

THE BUSINESS OF DYING: A NOVELLA

A dissertation submitted to the  
Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

Drew University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Letters

Kristen M. Coughlin

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

May 2026

Copyright 2026 Kristen M. Coughlin

## ABSTRACT

*The Business of Dying: A Novella*

Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

Kristen M. Coughlin

The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies  
Drew University  
May 2026

*The Business of Dying* follows a woman who feels entrapped by inherited, gendered expectations of caregiving. She must confront her own moments of selfishness as she begins to question what she has taken for granted, as well as her sense of identity. Her journey begins with anger and resentment, but gradually leads to a questioning of societal expectations placed on women—especially daughters—and the roles they are expected to play as parents age. As she moves through the journey of grief, shame and death, she learns tolerance, self-acceptance, and accepts the call to move forward with hope.

The accompanying Critical Reflection invites conversations regarding grief studies and the medical humanities, with particular attention to the silence and stigma surrounding illness and the expectations on women as caregivers. Where canonical representations of women who resist prescribed roles—such as *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*—culminate in madness or death, *The Business of Dying* presents an alternative trajectory: its protagonist moves through moments of profound weakness toward agency, embracing vulnerability. The reflection bridges the creative piece and

lived experience, reflecting on caregiving, grief, and advocacy, and considering how these experiences might be more openly acknowledged and shared, including a short list of resources for further reading.

## Table of Contents

### Part I: The Business of Dying

Chapter 1: The Call.....	1
Chapter 2: The Journey.....	14
Chapter 3: A Seedling.....	31
Chapter 4: A Bloom.....	47
Chapter 5: Determination .....	65
Epilogue:.....	74

### Part II: Critical Reflection

A Moment of Pause.....	79
Foundational Contexts.....	79
Bildungsroman Structure.....	81
Namelessness & Stream of Consciousness .....	90
Hope for the Work .....	91
Author's Note.....	94
Family Resources.....	102
Bibliography.....	104

## Chapter 1: The Call

It's hard to be happy when everything hurts. If all those opioid addiction commercials started with that truth, maybe I'd donate more "to the cause." Maybe they wouldn't need as many commercials. I've got to be less dramatic: I'm simply warm and sore. I have no idea if I'm happy. I don't know what I am anymore.

We had set out for our daily two mile walk, which shrunk because she only had the energy today for a mile. By noon, we were on the deck. I am wearing sneakers and we are both still covered in thick, caked on sunscreen. It's mid-May and scorching hot, no shade to be found. I've moved our plastic chairs out from under the gutters in the corner. There's a laughable awning, the siding is sweltering and yet, with our feet in a kiddie pool of cold water, we pretend we are comfortable.

She asks me what I'm reading. That's what we do. We read together. I mean, not together, she reads, and I read, and we both pretend.

"It's a novel, Mom," I say, "fiction. What about you?"

"I'm reading this article," I nodded, listening, "about how much money should be spent in technology researching sociogenomics, you know how to alter genes to get what you want and what you don't want." I always pretend that I don't hear that part.

I pretend, but I'm thinking the truth. You don't want that Alzheimer's gene; no one wants the sick genes.

"Isn't that, like, eugenics or something, Mom? Wasn't that the special we watched the other day on Channel 13?" She's looking at me but doesn't remember. I sigh. I am tired, but I continue, "Remember they had that one photo, where all kinds of people were

under the big top tent? Like a... a cattle contest or whatever that was called? Like....," it was hard to find words to describe the black and white film footage that was so horrifying, "like the 4-H best pig in show! They tried to rate who was the best whatever, and then wrote books about who was suitable to marry who and why. Do you remember, Mom?"

"Oh, right, right. Imagine that... determining somebody suitable for marriage. I imagine it *was* the best pig in show who won that one," she snorts and wheezes and I laugh, wondering if I ever appreciated her humor before? Can mothers be funny? Who isn't suitable for marriage I wondered--aren't we all just pigs at the end of the day? Being happy, now--that's the hard part.

"What's the name of your book, dear?" she asks, freshly, as if she doesn't know because she doesn't know anymore.

"Uhm, it's called," I check the cover and nearly lose my page, "*Love Walked In.*"

"Well, I guess it's not about us."

"Mom. I did say it was a work of fiction," I say, straight. Her eyes narrow, and I was scared, until her teeth about exploded out of her head with laughter; I'm pleased she found it comical, and I'm pleased at my own turn to be funny. The laughter is the only new thing in our conversation since January.

Humor's like that, a gamble, like health, never guaranteed. Unpredictable, like our damn DNA, doing whatever it wants whenever it wants. DNA's decisions steal our freedom. She decides she's going to rest her eyes a bit, and once she settles in to doze, I lift the magazine from her chest, remove the glasses from her nose. I look at the chubby,

diapered white baby on the cover, noting the wisdom of the publisher and the artful use of gender persuasion: “\$2 million would save her life. Could you pay? Should You?” This author Nathaniel Comfort asks some really fucking uncomfortable questions. There’s a subheading at the bottom that I can no longer read without my glasses. DNA: the equal opportunity thief.

Eugenics. Nothing new under the sun.

*The MIT Technology Review*. What 82 year old Alzheimer's patient reads the damn *MIT Technology Review*? I remember thinking the first time we had this conversation. I hadn’t noticed until after I filed her taxes that the issue was from November. That is why the conversation happens. It is pretend. It is practiced. I glance at my mom: she is so small. I wish I could protect her from more than just the sun.

I moved back to Florida to help her with things in January. She told my brother and me both on Christmas Eve that she was sick but was still technically awaiting a diagnosis. Like children do, we fell for the fib and focused on our plans, aligning details to suit our busy lives. I would move in just for a while and be around in case of emergency. I could work remotely for at least six months.

The only thing I had to leave was a job, anyway, I had said to both of them.

It was a lie. I was leaving the start of an ‘on’ part of a long time on and off again relationship with a colleague.

I suppose that’s a statement about my character: long time on and off again is a kind of code that translates to low expectations and tolerance, not love. I had built that expectation, I suppose.

Bill and I began working at Fitch's at the same time, about ten years ago. We danced around each other. I remembered my mother always telling me you don't shit where you eat. Well, I shat where I ate anyway. It was casual at first, easy. It fit.

His voice was gravelly, it always annoyed me. It didn't make any sense. I told myself to listen to his words, not his sound. Then, when I told him I wanted to have a baby, hoping, playfully, purposely bashful, I fell into the gravel, pieces of it getting stuck in my skinned knee, and I knew what he said had never mattered. I had been pretending the whole thing. He had been pretending the whole thing. Pretending. Which comes first: pretending or protecting? Was that the singular thing I knew to do as an adult, pretend in order to protect myself from the truth?

I was good at numbers. At spreadsheets. At driving a hard bargain. I was good at counting calories and saving money and spending wisely. I was shrewd. I was never good at people. I was always too closed off or too cynical or too loud. My humor was always too biting. My timing was always, always off. That's part of why I wanted to have a baby: timing. It was an economical use of my time to have a baby now. It was a simple fact, literally, of life. The truth was that I was lonely. I was even kind of bored. A baby was a logical fix and would give meaning to my existence.

"I really didn't think this is where that was going," he said, "sometimes we're good and sometimes we're not—is it ethical to bring a baby into this?" he gestured to the world and said, matter of factly, "Why would you bring a baby into an uncertain economy? This crazy, uncertain environment?"

“Right. You’re right, I understand your point,” I had answered, “but I wouldn’t need you to be responsible—I mean I can do it myself.”

He shook his head and said, “I’ve got to go.” I nodded and our off and on again thing was permanently turned off.

I went home that night and threw myself a pity party. My thoughts ran between *I don’t need a man, there’s a thing called a sperm bank* and *I’m going to be alone forever*. I was eating a lukewarm Lean Cuisine in the dark, by myself, in front of the television, when she called. I rolled my eyes when I saw her number on the screen. I sighed and begrudgingly answered. She asked if I had plans for the holidays. I made something up about a company party. I actually don’t really remember what I said.

“Well, I’d like you to come down,” she said. This surprised me. We had never been close and I had visited in the spring like I always do; why did she want me to come again? “I think I’m going to need some help, soon. I’ve been seeing some doctors, and well...I’m going to need some help... soon,” she had repeated, as if she knew I wasn’t interested.

“Can’t Bobby do it? He lives like, five miles from you?” I whined.

“Yes, but I hate to ask him for favors,” she said gently.

“But you don’t mind asking me? Who lives five hours away? By plane?” It pissed me off that she saw her existence as an inconvenience only to him, and not to me.

“I understand, but you know him,” which was code for he wouldn’t be much help. “Plus he’s got the kids and...” I stopped listening. Having kids was Bobby’s fucking excuse for everything.

With him it was always “I can’t because of the kids...” or, “You know, the kids...” He couldn’t help her mow the tiny lawn. She had to hire someone. He couldn’t help bring her to doctor’s appointments, so she learned the bus routes. *And I only got lost one time*, she had bragged. So of course, now that she needed help, he couldn’t do it. But I have no kids, so I must be responsible for everything Mom-related. How convenient for Bobby. How fucking lucky.

I hadn’t even asked what kind of help, or what kind of doctors.

“Sure,” I sighed, resigned to remaining childless, feeling as if it were a curse to bear. “I’ll come down.”

I dragged my feet booking the flight. I kept wishing she’d call back and say “never mind” and leave me alone. People at work thought I was some kind of hero, sacrificing to take care of my mother. I don’t think anyone knew the truth. I was filled with dread.

Looking back, I should have done so much differently. I should have been grateful. I should have said “Yes, absolutely!” I should have tried harder, been less selfish. I should have rushed to the airport that evening. I should have been more like my mom. I thank God I didn’t go to the sperm bank, that Bill rejected the idea of having a baby.

I head in through the sliding doors, leaving her there on the patio, her feet still in the water, my eyes and body relieved to be in air conditioning. I can’t believe how much has changed, how much everything has changed.

The Channel 13 movie that night is *Baby Boom* with Diane Keaton. She makes it look good. I mean, she *makes* it: baby, house, career, love. Of course it's glossy in the movie, just like the cover of Mom's magazine.

\*\*\*

We decided she could move in with Bob by September. He'd transition her over the summer to live full time with him and his kids by the time they started school in the fall. That was our plan. We had left her mostly out of it. We consulted no one but ourselves.

It was later that winter that I began to realize just how long she'd been pretending. I'd been checking through her cabinets. I had been looking for a bowl, but the cabinet was filled with papers, medical bills. They were all stacked neatly, about a foot high, but papers don't belong in the kitchen. What had she been thinking? In another cabinet I found only a box of broth and a collection of applesauces. Who can survive on that? Was she trying to die faster, I thought, mad at her like I was when I was a teenager.

I notice the dishwasher. It's musty, like it hasn't been run in awhile. It's the same one we've had forever. I wonder if it still works.

I remember going shopping for it one day after Dad left.

"Come on, let's go shopping," she had said. This was how it always started. My mother, cheap when it came to us and spendy when it came time for her.

"A dishwasher," she said, "we need a dishwasher." And so we went, me, her, and Bobby.

It was always a chore with her. She had that high pitched excited voice, as if we'd never left the house and were finally going out. I realized later that she was just nervous. She always called it an adventure, every time we got lost she'd sing out "New roads, new stores! We'll just go and see what's there!" It was so annoying.

She was terrified of driving. Sometimes she played the radio. Sometimes it was quiet. I can't remember which one I liked more. Every now and again, if it were on, she'd shout, "Oh this is my song! Oh this song is about me!" She always had a smile on her face, egging us on to agree with her as if we knew what she meant.

She'd sing "*never make a pretty woman your wife,*" "*ragdoll,*" "*wrong side of the tracks.*" Sometimes lines she'd sing at the top of her lungs, and other ones she'd mumble under her breath.

Is it fair that I get to blame myself for the faults of my mother? I'm her child. I was supposed to be the cared *for*, not the caretaker. I suppose she did the best she could. It's just that her best wasn't very good. Or maybe it was; I guess I oughtn't judge.

She liked beautiful things, but we didn't have many. I try to have...pity? No, I try to have sympathy but instead I have pity. She knew better and she should have done better. It's not that hard to make good choices. Maybe she *wanted* pity. God. Who knows.

We went shopping. We bought a dishwasher. She haggled like it was her superpower. Found the right salesman, just old enough to feel for her, and just young enough to feel for her in a different way. She worked the man. My brother and I were hungry because we'd left before lunch, not because we were spending our last dollar on a high priced appliance, as she led him to believe; how stupid could that salesman have

been? Especially, when she was ready to spin on her heels when the installation wasn't for free? I hated shopping.

I hate shopping. What a distraction, like the music on the radio. We got home, after fewer wrong turns than usual, and without any extra stops. That day it seemed almost as if she were making excuses to go home where she usually did the opposite. "Just a Target run...Just a stop at the Acme..." Just-a, just-a, just-a was really her song, but that day it seemed she just wanted to get home. I couldn't care less. I had friends to see. Let her get home and do the chores.

I wonder what she had been avoiding.

Looking at the pantry now, I glance at the calendar. I remembered we always had a calendar. It was whatever free kind my mother could get, and she filled in each box for each month as far in advance as possible, detailing everything from annual appointments to special occasions. Any new plans needed to be added in blue ink, so they were bright against her black ink.

"If it's not on the calendar, it's not happening," she always said. Bobby and I used to mouth it to each other, behind her back, mocking her. I chuckle at the memory.

The calendar always hung in the same spot on the inside of the pantry door. It would have been easier, we always argued with her, if she would just keep it on the fridge where we could see it all the time, but she had an aversion against magnets because "they looked sloppy." So, whether for convenience or spite or a natural affinity for sloppiness, my brother and I never closed the pantry door. But it had been closed when I first arrived. Looking at it had turned my stomach.

Now I'm supposed to be looking for supper. I'm not sure what to make. She has trouble chewing lately. Everything has been giving her trouble lately.

I feel my chest tighten as I open the door to reveal the last blue box of pasta and I force myself to look at the calendar. I have been trying to deny its concrete timeline. It is full until June, and then there's nothing but empty boxes for the rest of the year. The glossy pages wilt and cling to my clammy fingers as I flip through. Every time I do this, I feel as if I'm invading her privacy. The calendar was always more hers than ours. She must have gotten this calendar from a church. Its pages are full of saints.

Saints are on the calendar in black ink. Appointments are on the calendar in black ink. There isn't blue ink anywhere to be found, so it's not happening. Alzheimer's disease isn't happening. Death isn't happening.

I make some pastina, just like she did for me when I was sick, boiled in chicken broth, well buttered and with a little bit of salt. I tell myself both the broth and the pasta have protein, so it is a well-rounded meal. I tell myself that she can't choke on the small star shaped pieces, that I've made a good decision as a caregiver. I wonder if there's ever been a time when I don't comfort myself with lies. We have our meal and the evening stretches on.

It feels like midnight, but it's just seven o'clock and it's just as damn hot. I can't even look at her, in bed under her blanket. She's cold and I'd peel my skin off if I could. She ate pretty well, I think, and head back to the calendar, because even though I checked what time we are supposed to be at the neurologist's tomorrow, I've already forgotten.

Forgetting something so simple comes laden with such selfish, intense, new fear now. I'm not sick, I tell myself, I'm distracted.

Tomorrow is the first appointment with a new specialist, though I haven't for the life of me been able to understand why they'd send an old lady with no memory to a new doctor. Then, on the box for February 2nd, I see for the first time that she had written *New neuro; ste 310; 10:15AM*. I flip the warped pages back to March and then to April and feel betrayed: tomorrow would be her fourth appointment with the same doctor. Was she calling him 'new' for me? Had she forgotten? What kind of daughter questions her mother's honesty? Her sick mother's honesty? What kind of daughter was I that I hadn't noticed?

I had had no idea she was this sick. On New Year's Eve, she told me four to eight years was common with an early diagnosis and no other medical conditions, and they-every freaking they you can imagine-told me they expected her to last three to four months, barring, they all added, emphatically, any other complications.

But she didn't act sick. She wasn't weak or frail, or really all that forgetful, even. She was just getting older, like *normal getting older*, not *sick getting older*. My mother was never even sick when we were growing up. According to her even me and Bobby were never sick growing up. She used that stupid "healthy as a horse" phrase all the time. So, I figured that all these doctors had just underestimated her. Single old lady, young male doctors: it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. It was actually quite common, I had just heard a program on the radio about it the other day, some statistic about women

being misdiagnosed a gazillion more times than men are, that women simply aren't taken seriously at medical check ups. I was sure the doctors were wrong.

But they weren't.

I get a lot wrong a lot of the time but there's no way I got that timeline wrong. According to her symptoms, she had advanced from the "Moderately Severe Decline" stage to the cleverly titled "Very Severe Decline" stage as if she were sprinting toward death. Who thinks of these damn Three Word Stage titles anyway? Had they no access to a thesaurus for God's sake? Seven stages of sickness and the versatility lies only on the adjectives, decline coming standard?

I was angry, but didn't know who to blame. Me? Them? Her? I realized again how little I knew. I realize how little I still know. How much she had been keeping from me. Was she lying? Had she forgotten? Did I simply not listen? Was she trying to protect me? There's no one to ask.

The next few weeks are busy, each little box proclaiming some historic, religious event right under the name and times of doctor after doctor. By March it seemed cruel. I moved in full time on Saint Patrick's Day.

She used to make a big deal of St. Patrick's Day. I remember a lot of steam in the kitchen and Bobby and I were able to get away with anything-as a kid it was better than Christmas. I remember her laughing. She answered every "Can I" question with, "I guess, so" and a smile. By the end of the evening though, I remembered, I'd hear her crying after she tucked us in. Why was she crying? How come I never thought to ask?

This year there was no celebration. I sip my glass of wine and wish it were whiskey.

I begin to make lists. I'm afraid I will forget everything, like that lady in that movie we watched on channel 13. What was the name of that movie? I refuse to Google it.

I bite my lip and rack my brain. Remember, remember, remember, come on...it was that one with Julianne More and Kristen Stewart—

*Still Alice*. I'm relieved to remember. It's like my heart starts beating again.

I make one list of what I remember when I remember it. I make another list about how it happened according to my mom. I try to merge them to make reliable memories.

But why am I making memories if I'm afraid I'll forget everything?

I make a list of her medications.

I make a list of her doctors.

I make a list of what I need to make a list of.

## Chapter 2: The Journey

Driving home from the appointment I keep thinking: Why keep going? Why keep referring her to all these new doctors and specialists? They can't do anything. They don't know anything; they're doctors, not saints. Is this part of the plan? Is this the secret lesson taught in medical school, keep the patients and their families so busy we can't worry about the future? Maybe doctors and saints shared more in common than I thought.

I'm tired of eating pasta and desperate for pizza but there really isn't any good pizza around here. They say it's something in the water. The cheese would choke her anyhow. Cheese has become life threatening.

By April, when we sat to read, I knew she was only looking at the pages, not seeing them, not reading them. Our walks had betrayed her vision.

"Yes, Mom, there is a man walking on the sidewalk."

She whispered to me but I always tried to downplay her increasing paranoia. More pretending.

"No, Mom, I don't know why he's out walking alone in the dark, but lots of people walk in the evening in Florida. It's hot in the sunshine." I remember he did have an awkward pace and looked almost like he was bouncing, but it was just his backpack jostling.

She whispered to me, "He's got a backpack."

I smiled and reassured myself it's not so bad! See? I'm not alone, she's with me. Then she grabbed my elbow, stopped me to look at her. She added, very seriously,

narrowing her eyes with suspicion, “and a mustache that looks like the walrus in those Dr. Seuss books.”

We walk in silence the rest of the way home and I’m remembering my mother’s constant strength, her decisions were solid. She never gave into my persistence and it used to really piss me off. She never wavered. I had hated her for it. Am I hating her again for it now? Surley, if she weren’t so headstrong, this would be easier, wouldn’t it? She remembers Dr. Seuss books for God’s sake. Had she used up all her strength on me and Bobby? Do you get, like, an allotment and if you use it all up, you get Alzheimer’s?

I had to stop pretending about two things that night: I was alone. I needed help. I made flyers and hung them in churches. I googled home health care near me. I googled home health care, Florida. I called A Place for Mom. Everywhere I was waitlisted. Everywhere I got through to, anyway. Some places never even returned emails or messages. I was frustrated – scared, angry. Shouldn’t I be able to take care of my own mother, what kind of a daughter am I? What kind of a woman am I? Just six months ago I had wanted to have a baby on my own. I had thought I could have a baby all on my own, but the truth was I couldn’t even take care of this grown woman.

I called A Place for Mom again. It was advertised all over the place, like the addiction help centers, Penn Life Insurance, and all the other commercials old people watch on repeat.

I’m the kind of woman who wanted to have a baby on her own; I’m the kind of woman who wants to send away her own mother. Damned either way.

I start calling everywhere, again.

I get a hold of this one lady – it was about 4PM. Mom was sundowning hard – it had been one hell of a day with diapers and forgetting and raging. I was short on the phone – short on everything.

“Listen, the best I can do is put you on the wait-list. And we’ll call as soon as there’s an opening.”

“Wait-list? Are you serious? I’ve been calling for weeks!” I’m angry. My voice is angry.

“Listen, you know, we’re having a caregiving crisis, right?” she says, harshly. I deserve it I suppose but I think: Caregiving crisis my ass. I’m the one in crisis – my *mother*’s the one in crisis. How hard can it freaking be to find a goddamn pair of extra hands? Apparently, it’s hard to be nice when everything hurts.

A pair of extra hands is all I need. The thought settles with me. Bobby’s worthless, I think. No, I shouldn’t think my brother’s worthless. He’s just unreliable. Inconsistent. He’s not a pair of helping hands – if family won’t do it – I think... Maybe there is a caregiving crisis. This troubles me but I push it off, I have to start dinner.

Dinner – if you can call it that – has to be started while she’s napping. When she wakes, I tell her thank you for making dinner, it smells so good. Usually she goes along with it. Usually. Pretending is our sustenance.

I think about leaving her. A lot. I think someone will have to step in, they have to, legally, right? There’s laws I read about in India and Korea, and some other places that you can actually be fined if you don’t take care of your parent. I’m ashamed I looked it up. I’m ashamed I thought a fine might be worth it. I’m not sure what I am when I learn

Florida doesn't have these laws. I think, if I just leave there's going to be somebody who notices...*who notices what?* What has my mother done – where has my mother been? Does my mother have friends? Did she? How come I've never asked?

There has to be some kind of social worker who will check in. I could just call and say I can't do it. I have to get back to work, or I don't know how to do this, or some other...excuse.

I have to stay. There is no one but me.

I've been getting up earlier than she does most days. I'm tired all the time, but I feel a kind of hyper alertness I've never felt before and I can't sleep much after four or five. One morning when I go in to check on her, there's blood, dried, but kind of everywhere, like something's sprung a leak. She's still sleeping. I move in closer, quiet, so as not to wake her - it's on her face, streaked, like maybe she had blood on her hand and then rubbed it on her face, the blood is not from her face. I follow it down to her neckline, where some must have pooled but is dry now. I'm tracing the stains, splatters of blood, down her neckline to her shoulder, wondering what on earth could have caused this. It didn't look like a nosebleed. What am I freaking Matlock? I'm not cut out for this. She opens her eyes and I jump back, gasp, and then try to calm myself quickly. I don't want my alarm to alarm her.

“H-hi, Mom,” I venture, smiling, feeling like a sneak.

“Itchy, so itchy last night,” she says blinking her eyes, not quite awake, I'm not sure if she's seen or heard me. Her hands start up to her face and I notice she's wearing a ring. A ring I'd never seen before. It's pronged and jagged and caked in dried blood.

I clear my throat, regroup.

“Mom,” I say, “I’m hungry for some breakfast, how about you?”

She opens her eyes, sees me, I think. My heart is pounding.

“Oh, sure, I’ll make you some eggs,” she says, starting to move. Phew.

“Mom, are you okay?” I ask quietly.

“Yeah, why, don’t I look okay?”

“Maybe...Did you have a nosebleed?” Let her think she is in control, they had said.

“Oh,” she glances down at her hands, “I am a mess.”

“I’ll come help you clean up? I don’t mind waiting.”

“No, no, I’ll be okay. Probably just a skin tag or something. I’ll wash up and be right out.”

I stand at the bathroom door to listen-to make sure she only turns on the sink—I don’t want her to run the bath or take a shower. I hold my breath. Only the sink runs. I exhale.

“I’ll bring you a clean shirt, okay, Mom?”

“Oh, yes, that would be quite a help, thank you.”

When she comes into the kitchen, she’s cleaned well enough but I can see where the ring scraped her, her forearms and neck are scratched, and there’s a long line that’s leading below her collar, so she must have scratched her chest, too. I notice the ring is gone. I don’t know why I’m suddenly scared that she’s swallowed it. It’s not like she’s a

toddler or anything. But, then again, she actually kind of is. I watch her stand at the kitchen sink and look out the window. I wonder what she sees.

“How did you sleep last night, Mom?”

“Okay. I was very itchy. It must have been the heat or something,” she says as she reaches for a glass. She sees her hands and exclaims, “Oh! I’ve scratched myself all up!” like she’s seeing it all for the first time. Which, I guess, to her, she is. Not even ten minutes had passed since we left the bathroom.

I take a breath, try to sound surprised, too.

“Oh, no!” I say brightly. “Do they hurt? Should we put something on them?”

Her skin is so thin now, you can see her veins and I’m worried about infection.

“No, I’ll be ok. What time are we going to the...” she trails off.

“The doctor?”

“Right, the doctor...which one is it this time anyway?” Her voice is so clear, I feel like she gets it and I want to ask if it even matters, at this point? I want to joke about how the doctors don’t know what they’re doing, or about how insurance is a racket, and I’m thinking all this and realizing it’s not exactly funny but I’m trying for something quippy, and she turns around, and I open my mouth and she asks, “What are we doing today? Are we going to soccer practice or some other thing for Bobby?”

I swallow the words I was ready to say.

“Want to check the calendar, Mom?” my voice cracks, I’m someplace between fury and terror but some saint must have intervened.

“I’m pretty sure you wrote it down,” I say. Empower her, they had said.

She looks left to the refrigerator door, then back to the right at the pantry. I can tell she's deciding which way to go. I stay quiet. Eventually, she shuffles to the refrigerator and gets the eggs. Another close call, I think to myself as I sneak into the bathroom to look for the ring. It's on the sink, yellow gold with a huge purple amethyst in its prongs. It looks gaudy. I've never seen it before, and I pocket it before returning to the kitchen.

"Mom," I say as I get back to the kitchen. "Want me to check the calendar while you make the eggs?" She's humming and I can't tell if she's heard. Resigned, I wander over to the pantry. "It's not a doctor today, Mom," I say as I read the calendar, and this time I know she doesn't hear me.

A "consultation" is written on the calendar in black ink. I'm so nervous about this person coming to the house to take care of my mother. It's not a doctor or a nurse, just a person I'm supposed to interview to see if she "fits the needs of our family." I chide myself as I open the door to meet who was sent to do something I ought to be able to do myself.

Martha, a large woman with a thick accent from Barbados, turns out to fit perfectly. She moves in Mondays through Thursdays. She was soft in all the ways my mother was hard, in all the ways I was hard. She had affectionate fingers and soft hands that helped my mother's angular body in and out of the bath, up and down off of the toilet, in and out of her sweaters. I moved into my mom's room on a set up cot, and Martha slept in my old room. She helped to keep things tidy. She took intimate care of my mother, I asked no questions. I didn't want to know answers about anything.

\*\*\*

One night at the round formica table, my mother blurted out to Martha and I, almost harshly, that she didn't want to keep anything. Her deliberate tone and the strength of her voice captured both of us. She's breathy, yet clear. Determined.

Martha and I sat delicately at the table. I swallowed hard.

"What do you mean, Mom?" I ask, trying to sound casual, trying to hide my confusion.

"Mom, you're going to want to keep some things to take with her when you move into Bobby's later this summer," I say to her. "Even if you don't need them now, you'll want some stuff from here later on, right?"

We talk about her moving to Bobby's almost every night so it becomes routine for all of us, and isn't a shock to her. Over the weekends, I had been packing up little by little, and on Mondays, when Martha's back, she dusts through whatever shelf or corner I've emptied out and finishes whatever task has been interrupted and left incomplete. I glance around the room and see the boxes lining the walls in the living room, revealing only a carpeted path between rooms. We could be in an episode of Hoarders. I see the mess, and try to explain.

"Mom, it just looks sloppy now because I'm a little disorganized, and I'm packing slowly, but we're packing it so you can take it with you, to Bobby's"

"It's all crap," she replies. "Everything in the house, everything in anyone's house, is all crap. Sorry, Martha, for the language," she interrupted herself and Martha and I looked at each other. My mother hadn't recognized her at breakfast that morning.

I look around and wonder if it is all crap. The battery chargers, the cords, the wireless speakers-it is all crap waiting to be replaced-bound to be replaced by the next. Best. Thing. The next best pig.

“Who needs all these plates? Who needs so many towels?” She was waving toward the hall closet.

“Just get rid of it all,” she said, shaking her head. “Except for the books,” she said, scaring me, pointing her orange jello-filled spoon almost into me.

“Start with them,” my mother told us that thundering afternoon, pointing at the bookshelves near the window, “start with the books, the old ones. Pack them in good boxes, pack the books in good, strong boxes.” It was 4:30. You can set your clock by the summer storms. I felt struck. And I couldn’t stop thinking that my mother would soon be packed in a box, too.

“They’re antiques,” she said. “They’re the most expensive thing in this house. And the world needs books. I know you think you can learn all you want from that stupid computer screen, but one day it won’t be there. The damn thing’ll break or explode. They’re not gonna last, you take my word. But the books will. The words will. Trust me. You’ll need the words.”

“Ha!” she exclaimed, “one last word from your old mother! Who’s got the last word?” she giggled, “I do!” Then she saw her spoon mid air and her eyes glazed over, lost again in her own mind.

The shock of her lucid orders passed, and Martha and I quickly became accustomed to Mom’s new habit of repeating “words” and “books,” an occasional

“volumes” peppered in. All of it under her breath, reminding me she had some secret with someone who wasn’t me, or Martha, or anyone we knew. She stayed mostly in bed after that, and Martha and I did everything we could think of to keep her comfortable.

I was lonely for her. It was ridiculous, I told myself, she was here, with me, how could I be lonely for her? I think I was lonely for who she had been, for who she had been to me, to herself, to this small, sad but legitimate family. Who had she been to herself? It was like a delayed explosion of thought: surely my mother had friends I think again. Or had had friends? Or had she? Who misses you when you have no friends? Did my mom sacrifice friendships for me and Bobby? How come I never asked these questions before now? I realize I don’t have any friends. My selfishness is about as stifling as my sadness.

That Friday, after I was in bed, I wake to her gasping. I am reluctant to go in and roll my eyes. I was hoping to actually sleep. But I get up and go to her.

“The, th-” I get as close to the bed as I can, on my knees, to see her eyes, leaning just my elbow so as to not bend her mattress too much and slide the straw along her bottom lip slowly, slowly left to right, until her top lip closes over its top. I lick my lips and say, “Small sip, Mommy, small sip. Swallow,” I remind her.

She sips and as she does I realize I’m grateful – so fucking selfishly grateful that I didn’t have to lift her head, drain her nostrils, clean her puke or her shit. For once, just a simple sip, she remembered how to swallow. She’s trying again. Her eyes grab me.

I put the glass down on the coaster to avoid a water stain on the cheap plywood tray table. I inhale through my nostrils slowly, as if I can create calm by imitating it. It’s

all so stupid, this stuff, it *is* all crap. It is so stupid how we take care of it so much: I'm taking more care of a tray table than of myself. Than of my mother. My mother had been right. Again.

“Th-” she says.

“The Bibles, Mommy?” I know this is what she will say, but I think she likes to tell me things, so I work to sound like I'm asking. She nods.

“And the poetry, too, right?” I feel so soft, for some reason, proud. Like I got the gold star for remembering what my sick mother's been talking about for the past three weeks. I am absurd. I have never outgrown wanting my mother's approval.

Her father's leather bound books, I remembered her saying, were the only good things he ever gave her. She said they were her most prized possession and that she didn't care about anything in the house except those books. She asked me to promise to keep them though I have no interest in them. I'm an accountant. I read numbers, not books. But I promised. Your sick mother asks for a promise, you give it to her.

She smiles, her cracked lips creating a crevice in her face, dry and sad, and all of a sudden I can't stop thinking that my mother is going to die. I'm terrified. My mother is going to die, my mother is going to die, my heart is pounding loud in my ears, and the fact hits me as if it's the first time it ever crossed my mind. My mouth goes dry and I try to swallow, to speak, to do anything, and then, she's gone.

She's gone.

She's dead.

Just like that.

Like a fuse blown. No question. No delay. I know it, I can see it and I can feel it. Suddenly *I* can't remember how to swallow, or how to breathe.

How did that just happen, so fast and sure? Is there anything else so certain? It is jarring, life in a breath, gone, out in a flash, but she's still warm, her hands still here, in mine, her throat just tensed from swallowing, the last thing she remembered to do. Cheeks and hair and nails, skin and softness, solid here but *she's* not here. She's been gone a long time, I think, but this gone is surreal and nightmarish. I go to the bathroom and vomit.

When I have the stomach to go back to her room, I look up at the lamp on the table and see her water glass. I can't believe they want to ban straws. We can't cure a disease that makes people forget to swallow but we're going to ban straws.

I've got to plan a funeral. Without straws.

It's time to call Bob. He says the soonest he can be here is tomorrow, and I'm annoyed at his dismissal, but, I guess, at this point, there's no rush. It's not like I can call him again in an hour and say, "Come quick! She's gone from Moderately Severely Dead to Very Severely Dead!" Death has no degrees.

Here I am, making it about me, again. I guess I'm just not so good at being selfless.

Did she not tell me? Was I not listening? Had I been that good at pretending? Am I simply not made to be a caregiver?

I call Martha. She comes right away and while I'm pacing around from the hallway to the kitchen, not sure how to function, she makes some calls. Then, she tells me

who to call, helps me talk to them. Martha makes lists of questions I should ask.

Arrangements are done and someone will be here within the hour to help us. I appreciate the expediency, but I think I may need more help than that. She is as sure as I am shaken.

Martha has direction and I am lost.

There is a flurry of people in and out of the house in the next three hours, more traffic than there had been all year. There were paramedics, a police officer, some people Martha just spoke to quietly, as if sharing some kind of sacred secret, and then they left as quickly as they came. Eventually, I tell Martha go, too, it was her weekend. Anyway, her job was just terminated, right? I stifle a snort at my own sick thought and rub my throbbing temples.

I fall asleep on the couch but wake early Saturday morning, before sunrise. I get up, have a sip of water in the kitchen, use the bathroom, glance into Martha's empty room and I realize it's the first time I've ever been alone in this house. It was my house, but she was always here. She wasn't a recluse or anything, but if I was here, she was here with me. I feel queasy again but remember: I've got to take care of the books. To keep my gold star.

I've got to try to figure it all out. I'm lonelier than I ever thought possible. Bob will be here by lunchtime, if not before, and he'll have no patience for me. He was born with a strength for disposal and a disgust of sentimentality. I'm cold for the first time in this horrible, hot, never ending summer. I'm starting to feel angry again, more tense, robbed somehow of something I can't determine.

I pack up the Bibles first. Somehow it's right to start with the Bibles. There seems to be one on every freaking shelf in the TV room: an NIV, an illustrated one, a Catholic one, a ridiculous King James Version I don't think anyone's ever read, the one still wrapped in plastic that was to record a family tree. It was supposed to be mine if I ever got married. I take a deep breath. What would my one-sided family tree have looked like anyway? Mom, child, no dad. I guess I never found my winning pig.

Do people even make family trees anymore, I wonder, turning it over in my hands. It's clean enough, just a small tear in the plastic, the white binding never cracked. Is there a way to salvage it? I shove it in the box quickly; I can't stand the thought of keeping the concrete evidence of what I never had. It goes next to a Student Bible someone must have had from college, but I have no idea who, Mom probably picked it up at a thrift shop. Then The Book of Mormon. Does that count? I think it's a Bible? I wonder where we got it -- soft navy blue cover with embossed gold lettering. Baby's First Prayer book. They are all so dusty. I throw the concordances in the box, too.

On to the poetry. Two or three of them are Lord Alfred Tennyson, one Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one John Greenleaf Whittier--do all poets have three names? I'm suddenly so annoyed, I mean -- is their craft not intimidating enough that readers have to know three names? There's E.A. Robinson, W. H. Auden and e.e. cummings -- at least these assholes had some sense and used abbreviations. I find Rudyard Kipling, Shelley, a *Pocketbook of Verse*, Bartlett's quotations and close up, they all look like they are going to fall apart. The leather is cracked, dull and dry, some of the covers are shredded and you can see the pages' stitches; I wonder if they can be refurbished or...polished?

Something? Do you take them to a shoe maker? If people aren't even making family trees anymore, is anyone still repairing books?

"Hey, Mom?" I call out, and I get up to walk down the hall to her room, wiping the book on my pants. I take a breath in the doorway to ask her, and I'm hoping she'll laugh at the image of an antique poetry book getting a shoe-shine in the train station and once I'm in her room, I remember.

She's not there.

She's not there because she's dead.

My mother is dead and I forgot she was dead. I forgot she was gone -- not even a body to speak to. I didn't realize you could do that. I mean, I read that you do, that people do, that they dial the phone and then realize there won't ever be an answer, but I didn't think I would forget. At least, not so soon. Is there an official timeline on when you forget someone?

I'm looking at her bed, the sunlight is streaming in and the striped, old, ugly orange and yellow bedspread seems thinner even than it was before, pressed flat to the pillows. I can't even remember who made the bed after she left-after she was removed. After her body had been removed. Had I done it? It was probably Martha. I reach down and touch it, just gliding my fingertips along its surface, where its maker had used red and green thread in order to give it a pattern. I always hated that blanket. It was scratchy and too thin. I can't believe it ever could have passed for being called a blanket; it was a blanket wannabe, an upholsterer's reject, with stitches for decoration and stripes as repugnant as the seventies. Somebody who was colorblind or high must have made it.

How could she have slept with something so ugly, with so little to comfort her? I tear the blanket off the bed and ball it up and throw it as hard as I can against the wall, but it doesn't make me feel any better.

I sit down on her newly empty, newly naked bed, and I am finally ready to cry for the first time after her death. Surely I must weep for my mother? People cry when someone dies. It's normal, it's something to do-- a job to get over with and just after I've set my mind to it, a piece of paper falls from the pages. It's a poem I wrote, after we bought that damn dishwasher. I didn't know she had it or how had she even gotten it? It's angsty and bad, but Bob arrives, more quickly than my tears.

I get up to meet him at the door. The heat pours into the entryway, the sunbeams revealing endless, tireless specs of dust in the air surrounding us.

"Hey, Bobby," I say, warm and slow, emotions caught in my throat. Sometimes, almost always actually, I can't stand him. He's always been selfish and lazy, yet he's got the family. He won that jackpot without even trying. But he is my little brother and his mommy is dead. Our mother is dead.

"Hey," he says exhaling, bored or tired, but definitely dismissive. "I brought the truck. What needs to be loaded up?"

Business as usual.

"Start with those boxes," I swallow, pointing. With a single sentence I break my promise. My star has fallen. I'm numb. There is nothing left to feel.

I kind of fall into the couch, my back and knees aching, feeling grimey, and watch him take away the Bibles filled with rules and afterlives, and the poetry books filled with

pictures of fiction. The boxes filled with stories that won't be passed along to future generations are gone.

Three swift trips and the boxes are gone. Bobby doesn't even break a sweat.

The pretending is over. I don't want to remember any of it anyway.

It's not dramatic, I tell myself; I'm simply warm and sore, and far, far from happy.

Martha surprises me that afternoon for a visit. She says she told me she was coming, that I must have forgotten. I go down a rabbit hole about my future. About my genes. About my choices. About myself.

"Listen," she says, snapping me back. She's standing in front of me, in blue and gold. She asks me what about the funeral.

### Chapter 3: A Seedling

I never asked my mother if she wanted a wake. I never asked if she wanted anything. Everyone else seems to have a wake. So I plan one, and I learn that you have to also plan a burial or a cremation, and a reception. I mean a repast. Some re-word that doesn't quite mean do again. The people at the place are very helpful. Thank God they know what they're doing. They ask questions I don't have any answers for, and before I can stammer out something idiotic and angry, they offer a suggestion, a kind of guidance I didn't know I needed, didn't think I'd ever need. Did I really just think she wasn't going to die? How is it so easy to see right through the obvious, to be so locked in the now that we assure ourselves there won't be a future?

They say I have to write an obituary. At this I blanch. They provide an outline, like one of those sentence starter worksheets they give you at school. All I have to do is fill in the blanks.

They tell me to pick a coffin. I saw some reality show once where some woman made her daughter take her coffin shopping as a birthday present. They suggest a popular, but affordable model. I say yes.

They ask about a plot, if the family has one, perhaps? Maybe she'd like to be laid to rest where she can be surrounded by loved ones? My mouth is dry as I wonder: was my mother ever surrounded by loved ones? Did I love her? Did Bobby?

They suggest a break, tell me where the bathroom is, and I follow their directions like a child.

I tell them about the church we went to when I was little. They say they have a relationship with them and they can call right away. They're sure something reasonable can be arranged, because they've worked together so frequently in the past. They will make the calls and let me know about everything tomorrow, but to please call back if I have any questions at any time. They know this is a lot to deal with, and they know this is a time of great difficulty, and they want to respect my wishes and needs and they want to honor my mother and, they say their job is to help, so please let them know if there's anything, anything more that I need or want and they will do their best to make it happen. It's their pleasure to be of service. They walk me to the door. They remind me that they know that this is a difficult time, that they've done this for many families, that I am not alone.

And then, I am alone.

I drink the next few days away. I wake up, have an idea that I should do something, create an ambition, set an intention, make a vision board, something, anything to force myself out of bed. But each day, around 5AM, before the sun has begun its day job cooking the earth, I have a screwdriver with breakfast. I scramble eggs, cook them soft, like Mom liked. I'm weepy by lunch, I wash the egg pan, reward myself with a glass of wine, and am asleep in the chair in front of the television before the early bird specials begin.

\*\*\*

I have to get my shit together. It's showtime, I think to myself. I'm psycho, I think as I wander through the kitchen, collecting empty bottles and eggshells. The mantra morphs quickly to the Beck song. *I'm a psycho baby, so why don't ya kill me...*

After the shower I dress. I'm wobbly and dehydrated, still so tipsy from the night (nights) before that I can't stomach anything. I'm anxious. I'm sweating. It'll be over soon, and I'll be back home-back here—before I know it.

They greet me at the door, suggest I spend some time alone before the service begins. They ask if there's anyone else coming. I doubt if anyone will come, I think, but I simply shake my head and look down. They hand me a cup of water. I'm not looking forward to going into this room. I'm not looking forward to seeing her body in its box. I'm not looking forward to pretending like I have something to say, or something to feel. Then the doors open. *And the beat goes on* begins to loop through my head.

There are some neighbors who come, who I pretend I'm happy to see. There's a couple who said they knew my mom was sick, but gosh they just had no idea how sick. Bobby shows up, late as usual, but he stands next to me.

“You look nice,” I muster.

“Yeah, you too.” He pulls out a flask. “Want some?” I say no and walk to get some coffee. They say they just made a fresh pot, and they will bring me a cup. I go back without what I was looking for.

\*\*\*

It feels like time has slowed down. As if everything is in slow motion, morphed, warped, fuzzy. It feels like I've spent days standing in front of this box. I'm standing

there, hot again, alone as always and of course Bobby's yucking it up with all these people I've never seen before. Maybe they were friends of his? The obituary that ran on the website was very neutral, and I didn't call anyone – he must have taken the time to call them himself. I called the doctor's office, the police, the funeral director...*he* called friends. My stomach lurches, not happy to have had nothing but coffee all morning.

I can't wait for this to be over.

One hour left.

One hour left and this will all finally be over. Sell the house, get the fuck out of Florida, and never look back. I'm done. My job is done – I took care of my mother like a good daughter should and I'm out.

I shoot a dirty look at Bobby, not that he'd notice, but I was the good daughter, doing what is expected, and he's the one who has company? I took care of her and he gets a reward? Who is taking care of me? Why must all care fall to the women?

I think about Martha. She says her sister does the same thing as she does. Maybe they're both just good at it? Maybe caregiving just comes naturally to people from Barbados? Is it– could it be *genetic*? Not just society? I sigh. Who knows? Who cares?

Fifty-five minutes left. God I have a headache.

“Excuse me,” I interrupt the Brother Bobby show, “I'll be right back. I'm getting some water. You want some?” I offer. Why did I offer to get a grown man water? I walk away pretending I don't hear his answer. I'm done taking care of him. Of people, of anyone.

At the water cooler, I hear the door open, a whoosh of humid comes in. It's suddenly loud—probably more people for Bobby. I roll my eyes and curse under my breath, but when I turn around, it's Martha. And Martha's sister. And — I count — four other women.

They are loud, speaking Bajan. Martha's arms are around me. I spill the water on my pants. My jaw remains dropped though all of their hugging. I follow them in. No—it's more like they usher me in. There are soft sounds between them, whispers, as they pass the coffin. None of them seem phased by seeing a dead body. I notice this because Bobby said his kids couldn't come because they'd be traumatized. These women see death every day. What does that do to a person?

These women, I think, are *never* done. Martha's hugging me again. If I could just breathe in her perfume of figs and flowers all the time, I'd be okay. They exchange glances and make some tsk-ing sounds as they pass my brother, only Martha extends a hand, saying "Sorry for your loss." They are gone as quickly as they came.

I'm finally home. Well, in her home. What was my home. Our home. There is no we anymore. I've been surrounded by people all afternoon, every afternoon for months now, and now I'm alone. *Alone* alone. As I undress for bed, I catch a whiff of Martha—a trace of her perfume on my sweater, and burst into tears. I crumble into sobs, my gut bends me in half, there's drool escaping down my chin, snot on my hands making everything sticky and shiny and blurry. I sink to squat on the floor. Outside, it starts to rain.

The next day, Bob's back and this time he brought one of his kids. I order pizza. I pretend to be interested in whatever they're talking about, but all I can think about is the boxes I still have to clean up and the gross Florida pizza. Bob stands up, leaves his paper plate and greasy napkin on the table.

"Um, did you forget where the garbage is?" I ask, annoyed, the joke turning sour as soon as it escapes my lips. Forgetfulness is not a joke.

When I walk them out, I notice the boxes still in Bobby's truck. It's been a freaking week and he *still* hasn't taken care of them and that's typical, but I lose my shit. In a flight of fury I tell him to put the boxes back in the house.

"What? Why?" he asks, almost with disgust.

"I think I left something in one of them," I lie, "Mom said something about an envelope and I want to look for it."

"Mom said all kinds of crazy shit-"

"I don't care!" I yell at him. I stomp my foot, ridiculously. "Just put them back in the house!" I snap, tired of him questioning me. He is startled at my temper. He brings them into the house in silence. He leaves without saying goodbye.

I take out the bottle of whiskey that had been hiding under the sink. My mom wasn't a big drinker, and Bobby had that stint in high school where he drank anything he could get his hands on, and I guess my mom thought under the sink was a good hiding space. God knows how old it is. Does it still have kick? I mean it's like medicine, less effective after a year or so, but still good? Or—wait—isn't liquor supposed to age well anyway?

I set the green glass bottle on the counter next to the sink. I glance up, out the window looking for...I don't know what. The grass in the yard is brown. There's no breeze. There's no air. I open the cabinet to find a glass, but there isn't one. I've gotten rid of them. I suppose that was rash, but it was easy. Or, easier than hanging on to the "crap" we had been calling everything for months. She must have had twenty glasses. I don't even think she knew twenty people. Twenty glasses and I didn't think to keep one.

I have a stack of paper plates, napkins, and catsup packets. No cups. No glasses. Nothing to hold anything in. Nothing to hold.

I could empty a bottle of water down the sink and then? What? Fill it with whiskey? Fucking idiot. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and leave the kitchen. Whiskey's not going to help me tonight.

I sit to look at the Bibles again. I realize they're all the same but they're all different. How is it Mary makes the cut in every version? Wasn't she just some poor girl with bad luck? I mean she basically became invisible after she had that baby. I wonder if she ever had friends. I wonder why the Bible repeats itself. Like it's a parent, yelling at children who don't listen.

I'm thinking about this and the doctors. All the specialists: they all say the same thing with different semantics, different nuances. And, like the Bibles I wonder, which one is right? Something here must be important or else why repeat it? What message am I not getting? What haven't I heard?

Eat right?

Check.

Maintain weight?

Check.

Muscle mass?

Check.

Sleeping well?

Check.

Brain training?

Check.

Vitamins, physicals and doctors, oh my? Check, check, and fucking check— yes— what’s the point if you end up sick anyway? If your brain and its memories rot inside your skull, what’s the fucking point?

The people at the funeral home told me about a grief group that meets in the basement of the church around the block. Without knowing what or why, I decide to go. We’re seated in a circle like a goddamn AA meeting. It’s my turn to speak. I start, guilt on my tongue.

“When my mom first got sick, I was annoyed. *Annoyed*. I wasn’t angry or sad or scared, I was *annoyed*. Like when I was thirteen and I had to stay home and watch my baby brother. Eye rolls and everything. I kept thinking, I shouldn’t have to do this, this shouldn’t be my problem. Why are we like this?”

“Well,” he starts, “we’re not all like this. There are people who actually enjoy taking care of others. But I think you’re missing the point.”

*What? This mother fucker* I think to myself. What does the group leader of the free grief group therapy know anyway? I just admitted to a room full of strangers that I'm an asshole, and *you* tell *me* I'm missing the point. You get what you pay for I guess. I must have made a face, because he started up again quickly.

"I think we have to think about a couple of different things. Taking care of someone who's sick is hard work. And it's not rewarding like, say, taking care of a baby or a pet. Taking care of someone who's sick means you've got a twenty-four-seven date with death. You can't not see that the person you love is dying. And...that, by itself is, as you said, annoying, and it disrupts your entire life—the thing you planned, the thing you thought you had control over is thrown in your face. No one likes knowing they're not in control, especially of themselves."

I hated this man. Someone else piped up with some kind of yeah-you're right bit and I left to use the bathroom. I couldn't get his words out of my head. And I couldn't stop thinking about Martha. I couldn't stop thinking about how many other sick people she's helped, how many 24/7 dates with death she's had. I remember that lady saying we were in a care-giving crisis. What the fuck are we doing about that?

When I get back to the group, it's over and it's that coffee or water time where you're supposed to talk about stuff other than grief. Some guy comes up to me and says he agrees with me, he was annoyed, too.

He says, "Taking care of my wife was a huge inconvenience—I never signed up for that. I signed up for a wife, a partner, not someone sick."

I want to say “Guess you didn’t really buy into that whole ‘in sickness and in health’ bit, then?” But instead I don’t say anything. I really don’t care about this guy or what he’s saying to me. There’s that word again, care. It seems I have my own personal care-giving crisis. He keeps talking anyway.

“How long has she been gone?”

“*Gone*” he asks, like she’s gone on a fucking vacation, but it makes me realize: I don’t know what day it is. How long *has* she been gone? A week? Two? A month? Aren’t I supposed to remember that? Don’t people keep track of how long ago someone died? It’s all over Facebook...a year to the day so and so left us all these people write under pictures.

“About three weeks,” I mumble. My mouth is dry.

“Wow. That’s still really fresh then, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so...” I think fresh is a stupid word to describe death. My mother was not a fish. I start to look around the room, trying to signal I was interested in leaving, not interested in talking.

He says, “I don’t know how you feel about it or anything, but I went to one-on-one counseling. It helped way more than this group.”

“Thanks,” I say. He finally gets the clue as I start to take out my car keys.

“Right, well, see you round,” he says.

\*\*\*

Back at the house I go into the kitchen to check my list of what’s left to be done. I don’t feel like doing anything. I don’t *feel*. There’s got to be more than just feeling numb

for the rest of my life. There I go again, so freaking dramatic. The rest of my life...what am I doing with the rest of my life?

Suddenly I'm so nervous. I keep thinking it in my head, like that Poe guy wrote...nervous...very nervous runs on repeat through my thoughts. I do not however, have a dead guy in the floorboards. That is good, I suppose.

Maybe I should call someone. But I don't have anyone to call. No one from work ever called. As soon as I started taking care of my mother it was like I disappeared, like I was erased from the rest of the world. Is that what taking care of someone does to you? Erase you?

Is this what it was like for my mom, after she had us? Do moms get erased once they become moms? I think they might. I look around the now mostly empty house with its mostly bare walls and realize I never saw pictures of my mom. My mother was invisible even when she was alive.

Is it wrong to call Martha? Is it, like, creepy? How do you know when you can't contact someone anymore, how do you know when a break up is final? Is Martha dead to me, too, now? It doesn't seem fair to have two losses, but Matha's not dead...my head is hurting. I'm breathing too quickly.

I start to chew on my fingers as I wander into the living room.

I can't put words to these feelings. Maybe I should see a doctor. Maybe my brain is shutting down too. Maybe I have early onset? Prevention is key they say in all the commercials.

Can I be overwhelmed and empty all at the same time? Is this a thing?

I sit to check my email on my phone, and according to my out of office automatic reply I'm supposed to be in the office again in a week. Six months. Poof. Gone like that. Like my mom.

Do I have to go back, I wonder? What if I don't? I never followed the get married and babied trajectory, what if I don't follow this one, and I don't go back? The house is paid off. The cost of living is low. I have some savings. But what exactly am I going to do if I stay here? Bobby and his kids don't care about me, besides, they make me nuts. I'm alone here. Then I remember: I'm alone *there*. Anywhere I go I'm alone. Is this when people decide to get a pet?

\*\*\*

I try to remember our father sometimes. All I know about him is that she hates him, though she never quite said that. Her silence told us that much. I think back to the scar I saw when I first had to help her bathe. It had jolted me when I saw her elbow and the scar. Pictures I couldn't make sense of popped into my mind. Drinking. Loud talking. Something about sobriety. Hitting.

“Did daddy hit you?” I had asked.

“Only when sober,” she said.

I was extra careful with her elbow that night, and I couldn't stop staring at the scar. I memorized its puffy, jagged shape. It must not have been a deep cut, I realized and I racked my brain all that night about how it could have gotten there, how long it had been there.

That night I dream. My mother is being dragged, her elbow covering her face as something, someone, much larger pulls her across the room, the carpet is orange, the whole dream sepia tinted.

“Come out children, it’s safe now,” the good witch says. *The Wizard of Oz* is loud on the television. My father is not under the house, but he’s not in it either.

When I woke, I had been breathless, back from time and space. I decide maybe I do need that one on one counseling thing.

\*\*\*

He invites me into his office, a tiny little thing that must have been someone’s room before the whole building had been converted into business space. He asks me why I’m there. I explain I’d been taking care of my mother for the past few months, and that she died.

“I just kind of feel...unsettled? Unresolved? Like I don’t have any answers for any questions, but I don’t even know what the questions are? I don’t know what I’m doing, or what’s next that has to be done. I feel like...like I’m crazy. Like nothing I think makes any sense. I’m kind of confused all the time, but there’s nothing really to be confused about, I feel everything and nothing all at the same time. Does that make any sense?” I already regret this decision. Taking the advice of a stranger, freaking idiot, I think to myself. Maybe I should take a vow of silence and never speak to anyone ever again.

“Decision fatigue,” he calls it. “Post Traumatic Care Giving.”

I don’t know if I buy this idea of being traumatized by taking care of my mother.

“You had no time to adjust, no time to prepare. You were just thrust into this role that you’d never done before. Add on top of that grief, and that’s why you’re feeling this way.”

“Feel what way? I don’t even know what I feel. I’m nervous all the time, I keep having these bad dreams, and everything seems to hurt.”

“Tell me about the dreams.”

I frown. Dreams are so hard to explain and I thought the whole dream analysis crap was debunked because Freud was a junkie, but I try. I tell him about *The Wizard of Oz* one. We’re both silent for a minute. And suddenly, I’m angry. Again.

“How the fuck could I have not known? How did she put up with this? Why? Surely she could have done better, tried harder— at least have gotten out of the marriage? And another thing that makes sense to me: who gets sober and then violent? I thought it was always the other way around? Leave it to my family to be freaking backwards,” I say, trying to be funny, but he doesn’t bite.

“Oh, and then listen to this ridiculous one—it’s me and Bobby” I can’t stop talking, I’m a real life motor mouth, “but he’s little and I’m the grown up. There’s a shopping cart I have to empty, and I have to hurry because people are coming over. So I’m rushing to find the shopping cart in the living room and then I realize it’s in the bedroom and someone else had already emptied it. And I felt relieved that someone had done that for me. And then there was something about who paid for the groceries. And I don’t really know anything else... So, since you asked about dreams, you tell me: why was there a shopping cart in my house?”

“Was it your house or your mother’s?”

“I don’t know...it was my house, but I’d never seen it before.”

“How did you feel when you woke up?”

“Confused.”

“You said everything hurts, can you tell me about that?”

“I don’t know, I’m sore and achy, like all the time.”

“Does it wake you up?”

“No,” I say, realizing for the first time it’s only when I’m awake. I suppose I should be grateful for that.

“Good,” he says.

I don’t know if this counseling gig is for me.

“I’m wondering what you’re doing to take care of yourself. You said in the dream someone took care of the groceries for you. You’ve been taking care of a lot—what are you doing to take care of yourself?”

Drinking, I think, but instead I say, “I don’t know. I just yesterday was thinking maybe I should quit my job. I don’t know if that counts as self-care...”

“Interesting, what would you do? I know you said you’re not close to your brother— is there other family? Do you have some friends?”

“No.”

“Well then, why stay?”

“What, you don’t want me here? My money’s as good as anyone else’s doc,” I say pretending to be offended.

“You know that’s not what I mean,” he says, annoyed.

“Anywhere I go I’d be alone. So the where doesn’t really matter. And I’m already here so...why not just stay?” I shrug.

I tell him I’ll be back next week, but I leave feeling as awful as when I walked in.

I start thinking about this “self-care” idea...am I supposed to take bubble baths or light candles, eat chocolate or shop for new shoes? These are all the things they talk about on the news, the anchor person so excited and bubbly, talking about a new herb or a new scent, some kind of loofah or scrub...some other thing to buy. It all seems so fake to me, so shallow, so superficial.

I didn’t give my mother bubble baths, or take her shopping when I took care of her. I washed her sheets after she soiled them, made sure she ate, tricked her into taking sips of water so she didn’t get dehydrated, packed boxes behind her back, and ran her all over the county to specialists who never had answers.

Journaling? Is that one of the other things they suggest? I snort audibly when I picture myself writing in a journal on some park bench, looking out onto a...what? Patch of concrete, yellowed grass? Swamp lands? I could go to a beach, I suppose, which would be a prettier picture, but I hate the beach. I’ve always hated the beach.

“Self-care,” I grumble under my breath, “It’s all just crap.”

## Chapter 4: A Bloom

Once I'm at home, I get a bottle of water from the fridge in the kitchen. I head back out to the living room, and see the boxes of books. I wonder if maybe I've gotten my gold star back, by asking Bobby to bring the books back. I shouldn't have told him to take them in the first place. What was I thinking?

Maybe there's a poem about a gold star? Probably there are lots of them I think. Despite the cold water I just downed, my mouth is dry again. I take the lid off the box. Those damned three named poets are there again. I sit on the floor, and reach in and grab a book. A 'volume' as she had called them. As I turn it over in my hand, there's clearly a page marked, the binding near broken, that she must have revisited over and over again. It's not highlighted, but the page is more yellowed than the others. I read:

### The More Loving One

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well  
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,  
But on earth indifference is the least  
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn  
With a passion for us we could not return?  
If equal affection cannot be,  
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am  
Of stars that do not give a damn,  
I cannot, now I see them, say  
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,  
I should learn to look at an empty sky  
And feel its total dark sublime  
Though this might take me a little time.

*Though this might take me a little time*, I re-read it over and over again. I put it in the box, go to the kitchen, and take a swig right out of the whiskey bottle.

The next morning I read the poem again. “The more loving one.” I stop at just the title. That was her, certainly it was her, and after her, Martha. Where am I on that scale? I thumb through the pages of the book, carefully, no other page seems to be as marked as this one. I wonder what led her to find this poem. Had she liked poetry? I feverishly begin to flip through each book, like I was looking for her to be there, to be hidden in the pages. I’m nervous again– and I don’t know if I’m more nervous about finding something or finding nothing.

I decide to take a walk. Not today, Decision Fatigue, I think as I grab a cap and slip into sneakers.

This is the first time I’m doing this walk alone, without my mother. I feel a weight which is not weight, like I’ve broken a rule and I’m sneaking out without her, like I’ve left her home alone, like I’ve finally abandoned her and also, I feel...somehow...lighter, which is ridiculous. It wasn’t as if I was carrying my mother, but then I think that yeah, maybe I was. I don’t have anyone to carry anymore. I walk slowly, not really wanting to go back home. Maybe I should take myself to the movies I think. Maybe I should take myself for a drive. Instead I pick up a box of wine and go home to watch the Saturday night movie on Channel 13. I think my mom is the only person left on the planet with cable.

I order in some Chinese food, and settle in on the lone chair in front of the lone tv. As I'm munching and waiting for Reels to start, I reach into the box of poetry again. This time I find a poem about a rain coat.

Banal topic for a poem I think.

But it's not about a rain coat. It's about a mom.

...I saw a mom take her raincoat off  
and give it to her young daughter when  
a storm took over the afternoon. My god,  
I thought, my whole life I've been under her  
raincoat thinking it was somehow a marvel  
that I never got wet.

My cheeks are wet now. Her raincoat isn't here for me anymore.

*Forbidden Planet* comes on and I feel so badly for this girl Altaira. She has no mother. She's living alone on a planet surrounded by men. Even her steel robot named Robbie is a man. Robbie takes care of her, kind of like a mother, but no he's no rain coat to be under. I'm crying at a goddamn sci-fi movie from 1956.

\*\*\*

"Triggers," he calls them. "After experiencing trauma and grief, emotions are volatile, constantly changing, and anything could trigger an emotional response. It seems like yours was one of empathy. Some people even get angry. It's not something you can predict, but you can try to be prepared by being aware of yourself."

"I'm not really buying this trauma thing. People see people die everyday and it's not tr--"

“Are you the trained psychologist here? Everything you're saying adds up to the symptoms of PTCG– the dreams, the ‘what now’ kind of thoughts about leaving your job, right down to the aches and pains.”

“Ok then. Cure me,” I challenge.

“You know it’s not like that. You sure can be difficult sometimes–is this how you were with your mother?”

“I mean, we were both always kind of cynical, maybe distrustful? Pragmatic, maybe?”

“Being cynical can protect you.”

“From what?”

“From the real feelings? Fear, shame, regret,” he lists them all slowly as if they’re special, separate things.

“What do I have to be ashamed about?” I ask, defensively.

But I am. I know I am. Deep down I’m ashamed. He starts talking about something called “survivor’s guilt” and I hear him talking, but I’m not listening. I say you’re right and ok, and thanks and see you next week, and head to the parking garage.

I get into the car, and before I can even start the ignition, it hits me. I look at myself in the rearview mirror. Deep, deep down in the abyss of everything I don’t want to be, I am ashamed.

I am ashamed.

I was ashamed that my mom got sick. As if it were some kind of moral failing; I think I’ve always thought that. Only the weak get sick. I mean what do you say when you

can't make a meeting? You say, "Sorry, I'm sick," as if you've done something wrong. Like, you're a loser with no work ethic if you're sick. By that logic, my mother was a loser. I start the car and think I am going straight to hell.

But first, I'm going to stop at the liquor store. I decide to buy some plastic cups. I spring for a sleeve of what my mother would have called the fancy cups because they were see through. The poor man's crystal.

I watch *Jeopardy!* and reward myself copiously when I know the answer. I fall asleep in front of the television. *Who's the loser now?*, I ask myself when I wake up at two thirty. I wander into the bedroom to sleep. I still sleep on the cot. I realize I've emptied every room but this one. I look over at her closet. Why is it so hard to go through her closet and let things go? As I fumble to pull back the sheet, I decide that's what I'll do tomorrow. It's been on the list for too long now. I spread out on the cot and sleep deep, dreamlessly.

\*\*\*

I wake up and get ready to walk. Routine is good for you, he told me, so I will go for our walk. For *a* walk. It feels like someone has stretched the road. It takes so long to get home.

*I have to go through the closet, I have to go through the closet, I have to go through the closet*, I'm repeating to myself as I finally reach the house. I take off my shoes and head directly to her bedroom.

I will myself forward to the closet door that was never quite fully open and never quite fully closed. The old wood door was warped at the top and was a hassle to close,

always screeching, wood grating against wood. If you wanted it to shut fully you had to slam it. I remember that slam shaking the house sometimes.

I'm afraid I realize, as I push the door all the way open, the carpet underneath resisting. I'm not sure what I'm expecting.

Dust? Bats? Mice? A ghost? *Stop being ridiculous*, I tell myself. I reach up to pull the chain and turn on the light and the chain snaps down in my hand. I guess that light will have to be on forever now, I think, or at least until the bulb burns out, I can't reach to reattach the cord.

There's a shelf just about eye level, with stacks of folded sweaters and sweatshirts. My mother. Sweaters and sweatshirts in Florida, ladies and gentlemen. I sigh as I reach up for a stack. I empty the entire shelf onto the bed, five stacks in all, folded neatly. There's barely any dust on the shelf she had it so packed with stuff. I fumble through the stuff on hangers, my fingers suddenly feeling bloated and clumsy. I need a break. I just started and I need a break. My eyes are welling up, and my nose is starting to tickle, my jaw clenching, I can't blame the dust. It's all so sad, so final. I mean in the last few months she wore maybe what? Maybe the same six or seven things? Why am I upset looking at clothes I haven't even seen her in in years...if ever? I mean it's not like my mom was fancy. Or maybe she was, how the hell do I know. These days I'm realizing now more than ever that I never knew my mom. I head to the bathroom, wash my hands and face, and go out for another walk.

\*\*\*

"I've had a lot of two-walk days lately," I say to him the next week.

“What does that mean?”

“You know, like I go for a walk, do something in the house and go for another walk.”

“Is this a big deal? I’m not sure what you’re telling me or what it means for you?”

“I don’t know, it’s just how I’ve kind of started classifying my days. A one walk day or a two walk day.”

“Which days are better?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug and think it’s a ridiculous question.

“What does that face mean?”

“I don’t know, it’s just...are any days better than any other days?”

“Have you considered taking an antidepressant?” he asks me.

“Have you considered that my mother is dead? Have you considered that I've never ever in my whole life been on this planet without her? Have you considered that I will be on this planet from now on without her until I die?” I want to scream, but instead, I say yes, I’ll consider it.

He explains that it's not a life sentence, medication, it would just be temporary, he can refer me to someone. I should think about it and let him know.

“A life sentence is a loaded phrase here, doc, but, what if, I’m just wondering, I guess, though, what if we’re doing it all wrong?” I ask.

“You mean using medication when one needs it?”

“No.”

“Then what if who is doing what all wrong?”

“Like, maybe we’re not supposed to be happy. Maybe we’ve been sold a lie. What if we’re only just supposed to live, like, without joy, without expecting it?”

“You mean, to never feel happy?”

“No, I mean to never expect to feel happy. I was reading this poem by Alice Walker about it the other day-”

“A poem?”

“Yeah, from one of my mother’s boxes. I remember she helped me memorize it for something in fifth grade. Depressing little thing, I think now, maybe that’s why I’m so fucked up—some teacher made me memorize this poem when I was ten years old about how you should expect nothing from life. It said instead to ‘live frugally by surprise.’ Anyway, maybe we’re supposed to just be, not be happy.”

“But not sad either?”

“I dunno. Take your pick, doc.” He’s quiet a moment. It makes me nervous...that voice again...very nervous, “What?” I blurt to break the silence.

“Nothing, I’m just thinking about what you said. Is there a way to live with an absence of feeling that is healthy? And just for the record, I don’t think you’re that fucked up.”

“Oh, so on a sliding scale of one to ten, I’m like, a five?” I laugh.

“You know you’re a real piece of work sometimes,” he says to me.

“My mom used to say that to me. What is that even supposed to mean? It’s such a weird phrase, and aren’t you supposed to be on my side instead of calling me names?”

“No, I am not calling you names, yes I am on your side, and I’m also here to do a job— which is called helping you be honest.”

Now I am quiet for a moment.

I can’t say anything. I can’t even protest. I know he’s right. But I do think I’m being honest. Mostly. He waits for a minute. I look at my hands. They look old. The skin is textured, rough. There are craters, lines around my knuckles. I remember my mother telling me you could always tell how old a woman was by the back of her hands. When did I get old? I bite my lip. I can’t wait to get home and have a vodka on the rocks.

“Why do you think your Mom called you a piece of work? What did that mean to you?”

I don’t say anything for long enough that he switches subjects.

“Did you make any progress with the closet?”

“Some,” I say. I think about that damn light bulb always on, and the door always ajar. Little things bother me so much these days. I tell him this.

“It’s ok. It’s ok to be irritable. There’s a lot going on right now, and you have to deal with it. I think you’ve been closed off for a long time. I know you said you’re learning a lot about your mother, but I think you’re learning a lot about yourself, too.”

“Yeah,” I say. *Learning that I drink way too freaking much. Learning that I’m self-centered and lonely and an all-round miserable person.*

On the way home I stop at the store to get some ice. Mom’s fridge stopped making ice years ago, and she never fixed it. I’m too lazy to make ice cubes. *Too lazy to make ice cubes?* I think to myself one level of pathetic after another.

\*\*\*

Is this who we are? We just live with broken things. Is this the best we can do, I mean, I know we have to accept certain things, but...*Things Fall Apart*—was that the name of the book I had to read in high school? Am I settling for broken? I'm looking around the house, there's the outlet I almost pulled out of the wall the other day, the kitchen sink that spits because it needs a washer or an aerator or something, the ice machine is broken, the closet lightbulb is broken, or is it? I mean it's on but it's broken. That's what I feel like right now: I'm on but I'm broken. What does that even mean? I'm beginning to sound like the shrink. What did mom mean when she called me a piece of work?

I grab the bottle of Stoli's out of the freezer and spill it over some ice. A generous pour, I think to myself as I hold it up to admire it. I drink it one swallow. I pour another and head back into the bedroom.

This *closet* is a piece of work, I start to think. Thanks a lot, Mom. I place the fancy cup on the bedside table and start to look at all the stuff I pulled off the shelf earlier today. There's a pink sweatshirt, crew neck, with white capital letters. FLORIDA it just says. No commitment to a place or a beach. I chuckle to myself; she probably bought it at the Publix.

I remember for a while all our clothes came from the grocery store, or the Walmart, and then Walmart became a grocery store. I pick it up, hold it, it's in pretty good shape. I smell it.

There's no trace of her left in the fabric.

Donations, I guess, and head into the kitchen for a big black garbage bag. I load the stacks up, filling the bag, tie it off and lug it toward the front door.

Now for the stuff on the hangers. There's a longish dress, purple and beige and yellow designs. I think she wore this dress every Easter. I wonder when she stopped going to church. When we stopped going, why we stopped going.

I remember feeling busy at church, no, I remember my mother being busy. My mother had something to say to everyone. The weird lady in the moo-moo: "How's this week been, did you make that appointment on Wednesday?" The lady who seemed to have a new baby every week: "I'm going to come by later and drop off a casserole I made for you." The old guy whose smile was all gum and saliva, "It's going to be hot this week, don't spend too much time fiddling in the garden!" She seemed to know something about everyone. I was bored, I wanted to get home, I didn't want her to send me to the playground to watch Bobby, but I didn't want to be with her, either.

I kind of remember Sunday school or something, mostly just that it was a fight to get Bobby to put on something other than shorts, the bench was cold and hard, and I had to wear white ankle socks, the kind with the lace. What did I learn when I was there? Maybe I should revisit the box of Bibles. I hang the dress back up and rifle through a couple of other things. She didn't have much, my mom. I slide the hangers down to the right, to see the back of the closet. It's a deep, long one, Bobby and I used to hide in it when we played hide and seek.

I drag out the big blue suitcase, a cardboard box labeled TAXES, some shoe boxes that don't appear to be holding shoes, and a big, white, plastic wrapped box. Her

wedding dress, preserved and now...worthless? Can it be donated? Is that a thing? Is it bad luck to wear a dead lady's wedding dress? Is it like, bad karma or something?

I stop to look at it. I don't think I've ever really seen it before. I guess I'm doing that a lot lately, seeing things for the first time. Looks like it's held up well. I don't remember ever seeing any wedding pictures up in the house, but to have saved the dress? It must have meant something to her.

It's white, with a mock turtleneck kind of collar, made of lace that goes down into long sleeves, a lining like a sheath underneath it. There are no beads. Except for the lace, it's a pretty plain dress. I touch my neck line—it looks like it must have been itchy, constricting. Is that how she felt, my mom, her dress, her commitment choking the air out of her? I stand the box upright,

The bust of the dress is stuffed with tissue paper and looms above the ground like a headless ghost. I run my fingers along the top of the box, it's wrapped in plastic, the corners are sharp to touch, there is no dust. I wonder what I'm supposed to do with it. I wonder why she kept it. Her voice echoes in the back of my head.

"It's all just crap, anyway."

"Except for the books," I answer her, out loud.

I sigh and go to the shoeboxes. There's a beige and light green one, marked Aerosoles, size 7.5, black and a picture of a boot. I remember her wearing those boots a lot. It was sneakers around the house and those boots almost everywhere else. Unlike the pristine hangers, the boxes are covered in dust. As I'm wondering where those boots are, Nancy Sinatra's *Boots Were Made For Walking* pops on in the background in my head,

when the glue on the box gives and the sides burst open. CD cases, at least a dozen of them, cascade out of the box and crash to the floor and I jump and drop the box, looking at the mess of colorful plastic. Do they even make CD's any more? I'm sure they have some use...the next best thing came along and replaced them.

Everything is replaceable. Is everyone? That Beyonce song pops into my head—which is, for some reason, behaving as a constant radio. “Irreplaceable.” *To the left, to the left, everything you own in a box to the left*...I pick up my glass, grime from the box rubbing into the condensation making its contents look murky, and go back to the kitchen to wash my hands. And to get a refill.

\*\*\*

There is a magazine about cats in the waiting room. I pick it up. The magazine is not about cats, I realize. It's about cat's brains. The *whole* magazine is about cat's *brains*. My mother's brain rotted in her own head, leaving her dead while she was alive, and no one could stop it, or explain why or how or offer any concrete answers about anything but here is this whole entire magazine about cat's brains. This world, I think to myself, sighing, is going to the dogs. I chuckle at my own idiocy when he opens the door.

This time I start with regret.

“Now I regret every time I let her call go to voicemail. Every time I rolled my eyes and thought *what does she want now?* I have so much regret. And every time I go through another box, or find another book, I realize there's so much she lived, and all of it is unknown to me. And I can't go backwards. I can't ask why she stayed with my dad or

how she met him or what she did before us. She's gone—like, forever gone—and I'll never know any of these things and I...regret that."

"I think that's fair—but it makes me wonder," he says, "what is the opposite of this?"

"Is there an opposite of regret? You'd have to spin your feelings wheel to find that out, doc, 'cause I sure don't know." I hated that damn feelings wheel. I hated all the little info graphics and blogs and articles and everything. Mostly I hated that they were right.

"No, I mean, what happens if you focus on what you do know about your mother?"

"That's what I'm saying," was this man even listening? "I don't know my mother, I never did, and now I never can." I choke back a sob and grab a tissue.

We sit in silence for a minute, and I'm about to tell him about the damn cat magazine in his waiting room but he cuts me off.

"I'd like to push back on that." Push back is fancy speak for telling me he thinks I'm wrong. Why don't people just say what they mean? Isn't that a song too, "Say what you need to say..." floats through my mind and I try to remember who sang it, my memory feels like it's being squeezed dry lately, searching for unnecessary words, leftover information.

"You know more about your mother than you think you do."

"What? How dare you? I..."

“Just listen for a moment. Your mom read books, and she kept them, and she asked you to keep them, what does that mean about her? What does it mean that you never saw a picture of her in her wedding dress, yet you found her dress? What does that mean? What could it mean?”

“What? That she’s a packrat? That she was too damn lazy to throw anything out? What are you talking about? Great, so I know she liked to read?! I’m trying to know a person who’s dead, not write a caption for a dating app—she is my mother!” I’m yelling now, “She was MY MOTHER!” I put my head in my hands and cry.

“You know more than that. Think about what she read. What she read-”

“I’m done for today. I’ll see you next week,” I pretty much growl as I leave his office. I slam his door as I leave, but I can’t hear it bang through the white noise machine, and this makes me even angrier. Looks like it’s going to be another two walk day.

I’m cooled off by the time I get to the house, as cool as one can be. What was all that about? In the bathroom, I notice my eyes are puffy. My tears have trailed through my sunscreen, and my skin looks dirty, like a child who was outside playing all day. I start to wash my hands and the faucet only spits out cold water.

“Great!” I shout to no one, “Another fucking broken thing in this house!” I splash some water on my face and my eyes sting. I’m not sure if from crying or makeup.

“Dammit, Mom! How come you didn’t ever fix anything in this damn house?” I throw the hand towel at my own face in the mirror, begin to cry again and storm out into her room.

“Like this fucking light? Like this fucking closet door?” I push it as hard as I can into the jam, it screeches like nails on a chalkboard, and wedges solidly shut.

“Really? Really?” My voice cracks, shrill. “Oh, now you fucking shut?” I shout to the door. I pull on the door knob. It falls off in my hand.

“I’m going for a walk!” I yell. Again. To no one.

\*\*\*

“I feel the need to tell her stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, I talk to her. Does that make me crazy?”

“Well, does she answer?” he leans in and I can tell he’s kidding, a real comedian this guy is.

“Sometimes? I mean, I hear her voice in my mind all the time.”

“I think it’s good you’re talking to her. A lot of people write letters, send texts to old cell numbers...how do you feel when you’re talking to her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe like, like talking to a ghost? Like she’s always there but she’s not. It’s not like I feel her or something, I’m not into that hippie dippy stuff, but I can’t explain that feeling. Supernatural? I don’t know. It feels crazy and sounds crazier now that I’m saying it out loud.” I look at my hands again. The skin on my knuckles is cracked, ashy, but my palms are moist, lint getting stuck under my fingernails from rubbing them on my pants. How can two sides of the same hand be opposites?

“Ok. So we don’t have a word yet for what it feels like. What do you tell her?”

“Well,” BUSTED, I think to myself. “I haven’t *really* been talking to her.”

“You just said you’d been talking to her so…”

“Yeah, no, I’ve been yelling at her,” I interrupt him to confess.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, yelling at her about why everything is broken, why she never fixed anything… why living with okay was good enough.”

“Last week, I mean a couple of sessions ago, you were talking about not expecting anything—or something?” I see him glance at his notes, an old fashioned yellow legal pad. My mother may have been the only person with cable and I chose the only therapist who still used paper.

“Yes, the poem I memorized, what about it?” Christ, I think, this man’s looking at notes because he’s trying to make sense of nothing. I sigh, impatiently.

He says, “What if—is living with okay being good enough kind of like expecting nothing?”

“No,” I spit, “living with okay as good enough means doing nothing, not expecting nothing.”

“That seemed to have hit a nerve, and I’m not telling you what you feel, but it seems as if—well, you tell me. What just happened there?”

This may be the first good question he’s asked me. I shrug, for real, alarmed by the fact I don’t have words for him. I don’t have words for me. I take a deep breath.

He says, “That’s good. Good breathing— can you name the feeling, yet?”

“I feel ashamed,” I finally admit. “I feel like…like…like, God, I don’t know.” I try another good breath but end up teary instead.

“Ashamed?”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

“Of what? How come?”

“Like I should have done something, done more, tried harder. I saw the same broken switch and I lived with it too, and I didn’t fix anything, and I could have, and I didn’t and-”

“You feel like a hypocrite?”

“No! I feel like I should have fixed things! Like I should have fixed her, like, like,” I stammer.

On the ride home my anger peters out and is replaced by utter self-loathing. I never knew I could feel so low.

I go to church that night. I don’t know why I wanted to go, but I shower and head out. I walk there. I mean mom and I—on our walk—passed the church on our loop all the time.

My mom always said if you can walk there, then you should. Look Mom, I think, I’m walking. To church. I hesitate for a moment before going in. The big heavy doors are looming, and the last time I was here someone was wheeling Mom’s body up the concrete ramp right next to the stairs. I feel like I want to walk the ramp to be with her, but I’m not dead, so I feel like I’m not allowed, like I’m supposed to take the stairs. I touch the black wrought iron banister, and instead of going in, I go home. Better luck next time, God, I think, as I walk home, regretting the water wasted on the shower.

## Chapter 5: Determination

“I’ve decided I’m going to stay.”

“In Florida?”

“Yes, in Florida, in my mom’s house. I feel like leaving would be abandoning her... I mean, abandoning her...again.”

“Again?”

“She didn’t want me to go so far away to school, to work. I did it anyway. And maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“Is that regret, do you think, or something else?”

“I mean, I guess so? And I kind of feel...guilty, like, all the time. I feel it, like, on my shoulders. My neck has been killing me lately and I thought it was just a shitty pillow, but, but I feel like I don’t even stand up straight anymore, like...like I’m shrinking, my head into my neck into my shoulders. I feel like I’m shrinking, like I’m disappearing.”

“So I would like to invite you to reconsider the word you used before when you talked about going away to school: should. You know, should is a word of judgement.”

“What?”

“Oh, come on,” he says. “You must know this. You *should* not smoke, but you can and you may; you *should* exercise everyday, but life carries on for plenty of people without it. So, when we say should, we are judging ourselves. And you can’t should backwards; you’ll always be wrong.”

“Like Monday morning quarterbacking,” I murmur, “I understand you, but I don’t know if I agree. I mean, what if all the decisions I made...what if I hadn’t been so

far so often, maybe I gave her Alzheimer's disease? I read that loneliness, not being part of a community makes it more likely and-

"I need to stop you right there."

What, I think, time's up and you're just going to kick me out? This from a guy who uses the word closure on repeat. I look at him.

"None of this is your fault," he says gently.

"*None* of this is your fault," he repeats, slowly, and I burst into tears. I don't deserve this, I don't deserve this kindness or his gentleness.

"Stop it!"

"Stop what? Telling you the truth? You had no control of the fact that she was always going to die, from this or from that or whatever. We all die."

"But what if-"

"Stop," he cuts me off again. "It's a simple fact: this is not your fault."

"But how can you know that— what if" I'm getting tired of him interrupting me, and my face says so.

"You can 'what-if' yourself forever. I'm telling you this is not your fault. Can you try to look at this objectively?"

"I'm pretty sure I can go toe to toe with you here. I'm *always* going to find a way to make it my fault. I should have been able to stop it, to have been closer, to have loved her more-

"Do you blame Bobby at all?"

"Bobby? No—he's a shitty son but-

“So why is it your fault instead of his, then? I mean, how does what you’re saying make sense?”

“Ah, fuck, doc, I don’t know—I don’t care about making sense, I just know I’m right! I should have done more!”

“Can you say that again without using the word should?”

“Well, what the fuck word do you want me to use then?”

“You sound angry.”

“I am!”

“At whom? Are you angry at your mother, for dying?”

“No, I’m angry at me!”

“For what,” he presses, as if he doesn’t know.

“I’m angry I couldn’t stop it! I’m angry I didn’t try harder! I’m angry I couldn’t fix anything! I’m angry I couldn’t fix her! I’m angry I didn’t know anything about her and now she’s dead!”

Silence fills the room. I can’t breathe. Everything is stale here, smells fake, manufactured, sickening. I feel broken as I reach for another one of his scratchy tissues.

“You know,” I say to him, trying to pretend I can’t taste the bile building in the back of my throat, “you could at least spring for the name brand tissues. Seriously, this stuff is like sandpaper,” I shake my head as I blow my nose.

“I don’t think the tissues are the real enemy here,” he says, his voice soft again.

“Are you still talking to her?”

“What?”

“You said sometimes you had been talking to her. Yelling at her about stuff.”

I had forgotten I told him that. Shit, forgetting what I tell people? Forgetting what I tell my therapist? My mouth goes dry, my stomach cramps, my skin goes clammy. My whole body feels under attack. I’m not sure if it's fight or flight or straight up denial but I bolt up, and start to leave.

“Maybe tell her about this? Maybe talk to her about this? About how you’re feeling?”

I sit back down and hear him out.

\*\*\*

I decide to try it once I get home. Maybe this shrink is right. I really ought to start giving this man more credit, I think to myself, as I walk through the front door of the house, the screen banging closed behind me. It’s hot, too hot and I instantly know the fuse has blown. There’s a faint smell of something burning, of something that has burnt out.

“You know, Mom,” I start, as if she were really there, “we really should have someone look at this. A *real* someone, not just Bobby-jack of all trades.” I flip the breaker, the AC begins to churn out its cold air.

“There you go again,” I hear her say to me, “always so tough on Bobby. It’s like he can’t ever do enough for you. Why can’t you just be nice to him?”

“Why, Ma, why can’t I be nice to him? Because he’s a do-nothing! He talks about himself all the time, he never listens to anyone else, and he’s a rotten father!”

“How would you know?” she chides. How would I know, I echo. It’s a reasonable question. But I do think I know. I think a decent father wouldn’t roll his eyes when he hears his kids call his name...but, I cut off my own thoughts. How would I know.

“So, the other thing is,” I glance up at the ceiling for some reason while I’m slipping off my shoes, “I’ve been seeing this guy—no not that kind of guy,” she always asked if I was seeing anyone. “No, a therapist, because I’m a mess since you died. Hell, maybe I was even a mess before that, a mess before you died, a mess while I was trying to help you not be a mess...God, Ma, you won the jackpot with kids, huh?”

Fuck, I mumble to myself as I walk over to the bathroom, but I say “sorry” out loud. She always did hate it when we cursed. She didn’t even let us say geez in the house because it sounded too much like Jesus. Where in the Bible does it say you can’t curse anyway I wonder as I sit to pee. Like I know it says don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, whatever that means, but to not curse? Who knows.

My second walk that day takes me back to the church. This time I go inside. I don’t know why. *It’s hot, and you’re lazy, and you want a break* I tell myself as I open the heavy door. I don’t know if I took the steps or the ramp, but the big, heavy door rewards me with cool air and low lighting. My eyes adjust, slowly, my body is drenched and I’m breathless and think I can’t sit in here. I don’t look good enough—I don’t look enough for God to see me. Mom would say “God sees you all the time, get over yourself.” I’m glad that there are no onlookers, no services. It seems somehow fitting that I am here on an

unholy, unspecial day. I'm glad the only sound I can hear are my own steps as I head to a pew. I rest my hand on the shellacked wood and decide yes, I can sit.

I don't know what time I entered, or how long I sat, and I didn't notice when the priest came in.

He sat next to me, on the same bench, or pew or whatever. He was a few feet to my right, and I didn't look at him. We didn't speak. I got the feeling he wasn't going to leave until I did. And I didn't want to leave, but I stood and did anyway. It was as if his presence made me, somehow, even lonelier. It was getting too cold in there I told myself as I walked out and I heard my mother complaining that the air conditioning was always too high.

"Such a waste of energy," she'd say. "It's Florida for Pete's sake, if God wanted it to be cold here He'da done so." And I'd roll my eyes for anyone within earshot, like they mattered, like they cared. Why didn't I love her enough to protect her—or at least respect her? Did I respect her, at all, ever? What the hell did I learn at church if I didn't respect my mother?

She comes to me that night, in a dream, but it's her from when I was in middle school. When she still dyed her hair, curled it, wore big earrings. We're sitting in the living room, each of us with a tray table in front of us, and then there's a sound, from the ceiling, like stomping or jumping. "Elephants must live up there," she says, and we both look up. Mom starts to say something else, but then she stands up and says, "I don't know what to say about that, so I'll just give you a hug." And she does, it's awkward, the tables teetering against us as we embrace. The elephants living upstairs sound like they're

fighting, or, maybe dancing? Whoever or whatever they are, I know we don't know them. I get the feeling my mom's not happy with their noise. She always hated loud noises.

I don't know what to make of this dream. Her voice saying, *I don't know what to say about that so I'll just give you a hug*, is stuck in my mind as I dress. The sound of her voice, it's so clear, it's so *her*. And she was never really a big hugger. Affection wasn't something we did in our house. But in the dream, she gave me a hug, and it felt like her voice: real.

*I don't know what to say about that. I don't know what to say about that.*

But maybe I do.

\*\*\*

"I saw you in my dream last night, Mom," I say as I walk through the kitchen. I feel ridiculous. I am ridiculous. What the heck I think, nuts is nuts, so I might as well go all in: dreaming about a dead lady, talking to a dead lady.

"Thanks for coming," I say, kind of feeling it's important. I reach out to open the back door.

"Thanks for the hug," I add quickly.

I head out for the morning feeling, somehow, like I've accomplished something.

\*\*\*

"Can I mourn something I never really had? Is it fair, or possible? How can I mourn what I don't know; it's only a fiction, a movie, a Channel 13 Saturday night movie—fake and pretend and Hallmark and all full of bullshit?"

“You’ve lost me a bit there,” he says.

“I mean, I’ve been all upset that I never really knew my mom as a person, as more than a mom, and I’m missing her, but if I never had her, never knew that person, how come I’m mourning it? How can I mourn something I never had?”

“Of course you can mourn something you’ve never had,” he says so confidently I want to smack him. “In fact, I think we all do. I mean, our ideas are only as big as we let them be. As big as we can let them be.”

“What?” It’s my turn to be lost.

“You don’t know what you don’t know. And then you learn something, and then you do know, and then you mourn what you didn’t have.”

“Accountant here, Dr. Vague,” I wave my hands in mock surrender, “help a girl out,” I say.

“You ever see a dinosaur?”

“What? Are you as cracked as I am?”

“Answer the question—have you?”

“I talk to my dead Ma, doc, I don’t hallucinate,” at least not yet, I think to myself.

“No. I have never seen a dinosaur,” I say to appease him. Then I lean forward, put my hands on the cool, brown armrests and say, “Have you? Is there one in this room right now?” Sometimes I just can’t help being a jerk.

“Can you imagine one? Can you picture it?” he presses on, undaunted.

“Yes, yes,” I sigh, growing impatient.

“How can you imagine something you’ve never seen?”

I think I might be getting where he's going but I sigh and ask. "How?"

"Because other people crafted it for you, told you what it might look like. Because people made comics and shows and movies. Because people became paleontologists and studied bones and made plasters and recreations. Dinosaurs are things we don't have, we've never had, and will never have, yet we know them. We can grow our ideas about them as big or as small as we want. Imagine a little kid who loves dinosaurs. Somewhere deep inside this kid knows he'll never see or have or be with a real dinosaur. That's a kind of mourning something you do not know, and haven't ever had."

"You rambled a long time about dinosaurs to answer that question," I tease.

"And now you have an answer."

I go home that night and dream about dinosaurs. About bones. And when I wake up it strikes me: how odd it is that we hang up bones, displays of death, morbid reminders of how it *was* life, how it became death, how it ended in an extinction. And what do we do with our bones? We bury them. We burn them. There must be someplace between shrine and shame. As I head out to walk, I brace myself for the day ahead.

## Epilogue

The doorbell rings. He's on time I think, grateful and surprised. I've planned what to say, and how to end the conversation without argument. And I've promised to reward myself with a glass of wine after he leaves. One, nice, simple glass of good red wine. Not a shit ton of whatever I can get my hands on to forget reality.

"Bobby, thanks for coming," *see Mom, I'm not always so hard on him*, "I've decided I'm gonna stay here. I can go to the thrift shops, or whatever, buy back most of what I need. The house has no mortgage, and I'm sure mom would have wanted us to share whatever it's worth, so I called around and have some companies scheduled to do some estimates." I don't say: I'll eat those costs, so when I decide to sell, or when I pop off or go senile or whatever the fuck happens to me, you'll be entitled to whatever its left, because I don't need to.

"You couldda just called," he says. I planned for this too.

"Right, but sometimes you don't answer and more than once I've left a voice mail and it doesn't reach you, and more than once you've said you miss texts," *Mom I had to give it to him somehow, just a little*, "I guess it's the service or something weird." When did I get so good at lying? Or, perhaps this a new kind of pretending, protecting?

"So you're good with that, right?" I lead.

"I mean, I guess, but what are you--"

"I'm gonna see about updating the HVAC, maybe get rid of the lawn, maybe rocks with decorative grasses? I'm not 100% sure. You have any ideas?"

"Well, I guess, I never really thought about it, I mean--"

“Right, so the first contractor is here, “ I say, nodding to the red pick-up pulling in front of the house, realizing I kind of love interrupting Bobby. *I know it's rude Mom. Sorry.* “I gotta go.” I walk past him on the stoop, wave to the truck, and smile. Bobby leaves without saying goodbye. I don't mind.

It's a busy day, I was able to get three estimates from three different people all on the same day. I have no idea if this is how you're supposed to do it. I don't even know what “supposed to” means anymore. But it doesn't really bother me. I can't tell what I'm feeling. I'm pretty sure I'm not happy. But I know it's not sad. Productive? Can you get a high from being productive? It's probably just relief. I have just a half glass of wine—it's scrumptious—but I'm so tired. As I lay down, I wonder, is this what it feels like to be proud? Of yourself?

In the morning I review all the notes I made. And I laugh at myself because I'm glad it's not a list of notes for Mom, and I laugh for all the tech in the world, I like making and looking at lists on paper, the feel of the pen, so solid and smooth and sure, just like she liked her wall calendar. I consider getting up to find highlighters and laugh at myself again for being such a child. An episode of “Little House on the Prairie” runs through my head. It's the one where the Ingalls family had just recently-ish moved to Walnut Grove and Laura couldn't write but she had to read an essay about her mom. At the end, the camera reveals an empty piece of lined paper, and of course Miss Beadle knows this but protects Laura's dignity. I'm glad my papers are full of information instead of being blank and—as hokey as it sounds—I feel protected by the words. Excited about the choices that are mine. Sayonara, Decision Fatigue.

As the day ends, I've decided which landscaper to go with and which HVAC company, and I have to figure out who to call for the indoor stuff I should be able to figure out on my own, like hanging dry wall. Or fixing that damn closet door, but I decide to take a walk. It's late, and dark, but I feel...good.

That night is the last time she comes to me in a dream. I remember it so vividly, and I didn't know it was going to be the last time. I guess no one ever does.

I'm excited to tell the shrink.

"She's sitting on a bed, someplace between a cot at camp or a dorm room mattress, there's white cinder block behind her. She's in a white t-shirt, sweat pants, her middle round and full, her hair long like from when I was in high school. She's smiling, and we don't speak. In the dream it's like I'm the ghost, I'm the one standing while she sits. She holds up a little paper back book, it's white like her shirt. There's a rainbow on it, a simple rainbow, just a few thick colorful lines, and she's smiling. Like, *glowing*-smiling, I realize she's showing me the book she always wanted to write. I didn't know she wanted to write a book, but it was just so, so clear in the dream. How does that happen?"

"Well, dreams are often a conglomerate of—" I am indeed in love with interrupting people I realize. Mostly men.

"No—I know that, I mean—how can a dream tell me something I didn't know and then make me so sure that what I know is right? Like—it's not prophetic, but maybe it is? It's so, so weird," I push up my sleeves and shift on the couch. It's like I can't sit still.

"You can't stop smiling," he says.

I cock my head.

“Yeah,” I nod, “I can’t.”

“What’s that like?” he half whispers.

“I don’t know. But it’s good, and I like it.”

He smiles at me and I realize it’s peace. I’m feeling peace. Funny you don’t know you’re missing a thing until you have it for the first time.

\*\*\*

The next day I visit her grave for the first time. I hadn’t been putting it off, but it wasn’t exactly on my agenda. Today I feel drawn there.

“Mom,” I say, “I think maybe I need to learn from what’s broken; learn with it, learn how to use broken because maybe broken isn’t broken and it’s just working differently, asking for different care or attention, or something. Your mind wasn’t broken, I just didn’t get it. I didn’t know how to work with it. I felt like I had to fight against it, against you, to reject this change, to reject your behavior, to reject you.” My eyes become wet and I brush my cheeks with the backs of my hands. “I wanted to fix you. I wanted to fix you, Mom, but you weren’t broken.” I snuffle and try to inhale. My breath catches.

“Remember, Mom, you always used to say *the only thing you can control in this world is you?* You said it like—all the time. I shouldn’t have tried to fix you, or what you did or tried to do. I should have accepted you. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t understand,” I throw my head back and laugh, “I probably still don’t understand! But I’m trying to, now. And I’m going to keep trying to and I’m gonna try to help other people figure it out, too. And I can’t fix that I didn’t know you when you were here. But I know you loved poetry,

and you loved reading, and you loved helping people and you hated being idle. That's what I know and I hope you'll teach me more."

The sun is out, I'm not hot, but I am a mess. I feel giddy. I am crying. I dig into my pockets with clammy hands.

"Mom," I say, "I brought you this poem. It's by Andrea Cohen. And I was thinking, well I'm just gonna read it to you. Here it is:

The Committee Weighs In

I tell my mother  
I've won the Nobel Prize.

Again? she says. Which  
discipline this time?

It's a little game  
we play: I pretend  
I'm somebody, she  
pretends she isn't dead.

My eyes well up. I clear my throat.

"I hope you liked the poem, Mom," I say, "I haven't won any prizes, but the house is ok, and Bobby's okay, and I'm gonna be okay too." For the first time in a while I feel like I'm telling the truth. I feel like she knows this. I start to walk away, but stop myself and turn back to her.

"I love you, Mom," I say. "I'll see you again. Soon."

### **A Moment of Pause:**

*The Business of Dying* has moments of poignancy and pain as readers share the narrator's personal and highly emotional journey through loss. It asks readers to identify with shame, to keep company with grief, and to integrate these raw emotions with the harsh realities of caregiving and struggles with identity.

This is not just a story about a woman who loses her mother. It asks where have people been erased—and how. It requires readers to question who they have erased, and why. It is a call to see each other, as caregivers, as daughters, as mothers, as women, and as multifaceted souls before we become ghosts. It is about grief and shame. More importantly, it is also a story about redemption, about how to recover from feeling invisible and helpless, and about what can be gained while suffering through loss. It is about a woman—an every woman—who learns to grow.

The following reflection situates this original creative piece in conversation with *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gillman and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, two canonical pieces of American literature informing modern feminism and confronting the conflicts between self and domesticity. Against this literary backdrop, *The Business of Dying* extends a tradition that examines constraints placed upon women's identities, particularly within systems of care.

### **Foundational Contexts**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is a short story about a woman experiencing "a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency..."

after giving birth (Gillman 3). Widely considered the first documentation of what is now called postpartum psychosis, when the story was first published in *The New England Magazine*, a Boston physician wrote that such a story “ought not to be written” and that it was “enough to drive anyone mad to read it” (Gilman). Reviled for vivid portrayal of a woman’s intimate thoughts, it is considered an early work of feminism and protest, and has even been used to teach empathy as a part of medical students’ training (Tucker).

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) is a longer short story about Edna Pontellier, a woman whose “eyes were quick and bright” and sometimes looked “as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought” (8). While “[m]ost critics regarded the novel as vulgar, unwholesome and unholy... (Sprinkle), it “gain[ed] acceptance in the American literary canon [by] the late twentieth century” (Williams). Considering a woman as something more than a mother or wife is no longer considered bizarre and the study of Chopin’s works remains widespread on American college campuses.

*The Business of Dying* is reminiscent of these 19th Century works because it examines characters trying to reconcile the need for identity with the expectations imposed by societal expectations. Not only connected through overlapping themes, the works are similar in style, structure and pacing. The woman at the center of the novel is neither wife nor mother, but she struggles under the weight of becoming the primary caregiver of her mother, an expectation not enforced upon her brother. This reflection first examines literary structure, then authors’ styles and narrative techniques, and finally a hope for the work

## **Bildungsroman Structure**

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*, and *The Business of Dying* all use a modified bildungsroman structure, a familiar literary form which fits well to expose societal limitations applied to women's lives. The term *bildungsroman* derives from the German *Bildung*, meaning education or formation, and *Roman*, meaning novel, and traditionally "[d]eals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" and is "frequently autobiographical" (Holman 52). Essentially a coming-of-age narrative in which a protagonist matures through experience and self-discovery.

Foundational examples of the genre include canonical nineteenth-century novels such as *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*. These works establish a recognizable arc—call or loss, journey or apprenticeship, psychological growth, and resolution—through which the protagonist emerges with a more coherent sense of self and a negotiated place in society. Modern examples, including *Harry Potter*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*, also center on personal development, though often with male protagonists.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*, and *The Business of Dying*, however, this trajectory is diversified because they all follow female narrators who are already adults, as opposed to adolescents. This shift in protagonist's perspectives complicates what might otherwise be simple plots and therefore alters the pattern of the bildungsroman. While each protagonist undergoes a form of "education," that education does not culminate in integration, stability, or self-possession. Instead, the genre

functions dually: the character's development unfolds alongside the reader's instruction, as readers are asked to witness how social authority, gendered expectations, and systems of care can distort or arrest personal growth. By preserving the outward structure of the bildungsroman while revising its expected outcomes, the genre's formal constraints mirror and underscore the ironic lack of autonomy in characters whose lives are governed less by self-determination than by obligation, inherited roles, and erasure.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman draws from Gilman's life in that the narrator, like the author, is prescribed the "rest cure" following childbirth. The story is narrated in the first person and traces a largely nameless woman as she gradually succumbs to madness. While not strictly autobiographical—Gilman ultimately rejected the rest cure and many other societal expectations without losing her sanity—the story uses lived experience to critique medical and social control (Gagnon).

The first stage of the bildungsroman arc, loss, is immediate and multifaceted. The narrator is isolated by her husband, deprived of society, and stripped of meaningful work, particularly writing, which serves as her source of identity and worth. She observes, "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—," only to be told by her husband that writing is "the very worst thing" she can do (Gilman 3). Later conversations reveal John infantilizing his wife, laughing at her concerns and calling her "blessed little goose" (Gilman 6). Under the "rest cure," she loses not only companionship and creative expression, but also autonomy, as she is treated like a child rather than a fully developed adult.

The journey the narrator undertakes is partly physical but mostly psychological: in order to be a “good” wife, she submits to her husband’s authority and the directives of society, moving away from her own instincts and inner truths. This submission generates the central conflict, as she hides her writing, suppresses her thoughts, and denies her own personhood. The resulting “growth” produced by this conflict is madness itself. Gilman’s story collapses and blends all four stages of the bildungsroman into an endless cycle of loss, in which development becomes a descent rather than elevation or improvement.

In this way, Gilman both upholds the traditional structure of the form and radically advances it, exposing the destructive consequences of a system that equates female obedience with wellness.

*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin adapts the bildungsroman structure in a compressed and nonlinear way. The novel is told through a third-person omniscient narrator and centers on Edna Pontellier, despite dedicating its entire first chapter focusing on Mr. Pontielier, a purposeful nod toward the patriarchal society surrounding Edna. Edna’s journey begins not with departure but in medias res, after she has already physically left home for a vacation with her family.

Readers meet Edna shortly after being introduced to her husband, within a setting that initially appears comfortable and traditional: the Pontelliers are financially secure, have two children cared for by a nurse, and Edna is widely regarded as fortunate, even “married to the best husband” (Chopin 12). Yet this outward stability masks an inner disquiet.

Edna's first call to awakening emerges as a subtle, unsettling disturbance of emotion following her husband's accusation that she is an inattentive mother. Awake at midnight and crying without fully understanding why, Edna recognizes that "such moments were not uncommon in her marriage" (Chopin 11), but she is aware of a new intensity in her reaction. This internal whisper is amplified through her relationship with Robert and her growing responsiveness to the sea, which the narrator describes as illuminating yet forbidding, a call toward freedom from her comfortable but banal existence.

*The Awakening's* chapter ten closes with the narrator telling readers that "no multitude of words could have been more significant than the moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first felt throbbing of desire" (Chopin 35) and signals the call becoming unstoppable, marking the beginning of Edna's choice to be self-aware. When her husband orders her to come to bed, she wonders "if her husband had ever spoken like that to her before" and "if she had committed to his command" (Chopin 36). She firmly rejects the direction and tells him to not speak like that to her again, affirming acceptance of the call to reject domesticity. These moments collectively mark Edna's escalating response to the call of change, as her development leads her to challenge her husband, reject conventional motherhood, and pursue autonomy. Like Gilman, Chopin's compressed structure intensifies Edna's psychological growth, guiding readers toward a form of self-actualization that culminates not in connection, but in detachment and, ultimately, death.

In *The Business of Dying*, the bildungsroman structure initially appears more conventional on the surface, as the narrator receives a literal call for help from her mother that initiates the losses that follow. The novella employs a first-person, unnamed narrator whose bitterness and dark humor move the entire arc of development through her subjective consciousness, making some of her narration unreliable and reveals a callousness rebutting the societal expectation for softness.

She initially appears firmly situated in adulthood, competent and professionally established, with an identity anchored in work that provides autonomy, control, and social legitimacy: “I was good at numbers. At spreadsheets. At driving a hard bargain. I was good at counting calories and saving money and spending wisely.” This stability is disrupted when her mother becomes ill, issuing the narrative’s call not toward expansion or adventure, but toward obligation and contraction. The narrator undertakes a physical journey from her own home to her mother’s home, a movement that is accompanied by an emotional and largely unintentional journey away from her established sense of self.

The first stage of loss unfolds through the erosion of role clarity, as she is asked—and ultimately feels forced—to relinquish professional authority in favor of full-time caregiving. As she moves her mother from appointment to appointment and sorts through the contents of the house, her identity becomes increasingly defined by the role of “caregiver,” displacing roles she had previously chosen and controlled. The journey that follows is therefore both physical and psychological, unfolding through interior monologue as she attempts to reconcile incompatible social expectations:

professional competence, filial responsibility, and culturally enforced ideals of feminine selflessness.

Formally, the novella resists linear progression; instead, the arc circles through recursive reflection and fragmented flashbacks that destabilize narrative time and render memory unreliable. Memory becomes a disruptive force rather than a stabilizing one, blurring personal, familial, and cultural narratives and mirroring the narrator's growing disorientation as caregiving collapses distinctions between past autonomy and present constraint.

The central conflict emerges through cognitive dissonance as the narrator recognizes the extent to which shame structures her responses—shame at needing help, at resenting caregiving, at failing to embody idealized womanhood—while simultaneously resisting those expectations. Her bitterness and dark humor function structurally, exposing contradiction rather than resolving it, and her unreliability denies the reader moral comfort or narrative clarity. She is intentionally an unlikeable, unreliable narrator. She is selfish, resentful, and self-involved. She embodies traits traditionally stigmatized in women, particularly women who violate cultural ideals of womanhood, like selflessness and nurturing.

Growth unfolds in two internal phases: first through painful self-recognition as she confronts the narratives she has internalized, and later through sustained reflection and counseling that introduce the possibility of reframing rather than escaping her situation. Her internal monologue externalizes emotions often left unspoken—resentment, confusion, fear, the loss of control—a mirror to so many

women's interior lives. When the narrator's identity is disrupted, it challenges her core existence, slowly recognizing catastrophe as an unwelcome yet undeniable catalyst.

The *Business of Dying* refuses a conventional resolution; there is no mastery of circumstance or reintegration into a stable identity. Instead, the narrator arrives at determination: "I wanted to fix you Mom, but you weren't broken...Remember, Mom, you always used to say *The only thing you can control in this world is you?* I shouldn't have tried to fix you, or what you did or tried to do— I should have accepted you." The narrator's closing speech to her mother reveals an inaugural yet hard-won agency grounded in recognition and self-possession. Her growth, like her grief, requires a witness. Her self-reflection is honest and raw and leads her to the truth she so hated to hear from her mother.

Unlike *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Awakening*, *The Business of Dying* culminates not in death nor demise, but in showing self-actualization as an ongoing process rather than a completed transformation. Initially, the narrator challenges voices of culturally "unacceptable" women, she reflects upon her resentment, fatigue, and ambivalence. Rather than suppressing these emotions, the narrator names and examines them, thereby challenging the normative script of female self-effacement. This framing invites the reader to investigate whether such emotions constitute selfishness or a valid, even inevitable, response to structural expectations. Rather than turning away from the uncomfortable voices of culturally "unacceptable" women, she shares her resentment, fatigue and ambivalence. Women in the aforementioned works knew these feelings, but did not name and examine them as thoroughly as *Business*. She challenges the normative

script of female self-effacement, through its brevity, lack of subplots, and reliance on a single narrative voice, *The Business of Dying* accelerates psychological tempo and accentuates the benefits of the traditional bildungsroman when applied to grief, caregiving, and gendered obligation.

Across *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*, and *The Business of Dying*, the bildungsroman structure is preserved and yet fundamentally reworked, particularly through its first four stages. Loss initiates each narrative, though it appears in different guises: the loss of autonomy and creative agency under medical authority, the loss of emotional coherence within a socially sanctioned marriage, and the loss of professional identity through enforced caregiving. In each case, this loss is not incidental but structural, and it destroys the very conditions that once stabilized the protagonist's sense of self.

The calls that follow do not promise growth or opportunity in a traditional sense; instead, they disrupt equilibrium and demand response. Whether emerging as a medical prescription, an emotional awakening, or a literal request for care, the call is inward-facing and disturbing, compelling the protagonists to confront roles they did not choose. The journey that unfolds is therefore not primarily physical but psychological, marked by increasing interiority, fragmentation, and resistance to linear progress. Each protagonist moves away from externally defined identities—mother, wife, professional—and into heightened self-awareness, even as that awareness proves painful or destabilizing.

Across *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*, and *The Business of Dying*, the bildungsroman structure is both preserved and reworked. Each narrative begins with loss—of autonomy, coherence, or identity—and progresses through an inward journey marked by fragmentation rather than clarity. The call to action in these works does not promise growth in the traditional sense; instead, it disrupts stability and demands confrontation with imposed roles.

Conflict emerges from the irreconcilability of internal truth and external expectation: autonomy versus obligation, selfhood versus care for others. Rather than resolving this tension, each text sustains it. In doing so, they expose the limitations of a genre traditionally associated with integration and maturity, revealing instead how systems of care and gendered expectation constrain development.

## Namelessness & Stream of Consciousness

If structure shapes development, narrative voice determines how that development is experienced. The use of nameless or partially obscured narrators across these texts reinforces themes of invisibility and social constraint. Anonymity transforms each protagonist into an everywoman figure, reflecting collective anxieties surrounding identity, caregiving, and expectation.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, confinement—both physical and psychological—erodes the narrator's sense of self, as her husband's authority strips her of agency. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is named, yet her individuality is similarly constrained by societal expectations of wifedom and motherhood. In *The Business of Dying*, the narrator resists these expectations more overtly, yet remains entangled within them.

Across all three works, interiority—often rendered through fragmented or stream-of-consciousness narration—immerses the reader in the protagonists' psychological experiences. This narrative strategy not only reflects the instability of identity under pressure but also invites readers to witness the tension between autonomy and obligation.

By destabilizing or withholding identity, these texts expose the mechanisms through which women are rendered invisible, particularly within roles of care. In this way, narrative form becomes both a literary device and a social critique.

### **Hope for the Work**

While this analysis situates the novels within a literary tradition, its purpose ultimately extends beyond that singular literary interpretation. *The Business of Dying* carries lofty—if not entirely attainable—ambitions. I hope readers will enter the narrative willingly and remain within it, even when what unfolds is uncomfortable or painful. If enjoyment is too strong a word for a story shaped by illness, aging, and anticipatory grief, perhaps recognition is more apt: I want readers to feel seen, to feel that their private experiences with caregiving, dread, resentment, tenderness, and love are neither singular nor shameful. Beyond recognition, I hope for a quieter form of comfort—the reassurance that the isolating labor of care has been witnessed. And if fiction can do what it has often done—inform, unsettle, and eventually influence cultural reform—then I hope this work participates in reshaping how we view aging, how we care for the ill, how we support caretakers, and how we confront the conversations we most wish to avoid, especially those surrounding death.

One reason caregiving remains in the shadows is that we do not truly know how to do it. From infancy, we rely on others to care for us. Those “others” - mostly women, mostly mothers, sometimes sisters or aunts—often lose their sense of identity in the process. Mother’s Day attempts to honor the woman behind the role, but it often falls flat, laced with inauthenticity. We praise sacrifice while ignoring depletion. If caregiving is to be sustainable, we must learn both how to care for others and how to preserve the self in the act of caring.

When we relegate women to the role of caregiver, we assume the act itself will be fulfilling. While many do find meaning in it, fulfillment alone cannot erase the emotional, social, and financial strain caregiving imposes. Further, true care cannot exist without reciprocal care for the caregiver. Studies show that family caregivers experience higher rates of stress, depression, and economic hardship than non-caregivers, yet our systems acknowledge their needs only through occasional respite or perfunctory praise. Caring for caregivers is not indulgence; it is a necessary investment in collective well-being and sustainable compassion.

Beyond structural neglect lies a deeper cultural problem: our avoidance of death and illness. These subjects remain shrouded in shame and silence. To shift how we care, we must dismantle that shame—for both the ill and their caretakers—and allow individuals to serve as caregivers without surrendering their sense of self. As with most enduring problems, the answer begins with recognition and education.

Many states require personal financial management courses as graduation requirements for high school students and these courses are successful because money feels tangible and urgent. Few students would voluntarily enroll in a class called *What to Do if Dad Gets Sick* or *What to Do if Mom Dies*. I am not advocating for dystopian death conditioning. But just as we have driver's education and sex education, a course in "death literacy" before graduating high school (Miller & Berger) could serve as a bridge toward preparedness, empathy, and practical care. As our population ages and the pool of available caregivers shrinks, such education becomes not merely helpful but necessary.

To connect fiction to reality, readers must acknowledge what Kent et al. call the “largest hidden palliative care workforce: the millions of family caregivers across the world” (Kent). Family caregiving is not new; it is simply persistently hidden. And within that hidden labor, patterns emerge. Research reflects what many families quietly understand: caregiving disproportionately falls to daughters. Daughters provide significantly more hours of elder care than sons and are more likely to shoulder emotional and day-to-day responsibilities (National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP). These expectations are rarely about capacity; they are about inherited gender roles.

Betty Friedan described housewives in 1963 as suffering from “the problem that has no name” (15). A nameless problem cannot be solved. Decades later, Jonathan Rauch argued that today’s invisible caregivers face a similar predicament: they are asked to do alone and out of sight what requires public acknowledgment and assistance. No daughter or son, no parent or spouse acting as caregiver, should feel compelled to perform this work invisibly. Nor should aging or dying occur out of sight.

This dynamic of invisibility also resonates in contemporary fiction. Sam Sacks notes that nameless narrators often represent “the real-world, present-day phenomenon of namelessness” (Sacks) — those who cook, clean, build, dismantle, and remain unseen. Like these works, *The Business of Dying* centers an unnamed narrator and under-discussed themes of shame, illness, and aging. The literary strategy mirrors the cultural condition: anonymity signals erasure.

At minimum, we can increase visibility for emerging roles such as the death doula. In "*Briefly Perfectly Human*, Alua Arthur advocates for “functional death literacy,”

asking, “We live in a community — why don’t we die in a community?” (Death Doula Says Life). Just as expectant parents often create birth plans, perhaps it is time we consider death plans with equal care and dignity.

Hope for this work lies in that shift: to care in ways that honor the living, the dying, and those who stand beside them. We are all living and dying simultaneously. Like any symbiotic relationship, we must sustain one another if we are to endure.

**Author’s Note:**

Everyone has an opinion. Experts have podcasts on grief, write books on grief, outline stages of grief, explain grief, monetize grief:

“Grief needs a witness.”

“Grief is the difference between what you wanted and what you got.”

“Grief is a journey.”

“Grief never goes away.”

It’s as if grief is being promoted, but it’s superficial at best because our conversations surrounding grief in general are, well, too general.

The only thing I’m sure of is that we all experience grief. Loss, feeling lost, being reminded of loss—grief can and will surface at any time. You can be belly laughing with your college roommates over an offensive game of *Cards Against Humanity*, and the sobs turn on like a switch, faster than light.

There are grief varietals:

Loss you chose.

Loss you didn’t choose.

Loss you expected.

Loss you didn't expect.

What makes grief harder, I think, are the socially accepted responses that sound comforting but feel callous—*at least you knew it was coming, or she's in a better place*. These comments do nothing to care for the living, for the ones left here. Grief is not always about death. It can be about change, about the loss of a self, a role, an imagined future. And just as grief is multifaceted, so is individuality. Chopin's losses are not Gilman's losses, Gilman's grief does not look like Edna's, and neither of them look exactly like mine or yours.

I don't want to be disingenuous. I fear that, actually. You know the author who writes a book about being a teacher but has never taught? I have an involuntary *you-think-you-know-what-you're-talking-about-but-you-don't* response to that work. So I need to be honest: I do not have the experience of being a long-term caregiver. My mother is alive, she does not live in Florida, and she has been a long time advocate of reusable straws.

I do have the experience of becoming a mother. The first time I became a mother was terrifying. Who trusted me to leave the hospital with an infant? I cried on the way home. Would the baby like the apartment? I was illogical and overwhelmed and certain I wouldn't be able to do it. Yet I had no choice. I read books. I asked for help. I went to a lactating mothers' support group—after mocking the fact that such a thing existed. I nursed and I cried and more than once I wet my pants. There was a series of humbling

events I could never have been prepared for, despite intentionally preparing for ten months.

Just under a month after giving birth, I was at a Fourth of July barbecue. A woman came up to me and asked my name.

“Kristen,” I told her.

“Not anymore,” she said. “Now it’s Joe’s mom.”

At the time, I found it endearing. I felt pride. And I did the same thing to other women—“Listen to Maggie’s mom,” or “Tell Michael’s mom I said hello!” (I later realized this was also a convenient way to cover up forgetting people’s names.) You’ve probably done this too, even if you’re not a parent. At weddings or family events, people introduce themselves as someone’s daughter, someone’s wife, someone’s mother.

It is a broadly accepted way to refer to women as possessions. It is an erasure of personhood. It leaves you nameless.

When I was about thirteen, my parents let me have a small TV in my bedroom. No cable. I watched a lot of PBS. I was instantly transfixed by *The Yellow Wallpaper* on *Masterpiece Theatre*. I don’t remember everything clearly, but I vividly remember the woman crawling, hands and knees, into the wallpaper as it blurred into a forest—or something like that. Reality itself seemed to smear. What made me keep watching, despite not fully understanding, was that the woman was a writer. And I fancied myself a writer too. At thirteen, I identified with a fictional woman who writes, who is unsupported by her husband, who is ambivalent about motherhood, who becomes insane.

About a decade later, as an English teacher, a student wrote an essay on *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and I used it as a model in my classes. There it was again—this haunting story that had somehow never left me. It magnetized me before I had the language for why. It spoke to expectations I hadn't yet named.

When I began *The Business of Dying*, it was for a short story workshop. It was—dare I say—easy to write. The narrator's voice was clear and unwavering. She told the story; I typed. Almost compulsively. What I've learned while expanding it, and while researching it, is that this story is not unique in its emotions. None of us has a monopoly on shame. We've all had thoughts we believe we're not supposed to think. We've all been asked to help someone do something we don't want to do. We've all felt guilt. We've all lost someone. This story is about the snare of guilt, shame, and caregiving that traps women into roles and erases personhood.

I started writing it because I felt exceptionally lonely and invisible and wanted to be heard—but was afraid to ask. Somehow, with all my education and experience, I still couldn't find the voice to speak, so I wrote. I believe in the power of story. I believe it can guide us, correct us, heal us, and connect us. It reminds us that we are not alone. I used to find the idea that there is “nothing new under the sun” frightening. Now I take great comfort in it. No matter what you're feeling or where you are, someone has been there before, and someone is there now too.

And yet, there remains—perhaps quieter than in previous generations—the belief that we should keep these things silent. Be grateful. Don't complain. Keep your needs and wants to yourself. I could not escape this expectation: to love being a mother, to be

unbothered by selflessness, to joyfully accept the erasure of self. One can love being a mother without losing oneself, right? It seems not here.

Building on the narrative strategies of namelessness and interiority explored in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*, and *The Business of Dying*, this reflection considers how these themes manifest in lived experience, particularly in caregiving, grief, and societal expectations. Just as these narrators give shape to interior struggles shaped by social pressure, reflection allows us to witness, name, and affirm experiences that are often unspoken or unseen. The literary strategies of namelessness, partial naming, and stream-of-consciousness do more than tell a story—they make visible the tension between autonomy and obligation, the fragility of identity under social constraint, and the quiet burdens of caregiving. Moving from text to life, we see how grief, shame, and the negotiation of self are not only literary themes but also lived realities, and how the act of naming—whether in fiction or personal reflection—functions as both recognition and reclamation.

The connection between literature and lived experience is particularly apparent in how these works illuminate the interior lives of women contending with invisibility caused by engendered, societally imposed roles. The narrators' struggles mirror real-life pressures faced by caregivers and those navigating cultural expectations: their erasure is both structural and psychological. Stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue immerse the reader in thought processes that are fragmented, recursive, and deeply subjective, fostering empathy and giving form to feelings that might otherwise remain unarticulated. Namelessness, or partial naming, heightens this effect, transforming the

narrators into universal figures with whom readers can identify, bridging the gap between specific circumstance and shared experience. Themes of grief, shame, and constrained autonomy recur in all three texts, revealing the tension between what society prescribes and what the individual desires. The narrators reflect what the writers experienced and demonstrate the power of storytelling as a method of witnessing, reclaiming visibility, and asserting selfhood even when it is socially denied.

If these tensions expose the limits of what can be said, *The Business of Dying* challenges the boundaries of what might still be shared. It turns toward the reader not to offer resolution, but recognition. The narrative asks to be engaged—even when it resists enjoyment—and, in doing so, makes space for a quieter kind of consolation: the sense of being seen, of being heard. If storytelling can inform social understanding, as it so often does, the text gestures toward a reconsideration of how we approach illness, aging, and the conversations we tend to avoid, particularly those surrounding death.

Nowhere are these pressures more visible than in motherhood. For those who have lived it, it can function as a kind of Trojan Horse: culturally celebrated as noble, desirable, even a marker of privilege, yet often experienced as isolating and alienating. Beneath the familiar narratives lies an expectation of self-erasure, a quiet demand that a woman surrender her identity in service of an ideal. Women who resist—who say no to being room-mom or yes to something as ordinary as a manicure—are often judged, reinforcing narrow definitions of care and silencing the possibility of a more expansive, multi-faceted self. In this way, cultural expectations continue to position women as existing primarily for others.

Culturally, women exist to care for others. Dehumanization seems to be at an all-time high for those at the margins, yet every culture has mothers, women, aunties, and caregivers. The fictional characters in the literature presented here, and the reality of many women globally, echo Greta Gerwig's 2023 *Barbie* film explaining "the literal impossibility of being a woman" (Gerwig): contradictory demands define contemporary femininity. The contradictory imperatives to be extraordinary, selfless, tireless, and yet never fully successful are simply unsustainable. Society owes it to itself—and to caregivers of all capacities—to do better. Caregiving, illness, and even death strip away personhood, but they do not have to; it is our responsibility to see, support, and sustain one another.

Our caregivers are frequently subsumed by the role itself, their identities narrowed or erased in the process. Even gestures of recognition, such as Mother's Day, attempt to name the person behind the role but often ring hollow. What remains necessary, then, is a reimagining of care: one that allows for the preservation of self, rather than its depletion, and that acknowledges care as both relational and reciprocal.

Like Mother's Day, the multi-billion-dollar global industry touting self-care products, juice cleanses, and crystals is largely "faux self-care" (Gupta, *NYT*). These commodified products claim to fill in the gaps left by systemic lack of support, but they cannot substitute for introspection, reflection, and the social and structural work necessary to sustain caregivers. True care cannot exist without reciprocal care for the caregiver. Studies show that family caregivers experience higher rates of stress, depression, and financial strain than non-caregivers, yet systems rarely provide

meaningful support. Caring for caregivers is not indulgent; it is essential to sustainable compassion and collective well-being.

A deeper part of why we struggle with care is cultural avoidance of illness, aging, and death. These subjects are shrouded in shame and silence. To shift the way we care, we must dismantle that shame—for both the ill and their caretakers—and allow individuals to serve as caregivers while maintaining their sense of self. Education and visibility are crucial; just as driver's ed and sex ed provide practical, preparatory knowledge, structured guidance on caregiving and death literacy could normalize these experiences, reduce shame, and equip people to act with dignity and foresight (Miller & Berger). Increasing recognition for caregivers, including emerging roles such as death doulas, can ensure that the living and dying alike are supported, while the people who stand beside them remain visible and valued (Arthur).

My hope is that we learn to see these shared human experiences as bonds rather than divides, and that we find in them a reason to grow our collective compassion, have open conversations about expectations and needs, and live more purposefully. Just as the narrators in these texts reclaim voice and identity, reflecting on caregiving, grief, and societal expectation reminds us that storytelling—whether in fiction or in our own lives—can illuminate, witness, and guide us toward more humane and sustaining practices.

## **Help for the Hard Conversations/Family Resources**

When faced with the responsibility to take care of someone and prepare for their future, fear of the unknown is a loud enemy. What seems ordinary carries significance, and every choice can ripple beyond the moment. Knowing what to expect and understanding the wishes of our loved ones removes much of this fear, replacing unsettled disease with quiet comfort. Awareness and preparation transform uncertainty into clarity, creating space for steadiness, intentional action, and compassionate presence.

Conversations with loved ones about illness, aging, and death are difficult, uncomfortable, and absolutely imperative. Engaging in these hard discussions honors the aging, respects the sick, and preserves both their identity and our own. By shining a light on the realities of illness, caregiving, and mortality, we replace the shame and avoidance that so often surround these experiences with understanding, dignity, and empathy. Facing these challenges directly allows connection and care to flourish where fear and silence might otherwise dominate.

Accessible and thoughtful, the following resources offer guidance, information, and support for every stage of caregiving:

“5 Conversations to Have With Your Aging Parents” - The New York Times

“The Conversation Project - Get Started”

“‘Carefluencers’ Are Helping Older Loved Ones, and Posting About It”- The New York Times

*The Thirty Six Hour Day* by Nancy L. Mace and Peter V. Rabins

*Dignity for Deeply Forgetful People: How Caregivers Can Meet the Challenges of  
Alzheimer's Disease* by Jade Christine Angelica and Stephen G. Post

*A Beginner's Guide to the End: Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death* by BJ  
Miller and Shoshana Berger

## Bibliography

- ““Carefluencers” Are Helping Older Loved Ones, and Posting about It.” *Nytimes.com*, 3 Apr. 2024, [www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/style/carefluencer-social-media.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/style/carefluencer-social-media.html). Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Alzheimer's Association. “Caregiving.” *Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia*, 2019, [www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving](http://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving).
- American. “Dementia Is a New Way to Be Buddhist.” *Poets.org*, 2019, [poets.org/poem/dementia-new-way-be-buddhist](http://poets.org/poem/dementia-new-way-be-buddhist). Accessed 7 Oct. 2025.
- Applebaum, Allison. “Isolated, Invisible, and In-Need: There Should Be No “I” in Caregiver.” *Palliative and Supportive Care*, vol. 13, no. 3, 21 May 2015, pp. 415–416, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1478951515000413>.
- “Are Funeral Homes Profitable? Funeral Home Profit Margins.” *Funeral Mavericks*, 18 July 2022, [funeralmavericks.com/start/how-much-profit-does-a-funeral-home-make/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20between%202014%20and](http://funeralmavericks.com/start/how-much-profit-does-a-funeral-home-make/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20between%202014%20and). Accessed 3 Apr. 2024.
- Arthur, Alua. *Briefly Perfectly Human*. HarperCollins, 16 Apr. 2024.
- Batalova, Jeanne. “Immigrant Health-Care Workers in the United States.” *Migrationpolicy.org*, 6 Apr. 2023, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrant-health-care-workers-united-states-2021](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrant-health-care-workers-united-states-2021).
- Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. London, Souvenir Press, , Cop, 1973.

- Bertsche, Rachel. *The Kids Are in Bed : Finding Time for Yourself in the Chaos of Parenting*. New York, New York, Plume, 2020.
- . "When Your Name Becomes "Mom," Do Your Other Identities Matter?" *The New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2020,  
[www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/motherhood-identity-crisis.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/motherhood-identity-crisis.html).
- Browning, Robert, et al. *Poems and Letters*. New York, N.Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- Cahill, Susan, et al. *Writing Women's Lives : An Anthology of Autobiographical Narratives by Twentieth-Century American Women Writers*. New York, Harpercollins, 1994.
- Comfort, Nathaniel. "OPENING EUGENICS." *MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW*, vol. 121, no. 6, 1 Nov. 2018, pp. 16–19. *Science Citation Index Expanded*,  
[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=edswsc&AN=000449138300003&site=edslive&scope=site&custid=s8998431](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=edswsc&AN=000449138300003&site=edslive&scope=site&custid=s8998431).
- Contributor, BrandStorytelling. "BrandStorytelling BrandVoice: Human Beings Are Wired for Story: Here's Why." *Forbes*,  
[www.forbes.com/sites/brandstorytelling/2023/10/26/human-beings-are-wired-for-story-heres-why/?sh=62124de62d83](http://www.forbes.com/sites/brandstorytelling/2023/10/26/human-beings-are-wired-for-story-heres-why/?sh=62124de62d83). Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.
- Cueto, Isabella. "After "Losing My Life" Caring for a Sick Partner, a Professor Examines the U.S. Caregiver Crisis." *STAT*, 6 Feb. 2023,  
[www.statnews.com/2023/02/06/caregiver-crisis-laura-mauldin/](http://www.statnews.com/2023/02/06/caregiver-crisis-laura-mauldin/).
- "Daughters Provide as Much Elderly Parent Care as They Can, Sons Do as Little as Possible." *ScienceDaily*,

[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140819082912.htm#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20study%2C%20daughters.](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140819082912.htm#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20study%2C%20daughters.)

“Death Doula Says Life Is More Meaningful If You “Get Real” about the End.” *NPR*, 17 Apr. 2024,

[www.npr.org/2024/04/17/1245264129/death-doula-alua-arthur-briefly-perfectly-human](http://www.npr.org/2024/04/17/1245264129/death-doula-alua-arthur-briefly-perfectly-human).

“Death Doula Says Life Is More Meaningful If You “Get Real” about the End.” *Houston Public Media*, 17 Apr. 2024,

[www.houstonpublicmedia.org/npr/2024/04/17/1245264129/death-doula-says-life-is-more-meaningful-if-you-get-real-about-the-end/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](http://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/npr/2024/04/17/1245264129/death-doula-says-life-is-more-meaningful-if-you-get-real-about-the-end/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

Accessed 7 Mar. 2026.

define. “The Bildungsroman Project.” *The Bildungsroman Project*, 23 Apr. 2013,

[bildungsromanproject.com/define](http://bildungsromanproject.com/define).

“Dementia Care and Treatment: Continuing Inequalities across Europe.”

*Healthcare-In-Europe.com*,

[healthcare-in-europe.com/en/news/dementia-care-treatment-inequality-europe.html#:~:text=On%20the%20basis%20of%20the](http://healthcare-in-europe.com/en/news/dementia-care-treatment-inequality-europe.html#:~:text=On%20the%20basis%20of%20the).

Dey, Deepanwita. “The Dual Consciousness of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s the Awakening.” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol.

7, no. 2, 2022, pp. 330--332, <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.72.47>.

Dosani, Sabina. “The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Gothic Story of Postnatal Psychosis – Psychiatry in Literature.” *The British Journal of Psychiatry*,

vol. 213, no. 1, 27 June 2018, pp. 411–411,

[www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/yellow-wallpaper-by-charlotte-perkins-gilman-a-gothic-story-of-postnatal-psychosis-psychiatry-in-literature/3E254A6C21E2CACA5F539B658DE26A25](http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/yellow-wallpaper-by-charlotte-perkins-gilman-a-gothic-story-of-postnatal-psychosis-psychiatry-in-literature/3E254A6C21E2CACA5F539B658DE26A25),

<https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2018.63>.

Doughty, Caitlin. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes : And Other Lessons from the Crematorium*.

Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 2016.

Dunn, Jancee. “What Not to Say When Someone Is Grieving.” *Nytimes.com*, The New

York Times, 11 Oct. 2024,

[www.nytimes.com/2024/10/11/well/grief-condolences-what-not-to-say.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/11/well/grief-condolences-what-not-to-say.html).

Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

Editors of KateChopin.org. “Biography.” *KateChopin.org*, The Kate Chopin International

Society, 2014, [www.katechopin.org/biography/](http://www.katechopin.org/biography/).

Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Faggen. *Selected Poems*. New York, N.Y.,

U.S.A., Penguin Books, 1997.

Erkoçi, Ilda. “Struggling for a New Identity: Glimpses of Nineteenth Century

Womanhood in the Fiction of Gilman and Chopin.” *Anglo Saxonica*, vol. 20, no.

1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.49>.

Family Caregiver Alliance. “Caregiver Statistics: Demographics.” *Family Caregiver*

*Alliance*, 2016, [www.caregiver.org/resource/caregiver-statistics-demographics/](http://www.caregiver.org/resource/caregiver-statistics-demographics/).

Gagnon, Amy. “Charlotte Perkins Gilman.” *Connecticuthistory.org*, 7 Mar. 2020,

[connecticuthistory.org/charlotte-perkins-gilman/](http://connecticuthistory.org/charlotte-perkins-gilman/).

- Geddes, Linda. "Fridge Magnets Can Be Cool Aid to Holiday Memory Recall, Study Finds." *The Guardian*, 18 Mar. 2024,  
[www.theguardian.com/science/2024/mar/18/fridge-magnets-can-be-cool-aid-to-holiday-memory-recall-study-finds?CMP=fb\\_gu&utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2jpJVotUpJZD1aXH0svCACXyfEWK5yDVQUCAe sPXJ4UEX3x\\_ZbAKxZaNE#Echobox=1710779688](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/mar/18/fridge-magnets-can-be-cool-aid-to-holiday-memory-recall-study-finds?CMP=fb_gu&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2jpJVotUpJZD1aXH0svCACXyfEWK5yDVQUCAe sPXJ4UEX3x_ZbAKxZaNE#Echobox=1710779688). Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. *The New England Magazine*, Jan. 1892.
- Grose, Jessica. "Opinion | the "Impossible Life" of Equal Devotion to Art and Mothering." *The New York Times*, 1 May 2024,  
[www.nytimes.com/2024/05/01/opinion/equivalents-radcliffe.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/01/opinion/equivalents-radcliffe.html).
- Guardian staff reporter. "I'm a Death Expert. I Designed Eight Questions to Help You Think about Dying." *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 24 Oct. 2024,  
[www.theguardian.com/wellness/2024/oct/24/think-about-dying-death-meaning-belief?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](http://www.theguardian.com/wellness/2024/oct/24/think-about-dying-death-meaning-belief?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other). Accessed 28 Oct. 2024.
- Gupta, Alisha Haridasani. "How to Escape "Faux Self-Care."” *The New York Times*, 15 Mar. 2023,  
[www.nytimes.com/2023/03/15/well/mind/self-care-womens-health.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/15/well/mind/self-care-womens-health.html).
- Heffington, Peggy O'Donnell. "Opinion | Why Women Not Having Kids Became a Panic." *The New York Times*, 6 May 2023,  
[www.nytimes.com/2023/05/06/opinion/women-without-children-history.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/06/opinion/women-without-children-history.html).
- Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. 1992. fourth ed.

- “Home Care Costs in Each State.” *W*[www.aplaceformom.com](http://www.aplaceformom.com), 24 Oct. 2023,  
[www.aplaceformom.com/caregiver-resources/articles/in-home-care-costs](http://www.aplaceformom.com/caregiver-resources/articles/in-home-care-costs).
- “How to Know When a Person with Dementia Is Nearing the End of Their Life | Alzheimer’s Society.” *W*[www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk),  
[www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/recognising-when-someone-reaching-end-their-life#:~:text=A%20person%20in%20the%20later%20stages%20of%20dementia%20is%20likely](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/recognising-when-someone-reaching-end-their-life#:~:text=A%20person%20in%20the%20later%20stages%20of%20dementia%20is%20likely).
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York, N.Y, Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 1932.
- Kent, Erin E., et al. “The Family Caregiving Crisis Meets an Actual Pandemic.” *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, vol. 60, no. 1, 1 July 2020, pp. e66–e69,  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7151363/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7151363/),  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2020.04.006>.
- Lewis, Kara. “Senior Care and Aging around the World.” *A Place for Mom*, 3 Aug. 2020,  
[www.aplaceformom.com/caregiver-resources/articles/how-different-cultures-care-for-seniors](http://www.aplaceformom.com/caregiver-resources/articles/how-different-cultures-care-for-seniors).
- Lloret, Maria-Angeles, et al. “Is Sleep Disruption a Cause or Consequence of Alzheimer’s Disease? Reviewing Its Possible Role as a Biomarker.” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 3, 10 Feb. 2020, p. 1168,  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms21031168>.
- Martin, Anna, et al. ““Modern Love Podcast”: One Last Conversation, with the Help of A.I.” *The New York Times*, 23 Oct. 2024,

[www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/podcasts/one-last-conversation-with-the-help-of-ai.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/podcasts/one-last-conversation-with-the-help-of-ai.html)? Accessed 23 Oct. 2024.

“Millennials and Gen Xers Might Be the Unluckiest Caregivers in History. Here’s How Their Crisis Is Affecting Every Workplace.” *Fortune*, 8 Dec. 2023, [fortune.com/2023/12/08/millennials-gen-x-unluckiest-caregivers-crisis-workplace-bill-novelli/](https://fortune.com/2023/12/08/millennials-gen-x-unluckiest-caregivers-crisis-workplace-bill-novelli/). Accessed 11 Mar. 2024.

Miller, B J. *BEGINNER’S GUIDE to the END : Everything You Need to Know to Live Fully and Die Well*. 2019.

Molter, Cheri. *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Experience: An Analysis of the Literary Devices in Her Short Stories*. 2018.

Montgomery, Rhonda J. V., et al. “Effects of the TCARE® Intervention on Caregiver Burden and Depressive Symptoms: Preliminary Findings from a Randomized Controlled Study.” *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, vol. 66B, no. 5, 1 Sept. 2011, pp. 640–647, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3202705/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3202705/), <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbr088>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2020.

NPR. “Why Are Women’s Health Concerns Dismissed so Often?” *NPR*, NPR, 4 Jan. 2023, [www.npr.org/2023/01/04/1146931012/why-are-womens-health-concerns-dismissed-so-often#:~:text=Berry%2FGetty%20Images-](http://www.npr.org/2023/01/04/1146931012/why-are-womens-health-concerns-dismissed-so-often#:~:text=Berry%2FGetty%20Images-).

“Opinion | Family Caregiving Should Be Seen as an Expectation — Not an Exception.” *Washington Post*, 22 May 2023,

[www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/22/family-care-crisis-emily-kenway/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/22/family-care-crisis-emily-kenway/)  
 . Accessed 11 Mar. 2024.

Osterweis, Marian, et al. "Sociocultural Influences." *Nih.gov*, National Academies Press (US), 2013, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217844/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217844/).

"Perspective | Have We Been Doing Self-Care All Wrong?" *Washington Post*, 1 Oct. 2021,

[www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/self-care-meaning-history/2021/10/01/c4f8a1ea-2232-11ec-9309-b743b79abc59\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/self-care-meaning-history/2021/10/01/c4f8a1ea-2232-11ec-9309-b743b79abc59_story.html).

Post, Stephen G. *Dignity for Deeply Forgetful People*. JHU Press, 31 May 2022.

Rauch, Jonathan. "Letting Go of My Father: The Atlantic." *The Atlantic*, 1 Apr. 2010, [eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=10&sid=43248982-e17c-4e5d-bc58-35da4aae5345%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPXNzbyZzaXRIPWVkey1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=edsglr.A228149884&db=edsglr](https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=10&sid=43248982-e17c-4e5d-bc58-35da4aae5345%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPXNzbyZzaXRIPWVkey1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=edsglr.A228149884&db=edsglr). Accessed 9 Apr. 2024.

"Real Self-Care Takes Real Systemic Change : Code Switch." *NPR*, 19 Apr. 2023, [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2023/04/19/1170063872/self-care-laid-bare](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2023/04/19/1170063872/self-care-laid-bare).

Rosen, Aliza. "Caring for Caregivers of People with Alzheimer's Disease | Johns Hopkins | Bloomberg School of Public Health." *Publichealth.jhu.edu*, 20 Jan. 2023, [publichealth.jhu.edu/2023/caring-for-caregivers-of-people-with-alzheimers-disease](http://publichealth.jhu.edu/2023/caring-for-caregivers-of-people-with-alzheimers-disease).

- Rusciano, Aly . “Kate Chopin’s Technical Artistry in “the Awakening.”” *PopMatters*, 16 Sept. 2021, [www.popmatters.com/kate-chopin-the-awakening](http://www.popmatters.com/kate-chopin-the-awakening).
- Russ, Sprinkle. “KATE CHOPIN’S the AWAKENING: A CRITICAL RECEPTION.” *Studylib.net*, 1998, [studylib.net/doc/9207551/kate-chopin-s-the-awakening--a-critical-reception](http://studylib.net/doc/9207551/kate-chopin-s-the-awakening--a-critical-reception).
- Sacks, Sam. “The Rise of the Nameless Narrator.” *The New Yorker*, 2017, [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-rise-of-the-nameless-narrator](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-rise-of-the-nameless-narrator).
- Sharon Robin Kaufman. *The Ageless Self : Sources of Meaning in Late Life*. Scarborough, Ont., New American Library Of Canada, 1987.
- “Support for Loss.” *Empathy*, [www.empathy.com/](http://www.empathy.com/).
- “Ten Real-Life Strategies for Dementia Caregiving.” *Family Caregiver Alliance*, [www.caregiver.org/resource/ten-real-life-strategies-dementia-caregiving/](http://www.caregiver.org/resource/ten-real-life-strategies-dementia-caregiving/).
- Tennyson, Alfred. *8A9 Choice of [Alfred] Tennyson’s Verse*. 1971.
- “The Eugenics Crusade | Full Documentary | AMERICAN EXPERIENCE | PBS.” *Wwww.youtube.com*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmRb-0v5xfl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmRb-0v5xfl).
- “There’s a Daughter-Care Crisis in America. This Is Why Health Care Needs to Address It.” *Katz Institute for Women’s Health*, 2019, [www.northwell.edu/katz-institute-for-womens-health/articles/daughter-care-crisis](http://www.northwell.edu/katz-institute-for-womens-health/articles/daughter-care-crisis).
- “This Is Why Every Couple Should Want at Least One Daughter.” *HuffPost*, 19 Aug. 2014, [www.huffpost.com/entry/children-caregiving-for-parents\\_n\\_5688705](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/children-caregiving-for-parents_n_5688705).
- Tucker, P. “Helping Medical Students Understand Postpartum Psychosis through the Prism of “the Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.” *Academic*

*Psychiatry*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2004, pp. 247–250,

<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ap.28.3.247>.

“Why Are Women Who Don’t Have Children Still so Judged?” *The Guardian*, 12 Apr.

2023,

[www.theguardian.com/society/2023/apr/12/why-are-women-who-dont-have-children-still-so-judged](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/apr/12/why-are-women-who-dont-have-children-still-so-judged).

“Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.” [ic.media.mit.edu](http://ic.media.mit.edu),

[ic.media.mit.edu/people/davet/yp/whyiwrote.html](http://ic.media.mit.edu/people/davet/yp/whyiwrote.html).

“Widow’s Peak.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 Aug. 2022,

[lareviewofbooks.org/article/widows-peak/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/widows-peak/). Accessed 3 Apr. 2024.

Williams, Christina. “Reading beyond Modern Feminism: Kate Chopin’s the

*Awakening*.” *An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, vol. 10, no. 10, 2008,

[scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=tor](http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=tor).

Wood, Stephanie. ““I Fret about the Years That Lie Ahead”: The Unique Caring Burden

of Single Childless Daughters.” *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2023,

[www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/dec/03/i-fret-about-the-years-that-lie-ahead-the-unique-caring-burden-of-single-childless-daughters](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/dec/03/i-fret-about-the-years-that-lie-ahead-the-unique-caring-burden-of-single-childless-daughters). Accessed 16 Apr.

2024.

## VITA

Full Name: Kristen Marie Coughlin

Place and date of birth: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania    December 1, 1975

Parents Names: Jennifer Grogg and Robert Karlicek

Educational Institutions:

<u>School</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Date</u>
South Plainfield High School	South Plainfield, NJ	diploma	June 1993
Franklin Pierce University	Rindge, NH	B.A.	May 1997
Saint Elizabeth University	Florham Park, NJ	M.A.	May 2004
Drew University	Madison, NJ	D.Litt	May 2026