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## Dear Ma



Dear Ma,

It's been nine years since you've been gone. Since you died. For a long time, I couldn't even utter the word—died. I'd just say, "My mother is gone. My mother has passed." When I spoke it out loud, it physically hurt. I could feel my chest cranking tighter and tighter, the pressure like a cork in a fancy French wine bottle. Any minute, my heart would surely pop.

With each May that passes, it becomes easier to breathe. It used to be a month I wanted to skip over completely. May 4, while people on Facebook joked, "May the fourth be with you," then posted a stupid picture of Yoda. May 4, your birthday, solely belonging to you, not George Lucas. A week later is Mother's Day. And since your birthday and Mother's Day were always so close together, in my mind, they mashed as one. Mom's birthday—Mother's Day. The month of Mom. The month of May. Next came May 11, the day you died. The anniversary of your death. You always prided yourself on efficiency. You did the whole Lion King, Circle-of-Life thing—all in one tidy month. Now that's taking care of business.

I wonder where you are. I can't say I totally believe that you made it to heaven, since we never went to church. You were a bit hostile about the God thing. (Don't deny it, you were very passive aggressive.) I also don't know if I believe in ghosts or spirits either. I guess if I had to think of you, it would be as a stream of sunlight.

When we first moved into the Spanish, Mediterranean-style house in Berkeley, California, I set your urn right by one of the dome-shaped windows in the living room. Your ashes sat next to the only greenery in the house. A plant, that looked like a mini tree, that somehow managed to stay alive. I'm pretty sure it was because of you. One day, we were in the living room and noticed this crazy beam of light coming through the window where your urn and plant sat. It was a four o'clock shadow projected on the hard wood floor, and Albert said, "Look, it's your mom." We both stared at the light. That was the only time I felt you. I think I made a funny noise because I knew that the light would come by every day. That meant I would get to see you every day. It was something.

I've read there's no timeline when it comes to grief. There are stages but no clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. The word circular or cyclical is used often. Also "processing" is an important part of it. (Yes, if you're wondering, I read some books about grieving and loss. If I read self-help books to learn how to find a mate, don't you think I'd go to the library and read up on this, too?) I've learned something that a book couldn't tell me, though: If you suppress grief, if you don't deal with it, it doesn't go away. It eventually comes out. That's why losing you was doubly hard—because technically, I was orphaned twice. (Don't roll your eyes.) I'm not trying to play victim. I'm just pointing out that you were the second mother I lost. You liked to say that I came from the belly of a 747 that flew from Seoul, Korea to the Philly airport — that I came from metal. I was a three-year-old newborn. But do you see that by not allowing my birth mother in the house, by cutting her out of my history, I was never able to grieve her? So when you abandoned me, I had so much loss to make up for.

Having you die was my worst childhood fear. Remember all the dreams I had as a kid of you getting murdered in your bed? A man with a black mask kept stabbing you to death as I watched. Or the clowns throwing darts at you? So when it happened, when you died, I thought I would die with you. I thought that your lifeline was my lifeline. But I was wrong. I'm still here. Turns out my lungs could breathe all on their own.

On the one-year anniversary of your death, I hit my first grieving "crisis." It was May, the month of all of your anniversaries. I was lying in bed, immobile from a bad cold, and I remember thinking, *Is this how you felt when you were sick? How you didn't have the energy to do simple pleasures like reading or watching TV. How you missed the smell of outside air and the heat from the sun.* Being sick consumed me with you. Then I remembered the anger. The way you handled the news that you had stage IV breast cancer, how you kept it a secret from me the first time you were diagnosed. How you lied. That made me wonder what else you'd kept from me. How private you've always been. I panicked. I never knew you. You as a woman before you became my mother. Suddenly I wanted to know what you were like as a child. I wanted to know who you had crushes on in high school. I wanted to know what you were like as a young lady in her late twenties, like I was. I thought in order to know me, I had to find you.

So I went on a hunt. I was going to make a documentary about your life. (And prove that my NYU undergraduate film degree was not a waste of money.) We traveled around the U.S. and found all your friends and family. Everyone was so willing to talk about you. We videotaped them and learned stories you never told me. (Were you screaming at me with your eyebrows all furrowed?) After we got home from all of the traveling, I put the 40 mini-DV tapes deep in a closet. I haven't touched them since. I think I just needed to do something proactive. I needed to feel that I was participating in the grieving process. I was impatient and just wanted to cross it off my to-do list. I thought there would be an end to it all.

Besides the documentary, another way I've been able to process your death is through writing.

You know I got an MFA in creative writing, right? I focused on creative non-fiction, so it's all based on my real-life experiences. It always was, but this time I could be upfront about it. (Are you upset? Don't answer that.) I know you never approved of my dream of being a writer. You thought I'd die in a gutter somewhere without a pension plan. Your too-practical mind couldn't see the merits, the benefits of writing. Of expressing feelings. And even though it's an uphill battle going against your wishes, I'm doing it. Since you've been gone, I've had to give *myself* the permission that I used to need from you.

Also, you should know, I've developed a bad habit, well, obsession really—House Hunting. I could waste hours scouring the Craigslist real estate ads, searching for the right home. I always have the HGTV channel on with its never-ending *House Hunters*, *Property Virgins*, and *My First Place* shows, the same way some people keep CNN on mute. As background comfort. I started to form a strong design aesthetic—nothing contemporary, modern, new, sleek. Nothing built after the 1970's. I didn't mind mid-century modern or craftsman style. But the Victorians, the Edwardians, and the Queen Anne's in San Francisco

made me swoon with the same flush of heat I felt for my teenage crushes. I fell in love with the past.

I know what you're thinking. The irony has not escaped me that you, too, were obsessed with old houses. I remember how all of our vacations were centered around house tours. You were partial to dead presidents' houses in the south. As you wistfully touched the velvet of an upright chair, I longed for the gift shop, my reward for withstanding the tedium. Furniture, big whoop, I thought. A new silver bracelet, a stack of postcards or peppermint sticks, now that was the real deal.

When my house hunting started to get in the way of daily life, I emailed a friend, not understanding where this frothing, out-of-control need came from. In plain Helvetica font, she told me, "Could it be that you're searching for a physical home now that you've lost your metaphorical home?" Of course! That had to be it. I always equated you to home. Now, when I look at houses, when I have a chance to travel and soak in different seas—I miss you. It hits me between the eyes. It sinks from my chest to my toes. I think about how you would have loved this house or that one. I wished our appreciation, our understanding could have been in sync. When you appreciated it, I didn't get it. But now that I appreciate it, you're gone.

"You're a weeping willow," my best friend said. I knew what she meant. Me—the girl who wasn't allowed to cry, now just had to think of a mom memory and the just-add-water came on cue. I cried thinking about the lilac trees in our large backyard of my childhood home. We had purple and white ones, and right before we made the trek to North Jersey to visit Grandma and Aunt Jane, the long claw clippers came out and snapped bushels of purple and white balls. Those intermingling colors were always purple heavy. You used to say, "The purple were prettier, but the white lilacs were more flavorful." They smelled sweeter. They had staying power. So tabletops in our house had white bushels—not purple.

So anyway. As with everything, there has to be an end. This letter has gone on long enough. I can tell you're tapping your foot saying, "Speed it up Lynne. Cut to the point. Enough already. Enough!" Plus, I know you can't stand this sappy stuff. Just know that I think about you every day. That I still cry for you. That I love you. And that I am ok. I'm better than ok. I'm really happy, Ma. So don't worry. Go play mahjong or go eat some key lime pie or whatever it is that you do wherever you are.

Love,

Your daughter,

[Lynne](#)

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**Kathryn Reiss** · Professor of English at Mills College

So beautifully written, Lynne! A tribute to your mother, and a piece of your heart, right out there for the rest of us to share. Thank you.

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