another page, nine more possibilities. Some were novel, like HOH, human growth hormone. Others, just ordinary produce; carrots, cabbage, and cauliflower were on my list, as were broccoli, beans and peas. I put an asterisk by Oral Chemotherapy, CPT11. "It will either kill you or cure you. Dosage control is critical." I was quoting Loy Allen, one of the e-mailers in the colon cancer discussion group.

Yet another page, with fifteen more cures and treatments. Some of them were repeats from prior pages. I must have forgotten that I already had them. But a few new ideas were also taking their bows. Vitamin E, megace as appetite enhancer, mitomycin, Edelfosine, and Depsipeptide, which someone in the cancer discussion group had recommended trying after 5FU and Leucovorin fail. I also referred myself to an article in *Atlantic Monthly*, "Vaccinating Against Cancer."

Finally, the last of the seven pages. This last page had my notes on Gerson Therapy, which involved coffee enemas and a juice diet, along with a theory that people with cancer have too much sodium and too little potassium. The therapy required drinking thirteen glasses of juice a day, all of it made fresh from organic fruits and vegetables. Then, coffee enemas, to remove "the toxins." It was nothing approved by the FDA, but it had its champions. None of the seven pages were dated, but this last page must have been the last of my listmaking efforts, because it included calling hospice about afternoon volunteers. It also listed Roxanol, which was underlined. My note said that Roxanol, which is morphine sulfate, was for the "opioid tolerant." The very last line was about a CADD-PCA portable pain pump, and the need to remove furniture from the building on Wycliff where Dolores had her office. It must have been the middle of June by then.

\*

Dolores's business as a psychologist, and at least some of her delight in being Dr. Dyer, had come to an end. Her professional efforts concluded with a statement she approved on office letterhead:

*To My Patients*

*My continued health problems force me to make a decision I had hoped not to make. I will be closing my practice as of May 20, 1997. I have enjoyed my work so very much but now need to give all of my energy to my health and my family. Your records will be available for review at my office. I refer you to Dr. Kirby or Dr. Tankersley at the office. Either will be glad to assist you. Yours truly,*

\*

At some point, rescuing the dying turned into dealing with living. And life was all about practical matters, tending to the day, anticipating tomorrow. I could be of use to Dolores when she was sick in bed by flushing out the port in her chest and injecting lorazepam. I could also wash our dishes and transport Ben and Eden to school and pay bills, though none of that was anything out of the ordinary. The hours in the evenings trying to learn how to "beat cancer" had been a pretense, something done to satisfy a need of my own. I wanted to think of myself as someone who would do whatever it took, even if none of it amounted to much. In fact, none of it was ever tried – not P53, not radio therapy, not walnut shells and wormwood, not even the broccoli. We never went to M.D. Anderson, which was only a few hours away in Houston, or to UT Southwestern, which was in our neighborhood. Instead, Dolores had the standard treatment, 5FU and Leucovorin, which was what she wanted, and we accepted as a fact of life that happened that nothing worked or was going to work, as we managed the months of dying.

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"Dr. Redford Williams, a physician and researcher at Duke University Medical School, wants people to pipe down and listen for a change. 'Hostile people can't seem to shut up. Research clearly shows hostile personality types are four to seven times more likely to die by age 50 in all disease categories,' he says." This was in a newspaper article from 1997 that I must have thought was worth saving, since I found it in the storage room. I was feeling pretty hostile myself as I removed it from a bankers box, reread it, tore it in two, and then in two again, and threw it out. Four to seven times more likely to die? Really? It was preposterously vague, and even more ridiculously specific. I wonder whether the phrase "research clearly shows" might have no more weight than the opinions of the four out of five dentists who recommended sugarless gum or picked Crest or Colgate in the TV advertising of an earlier era. This article's title was *Silence is golden, but it may also be therapeutic.*

\*

There were other folders, also full of “science.” I had taken scissors and cut out as surgically as I could an article that appeared in the *New York Times* in March, 1997, reporting that “the biotechnology industry is poised to deliver a host of cancer drugs in the next two to three years. Some of them promise to extend lives...” It offered a graphic with the names of different cancers, drug companies, and their drugs, positioning them next to the corresponding body part on a visual outline of the human body. For colorectal cancer, Centocor was the company named. Its drug with promise was called Panorex. I wondered what had happened with it over the past quarter century. It turns out that Centocor was valuable, but Panorex was not. Wellcome in the United Kingdom had taken an equity position in Centocor. Then Centocor became a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson. As for Panorex, an article in the *Philadelphia Business Journal*, August 19, 2002, under the headline *Centocor: Now Bigger Than Ever*, reported in passing that Centocor “pulled the plug on Panorex, after it performed poorly in late-stage clinical trials.”

Dolores would have been unable to wait in any case. For her, the late-stage result was only a few months off.

\*

Death was approaching. As an amateur watching it happen, I was coming ashore from the choppy sea of scientific language, medical studies, and products with many more syllables than Crest or Colgate. The “study” that Dolores had signed up for was expected to continue until April 6, 1998. She was there for the start, but flunked out long before graduation day. The title of the study: *A Phase II Trial of LY231614 Administered Intravenously Every 21 Days in Patients with 5-FU and Irinotecan-Refractory Colorectal Cancer*. Dolores had given her permission, as far as it went. She was asked to sign that she understood that she was taking part in a research study “because I have cancer of the colon that has not responded to treatment or is no longer responding to treatment with drugs used to treat cancer.” In fact, there were no prior failed treatments; after the surgery, being on the study was the only option presented. So it was not so much accepted, as submitted to. “I understand there is no guarantee that I will benefit from participating in this research study. I understand that I may receive no direct medical benefit and the drugs I receive may even be harmful.” The multi-page document, which I removed from a manila folder, was full of understandings. It described the study Dolores participated in, but not the experience of it. I saw that the Consent to Participate was unsigned on the document that I tore up.

\*

Mixed in with Dolores’s notes to herself, a prescription receipt, 6/3/97, Opium Deodorized. Warning: Causes Drowsiness. This was for “oral administration.” The tincture was prepared without the natural, nauseating odor, by adding a petroleum distillate. I found the card with June appointments at Texas Oncology, PA, the Infusion Clinic on Worth Street. 6/3/97 Lab, 6/10/97 Lab, 6/16/97 Lab, 6/17/07 Lab; all the appointments were for 1 pm.

Also, a phone number – *Bobbie, for nails*. Manicures, or the wish for them, even when life was slipping from her hands. And a blue laminated “prayer card” from Baylor University Medical Center, with a line of Psalm 118, “This is the day that the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

xxv

Frances Cargill Walther Burch was living with her seventeenth husband, Blufird, when I was married to Dolores. Their dilapidated two-story house on Elsbeth in the Oak Cliff area was just down the street from a ten-unit building where Lee Harvey Oswald had lived with his wife Marina and their daughter. I found a folder with a cache of photos of Frances, along with other keepsakes that Dolores had kept to herself. There was a faded Family Register, with a few blanks filled in – *Husband*, Mr. Leon Dyer, no birth date given; *Wife*, Mrs. Francis Cargill, born February 24, 1909. That helped me make sense of a tiny tarnished spoon I had uncovered a month before, which had 1909 engraved on its bowl.

A photo in a cardboard frame showed Frances as a stunning young beauty, posed with her head turned and tilted slightly down. It was a professional sepia-colored portrait. She had a feint pink blush applied to her left cheek. The *Sincerely yours, Frances Cargill* written on a slant over her chest and turned shoulder seemed like a relic as well.

Frances was twenty when Dolores was born in 1929, a hundred days before the crash on Wall Street. Whatever roaring had happened in the decade when Frances was a teenager, it was coming to an end. Still, Frances remained a bit of a vamp all her life. One of the photos Dolores saved showed the two of them. Frances must have been in her early thirties. She looked as distant as a someone can be, for a mother who has her arms around a daughter, her only child. Along with the photos, I found a formally printed program for *Piano Recital, Our Lady of Victory Academy, High School Department, May 13, 1943, 7:45 P.M.* There were thirty girls on the program. They were listed in order of performance. Unfortunately, *Dolores Dyer, beginner, O Sole Mio* was second on the list, which meant her mother would have twenty-eight more performances to sit through after Dolores finished.

The program preserved a message that Frances had written on the back and passed to a friend during the concert, like a schoolgirl passing secret notes in class: “I’m bored stiff,” she complained. “It’s hot. Let’s go down to drug store and get some ice cream before we go home.” We’ve all been there. A parent at a school concert, when our child is done and we still have to listen to all the other prodigies.

In the same folder, a page from the Thursday, December 26, 1985 *Dallas Times Herald*. Half of the page was a *Toys R Us Values Galore* ad. Dolores had written on it twice, in very large print, *Don’t Throw Away!* An overreaction to a day after Christmas sale? Local Area Deaths was below the fold. Under the headline, *Frances Louise Walther Burch, 77, of Dallas, died Tuesday. Graveside service will be at 10 a.m. today at Grove Hill Cemetery.*

A mother's obituary may be hard to let go of, however unsentimental you are, or no matter how difficult your mother might have been. A "Deed to Burial Rights" at Grove Hill Memorial Park identified the location of Frances's grave. As far as I know, Dolores never visited. I also threw away the receipt for the gray granite marker we bought for the site at Grove Hill where the cremains of Frances Louise Burch were buried in a pink plastic box. The marker was inscribed with name and dates and, above the name, *Dolores's Mom*.

\*

Newsletters, awards programs, congratulatory notes, acknowledgments of donations, another letter on the stationery of the State of Texas House of Representatives, invitations to award presentations – all of them naming Dolores somewhere, *this very special person in the life of the Center or in recognition of long-term commitment or a perfect example of a Woman of the 80's*. The *perfect example* paragraph was from a Member Profile that appeared in a newsletter from the Verandah Club, the health club where Dolores went to water aerobics three times a week.

Some of the odds and ends were odder than others. Dolores saved two color advertising inserts from the newspaper. They promoted I.C. Deal Development Corp's newest apartments, which included the Tecali, where she lived in the early 1970s. "New world influences in the Spanish architecture of the Tecali conjure visions of Old Mexico's timeless grandeur." Why hold on to this boilerplate? Maybe she knew I.C. Deal, who made a fortune in real estate, started an independent oil company, and was ranked one of the top 100 art collectors in the United States, according to *Art & Antiques* magazine. His obituary in 2014 described him as a champion athlete who died from complications of childhood polio.

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It may seem cluttered, but the world of what we leave behind is as vast as space. And cold, too, in the emptiness between past and present, and the void of meaning between the objects and their subjects. What about Dolores's wooden plaques on the shelves in the storage room? There were two stacks of them. Why does anyone want a plaque in the first place? They are ugly and often heavy and sometimes in awkward shapes, rectangles and shields, with protrusions. On one of the shelves alongside the plaques, a small block of marble with a message of appreciation on a strip of metal. And a chunk of glass, with Dolores's name engraved on it. These are the kinds of objects you can't even put out on the table at a garage sale. At the same time, it feels just as disrespectful to put them in the trash, where they belong.

In another bankers box, framed photographs of Dolores from her childhood, her girlhood, her young motherhood as a single parent, and from the time of her earlier marriages. A photograph shows her in a snug black evening dress and heels and pearls. She posed at the foot of an elegant stairway, as if about to ascend, her hand on a polished wooden rail. The

printed legend up the side of the photo: Photographed on board *RMS Queen Elizabeth*. This was a trip I had heard about. Her son Mike, a teenager then, had gone with her.

Mike is still alive, as is his son, Michael, who has never married and is nearing fifty himself. Biologically speaking, it's the end of Dolores's line. She was an only child who raised an only child who also had only one child, the end. I put all the photos of young and younger Dolores in an envelope and mailed them to Mike, who lives in Hutto, which isn't far from Austin. And I included every photo that I found of Frances, his grandmother. They can be his to dispose of. I am keeping the frames, though for no reason other than they would have made it a more cumbersome package to mail.

Those empty frames will do well on a garage sale table.

xxvi

Gone, your childhood photos. And gone the June 1974 "News and Views" newsletter of the Community Council of Greater Dallas, which announced that the Commission on Children and Youth, funded by the Junior League, intended to look at the child as a "total functioning human." You were the project director. You were the one the newsletter said "will be glad to answer questions."

Wherever your name appeared, you underlined it. Dallas had two daily newspapers then. Your name was in both. For *The Dallas Times Herald*, now defunct, your picture was taken with Judge Lew Sterrett, whose name is on the county jail off the former Industrial Boulevard, which is Riverfront Boulevard now, renamed after a Calatrava bridge was built over the river that separates downtown and the affluent north from Oak Cliff and the poorer, darker south.

You saved an invitation from Mrs. Adlene Harrison, Councilwoman, on the city's letterhead, inviting you to become of member of a citizens' advisory committee. You even kept a copy of your response. You accepted. Both invitation and response went into the trash, on top of a Membership List of the Commission on Children and Youth, with its names of so many somebodies.

Dolores, I'm clear cutting the forest of paper you left. You left it for someone. Twenty-five, now twenty-six years later, I am someone else.

A signed card for membership in the Society for the Right to Die fell out of a manila folder Dolores had marked *Vita*. The card was dated 1973. Did a member need to re-up annually, or did membership in the Society confer the right to die for a lifetime? No bigger than a business card, it had a Living Will on the flip side. Dolores had signed. The text of the Living Will directed that she be allowed to die naturally, receiving only the administration of comfort care. Also in the *Vita* folder, a xerox of her application for the *Marquis Who's Who of American Women*. Her answers to some of the questions: unmarried, political affiliation independent, religion Episcopal.

All of the resumes in the *Vita* folder dated from the time before we met. None of them mentioned her failure to finish high school. They all began her Educational History with her B.A. degree at North Texas State University, then Southern Methodist University for an M.A., then four years at two different campuses of the University of Texas. One resume awarded her Ph.D. degree in clinical psychology in 1969. The program from her graduation ceremony at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School said 1973. At that ceremony, most of the diplomas went to M.D. recipients. Dolores was the only one of the four graduate students awarded a degree at UT Southwestern that year who actually showed up to receive her diploma from Lady Bird Johnson.

Dolores's employment history started in 1969, which was the year I was giving the valedictorian's speech at Westchester High School on the west side of Los Angeles. As I offered my goofy wisdom on "existential anxiety" Dolores was starting four years at the Dallas County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center. She held different positions at MHMR: staff psychologist, chief psychologist, administrator and project director. Resumes from the *Vita* folder provide eight references, including a judge, and various professors, and Dolores "would be happy to provide additional references." I wonder what other job she was looking for, or what existential anxiety, if any, she had about applying.

\*

I came up with no criteria for what Dolores deemed deserving of a Ziploc bag. Among the things she sealed in the same Ziploc with a receipt for two office chairs purchased from Contemporary House in 1975: A Clos Pegase newsletter from Summer 1995. A birthday card, July 11, 1988, from Laverne Cook, our nanny and housekeeper. Michel Baudoin's business card from Le Chardonnay in Fort Worth – handwritten on the card, "Jean Claude's brother." A message from Gwen Ferrell, her lonely next-door neighbor when both lived at the Tecali Apartments; Gwen had moved to Phoenix – "I can't remember when we last talked, but Albert is out here now and committed to our relationship." A lock of someone's hair. And a crafty folded paper heart with colored threads pasted on it – "To very special friends, Happy Valentines 1994 – Pam and Jason". Jason was a school friend of Ben's; Pam, someone I was married to, though not for long, four years after Dolores's death.

\*

An unused Will in yet another manila folder. This Will, formally prepared in 1980, gave, devised and bequeathed to her adult son Mike any interest in any insurance policies. Her mother would receive "any automobile I may own." I was given and bequeathed the house we owned at the time and everything in it ("furnishings, decorations"), but not including personal belongings – clothing, jewelry and "articles of personal adornment." As for "all the rest in residue," only one-third went to me; two thirds went to Mike. What residue was being referred to is a mystery.

Dolores had never shown much concern about her own final disposition. She did save a letter and brochure we had received in 1987 from a cemetery that promoted “our sacred and beautiful Mausoleum.” It advised planning in advance for burial. I had opened the mail, reviewed the letter, and wrote in red pen at the top of it, *I’m interested (for me, of course)*. I left it on our kitchen counter for Dolores to see. Her comment was in black sharpie underneath mine. “Me, too,” she wrote, “for you, of course.”

\*

Wives in general expect to outlive their husbands. That’s not an unreasonable expectation. A life insurance industry anecdote is often retold by those who know the actuarial tables. The joke begins, “Do you know how long a woman lives?” And the answer, “Just as long as she needs to.”

\*

Dolores wore a diamond ring from one of her prior lives. Her piles of costume jewelry also came from those times. The costume jewelry remained in five lidded plastic trays in the storage room, inside the blue plastic trunk. Earrings and bracelets were like data points in a random scatter, with no correlation that I could make between size and beauty, shine and value. There were old-fashioned pins, necklaces of thin silvery chain, and rings of bright ceramic fruit that Carmen Miranda might have coveted. I gave all of them to Corinne, who cleans my house once every two weeks. Corinne has a teenage daughter, and my middle-aged daughter hasn’t spoken to me in years.

As for the diamond ring, I don’t know what happened to that or where it is. I may have buried her with it. Dolores and I were married for twenty years, but we never gave each other engagement bands or wedding rings. I did buy her a necklace that she always wore, nothing precious, slender cylinders of cat’s eye. She was buried wearing that.

xxvii

Some people are pained that ephemera is ephemeral. They have collections of candy wrappers or milk bottles or do not disturb signs from the Holiday Inn. For others, a digital database is their home base, where the past and its information are safe. The Smithsonian Institution reports that it holds an estimated 156 million objects. I would not describe that as an example of being picky, but it’s a drop in the bucket compared to the 5.6 trillion pieces of plastic in our oceans.

I read somewhere that the only things we truly own are those we give away. That is as far from the literal truth as any wisdom could be. It’s too clever by half, which is another saying that I question. If it refers to the person who is “too smart for his own good,” why wouldn’t it always be better to be smarter, whether by half or any other fraction? All that said, I agree that it’s



fair to consider what I own, and when does the metaphorical mountain of my possessions begin at least metaphorically to own me.

Everything I own – car, house, furniture, photographs, tax records, the clothing in my closet, books on the shelf – all of it falls into two categories, based on how easy or hard it would be to part with it. Things shift from one category to the other over time, but ultimately in one direction, toward disposal.

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Not done yet, but getting there. I was down to four boxes and a large white plastic tub.

I threw out Dolores's death certificate. Carcinoma of colon with metastasis was the stated cause of death. I want to question Dr. Gross. His answer to "Approximate Interval between Onset and Death" was "About 3 Years". I wanted to ask him how he had allowed her cancer to go undiscovered until too late. When was her next to last colonoscopy? And when should it have been? Dr. Gross died in 2015. He's taking no more questions.

Information in an envelope mailed to Dolores from the Social Security Administration? Into the trash, which it could have gone into the day it was received twenty-five years ago.

A xerox of a letter Dolores had handwritten to La Verne Cook, Ben and Eden's nanny for eleven years. La Verne could not be persuaded to stay in Dallas any longer because her father was ailing. She was returning to Elkhart in East Texas.

*August 4, 1995*

*Dear La Verne,*

*Our love goes with you.*  
etc.

This fell into the category of it should be thrown away, but I would prefer not to.

xxviii

A diary. It was hardbound, the kind of blank journal you buy in an office supply store. Dolores was writing to Ben, a serial letter addressed to him.

It began January 1, 1985. "Your first new year was spent at home with us."

Same entry: "Standing up! Not bad for six months plus."

It continued like this until the bottom of the first page. “I’ve started your diary,” she wrote. “I’ll try to catch up on your first six months.”

Dolores wrote again the next day, but then skipped to Thursday, January 8. “I see the tip of your first tooth – bottom, front, your left side.” Then it jumped to Monday, January 21, a four-page entry that was a political report. There was the news from Washington, D.C. where it was so cold “the President’s swearing in ceremonies were moved inside for the first time since 1833.” Dolores editorialized. “In his inaugural address Reagan continued to talk about balancing the budget as if he hadn’t run up the largest national debt in history. You’ll still be paying off this national indebtedness when you’re grown.”

On January 22, Dolores left inauguration day and returned to the everyday. “You fell off the bed this evening,” she wrote, “when your dad left you for a moment.” This was my brief appearance. “You’re very busy falling off everything, and we’re busy trying to catch you. Your daddy is standing here. He’s asking me if I mentioned that you fell off the bed so I can accuse him of neglect years from now. He said I need to point out that I am the one who lets you stay up late so I can sleep all morning, and I am ruining your habits.”

Sunday, January 27: “You say ‘bye bye’ and lift your hand when ‘bye bye’ is said to you. These are your first words.”

Those were her last two entries. The rest of this book of blank pages was left blank.

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When a mother of young children dies, what has not been completed never will be. But isn’t the human situation always one of incompleteness? We leave things unfinished – a diary, the clean out of a storage room, a recounting of the past.

Philosophers of logic have their notions of incompleteness as well, which they apply to mathematical systems. In a coherent mathematical system, when being true means being proven, there will always be a statement that is true but cannot be proven. It’s a baffling, profound notion. Also, in different contexts, obvious. What is true in our lives that we can never know is true? Probably lots of things. But our lives are not mathematical; the living are not subject to proof.

Others have shared related insights. One way of putting it is to say that we are all leading the life of Moses, who got to the edge of the promised land but could not enter it. We obey, we serve, we may spend our lifetime working toward a goal, but life does not let us reach it. Kafka wrote this in his diary, that Moses was “...on the track of Canaan all his life,” but that his failure to get there, to only glimpse it from a distance, was symptomatic of incompleteness, and an incompleteness that would be the case even if the life of Moses “could last forever.” “Moses,” Kafka wrote in the privacy of his room, “fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short, but because it was a human life.”

\*

April, May, June of 2023.

The parade of papers continued.

A typed Financial Statement for Dolores Dyer, Ph.D. Total cash in the bank in 1976, \$2500. Loans totaled \$7,300. One from school, another an auto loan, the third a “personal signature” loan. She listed twelve different credit cards, five of them for clothing stores – Titcher’s, Margo’s LaMode, Carriage Shop, Sanger-Harris, and Neiman Marcus.

Dolores and I bought our first house together in 1977. So her financial statement was in support of that effort. I listed assets of \$5,282.61 and a ’67 Chevrolet Biscayne automobile. Together, our confidential financial statements were sent to reassure banks that were themselves of suspect worth. Republic and InterFirst required evidence of our creditworthiness. Ten years later, they had merged their billions together and both of them were swept away in an excess of suspect lending.

Our settlement statement from Dallas Title Company. Sales price for our first home, \$49,650. We borrowed \$39,402.90 at a 9.00% APR, promising to make three hundred monthly installments of \$326.40.

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Her high school yearbook from Our Lady of Victory. Also, more locks of hair in baggies, but no clues to whose they were. Glossy red shopping bags from Neiman’s, a wooden block with slots to hold kitchen knives, and a bunch of plastic grapes—none of that seemed to belong in a bankers box, but there it was. Dolores had also packed dozens of textbooks in abnormal psychology, statistics, and experimental method. They were the required reading for her courses on the way to her doctorate. I took them to a dock behind Half Price Books on Northwest Highway, where a young man with hair down his back, a brown beard, and a manner redolent of a graduate student circa 1969 himself said he could offer me “a few bucks” for them.

\*

Another gold Mead folder. In this one, Dolores had made a directory of names and addresses. It was an invitation list. There were tabs for *personal* and for *office*. Within each, names were in alphabetical order, one name or the name of one couple per page. So the folder was much thicker than it needed to be, but the number of pages did give the impression of a life crowded with collegiality. I flipped through it. Hogue, Bob. Brice Howard. Joyce Tines. Lynn and Vic Ward. Maybe sixty, maybe seventy pages. It had the flavor of a Biblical census. Like that ancient enumeration, the names belonged to distant days.

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A handwritten *Medical History* from 1979 on four sheets of her business letterhead. This had nothing to do with colon cancer. Dolores had prepared it when she was fifty. She began at age 15 (*Face paralysis – being treated for infected fever blisters on lips and face when left side of face paralyzed; had electric shock to face*). At age 23, *a tubal pregnancy ruptured, one tube removed*. Age 26, *“missed abortion,” or “reabsorbed pregnancy”*. Other ages, other issues, breast cysts, abscesses, gastrointestinal spasms, an abdominal abscess. In 1979, the hormones she had been on, premarin and provera, had been stopped suddenly by doctor’s orders. What followed was a year of symptoms that were easy for experts to dismiss. She prepared this *Medical History* in response, reporting the consequences month by month and in detail. She had seen a psychiatrist as her health deteriorated. There was *shortness of breath, vomiting, soreness, infections*. She included *the problems of continuing a relationship with a dry, rigid vagina or even a marriage when constantly irritated or feeling out of it*. The endocrinologist she was seeing “indicated that my symptoms don’t make medical sense.” She described a distress that I remember, in the sense that I was there.

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Dolores kept twenty years of DayMinder Monthly Planners and DOME bookkeeping records. These spiral notebooks were the pencilled records of her private practice as a therapist. DayMinders had the names of patients and their appointments in the squares for each month’s calendar, across facing pages. DOME notebooks had the billing and payments. From 1977 to 1997, it was all by hand. BillQuick was only released in 1995, too late for Dolores to learn the new tricks.

Every DOME memorialized the name of its author, Nicholas Picchione, C.P.A., on a title page. Since the DOME was essentially a workbook, all Nicholas Picchione had written was the introduction. There were three Nicholas Picchiones --grandfather, father, and son--all deceased. It was the grandfather, born in 1904, whose name was on the title page. He was “the author of this system.” He was the one who had “spent 50 years specializing in the tax field.” Along with updated excerpts from the Internal Revenue Code, his introductory pages in the DOME spirals were full of his grandfatherly advice. For example, “To avoid is legal, but to evade is illegal.”

Month by month, Dolores recorded the payments from the patients she saw. She left notes on returned checks, marked NSF. Most of the spirals also had handwritten worksheets to show total income, total IRA contributions, her office expenses, and details about doctors and donations, mortgage interest, local real estate taxes, and the expense of gasoline and long-distance calls.

Her DayMinders were also a repetitive record. Pencilled names for patient appointments occupied the squares in 1976 and in 1986 and in 1996. Still, some changes were obvious over

time. The seven appointments that filled each square in 1976 dwindled to four by 1986 and typically only two or three by 1996. By then many of the squares in a month were blank, or had a salon appointment in them, or a parent meeting at a child's school. Boots and Cleo, the names of our two cats, appeared in the April 23, 1996 square; it was a reminder to celebrate their birthdays, which mattered to Ben and Eden.

I've read about the thrill of archaeological digs that uncover the most everyday items. The farm tool from Saxon England, or the shard of pottery. Dolores's DayMinders and DOME records have a different provenance, but in a thousand years they could also be thrilling, as evidence of the ancient practice of psychotherapy.

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The Dome and the DayMinder were not the only tools she used to keep up with her days. She also had the Plan-A-Month calendars and a wire-bound Dates to be Remembered.

On the 1976 monthly planner, Dolores wrote *If lost, please return*. It was in red on the very first page. The 1996 Plan-A-Month was her last one. Instead of *If lost, please return*, she had written *Reward if lost*. This was a more motivating phrase, though neither of the planners had ever been lost. On a square in August 1996, she wrote *Robaxin 700 mg 3 times a day*. The same appeared in October, along with *Medrol dose package*. Medrol is a corticosteroid hormone, used to treat all kinds of things, from arthritis to certain cancers. In a square for that same week in October, departure times were circled on the planner. We had a flight to New York. A family trip. All four of us went. Sightseeing, and then attending a production with Pavarotti as Andrea Chenier at the Met. I don't recall her mention of any discomfort.

The *Dates to be Remembered* – “A permanent and practical record of important dates” –was mostly blank. Its “perpetual calendar” came with the standard information about Wedding Anniversaries and what materials are associated with the milestones. It goes from the paper first to the diamond sixtieth. Wooden clocks for the fifth and electrical appliances for the eighth. The fiftieth anniversary is golden. The only anniversaries that Dolores wrote down in were ours on October 6 and my sister's first marriage on May 20. For ours, Dolores noted that it was 1977 officially and 1978 “to his family.” I had failed to tell my parents about our marriage until a year after it happened. Aside from the two anniversaries, there were eight other dates to be remembered every year, all of them the birthdays of faraway relatives, other than La Verne's. Dolores also drew a star on November 6.

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The manila folder that Dolores labeled *People* was a thin one. Only three pieces of paper, two of them duplicates.

A tear sheet from *Ultra*, June 1983, had a photograph of Sue Benner in her studio in Deep Ellum. The article showed some of the artist's paintings on fabric, including *Six Hearts*, all magentas and violets on silk. Sue was a friend. After our son's birth in 1984, she presented Dolores a painting on silk of three hearts to represent our family. When Eden arrived the following year, Sue gave us another, with four hearts.

The duplicates? They were minutes of the Child Advocacy Advisory Committee meeting at City Hall on Wednesday, November 6, 1974, Conference Room 206B at 3:30 pm. Both were originals, the logo of the City of Dallas in color on both. Members present, *Dyer* and eight others, three members absent. Guests present, one.

First item on the agenda: Proposed KERA-TV Special on Child Care

*Mark Perkins, Features Editor, KERA-TV acquainted the committee with plans for a 90-minute special on children to be shown in conjunction with the Week of the Young Child the first week of April, 1975. Chairwoman Harrison assigned Dolores Dyer to work with Mr. Perkins in getting the committee's input for whatever assistance he may need from us in choosing and presenting subject matter for this special.*

This was the official record of the minute that we met. In a way, that made it the quintessential keepsake. But did Dolores know the future, and that's why she took two originals for safekeeping when she left the meeting? If we had divorced, Dolores might have brought these minutes to a girl's night out, where Sue Benner might have asked, "Whatever made you get together with *that* guy?" And Dolores could have answered, "I was assigned to help him!"

I took more than a minute looking it over. I never realized I had a title. I was six months out of college. Only a month before, I had driven an unairconditioned '67 Chevy Biscayne from Southern California to Dallas to take a first job, at a public television station managed by Robert A Wilson, father of six-year-old Owen Wilson and three-year-old Luke. On November 6, 1974, I would be twenty-two for another week. Dolores, born July 11, was on her way to forty-four. I never thought of myself as someone's "better half," but mathematically we did have that relationship.

The minutes had been saved only so I could throw them away. They proved however which day we met – and in what room at City Hall. If I had been asked, I would have said we met in 1975, at the earliest. I may also be mistaken about when I first arrived in Dallas. If it had been in October, as I thought, would I possibly have been in this meeting a month later? I remember spending my first months at KERA-TV staring at the walls and not yet accepting that I was employed. So I am probably wrong about when I left Los Angeles, stopping one night in Lordsburg, New Mexico, before reaching Dallas by evening the following day.

Of course, I have no manila folder with any proof of my own. No saved receipt from the gas station in Lordsburg.

\*

Dolores was asked to describe our marriage. She said nothing about love. "We got together," she said, "and we never got apart."

She was lying in bed and answering in response to a friend who had come over with a video camera. He thought it would be valuable to have a recording. It was April or May, two or three months after her diagnosis and surgery. I was in the bedroom, too, so I heard and saw. I've never seen the videotape though. It may still be in a closet. Whatever VHS player we owned that would have allowed me to watch half inch tape I no longer have.

What did she mean, we never got apart? Was she ascribing the stability of our marriage to inertia? It's as powerful a force as any, I suppose. I never thought of us as bodies at rest during our twenty years together, but perhaps we were, certainly toward the end. People can be happy without sparks; happiness can be the absence of conflagration.

Dolores and I were married by a justice of the peace in 1977. There were no witnesses, or none that we knew, only the next couple in line. It was unceremonious. We had no rings, I never wore one. The State of Texas required that we take a syphilis test prior to marriage, so we had done that. After we left the courthouse, there was no reception. Instead, we stopped at the Lucas B&B on Oak Lawn, where waitresses had beehive hairdos and breakfast was served all day. In a bankers box, I found the orange, laminated menu we brought home with us from the restaurant. On it, the steak sandwich I ordered will always cost \$2.45, its price a reminder of how little happiness used to cost.

xxix

In a small book called *Travel Therapy*, the claim is made that the meaning of a family trip has nothing to do with itineraries, but with opportunities, as it says, "to cement the bonds of affection between family members." That does not ring true. But then the material is produced by an outfit called *The School of Life*, where the wisdoms are sweet and forgiving and wise.

Togetherness was not our foursome's strong suit. In truth, a family trip could feel at times more like a forced march. It was only from a distance of years and in selective memory that our travel together felt comfortable. Still, I take comfort in the fact that we did so much of it in what turned out to be our last year together.

The four of us took five trips in 1996. It's as if we knew that this would be our last year intact, and we needed extra chances "to cement the bonds of affection."

In January we went out to Oceanside for my father's eightieth birthday. Other than the dates Dolores wrote down on her 1996 Plan-A-Month calendar, his birthday is a blank. Nothing beside remains. The second week of March was also marked out on Dolores's calendar. The

diagonal lines meant we were on vacation. No departure times for March 6 and no arrival time on March 12. Destination unknown, unremembered.

The lines hatched across May 30 to June 18 on her 1996 Plan-A-Month were easy enough to cross reference. They were for the big summer trip: Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar and Morocco. Our itinerary must have been misplaced, but not the “travel reports” prepared by Rudi Steele Travel and their country-level introductions. Dolores saved them in one of her folders.. In these reports, countries are “sun-drenched,” their cities are “picturesque.” Everywhere, the health advisories include “take a pair of comfortable walking shoes,” and, in Morocco, “stick to bottled or boiled drinks.” Much of the *What to Buy* sections repeated an explanation of valued-added tax.

We did take some of the advice. After we returned home, an Arraiolos rug arrived, shipped from Lisbon. Also, a second rug, from Marrakesh. They were *What to Buy* in Portugal and Morocco. And we agreed with the report that Gibraltar “merits at least a half-day’s visit.” Monkeys climbing on the walls there – Barbary apes, according to the travel report -- entertained Ben and Eden far more than the Prado or the Alhambra had. One of the travel reports, using the impersonal first person, declared, “We think Spanish cooking is reason enough for a trip to Spain,” but also suggested not complaining about cigarette smoke. *Health Advisories* for Morocco advised not swimming in desert streams, since “they may contain bilharzia”, a potentially fatal parasite.

Morocco had more than its share of warnings throughout. For example, under *What to Buy*, “Morocco appears to be filled with bargains, but look closely before purchasing. Good buys in wool carpets can be found, but most of what is sold is of poor quality.” This warning even suggested that the carpet-buying tourist “take a small tuft from the carpet and burn it with a match or lighter. If it smells like burning plastic, it’s acrylic fiber.” This was exceptionally rude advice. We did not follow it as we sat drinking glasses of green tea with the carpet salesman in Marrakesh.

*What to Eat in Marrakesh?* According to the travel report, Moroccan cuisine is one of the finest in the world, but the same thing was said about every country on the itinerary. The report advised that we not be put off by *bastille* just because it contains pigeon. There was guidance that “meals are eaten with the right hand” and “don’t even pass food with the left hand.” The report said we should “splurge one night for a feast at a deluxe restaurant.” We did that. It informed us that “tradition holds that you should be seated on floor cushions,” and we were. *Touajen, hout, mchoui, bastilla and djaja mahamari* were praised. Mostly chicken and fish dishes, though *mchoui* is roast mutton. No mention of sheep’s brains, however, which is what Dolores ordered the night we splurged “for a feast.” The restaurant we picked was near the Djemaa el Fna, a Disneyland of snake charmers, musicians, and gas-lit stalls, some selling street food we avoided, and a powder to cure snoring, which I bought.



After we returned home from Morocco, Dolores's back pain began. She found no relief, and we speculated about the causes. Sometimes her stomach hurt. We thought it might have been something she had eaten. We thought it might have been the sheep's brains.

\*

In October that year, the four of us went to New York. I found no ticket stubs or hotel invoices from that trip. No business card from a restaurant on Mott Street. But the time was memorable because Dolores wanted to do something improbable. She brought Ben and Eden to hear Luciano Pavarotti in *Andrea Chenier* at the Met. We attended during his second week of performances. The opening night review October 2 in the *Times* described a production that was "pretentious, ugly, and confused." As for the tenor, "six decades have drained a lot of color from his voice." Pavarotti was outed as a sixty-one-year old.

None of that resonates. I don't remember the performance anyway, but that Dolores persuaded two reluctant children who had already sat through an opera to go into a reception room after the performance and meet the star. I don't know how that even happened. There was no line. Pavarotti was by himself. He was a few feet in front of us, available for a photograph. She pushed Ben forward, but Eden, a month past her eleventh birthday, hung back.

Pavarotti extended his arms toward our daughter.

"Come here, adorable," he said.

Could that really have happened? I have the proof, a photo on my desk in a wooden frame, with the son who would never go to another opera, the daughter who doesn't speak to me, and in between them Luciano Pavarotti in costume and full makeup. The reviewer had a point. He does look drained, six decades in. But then Pavarotti had just been executed by guillotine moments before on stage. He's the only one smiling in the photo. At the same time, he also seems sad, aware, almost prophetic.

These children are a few breaths from their forties now. The one I haven't seen or spoken to, and the other a difficult adult – needing help, refusing help, unwilling to help himself. The phrase that floats above my head with the obviousness of a thought bubble or a speech balloon in the comics: *How did I get it so wrong?*

\*

One more trip that year.

We spent Christmas in Santa Fe. It was something we had done many times before. We would fly into Albuquerque and drive north on I-25 for an hour, passing pueblos and casinos on either side of the highway.

When Dolores and I first started going to Santa Fe, we would stay at the Residence Inn, where there was free breakfast in the morning and free snacks in the late afternoon. By 1996, we

were renting houses and taking Ben and Eden to Café Pascual's for breakfast and La Fonda for Christmas dinner. We marched along the Audubon Trail until their resistance stiffened. The Georgia O'Keefe Museum wasn't for them. It was the season of farolitos and the smell of pinon burning, and we walked Canyon Road on Christmas Eve, when the galleries stayed open and shop owners gave away cups of cider and cookies. It was charming, but not so much for two pre-teens. We were putting up with each other.

That's how I remember it anyway.

We spent a last day in the Santa Fe ski basin. Dolores didn't ski, but it was beautiful to be near the tree line of an alpine forest. On the way to the basin, we stopped at Cottam's on Hyde Park Road and bought a cheap plastic sled, a throw-away, so Ben and Eden could slide around on roadside hills. We did that every time we went to Santa Fe at Christmas. One of those throw-away plastic sleds is on a hook in the storage room off the garage right now. It's not from 1996, but from some earlier December, when I thought it was worth shipping home to a flat city where it almost never snows.

Those were the varied travels in the twelve months of 1996. Oceanside, Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar, Morocco, New York, Santa Fe. But we were on the very same road in all those places without knowing it, and without seeing the fork in the road ahead.

\*

Dolores went to the Carrell Clinic in October 1996, looking for relief from pains that she thought might be merely muscular. I found a prescription pad authorization for physical therapy, for lumbar stabilization and abdominal strengthening exercises. *Instruct and then set up a home program.* That was the guidance from William A. Bruck, M.D. Dr. Bruck offered the same Rx again on February 5, 1997, suggesting physical therapy three times a week for four weeks. Dolores never did those exercises. Instead, she was operated on at Baylor two weeks later. On February 12, right before the scan that confirmed a presence of cancer and led to the operation, she sent a history to the surgeon —handwritten, in the script she had perfected at her Catholic girl's school fifty some years earlier:

*To Dr Jacobson from Dolores Dyer*

*June 96 Flew home from trip. Spent hours of flight in toilet vomiting.*

*July 96 Treated with Cipro for diverticulitis by family doctor. Had painful abdomen. Could barely walk. Referred for follow-up scope. Back problems started.*

*August 96 Can't sleep on sides, back starting to hurt. Nightly and periodic spasms lower back. Doing water aerobics. Referred to Dr. Bruck, Carrell Clinic.*

*October 96 Back problems worse. Went to Dr. Bruck. Told to see physical therapist. Didn't go.*

*December 96 Back spasms at night, up and down back – very severe.*

*January 97 Seeing family doctor.*

*February 5 Back to Dr. Bruck, more X-rays. Agree to go to physical therapy.*

*February 7 Abdomen severely painful. Back too. One spot on left side throbs. Diagnosed with diverticulitis and put on Cipro to heal infection.*

*Current Swollen, sick to stomach, most of the time. Back hurts. Pain on left side. Lower abdomen sore. Staying in bed a lot. Taking Vicodin to keep pain away. Cipro used for diverticulitis.*

*2/12/97 CT scan. Hope this helps*

xxx

Travel light is good advice for backpackers, but it retains value on the road of life generally. The things we hold onto have us in their grip. Imagine a life without closets. That would be a home improvement project with the power to remodel our souls. No storage room off the garage, maybe no garage at all – these were spaces that were more of a spiritual menace than any dark wood.

In the dim light of the storage room, time had disappeared. Boxes of documents. Plastic tubs of clothing. Cords for landline phones and other tech past the donate-by-date. A trunk filled entirely with a teenager's empty CD jewel cases. A grocery bag of speaker wire more tangled than jungle vines. So many photo albums, their pages sticking together like dryer lint. To keep or not to keep; until now, that was never the question.

Surely I kept so much because I could not distinguish between what was valuable and what wasn't. Either I had no judgment or didn't trust my judgment. Safest, then, to keep everything for consideration later. Now that later had arrived, it was taking forever to get through.

The rubric that begins, "There are two kinds of people" always provokes an objection. Life is complicated and no behavior falls into just two categories. With that disclaimer, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who like to throw things away, and those who are distressed by it. In the end, both need to come to terms with the facts of life. Both need to bend to the limitations of space or time, which dictate that discarding is essential and inevitable. One of them just becomes convinced of this more slowly.

xxxi

A note that Dolores wrote toward the end of 1996 to Dr. Perry Gross. *Please give this to Perry to read*, she wrote. It was a plea for help. Dr. Gross was our family's physician. He knew Dolores longer than I did. *Perry, I am not okay. There is something wrong.* Dolores was on Cipro, but she was still hurting. *It is not just soreness*, she wrote. She was having spasms in her back when she lay down. The pain was overriding the Vicoden and Robaxin that Dr. Gross had already prescribed. She needed to get up at night and walk for relief. She had gone to see a back specialist, who found nothing on an x-ray and recommended physical therapy. She tried sleeping *sitting up against pillows*. She used heating pads. A third doctor informed her unhelpfully that the areas in her back that hurt were places of "major muscle pairs." She asked Perry again, *Do you think this is referred pain from an infection? Should we do a sonogram? Can I get stronger pain medication?* Her questions were foretelling. It was indeed referred pain from the cancer that was spreading. In the new year, Dolores would need a different diagnostic. And stronger pain medicine. And within a few months, morphine through a port in her chest.

\*

Some of what I found in the box marked *Dolores Illness* bankers were daily logs. Toward the end of June, these read like the journal of a lost explorer on a doomed expedition, a record of the freezing temperatures or how much food remains. *June 26, strong pulse, active bowel sounds, no edema, blood draw.* Some of these logs had been made by Mary, a nurse who came to the house, though not daily. I discarded records from Mary that were simply statistics: *Weight -105, was 140, lost 35 lbs.* Also, notes that were descriptive or prescriptive: *Having difficulty staying awake. Nutrition key, eat a few bites every hour. Peanut butter, banana, yogurt.* Most were very brief reports: *Flushed dressing, changed battery.* Other pages finally discarded might have been come from Monica. She came to the house five days a week, did the cleaning, shopped for groceries, and picked up Ben and Eden after school and fixed dinner for them. Monica wrote down names and times of visitors and phone calls. *Joan called 9: 15. Bob Hogue by at 10. Leah Beth, 12. Debbie, 2:30.* These were for my benefit, since I was at work and not home weekdays to answer the phone or a knock at the door. One of the visitors, a former patient of Dolores's, left me a note. It said Dolores told her we needed WD-40 for the toilet so it will flush more smoothly; this might have been a misunderstanding.

I found a note from Marti, another of the nurses, in the *Dolores Illness* box. It reported that Mary hadn't been able to come that morning but Marti happened to be in the neighborhood and stopped by. *New settings on pump; increased to 12 mg/hr; bolus 3 mg - still at every 15 minutes as before*, she wrote, before adding *Dolores wants to go to the spa with me Wednesday. My daughter and I are going for a total body overhaul - Dolores thinks she would enjoy that! Lungs are clear, heart rate a little fast, complaining of nausea.*

A total body overhaul? Yes, Dolores would have liked that. She needed that.

\*

These handwritten notes became more clinical as the purpose for them, in retrospect, becomes less clear. These are from July 11, Dolores's birthday, and July 12, her last full day:

7/11/97

8:30 pm 1 bolus 10 mg morphine sulfate  
3 mg of lorazepam at 9:30 – every 2 hours, 3 mg  
1 ½ cc + 1 ½ cc, wipe mouth, Vaseline  
11 pm 3 mg lorazepam, bolus 20 mg morphine sulfate  
11:35 pm 1 mg lorazepam  
12:10 am bolus 10 mg morphine sulfate  
12:33 am bolus 10 mg morphine sulfate  
1 am 4 mg lorazepam, bolus 20 mg morphine sulfate  
2 am 10 mg bolus morphine sulfate  
2:20 am 10 mg morphine sulfate  
2:45 am 10 mg morphine sulfate  
3 am 4 mg lorazepam, 20 mg morphine sulfate  
4:20 am 10 mg morphine sulfate  
5 am 5 mg lorazepam, 20 mg morphine sulfate  
7 am 5-mg lorazepam 10 mg morphine sulfate

Nurse Marti reported. *We have given 110 gm morphine throughout the night.* She wrote “we,” but I don't remember Nurse Marti being there at night. *We have increased the lorazepam to 5 mg every 2 hours per Dr. Gross's instructions,* she wrote. *And we have about 24 hours worth of lorazepam at this level. We need syringes. Suggest we increase base level of morphine to 110 mg/hour. At that point, baseline level at 110, we can try giving 10 mg morphine bolus with lorazepam, rather than 20, and continue other morphine boluses as needed.*

On her visits, Marti kept watch. Then I kept her notes for another twenty-five years. For all their quantitative detail, I find it hard to take their measure. By July 11, Dolores was asleep day and night. She was medicated and kept under. July 12 was more of the same.

7/12/97

8 am 10 mg morphine  
9 am 5 mg lorazepam, bolus morphine sulfate

The last of the recordkeeping was in my handwriting:

11 am 5 mg lorazepam + 20 bolus + bolus of 10 at 12:30  
1 pm 5 mg lorazepam + 20 bolus  
2 pm 20 bolus  
3 pm 5 mg + 20 bolus

This list of hours and dosages went on until 11 pm that night. The task at that point? It was management.

These days, if I looked up the best treatments for late-stage colon cancer, I see that some aspects of treatment haven't changed. Leucovorin and 5-FU are still among the recommendations, sometimes combined with other drugs as well. So was anything valuable learned from the treatment Dolores received in 1997? Has progress been made? Maybe, I hope so. As for any lessons about the tribulations of dying, no progress has been made in that area.

xxxii

Let's review:

Dolores never showed an interest in the past during her last months. She never mentioned her certificates, the Ph.D. thesis, old receipts, newspaper clippings, the Mary Jo Risher trial, or anything about manila folders. She wrote notes to friends, to her therapy patients, to our children's teachers, and to whoever she thought needed to know, or to be instructed, or to be thanked, or to be encouraged. She was concerned with her physical comfort. She arranged to have a pedicure at the house.

In November and December, the months of the chiropractor visits, she looked for relief from back pains she could not explain. Our days were ordinary. We had the typical problems. Our two pre-teens were normally unhappy at school. In our family of four, Dolores was the happiest one, I would have said.

She wrote her letter describing the pains that never went away to our family doctor. It must have been Perry who advised her to schedule a colonoscopy, just to be on the safe side. No urgency. So it was scheduled for February. Then surgery within days. After, when she was returned to her room at Baylor Hospital, her skin was yellowed with dye, and we waited together for the surgeon to give us the news. Eventually he came in. Dr. Jacobson informed us that the spread of the cancer was such that to remove it surgically would have led to immediate death. "What you have is incurable," he said, "but treatable." And so we returned home with that.

For the next weeks, Dolores stayed in our bedroom upstairs, recovering from surgery. And then came short trips to the oncologist, chemotherapy, the protocols of a drug trial. My evenings passed in online colon cancer forums. I learned how to inject dosages of lorazepam for anxiety through a port in her chest. Dolores received a morphine pump so she could administer the bolus by herself.

Our children went off to school. It was winter, they were occupied. Our house was being remodeled downstairs, and Dolores kept herself involved, picking out colors, writing detailed notes to the architect or the contractor or the interior designer, though her hand became increasingly unsteady.

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At [condolencemessages.com](http://condolencemessages.com), there are some two hundred examples of “short and simple” condolence messages. *The news of (blank) death came as a shock to me. So sorry to receive the news of (blank) passing. We greatly sympathize with you and your family. Our hearts go out to you in your time of sorrow.* In many cases, maybe in most, the “short and simple” messages seem to be about the messenger. What does the sender feel? It’s possible that the answer to this question is closer to indifference than to any genuine distress. These recommended stock responses have the substance of a vapor. Some of them arrive trailing clouds of nothing. *We will continue praying for you from our hearts.* Whose burden is lightened by what someone else says they are feeling or pretend to be doing? Guidance is provided on the Hallmark website for what to write on a sympathy card. As a result, too many are *keeping you in our warmest thoughts as you navigate this difficult time.* If 1-800-Flowers has the *25 Thoughtful Messages to Write in Your Sympathy Card*, Keepsakes-etc.com comes up with ten times that many. It offers 250 examples. The Pen Company promises “The Definitive Guide, what to write in a sympathy card.”

There isn’t too much to say about most of the dozens of sympathy cards I discarded. Their messages were standard. Some of the senders surprised me though. Among those in sympathy were eleven employees who signed the card from a roofing company. The parents of the ex-husband of a one of Dolores’s former friends were also in sympathy; they must have been regular readers of obituaries in the local paper, as people of a certain age are. There were notes of sympathy from children prompted by their mothers, who were teaching manners. One child from across the street signed with a heart drawn for the dot over the *i* in her name. “I’m so sorry your mom died,” she wrote to Eden. It came the very same day Dolores died. Her mother may have seen the van from the funeral home arrive at three in the morning to pick up the body.

One of my cousins, her husband, and their children were “so very sorry to hear about Dolores’s passing.” She asked, “Why do these awful things always happen to the best people?” I didn’t know. I don’t think the premise is correct.

Our family was in the thoughts and prayers of the woman who used to give Ben and Eden piano lessons before they finally refused to continue.

A card came that had a profile of the poet Roman poet Virgil on the front, with a verse circling it: *Give me a handful of lilies to scatter.* Another was made by KOCO, which declared on the back that it was a contributor to The Hunger Project, “committed to the end of hunger on the planet by the year 2000.”

Esther Ho sent a *thinking of you* Hallmark card from Kuala Lumpur. I wondered whether that was available in the drugstore there. She included a picture of her daughter, who was named after Eden and was already in third grade and doing well in ballet and music.

Our family was in the thoughts and prayers of people I barely knew. Two months after the funeral, a neighbor sent a note on *Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Juster* stationery. They had only just “sadly learned.” They said Dolores would miss enjoying the remodeling of our house, and “our deepest sympathies are with you.”

I recognized the name of one of Dolores’s former patients, whose story I remembered. He was a burly bar fighter who was going through a sex change. Dolores used to advise John on women’s clothing, wigs, and how to apply makeup. On the front the card, tulips were embossed *With Sympathy For You And Your Family*. On the inside, one sentence, but broken into four phrases, and with a rhyme to make it poetry.

May you find in each other  
A comforting way  
Of easing your sorrow  
With each passing day.

It is one of the many conventions and duties of sympathy cards to say something in writing as we might never speak it.

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Not every message was scripted.

A picture postcard of Cape Point near Cape Town came through the Royal Mail in mid-July, postmarked London. It was to Dolores from her friend Louis, who spent part of the year as a guest conductor in South Africa.

*Hope the summer is treating you well.*

A week later Louis sent a letter. “Thanks for asking your friend to call me about Dolores,” he wrote. “I grieve for her, and for what you too have endured.” He added, “May your healing start soon,” which would work well on [condolencemessages.com](http://condolencemessages.com).

A former co-worker who had moved to San Francisco customized her message. I didn’t think Jennifer had ever met Dolores, but she wrote, “All of us who knew Dolores have been so touched by her.” Jennifer also let me know she was not married and that it would be wonderful to see me if I were ever in San Francisco. Maybe she and Dolores did know each other.

Jennifer’s name was on the list of those who donated to Hillcrest Academy Building and Development Fund, which was the donations-may-be-made-to charity in the obituary. Hillcrest was where Ben went to middle school. Jennifer’s was one of seventy-three donations to this pre-K to 8th grade school for kids with “learning differences.” I found the letter from Hillcrest’s director reporting the “overwhelming response” and his “heartfelt thanks and deepest sympathy.” “As Dolores knew,” he concluded, “we will always be here for you.” As it turned out, no building was ever constructed. Hillcrest Academy struggled and in 2003 went out of business.



I put every card and all the letters in the trash. But I was *thinking about you*, Victor and Melanie Cobb, Ernest Mantz, Elwanda Edwards, Roddy Wolper, Betty Regard, Bob & Beverly Blumenthal, Lawrence & Marilyn Engels, Ronald Wuntch, Inwood National Bank, Tom Sime, Melanie Beck Sundeen, Jack and Janet Baum, Forrest and Alice Barnett, Marjorie Schuchat Westberry, Jess Hay, Robert Hogue, Richard and Roberta Snyder, J.B. and Judith Keith, and the rest. I was thinking about aftermaths, too. Of the seventy-three donors that were listed by the Hillcrest director in his letter, I have seen only seven in the last twenty-five years. Nine, if I include my parents, whose deaths came in 2010 and 2018.

\*

*Witness My Hand*, etc. It is typical of the seriously official to have an odor of oddity, a pinch of strange grammar, a language never meant to be spoken. This *Witness My Hand* phrase seemed to combine both sight and touch. It appeared on the Letters Testamentary that had found its way into an envelope with a return address stamped Forest Lawn Funeral Home. Letters Testamentary, from Probate Court 3, Dallas County, Texas.

The Letters appointed me as executor for Dolores's Will and Estate. The business that follows dying can only be in the hands of the living. A yellow post-it note I had left attached to the Letters had my to-do list, numbers 1 through 5 in circles. The tasks were financial. *Look for TransAmerica in safe deposit box. Call Franklin Templeton, 1 800 – 813-401K.* I discarded all of it. Including a receipt from the City of Dallas Bureau of Vital Statistics for death certificates; two at nine dollars each and ten at three dollars each. A death certificate signed by the funeral director seems like something that shouldn't be thrown away, but I threw it out, too. And I tossed the contact information for Michael's Fluttering Wings Butterfly Ranch. There was a sketch stapled to it of a gravesite monument, with scribbled instructions and a few questions. *Texas pink granite. A rectangle around Dyer polished, or just a line under? Base polished, versus dull? Go see polished samples. Ask Bob?* Bob was Bob Hogue, the interior designer Dolores had worked with on our endless remodeling. Also in the envelope, two dozen printed invitations to a ceremony at the cemetery. This was for Sunday, June 14, 1998, eleven months after the funeral. The plan was to unveil the headstone and to release butterflies with their fluttering wings.

Forest Lawn's business card was also in the envelope. No need to keep it, though. Forest Lawn Funeral Home on Fairmount Street is no longer in business. The phone number on the card belongs to North Dallas Funeral Home on Valley View Lane now. Was there a buy out? When a funeral home owner retires, or wants to sell the business, who wants to buy it? is a customer list one of the assets with market value? No one wants to be buried again or cremated a second time, but the dead are not the customer. And there's a market for second-hand mortuary equipment. For the body bags, mortuary stretchers, lifting trolleys, mortuary washing units, autopsy tables, coffins and caskets, coolers and storage racks. What Forest Lawn had for sale, North Dallas must have wanted to buy. Purchasing the business in its entirety made sense. As part of the equity, the phone number never changed.

\*

After I discarded the sign-in book that Forest Lawn Funeral Home had provided for the funeral service, I thought, this chore that feels like it has no end is finite. And whatever I put in the trash will be forgotten. Should I care? The facts will disappear with the artifacts. On the pages that preceded the sign-ins, Forest Lawn had filled in Dolores's date and place of birth. Under the *Entered Into Rest* heading, her date and place of death. For place of death, someone from Forest Lawn had entered "At Home." It wasn't obvious to me who such facts were for. But a fact is like life – it seems to matter, even if it's hard to say why. For example, the number of sign-ins at Dolores's funeral, how many were there? I counted. There were 247 names in the book, including two that were unreadable. Does that fact matter? Keeping count easily devolves into keeping score. It can turn anything into a contest. I don't know how many people will show up for my funeral, but I am certain it won't be that many. More than once at an intersection – this was in the 1980s -- I saw *He who dies with the most toys wins* on the bumper of a car in front of me. That was an expression of the vulgarity of the times. Attributed to Malcolm Forbes, the phrase was countered soon enough by a slogan on a t-shirt, though I never saw one: *He who dies with the most toys is dead.*

\*

Rubber-banded together, more sympathy cards at the bottom of the last of the unemptied bankers boxes. I set them loose on the floor of the storage room. Some were addressed to me "and the children," who have never seen them. Someone quoted Matthew 5:4 (*Blessed are those who mourn*). "Thoughts and wishes" varied on dozens of them, but not that much. *May memories comfort you. Our thoughts are with you. In deepest sympathy. With deepest sympathy. With sincere sympathy. In sympathy. With heartfelt sympathy. Let us know if we can help. Our thoughts are with you. Thinking of you.* What does it mean for someone else's thoughts to be with you? It had certainly been too much to respond to at the time, and I had never responded. What if I sent a message now, after all these years? *A belated thank you, should you yourself happen to still be alive, for your thoughts and wishes.*

\*

Much has been written about the association of flowers with death and mourning. Lillies are displayed at a funeral. Carnations or chrysanthemums are brought to a grave. Reasons why are available, or at least proposed, on the blog of 1-800-Flowers, under the category of *Fun Flower Facts*, subcategory *Sympathy*.

Flowers and the dead have been together forever. According to the blog, flower fragments were discovered at burial sites by during the excavation of the Shanidar Cave in Northern Iraq. Soil samples from the excavation were used as evidence that flowers were placed on the graves in 62,000 B.C. Indeed, flowers at funerals are in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the oldest form of human ritual. The 1-800-Flowers post also points out that decoration and

expressions of sympathy may have not been the strongest motives for flowers at funerals in the past. Before the practice of embalming, which has never been universal, flowers were used to cover the stink of decaying bodies.

Is this true? I don't know. At the bottom of the 1-800-Flowers post you can read the author's bio: *Amy graduated from Hofstra University with a degree in Journalism/Public Relations and put her studies to good use, frequently contributing articles to various websites and publications. She is a native New Yorker but has once called Paris and Brussels home. When not writing, you can find her painting, traveling, and going on hikes with her dog.* Below that, the author's photo. She's a young woman. Blonde hair, but with darker roots, so not entirely opposed to deception.

xxxiii

Memory is an internal state, the bringing to mind some moment from the past. And there is more to remembering than simply not forgetting. There is paying attention. In that sense it is an act of love.

Sometimes, my memories are like those flowers that were brought to a burial in that time before embalming was either practiced or perfected. They provide a fragrance that hides as best it can the odor of decay. Other times, memories are a cover that I can throw over my experiences. It keeps them warm, and also hides them.

I kept journeying through the bankers boxes, and the plastic tubs, and the trunks. I looked at what Dolores had saved from her own life, as well as what I had collected during the months of her illness and after. I threw out her manila folders. I donated her clothing. And I brought into my house that handful of things someone else will need to discard after I'm gone. But I never arrived where I intended to get.

I expected to reach a conclusion, and I don't have one.

Maybe this, that those who forget the past are not condemned to repeat it; they are free to imagine it however they choose.

I don't trust my own memories. Why should I? Even if they are based on my direct observation. Especially if they are based on my observation. The initial experience is filtered by my blinkered understanding. Then add to that the layers of static as the years go by, and what I remember is no clearer a transmission of the original than in the game of telephone, when truth is degraded as it passes further from the source.

When Dolores died on July 13, 1997, my watch ended. But all things come and go, and time is coming for me. She and I are only separated, as we have been from the beginning, by the fiction of years.

What did Dolores leave behind? She had one biological child, who had only one child, who never married; so, end of the line. Her descendants will not be numerous as the sands or the stars. Nor was she Eve, the mother of two, although one of those was a murderer. How proud could Eve have been, with Cain as her only living son? Without other mothers around asking her how are the kids doing, it probably wasn't so bad. Eve could keep the grief to herself, hiding it even from Adam.

Of course, none of the things that were in the storage room mattered. Not the high heel shoes in the clear plastic box. Or the Ann Taylor jacket, as yellow as the sun, still wintering in my closet for now.

Dolores, you bagged and sealed letters, photos, Playbill programs, costume jewelry, sweaters, curled belts and scarves. They are gone. They are keeping company with that pockety noise of the dieseling maroon car you drove, which outlasted you three years, until our son – sixteen then, and unhurt by the accident - drove it into a telephone pole.

Manila folders, dissertation, travel itineraries, pill bottles, flyers, postcards, certificates.

It was all a message from the past. I could record it, but I could no more translate it than if it had been birdsong.

\*

Time to stop. For the day, for the month, for however long it takes to get away from the bankers boxes. For now, I have had enough.

xxxiv

Some of the boundaries of Dolores's later life were set by her willingness at age fifty-five to adopt a newborn, and then another fifteen months later. Disqualified by her age from using the normal agencies, we made private arrangements. These are ambitious undertakings at any age. Dolores was a networker. She took charge of the effort and succeeded, twice. Boxes in the storeroom were full of folders there were full of reminders of the adoption process and the first year after.

There were lists of potential babysitters, possible nannies, a business card for The General Diaper Service, receipts from first visits to the doctor, and the handwritten guidance *alcohol on Q-Tip 2 to 3x/day for navel, Desitin Ointment for diaper rash, Poly-vi-sol 1 dropper/day.*

Among the throw-aways:

A note with a social worker's name and phone number – Linda Carmichael, who was sent by Family Court Services to interview us for suitability as adoptive parents.

A bill from Dr. Schnitzer, the perfectly named urologist who performed Ben's circumcision.

A Storkland bill stamped Picked Up and Paid. It was for a portable crib, sheet, pad, changing table, and a nipple.

A receipt for four bottles of Similac at \$5.99 each from the Skaggs Alpha Beta on Mockingbird Lane. That may have been the per-carton price. Similac was one of many receipts that Dolores had sealed in a Ziploc bag for reasons of her own. Like the Visa credit card carbon covering four weeks service by General Diaper Service, \$34.08, and a "Bath tub," only \$8 from Storkland. She kept the carbon receipt for an Aprica stroller, model La Belle, in Navy, also from Storkland. The top of the receipt was for warnings. The customer understands that the merchandise must be returned at the end of the lay-away period if it hasn't been fully paid for, "and all moneys forfeited."

She kept receipts from Storkland for the Medallion crib and the Typhoon rocker. A tear sheet for our Medallion crib, also saved, has the picture of the finished product assembled. Dolores chose the Malibu model, with its wicker headboard and footboard. "Today more and more young families are selecting wicker," the copy reads. "They know wicker is a sound investment of lasting value." This crib, disassembled, and the rocker were still in the storeroom. So was a pink bassinet, described on another receipt as a bedside sleeper. Dolores filed the assembly instructions for the crib.

Typhoon is a wonderful name for a rocker.

Another plastic bag had the assembly instructions for a Nu-line 4-Way Portable Pen-Crib, which is "a combination crib, dressing table and playpen that will fold flat for travel and storage." It's still in the storeroom, too.

These larger items were too much trouble to discard. Someone else will have to.

\*

*There you go again*, Dolores, saving not one, not two, but thirty reprints of Page 9 and 10, Section 1, from the Monday, August 20, 1984 edition of the *Morning News*. I unfolded one in the fluorescent light of the storeroom. I didn't need reminding, but I reread the story taking up three of the five columns across, about the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas. Its headline: *Beach Boys' Brian Wilson arrested for trespassing at convention site*. The forty-two-year-old Beach Boy had been arrested on criminal trespass charges inside the building where the 1984 Republican National Convention was not quite underway. Brian Wilson spent three and half hours in custody before his release after posting a \$200 bond. From the third paragraph, "Arrested with Wilson inside the Convention Center were two men, listed as employees of the Beach Boys, both of whom were found to have large quantities of pills in their possession." The article also provided the ironic context: "In 1983, then-Interior Secretary James Watt stirred up controversy when he prohibited the Beach Boys from performing at

Washington's Fourth of July celebration. Watt contended rock groups attracted 'the wrong element.' But the White House rushed to the Beach Boys' defense, with first lady Nancy Reagan declaring herself a fan."

This is history, but it wasn't what Dolores was after. On the same page, below a story headlined *Protesters brave 108-degree heat to rip Reagan*, I could see the United Press International photograph of our newly adopted son leaning back in his navy Aprica stroller. Ben wore a "Babies Against Reagan in 84" t-shirt and was gripping the finger of the young woman kneeling next to him. The caption: *Benjamin Perkins, 9 weeks old, and friend Charlotte Taft protest President Reagan*. Our friend Charlotte, the most photogenic pro-choice spokesperson in Dallas, the one always interviewed on camera about abortion, its most articulate and presentable local defender, wanted her picture taken with a baby.

Into the trash, the stack of yellowing reprints. Also, in its sealed Ziploc bag, a pink Babies Against Reagan t-shirt, which had dribble around its neckline.

\*

*All About Baby*, a Hallmark product, was sleeping on its side on refrigerator shelving in the room off the garage. Its first page declared *This is the keepsake book of* followed by the blank space where Dolores had written in our son's name. She provided the facts on *The Arrival Day* page – arrival time, color of hair, hospital, names of doctors. Other pages had prompts for what was coming soon. *Growth Chart. Memorable Firsts (smile, laugh, step, haircut). Then Birthdays, School Days, Early Travels*. None of that had been filled in. Instead, the bulk of *All About Baby* was all about congratulations; the pages and pages of cellophane sleeves were packed with congratulatory cards.

Also, Dolores's notes about gifts and matching them to their senders. People had shopped, purchased, mailed or dropped off at the house a Wedgewood bowl and cup, a rabbit and a second stuffed toy, a cup holder, socks, a quilt, a red suit and a blue blanket. She noted the vinyl panties, booties, children's cheerful hangers, an elephant rattle, the electric bottle warmer, a rocker music box, and chocolate cigars. There were gifts of receiving blankets, two of them, one with a mouse head and one Dolores simply called "blue". The infant kimono had a snap front. There were blue and red overalls, a striped t-shirt, a blue knit jacket, white sweater, infant coverall, and a stretch terry. A baby care survival kit had come in a Teddy Bear bag. Ben was a bonanza for the makers of cradle gems, towels and washcloths, yellow blankets and matching coveralls, and a white short suit with light blue trim and pleats. Dolores kept every sender's name and the gift given in the *All About Baby* book. She needed to distinguish a pastel blanket from a blue blanket from yet another receiving blanket.

There were the wishes and predictions, too.

"Only people who adopt can really appreciate the special joy..." The card was signed *Mr. and Mrs. Mathis*. Tommy and Thelma had lived in the house next door in Los Angeles when I was a

teenager. I played some with their adopted son Tracey and dreamed some about their adopted daughter Debbie.

*May this* is the common format for wishes. Card after card, with their manufactured messages, used it. It appeared on personal messages, too. "May this happy event continue to bring you even more happiness in the years to come," my father wrote, following the formula. One summer when I was home from college, my father had told me if given the chance to make the decision again he would never have had children. Perhaps his opinion had changed.

"Happy birthday, my little one," someone named Doris wrote. She had pasted a typed prayer in her card: *May you grow to love only that which is good. May you seek and attain that good. May you learn to be gentle and respect yourself. May you never fail your fellow humans in need. May you lessen a bit the tides of sorrow. May you come to know that which is eternal. May it abide with you always. Amen.* It was a lot, for a newborn.

Liz, another name I didn't recognize or couldn't remember, had sent a card to express her happiness. She addressed Dolores. Her brief note ended with, "May it all work out the way you wish."

Dolores took three pages to record names and associated gifts. At the time, these pages were a to-do list for thank you notes. Nothing to do but toss them now.

\*

Unpacked, years of large calendars. These calendars were strictly business, if only family business. They had no panels of color photographs, no wildflowers, landscapes, oceans, sunsets. Dolores used to scotch tape them to our refrigerator. She wrote her schedules for Ben and Eden on them -- piano lessons, dentist appointments, Gymboree, Skate Day. One month at a time, she recounted the days. But a calendar is not a diary. It's more like a warning, a reminder to not forget. So there's no reason to keep it once the month and year have passed to which those forgotten days belong. Yet, here they all were, in a pile at my feet. As I lifted the pages of 1996, flipping its months over the wire spiral of the binding, the future lay underneath the past, each new month uncovered by lifting the one before. If at times in the storage room I felt like an archeologist, this was just the opposite of a dig, where recency is on the surface, and the deeper you go, the further back you get.

Saturday, May 4, 1996. Baseball game, Scouts, 3 pm recital, 6:30 Greenhill School Auction & Dinner. For May 31, Memorial Day, the square said "Go." Then, blue slashes all the way to June 18, and, on the June 18 square, "Return." On June 10, the square also had "12<sup>th</sup> birthday," despite the slash. From the look of it, our son had written that one in. Three other months had a date filled in for the birthdays of the rest of us. Our birthdays were considered to be certainties.

The first days of school arrived the third week of August in 1996. School pictures were scheduled and a Mother's Breakfast. Aspects of our remodeling projects made it onto the calendar. The Nicodemus sons were repairing our seamed metal roof in September. They were the & Sons of their grandfather's sheet metal business. In his day, they would have been called tanners. School magazine drives, volunteer board meetings, city trash pickups, the due date for a science project a month away – all of it made sense in the lives of our ordinary household, though I could imagine a distant future when Dolores's 1996 calendar would be as enigmatic as a carving in Akkadian on a stone stele from Babylonia.

On Friday, November 1, our twelve-year-old son was grounded. Ben was grounded half a day on the adjacent Saturday, too. Sunday had a green SS marking; Sunday school, probably. The following Monday was the start of Trash Week. If I compare those days to plates spinning on sticks, it is an enviable trick. People complain about too much to do and their overcrowded calendars, but only the living need reminders.

\*

Making plans for children consumed much of Dolores's time. There was plenty of evidence of it in her manila folders. It's on monthly planners, typed schedules, and written lists with items crossed off. I had the inevitable reaction as I threw things away. It was a sadness that arrives long after the fact, replacing the anticipation that preceded and the excitement or disappointment that actually occurred.

The list of names for a daughter's birthday party is a roll call of Indian princesses who are middle-aged women today, or empty-nesters on diets. Dana and Margaret and Lauren and Leah and Kate and so on.

Dolores made a list of the invitees to a Halloween party at our house in 1981. Counting each couple as two, there were sixty names. Did this list of names from 1981 still have any purpose? Hadn't it already done its job? I am close enough to the end of my life to need no more reminding. But as I threw this list of names away, crumpling the three paperclipped pages, I suspected I would never have another thought about Larry and Sharon Watson, or even try to recall Peter Honsberger or beautiful Pam who answered the phone on the front desk at a graphic design studio where I worked in 1981. She was the Pam who was hit by a car while crossing the street after a softball game, a year after she came to our Halloween party. I saw her comatose in the hospital, which she never came out of.

It occurs to me that end of recalling is all the more reason for this list of names to go into the trash. I had been looking for some principle or rule for keeping or discarding. Maybe this should be the rule: If what I was looking at will mean nothing to anyone other than to me, then throw it out.

But no, the rule cannot be based on meaning alone. That would only lead in the direction of chaos. I trashed the plastic wire-o notebook from Rudi Steele Travel, "especially prepared for



Dr. Dolores Dyer,” with the Weissmann Travel reports for Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar and Morocco, along with a folded street map of central Cordoba that Dolores had inserted into it. It had meaning. it was a record of our final summer trip. And it was my second go-round with this wire-o bound notebook. It had survived weeks earlier, when I first took it out of a manila folder and could not throw it away.

\*

Dolores filled in a notebook with instructions for sitters. It served for those few times when we went out of town by ourselves. She provided names and numbers for doctors, neighbors, grandparents, co-workers, our children’s best friends, and their schools and teachers. Kirk Air Conditioning, Public Service Plumbers, and even Parker Service for the refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher were on the page for *Services*. *Medications* – Actifed for sniffles, Tussin DM for cough, Tylenol for fever. She wrote down the first name of the pharmacist at the nearest drug store, not just the store number. Ben had asthma attacks from time to time, and those times were typically two or three in the morning. So, instructions guided what to do. A formula for medications got posted on a cabinet door. It was Slobid and Alupent at bedtime, and, if needed, Ventalin for the nebulizer in the hall closet. If even more was needed, then Dr. Ruff, or the emergency room. Dr. Michael Ruff was the asthma specialist, but, she wrote in the notebook, “Dr. Dan Levin of Children’s Medical Center Intensive Care Unit would respond for me in an emergency.”

Thermostat instructions received their own page and included drawings of the arrow buttons and the “heat off cool” switch, along with explicit cautions (“open the lid carefully, it drops down”).

Overnight caretakers were advised to watch the doors on the refrigerator, “they don’t always catch.” Also, to remove the top caked ice on the right end of the icemaker each day, so it would make new ice. On the separate page for *Kids, Clothes, etc.*, Dolores’s note about taking our son to the bathroom before the sitter went to bed was starred for emphasis: “Walk him into his bathroom and help him get his pants down good. Be sure he leans over when he sits on the toilet or he’ll pee on his legs and clothes if he’s erect or not careful. He seems to sleep through this!”

I found the handwritten response from one of the sitters, who reported on yet another aspect of the bathroom experience. Ben had been caught “dumping and flushing his trash can into his toilet before I could stop him. Might want to watch his toilet, I don’t know what all he dumped...”

Care for a special pet also merited a star: “Give leaf lettuce, apples, veggies, give clean water, turtle needs indoor sun or some light for two hours.”

After Dolores’s death, I had my own variation on all this, for when I need help to cover a business trip or a weekend away. It picked up names and numbers from Dolores’s handwritten

version, but the listed contacts were far fewer. Fewer friends, fewer neighbors. Dr. Michael Ruff still made the cut, in case of an asthma emergency.

\*

In the thirteen years from Ben's birth until Dolores's death, two nannies helped raise our children. Dolores chose them. Each was nanny, cook, and housekeeper combined, five days a week. First La Verne Cook for eleven years, then Monica Clemente. Their days were captured in schedules, menus, and recipes that Dolores kept on three-hole punch paper, the pages fastened with brads, in a blue Mead folder. A few of the recipes were Dolores's, but most had been handwritten by La Verne. Lima beans and pot roast, red beans and ground meat, and ground meat patties and gravy. Baked ham. Chicken fried steak, definitely La Verne's. The ones in Spanish were Monica's. I sat reading the Monica's chicken recipe, with her instructions penciled in, *se pone en un pan el pollo con limon*. Monica favored scalloped potatoes. *Pasta con camarones en salsa de naranja* was entirely in Spanish. The recipes for plain chicken and for salmon on the grill came from Dolores's. One of her suggested meals was Cornish hen, dressing, green beans, new potatoes, cranberries, banana pudding. That was a meal no one made.

Dolores also wrote an overview. She suggested that each meal should have a vegetable, and that other recipes could be found in our cookbooks. "Look in the Helen Corbitt Cookbook," she advised. Helen Corbitt, overseer of food at the Zodiac Room on the seventh floor of the downtown Neiman Marcus, was an arbiter of taste in Dallas. Dolores had brought the Helen Corbitt Cookbook into our marriage, though I never saw her use it.

There were two sets of work schedules in the blue Mead folder. The one that was typed had SCHEDULE in all caps for a heading. It was detailed. Tasks were broken down by time interval, starting at 10:30 and not ending until 6:30, though 5:30 to 6:30 was "flexible time." Not on the schedule: Morning drop-off at pre-school. That was my job.

This was Monday:

10:30 – 11:30 Laundry

11:30 – 1:00 Pick up at pre-school, lunch, nap

1:30 – 2:30 Clean kitchen, especially floor

2:30 – 3:00 Sweep patio

3:00 – 5:00 lesson: reading, stories

5:30 – 6:30 Flexible time

The Wednesday and Friday schedules were similar, except for sweeping the pool perimeter on Wednesday and Friday's lesson being numbers. Tuesday and Thursday had kids outside, games, alphabet, and housekeeping (organize pantry, organize drawers), with an afternoon block for numbers, learning games, trips to the park or another outside activity once a week. How shopping for groceries and cooking dinner fit in, somehow it did.

Did anyone really adhere to these schedules? Probably not. A second schedule in a second folder seemed more realistic. Handwritten by La Verne, it had no time intervals separating one hour from the next. It was just, get these things done: grocery list, coupons, clean porches, clean refrigerator before groceries are bought, clean downstairs toilet. That was all page one. The other pages listed different rooms in the house to be cleaned and a few specific requests with more detail. Water flowers inside every other week. Wash all clothes on Monday and the children's clothes Thursday as well. Change cat litter boxes on Monday and Thursdays. Bath for kids Wednesday and Friday and wash their hair. Empty trash in the laundry room, and all trash outside on Monday. La Verne must have made the list for Monica, who worked for us after La Verne left. Since Monica did not speak or read English, this list was also not likely used. Still, the schedules had the charm of artifacts.

Neither La Verne nor Monica were live-ins. Both came weekdays, full time, and their duties extended far beyond child care. While Dolores went to her office, they were the stay-at-home mom. We paid their health insurance policy and stuck to the IRS rules for household employees. They earned what others earned, though the market rate certainly wasn't enough.

Monica had a husband but no children of her own. La Verne had a boyfriend, Ron Bryant, and eventually they married. I can remember when their vows were said, because Dolores had made a xerox of the announcement. It appeared in the community newspaper for Redland, Texas. *Bryant-Cook Say Vows in March 31 Ceremony*. Redland, an unincorporated community of a thousand people, is in northwest Angelina County. So, in the piney woods of East Texas, an area settled first by the Caddo and later by slaveholders. Texas may be the West in the movies, but East Texas is the South.

"La Verne Cook and Ronald Glenn Bryant, both of Dallas, were united in marriage March 31 at the home of the bridegroom's parents in the Red Land Community. The bride, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Doyle Cook of Elkhart, is a graduate of Elkhart High School and employed by Dr. Dolores Dyer and Mark Perkins..." Two columns in the local paper had space enough to include a photo of La Verne and the names of everyone involved in the wedding. "Flower girls were Eden Perkins of Dallas and Sabrina Peterson of Palestine, niece of the bride. Ring bearers were Quintrell Kuria of Tyler and Ben Perkins of Dallas." Laverne was in her wedding dress. She wore a white hat with a trailing veil, white pearls and matching earrings. She was not smiling in the photo.

I don't think La Verne ever thought of the apartment south of downtown Dallas where she and Ron lived together as her home. Home was her daddy's shotgun place with its gabled front porch in the piney woods. After Doyle became ill, La Verne left us and Ron and moved back to Elkhart to take care of him. That was in 1995. She stayed there. The year after Dolores's death, La Verne was diagnosed with breast cancer. I knew about it because she called to tell me that she was driving herself to M.D. Anderson in Houston for treatments. That must have been very difficult for her. The next time I saw her, fifteen months had gone by. Ben and Eden and I were in Elkhart at her open casket funeral.

La Verne had sent Dolores one of the *thinking of you* cards. It was in the Get Well stack. It's a card I'm keeping at least for now. On the coated cover, an illustration of a wicker chair and glass-topped table. Draped over the chair, a quilt; and, on the table, two glasses of lemonade, a plate of cookies, and a vase with blooming pink roses. The back of the card quotes from II Thessalonians. On the inside, La Verne tells Dolores that she loved her and is praying for her, and then she added a *you are the strongest woman I know*.

After La Verne, Monica Clemente worked for us for three years. Like La Verne, she arrived at the house after I left every morning, and she was gone by the time I came home from work in the evening. A year after Dolores's death, she was entirely gone. I used an agency to find someone else, who stayed less than a year. I don't remember her name. She was older and from the Philippines, very disciplined, and said "Okey-Dokes" repeatedly. By then Ben and Eden were teenagers, and the days of nannies or household help other than housecleaning had come to an end.

\*

Dolores devoted a manila folder to a "Saving Our Son's School" campaign. When Hillcrest Academy lost its lease in 1996, it made its temporary home in St. Luke's Church on Royal Lane. Some of the neighbors objected. They opposed the nine-month permit that would allow Hillcrest to survive until the school could find a permanent location. A manila folder had copies of letters that Dolores had written to the mayor and other members of the city council, who would approve or deny the permit. She saved her correspondence with a reporter at the *Morning News*. She was among the signers of the *To The Neighbors of Hillcrest Academy* letter, which was sensibly worded. She also handwrote her own *Dear Neighbors* letter. This one was never sent, though she kept it in the folder. After telling the dear neighbors how distressing their opposition was, she concluded, "I want to thank you bastards for all the trouble you've caused."

\*

Many parents have written about the challenge of downsizing after their children have left home. They talk about the difficulty of letting go. Not of abstractions, such as hurt feelings – which are difficult to let go -- but of actual objects. A mother blogs about "the impossible task" of getting rid of a child's toys, the onesie, or the small furniture that the baby or toddler outgrew so many years ago. She denies she's hoarding, then slyly applauds herself for being "a pack rat," and then gives herself an ovation as she relates how she did the right thing at last, donating the old toys or putting the unused furniture out by the curb, so someone else can benefit.

What is the point of those feelings? They seem as inauthentic as my need to complete the task of emptying out a storage room of Dolores's folders and my records of her illness. It was daunting at the start and became more ridiculous the closer it came to the end. I had thought I

could reduce, distill, extract an essence, or transmute it into some meaning, as I went into her boxes in storage. Or I would form a picture of the past, handsome and coherent, from ten thousand pieces of paper in manila folders. Instead, the pieces I went through had no straight edges. They belonged to a puzzle that cannot be put back together.

Maybe what I have been doing is discovering or demonstrating a physical law. A kind of Conservation of Matter, applied to memories, which says that whatever I began with, I will have the same amount at the end, even if the form may have changed. Nothing disappears. Not the water boiling in the pan, not the papers or ticket stubs I throw away. They may simply change form.

I did not throw away the homemade Mother's Day cards that Dolores kept in yet another Ziploc bag. They were made when Eden and Ben were five and six, to judge from the wholly enthusiastic declarations of love. I brought them into the house for safekeeping. They have graduated from the storage room and are now inside, behind a cabinet door. As for their unthrottled messages? Those have turned into the message in a bottle tossed into an ocean with no expectation of ever reaching the right recipient.

\*

That subcategory of people known as your children are going to be themselves no matter what you do. Thirty years ago, I failed to understand this. That lack of understanding is the only explanation I can make for a document I found with *General Principles* typed on the first of its twenty pages. I had been reading a book on "parenting" and its advice on how to discipline. Most of the twenty pages were copied from it. According to *General Principles*, we needed to have rules, we needed to explain the rules, and we needed to not repeat the rules endlessly or discuss behavior over and over. It also said we needed a reward menu with at least eight items on it. On a blank page in the document I had handwritten my proposal for the first four: *Rent a Nintendo tape at Blockbuster. Rent a movie at Blockbuster. But a Turtle or another small figure. Special dessert with the family dinner.* Dolores filled in numbers five through eight: *Have a friend over. Go to a movie on weekend. Go out for lunch or dinner on weekends.* Number eight sounded more like her. *Ask kids*, she wrote.

*General Principles* was very insistent – it used *will* and *must* and *should*. There were lots of *don'ts* as well. And there were plenty of *consequences*.

*Provide the consequences with consistency*, it said. That never happened but was not quite as mythological as the sentence that followed it: *When you consistently apply the consequence, they will understand the rules.*

I must have believed that rewards and punishments could impose order, at least on someone who was still small enough to command.

Browsing through *General Principles* was like unearthing an ancient legal code. By the prohibitions, you gain insight into the common transgressions.

Money, food, and toys were declared acceptable as rewards. But with rewarding, there was also a *don't*. Don't use the same reward over and over, a child can tire of money, food and toys, so *construct a varied reward menu* so it will remain motivational.

*Timeout for bad behavior must be coupled with rewards for good behavior.*

*Don't praise the child, praise the action. Don't threaten loss of the reward.*

*You need to establish a baseline record for behavior. For this purpose, make a chart and keep it for two weeks. It said see xerox of page 50-51, but I no longer that.*

Dolores actually made a chart. There it was, on lined yellow paper, more like a list than anything charted. There were specific crimes. *Saying bad words* and *calling names* made the list for Ben. Also, *kicking, hitting, scratching, slapping or grabbing*. His violations continued with other categories of defiance. *Not stopping when told. Screaming and shouting*. Our daughter Eden specialized in transgressions that were less aggressive, but hostile nonetheless - *going into your brother's room, taking other people's things*. Last were the general misbehaviors, things that must have annoyed Dolores -- *complaining about clothes and breakfast, getting up late, not getting dressed*.

The list replaced any longer narrative. I can't reproduce the dialogue or picture the overflowing toilet or the birthday cake on the kitchen floor. Dolores's list recaptured the atmosphere, though, the fragrance of the household with the six-year-old brother and his five-year-old sister.

\*

I read through the sequence of "I will not" commandments that Dolores created. Not ten, but six for our daughter and seven for our son. They took up a page of *General Principles*. If this program existed in our household, nobody ever got with it. Eden's six: *I will not scream when my brother calls me names. I will not go into his room without permission. I will not hit anyone. I will not call anyone names. I will not fool around when Mommy tries to get me dressed. I will not tease my brother*. Ben was not to say bad words or call anyone names or tease his sister. He was never to hit anyone, but to keep his hands to himself, which is a broader law, covering poking, tapping, and other activities he seemed unable to stop doing. His list also included commands that broke the "I will not" pattern. For example, *The first time I'm told to do something I will do it. I will listen to my teacher and do what she says. And I will do my piano lessons when I am told to do them*.

Titles on many of the pages copied from the parenting book were hot topics: *Family Meetings, Problems We Have, Behaviors We Want, Temper, Putting Clothes and Toys Away, Bedtime,*

*Fights Between Children, Following Instructions, Good Behavior Away From Home, School Attendance, Chores and Allowance, Homework, Swearing and Lying.* These were all pages that I had xeroxed from the source.

Hopes for our children were expressed as assertions, and there were whoppers on page after page.

*They will be people who listen to others, and who say positive, sympathetic things.*

*The fewer instructions you give, the more instructions your children will follow.*

Also, some understatements:

*The program for solving problems at home is a 12-week program, at a minimum.*

It turned out to be a lifetime project. And the solutions that I eventually found after Dolores – they were not the ones I had looked for. Tears, surrender, estrangement are solutions. Another solution to problems at home is to leave home. Sometimes partial solutions are the best you can do.

\*

Under *Problems We Have*, there was a *Being Lonely and Unhappy* subhead, with its *Loneliness and Unhappiness* sidebar. The paragraph in this sidebar advised the parents of misbehaving children to *decide what a good day involves*. The very last line instructed us to work for *two continuous months of good days*. We would have needed to set a very low bar for good days in order to have two continuous weeks of them. The list under *Behaviors We Want* included *smiling, saying something nice, giving a compliment, and not swearing when angry*. For chores, the guidance was to assign as few as one but no more than four. Dolores wrote our list on one of the blank sheets: *Set the table. Clear the table. Make your bed daily*. Neither of our children ever made their beds. Not when they were seven or eight or nine, and not now at thirty eight and thirty nine. The guidance on allowances was to pay *only when chores are done, on time, and correctly*, not as guaranteed income, regardless of work performed.

We were advised to discourage complaining and encourage problem solving. When we heard complaints, we were to listen quietly and only speak when the child changes the subject. We were to *see page 169 for more detail*. Our goal was to *give little or no attention to the complaint*. If we needed five ways to discourage negative statements, we could *see page 169* again.

*General Principles* spoke to a family where children responded rationally to reward and punishment. But our two were never rational actors. Haven't Nobel Prizes in economics been won demonstrating that most of us are not? Dolores had problems with Ben and Eden getting

themselves dressed for school on time in the morning. But in what world would it work to *dress the child in an outfit he does not like if the child does not get dressed independently and quickly?*

I never wanted to instruct, reward, or punish anyone. My dog has always been disobedient. As for disciplining my children, I had no gift for it. So, probably not the right qualities to be the dad. The pages of *General Principles* were evidence of things not going well, if not a partial proof that I should not have been the dad. They belonged in the trash.

I had emptied another bankers box. Next came the noisy part, stomping on the stiff corners of the empty box and flattening it, so the cardboard could also be discarded.

\*

*Decide what a good day involves.*

That is a challenge. To have a good life, you need good days. And to have them, you need to know what a good day is. Thirty years ago, I thought I knew. I no longer do. In truth I probably never did; at least, not with enough clarity to persuade Ben or Eden to take my version of a good day for theirs. Instead, I offered both of them the elementals. Diapers, then onesies, then t-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. I provided square meals in all their shapes and variety. There was a roof over their heads; tar and gravel at the first, smaller house, then standing seamed metal over the two-story brick home where each had a bedroom and even their own bathroom. I made wisdom available. Or at least pointed in its direction, at home and at schools both on weekdays and Sundays. I can't say they found it. Same goes for love, a lack of which will stunt a child's growth and misshape it. I offered what I had. These years later I have concluded that it may have been unrecognizable. Maybe it was their wiring. There are circuits in both of them, they have antennae that are uniquely theirs. I thought I was broadcasting love, but the reception may have been poor. My love might not have come through. For so many reasons, good days were rare after Dolores, and then there were even fewer of them. Adolescence is a steep climb for a boy just thirteen and a girl turning twelve. After Dolores, they were making that climb with weights on their legs.

\*

I've not really spelled it out, have I, but those were in fact the good days, those thirteen years when Dolores and I were parents together. Even the last five months of them in 1997. Those were good days despite the foolishness of *General Principles*, or my attempts to instill good habits or whatever else I thought I was doing. Eden was a delightful kid, full of devices. Ben was a beautiful boy, a slender demiurge. The subsequent years and their commotions have nothing to do with boxes in a storage room and clearing out papers and clothing and pill bottles. That later story doesn't really belong here, with my tug of war between discarding and preserving.



As for the subsequent state of things, that is more a story of mental illnesses and estrangements. Placement in a group home to see if “structure” would help Ben (it didn’t). Calls from a stranger who was Eden’s birth mother, which acted as a nuclear bomb on our nuclear family. Did all this follow only because Dolores died? Or simply because delightful kids become troubled teenagers and then even more difficult adults. Or because I could never figure either of them out? Or because of who Ben and Eden are, for reasons of blood, as it were? Do I regret adopting? And, pressing this further, should I never have married Dolores in the first place, as my current “significant other” believes, though she has only said it once, adding that Dolores, as a woman twice my age, should have known better and never married me.

These are nastier questions that lie under a rock in my consciousness. And nothing that I was throwing away from Dolores’s manila folders or from my records of her illness offered any answers.

Like so much else, these questions will be stored. They exist as misunderstandings, like other things I cannot throw away. And these sentences, too, are a feint and a dodge.

\*

One of the curiosities of looking at your distant past is how it comments on your recent past, which used to be your future. The congratulatory card from Milt and Evelyn, friends of my parents, for example, wished Dolores and me ‘Best of luck with your new baby. We know he’ll bring you much happiness.’ There is some sorrow in this message, which it never had originally. How could it be otherwise, given what the future held? It is the same feeling that adheres to a pink Babies Against Reagan t-shirt, or to a black and white photograph. It isn’t nostalgia. It’s not sadness exactly. It might be bitterness, but it isn’t that, either. It’s colder than that.

The coldest things for me to look back at were those at the farthest distance from where I have landed. Things that remain where the hopes and dreams were, on the shore where a future that never came to pass was left behind.

What would it mean to be God, to know the future, as God is said to know it? What sorrow that would be, though God would never feel it, to know in advance the hollowness of intentions, to know the misfortunes that are waiting. What better definition of hopelessness could there be than to have perfect knowledge of the future.

\*

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote a short essay on the portion in Genesis that begins with the death of Sarah, *Chayei Sarah*. He titled it *A Call From the Future*. It begins with a recounting of Abraham’s past. At 137 years old, Abraham was “old and advanced in years,” as the text describes him. He had banished his first son, Ishmael; he had stood with a raised knife

over the breast of his second son, Isaac; and now his wife Sarah has died. What does a man do after knowing such trauma? He is entitled to grieve. But Abraham's most pressing task was to find a wife for Isaac, who is unmarried and nearing forty. This is the lesson, according to the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: First build the future, and only then mourn the past.

Isn't that what I did? After Dolores's death, I worked with my children to see them on a path into college. But Ben dropped out and moved back into his bedroom, behind a closed door. And Eden spiraled off to be with the birth mother who reclaimed her, and then with husbands as intemperate as she was, the last one a violent suicide. And whatever cloud was inside my son darkened into depression and a passivity complete enough to obliterate the distinction between failure and the refusal to try. Both of them, like Isaac, are nearly forty now.

So I built a future, just not the one I thought I was building. And if I am now spending time in the past re-reading emails, looking at old clothing, or going through greeting cards, I am making no apologies for it.

Rabbi Sacks concludes his essay with a warning. "So much of the resentments of this world are brought about by people obsessed by the past and who, like Lot's wife, are unable to move on." Maybe so. But two cheers for Lot's wife for looking back. In the text, she has no name of her own. I would call her human.

xxxv

*Those not busy being born are busy dying.* And I had bundles of bills from those busy earning a living from the dying. A "hospital visit/simple" from Dr. Pippen, \$66. A "hospital consult/comprehensive" for \$330. Prudential could provide an "explanation of benefits." Other insurances did the same, on pages of explanation no one had any interest in understanding. Pages were mercifully marked *This Is Not a Bill*. An invoice from Tops Pharmacy Services asked that its top portion be detached and returned with payment. The patient balance was \$1.50. Tops sent a subsequent bill that listed this \$1.50 again, but also requested \$919.23, which was *Over 30*. I must have neglected the earlier, larger invoice, for the period ending 7/12/97.

Dolores died 7/13/97. Some subsequent bills were addressed to the Estate of Dolores D. Perkins. Charges for morphine sulfate injections, drug infusion pump supplies, and external ambulatory infusion devices. For the thirty days ending on July 13, 1997, these charges totaled \$9,436. I had reviewed none of the charges at the time. Now I was throwing bills away and took the time to wonder about them, trash bag in hand. If two 200 Morphine sulfate injections (J2270) had a \$534 charge each, and each of two 400 Morphine sulfate injections (J2270) had the logical charge of twice that amount, then why did the 160 Morphine sulfate injections at the end of the invoice total \$4,272? Maybe it had something to do with the number of injections needed that very last week. Medical billing is a mystery. The hospital is harder to question than even the car mechanic.

Nobody really wants any of the things they must buy from the business of medicine. North Texas Colon & Rectal Associates PA billed Dolores for “mobilization of splenic flexure.” Medibrokers rented her a lightweight wheelchair with two “swingaway” footrests. There was the morphine and the pump to dispense four to seven milligrams per hour. Other medications, supplies, and equipment, and instructions for same. Prednisone, take with food, take EXACTLY as Directed. Morphine Sulfite, Causes Drowsiness, especially w/alcohol. Clindex, Compazine, Imodium, and Lomotil, for stomach pain, nausea, and diarrhea. Promethazine, for pain, nausea, and vomiting after surgery. We descended through an underworld of Greek-sounding words that are found nowhere in the daylight of home or neighborhood. Heparin flushes, bacteriostatic agents, syringe, needle, tubing, and pads with alcohol for prep--those were in my wheelhouse. I did the flushing of the port in her chest, administering the anticoagulant, then the Ativan. Packages with supplies of morphine, sodium chloride, bacteriostatic, heparin, needleless connectors, latex gloves, syringes and needles appeared on the woven mat at our front doorstep. Emptying a bankers box, I was finding the packing slips and taking my time reading their once urgent delivery instructions: *Deliver via Sharon P. by noon.*

We received no deliveries from Amazon in 1997. Amazon had only just filed its S-1 as part of going public. That happened on May 15, when Dolores had less than two months left. I should have bought Amazon stock that May instead of *A Cure for All Cancers*. An investment then would be worth a fortune now. But no one knows the future. We only know what happens to us eventually, in the long term, though by that May Dolores almost certainly knew the near-term as well.

\*

Into the trash, bills for services provided at the Sammons Cancer Center, whose lead donor, billionaire philanthropist Charles Sammons, had made his money in insurance, cable television, industrial supply and bottled water.

Sig Sigurdsson sent a separate bill for the \$77.92 left over for management of anesthesia, after insurance payments.

A letter to Dolores from the government. “Medicare cannot pay for the services that you received,” she was told in reference to a charge for Omnipaque, which is used before CT-scans because it contains iodine and is helpful as a contrast medium.

Statements for services performed in March, April and May for chemotherapy, venous access and flush, fluorouracil and leucovorin calcium, were mailed again in December from Texas Oncology PA. *Dear Patient, attached is a new patient statement. Based on comments from our patients, we’ve made changes that should make the statement easier to read and understand.* Overdue reminders came from Patient Services.

By and large, the business offices were patient. Invoices for services were still being sent from Sammons Cancer Center in February the following year. *Your Insurance Has Been Billed*, they

would say. *Please Remit payment For Any Balance Reflected In The "Patient Amount Due". And Thank You.* Instructions were repeated in Spanish, with "*Patient Amount Due*" in English, and then *Gracias*. There were bills for small amounts left over for *Chemotherapy, push technique* and injections of heparin, fluorouracil and leucovorin calcium. Dolores had done chemotherapy starting the month after surgery until near the end. These were experimental protocols. I can wonder whether participation in an experimental drug trial should be considered paid work, rather than a billable event.

xxxvi

Only one bankers box left.

More than enough has been written about travel, how it broadens us and allows us a perspective unavailable any other way. Less so about the hoards of itineraries, hotel brochures, city maps, country maps, visitor guides, handwritten lists of attractions, receipts and ticket stubs that it produces. In Dolores's collection, placed in multiple manila folders, each of them labeled *Travel*, she was all over the map.

She saved an article about the hill towns of Tuscany, a handout with day hikes in Bryce Canyon, a mint wrapper from the Pan Pacific Hotel in Vancouver, and a Quick Guide to London (a Beefeater on its cover) from the British Tourist Authority. Also, three pages of home listings from Anchor Bay Realty in Gualala, California, a trip we took that must have provoked daydreams about moving, or of a second home.

The American Automobile Association sent her the folded map of Spain, Portugal and North Africa, including Gibraltar, Andorra, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Madeira, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. In the same folder, an Official Visitors Guide to Santa Cataline Island, and a note with a smiley face from Susan "looking forward to your stay in the E.P. Ferry Room" at The Old Miners' Lodge in Park City, Utah.

Some of the trips we took left nothing behind in my memory, either of the year they occurred, or of the experience. Despite maps and receipts, they made the trip to the trash. Most, however, had left a combination of mental snapshots and uncertainty – had we actually been to such and such a town or museum, or did Dolores simply get the brochure.

I sat in the storage room reviewing and disposing. An itinerary from Rudy Steele Travel recaptured our first trip overseas with Ben and Eden. That was 1993, when they were eight and six. We flew into Milan, took the train to Rome, stayed Sunday to Thursday, left by train for Florence, then a rental car to Siena, Orvieto, Gubbio, Ravenna, before dropping the car in Venice and taking a water taxi to the Hotel Marconi for three nights, then the train from Venice back to Milan, then home. I only know this because the itinerary said so. The memory of these places is a blur. It comes into focus only for moments, on stracciatella gelato in Piazza Navona, on pigeons landing on outstretched arms for photographs in Piazza San Marco, on squabbling

children, and on that sharp moment that occurred on every family trip, when I swore to myself I would never do this again.

Dolores saved a library of brochures and maps for Lone Pine, California, including an alphabetical list of the movies that had been made there, from *Adventures of Haji Baba* with John Derek to *Yellow Sky* with Gregory Peck, Anne Baxter, Richard Widmark, and Harry Morgan. There were one hundred thirty-four films listed, and a dozen television shows – *Death Valley Days*, *Wagon Train*, and so on. She also kept the self-guided tours of Inyo County, a map of Mt. Whitney, and a “planning your visit” guide to Furnace Creek Ranch, for our own Death Valley days.

I discarded any number of one-offs. A typed reminder from the *Jefe de Reception* that the *fecha de salida seria hoy* at Hotel Playa Blanca in Cancun, Quintana Roo. A brochure from the Chateau de Pommard in Burgundy. A stub from the Millenium Broadway, for a 4-night stay, four guests in one room. A detailed graphic with explanations of every image on The Sun Rock, which is the Aztec calendar. The business card of Hotel France Louvre, 40 rue de Rivoli, Paris 75004. A ticket stub from Mission San Juan Capistrano, visited on St Joseph’s Day, March 19, 1982. Another stub, this one from Museo del Prado in 1994. The 1992 *Carte Touristique* in celebration of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Montreal. Did we ever go there? Stationery from St. Ermi’s Hotel on Caxton Street in London, also completely forgotten. A brochure from The Andrews Hotel, two blocks west of Union Square in San Francisco. This was close enough to walk to Sears Fine Food for Swedish pancakes and lingonberries. I remember that. A postcard from the front desk of The Inn of the Governors in Santa Fe. A receipt from Le Richelieu Motor Hotel in the French Quarter, \$25 for the night in 1975. A brochure for Yamashiro in Hollywood, where we took my parents to dinner for their fortieth anniversary in 1988. A brochure for Hotel Colon in Merida, Yucatan, which had tiled steam baths. It was a city where a steamy rain fell every afternoon when Dolores and I were there. That was back in 1975, when we barely knew each other.

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An oversized postcard from the George C. Page Museum in Los Angeles displayed the skeleton and tusks of an Imperial Mammoth retrieved from the La Brea Tar Pits. An undersized paper bag from Smithsonian Museum Shops contained a receipt for \$.75. Dolores saved all shapes and sizes of tickets for admissions, including a green ticket smaller than a postage stamp for Empire State Observatories. It carried the self-advertising message *Souvenir of visit to the most famous building in the world*. That could be true. The Taj Mahal might be more famous. So might one of the Great Pyramids, if a pyramid is a building. Souvenir tickets for tours of the United States Capitol had rules on the back that warned *Standing or sitting in the doorways and aisles, smoking, applause, reading, taking notes, taking of photographs, and the wearing of hats by men are prohibited*.

I threw away brochures for Hershey, Pennsylvania (The Sweetest Place on Earth) and for Fallingwater, in Mill Run three hours away. Also, the flyer that bid us Welcome to Capilano

Suspension Bridge & Park. A business card for the Mandarin Inn, at 34 Pell Street, specializing in Peking and Szechuan cuisine. And a promotional brochure for *The Money Factory*, from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. This brochure could have been used as prep for the *Jeopardy* category *Denominations and Their Presidents*. It not only named whose face appears on the one dollar, two dollar, five, ten, twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar bills, but what's found on their backs as well. Those "what is" *Jeopardy* questions, in order: the Great Seal of the United States, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Lincoln Memorial, the U.S. Treasury Building, the White House, the U.S. Capital, and, on the hundred, Independence Hall.

Prepping for *Jeopardy* would not have been Dolores's reason for saving any of this. I didn't have the question to which her *Travel* folders was the answer.

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The Caribbean cruise we took in 1977 on the *Monarch Sun* was scheduled for a week, departing and returning to Miami, with stops in San Juan and St. Thomas. It turned out to be longer. A different ship, the *Monarch Star*, broke down. It floated into waters near Cuba, and the *Sun* was required to rescue its passengers, who were miserable and cursing as they were brought aboard our ship. It was our good luck. Those of us on the *Sun* were offered the option at no extra charge to take the *Star's* more expensive itinerary, with stops in Port-au-Prince, Cartagena, Aruba, Curacao, Caracas, Grenada, Martinique, and St. Maarten.

Dolores kept our passage ticket in its yellow jacket for cabin 606, an outside stateroom with shower. On the list of thirteen cabin options, from deluxe apartments to inside double staterooms, our outside stateroom with shower, double bed, vanity, and double wardrobe was fifth from the bottom. I found the Schedule of Shore Excursions, and the daily Program of Activities. The Sun Never Sets on the Fun, starting with coffee and pastry, then breakfast, then mid-morning bouillon, light lunch, then luncheon, then afternoon tea, then cocktails, dinner, midnight buffet, and then Eggs Benedict at three a.m. "for the late swingers." Passengers could dance or flee from the music of The Regency People, Koko and the Calypso Stars, the Betty De Que Duo, and the Al Kapp Duo. There were on-board stage shows, talent shows, exercise classes, ping pong and shuffleboard, movies, bridge lessons. Giant Jackpot Bingo for prizes at 9:30 p.m. An on-board casino, open until three in the morning. Suggested dress for the evening: *Jacket and tie for the Gentlemen*. Mr. James Kirk was the excursion manager for the shore excursions. Kirk was not the captain. The Sun's captain, J.E. Markakis, was called *Commander*.

I have a shipboard photo somewhere. In the photo, I am the twenty-five-year-old wearing a Cutty Sark t-shirt. Dolores was forty-eight then. Most of our fellow passengers were cruise regulars, gay travel agents, and retired dentists from Miami and their wives. The servers waited on us in the dining rooms, poolside, everywhere. They had seen everything before. Many of them were from Anatolia or the Maghreb and other places far more exotic than our stops in the

Caribbean. All of them wore the loose white coats that you might associate either with medicine or barbering.

Dolores didn't save anything from our stop in Haiti, where a local tour operator handled the shore excursion. I remember it though. Two scenes, disconnected, as though they were separate film clips. In the first, Dolores and I are led into the cathedral in Port-au-Prince while a funeral is in progress. We are ushered right to the altar. A priest is talking. Sitting in the new pews, schoolgirls in plaid skirts and white blouses.

"This is a funeral," our guide says, his voice louder than the priest's. "These are school children. This funeral is for their teacher."

Then he leads us out, the scene ends.

In the second clip, Dolores and I are driven "through the colorful winding streets" of a residential area and up a mountain, for the panoramic view and tour of the rum factory. It is the view described by an itinerary in Dolores's *Travel* folder as "one of the most beautiful in the World". To the west, the blue of Port-au-Prince bay and the whale-shaped Gonave island; to the north, the Matheux Range; to the south, the mountains of Morne La Selle; and to the east, the faraway Dominican border. No memory at all of the rum factory itself, but only of the ride in a private that takes us back down the mountain. The car descends slowly. At the first switchback, a young child, eight or nine years old and wearing nothing but his white underpants, runs in the dirt, just outside the passenger side of our car. He holds out his hand to our closed window as he runs.

"Give me something, give me something," he repeats, his pleas in a rhythm, keeping up with us for a few seconds, until we gained speed.

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Before any travel, there's the planning. And before that, the dreaming. Dolores's *Travel* folders were full of torn-out pages from travel magazines. I also found a typed list of ideas for destinations. The list was three pages. It covered all the continents. It seemed to aspire to include every possibility from Kansas to Kamchatka. With some of the entries, Dolores noted the number of airlines miles required for tickets. There was the improbable Kamchatka Peninsula, Boojum Expeditions, with its 800 number. Andy Drumm's Tropical Ecological Adventures, out of Quito. The Platte River Valley in Nebraska, to see the sandhill crane migration. And *Fly to Shanghai; Suzhou, the Venice of the East, a day trip by train from Shanghai; Hangzhou, resort by a lake; fly to Beijing, hire a car to the Great Wall*. That was a trip I actually ended up making in 2001, but with a girlfriend, her polite teenage son, and my resentful teenage children. We replaced Dolores's Hangzhou with Xian, in order to see the terra cotta warriors, and we began in Beijing instead of ending there. I might just as easily have let my finger fall elsewhere on Dolores's list. On ten days in Turkey, or through the Copper Canyon via rail out of Chihuahua, followed by kayaking on the Sea of Cortez or a drive through Baja California.

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After so many years, the roads have merged. I am no longer clear where Dolores and I had gone, when, or even if. The paper records I was throwing away had the quality of third-party news, rather than something I had experienced. Even her handwriting was no guarantee that what was written down ever took place. Did we stay in the Albergo Hotel in Firenze, or is this just information she gathered, although the note said *Please reserve room or rooms with bathrooms for family of four, two adults, two children, at most reasonable price*. My memory is as thin as the paper Dolores left behind in her *Travel* folders. Were we ever in Albergo Bosone in Gubbio as a family of four, *with bath at most reasonable price*? Her comments were often about costs and suggestions for trimming them.

A hotel voucher for the Jeronimos Apartments, Calle De Moreto, Madrid, proves that we were in Spain, party of four, in 1994. But keeping the receipt from a hotel, what for? Today, I would refuse the receipt. And any printed itinerary. When a business asks me to go paperless, they might have financial motivations, but their offer of electronic information is an act of compassion. It can all be deleted by the button on a keyboard.

We went back to Madrid in 1996. That was before Dolores knew that she was ill. On that trip, we took a train leaving Atocha station and went south past fields of sunflowers on our way to Cordoba. From there, memory fails. Car rental? We saw Seville, Grenada, Lisbon, and Gibraltar, and then flew Air Maroc to Marrakesh. My adult son recalls a different itinerary that included Barcelona, a place I'm certain I've never been. It came up long after I finished in the storage room.

"We drove through Barcelona," he told me.

"No, we didn't."

"We did."

"It never happened."

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No matter where, all of our family trips shared a common experience. At some point, Ben or Eden managed to get lost. Or we thought one or the other was lost; neither of them ever thought so. At Fallingwater, the Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece in Pennsylvania, Eden disappeared. We feared she had fallen into the water, but she was just in one of the rooms, being watched by security. The moment you realize your six-year-old isn't with you is a peculiar one. The emotion varies, depending on the location. At Fallingwater, it had an overtone of fear, but also notes of irritation. The solution came quickly, and everyone spoke English. On the other hand, the time we lost Ben in Belize, we came closer to panic.

Dolores devoted one of her manila folders entirely to Belize. Her collection included a brochure for Blue Hole National Park, a "popular hiking spot" where the Sibun River emerges from its subterranean journey into the base of a collapsed karst sinkhole. The park is also home to three of the five species of wild cats in Belize -- ocelot, jaguar, and jaguarundi -- not to mention coral snakes and boa constrictors. As I thumbed through it, I thought what a bad idea that had been, to go there for a hike. Even though the trail we took looked narrow enough to confine



both children, they delighted in racing ahead of Dolores and me. We caught up with Eden, but when the loop trail ended back at the parking lot, there was no sign of Ben. Could we have passed him somehow? On such a narrow path that seemed impossible. A park ranger at the exit only spoke Spanish, but he understood anguish well enough. He walked back down the trail into the park to look. We waited for an eternity, though the ranger returned with Ben in ten, maybe fifteen minutes. No explanation of how he had managed to get off the path. However it had happened, from the ranger's lack of excitement we gathered it had happened many times before.

Into the trash, dozens of loose papers, including a brochure from Rum Point Inn in Placencia and a picture postcard from Placencia. At Rum Point Inn, three daily meals were included, according to the voucher Dolores had placed in her folder. She kept the receipt showing the purchase of a snorkeling tour to Laughing Bird Caye. I was surprised by a tear-out from *Architectural Digest*. Its photo spread was for Blancaneaux Lodge, Francis Ford Coppola's property in the Cayo District. Underneath it, a receipt Dolores also saved. That's how I know fifty years later that the four of us stayed two nights at Blancaneaux Lodge in a double room with two beds. From there, a day trip to the border, though I found no record of that. Even so, I can picture the souvenir stand and the soldiers in fatigues carrying automatic rifles on the Guatemala side.

Only three things left to get rid of from the Belize folder. There was a rental car receipt and another rack brochure, this one for Pelican Beach Resort in Dangriga. And last, a tri-fold about Guanacaste National Park. I lingered over the cover drawing of a blue-crowned motmot. What, I wondered, is a guanacaste? It's a tree. It's a giant, over one hundred feet tall. It has a trunk that can be six feet or more in diameter. Or so the tri-fold said. I don't believe we got ever there or saw one.

\*

A trip to Costa Rica left its residue in a manila folder. *Nissan Sentra, \$486, 11 days* Dolores had written, on road map I unfolded to see our route traced in green marker. We drove north from San Jose, passing Arenal, a volcano that emitted small puffs far from the highway. The Monteverde Cloud Forest was fewer than a hundred miles northwest, but the road was slow. In places, it had collapsed. One of the holes we drove around was bigger than the Nissan Sentra.

I've read that Quakers were the ones who preserved Monteverde. They arrived in Costa Rica in the 1950s, looking for a country with a negligible military and no draft. Our arrival forty years later came after looking for a place to go on Spring Break. Ulises Rodrigues, Manager, and Wilberth Parajeles, Assistant, welcomed us cordially to Hotel Montana. "We do not consider you and your family as a number," they had written on the hotel handout. "For us, you are a very special person." Dolores had saved their message. She preserved the flyer from the Jardin de las Mariposas in Monteverde, too. Looking at it so many years later in the storage room, it did remind me of blue morpho butterflies that were the size of Chinese fans.

She also kept the pocket folder from *Si Como No*, a hotel in Manual Antonio on the Pacific Coast where we stayed three nights. It was still stuffed with its brochure, stationery, postcards, and menus. And its picture postcards were still perfumed with that “wish you were here” scent that is essential to destination marketing.

I found a business card from Restaurante Super Mariscos Sarchi Norte, Rigoberto Rodriguez Soto, Proprietario. You can google it, it’s still there, still *simplemente delicioso*, though this unremarkable roadside restaurant in Costa Rica is now *abierto todos los dias*. On the back of the business card, it said *Cerrado los Martes*. So here was a warning not to show up for *mariscos* on Tuesdays at Restaurante Super Mariscos. It been sleeping in a manila folder in a bankers box for nearly thirty years. Dolores had left it for me, through marriage, widowhood, my brief remarriage, and my long divorce.

*Si como no?*

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In my “if I could live my life over” fantasy, I long for the do-over of the many things I’ve bungled. And I want a repeat of experiences I will never have again, at least not at the age I was when the experience was a thrill. There is one trip I have the impossible wish to experience again just as it was. In 1993, Spring Break again, we visited the Big Bend area on the border between Texas and Mexico. No hint back then from our nine-year old son or seven-year-old daughter of the disruptions of the years ahead. So I lingered a bit longer than usual over the brochures and clippings that Dolores had collected -- the panoramic postcard from Prude Ranch in Fort Davis, where we stayed a night; a rack brochure for McDonald Observatory, with dates and hours for Star Parties; the newspaper article about the sandhills in Monahans, where we stopped in a rental car after a Southwest flight into Midland Odessa. I reviewed daily trip plans on the index cards she kept, a clipping about the Gage Hotel in Marathon, and information about the cottages in Big Bend National Park. Dolores had noted “no rooms available,” which is why we ended up in Lajitas, a faux frontier development that belonged to the empire of Houston businessman Walter Mischer.

An envelope stamped Official Business had come from the United States Department of the Interior. Dolores must have requested it. She had the official brochures on Big Bend National Park, Panther Path, and The Lost Mine Trail. A catalog from the Natural History Association listed maps for sale and guidebooks about rivers and deserts and flora and fauna. I tossed it. along with the *Texas Monthly* feature on Big Bend and the two articles on the park from *The Dallas Morning News*.

Why Dolores had kept hotel brochures and travel agent itineraries, ticket stubs, receipts, the shore excursion guides, the tri-fold flyers, street maps and road maps – was it to help her remember, or so she would be remembered? I have no theory.

All the papers went into the trash. They needed to be gone. It was sad to be reminded and, at best, bittersweet.

Nothing in a manila folder about La Kiva, a restaurant in Terlingua, though La Kiva was a best memory. La Kiva had a hole in its roof so the bright stars were visible. In its dining room, Ben and Eden raced around the tables and no one was bothered. La Kiva did no marketing, so there was no postcard, and the menu was on a chalkboard. Phones weren't cameras then, and no pictures were developed. As for my memory, it is fragmentary, and less spatial or visual than in the echo of the name of the place.

xxxvii

Done. The last of the boxes emptied. No more manila folders. Nothing left, or next to nothing, that Dolores had kept from the years before her illness. Same with the colon cancer discussion list emails, the get well cards, the amber pill bottles and funeral service sign-ins saved under my watch. If it had all been saved in support of memory, had it all been discarded in the service of forgetting? Or in order to remember the months of February to July 1997 in whatever way I want, unburdened by reminders.

In 1998, Michael's Fluttering Wings Butterfly Ranch was a business in Mathis, Texas, not far from Corpus Christi and the Gulf of Mexico. It supplied live butterflies, which were sold to be released at special occasions. Butterflies were purchased for weddings and for birthdays, but mostly for the occasion of burial, or for the ceremony graveside at a later time, when a monument might be unveiled. That was what we did. We ordered butterflies to release at a monument ceremony in June 1998, eleven months after the funeral.

The butterflies came packaged in a triangular, nearly flat paper pouch, one for each butterfly. Each of the pouches had *Caution: Live Butterfly* as part of the warning printed on them. *Open slowly and carefully.* Marketing collateral that accompanied the butterflies referenced American Indians and a legend in which butterflies were the messengers of the Great Spirit. To make a wish come true, the copywriter said, whisper the wish to a butterfly, and *upon these wings it will be taken to heaven and granted.*

The Butterfly Ranch was the business of Reese and Bethany Homeyer. Both names were on the return address of the flyer I saved, though only Bethany signed the letter that came with delivery. *You have received your shipment of Butterflies, she wrote. Keep your Butterflies in a cool dark place until the time of release.* She hoped we would enjoy the beauty of setting these delicate creatures free. I can say that it engaged both children, who were fourteen and twelve. At the unveiling, it provided a moment.

I found an article about Bethany online. It was from the *Caller Times*, "Butterfly wings lift spirits of grieving mother." It reported that the business was booming. And it was Bethany's story, about the business she had started after her son Michael died in a car accident at eighteen. Michael's behavior had been very foolish -- drunk, riding on top of a vehicle a friend was driving

at high speed down a rural road. The article online was “last updated” in June 1997. I wondered if the Butterfly Ranch was still in business. The article claimed that Bethany and Reese had out-of-state customers, “thanks to the couple’s home page on the world wide web,” but there is no such page to be found any longer.

xxxviii

Why would people want to be mourned? Surely we know that after we die we are unlikely to care. And who attends our funeral is not our concern either. Even our name on the donor wall of the symphony hall or homeless shelter will make no difference to us. Praise makes sense for the living. But being remembered? It’s less substantial than a shadow. Grief makes sense, but that is only for the living. Our attitudes toward death are full of contradictions. We dress up death, clothing it like a living doll. We take things we assert aren’t so and then act as if they are. We say God is incorporeal, but then we talk to Him. He has no arms, but we long for His embrace nonetheless.

xxxix

I have reached the point that you, if you are here, reached some time ago.

I have asked myself with every item discarded what good was this revisiting, this embrace of the past that was also a rebellion against it.

There was no single takeaway from what was hiding in the folders Dolores saved and I threw away. These folders, manufactured in imitation of manila hemp, a banana-like plant that isn’t hemp at all but a fiber that comes from the Philippines and is no longer used to make sturdy, yellow brown envelopes, are gone. Surely every piece of paper they had held had been placed in them deliberately. It had been retained by design, but over the years that design had disappeared.

Same with whatever I kept – or am keeping.

Isn’t that the way of things, a reverse teleological reality, where things move not in the direction of purpose, but the opposite.

Four last “thoughts”:

Memory is like the glass bowls I use for my cold cereal. The bowls are small, but if you accidentally drop one, the brittle, tempered glass shatters into a thousand pieces. The glass is made to do that. The tiny bits of the breakage are less likely to cause serious injury, as long as you don’t try to clean them up barefoot.

Memory is made up of fragments, bits and pieces, some rhymes, fewer reasons. When I am told that the unexamined life is not worth living, I have my doubts. Not everything is worth examining.

Memory is quicksand. Sink too deeply into it, let it into your throat and your nostrils, and you will be unable to breathe.

Last, more personally: Four years after Dolores's death, I remarried. It didn't last long. So I've been widowed and I've been divorced. I don't know if I ever want to marry again, but I never want to be divorced again. That said, being divorced does have an advantage over being widowed. When someone divorces you, at least they take their things with them, even if they take some of yours as well.

xl

An afterthought:

Articles arrive in my email daily, as reliably as a ten-year-old on a bicycle once threw a morning paper onto a front porch. While I was still working at emptying boxes in the room off my garage, an article appeared in my inbox. It linked to a translation of an essay written in 1943 by a woman in hiding on "the Aryan side" of Warsaw. She had escaped the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. This woman, Rachel Auerbach, was one of those who helped compile what became known as the Ringelblum Archive, a collection of papers and objects buried in three metal milk cans and some metal boxes on the eve of the uprising to preserve the memory of that doomed community of Jews in Warsaw. It held "diaries, eyewitness accounts, sociological surveys, poetry, public notes and wall posters," along with theater tickets and chocolate wrappers, and other ephemera. No Ziploc bags back then. Compiled under the direction of Emanuel Ringelblum, the archive survived the total destruction of the Ghetto. Ten metal boxes and two of the milk cans were found after the war. One of the milk cans had a note from a nineteen-year-old boy. "What we were unable to scream out to the world," he wrote, "we have concealed under the ground." Rachel Auerbach had helped buried the archive; when she returned to Warsaw after the war, she helped to recover it.

Her poetic essay might even be considered part of the archive, though it was never buried in a milk can or a metal box. In her essay, she called those murdered "the lowly plants of the garden, the sorts of people who would have lived out their lives without ever picking a quarrel with the righteous – or even the unrighteous—of this world." Of the deportations she witnessed, she wrote that no cries were heard, "except when women were caught and loaded onto the wagons, and one could hear an occasional in-drawn hiss, such as fowl make as they are carried to the slaughter." She asked, "How could such people have been prepared to die in a gas chamber? The sorts of people who were terrified of a dentist's chair; who turned pale at the pulling of a tooth." She grieved for her brother's orphan daughter, her cousins, all her mother's relatives. She named them, and the towns and places of their murders. And then she

wrote, "I will utter no more names." She knew that memory had become a cemetery, "the only cemetery in which there are still indications that they once lived."

True enough. True for Dolores Dyer, and for Rachel Auerbach's niece, though for Princess Diana, maybe less so.

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