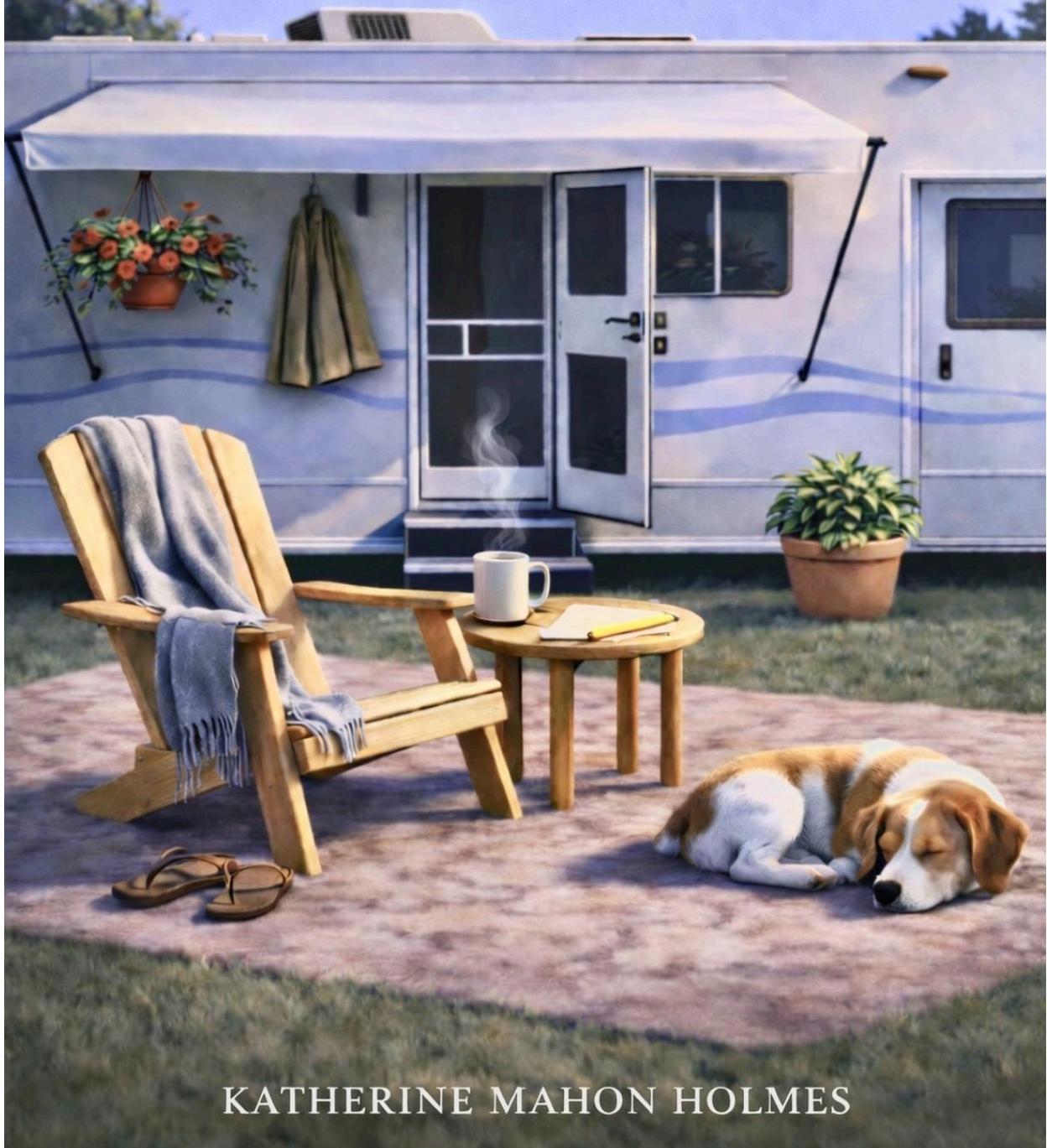


Me & My RV

A Widow's Season of Grief



KATHERINE MAHON HOLMES

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Katherine Mahon Holmes

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For Malcolm

Mom & Dad

in every season.

APPRECIATION

Some people carried me through grief itself — and through the writing of it.

Mary, my daughter: for her quiet, steady support. For introducing me to my writing teacher and opening a rich world of memoir — a two-year writing group with writers from across the country that changed me — and for lending me her apartment for a week so I could retreat and write.

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Andrew, Rosemary, and John: for making sure my RV and I made it from Maine to Texas — Andrew for driving from Arlington, Massachusetts to Connecticut (home base); Rosemary for being home base; and John for flying to Connecticut and driving with me as fast as we could to reach Texas by Thanksgiving — and his birthday.

Sarina — Malcolm in female form, beside me every step of the way

.

Thank you for being here.

May these pages keep you company.

— Katherine

INTRODUCTION

I'll say it now: this memoir is not about my RV.

Truth be told, I didn't live in it for very long. I lived in it from September of 2020 through October, then drove it 2,184 miles from my home in Maine to my brother's driveway in Texas.

There it sat, uninhabited, while my brother and I lived inside his home during those winter months when the country waited for the COVID-19 vaccine—and then waited in long car lines to receive it.

In the spring, I traveled across the country with one of my dearest friends, Sarina, from Houston to Maine for about a month. Then lived in it on my property for another four months.

So for the better part of half a year, I lived in the RV.

The beginning months were the best.

I gutted everything I didn't want and replaced it with a black-and-white farmhouse design, fresh white paint, and light grey laminate plank flooring.

Simple.

Easy on the eyes.

Just the right size for one person, a dog, and an occasional guest.

A space I could handle.

Not the larger house my husband left me with to live in alone.

My plan was to live in the RV for the remainder of my life, traveling with my home during the winter when Maine's cold and darkness became too much to bear.

I did not know at the time that none of my family or friends believed my RV was my forever home, like I believe it was.

They were relieved to see me invested in a project during this impossible loss of the love of my life gone too soon and unexpectedly.

My fantasy did not include RV parts loosening and flapping in the wind as I drove, or plastic RV-specific gadgets breaking– like the cover to the cute little toilet and the miniature faucet knobs, both expensive and seemingly impossible to replace.

I didn't anticipate the floorboards chipping from road vibration, or the tiny-house charm turning into a grimy, dusty, musty atmosphere one might feel after a week of camping in a tent in the rain.

And the clutter.

Oh my word, the clutter.

These realities made me realize that having a too-big, fully paid-for house wasn't the worst problem to have–especially knowing this oversized tin can, whose air conditioner broke at the end of the summer, had a heater that was double-dog-daring me to use it again that winter.

So, this is not a memoir about living in my RV.

It is a memoir of how it led me to write through my grief.

The writing is what got me through

CHAPTER 1

August 2019

August 8

These are my favorite days of summer.

The blackflies and mosquitoes are nearly gone.

Malcolm teaches summer marine biology class only until noon, so he's home for the rest of the day. As much as possible, I've organized my schedule to work while he's teaching. We can have the afternoons to do whatever we want.

We've been choosing places to take walks, and longer hikes on weekend days. On these half days, we usually take a walk on a beach. Lately, it's been Roque Bluffs Beach. He takes his students to all the beaches around here.

He loves teaching this class in the summer for two reasons. One, because the students choose the class, so everyone is interested and engaged. Second, summer classes require no grading, so there is no paperwork required.

It's a teacher's heaven.

Today, we chose Jasper Beach. I love how its sun-heated dark gray rocks warm every step of my bare feet.

As we walk along the beach, we see the coolest thing. Someone had collected a bunch of white rocks and outlined a huge heart set within the jasper stones.

It inspires us to create something too.

So we gathered more white rocks.

I start making a swirling sun. He was about fifty feet away, making his creation.

I finish and join him.

He is writing our initials inside a heart.

What a sweetheart he is, I think.

I help him finish.

He's been working out more regularly this summer. Today he told me he challenged his students to a running race and beat them. He said it just about killed him, but he was amazed he could run faster than these fit high schoolers.

I was impressed too.

He was also wearing those khaki cargo shorts I love with all the pockets and his button-down blue jean shirt.

He has no idea how attractive he is in that outfit to me.

We drove home in his beloved Willys Jeep with the top down. My sea-salt-infused hair blew every which way.

Our silly favorite song came on the radio, the one that makes me laugh at the thought of us singing it.

Two grown adults in their fifties with proper professional jobs singing with Ed Sheeran, "I'm in love with your body, ooh ah oh ah oh ah," and grooving out to the beat.

If you know the song, you gotta admit, it's a cool beat.

But any student witnessing "Mr. Holmes" and his wife grooving and singing to it would laugh at us old farts.

We get home and start dinner.

Steak on the grill and salad.

That's been our pattern, lately.

He grills the protein.

I make the salad.

We've been eating outside on the deck so often that this, too, has become part of our routine.

Our dog missed out on the beach, so after dinner and clean-up, we take Remi for a walk on the trail to the bridge and back.

And then we settle into the hot tub.

Again, part of our summer routine.

This year, we positioned the portable hot tub perfectly on the back porch to see a fuller view of the night sky.

What's even cooler, we can see the planes' flight paths arc the entire sky, and they are so far up that their sound is undetectable.

Just a normal summer day. But it is my heaven.

August 14

Mal came home a few days ago with what looked like a tick bite. There was no tick, but there was a bullseye.

He agreed to make an appointment with Dr. Rioux to rule out Lyme disease. He scheduled it for next week.

I wish he had asked to be seen immediately.

That's something not to wait around for.

August 19

The test Dr. Rioux ordered for Lyme isn't conclusive yet, but seems most likely he has Lyme disease.

So he's on the horrible antibiotics that are murder on the stomach.

I took a round of them once, and it's no picnic.

I'm relieved, though, that it's being taken care of.

CHAPTER 2

September 19 2019

I can barely write this. I don't understand how this has all happened.

From a tick bite,
to an upset stomach from the antibiotics,
to stage-four terminal abdominal cancer.

The morning we were told, Malcolm and I calmly waited for Dr. Rioux in exam room number five.

This was our third visit, ruling out all sorts of possibilities for Malcolm's abdominal discomfort.

Doctor's offices are usually stress-producing for me, as I don't like closed-in places. But since I've given chair massages in these exam rooms for years to Dr. Rioux and his staff, I was comfortable here.

Dr. Rioux had previously reviewed lab results that did not indicate what was causing Malcolm's ascites—a condition I never heard of until now. A build-up of fluid in the abdomen that requires draining. A procedure called paracentesis.

We had already driven twice—carefully over bumps in the road because going over them was so painful for this usually high-pain-tolerant, strong man— to Maine Coast Hospital in Ellsworth, over an hour away, for a paracentesis.

This condition is common in people whose liver is shot from years of heavy drinking.

Malcolm is not a heavy drinker.

Why he had this condition had been a mystery, but so far, cancer had been ruled out.

So I wasn't too worried.

“It's just this damn tick bite and antibiotics that are murder on the stomach. It just really messed up his stomach. So much so he's had to take time off from school and get a substitute to teach his classes.”

This is what my mind believed and what I told concerned friends and family.

Dr. Rioux said one test result was not in his chart, so he excused himself to call the lab, which is why we were waiting for him.

His assistant, Renee, whom I know well, left with him, chiming they'd be right back.

He comes back alone, closes the door, takes his glasses off by the rim with his left thumb and index finger.

Squeezes his eyes and touches them with his right thumb and index finger before saying anything.

He is more than our doctor.

He and Malcolm have shared many delightful conversations about medicine and science, probably more than he has with most of his patients.

And I have known Dr. Rioux for years.

I've been allowed to pass through the imaginary "Do Not Pass" door to the hallway of the examination rooms because I'm the person with the massage chair flung over my shoulder, whom his medical staff are happy to see every Monday at noon.

We are not just patients.

When Dr. Rioux clears his throat to finally say, "I'm so sorry to tell you this. You have stage four abdominal cancer," I know now why Renee did not come back with him.

She was probably crying in the back office and telling the rest of the staff the news.

We both respond matter-of-factly.

Malcolm asks, "What do we do next?"

Dr. Rioux straightens his torso and places his glasses back onto his face.

"We start chemotherapy for six weeks and evaluate if it's fighting the cancer cell growth. If so, we do another round of chemo."

His voice is starting to echo in my head.

I am not absorbing what he is saying.

My mind searches for reassurance and coming up with phrases like:

This is all fine.

He's going to die, but not really.

That is just not possible.

We got up from our seats.

Mal and Dr. Rioux have settled into the common ground of talking practically.

Medically.

Scientifically.

Emotions had found a box in which to be sealed.

Dr. Rioux shakes our hands.

We both say, "Thank you, Dr. Rioux."

We walk out of exam room five, down the hallway toward the door I walk through every Monday.

We pass some of the staff and Mal and I do our thing—smiling cheerfully, wanting to take care of the teary-eyed staff.

We are fine.

Don't worry.

We've got this.

Our faces tell them.

In the parking lot, Malcolm climbs into the driver's seat of his Jeep.

I hop into the passenger's seat.

We close our doors and stare ahead.

“What do you want to do first, Malcolm?”

“Well, first, I need to tell Tim and Jud,”

This is the first moment reality breaks through my denial wall.

My stomach drops. My throat tightens.

These are the men with whom Mal has worked, fought administrator-vs-teacher battles, built deep friendships, and whom he respects deeply.

We are going to break their hearts with this news.

“Then, we go home and begin making calls for appointments. After that, I’ll tell my kids. I’ll call Jessie, Stephen, and Tanya. I can’t think about telling Britnie yet.”

Before starting up the Jeep, Mal calls Washington Academy and asks to speak to Tim.

“Hey, Tim. It’s Malcolm. Do you have time to talk?”

I can hear Tim’s voice through the phone.

“Come right over.”

Mal puts his phone down and looks at me.

His eyes are filling with tears.

It is then that I hold his head in my arms, against my chest, so he can just rest for a minute.

He is so tired.

The tonnage of this new reality has entered his body. I can feel it heavy on my chest.

He can be weak, and I can be strong.

I don’t feel my denial.

I don’t feel overwhelmed.

I could lift this Jeep with the both of us in it and take him wherever he wanted to go with my mother-bear strength.

Maybe it's shock. Maybe it's from decades of being a mom. I don't know.

All I can think of is:

Thank you, God this is what emerged from somewhere inside me.

"Malcolm, when you're ready, how about I drive to WA?"

His head nods against my chest.

After a long pause, he lifts his head.

We get out of the Jeep and pass each other as we walk around the rear to switch seats.

I drive us the two miles to WA and park in his spot outside of the science classroom doors.

It's been his parking spot for almost a decade.

It's the place where I met him for our first date on a Saturday afternoon after he finished teaching a Hunter Safety course and I finished weeding my garden.

I am pleased no one has taken it while he has been out sick.

We hold hands walking up the side steps to the front entrance.

I can't help the burning sensation behind my eyes and the tears welling up in them.

I know we are about to change reality for many, many people who love this man.

The office staff is the first ripple.

They already knew the reason Mal had been absent was because he'd been in so much pain. So upon seeing us they know we may be there with some answers.

We walk through the front entrance. Immediately to the left are the office staff. I see these cheerful women see us.

Our heaviness wafts through to their space, and the cheerfulness ceases.

A smile is plastered on my face, but my eyes are glassy. I feel unapologetic for the weight I brought into the room.

I want it that way.

I want everyone to stop talking and make a quiet path for Malcolm.

I want everyone to know this was a moment that will be frozen in time and they are part of it. A moment they didn't know what was happening, but knew it was important to stop their normal lives.

Tim came out of his office to greet us.

“Hey, Malcolm. Hi Katherine. Come on in.”

We sit in chairs facing his mahogany desk. He closed his office door and sits.

Mal is as factual as he can muster, “I have stage four cancer. I need at least this semester for a six-week round of chemotherapy. We will see where we are at from there.”

“Malcolm,” Tim clears his throat, “I am so sorry,”

Mal pauses. Looks down. Swallows. Then continues as if Tim hadn't spoken.

“Mr. Sunde can easily take over the planning lessons for physics.”

Tim gently pushes back, “We'll take care of all that.”

Mal pauses again. Looks down. Swallows. Licks his lips and rubs them together for a good few seconds.

The absence of any of our voices and the hum of the air conditioner fills the room with dense tension.

Mal looks up at Tim.

Tim and I glance at each other, gently agreeing to appease Malcolm's wish to continue stating his plan.

“Mr. Sprangers can take over chemistry and marine biology. Mrs. Maker can take over the science club and Student Council. She'll like that...she'll do a great job.”

Tim is a trooper and just listens.

I allow my tears to fall for both of them, holding all of our sadness, which seems to make it possible for the two friends and colleagues to connect without emotions taking over.

I realize later, sometime after Malcolm died, why this moment remained in my memory as something tender and sacred.

Without really understanding it then, Tim and I were bore witness as Malcolm said goodbye to his life as a teacher.

CHAPTER 3

Measuring

Some thirty years ago, when my firstborn was just shy of three years old, his sister was born. He had never met another human littler than him. He would ever so gently place his hands around her tiny head, measuring it by making four sides with his hands, trying to figure her out. It took me a while to understand what he was doing.

That scene plays in my mind frequently these days. It happens during in-between times—walking down my hallway, moving from one task to another, or while washing dishes—when my mind wanders. I feel my mind making boxes around empty spaces with hands...around nothingness, measuring.

I can't figure out what life is supposed to look like without him.

CHAPTER 4

RV Beginnings

Months before we had any idea cancer was lurking, when life seemed like a happy song to which I knew all the words— I talked a lot about getting away from our long Maine winters.

There's a name for older Mainers who love Maine but leave during the winter because it's become too cold for them: Snowbirds. I used to think of it as a derogatory term, but in my fifth decade of life, with every seasonal depression I felt in winter, I identified with it more and more.

My husband, being a high school teacher, didn't have much flexibility to leave in the winter. Plus, he didn't need to. He didn't get tired of winter in Maine. He loved it here all year.

After a career in the Air Force taking him all over the world, retiring, divorcing, going back to school for a degree to teach science, finding his calling to teach in the same high school he attended, and then meeting me, he was pretty content to stay put.

He loved his life here, and though I did too, I liked to dream about where we could go together when he retired.

For now, lifting my face for a few weeks in February to a warm sun, in at least fifty-degree weather, wearing shorts and a T-shirt somewhere south of Maine was all I needed—on a schoolteacher-and-massage-therapist's limited budget.

I feasted on a few dreamy ideas and shared all of them with Malcolm as they came to mind:

1. Drive to the closest warm place on the East Coast and rent an Airbnb.
2. Purchase a small trailer and stay wherever I want.
3. Dust off my hiking/camping equipment and tent.

I think I wore the poor man down, because one day he came home from the summer school class he was teaching and said we should look at lightweight trailers that I could haul with my car. He had looked into the cost and figured we could pay it off with a five-year loan.

After looking at several, my dream of getting away in winter became our dream.

He suggested we rent a cabin in a campground over his spring break, to see if I'd like it. If I did, then we should purchase a camper for the next winter.

We agreed North Carolina would be warm enough for me and close enough to drive to in a day or so, with both of us driving.

I think it was more he couldn't bear imagining me doing this alone without his protection than his dream, but whatever the case, that summer, with a happy heart, I booked a KOA cabin in New Berlin, NC, for February break, 2020.

The first week back to school in September, we got his diagnosis.

For days and weeks after, under piles of new cancer-related information and decisions to weigh, the question of cancelling our trip nudged at me.

Canceling felt like giving up hope. God knows we didn't need even a drop of that.

Not canceling seemed like a foolish waste of money.

Maybe there was a little bit of avoidance mixed in.

Whatever the reason, I didn't discuss it with him. I didn't cancel.

Not even three months later, on December 7, 2019, Mal died.

After that, everything blurred.

I really couldn't tell you when I could focus on whether to cancel that reservation. It was among many other tasks on a to-do list.

In the days and weeks after his death, I knew I had to stay as sharp as possible to handle all the details ahead of me. Organization and taking charge are not my strong suits. I felt I didn't have the luxury of grieving with so many things needing my attention. Things I've never had to deal with before.

Funeral ceremony decisions.

Where to have the after-funeral gathering for the many people who knew him.

How to cater it.

Burial decisions.

Being sensitive to people who deeply mourned Malcolm's death.

All of his students.

The faculty.

Many grateful parents of wayward students as well as prized students who found their way with Malcolm's guidance.

His immediate family and extended family.

He was the eighth generation of the Holmes/Look family so he was pretty much related to everyone in Downeast.

Whether to purchase an expensive headstone that his daughter wanted or stick with his decision, his military plaque.

Paying off debt and understanding the life insurance policy.

I was going to own our property and a house too big for one person. Two vehicles. All his tools.

Would I sell it all, or just some things, or keep it all, or give some away?

Honestly, when we were happy and healthy, I only half-listened when Malcolm tried to prepare me for the possibility of him dying first. Britnie, his youngest daughter who lived with us at the time, and I would kind of laugh when he spoke of his wishes and where he organized all the paperwork I'd need after he died. She and I had the attitude that he was never going to die, and all this talk was silly.

Once the funeral was over and I had a better handle on finances, I asked my children, Alex, his girlfriend, Jasmin, and my daughter, Mary, if they would go with me to the KOA campground. I'm not sure what mountains they had to move to make it happen, but I am grateful they did.

We made one change, deciding to book a KOA cabin in Georgia, where it would be warmer and there'd be more to do.

My son and I drove down, and the girls flew down a few days later.

I remember feeling suspended. Like I floated a bit off the ground, and my kids anchored me.

This would be the second time my young adult children were my guy wires. Before meeting Malcolm, I had a boyfriend die by suicide. His funeral was in Buffalo, New York, where his family lives. I offered to give his eulogy, even though I'd rather die than speak in public. I just knew I was the only central person at that moment in, who could best bridge all the people who loved him and who he loved, into a proper eulogy.

A fourteen-hour drive with one sad and terrified mama, my children kept me safe and sane and made me laugh. Our car was like a soundproof capsule, free from the loud, chaotic world outside.

My car trip south with my son was a similar safe capsule.

At the campground, there were mainly RVs.

My dog, Remi, came with us, so I took several dog walks daily around the campground.

People were friendly, like me. They'd smile and say a cheery "Good morning," stop and pet Remi, tell me what a sweet puppy he was, and ask his name.

They were happy to share information about their RVs.

Maybe it was also the warm weather that attracted me.

I could see my future self living in one of these campers in the winter, and setting up home in one of these campgrounds.

My kids could visit.

They could meet my winter friends and make their own winter friends.

I would know who I am in the second act of my life as an official Snowbird.

One of those old people who fly south for the winter.

Little did I know, I became old in the year following Mal's death. I'd become someone who sighs and grunts while moving from chair to standing and vice versa.

I would decide, as many women did during the pandemic, not to color my hair anymore. I chopped off my shoulder-length light brown-colored hair, leaving just an inch of the salt and pepper roots.

I would accept I was an overweight, middle-aged woman who may never be anywhere near 135 pounds again, and stop worrying about how fat I was becoming, eating whatever I wanted, without guilt.

Entenmann's chocolate-covered donuts.

Spaghetti and penne pasta.

Tomato sauce. Eighty-percent hamburger meat, because twenty-percent fat tastes better.

Bread, eggs, butter, milk, ground beef, ravioli, tortellini pasta, and jars of tomato sauce stocked my pantry and refrigerator.

These were the indispensables that stacked on many extra pounds of weight and replaced the daily presence of Malcolm.

We spent the week venturing into the surrounding area and soaking in the warm weather.

Even the rainy days were sweet because it wasn't snowing and it wasn't cold.

Rain boots, a light jacket thrown over a T-shirt, and shorts were enough to feel relief from battling Maine winter, where one feels ready for bed at seven o'clock because it's been dark for three hours already.

At the week's end, I dropped off my kids and my son's girlfriend at the Jacksonville Airport.

In no hurry and with a song humming in my mind, I cleaned the cabin and packed my car with my luggage, dog food, and a cooler full of leftover food.

Remi hopped in the car as he always does the second he senses we're leaving, and we drove out of the park to begin a slow, solo journey north.

My parents and siblings told me years later how annoyed they were at my kids for allowing me to drive alone.

But they were only following my wishes.

I wanted to drive back alone. I needed to.

I'd been the driver of my own car since college, and I knew how to do it confidently alone.

Spending time alone with the simple purpose of driving was what I could handle.

Plus, there was a stop I wanted to make alone.

Six hours later, Remi and I arrived at the KOA Park in New Berlin, North Carolina, the one I did not cancel.

The kids wanted to go somewhere a bit warmer than North Carolina. So we found one on the border of Georgia and Florida for us.

I thought staying here at the original KOA reservation, alone, would be like staying with Malcolm.

Have a special rendezvous. Just us, in this place, we chose together.

To my surprise, this campground was not as lively and friendly.

It was almost empty and no town to speak of outside of it.

Good thing the kids chose a different place.

The sky was grey.

I got out of the car to bone-cold, drizzly, windy air.

Perhaps that's why the few RVs dotting the campground had no people outside.

I arrived after the office closed, so I drove right to my cabin.

The misty rain turned to pouring rain as I emptied the car.

The rain pounded on me as I transferred everything from the car to the cabin, then onto the floor while finding tidy places for it all.

Poor Remi was in the car all day, and now, stuck in the cabin, he was a bit antsy.

I let him out by himself, knowing he wouldn't want to be out there long.

He did his business quickly. I caught him at the door with a towel before he could shake water all over the cabin.

The towel didn't absorb it all, but at least there weren't a lot of droplets of smelly-dog splattered everywhere.

All we could do for dog fun was throw him a bone and another once he finished the first.

The sound of the rain and the heavy downpour of it outside our windows locked us in like prisoners.

Deciding to make the best of it, I unpacked the ground beef, sweet sausage, green pepper, and mushrooms to begin making a tomato sauce.

The stove would not turn on.

Another disappointment leading me closer to the notion that I can not distract myself from feeling utterly alone in this place and in the world.

I had the last of the potato chips and a glass of milk for dinner, scrolled through Netflix on my phone and discovered I could begin watching the twenty seasons of *Grey's Anatomy*.

That helped redirect me from the dreariness of this place.

When there was a break in the rain, and season one, episode one was over, Remi and I went for a walk.

He had to be leashed, and he'd pull hard on it.

The leash twisted tight around my index finger.

I screamed, "Motherfucker!"

Yanking his leash extra hard, I scolded him with a voice screaming from my gut, "Remi! Stop Pulling!"

I didn't care who heard me or how it hurt Remi.

I knew after I yelled, that my anger was from all the expectations I had of this solo trip home and how it had fallen flat. I was alone, not in a romantic kind of way, but in a frightening way.

I realized I was anticipating a sweet experience in my heart with Malcolm. The kind of experience I could write a beautiful poem later.

There was none of that.

Remi and I got back to the cabin. He was a good boy sitting still while I unleashed him, probably terrified of me. He found a comfy place in a corner and curled into himself, looking at me with sad eyes.

That must have been my breaking point.

I crawled onto the bed, face down into a pillow and cried for every sad thought, every injustice, every shattered expectation.

I cried because I was afraid to feel and was forced to feel.

I felt lost and so far from home.

It was like all the glue I worked so hard layering could no longer hold back this deluge. The jagged edges of feelings cut through my body. The sounds that came out of me were animal and unfamiliar.

Like vomiting, it was a relief.

A mess.

And out of my control.

I seemed to understand I needed to feel lost and loss—not run from it—in order to feel some sense of being found again.

Like this was the way home.

Then, like a single sunray lighting up the well I'd fallen into, like a rattle distracting a baby from crying, I realized I didn't have to stay in this campground.

Just because I planned it didn't mean I had to stay there.

I could choose to throw away all the leftover food I saved so thoughtfully and stay in a hotel with a restaurant, a heated indoor pool, and a jacuzzi.

During Remi's walk, I noticed every campsite had an outdoor garbage can.

I could find my garbage can and throw it all away.

I could choose to leave a day early.

Fuck this campground shit, I thought.

I have a focus!

I have a plan!

And a garbage can I can throw stuff in!

The rain seemed to let up just as I wiped my eyes with my sleeve and grabbed toilet paper to blow my nose.

Man did it feel invigorating to pack up everything I could, so I could just leave in the morning.

Once every item that could be thrown away was gone and the chosen stuff to keep was packed, I was ready to take a warm shower, get into pajamas, snuggle into bed with Rem, who had warmed a spot for me, God love him, and resume the *Grey's* season one, episode two on my phone.

Within the edges of this soft bed, Remi and I had a safe zone to wait out this horribly long night. I managed to find sleep.

The camp office opened at 7 a.m. At 7:01 a.m., I walked into the camp office to let them know the stove wasn't working and that I was leaving a day early.

Twangy country music gently filled the bright, fluorescent-lit office.

Touristy gift mugs, shot glasses, and plastic items that for a brief second you think you or someone you know might need, along with camping essentials, stocked white metal shelves.

A maintenance man was walking in and out from behind the office desk. He smiled and nodded a good morning to me.

By his perky energy, I could tell he was a morning person like me.

It echoed a funny memory of Mal and me. We were both morning people.

No matter how much we tried to dial down our morning happiness, it was too bright for Britnie, who was not at all a morning person. Poor thing had to pass us perky people sitting at the breakfast table every school morning, just to get her cup of coffee.

I don't care for country music, but I could see how it had a down-home feel.

And I never liked fluorescent lights or tacky tourist trinkets.

But all of this wrapped me in normal, as if welcoming me back to the earth of which I am part.

The manager finally arrived and was so apologetic about the stove.

I found myself chatting in small talk with her and the maintenance man.

A trait my kids never liked about me when they were little. Especially in the grocery store.

Mal was ten times worse than me.

He talked to past and present students, people he grew up with, former college acquaintances, and even people he didn't know.

I asked the manager if there was a chance for a refund for the second night I'd booked online.

She kindly refunded me.

I may or may not have used the grief card.

She and the maintenance guy were the first humans I'd talked to since I said goodbye to my kids.

They had no idea they were also welcoming me back to earth.

They wished me safe travels.

I thanked them and waved goodbye, walking out of the safety of the well-lit camp office—my earth landing pad.

As I walked to my car, my shaky vulnerability was met with a sense that the universe was holding me up.

And I noticed I was smiling.

A spark casting a sliver of light on the person I remember being, in this body I am walking around in.

Somewhere along the drive I found a song called Just Before Dawn by Solomon Elwes. I must have played it twenty times. The message felt written for that exact moment of my life—that sometimes the darkest hour really is just before dawn. I let it play again and again as Remi and I drove north

...

The next stop... Springfield, Virginia.

There, I'd meet Judy, my good friend born and bred in Maine, who moved to New Jersey to be closer to her grandbabies.

She is my true-north friend, both figuratively and metaphorically.

After a six-hour quiet, lovely, warm, uneventful drive, within five minutes after our hellos, I'd wholly entered Judy's world of conversation, love, and laughter.

I didn't have to say much.

Mostly, I listened and laughed.

My head felt like it had a chiropractic adjustment.

I felt clearer.

Lighter.

In the right direction.

She is a dog lover, so she reviewed Remi's possible needs and requirements and how we would meet them.

I remember we couldn't use the hotel pool and hot tub where we were staying due to a pool cleaning.

We chose this hotel specifically because we love pools and hot tubs.

In Maine, Judy owned an outdoor hot tub we enjoyed in all kinds of weather.

So we were bummed about that.

There were also major renovations happening inside the hotel, and I mean major renovations.

In the entry, off to the left, stood two waist-high posts and a connecting rope suspending the sign “Do Not Enter.”

To the right, massive, thick plastic sheets hung from the second level high ceiling to the lobby floor, gently blowing in the air like ghosts, hiding construction messes and guiding detour walkways.

As I followed the signs and raised my eyes following the plastic sheet ghosts to the massively tall ceilings, I got the feeling behind them was a gaping hole from an explosion too horrendous for the public to see.

“Nothing to see here, folks...just follow the signs.”

No pool and all this foreboding construction was my first eye-opener to something odder than my life.

Looking back on this memory, it foreshadowed what was to come—even odder than me or this hotel.

In just a month from then, COVID-19 would shut down hotels and reopen them with a similar eerie vibe.

No pools.

Darkened common areas closed to the public.

No regular traffic of people.

Hard plastic see-through shields dividing guests from desk attendants whose friendly faces were armored with masks.

My True-North Judy made all this present-moment oddness vanish.

It was as if she took my hand through this time in my life and through this horror-hotel lobby and said, “I know, but I’ve got you. I will show you where to go. There is still good here.”

I loved that Judy provided me space to say as little or as much as I wanted to report about my travels and grief.

I was most comfortable talking about what our children were up to, walking outside with her and Remi, and enjoying the sunshine.

She has always been very good at filling in any silences.

As the sun rose the following day (she's also a perky morning person), we said our goodbyes in the parking lot with a warm hug.

In that brisk morning spring-like air, among glistening Granny Apple green buds on tree branches, forsythia bushes beginning to bloom, and the soft sunshine warming our skin, we promised we'd see each other in the summer.

I asked if I could take a photo of her before we left.

She took Remi's leash so I could take the picture and knelt beside him, laughing and looking so comfortable, happy, and normal.

It was then, behind the camera of my phone, that the feeling of not my normal self returned.

Still, her presence was a comfort.

A touchpoint that even though I was so far from understanding what my life was—it was okay because Judy was there and knew me and talked to me as if I knew me, too.

She reminded me I am still me because she sees me.

One last hug, and then off we went to our separate vehicles.

Remi and I were only five and a half hours from our next stop, Connecticut, where we'd stay for a few days to visit my sister's family and my mom and dad.

I don't remember a thing about staying there.

Which is to say, I was fully enveloped in the comfort of the safety I feel with my sister and parents.

We were in the home stretch now.

That dark hole back in North Carolina was far behind us, and what a big relief that was.

Next stop, Portland, Maine, for one overnight with Mary in her studio apartment.

We did our usual thing.

Get comfy in sweats.

Scroll her phone of all the yummy restaurants Portland is known for and order take-out from one of them.

That night, it was Hawaiian food from Big Fin Poke.

We cozied up on her couch while eating from our take-out boxes, catching up on *The Bachelor* episodes I only watch with her.

Later, moving to her queen-sized bed, I fell asleep much earlier than she did.

Her warm body, which we've called a furnace since she was little, eventually occupied the other side of her bed.

I slipped into deep relaxation for the night in the familiar family nest feeling that is my daughter.

And then, up with the sun, Rem and I hopped back in the car for the last easy four hours home.

All the people I love behind me felt like a buoy.

With the promise of the blooming forsythia back in Virginia, I carried the hope that I would know how to go on without Malcolm.

CHAPTER 5

Essay

February 2023

Three Square Pillows

Three square pillows are meticulously arranged at a slight diagonal on the pristine bed. Crafted from the same soothing linen-cotton blend, two are calming charcoal gray, while the third is a comforting oatmeal. Each pillow is adorned with a smooth, dark tortoise wooden button, slightly smaller than a doorknob. The oatmeal hue delicately separates the grays. They are all subtly turned toward the doorway, a testament to meticulousness. While not exceptionally soft to the touch, they are a visual delight, signaling that this bed has been restored to its unslept-in state, and that the sleeper of this domain has this part of her life put together.

To a person who thinks throwing a disheveled sheet and comforter over sleeping pillows is enough to call a bed made, who looks at my three perfectly placed pillows and thinks, “For God’s sake, what’s the point! She lives alone! Who is she doing this for?” I say, “Every time I walk into this room, I feel the corners of my mouth go up. Some valve in my shoulders releases a small bit of tension. The rest of the house can be as lived in as it wants, subjected to sticky grandchildren’s fingers, endless tumbleweeds of animal hair, and dirty dog paws.”

The exposed, cracked drywall around the edges of the doorframes of my home can wait another day for its trim to be painted and nailed back into place. My eyes are drawn to the straight lines of the bed comforter, from the head of the bed to the foot. The lush, linen sheet, neatly tucked in and out of sight, assures me of its presence. And there they are, my three perfect pillows, a soothing balm to my soul. Peace cascades through my veins, because this part of my life is put together.

CHAPTER 6

Essay

3 AM

For someone who has fallen asleep her whole life pretty much as soon as she hit the pillow, and slept soundly for eight hours, being awake anytime between one and four a.m. seems like a weird time to be conscious. But in the days and months since Malcolm's death, it happens a lot to me.

I remember one of my first three a.m. weird times. It happened one New Year's Day three years before Mal died. I'd gone to a retreat center in the Maine woods. My husband had no interest in going with me. The New Year's Eve event centered around an outdoor wood-fired ritual sauna, blessing the past year, and bringing in the new year with intention. It sounded like a little too much sweaty body closeness and woo-woo-ness for him. But I wanted to attend. I thought it was going to be a meaningful experience for me. And he supported me going alone.

I arrived in the late afternoon. I parked my car, backpacked up a trail for about 300 feet, and found the cabin I rented for the night. Inside, against the right wall were two wooden chairs and a small wooden table. On it were Thich Nhat Hanh books vertically stacked. Turning my head sideways, I read all the titles: *How to Smile*, *How to Sit*, *How to Walk*, *How to Eat*, and *How to Focus*.

In the center of the cabin, I started a fire in the woodstove with the provided matches, kindling, and wood so the cabin would be warm when I returned from the sauna. Behind the woodstove, I dropped my backpack on the double bed. Then, I took a walk around the premises before it got too dark so I would have an idea of how to get back to my cabin after the sauna in the dark. I am not an outdoorsy gal to the extent of sleeping alone in the woods and making a fire all by myself without at least giving myself a little praise. I returned to my cabin and sat around, feeling both proud and uncomfortable, waiting to walk to the sauna. As soon as the clock on my phone read ten minutes to six, it was pitch black outside, and it was sauna time. The sauna had private rooms outside of it for changing into sauna attire. Men wore shorts, and women wore bathing suits. People were already inside. Everyone seemed to be with

a friend. They all seemed to know each other. I was the only loner. We chanted some and were asked to think about what we wanted to let go of and what we wanted to welcome into the new year. I tried to dig deep into my soul for what I wanted to let go of and what I wanted to welcome into the new year. I wanted to feel some connection in this community sauna. Instead, I was more concerned with the possibility of passing out from the intense heat and was happy when it was over. Outside the sauna, I changed into my winter attire, then chatted with some women pretending how amazing it had been, and walked back alone to my cabin with my flashlight, trying not to feel afraid of the dark.

Adding more wood to the fire, I could not escape the creepiness of the dark flooding my awareness. I could sit in the glow of the fire or turn on the offensive, glaring, fluorescent overhead light. Neither was comforting. Like in the sauna, I tried to settle in, but it just wasn't happening. So I decided to go to sleep. Worrying the woodstove fire would go out, and I'd be in complete darkness and freezing, I tossed and turned until midnight. I was too unsettled to read any of those lovely books by flashlight. Fortunately for me, there was Wi-Fi. I watched a movie on my phone and then texted my husband at that godawful hour of three a.m. when it felt like the night would never end. He texted back and said he'd call me to keep me company. He did, and the weirdness fell away. Who knows what we talked about. But it was easy and normal. We talked until I latched onto the idea that by the time I cleaned up the cabin as I'd found it and gathered up all my belongings, the sun would be starting to rise, and I could walk out of the woods to my car and drive home. Now that I think of it, that idea was probably his.

That's a nice memory of my husband. Of our relationship.

He was a hunter. All his life. I knew him only for the last seven years of it. Hunting had greatly slowed by the time I entered his life. He said he had little interest in killing anything anymore. He much preferred all the other parts to hunting. Being outside in nature. Being an observer. To feel the joy of watching a deer. Sometimes the deer would notice him and come closer.

One time, he yelled out to me as he headed out the door, "I'll be outside in our woods." I yelled back, "Okaaay!" Not much longer, I get a call from him to go to the door and look up our hill to see him. I did. I saw him. I waved. He waved back. We talked on the phone for a while. There was something so sweet about spending that time together. Separating our physical closeness so we could be close. I wasn't bothered by the call. I loved being in his space with him in that distant sort of way. I got such a kick out of him calling me from where I could see him talking

to me. We were each alone but not alone. We were something of an anchor for each other, even when he was only up the hill on our property.

I loved our connection.

I think it's one of the reasons why three a.m. is not a weird time of night anymore. Maybe it will have that lonely feeling again sometime in the future. But for now, it doesn't.

In Maine, in December, when it can be dark by three p.m. on cloudy days, I might be asleep by six p.m.— that's nine hours of sleep by three a.m.!

It is the three a.m. hour now as I write. I don't need a phone to connect with my husband. I need only to think of him. Especially at this time of night or early morning—this weird time that is not weird at all. I feel quite close to him in this quiet, peaceful darkness. It feels the same as if he were in the woods on our land. Only he's somewhere else, ethereal. I can't hear his voice, but I feel his presence. Three a.m. is perhaps the time I feel him best. When there are no distractions to tell me otherwise... that it may be all in my imagination.

It's the daylight hours, when the rest of the world wakes up, and the bustle of life begins that I lose him and lose my sense of my place in the world without him here.

On this morning, I am in no hurry for daylight.

CHAPTER 7

April 2020

It was the end of February. Malcolm had been gone two months. To give myself a boost of energy, I decided that for my birthday in April, I wanted to host a three-mile walk with girlfriends on the Sunrise Trail, an old railroad corridor. The walk would be on the part of the trail that follows the Machias River and meanders into woods, from Archibald's gas station to the Rim Road and back. While I was married to my husband, I didn't see my girlfriends as much as I used to. The day Mal and I first connected, my group of girlfriends and I met for our regular girls' walk on the trail. I wanted to tell Roberta, my oldest friend, privately that I thought I might have just met my future husband. But we didn't get to walk side by side during our walk. Finally, while returning to our vehicles, I seized the moment and ran over to hers, spilling all my excitement. We hugged and giggled like two little best-friend girls.

Returning to the trail with the girls seemed like a great birthday present.

I was very much out of shape, so I started taking short daily walks to build my strength and endurance. The idea was I'd increase to three miles by my birthday.

A new friend, Sarina, asked if she could walk with me as she wanted to incorporate exercise into her life. We walked the entire three miles on the first day because we were so engrossed in talking and laughing. Sarina and I met about a year or so before then at a church gathering for Lent. We knew of each other already but couldn't place how we did. Since she's been a mental health therapist for a long time, and I, a massage therapist, we figured we probably attended events of similar interest over the years. When my stepdaughter entered her battle with heroin, Sarina helped me keep it together. She became a quick friend-therapist. I remember meeting her one night at Helen's, our small town's local restaurant, and sitting at the table closest to the kitchen in-and-out doors and where a lot of customer traffic passes, knowing we were visible and curious to the locals because of who we were.

Katherine must be talking to Sarina about Britnie's drug problem. Maybe she's Sarina's patient and is having an emergency session.

I remember not caring what we looked like. Our chairs were catty-cornered close together as I soaked in every word of advice she had for me. It's all just a scene now. But back then, Mal and

I were so afraid every day that we'd get a call that Britnie was dead. Mixed with our fear and love for Britnie were the dysfunctional codependent dynamics going on in a second marriage with a teenage stepdaughter actively using. I had a lot to process.

And then, when Malcolm was diagnosed, Sarina was a great friend to lean on and, again, was an emergency therapist who helped me de-escalate my fear of hospitals. We had a few sessions of Traumatic Incident Reduction, where she prompted me to recount my first memory of being afraid of a hospital and repeat it until it held little to no charge of emotion. The therapy helped me to walk into chemo treatments with Malcolm, which I desperately wanted to do.

Sarina and I diligently walked daily, talking, walking, and laughing. A bit of crying. A lot of laughing. Sarina has a great sense of humor. We were certain we were childhood friends in another life because our connection was just like that. At the core of our friendship, we are perpetual four-year-olds. We choose to see the world with similar, innocent, enthusiastic eyes. Our walks took us to beautiful places. We daydreamed easily. We often took a path off the trail to a blueberry field on the ocean's edge. Sarina would talk about her future home in a place like this. We imagined we were in Ireland, overlooking a green pasture and cliffs that emptied into the Atlantic. I'd talk about the latest YouTube video I watched about RV living or another cool tiny house idea. She listened to me process my latest feelings. I listened to her as COVID-19 began to change how she saw her clients. We utilized our walks for her to process how to move her office into her home and set up a Zoom account specifically for confidential meetings. At that time, Zoom therapy was not a thing. Not insurance-reimbursable. COVID quickly changed that. Now, almost two years later, Zoom therapy, walking therapy, and even meeting side by side in separate vehicles at the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot are commonplace and reimbursable. This would be a key factor in Sarina joining me on our future RV adventure.

By my birthday, there would be at least 613,506 deaths due to the virus in the U.S. As the virus took over the world, we'd witness the news of bodies piled up outside NYC hospitals because all the morgues were full. People suffered alone from painful symptoms as they quarantined. People died alone. People feared for vulnerable loved ones who were most susceptible. People were scared for themselves because they couldn't work, had no money coming in, and had mouths to feed and bills to pay. On our daily walks, we processed the horrors and chaos of it all.

The world, literally the entire world, felt like it slowed down to my pace. All this suffering and stress I felt around me, and yet a part of me felt relief that I didn't have to catch up to the normal fast pace of the world before the virus. The world was suffering beyond the suffering I felt. In some very private place inside myself, I allowed myself to feel that the world stopped for the loss of Malcolm in this world. Though I'd never say it out loud, except to Sarina, the bigness of loss and confusion happening outside myself seemed to match the one loss of my husband's big presence in my world.

CHAPTER 8

All I need to say about the RV, in two essays,
and a few days of October

Essay

September 2020

Revised July 2023

There's Always Sweeping

Sweeping. In an RV, there's always an opportunity for it. Two dogs and a cat add to the dirt that gets tracked in every time one of us leaves and comes back. I don't recall having to sweep this much in my house, the one without wheels. But I don't mind. I like this small space. It's what I can handle.

The house without wheels, big enough for a husband, a wife, a teenage stepdaughter, and one of my two kids who'd come home to visit, is too big for me. All the kids have homes of their own now. And my husband died. He left me this house, debt-free, by way of a life insurance policy. The thing to which I never paid much attention. Because he was never really going to die. And I was never really going to have to know all the details about home insurance and furnace cleanings and when to get a new roof.

He made sure my life as a widow was comfortable. Except I was lost in all that extra space. It is not the house I would have chosen if we had never met and I was to live alone. It's the house we chose together to spend the second half of our lives together. So, I bought this thirty-one-foot 2002 RV for seventeen thousand dollars to live in for the rest of my life. Spent several thousand dollars to have an electric hookup installed on the part of our property I'd keep. And while I was advised by grief books and friends not to make any big decisions in the first year, I knew I'd probably sell the house and its portion of the property.

I spent the summer gutting and renovating my RV. Of all the cozy spaces I made, my bed above the cab is the coziest part. I sleep better here than I have since my husband battled his short-lived cancer. I don't hear any sounds during the night. The entrance to the RV is beside my head, below me. On my little shelf above my mattress, I keep a flashlight that doubles as a

taser. It's probably not strong enough to knock out an intruder. But it's enough to make me feel safe. My husband had a gun. I would be unsafe with a gun, but I am a safe person with this silly little hot pink taser. I sleep like a baby, cuddled in the nest of my new home. So if I need to sweep it many times in the course of a day, I'm fine with that. Sweeping, I know how to do.

Part of me knows I won't live here for the rest of my life. For now, it makes sense. My family doesn't say much. But I think the general consensus is, "She's grieving...let her do what she wants." My small town seems to be cheering me on. Because now they can talk to me about my adventures with the RV instead of not knowing what to say to me.

Fast forward, eventually, this sweeping will become ridiculous. And all the many pieces to an old RV falling off or breaking will get to me. And I will move back into the house and sell this thing. I will eventually start dating again. I will figure out that I can hire people to do things I don't know how to do. And some things I will finally fix myself, like the light to the bathroom exhaust fan that hadn't worked for months. My husband's four-year-old granddaughter, who he only knew for the first five months of her life, will watch me change the bulb. I'll use the step stool she needed to reach the bathroom faucet to wash her sweet little hands. And I will be amazed for days afterward, every time I walk into the bathroom, that a task I found impossible for so long, was so easy.

Essay

November 2021

Space

I moved back into my home in September after living in an RV for a year. My home, at times, continues to feel too big for me after two years since the passing of my husband. I still struggle with not filling the space just because it's there. I love listening to [The Minimalists](#), which keeps me honest about how I fill space. Space outside of me. Space inside of me. And how I relate to space. Am I completely ignoring the space inside of me? (The answer is yes) That ignoring reminds me of how I often feel when I FINALLY get myself on my yoga mat, and at some point in the routine, I am so thankful and think, "Why don't I do this every day?" Or, "I'm going to do this *every day!*" Well, I recently have been reminded of the notion that we are comprised of 99.99999% [space](#). Empty space. Isn't that amazing to think about? We, such

dense creatures with all our thoughts and feelings, and complexities, are mostly undefined space. To me, this is both freeing and terrifying. Space to breathe versus too much space I don't know what to do with. Or, that space will be filled with *something* if I don't hurry up and have a plan. It's like it's unfinished. And the expectation of addressing it is stressful.

Like a hangnail, just dangling. "DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!" That is what my fear-based brain tells me. I'm not surprised if that was one of the motivating factors for purchasing a 31ft RV in which to live out the rest of my days...less to do something about. Not only did I resolve the hangnail, I cut off the whole damn finger. And all the extremities, so I don't have to deal with them. So I can shut off the sound of my own inner voice saying, "What are you going to do with all the space (all this life) now that you are half of a couple?" I thought I had one big answer to all my life's questions in my RV. For a long while, I felt safe and content. As we all know, life happens, and change happens. Simple and safe don't last forever. Lately, this concept of space feels freeing. It says to me "possibility." It says, "freedom to be open to different ideas because nothing is permanent." There's so much space for something new. Even if it's just breathing space. Which I am really liking these days. I think I kind of stopped breathing for a while. Really breathing. Not the coming up-for-air kind of breathing. But with open arms, and a smile. And no fear of taking in all the oxygen the 99.99999% space in my body can imagine.

OCTOBERS

October 3, 2021

Putting the RV "to bed" (winterizing) is, for some reason, daunting to me. I've been "living" in the house since September, but really, living out of both the RV and the house. Renovations and Mom's last days of life have made for a lousy, not-so-smooth transition. Instead, I am living in a renovation zone. Which is probably a very good thing as I'd have no money left over for renovating downstairs into a studio apartment. Anyway, finally filling up V with her necessary fluids for winterizing, I needed to drive V to Archibald's for gas and True Value for supplies. Trips I've done numerous times with her—excitedly. Happily. Now, I am so unsure of myself. I'm more aware that I have no fucking idea how this massive machine works and it scares me. Potential lack of money scares me. Thank goodness for Sarina who told me last night after listening to my rant on how insecure I felt, "Don't overthink it."

I need those gentle slap-in-the-face comments.

Don't overthink it.

Breathe.

Do your *tapping.

**Tapping, or EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique), involves tapping on meridian points on the body while focusing on an overwhelming emotion to decrease its effect.*

October 25, 2021

“It's a new day.”

Sometimes, when my to-do list keeps getting bigger because instead of finishing a task, more is discovered to do in order to complete it, and nothing seems to get checked off, and I am discouraged, the next day feels brighter. All I needed was a little time away from it all (sleep) and I could see with fresh eyes and a full tank of energy.

That was true yesterday. Cleaning out V and winterizing her was my task for the weekend. It's been a task for a while now, but this weekend, it was first on the list. Since she spent her first winter with me in Houston, winterizing is a new learning curve for me. And it's way more complicated than I imagined. For instance, you can't just empty the water tanks and pour antifreeze down the drains. Maybe if I had the same focus and enthusiasm as I did last year this time to figure it all out, it would all be done by now. But V is no longer my forever home. I'm not even fully committed to owning her anymore.

Just like ideas around selling or renting my house have swirled in my mind, so have ideas about V come up. Ideas like:

“If I knew how much work went into maintaining a camper and all that can go wrong, I never would have taken it on. But I did take her on. Now I feel stuck with her.

I wish I could feel more like a steward of this house, this land, and of V. I wish I could muster up my fierce mothering passion. Instead, I have such a disconnect from all of it.”

Maybe once the last of the renters move out and I feel I can walk the land unencumbered, I can embrace this space. And share it as a place of peace.

That gives me a sense of purpose.

I think that is my basic issue.

A sense of purpose.

A compass.

A direction that makes a new day exciting.

October 21, 2022

My thought to write this date, October 21, 2022, is to really say, *Okay, reader, now it's a year later, and look how much smarter and evolved I am than that scribble above. And in a minute you will see this in what I have to write.*

And then I type the date and realize there'll be another date in the future where I write whatever scribble about how evolved I am, and I think to myself, What an idiot I was to think I was so self-aware back then, because look at me now! Until the next date I write that seems so important to note. Maybe it's the same way we look at photos of ourselves from a handful of years ago and think we look pretty good, remembering that we used to look at that photo and think how fat we were. Except this is reversed.

If I am being honest, sometimes I do read something I wrote a while ago and read it as if it were the first time. And I love it. And it makes me want to write again. I guess it's like looking in the mirror and liking the person you see.

E.B. White talks about spotting a fake. When the writing is not from the heart. I totally understand that. I can tell when past scribbles are too polished and when they are polished in just the right places so as not to rub too much clean, but to make it smooth, understandable, and worth reading.

Maybe that's why I'm sitting in this coffeehouse, in Portland, (where one might find a real writer sipping coffee, engrossed in whatever is going on with their moving fingers over the keyboard to their laptop), in my cat-haired-covered black sweater and black leggings that I wore yesterday, and not caring at all. I'm in a slightly messy writing bubble. It's a good place to be, cozy with tone. With word choice. Turning a sensation lodged somewhere in the body...usually for me, it's either in my chest or gut, into words. Chest equals heartfelt. Compassion. Appreciation. Gut equals embarrassment. Humor. Connection. Both have the potential for words to paint a story.

I also completely lost that profound thing I was going to write...

Writing Prompt from <https://catharinehmurray.com/blog/>: What would your beloved say to you about your own grief?

He'd say:

Oh Katherine, don't you know you have time to sort through all the things? The tangibles. And the hurts. The hurts that lie in your sweet heart that I love so much. You don't know it yet, but you will tease through it all. One day, you will know exactly what to do with my clothes you can't throw away now. One day, much of the cluttered basement you created into a dusty mess you find overwhelming now, will be just an easy project to organize. You'll enjoy it! I've watched you do it with valuables that have already become "just things". Easy to decide if they are for the burn pile, the garbage pile, or the save pile. I am so proud of you. I know you've thought I've been cringing at the chaos you've made of the garage and basement. Every time you went on an exploration to find something and moved organized stuff, and didn't put them back. All those tiny explorations have added up to an intolerable, disorganized mess that weighs heavily on your shoulders when you see it or think about it. You know I don't care. Only the "alive me" would, and I'd have it all cleaned up, buttoned up, got 'er done, done by now.

You don't need to compare yourself to how I'd be doing life if I were there and you were here. You are doing much better than you can understand now.

Later, you will be able to look back and see what I see.

I love you. I love watching you from here.

CHAPTER 9

Two Years Today

December 7 2021

Remi would not stop poking his wet nose into my arm at one a.m. But not to go outside. Not to investigate a sound. I finally figured out, all he wanted was my FULL attention—to pet him, talk to him. It was odd behavior for him, and too coincidental not to feel Malcolm’s hand in it, on this anniversary of his death. He died in the evening, some sixteen or seventeen hours from now. Not unlike Malcolm’s enthusiasm, he’d want me to wake up to be present all day for it. Feel all the feels. Yes. He’d like that if I would. Especially since I’ve sometimes (Mmm, sometimes meaning a lot) avoided them. Because if I didn’t, I’d be a dehydrated mess, crying whenever my eyes sensed the deluge.

So I’ve been close to Remi, hand on his torso, sitting up in bed, scrolling my phone (yes, I found and purchased the perfect runner rug for the hallway), listening to amazing music I “found.” I have no idea how, so yes, I thoroughly believe higher beings pushed the music to me. It’s by the duo, [Music, Travel, Love](#).

The music is a beautiful blend of two male voices in harmony, playing acoustic guitars...my favorite kind of music that goes straight to my heart.

All the songs are causing various strengths and lengths of tears as I listen and write.

Malcolm was one of those people who’s hard to believe is gone. Strong physically, mentally, and spiritually. Full of life. Of love. He was a presence. Even if he wasn’t talking. I loved his presence. Even when I didn’t like it. It was just so comforting. With him, you knew there was nothing that couldn’t be figured out. He had such a strong desire to serve, especially in guiding young men and women into adulthood. He loved fiercely. Go to bat for you at any cost. And loved gently. A child would melt him in two seconds flat. I loved to watch that. I loved his heart, most of all. I loved that he couldn’t sing to save his life, but would sing country music with the radio when we rode in his Jeep. I loved that he loved sappy love songs. This big, burly guy singing a Brad Paisley song. “[Waitin’ on a Woman](#).” He really got a kick out of introducing that one to me as he had to wait on me often. And the sentimentality of it. Its dual meaning of waiting in heaven, as the song goes. The irony of it now.

I miss his capabilities. These renovations would never have been this disheveled on his watch. I know it'll all come together. All these changes I have going on at the same time, and mostly doing them by myself. Hence the chaotic mess. Everywhere. I cringe walking through the garage, once his sanctuary.

I promise, Malcolm, I say often to myself, it will be organized and tidy one day. The metaphor between the chaos and my life is easy to see. I know it'll be better. I'm working on it. I can see what it will look like. It'll be beautiful. It doesn't look like it now, but it will be.

I carry on without you here Mal, but life was better with you in it. That your two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter crawls into my lap and not yours is a cruel, unfair twist. I'd trade places with you if I could, just so you two could know each other. You would just love each other to pieces. Her Pampie. And you loving her, with the same amount of love you have for her mom, and that love is even more big because of how proud you would be of both of them. Maybe Chloe would even have made up her own name for you by now. She's talking so much and says things that are so cute. There are times when her mom and I watch her say or do something, and can almost see you smiling into her face saying something goofy and sweet. And it's equal parts joy and heartbreak that it's not happening in that moment. Only in our imagination—so real I can almost touch it. But Chloe does not know you. Her happy face goes blank when we say we are going to visit Pampie. She does not know you. You are just the stone in a grassy place, where chickens and barking dogs wander beyond the cemetery fence. And for you and Chloe, that seems all right. But it's so not right for me and for her mom. It is heartbreaking. It's not what either of us imagined life would be. And we have to reshape this “not right” in our minds to make it right. To accept it.

I know you see us all and are with us. It's just not the same. At all. We are learning to live without you and finding joy wherever we can.

But truth be told—especially today—we can say: we [miss you like crazy](#).

CHAPTER 10

Essay

June 2021

Sweet Kindness

Living in rural Maine during the pandemic, finding a grief group was not possible. So I stopped looking. I joined several Facebook groups for widows and after a while, for whatever reason, deleted what I thought was all of them. Turns out, one did not make the cut. This morning, I've been reading through some of the posts and comments and it's been so helpful.

I'm learning that my grief has so many layers and side pockets. One of my most recent discoveries is this feeling that I should be more put together by now (two years, six months). On a day when nothing was particularly wrong, a dear friend brought to my attention that I'm still grieving. The sun was shining. Nothing outside of myself was out of place or askew to indicate something was not right. The day looked like it was saying to me, *nothing should be wrong*.

It was like my friend had to take out a compact mirror to show me my face. To show me I am still injured. My reflection revealed to me that just like physical healing goes, it takes as long as it takes. It's not up to me. And it's not my fault if it seems to be taking too long.

I was able to give myself permission to be okay with not feeling put together.

The work I've always loved to do has lost its luster and I'm feeling resentful. So resentful that I have decreased my workload. Trouble is, I have no idea what I want to do instead. I know in my bones it's not the work that's the problem. Something else in me is stuck.

I decided what I want to do with all my time, what would be meaningful, is get back into an exercise routine. Except this exercise is different than before. I am many pounds heavier (emotionally as well as physically) so I require different exercises.

There it is again.

That permission feels like a kindness to myself. Like sunshine when I close my eyes and lift my face to the sky, allowing the sun's rays to embrace my cheeks like hands, with its warmth. The

surrender that melts through the rest of me, trickling down the brooks of my veins, into muscle and bone.

This self-care gives me some sense of direction. After many starts and stops with previous projects I thought would be the “fix” to the stuckness, I’m aware this commitment to daily exercise is not the definitive answer to all my problems. It’s just taking a baby step into moving forward. An attempt to move out of the glue.

Today is Tuesday. I will be going to a yoga class. I’ve already given myself permission to just sit for most of the 90-minute class if I feel I can’t do most of the poses. (In another life, 10 years ago, I was a yoga instructor. Yep. May seem like a pretty sad, pathetic, or humiliating place I’m at now—but not really. The days of beating myself up about that seem to be long gone).

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are my pool days, where I either walk in the pool or partake in a light aerobics class for the 55+ folks. Yees, I’ve resolved I am one of the old, fat ladies standing in the pool, and I am ok with that. I know that also sounds judgy. But it’s not. It’s coming from a place inside myself where it’s ok to not be “The young, skinny one” anymore.

And to the younger version of me—the swimmer, the dive-in-and-do-laps swimmer—this too may sound sadly shocking, that I walk in the pool now. That said, my younger version is cheering me on. She’s just happy I am going to the pool.

At fifty-eight years old, I have, for most all of my life, felt young. But not now. Now I feel—and look—old. With that, there too, is a permission to just be who I am in the moment. The struggle to feel thinner or younger is not as much of a concern. Thank God. I like the relief that comes with letting the struggle go.

It seems possible—and perfectly fine—to take a step as a disheveled human. In fact, there is something a bit beautiful about it. Embracing the fact that I’m not put together. That I’m not all right. That I don’t have it all figured out after over two and a half years of widowhood.

It is surprisingly a sweet kindness.

CHAPTER 11

Essay

November 26 2022

Heart Matters

Today, I got to teach Chloe where her heart lives.

I know my days are numbered with her. I could get out a calendar and make a pretty good estimate of the Thursdays I have left with her, the day of the week I get to watch her while her mother is at work. It's in the ballpark of a year. When her mom moves to the Bangor area for school, better job opportunities, childcare, and closer to her sister and mother. But that would take away the delight in the mystery. I prefer it to be like savoring a candy bar—taking tiny bites with her and letting the chocolate melt in our mouths. I don't need to count the bites. I know the candy bar will be gone soon enough.

She placed the heart-shaped cookie cutter on her three-and-a-half-year-old belly. "This is where my heart lives, Kafrin," she said, half showing me and half asking.

My brain paused for a heartbeat, wondering what she meant. Then I got it. She was recalling an earlier conversation we had in the car. The kind that wafts through the air of a moving vehicle, where questions, answers, observations of what's passing outside, and songs we sing get bounced between the front and back seats. For the life of me, I can't recall what we were discussing, but I know I was taking the opportunity to tell her there are many organs in the belly. Not just the stomach. I figured all that may have been too much information to process from her long lack of response. Much to my amusement, what she gleaned from that science lesson was the heart resides in the belly, too.

Now that we are face-to-face, I explain to her that she has a chest cavity and a belly cavity. "Cavity" is an entirely new word, and I wonder if I need to water it down. But she allows it to land wherever it does without question. She is more concerned about the placement of the heart-shaped cookie cutter on her body.

"Under my boobie, Kafrin?"

I am certain my prim and proper Catholic upbringing would have never allowed my three-and-a-half-year-old self to know, nor utter the word “boobie”, but I let it continue to flow in the conversation rather than begin to unpack that. Besides, to her, it’s just a body part, as innocent as her eyes.

I move her cookie cutter to the left side of her chest. “Right there, Chloe.”

It’s the next morning now. Something has reminded me of hearts and cavities as I am walking down my hallway to resume my morning reading with my re-heated cup of coffee. And the understanding that I was able to drop a bit of knowledge into that sweet little brain of hers. How lucky for me, that I am her “Kafrin.” That lady she knew when she was little, who taught her where her heart is in her body.

She is my step-granddaughter. My late husband’s granddaughter, whom he only knew for the nine months she was in utero and six months after she was born. To her mother and me, this relationship is like a broken-heart glyph, all bandaged up. It leaks now and then. Mostly, we have it under control, how to keep it from constantly bleeding. It is one of the unspoken bonds Chloe’s mom and I share.

“Pampy lives in heaven,” we say often—now, with the same ease as talking about where the cookie-cutter heart goes on her body.

CHAPTER 12

Essay

September 24, 2022

Chicken Wrap, No Tomato

“*Chicken Wrap, No Tomato* called in her order tonight. Guess she really likes our wraps!” Since she stormed out a few days ago, saying she’d never return, tonight’s message from the boss to all of us hostesses was surprising. But it was also so funny that our boss called her by her order, which all of us know. I laughed out loud at this insider knowledge.

I started working at our local restaurant a couple of weeks ago. As the journey toward some sense of normalcy continues, I cracked a small code of what my soul needs:

People.

Smiling, happy people with whom I share finite moments.

Which is to say, coming on 3 years, I haven’t felt very social. And still don’t. I can’t fathom dating, and I’m not looking for another partner. But, before Mal’s death and before the pandemic, I was a people-person. People fueled my energy tank. Now, walking around the [Common Ground Fair](#) for over two hours today had me whispering to my friend more than once, “I hate people.” That would be people sucking my tank dry. It’s a lovely fair but really, what was I thinking? It draws 65,000 people over three days!

Working at the restaurant for a few shifts a week, I discovered that I could not have done this for a chunk of time after Mal died. He was too big of a presence in our little town. Being eighth or ninth generation (after a few generations, even he was never sure), everyone knew him. As a high school teacher, so many students and parents of students loved and appreciated him. One of his former students came into the restaurant with his parents. He’s college-aged now. After seating them, he said he was sorry for my loss and spent an extra few minutes telling me why Mr. Holmes was such a valuable person in his life and the lives of so many students. I was able to be fully present. Not an ounce of me felt any need to run or stop him lest I start crying. Instead, I thought how lovely for a typically—and rightfully—self-centered twenty-something to

intentionally make sure this widowed wife heard his appreciation for her husband. I felt completely filled to witness his story. And also so impressed by his lack of self-centeredness.

Before now, I don't know if I could have heard him in the middle of a busy night at the restaurant. For a long time, I was not really ready to be around people who knew Malcolm. I was not ready to absorb the tilted head and sad eyes greeting me. Or the lack of them as time moved along. Or the witnessing of my journey...how I'm doing. Truthfully, if you were to ask me, I would have had to say, not great. And who wants to hear that? I'd say I'm good or just avoid the interaction altogether with just a quick smile and hello.

Widows walk around like broken vases, all glued back together. There may be a gaping hole on our side, obvious to everyone. And we just have to walk with it. Ashamed. Pitiful. Wearing an apologizing smile. At least, that's how I felt.

I needed a change. The only place in my life where I could see change was in what I did for work. I found a job, no experience necessary, to take school pictures. They offered a week of training, which was to start the week following my job interview. I thought it was the perfect "being around happy people" amount of time to satisfy the "people person" part of me. And, there was no chance of any of them asking/avoiding asking, *How are you?* Turned out, the administrative side of the organization was too disorganized and unhelpful, which I could see would cause unnecessary stress. What I discovered during the training was, I enjoyed making connections with my fellow trainees the most. Telling a friend about this finding, he suggested I get a job at the restaurant. Then I shared this with my stepdaughter, and she said they were looking for a host. Hostessing sounded like something I could do.

Thankfully, I do not look as much like a mess outwardly that I feel inwardly and was hired on the spot. My first shift, my first moment of saying, *Hello, table for two?* filled that empty tank, and my "people-person" part was nourished again.

Chicken Wrap, No Tomato is about a particular mostly-daily customer with a poor attitude, effectively irritating everyone who has had to wait on her. One of my first evenings, I gave her real reasons to be disgruntled as I accidentally hung up on her and then got her order wrong, and she had to wait a long time for it because I didn't know I was supposed to fill it.

A few days later, our salt-of-the-earth restaurant owner informed Chicken Wrap, No Tomato, that she was no longer welcome at the restaurant if she continued to be rude to her staff.

Chicken Wrap said she'd never be back and stormed away. "Hooray!" Ding, dong, the witch is dead! Or so we thought.

I'm still, and will be, making mistakes as I learn all the parts of the job. And with that comes unavoidable shame. Even though there's a constant learning curve with restaurant help turnover, nobody likes feeling like the stupid newbie.

However, Chicken Wrap, No Tomato will go down in my history as part of my initiation of belonging to this restaurant family, and maybe even the human race again.

I look forward to getting her order squeaky clean correct, with more gratitude than she'll ever understand, wishing her a good day.

CHAPTER 13

Essay

October 2022

If It Were You

It's October 2, 2022. Fall is here. It's a beauty this year. In December, you will have been gone three years. If it were you, not me, living this life—aside from missing me—I think of how you would be enjoying it. You always thought you'd make an excellent bachelor, retired in the Maine woods. With maybe a trusted ol' dog. Huntin'. Fishin'. Kicking back in an ol' comfy chair, reading whatever, and napping whenever you wanted. Listening to country music from a scratchy a.m. radio. Ah, that portion of the daydream changes there. You loved your electronics too much. You'd have Alexa by now to play your music. In your cabin in the woods, you'd install a big-ass TV and have all the sports available to you. You'd refrain from Facebook—until you couldn't stand not correcting someone—and then start it up again, “debating” amongst Facebook friends (and I'd be glad I was ethereal).

Mmm. So you would also have WiFi.

And, of course, your Jeep. But you'd have the newer one you had your eye on. And also the newest iPhone and Apple Watch. But that's it. The rest would be just you and nature.

You'd get up before sunrise to witness it come up. And when the moon was big and bright, you'd walk out of the moonlit cabin to stand outside, maybe make yourself a cup of coffee before you headed out. Just to watch it.

You'd have all your tools and fix all sorts of things in your camp. I'm not sure yet in this fantasy if I'd include all the kayaks and canoes you had acquired over the years. Yes. I've decided, yes. You would have them all, just in case you had visitors.

I've often felt my late husband would be doing this widowhood crap better than me. Lately, though, I'm not feeling that as much, as I am enjoying witnessing myself in tasks I've been taking on.

Just this week, I filled my Crosstrek with a few months' worth of garbage, to bring to our town transfer station. If it were just me all along, as in, I never knew my husband, I simply would have had a garbage service pick up maybe a garbage can's worth of garbage. Maybe once a month. But, I have five-plus garbage cans in the garage, leftover from my husband's gargantuan garbage project. You see, if you weigh in at the dump in rural Maine with one hundred pounds of garbage, it's free. He saw no reason why he should pay to dump his garbage. Even more unthinkable, have and *pay* someone else to do it.

The garbage system started in the kitchen. No food goes into the kitchen garbage can, especially in the summer, as it would be transferred to the garage cans and stink up his domain. We had a kitchen compost bucket for that, which he mostly emptied. Seemed like any task requiring a trip outside, he was happy to do. And I was glad to let him. Who wants to go outside when it's cold? Or terribly hot? And buggy? Or dark? Not me.

Some Saturday morning, unbeknownst to me, would be the morning he'd shoot out of bed, pile all the cans and whatever else constituted garbage, onto his trailer, and drive it to the dump, some fifteen miles up the road. I drove with him a few times, because who doesn't like going to the dump? All that organization of filth. Old-timers around here call that Downeast dating.

But most of the time, I wasn't anywhere near as excited as he was. I'm pretty sure he was fine either way if I came along or not. Garbage was clearly one of his joys and not mine.

This is maybe my fourth solo dump trip. I'm always a bit nervous that I will not reach the one hundred pound weight. I'm always surprised that I do. It's become a fun challenge, gauging when it's time to go to the dump.

The first couple of times, I really felt the dump-novice in me noticeable to the dump attendee. Me, arriving in my Cross Trek full of trash bags, instead of a trailer full of tied-down trash cans like everyone else. Ever since I jack-knifed my husband's trailer early in our marriage, I haven't dared touch one again. I sold his. The attendee had a certain smile, saying, *It's okay dea'ah, we'll guide ya through. We can tell you don't know what the heck you're doin'.*

Well, I took all the help I could get. I feel grateful and full of pride every time I walk out of the dump office, successfully meeting the 100-pound minimum.

I'm kind of running out of heavy items (for weight reassurance). This time around, I passed by the skin of my teeth. This, however, did not deter my joy while driving back home. On a beautiful country road, the leaves are beginning to turn. I can feel the first brisk autumn morning air on my face (because I have all the windows open to air out the smell of garbage in my car). I remember that I love living here. Before I knew myself with a broken heart. Before I knew my husband, I loved this place. Maine welcomed me with open arms. There is an unspoken language we have. I found a place where, maybe for the first time in my life, when my parents dropped me off on a college campus way up on the Atlantic coast, I took a deep, refreshing breath and felt I had landed in a place that knew me. Not as a middle child in a big Irish, Catholic family. Or an awkward teen who moved from her secure home in New York to a foreign one in Connecticut. Maine was my place, starting way back then.

That ride home from the dump was a little bit of reconnecting with who I am here. Solo.

Maybe—just maybe—I can do this widowhood crap just as well.

CHAPTER 14

Essay

August 4 2023

Rocky Boat

There are days when my insides just feel unsettled. Ungrounded. If I were a boat, it would be on a day when the waves were choppy. The sky, gray with no rhyme or reason for this kind of weather. It catches me off guard. My footing is off. It's scary.

My throat tightens because I am acutely aware I am weathering a storm without my right-hand person. I am acutely aware I am weathering it alone. There are no tools in my grief-repairing toolbox to fix this. I just have to be wobbly, until the storm passes.

I can radio confidantes so I know I am not completely alone in this vast ocean. But I am so acutely aware, that I am alone in this boat where there once were two of us. I just need to right this boat with the new weight that is just me. Feel the weight of sadness and loneliness.

"This will not last forever," I tell myself. "The weather will change." The imbalance will eventually right itself.

For now, missing my partner is my reality. I can wrap myself in that like an oversized wool blanket instead of trying to change it.

I write this on a morning when I know my friend is missing her mom who passed away several months ago. Her voice is shaky on the phone with me and she is not sure she can manage going to work. She goes anyway. Off on her rocky boat, on a stormy day. My heart aches for her.

Grief is a solo event. All I can do for her is be her witness. That is sometimes a huge gift in itself—the thing that can shore up a vessel. Sometimes it doesn't do anything, but just let the grieving person know they are not alone while they're suffering. Makes it a little less lonely.

As anyone who has lost a loved one knows—these painful days have their value. They grow compassion in us. They strengthen our ability to live with duality—pain and pleasure, love and loss. They show us how two opposites can exist in the same moment. They remind us there may be other storms worse than this.

For me, I see I am not as afraid of storms as I used to be. Maybe these rocky boat days make us less fearful of our own death. That when our day arrives, the people who have already made this unknowable journey will have made it easier for us. And it may not be so hard to surrender to it. That we'd have that duality of gratitude for the life we are leaving while surrendering to what lies ahead.

Still, none of this is helpful on the day of the storm, when all we want is our mother back.

For my dearheart, Sarina

CHAPTER 15

Games We Play

Do you remember when Wordle came out? I had to look it up. To my surprise, it was created in 2018, long before the pandemic. I associate this game with that time, though—that's when it grew in popularity. By the beginning of 2022, more than 300,000 people were playing it daily.

Like the day Apollo 11 landed on the moon or the day the towers fell, the time of the COVID pandemic marks a time for us all. As we emerge from our cocoons, we begin to tell our stories.

For me, it will always mark when both my parents died and my husband. I can't blame COVID for their deaths. Each had its own separate causes, each their own kind of loss and grief. For me, 2020 to 2024 has been a season of learning about death.

My mother expressed concern that her six children would drift apart after she was gone. While I assured her we would prevent that, I wasn't at all sure how it would happen without her as our center. I just knew we would not drift apart.

Maybe something else would have helped us, but it is Wordle that is our daily thread. We haven't been in a pattern like this since being small children around a large dining room table, passing the peas to the right (to the RIGHT, John! Geez!). We use WhatsApp to share our daily Wordle wins. Even the youngest of us, who doesn't play and rarely uses any form of communication, chimes in on the app easily when the mood strikes.

It feels a little fortuitous that this game is what binds us, as our mother was an avid lover of crosswords and a game almost exactly like Wordle called Jotto. Both have the same rules, except in Jotto no repeating letters were allowed. The cursed double-letter days in Wordle are the days I usually exclaim, "I hate this game!" because my score is never good on those days. However, I am always happy to convey my disgust to my siblings in the banter to the day's Wordle. We all play at different times of the day—one because he lives in a later time zone. Our brother in Massachusetts goes to sleep after midnight so he's usually the first one to post his score. My sister in Connecticut and I, in Maine, are early risers, so we typically post next. Our oldest brother in New Jersey waits until he gets to work to play. So the later-in-the-day folks may or may not benefit from some clues we cleverly slip into the daily conversation.

It is a genius way to stay connected while sharing a silly game.

I feel my mother's joy threaded into our connection—a mix of love and grief and laughter—along with her approval that we are keeping our minds a little bit sharper.

That we are still, somehow, around the table together.

CHAPTER 16

Essay

Early Spring 2023

Life Goes On

Grief, my grief, has had these weird, awkward phases.

It's like traveling through uncharted waters with no map to follow. It feels so unguided—and there's no one to fix it. No one to help. And then I look back on those times and see the awkwardness as something kind of beautiful. Maybe it's because I worked through something hard, survived it, and learned it is possible to find some direction in a completely directionless place.

At the same time, while the world grieved so many lives lost during the COVID pandemic, there were other unknown casualties—like mine—unfolding alongside it. Divorce. A fatal car crash taking the wife and mother of a perfectly happy family. A miscarriage. Loss of a house from a flood or tornado. Death after a long life well lived. Saying goodbye forever to a beloved pet. All legitimate losses that maybe just did not get the proper acknowledgment of their moment in time.

On some cosmic level, it's as if we have been shaken up and tossed back into our lives. We've been told to create a new normal. And it starts from a real and raw, awkward place, from our insides turned outward, exposed to the elements, with no proper gear and no practice runs.

In my grieving journey, I feel much like this season. Like a perennial that has missed a few blossoming seasons and has decided this year to push its head out of the ground.

I am dating.

First on shaky legs. Not knowing what I'm looking for.

“What are your intentions?”

I answer this question on a dating app like a child rubbing her eyes with fisted hands, waking up from a nap, whose hair needs combing and breath needs refreshing. “Intentions? I’m just waking up. I have no idea what I’m looking for.” But I can’t write that. So I leave that blank.

In the meantime, I am finding my balance on these wobbly legs. And I see, as I am finding a bit more grace in my stride, there are A LOT of people everywhere, trying to figure out their lives. They have shaky legs of their own, too.

Some drift too close to my life preserver and need to get their own. And some are far enough away that I can witness their healing at a comfortable distance. The fumbling moments of healing—eking out of a mess of an existence—happen as randomly as the loss that got us here. And to my surprise, they are beautiful.

Because it is new life forming. And it makes me realize, there is beauty in all the awkwardness and stumbling I have felt in the last three years. And it’s nothing to feel ashamed or embarrassed about, like I had been feeling all along.

I am not who I was before. But I am not who I was three years ago, either.

This spring, I am waking up. And I like all the gnarly life I see. All imperfect. All real. All new.

CHAPTER 17

Online Dating

January 2023

In four months, I will be fifty-nine years old. After three years of widowhood and thinking I'd never love again, I'm open to the idea of a partner. Enter, online dating. "A place to which I happily go!" said no one. My married acquaintances say, "I'd rather die than date," or, "I think I'd just live the rest of my life alone." Believe me. I have had those thoughts, too.

But after three years, I can see my life is not as over as I thought it was. I'm no spring chicken, and also stuck with the genes of long-lifers. My grandmother lived to a hundred and five! My mother was almost eighty-nine when she died. My dad was ninety-two. And his twin is still alive and kicking. I may have at least a quarter century left here. I can't be an old cat lady just yet.

So what the heck is dating like for fifty-nine?

After a few flat dates, a friend of mine, who met her fiancé on an online dating app, gave me some advice. "Be really clear about what you want so the people who don't want that will fall away, leaving space for those who want the same thing."

I knew what she meant. My sad, silent reply was, "If I leave anyone out, there may be no one left to choose," because of the obvious fact that I live far from civilization, and, well, I'm no spring chicken. I knew she was right. I didn't want an inactive site that shouted back at me:

You are alone. No one is out there for you.

But, I thought, "I can do this." After all, I met Malcolm on a dating site.

The first time I experienced online dating, I used to joke with my girlfriends, "Someone with teeth would be nice." Years later, I told Malcolm that story. He did not think that was funny at all. Though he had all of his teeth, beautifully straight teeth, and a great smile—with no help from braces and probably very little dental care, growing up in this county—he knew plenty of good men who did not. He was a better person than me. I eventually learned my tooth joke was not funny anymore. Especially after a few years into our marriage, when our dog knocked out

my front tooth. It's replaced with an implant, but I can no longer be so dental-superior. Plus, all my girlfriends by now have varying degrees of dental paraphernalia at their bathroom sinks. It's socially inappropriate discrimination. Lookism, it's called. All the fun has deflated right out of that joke.

The first time I signed up on an online dating site was after losing a boyfriend to suicide. His death came out of nowhere and left me a shaky 46-year-old woman, unsure of what my life was to become. I hadn't dated since high school. Since before people owned computers. I didn't know a soul in my generation who did online dating, but it seemed the only way I was ever going to meet anyone. So, I took the scary plunge.

The relationships were short-lived. All the men lived at least two hours away. It was comical, really. One man lived with his parents. He invited me over to watch a movie. In the living room were three uncomfortable La-Z-boy-like chairs. They screamed, "*No cozy, emotional connection going on here. Ever*" I suggested for our date to make homemade pizza together. He said he'd get all the ingredients since I was making the trip out. I thought, Good job for being thoughtful about my drive and suggesting to get all the ingredients. Scored some points there. He bought Chef Boyardee Tomato Sauce. Pillsbury Pizza Crust. And Kraft Parmesan Cheese. Not the gourmet cooking afternoon I'd envisioned.

"Do you have any vegetables to top it with?" I asked.

Blank look.

He rummaged around his parents' basement pantry and found canned mushrooms. I nearly gagged. About halfway through a war movie he chose for us, I couldn't stand another second of this date. I left my untouched slice of pizza, the movie, and him, saying, "It's a long ride home, and I really need to get home before dark." I drove home thinking only one thought over and over:

I am going to be a nun for the rest of my life.

Being a nun sounded better than dating.

But I pressed on. Roy was a day drinker with a part-time job. He lived four hours away. That ended when I discovered his day drinking during a FaceTime call at two in the afternoon, with

a glass of wine clearly visible on his screen. It was strange to me that he didn't even try to hide it.

The next relationship lasted a bit longer with a graphic designer by day and drummer in a band by night, who was a true starving artist. Kind of attractive? Also, four hours away. The real kicker was when he told me he was having an on-again-off-again-fling that happened to be on again, with the singer of the band, who was married to the bass player.

I took a break from dating.

During that dating hiatus, I learned all these men had helped me get back on my feet. They showed me what I was worthy of. While it is entertaining to poke fun at these guys, I am truly grateful.

Just before meeting Malcolm, I decided to get back online. A lot of people had profiles stating they wanted to marry again, which made me think, "Do I want to get married again?" I hadn't been married for over ten years, and in that time, I hadn't wanted to be married anytime soon. My boyfriend and I talked about heading in that direction after my daughter graduated from high school. That's about as far as I thought about marriage. My first marriage to my children's father smashed my "happily ever after" fantasy, and it would take me a long time to have any faith in the idea of marriage again.

So I updated my profile.

"Although I am not looking specifically to get married, if I found the right person, I'd like to experience a successful marriage."

Soon after, Malcolm popped up. His profile read:

"I am a better man married, so I am looking for someone interested in marriage."

We already knew each other. He was one of those men I had pegged as, *Someone like him, I could marry*—but not him, because he was married. Being married for so long was part of why he was appealing. Loyal father. Loyal husband. That was what I wanted.

Never in a million years would I think he'd be on Match.com.

But there he was. Mr. Holmes. The nice high school science teacher everybody liked. Separated. Looking for a woman who wanted to share his life with.

He invited me to start a conversation.

Total shocker.

Malcolm and I took our first walk in the first week of May. We bought a house four months later. Married four months after that.

January fifth.

For seven years, I got to experience a successful marriage.

I don't need to be married again. I know this. I'm not sure what I am looking for except some kind of companionship. Someone to go to dinner with. Someone who laughs at least some things I laugh at. Someone to watch a movie with. Someone to enjoy intimacy with. Beyond that, I don't know.

In the spring of 2021, I was back in Maine, living in my RV. I was finally coming up for air from my grief swamp. I could see green again and smell fresh grass. I was humming songs.

It was during this above-water time that my friend Billy and I reunited.

He was a friend from twenty years ago, when both of our first marriages were ending. We became close friends during that time. He eventually separated from his wife, and not long after that, we began to see each other differently. Maybe we mirrored for each other the bravery it took to leave marriages that weren't working. He was practicing to be a Reiki master, and I was stepping into life as full-time massage therapist and single parent. We both felt free. Proud of each other. So when our physical attraction ignited, it was pretty amazing. But short-lived. He returned to his marriage. I understood. My direction was clear. I could leave the porch light on for a short while, but I knew I couldn't do that for long. So I continued on my way.

A dozen or so years later, we ran into each other. The joy on my face matched the smile on his, looking at me. He told me he had met his new wife and had been happily married. I told him I remarried as well and was also happy. We caught up on our kids' lives and parted happy for each other.

A few years later, I'd heard he lost his wife to suicide, maybe a year or two before Malcolm died. On one of those happy spring mornings, driving back from a dentist appointment in Calais humming to a tune on the radio, I passed his mailbox. Stopped. Backed up. Looked for a piece of paper and something to write with, but it's 2021, who has paper and pen in the car anymore? Way under my seat was a pen. I wrote on the back of my dental receipt, "Hey Billy, it's Katherine. I don't know what you're up to these days. Give me a call if you feel like it." Left my number on it and stuffed it into his mailbox. I had no idea if he was dating someone or remarried. But I did think there was room to at least be friends. We were both widows. There's comfort in that.

He didn't call that night. I figured it was a long shot. The next night, I was on the phone with my sister, and a second call beeped through. I didn't recognize the number, so I let it ring. Then the voicemail popped up. To my surprise, it was him. He sounded a little nervous, trying not to sound nervous with whatever he was saying. All I could register was, "Oh my god, it's Billy!" I did hear, "Call me back when you get a chance." After a few rounds of "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," I called him back. With only a bump or two of awkward greetings, we slipped right back into talking for hours, just like we always had.

For the next year, we became each other's person.

Billy will always be one of the most special people in my life story. Our companionship ran its course, and we both knew it was best to go our separate ways, knowing we would always be friends in some capacity.

Then I returned to Match.com. Just as squeamish.

This time I know I wanted to date someone local. At least in my county.

The first two men I cut my metaphorical teeth on, I had thought there was something wrong with me. I felt like I was a sixth grader, never having dated before, and the idea of being physical scared the crap out of me. What I learned was this: nothing wrong with me. I just was not physically attracted to them. That was such a boost to my low self-confidence. I also discovered I wanted to feel chemistry with someone again. Knowing that felt like my own rising from the dead.

Jon was kind of like Malcolm, but not Malcolm at all. Right shoe, wrong prince.

Another John was initially kind of suave. I felt like I was dating a mature adult who knew his wine pairing well. Turned out he simply wanted sex, regardless of how attracted or unattracted I was to him.

A third John—I'm not making this up—was more emotionally messed up than I was, which caught me off guard. And that's saying something. My heart opened up to this John and the relationship possibilities. He wasn't local, but we did have chemistry. I imagined moving closer to him, or him moving in with me, with his adorable little girl, about the same age as Chloe. But he had his relationship terrors that stopped him dead in his tracks from progressing any further. So I had to move on.

I learned I could survive opening my heart to another person and having it break.

We parted as friends, and surprisingly, we are still friends.

Back on the match-horse, Dave and I met. Local, but a non-local. A recent transplant. Handsome. Smart. Financially secure. Romantic. I like him. He likes me. We've been hanging out. I laugh. I feel loved. It's been four months, and it's easy. Easy is good.

He likes to spend a lot of time alone. Which works for me. I am able to still have space to learn more about myself as "just me."

When I turned fifty-nine in April, my kids and I floated an idea for my sixtieth: Ireland. I am terrified of crowds and planes. I have a year to figure it out. Because what I've learned from the mostly creepy world of dating is this:

The last quarter of my life will not be led by fear.

I'm ready to see the world.

Even a broken heart cannot keep the joy we are born with down forever.

Thank God.

CHAPTER 18

Mowing With Mal

July 2023

It is my fourth summer without you.

Interestingly enough, today is Dave and my four-month anniversary.

It would be so much easier if he just knew you. Then I wouldn't worry that he feels these mysteriously large shoes to fill. He only knows you through my stories—and of course, only the good stuff rises to the surface. I sometimes worry he doesn't have a balanced idea of you.

He doesn't ask about you.

And maybe that is a good thing.

Maybe his and my relationship gets to be all him and me. There is something refreshing about that.

I think about this as I glide along on the riding mower, with you drifting along with me. In this relationship with Dave, I get to be a whole person—just me. Not defined by our marriage. Not defined by your death. Not defined by my grief. Even me as Chloe's Grandmother isn't part of Dave's and my relationship.

That might be one too many things he is not a part of for a lasting relationship.

But for now, it feels good to feel “just me.”

I am drip-drying sweat at my computer in the mid-afternoon. I smell pretty bad, but to me, I'm enjoying the odor. It has passed the point of gross and become part of the scent of summer and putzing around our yard.

Brit and Chloe will be staying here to take care of Texas while Dave and I go on a trip for a few days. That has been the catalyst to get stuff done.

Today I replaced the screen on the kitchen door. For the past several summers, I've taped the small tears, but this year, it was time. The screen had been leaning against the house for two months waiting for me.

After I finished, I wanted to tell someone.
Like a kid to an adult—"Look what I did!"

So, I told you

And I feel your mutual pride.

A breeze passes through the kitchen door and out the living room windows, drying sweat from my skin with each pass. I had to pause and write about this moment.

Replacing the screens was something you did once while we lived in this house together. I assisted. It was fun and easy because you were doing most of the work enjoying teaching me. I wasn't there to learn. I was there to be with you.

It was one of those projects that was not hard to do but hard to get myself to do.

It carried with it a lack of confidence and the old notion that it's a Malcolm-task. Not a Katherine-task.

Now it is, finally, a Katherine-task.

Mowing the lawn usually brings you to mind. At some point during the monotony of the back and forth, I feel you with me in the steady way love settles into a life and stays. Maybe it's connecting to the feeling you had when you were engaged in yard work. It was your domain.

But when I asked you to teach me how to use the riding lawn mower, you did. And I loved it.

It was never military-cut perfect when I mowed it. I know you could see where, to you, it looked sloppy. But I know it was one of those penchants you would let go. Maybe because you saw how much joy it brought me to think I was doing a great job. Maybe you enjoyed seeing me swing that machine around like nobody's business, regardless of how well the grass was cut.

I remember once commenting on how lovely the grass looked as we drove out of the driveway in your Jeep. You smiled and paused just a hair before agreeing.

I felt like a kid with an adult who loved me more than he loved the lawn—and let me bask in my accomplishment.

The garage.

I know, I know. I've let it become such a disorganized mess.

Someday I may adopt a little obsessive-compulsive streak and organize it.

But don't hold your breath.

CHAPTER 19

Figuring It Out

April 2024

The first time we met was at her prom, at the high school where her dad taught. Her dad was a prom chaperone and my new boyfriend. He assured me this would be a great place to meet her. To my surprise, he was right. Her big, bright, beautiful, straight-toothed smile lit up when her dad introduced us. Her smile was as stunning as she was in her pretty prom dress. What high school student would want anything to do with adults and at a prom? Britnie did. She was pleased to meet this new lady who made her dad happy. He shared with me that Britnie had witnessed his heartbreak during his and his former wife's separation, so seeing her dad happy made her happy.

Already she had won my heart.

Months later, we admitted to each other we didn't know what our relationship would be. She already had an adoptive mother, and she knew her birth mother. She didn't need another mother.

I suggested to her that we'd figure it out along the way.

Being the sweet, kind-hearted person she is, she agreed. Three things we did know for sure: he loved her, his little girl he called "Magic." He loved me. And we both loved him. That was a good foundation.

That spring, summer, and fall passed. Her dad and I bought a house, married, and soon after, Brit moved in with us. Like most teens, she started getting into trouble—not terrible trouble, according to me. But to her father, the mischief was more than he could conceive to be true. So he didn't believe me when I told him anything I'd observed. Tension developed. To Britnie, I became the snitch, and her dad would continue to consider things like the pot aroma and cigarette smoke coming from her room as just incense, just as Brit said it was.

Britnie graduated high school and started college with dreams of entering the medical field. By her second year, she lived off campus. It was then her dreams began to fall apart. Heroin entered the picture. College fell away. So did her scholarship. The money she had saved, the rent she had owed, the apartment she lived in—all surrendered to heroin. Soon she was homeless. These were terrifying times as we learned more about the world of heroin. I'd take long walks, listening to podcasts and books about addiction. When my head was full of knowledge and still had no solutions, I let go of the illusion of control and surrendered to my heart. My heart surrendered to God. I'd drive myself to work or the grocery store and sob with surrender. I started going to our local congregational church. I'd write my same prayer and place it in the prayer basket: Please let Britnie live. I'd sit in the back pew alone with my surrender and let my tears fall.

Despite all the times her dad and I were at odds with each other in handling Britnie's truths and untruths, we also were each other's support. Many nights in our bed, we held each other tight, afraid to go to sleep, to wake to a phone call that we lost her. He may have been criticized by more than just me for his enabling behavior. But I know his love was a lifeline for her, letting her know he would never give up on her and never stop loving her.

We learned about a program called Drug Court that was graduating a high percentage of clean and sober people. Unfortunately, committing a federal offense was the only way into the program. Eventually, Brit found herself before a judge in our local courthouse, saying to her, “It’s seven years in federal prison, or you enter my drug court program.” I imagine her dad and I were like many parents who succumbed to the reality that getting to this moment was a real shot at recovery. We didn’t want her to get into criminal trouble; we also knew that was the only way she’d get into the program.

Such a catch-22.

She chose the program. Not too far into it, she discovered she was pregnant. Statistically, we learned pregnant women in the program have a higher chance of recovery because they have a reason to want a healthy body. Though having a baby during the most chaotic time in her young life was the last thing we’d wish for her, she fell into this statistic.

Thankfully.

Heroin could never detract from her one essential core truth: Britnie loves babies—and old people.

In high school, Britnie worked as a CNA at a nursing home. Along with her A+ work ethic—which I once credited to her dad, but now see she inherited from both parents— and her soft spot for the elderly (she always asked about my aging parents when I’d come back from visiting them in Connecticut and frequently would sigh with an “aw” and a smile in response to whatever I reported about them), she was an exemplary caretaker. She’d come home and tell

us about her disappointments, like how some CNAs would take so many smoking breaks or didn't seem to care about the residents very much. My heart broke for her because she was learning that the world was not full of good-hearted people like her. And that, on behalf of the adult population of which I felt sadly a part, I was so sorry to say, adults could really suck. But not to be dissuaded by us! That her good heart was the correct way to be.

As Britnie's baby grew inside her, she decided her baby's name would be Chloe Alice. She chose Alice to honor her dad because Alice was her father's mother's name, who died when he was three years old. I know this pleased him. So much.

Britnie and my relationship grew with our mutual love for her father and shared excitement about her pregnancy, while we figured out how to trust each other again. And then, when Chloe was born, Britnie and I shared our joy over her.

When Chloe was just two months old, Britnie's dad was diagnosed with cancer.

Four months later, he died.

Brit and I had not yet gotten strong in our relationship without her father. I wasn't sure if I'd move out of state, closer to my family. Britnie and I were still not wholly trusting of each other. Chloe had a grandmother and even a great-grandmother close by who loved them both very much. Britnie was focused on welcoming people who wanted to be part of her and Chloe's life and letting go of those who didn't.

Both of us were heartsick over losing her father; neither had the energy for a person in our lives we didn't trust or for anyone who didn't trust us. We could easily live without each other if trust were an issue. Once again, we would just have to see how it goes.

At first, I did not understand that she and I had become the closest people to her dad in these last years of his life. We knew something similar about each other's hearts. Without many words, sometimes no words, we started to reach out to each other for comfort. We could be strong for each other when the other's heart was breaking because we understood that exact pain. At three a.m. or three p.m., we knew we could text each other. Her dad was our lifeline to each other.

I will forever forget the song that was playing on the car radio—the one that had me singing gleefully one minute and coming unglued the next. But I will never forget stopping at Brit's before getting to my destination. I knocked on the door, frozen on her doorstep, emotionally melting before her eyes, and accepted a hug from her until I could breathe. In her arms, I held my breath as if it were holding broken pieces of myself together. My body shook. My throat bottled-necked with all the sadness that had hijacked my insides. Once I stopped shaking in her arms, I could breathe shallow inhales and exhales. Then, calmer, longer breaths, feeling my lungs filling with a bit more oxygen, releasing a bit more carbon dioxide. Then, one full inhale and one full exhale. I said, "Okay, I'm good." I think she said, "I love you," or "You sure?" Either response meant, "I've got you for as long as you need." And then I was off to wherever I was going. I just knew there was no one else I could ask this of, who would not need to ask questions, not be freaked out, and not be worried about me for the rest of the day. She could close the door and know I was good. That I just needed a moment. There was no one but her I wanted to ask this of.

Chloe will be five in another month. Britnie and I don't need that lifeline so much now, but I still feel it. As much happiness as we have known loving Chloe, we know that scar in our hearts. We are always each other's witnesses to the love and loss we have known for the same man.

And somewhere along the way, the wondering if we could trust each other disappeared.

I watched Britnie jump many more hurdles and claim many more triumphs after her dad died: Leaving the relationship that wasn't working, even when every bone in her body wanted Chloe to have a father.

Experiencing the passing and loss of her grandmother.

Coming back from one bad night relapse, working very hard at forgiving herself, and accepting help and love from her family.

Reclaiming her CNA license.

Moving her and Chloe to a city with more opportunity for both of them, leaving the only town she'd ever known.

Purchasing a vehicle, this time without her dad's guidance.

Taking a hospital job with health benefits and a path to earn a medical assistance certification while she works.

Celebrating a year with her boyfriend, who makes her laugh and smile that big, bright smile.

Amidst all this joy, secretly, I wish I could hold her for the rest of my life, knowing both of our hearts will, on occasion, beat with unspoken words, "I wish he were here to see this." Whatever the "this" is. Whether it's something wonderful we are witnessing about Chloe, who is one of the happiest humans ever. Or witnessing something good happening for Brit. All the tiniest and biggest of achievements and joys. He would be so proud and bursting with love.

But I figure watching her soar allows us both to keep living, carrying him with us.

CHAPTER 20

Oct 2 2023

Driving on Interstate 95 back from a quick trip to southern Maine to visit with my kids. My eyes drink in autumn's yellows, oranges, and reds. My ears take in an audiobook on witchcraft recommended by NPR's Sounds True program. Not something I would have chosen myself but I enjoyed listening to the author talk so plainly about magic. She talked about concepts I already knew. Her language was down to earth. She was easily trustworthy.

As I struggle with the invitation my ex-boyfriend offered to be his life-partner, part of me feels we are too different to support our differences. Part of me knows the magic of life, as I know it and want to live it, would be best lived without him. Magic is a foreign language he's not interested in learning.

Another voice tells me to be open to the unknown, and that perhaps this relationship is a gift given to me.

I recall this feeling with someone I dated in college. He was a med student I enjoyed having a relationship with, while my steady boyfriend, who I assumed I would probably marry, was attending Northeastern University 90 miles away. For some strange reason, this behavior seemed perfectly appropriate for my developing sexuality.

Anyway, he wanted a serious relationship, and I did not. But he wouldn't settle for my preference. He asked me to go on a day trip with him to the white mountains and just try out the idea that we were a monogamous couple. So I did. By the end of the evening, my stomach was in knots. That night, when he came to pick me up for a party, I pretended to be asleep on the couch. I couldn't play the role one more minute. We ended it soon after. I broke his heart. It was the only possible outcome .

A few more broken-hearted relationships later, some of which were mine, I met my soon-to-be husband.

My wiser self is reminding me I can let this current relationship play itself out some more, but the same will be true. He is not the right partner for this season of my life. Oh. Funny or not, both guys' names are Dave.

I truly believe the first Dave fell in love with the idea of me. A pretty, preppy girl from Connecticut. He had no idea when I moved to Connecticut in my second year of high school, and though I tried to fit in, I wasn't the true born-and-bred prep.

Present-day Dave saw someone interested in him and fell in love with that person. So neither of these Daves fell in love with me. Some version of me broke their hearts. Or maybe the real me did. Whatever. All I know is, there is a point at which I can no longer play the charade.

Malcolm always knew me as me.

I stop at a gas station to fill my tank. A woman, maybe in her sixties, is filling up her 80-gallon RV tank. I know this because she tells me, and also that she's traveling alone. As we both filled our tanks, she told me she retired just before the pandemic. Both of her parents needed care, and she took care of them for two years until their deaths. After she sold their house, she needed to get out and feel freedom. That's why she's driving a huge RV around the country alone. As she told me her story, I wanted to tell her she seemed so brave. Just what people said to me. And so I told her my story. Like me, she didn't feel brave. She was following her inner passions, or voice, or something moving her decisions. To the world outside of us, we looked brave. But neither of us sees ourselves that way.

As time gets further and further from my RV days, I am starting to see how others saw me, and how I see this woman traveling alone in her eighty-gallon tank RV. I can hardly believe I did it. And I'm glad I did. So much of it is a blur, driving across the country with my friend, Sarina. Amazingly, we never broke down in the middle of a desert or some sketchy place. We had no fear of that. Long hours of driving were filled with laughter. Philosophizing. An easy quiet. And crying whenever I felt like it. For Sarina, this was truly an adventure. Most of the destinations were places she wanted to see. For me, it was an opportunity to escape Maine for the winter, spend time in a warm and sunny location, and help me pass the grieving time. I can't think of a better way to get through that time than with my dear friend by my side, metaphorically and at times physically holding my hand, and showing me how to look at life hilariously.

I am finished gassing up my car. The woman is still at her pump. We say goodbye, and I get in my car, back on to Interstate 95, for the last two-plus hours home, in the afternoon sun,

content to be me, alone, knowing exactly who I am, listening to two intelligent women talk about magic that makes total sense to me.

The answer is clear. I'm ready to find a partner who recognizes the way Malcolm did—and the way I now recognize myself. Life has magic to it—in what cannot be seen, but is known, cannot be touched, but is felt. What we hear in the quiet. There's even magic in the dualities we can feel at the same time. Love and loss. Happy and sad.

Watching the woman at the gas pump, it settles in that as the fragile pieces of myself were gluing back together, something else was growing too—bravery.

I merge onto Interstate 95. The road stretches ahead, bright and open.

Addendum: Memories of Mr. Holmes follows

ADDENDUM

Memories of Mr. Holmes

I cannot tell my story of my life with Malcolm without including how deeply he was loved by his students, faculty, and members of our community. What follows is a collection of their words—a glimpse into the human being he was to so many.

Mrs. Atkinson, the music teacher at Washington Academy, shared this with me:

Outside Mr. Holmes's classroom, a Christmas tree was set up with paper ornaments and pens. Students, faculty, and visitors were invited to write their memories on the ornaments to hang on the tree through December. Here's what they wrote:

- Mr. Holmes was a great guy who was also very funny and caring.
- I never had a class with you Mr. Holmes but, every morning when I walked by, you would always have a smart remark which would make me smile.
- The amount of times he threatened, "That boy you've been in the halls every morning with," started to get on my nerves. Then, that boy asked me to prom. Crazy Mr. Holmes was always asking about it, but we knew he loved us. We talked about how he was just always looking out.
- Dear Mr. Holmes, there is one thing that I will never forget you've taught us and that is to keep on smiling no matter what. You were the most awesome teacher I have ever had. Thank you for everything you have ever done, I will definitely miss all of your jokes you would say in class.
- Mr. Holmes has been in my life since I was 5 years old. We had our moments but I consider him family. I could never thank you enough for everything you did for not only me but everyone else as well. Love, M.J.
- Whenever I went by, he always had a quick remark ready so he could get a laugh out of me or even just a smile. He always had the best hugs for when I was having a bad day! I love you Mr. Holmes and I will never forget you!
- On the first day of Marine Bio, I didn't have a permission slip signed because I wasn't in the class when they were given out. When I asked him if I should head to study hall since it wasn't signed, he said "No, because I know your dad. If he has a problem with it, I'll beat him up!"
- You always had your students' best interests in mind. A good man!
- I miss you. - Jack Han.

- A gifted man, with a heart for others.
- I remember Mr. Holmes getting kids out of the school during the fire alarm and making sure that everyone got out safely.
- We will miss you, Mr. Holmes!!
- One time he helped me and my dad make syrup.
- Thank you for making me laugh while walking to Integrated Science in my freshman year - Jaden
- He always supported me. I remember him telling me how smart I truly was and that I needed to stop putting myself down and live to my potential. A truly great person to talk with. - Jon B.
- Mr. Holmes, you were one of the kindest, honest, and hardworking guys I know. I look up to you.
- You gave me the courage to follow my dreams and leave my past behind. I love you forever. - Your first granddaughter
- Malcolm is the kindest, most caring man, with a great personality, and a sense of humor.
- I was not president yet, and you left.
- I remember the first time I talked to him. He said: "All of the Vietnamese students I have had, they were all great so you better be a great student." I replied: "That's a stereotype." He then said: "Well that's a great stereotype if everyone uses stereotypes like that to improve himself or herself!" After that, a friendly smile on Mr. Holmes's face.
- Mr. Holmes always treated kids in a fun way to raise everyone's spirits. I wouldn't ask for anyone else as my advisor.
- I loved experimenting growing corn with Mr. Holmes. It was never made the way we thought it would but we learned more each time.
- Thank you for helping me survive my first year of high school.
- Thank you for making me smile every day.
- All the times he took my stuff, and I didn't do anything.
- One day Marissa, Morgan, and I were heading to Spranger's advisor. We didn't plan it, but we were all wearing sweaters. Holmes stopped us and said, "No one told me it was an ugly sweater day!"
- On the first day of school, Mr. Holmes said he thought two students would get married. He said a lot of his students end up together.
- Mr. Holmes was cool, and I miss him.
- Mr. Holmes, I know you're watching over me, and I will make you proud. You inspire me to stay strong every day. Love you. - Kisten
- Special treats (at camp).

- I miss the little head shakes he'd do whenever I'd do something dumb. The way he messed with me every single day. I loved having a teacher like him that I could mess around with.
- The first time I met Mr. Holmes he tried scaring us. Never expected to be his advisor.
- Dear Mr. Holmes, I didn't know you that well, but every time we talked you were always very kind to me.
- Mr. Holmes, hope you are happy up there! Thank you for your encouragement and patience. It's my pleasure to meet you in this life. I will always remember you!
- Every time I walk downstairs to go to my class he will always say, "Watch out— I heard she's trouble."
- Thank you for believing in me and my brother.

- I remember you and Mr. Sprangers would always be funny and mess with me while walking to science class. -Jaden
- Thankful for all of the support you gave me. You always said I would do great things. I got into my dream college because of your support.
- Dear Mr. Holmes, I know you are in a better place now and finally at peace, but we all really miss you and are hurting. I'm glad that you aren't in pain anymore, but I still wish you were here. -Phoebe
- Miss you, best teacher ever. Love you. -Kyla
- Mr. Holmes, please say hi to mom for me. I know she would have loved to meet you. Merry Christmas!
- "Here comes trouble!" -Holmes
- Forever remembered and loved by all. An inspiration to all of us who teach.
- The time we forgot Alex in the Gardner rest stop on a student council trip.
- Mr. Holmes, you have made a massive impact on my life and I will never forget. Rest well.
- First day of advisor freshman year, I was playing with the lab stuff and he yelled at me. Miss you. - Brandon G.
- Mr. Holmes, You always had a gift for finding "lost" students. You knew when we weren't ourselves. Thank you, love you, miss you!
- The first day of your class this year I was caught using my phone. :))

From Malcolm's Facebook page, friends, family, students, teachers, parents, and friends wrote:

One of my first days of substitute teaching this past spring, I bumped into Malcolm Holmes in the front office. Having three daughters graduate from WA, I got to know Malcolm well throughout the years. He asked if I had ever considered teaching, or returning to school. I laughed and said that these high school students are too smart for me to consider teaching. Malcolm replied that the kids really just need guidance and caring.

When an ed-tech position opened and Mr. Roberts suggested I apply to fill an opening in the Special Education Dept, I seriously considered Malcolm's words of encouragement.

It is a privilege to find meaningful work here at Washington Academy. Finding confidence in Malcolm's bold suggestion, I have embarked on an entirely new mission in my life of caregiving.

Thank you, Mr. Holmes, and God Bless your family, fellow faculty, students and friends as they carry-on your memory and follow your words of wisdom.

Grateful, Amy Hodgdon

Tina Pham (Tram Do Ngoc Pham)

Poem— *I'll never forget you, Mr. Holmes*

12 months, the time I've known you
 But the lovely days are now gone
 Every happy school day
 Drifting in white clouds.
 I miss the old days when you were here
 You taught me how to open the door of my life
 You called me "trouble"
 Your voice echoes
 Already far away, I thought yesterday.
 You gave me the wings of dreams
 Let me fly from the fairy sky
 A while is gone and I have grown
 The answer of my life is no longer a mystery.
 Mr. Holmes, your heart is generous
 In the distance, following the wind,
 I send my respect to my dear teacher
 The man whose footsteps slow down the school days
 Let his students have a glorious childhood.
 You are the sailor

On a boat full of dreams
 Nurturing the young minds
 Step firmly into life path
 Thanks to the teacher who has fertilized life.

You and me

You and me
 Teacher and student
 You and me
 In different ages

I have asked myself many times
 Why you called me “trouble”
 Now I realize
 My life journey is endless
 You follow me with words of encouragement
 Whenever I make mistakes
 You follow me with reminders
 Everytime I find glory...
 Through sadness and joy, through ups and downs
 You sent me the teacher aspirations
 The road is still long and far
 You welcomed me step by step!
 Every step I take,
 There appears the memory of you - my teacher - Mr. Holmes...

At the beginning of this year, my junior year, I had some scheduling issues and it took about a week before I was able to get my schedule set. When I finally did, I got into marine bio with Mr. Holmes, and my first day they had planned to go to Jasper’s Beach on a field trip. I knew I had to get a permission slip signed for it, but didn’t have it. So I assumed I’d just go to study hall and start class the next day, but when I left chemistry, my third-period class, Mr. Holmes was outside his door as usual and I asked if he just wanted me to go to study hall for the day or the office or something. His response was “No, I’m going to bring you anyway.” I laughed and said, “Alright,” and he said, “Wanna know why?” to which I responded, “Sure,” and he said, “Because I know your dad and I know he would say yes, and if he has a problem, I’ll beat him

up.” He was obviously joking, but I appreciated him willing to bend the rules so I could start learning that day.— Sophie Bragg

Mr. Holmes would always talk to me in the morning since Mr. Ausprey was my advisor. Sometimes it was just quick, like, “Oh better watch out, shouldn’t be with them,” talking about whoever I was walking with, usually Devyn Seelye. Sometimes he could see I had no energy or was upset and he would pull a face to make me laugh or have a genuine conversation before I had to pull myself away to make it to class. In AP physics he always told us that while the class was grueling we’d come back to visit and say that the thinking skills we learned in the class helped us so much. While I will now never be able to say that to him, I can already tell with my first college chemistry class that is the case. Mr. Holmes ran a difficult class but he always tried to make us laugh and lighten the mood whenever possible, and if he couldn’t then he loved to talk about fishing or the Air Force to distract us. — Rosemary Corkins

Mr Holmes is the sole reason I am where I am. I was failing every class in high school, I struggled with depression, but he had my back through it all. He was the only one who told me every day how bright I was, that he could see through my failing grades. He told me he would be here when I graduated college (which seemed impossible at the time) and would be expecting an invitation. He pushed me to do something great, to help people.

Through the years I kept his words in my mind. I went on to finish college with my degree in biology (something he taught me to love). I moved to Virginia and became an embryologist, helping couples struggling with infertility to have children. I still tell stories about his classes, about his influence.

He touched so many lives, and I’m able to help all the people that I do because of him. I just wanted to share my story. Much love. — Katlyn Lang

I remember it was a regular day at school during study hall last year. I was with one of my friends after we went to the guidance office to get lollipops and visit Kelly and Tammy at their desks in the front office. My friend and I had our headphones on, listening to music, and were going the long way to study hall with Mr. Lynch. As we went down the stairs near the science wing, one of my favorite songs came on. I took the right towards room 12 and stopped to start dancing in the middle of the hall. My friend started laughing and then looked behind me and said, “Emma, stop.” With my luck, I turned around to see Mr. Holmes with his head in that small window in his door, laughing really hard at me. So out of embarrassment, I ran. That afternoon, I saw him up near the office. He said to me, “So I see we are just dancing everywhere nowadays.” We both just laughed and never spoke of it again! — Emma Soctomah

I could give so many stories about Mr. Holmes. He was one of the kindest people I have ever met. Before I knew him, he would grin warmly and wave at me from across the room without even knowing my name. Last spring I performed in the Pops Night concert. I was terrified as I sang, but Mr. Holmes sat in the front row and smiled and nodded the entire time to encourage me. The next day I saw him in the hall and he said to me, "You did such a good job last night! I am SO proud of you!" No one told me they were proud of me. But, Mr. Holmes did. —
Shaelea Perkins

Five or six years ago, Malcolm and I were traveling together back from a conference in Orono. We were chatting it up about things we like to do when we are not working, hunting, fishing, travel, etc.

Malcolm said "You need your health to enjoy those things and there is not that much time left to do it. I calculated how many weekends I have before my 70th birthday and put two jelly beans in a jar for each weekend. I've got to tell you, Chris, it's a pretty small pile of beans. I'm going to eat a pair of jelly beans every Sunday evening just so time doesn't sneak up on me" —
Chris Sunde

I first met Malcolm as a non-traditional student at the University of Maine-Machias majoring in science education. Malcolm was assigned to Washington Academy for his course practicum. It was immediately evident that Malcolm had a heart of gold whose calling was to help others (students, family, and friends). In addition to observing student learning and teacher performance, Malcolm tutored students in need of a little extra help. Malcolm related well with the students and they loved him. Malcolm demonstrated early on that he had the personality of a caring and focused educator.

connected by a door which allows free access into each others' classroom. Malcolm and I would frequently pop in next door to join a discussion, offer words of wisdom, borrow equipment for a lab, or to rib each other about our favorite football team. Notice the ties being sported in the



photo. Here is a picture of Malcolm and I before the start of school preparing our salmon fry for stocking into the East Machias River.

Malcolm would later earn his teaching degree and was hired to teach science at Washington Academy. Our classrooms (rooms 8 and 9) were next to each other and



The Patriots and Packers both had winning teams and multiple Superbowl wins...yes the Patriots' dynasty prevailed in a number of wins, but it was fun following our teams with the hope of our two teams making it to the Superbowl.



Malcolm led our team of science teachers in wearing red plaid on twinning days at school. Red plaid was his thing, a true Downeaster!



The students enjoyed our silliness and our participation in student-led initiatives, spirit weeks, and fundraisers. Malcolm and I would stand in the hallway outside our classrooms at the foot of the stairs while students passed to and from their classes. We greeted students, teased others, and genuinely checked in with others about their grades, sports, family, and leisure activities. Malcolm made meaningful connections with many students both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

Lastly, Malcolm was more than a friend and colleague. He was as much a brother to me as my real brother. We often talked about going hunting and fishing together but our lives were too busy to make it happen as often as we would have liked. When we did get out together, we rarely hunted or fished. We talked about family, our kids, our hopes and dreams for their lives knowing that our lives have been filled with fond memories and experiences. Like me, he loved his family and was saddened by certain events and fallouts...but we did our best as two men, two husbands, two fathers, in order to figure it out the best we could. He loved all his children and adored his grandkids. Malcolm and I shared much in confidence. We supported each other in our private lives and professional lives. RIP Buddy! — Don Sprangers

When I was a student teaching for Mr. Ausprey, Malcolm would always see me and say, "Here comes trouble!" or say to a student walking by while pointing at me, "Watch out for her, she's scary." I always knew he was kidding and would even throw back, "You're the scary one!" He also helped me build my resume and claimed me as his mentor student before he even knew I got hired! — Nicole Ouellette

The hardest part of writing this was not a lack of material to choose from, but the sheer amount. During the four years that I have attended high school, Malcolm Homes affected my life in more ways than I can count. He brought me into clubs, activities, events, and helped me develop as a person. Mr. Holmes is someone that I will remember all of my life.

Since the list of things he has done for me is almost too long to comprehend, I will only talk about some. When I came to Washington Academy he quickly took me under his wing giving me a place to both work and relax. He gave me a place to belong, let me help with setting up for his classes or experiments, and always took an interest in what was going on outside of school. He invited me on field trips that I had no right to be on but understood my love of science. While under his advice I learned important life lessons that I will value for the rest of my life. Even after he has passed he still looks out for me in the lessons he taught and the curiosity he instilled.

I am thankful that I got to know Mr. Holmes and had him as not only a teacher but as a friend. Thank you, Mr. Holmes, for everything you have done and continue to do not only for me but for all of Washington Academy. — Alex Maker

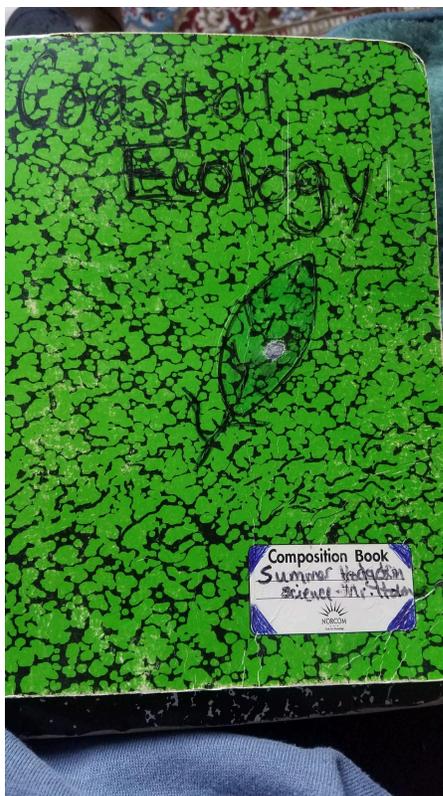
To be honest, I did not know Mr. Holmes until my junior year. Yeah I knew he was a teacher here at WA, I heard about him, and I saw him standing outside his classroom door every time I walked by, he would greet me with a smile and always had something funny to say whether it was me or someone walking behind me, either way, it would always make me smile.

My junior year came and I had chemistry with him. A few days went by and I was already loving his class. It wasn't before long I earned the nickname Sunshine. Throughout that class, he was there to answer any questions I had, and he would explain something over and over in different ways until he was sure I understood. At that time of the year, I was going through a lot with my own health issues, and with my family. He was so patient and understanding. Not knowing what exactly what was up, but just noticing that something was not right. Think about that, he only knew me for just a few weeks and paid so much attention that he knew I was acting differently.

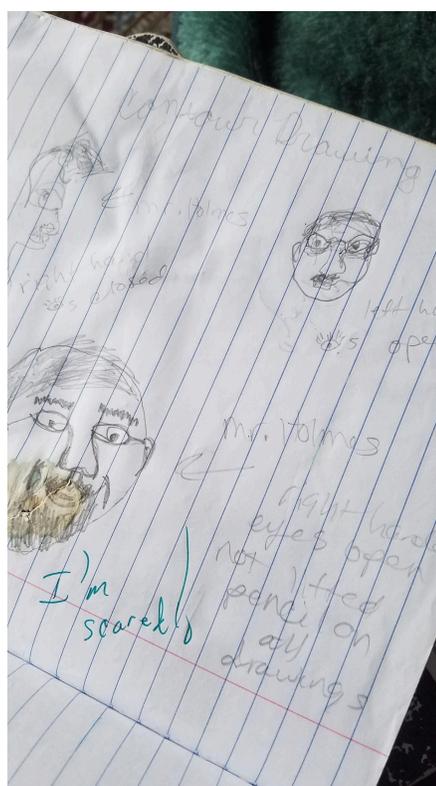
When he saw I was having a rough day, he would pull me aside, and tell me, "If there is anything I can do to help, you let me know, Sunshine". Even though there really wasn't anything he could do to make things better, that helped me more than he knew. He became the one I would go to if I needed to talk, needed advice, or assurance. He would be serious with me, and then cheer me up with some laughs and a, "See ya later, Sunshine," and I would get through my day.

He made me want to try harder in school, he taught me so much more than what I signed up for that year. He taught me how it was okay to ask for help when struggling, he taught me how to love myself, and he taught me that you can be best friends with your teachers. I am and always will be thankful for everything that man did for me. I loved Mr. Holmes like an uncle, and will never forget everything he taught me or any of the memories we share. — Abby Harmon

Mr. Holmes was not only my Coastal Ecology teacher but my advisor. His passion and dedication to our natural resources and sustainability were infectious. He made it his duty to prove just how important it all was. I will always appreciate that. His love for science definitely played a part in me choosing my career path (marine biology). He will be truly missed. Best, Summer Hodgdon



These are some pictures from my Coastal Ecology journal.



It's not easy to recall the workshop day of this 2019-20 season when he and I were paired-up in the tell-about-each-other exercise (part of an ice-breaker workshop for the new & old staff, in the library, perhaps the first "staff meeting" of the new season). We were each a bit embarrassed, him being a scientist, a veteran, an adopted kid, and me an artist, an alternative life-style, from an old Downeast family. And I can't recall the joking that helped us manage the moment but we'd met up long ago, as kids, in high school in Machias in the 1970s, with only vague

memories of each other then. And recently, over the last ten years I guess, through friends & family, we'd just become acquainted again. He'd see me performing at a local restaurant and I'd meet up with him at a teacher workshop somewhere. It's a small world. But also, it's a world of family, community, and spiritual connections, here in the U.S. eastern wilderness. I've recently experienced the loss of family and friends here, since returning in the late 1990s, as well as separating and reforming of families, and I've come to realize that maturity doesn't necessarily ensure control of emotion (as I write this I am crying, and proud to admit it). I'm sure Malcolm would agree that we're all lifelong students, even when we're teachers, and that we're never as prepared as we wish we were for the losses (and the gains) that we experience every day here in this world. Each of us is in debt to a great teacher and human like Malcolm, even if they only demonstrate to us that we're each a vital spirit in the many courses of life. — Duane Ingalls, WA

Freshman year during the PSATs, I got into some trouble. We had all finished the test and I was messing with a bottle. Then I got this great idea to blow the cover off. I said, "Mr. Holmes, come check this out," and I shot the cap off. There would have been no problem, but the bottle cap whizzed right next to his head and made the loudest bang. He said, "Yeah, I gotta send you to the office for that one."

When I came back, he made fun of me for almost taking his head off, and teased me about it for the rest of the year. Then he said that would do it for a science experiment and see how high the caps could go. He was my adviser, and I didn't get to take a science class with him to do those experiments. — Dillan Dow

I didn't get the opportunity to get to know Malcolm as well as I had hoped. My family had just recently moved to Maine and I had just been hired at Washington Academy at the end of July. That, however, didn't stop Malcolm from being one of the first people to introduce himself to me. He always greeted me with a smile, would tell me stories of the area as well as the school. He even was kind enough to offer to take myself and kids out to learn about gun safety and how to shoot. I am so thankful I had the opportunity to meet Malcolm and have his example of selflessness and love for teaching. His example has helped me in my teaching journey that has just begun and will be something I look to in the future. — Amy Simmons

Malcolm, you are the most selfless person I know. Always willing to help anyone in need, in fact, you seem to know when someone needs help before they even realize they need it. It's a gift you have. A gift that I am so grateful for and aspire to have someday.

As I write this, I think of the past five years that we have worked together. The many times that I have walked past your room, lost in my world, with so much on my mind and you snap me

out of it with a simple, “Hello,” putting a smile on my face and giving me an opportunity to just breathe. Who knew that such a simple word could be so helpful and so needed. Between classes, I would find myself walking past your classroom— even though I was one of those “troublemakers”— taking the long way around 😊 because I looked forward to seeing you in the hallway greeting people as they went by.

You have this special way that you connect with people, no matter where they come from or who they are. You make it seem so simple, so easy to do. You have certainly inspired me to work harder to make every interaction count.

You have gone out of your way to make sure that I know you are always there willing to help. The best feeling is knowing that you mean it and would in a heartbeat. How you extend your heart for so many just leaves me speechless.

I am just one of many that you have positively impacted, inspired and given new hope to. For that, I will always be grateful. Life isn't always fair. All we can do is make the best of each day that we are given. You, sir, have certainly done that. I cannot think of one day, even during some of your trying times, that you have been negative. I haven't figured out how you do it, but you always keep that smile on and spread positivity.

Thank you, Malcolm, for just being you. — Heather Smith

Yesterday I spoke with Arianna and she said she had sent Mr. Holmes a couple of messages. She told me on one of her messages from him he considered her one of his ❤️ so like him. I owe it to him for her love of science. It was her sophomore year at WA and she had him as a teacher. He was so encouraging towards her. He recommended she attend a school in Atlanta for a week during the summer, which she did and ended up falling in love with the medical world. Today, thanks to Malcolm, she is a nurse practitioner in Philadelphia. The students at WA have been very lucky that they have had such an awesome, incredible, loyal, kind, caring educator like him.— Traci Sanborn

Malcolm worked with my mother, Paula, for years at WA, and she had great respect for him as a person and as a teacher. When my son, Alex, started high school, Malcolm introduced himself and since then has made sure to keep an eye out for him, as I am sure he has done for so many other students. Over Alex's four years, Malcolm has been a mentor in and out of the classroom. We are waiting to hear from UMaine about acceptance into its microbiology program, and when he is there, I know he will take a piece of Malcolm there with him as he applies what he has learned from him about learning and life. Thank you both for helping my son become the wonderful person he is.

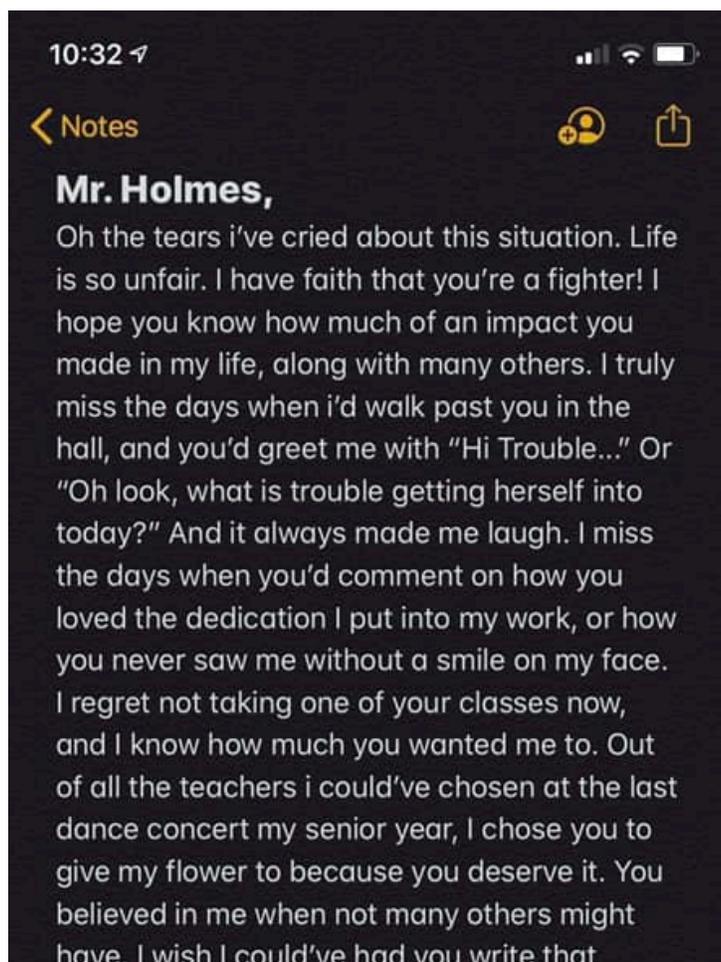
— Josh Make

I had many chats with Malcolm about our kids and the hardships we as parents often endure, never giving up on them. Malcolm was always so straightforward and positive, and I had a great deal of respect for him. I knew Malcolm and Eric when they were both high school students. Malcolm, you are indeed blessed to have such faith. It helps those who care for you and love you, knowing that.— Diane E Abrams

I had Mr.Holmes when I was at WA. I struggled in his class and he always made sure of it to help me understand, and always did it with a smile. In between periods, I would always see him sitting on the table greeting his students, or even the ones that walk by, he would shout things or make faces just to make sure they had a smile on their face. He also would let me come in after school to get help on homework. Mr. Holmes is one of the reasons I'm going into teaching. The love he has for his students was so very clear and meant a lot. He is such a kind-hearted man and I'm very thankful to have had learned from him. — Kaylee Weston

I worked with Malcolm for a short time at WA and he was always positive and kind! He is such a great man!!! — Debbie Whitman

You have had such a great impact on my life and the reason I finished college and became a teacher. I am and will be forever grateful for you. — Nicole Beach



My daughter Briahna sent this [screenshot of a message] to me this morning and wanted me to forward it on to you. I remember when she chose you last year to give her a flower during the Spring concert. She has always thought a lot of you. — Shannon Huntington Reese

When I moved here from Georgia in 2014, Spencer was heading into her senior year of high school at WA. The adjustment was very difficult for her. She didn't have Malcolm for a teacher but he spotted her, eventually seeking her out, to do his best to make her smile. By the time graduation rolled around, she insisted she was not going to go, so Mr. McBrine let us have a small, very small, graduation in his office. With me, her dad, and one other person, Malcolm Holmes. I will never forget his kindness and genuine love for my girl who was desperately sad at the time...and by extension, for me. Thank you, Malcolm. — Kate and Spencer Atkinson

I never had the pleasure of Malcolm being my teacher, but I saw him every day I went to Mr. Spranger's class. He never didn't have something funny or kind to say. We got close just visiting in the hallway and I've loved him ever since! He is a dear, kind, thoughtful, wonderful man. I think about you guys several times a day. — Savahna Schmauderer

Mr. Holmes did a lot to help me through high school. He saw potential in me, encouraged me, and gave me the freedom to learn outside of the school environment. I once asked him if it was ok to miss school to go on a trip. He told me, "Never let school get in the way of your education." I took what he said to heart. I got married, I traveled, and I learned. Now I am going off to medical school. I want to say thank you to Mr. Holmes, the WA teachers, and all the teachers beyond that helped to expand my mind and assist me on my path. Mr. Holmes, I love you and wish you well at the end of this journey and the beginning of another. Much support to the family and friends. — Elizabeth Jans

Mr. Holmes is an amazing teacher and a very kind-hearted person. Everyday when I passed him in the hallways he always yelled, not just said, but yelled at me to smile. Almost every time I always did whenever he yelled. He told me once, "Life can be really bad sometimes, but smile and it will be better." Thank you, Mr. Holmes, for making me smile everyday as I went to my classes. Even the littlest things you did made a big impact on the lives of every WA student. Thank you so much, I am sending lots of prayers and love from WA to you. — Dakota Luppold

He always called me "trouble" and encouraged me to take chances so...I'm just following his advice!!

If I had a dollar for every time I heard the phrase, "I'm a retired Master Sergeant in the United States Air Force," I would be a millionaire a couple of times over. These were some of the first words Malcolm said to me 11 years ago on my first days at WA. I learned that his experience

working with diverse populations of people in the military really gave him the ability to be the type of amazing teacher is he. It's all a part of his story— what made him so willing and able to help family, friends, students, and strangers. When I visited DC several years ago, I snapped a photo of the Air Force Memorial at Arlington and sent it to him. He responded with, "Thanks for making my whole day, kiddo."

I learned over the course of 11 years that a person can really take a licking and keep on ticking. Mr. Holmes taught me that. He had BEEN THROUGH IT and kept going. Not once did he stop teaching, helping, and being a role model for so many of us. I especially saw this when his daughter was in the thick of it. It would have been so easy to let her suffer alone and practice really tough love. But I believe that he practiced his own form of tough love by treating her and others like her with total respect, love, and most importantly compassion.

I have learned SO MUCH from him over the years and perhaps the greatest lesson was being patient and positive, two things that I struggle the most with in this world. He never hesitated to offer help or his opinion— which I didn't always agree with— but it's all part of it. He believes that you can be different and still love and be kind to each other!

Once after my Delaney was born, he thought it was important for us to feed her fresh veggies. So early one Saturday morning he came over with his trailer on his truck. He took my husband Barry down to EBS and they purchased all the supplies to make a raised bed, and the two of them put in a morning's worth of work building our very own raised bed. For eight years we planted, weeded, and tended to and fed our small family some of the best veggies around. It was so simple but meant so much to me that he would give up a perfectly good Saturday morning to help us "city-folk," as he liked to call Barry and I.

Another of my favorite moments was Malcolm telling me how excited he was to start a life with you, Katherine. He was giddy telling me all about it. I'm so glad you have had some— but certainly not enough— time together. I will forever love our Saturday/Sunday mornings at the gym together. Mr. Holmes has told me countless times that he has always viewed me as one of his daughters, and I've told him he was a father figure to me. I'm forever grateful for him in my life. — Mathy Terrill

Malcolm Holmes...what can one say about this man? This guy— I remember Zain's (Fitzsimmons) initial impression of Malcolm was that he liked to talk— a lot— and his words of warning would probably have been, "Do not get him off track in class because you will hear a story whether you want to or not, and it will be a long one." Malcolm had great tales of a life well-lived, and if you listened hard enough, those tales always had a lesson, even the long-winded ones. Our kids were blessed to have this guy as a teacher, mentor, and support. We all were really.

Malcolm Holmes is a man that there are a million words to say but at the same time, few words will ever describe his influence and presence in many of our lives. He was the man who married

my dear friend Katherine Mahon Holmes when I thought her heart had been broken beyond repair. Malcolm brought the smile back to her face and put that Katherine skip back in her step (I did not initially approve 😊). He was the man who lifted my son up as a struggling young freshman at WA and encouraged him to be a kind, courageous, and assertive young man, and became an influential spark in his love of science. He supported me as the mother of Zain, constantly reminding me that no matter what faced us, I had done a great job as a mother to Zain and that he and I would be ok. He was the loving and completely devoted father of my dear friend Britnie Holmes and her siblings through everything life could throw at them, which was absolutely everything. It took me a long time to realize that Malcolm was a man who had all our backs...unconditionally, with pure love and 100% good intentions. I know that he will leave us with contentment and peace because his strong faith leads him to the great heavens that await him, but it doesn't make us any less sad. Thank You, Malcolm, for coming into all of our lives. My love for Katherine, Britnie and all of the family.— Bobbi-Jo Bourdeau

Malcolm touched so many lives through his years of teaching and just being the great man he was known for. He never met a stranger. — Rick Butcher

Malcolm is the best teacher I've ever had. I've never had a teacher since who was so kind and caring, an educator who cared so deeply for their students. I had the pleasure of meeting Malcolm before I started my high school career. I was invited to a science or ecology thing that I can't really remember now, but I remember Malcolm. After the day was done, he told me he'd be watching out for me at WA and he did. For four years I had a mentor, guide, friend, and advocate for my education. I was lucky enough to have two classes with Malcolm. I took coastal ecology and chemistry with him. The things I learned from him will never leave me. I was given way too much slack from him but I'll be forever grateful for him believing in my abilities and intelligence. Thank you for everything you did for me and all your students. I love you. — Donna Wingett

When I was first transitioning into high school, I was very scared. I didn't know if I was going to be able to make a lot of friends or be that involved, due to the recent passing of my father. Although anybody who knew me then and knows me now might be chuckling, because I was often over-involved and perhaps too social throughout my high school career, those were real feelings and were very challenging for 13-year-old Larissa to navigate through.

To say that I adapted, though, would of course be an understatement. I became very stabilized and found my groove, found my paths, found my passions, and found my voice. I also found my people and made it a priority to build time into my day to keep them close.

I never took a class with Malcolm. However, I had homeroom in the Fine Arts building and most of my first classes of the day were either in the main building (because I generally tried to only take classes with Amy, right? ;)). Every morning I would walk through the back door so I could high-five Malcolm, or stick my tongue out at him and give him a hard time. "Here comes Sunshine!" he would say, even in the mornings when I didn't feel like sunshine at all.

Sometimes he would replace "sunshine" with "trouble," but I don't think that really stuck, although I know it did for many. I loved starting my day that way. I loved it so much, I would do it every day for four years.

This wasn't unique to me, though. Malcolm greeted everyone this way. He and Don would sit outside their classrooms every morning, to share a smile or a wave or a quick story with those in passing. What was unique to me, however, was the real bond that I shared with Malcolm.

Navigating high school, college, and life without my dad has been hard, to state it simply. He was so proud of me and loved me very, very dearly. I am quite hard on myself, many might know, and for most of my younger years, the person who helped alleviate some of the anxieties I had surrounding self-worth and accomplishments was my dad. Although nobody, ever, could fill the shoes he left behind (mainly because they were literally giant, but I digress), my male role models in high school really came close. Don and Malcolm alike played seriously crucial roles in my life, both as strong male figures and environmental science role models, and individually and collectively got me to where I am today. Malcolm is probably one of the closest figures I will have as a father, for the rest of my life.

Whenever I had an accomplishment to celebrate, I went to Malcolm. Whenever I had a news article I wanted to debate, I went to Malcolm. Whenever I had a tear to cry, I went to Malcolm. Whenever I had nothing to do and just wanted to talk, I went to Malcolm.

There was a day just last year when I was talking with him, and he said, "Just so you know, kiddo, I think of you as one of my own. If you ever need anything please let me know."

And of course, I did. I have never, ever been home on a school break without seeing Malcolm. Whether we talked over coffee or I visited him at school, my friendship and connection with Malcolm have been a priority of mine throughout my entire young-adult life. And it will continue to be so.

Malcolm has brought so much genuine kindness and warmth not only to WA but to the community as well, and my experience there as someone who hadn't grown up there and felt enough like an outsider would not have been made as comfortable or rewarding if not for him, among other teachers there. We must all count ourselves entirely too fortunate to have had them in our lives; they've made all the difference in the world. — Shelby Kreiger

The science department at Washington Academy is amazing because of the teachers that I cannot wait to see who I become, as I have already been exciting myself! Mainly what I am the most excited for is to continue seeing the impact of the places, spaces, and people who have

shaped me play out in how I interact with the world. Malcolm, your impact is timeless. I will carry all of the lessons you shared and the conversation we had with me wherever I go, and I will make sure to pass them on for generations to come. — Larissa Claire

If I was having a bad day, he was one of my go-to supports at WA. His no-nonsense yet supportive approach to teaching and to living life always made and still makes me feel better. And if things are going well, he is the first to congratulate you. There was not a jealous or mean-spirited bone in his body. He wants everyone to succeed and be happy. — Amy Axe

To say we were fortunate to have the teachers that we did would be an understatement. Malcolm, Amy, and Don are all huge influences on who I became, and I wasn't exactly the most behaved student.

I would also add Mr. Parker who would reward me with candy (and more importantly his excitement) every time I would learn new songs he would request on guitar. I can't explain how fervently that changed the course of my life. I miss him dearly.

Mr. Rensema was an enforcer that I needed and his excellent math teachings are the reason I was able to make it through the electrical engineering program and have such an exciting career. I will also always carry what Don taught me the environment, and his passion to make it better. I've now helped to design solar farms all over the US, including supplying Hawaii with 25% of their power needs from solar.

None of them knew how awful my home life was, but it didn't matter; they will always be some of my most important role models.

Don't ever underestimate how important you are to these role models, and understand that you are and will be just as important to people that consider you a role model. I'm certain your mother falls in this category. You've already done amazing things, and I can't wait to see what you do with your talents and passions. — Ben Spencer

We were blessed with. honestly, even though I didn't put my effort in at the time, I think that those teachers played a HUGE role in my decision to pursue a science degree. I will forever appreciate those guys for everything they did for us students — Ashley Rier

One of the best teachers I have ever had ❤️. Hearing his "short jokes" every day as I passed him in the hallways of WA always put a smile on my face. He was truly dedicated to each and every one of his students, and always went the extra mile to help us succeed. — Amy McKinley

Much love to the most caring teacher I ever had. Say hi to Jacob Robbins for me. Thanks for caring when I needed it most and deserved it least.

Rip Mr. Holmes. The world has too few people half as genuine as you. — Jocelyn Dinsmore

Malcolm was a passionate man with a deep drive and a belief that every student can learn.—
Nikki Carter

Malcolm Holmes was the real deal. He loved his family, students, and friends deeply, and I am heartbroken for the loss for so many. If you want to remember Malcolm just try to be a bit more like him: thoughtful, humble, funny, patient, understanding, loving and kind. That's a good start. — Bonnie Atkinson

My heart is broken. This world doesn't deserve men like him. To everyone who knew him, we are better for having had the chance. Rest easy, my friend. Thank you for your words of wisdom, your encouragement, and your leadership. — Michaelene Spencer

About 15 years ago I met Malcolm while I was a student at UMM. He became my math tutor and is probably the reason I was able to graduate while also conquering and liking math equations. That is our meeting story.

Over the next 14 years Malcolm always met me with a smile and told me he was proud of me for all I was doing. If things were not good for me, he had a way of knowing and managed to paint the silver lining in, or at least make me smile. At each meeting we had, he always made me laugh.

One particular time that Malcolm saved the day and made me smile, I had been canoeing the Machias river from Third Lake to Second. It was a very dry spring, and I was also with whom I *thought* was an experienced canoeist. We dumped. A normal canoe expedition experience to be prepared and walk away from, we were not. Our dry bags had leaked and we came to find out some of our food floated away in the river. After we made camp on Second Lake we saw there was a group across the lake. I paddled over to see who it was and if they would bring us to our vehicle in the morning. When I got there, it was Malcolm and a group from WA. They shared warm food and drink with us and drove us to our vehicle in the morning.

Out of all the places to run into him, usually, I ran into him at Hannaford, I sure was glad to see him in the woods. He made a bad experience enjoyable and laughable. He always did. And had his share of stories to tell of his excursions.

He will be missed, at school, Hannaford, when I do math, and in the woods. He is probably missed everywhere. — Anonymous

Malcolm Holmes was my mentor for my first year of teaching at Washington Academy. He was very knowledgeable, helpful, and kind. — Dara Economy

Just a short time ago, Malcolm was reassuring Holly that he would check in on Michon at school given Holly's illness.

Only six weeks ago, Malcolm took me to lunch to make sure that I have someone to vent to. He wanted to express that caregivers of ill people need support. He also expressed that he was planning to return to work at WA. Caring for others until the end, he expressed how much more he wanted to do with his students, his friends, his family, and his beloved wife Katherine. I'm happy that Holly and I were able to visit him in his beautiful, warm home this week. While there, we visited with him, Katherine, his son Stephen, his daughter Brittany, his granddaughter Chloe, and his 9-month-old pointer Remington.

I asked him what I could do to help. He shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes in an extended blink. I suggested that we win Yes On 1 for him. His eyes opened and welled up. He said, "Yes! I only wish I could have done more to help!" His was one of the 800 written testimonies submitted against LD798.

Malcolm will be sorely missed by the students and faculty of Washington Academy. Michon is concerned about Malcolm's special friends, Don Sprangers and Chris Sunde. Malcolm's science room was a refuge to a lot of students who sought his care and guidance.

Gone way too soon. — David Whitney

I didn't get to say goodbye to you. I know you understand but that doesn't make it hurt any less. I know you were proud of me for what I am trying to accomplish in school. I have always imagined that things would get better and I would get to see you at my college graduation. I'm so sorry I wasn't able to come to say goodbye and tell you just how much I love you. I will cherish the memories I have with you forever even if we weren't able to make many. I will always be Pampie's peanut, I love you so much.— Melissa Clemens

Every time I wear red flannel I will think of you, Mr. Holmes. I know you are looking down on your former students & cheering for us to be successful ❤️. Thank you for everything.— Rebecca Whitney

You don't truly realize the impact that one person has made until they are no longer there. 💔 RIP Malcolm Holmes. — Heather Smith

This morning, just one hour ago, I received the news about Mr. Holmes. I am saddened for his family and friends, and honestly, this entire community that he was such a huge part of. For me, it's game day, so I can't wear my favorite flannel in support of his family. Instead, I will show my support in the best way possible today by wearing my "Raider Pride" shirt that I got years ago, along with my black and red plaid scrunchie. Win or lose today, I will leave

everything I've got on the court for you, Malcolm. You will be greatly missed by so many. I love you ❤️. — Caitlyn Lyons

Malcolm Holmes, when we got the text last night letting us know you had gone Home, a void opened here on Earth but Heaven was made a little more whole. We didn't always see eye to eye and we loved to go toe to toe debating and teasing, but it always ended with a hug and an I love you. All those years ago having meals at the house, then sitting around my table studying chemistry, then the calls to check in on Jeff and I... the memories are there and I am so thankful for them. We will miss you and can't wait until we see you again! Be ready to give some lessons about the science of Heaven, OK? Love you, Malcolm. — Tina Smith Ingemi

I only knew him for two years but I wouldn't have asked for anyone else to help me what high school had to bring. He was an amazing teacher and he will be forever missed. Thank you, Mr Holmes ❤️. — Emmitt Gardner

When I began subbing at WA, Malcolm was the very first person to make me feel welcomed. He began talking with me about everything under the sun—he wasn't suspicious, or waiting to see if he liked me or not—he was just embracing me for being me, just like he did with everyone. I struggle trying to be non-judgmental, and when I find myself “slipping,” I think of Malcolm and how he was such a good role model for being kind to everyone. — Bonnie Look Thompson

Malcolm Holmes was such a role model to so many people, myself included. He was always around my entire life, and he always managed to put a smile on my face. Throughout high school, he taught me how to be a proactive member of society, and how to be my best self. Mr. Holmes was my dad away from home, my shoulder to cry on during a rough day and my number one cheerleader. I love you Malcolm, and I will always carry your words and lessons with me. — Taylor Bridges

One beautiful soul, an amazing teacher, and a mentor... I wish I never had to write this but as reality goes on, we lost Mr. Holmes. He always used to call me “trouble” and tease me in class but whenever he caught me alone, he always used to tell me how “brilliant young lady” I was. These moments were the times that would light up my day. He always knew how to brighten up someone's day, even with just one word. He made me learn so many things, not only in the classroom but also in life. One thing I learned about him was that it's not always about dreams but what you do to achieve them. I wish I would be able to keep my promise to you. I was going to come to visit you when I became successful at my job and in life, I promised that to

you. Even though you will not be here to see it, I will do as you said, and go after my dreams. Thank you so much for everything, Mr. Holmes... — Selin Sev

Malcolm was one of those people who cared deeply about everyone and everything. He made quite the impact on all of us and that's a testament to what a great man he truly was. I didn't have the pleasure of being in his classroom, but I went to high school with his kids. Whenever we crossed paths he always had a smile and something nice to say. The last lengthy conversation I had with him we were at a meeting to convince one of our local Representatives to vote against mandatory vaccinations. He was passionate about this issue and fought very hard to keep those choices OURS and not the governments. If you'd like to know more about the issue or how to register to vote, I can help! And if you would like to honor him and you're over 18, please consider voting YES on question 1 on March 3rd. — Melissa Hinerman

I knew Malcolm Holmes was someone special when I met him many years ago when he was a student at WCCC. We had many conversations during that time and, of course, he loved to tease me about one thing or another. He was a wonderful student and contributed to the college by volunteering for various events and things we had going. I watched him go on to get his bachelor's degree and later his master's. It was fun following his life and progress and seeing him find his niche in life. I was proud of him. A highlight was officiating at his marriage to Katherine Mahon Holmes. What a special honor that was for me. Two people made for each other and who made each other so happy. I could see it in their eyes and read it in their faces. We didn't see each other often over the years but would communicate from time to time on Facebook. I could tell from his comments to me and now from the comments, I read from students, parents, and colleagues that he was a truly great and caring teacher. Malcolm was genuine. My heart aches because he was taken too soon. My heart aches for all who love him. Let us take a lesson from Malcolm and find good in this world, find good in every person we meet. He did. — Tessa Chaffey Ftorek

Malcolm Holmes, your ability to see the best in everyone you met is a loss for our community. Your capacity to love your family is a huge loss for your loved ones. Your friendship to me, even when we did not see each other often, is something that I will forever treasure. In one of the hardest times in my life, you were the one person that recognized that my outward strength was just that. Your love, understanding, and support will be missed. Goodbye, my friend. — Janice Rice

Thank you for all of the memories, laughs, and lessons. I wish I had the opportunity to be in a class with you, Mr. Holmes. You were one hell of a teacher. I'll miss having you poke in on our

chemistry class, and the camping trips we went on. You never failed to bring a smile to someone's face. — Heather Seelye

These past few days have been incredibly difficult for me. On December 7th I lost my daddy. The days leading up to his death were gut-wrenching, as I watched his body starting to really fail him as well as watching him be in discomfort. Those days were also so very precious to me and my family.

Anyone who knows my dad knows how much he loved family, and his family all came together to be with him and support him in the end. He always told me that if anything was to ever happen to him, that's what he wanted: that was his dream for the end of his life, and I think it was met. Those last few days we all pulled together and put the differences in our past aside. This experience changed all of our relationships, too. We were able to make memories with Dad. Chloe was able to be at her Pampie's, sit with him one last time, hold his hand, and Dad was able to listen to her play, laugh and cry. He loves her so much. I am so grateful that she will have pictures and stories about her Pampie and to be able to know just how much she meant to him.

Dad loved listening to all of us. He would have his eyes closed and all of a sudden wink, smile, make his funny comments to what we were saying/doing, make his "frog face", and raise his eyebrows at our stories. He was able to spend his last days in his home that he loved more than I can put into words. We sat holding his hand and kissing his forehead day and night.

The night he passed was the hardest thing I will ever have to endure. I am struggling and will probably always struggle with the way he passed. But he is now in heaven, no longer in pain, and with his mom, Roland, and his grandson Matthew. He couldn't wait to be reunited with them. A piece of me and who I am is in heaven now, and I feel empty but I am comforted that he will remain very present in all my decisions/aspects in my life. He is watching over his family. It won't ever be the same without him. He was my person. He helped me more than I think he even knew and never left my side. He taught me what family is and what true love is. As well as so many other things. I love you daddy and miss you so much. Love always, Your Magic. — Britnie Holmes

A lifetime of achievements and awards from Dad's 20 years of military service, dean's list when he went back to college after retirement, awards from his time teaching at Washington Academy, many hunting and bowhunting awards, and all of the coaching plaques he received during our upbringing when he would coach one of our teams. Going through his things after his passing has felt invasive and very difficult. However, is giving me such a great insight and appreciation of his life well-lived. Sixty-one years went by in a blink, but look at all of the accomplishments. Well done, Dad.

— Jessie Ray



Mr. Holmes was an incredible teacher. However, he wasn't just a teacher, he was a mentor, an example, a friend, a counselor, and an amazing person. My senior year was very stressful and there were times when I was more stressed than others, but in his marine biology class he taught us not only about nature and the ocean, but he also taught us about the beauty that accompanied it and how it can be so peaceful if you allow it. I can honestly say that I learned more practical advice in the time I spent

with Mr. Holmes than in any other class. In the student council, he was an example of leadership and taught each and every one of us what responsibility and accountability were. I can't even describe how much I am going to miss Mr. Holmes. Hearing of his loss saddened me so much! One day in class, he said that the older generation is passing on and the younger generation is not taking enough of an interest to hear about their knowledge and experiences. I am so happy to know that I had a chance to hear the wisdom of Malcolm Holmes. — Mailena Alicea

When I first started teaching at WA in 2017, I had been hired on as an emergency permanent sub for English 10. I'd met Malcolm the previous year when I was visiting WA with my husband, but I was surprised when he pulled me aside the week I began and talked to me as if we were old friends. His first words of advice were, "These kids will break you. They will break your heart. I can already tell you'll be the kind that will devote all you have to these kids, and in the end, they will break your heart, because you'll love them so much and cry when they make stupid mistakes. I'm here for you. When you're overwhelmed with frustration for their stupidity, or when you just can't figure out how to reach them, I'm here for you."

I was quite taken aback with that introduction speech, but Malcolm was always an intense, overwhelming character. I think I nodded thanks to him and wandered off, wondering what he meant by "break my heart." Very quickly I understood, as I did all I could to teach and help, and came to understand the kinds of lives that so many of these students live and the trials they have. Malcolm also suggested, a few weeks later, to accept their friend requests on Facebook. "That way you can see what's going on in their lives," he told me. "When they break up with someone, they'll let the world know. If they post memes about drinking or drugs, then you know what they're doing in their free time. Want to really know these kids? Follow them." It was good advice which I took.

Another time he pulled me aside (always beckoning me with his finger and I wondered what was up), and he said, "I see on Facebook [he was keeping tabs on me, too] that you have a big family. It must be really hard with them so far away, and you here." Yes, it's very hard to be 2700 miles away from my adult children and grandchildren. No one had noticed that. No one had mentioned that. But Malcolm noticed. "I worry about you," he went on. "Know that I worry about you, as a mom far away from her kids." How did he notice that I was struggling and homesick for my kids? I couldn't even respond, but I'm sure he saw my tears of gratitude. Malcolm was also a huge tease, and not always entirely appropriately, which made him even more of a character. When he realized that I love Shakespeare, suddenly that became his target. The first time he shot that arrow, I was passing him in the main hallway in front of the office. He suddenly burst out with, "Shakespeare was a dirty old man who wrote only sex jokes about men killing their fathers and marrying their mothers!"

I literally stopped in my tracks, astonished that he was saying— no, practically shouting— those words at me, that we were near the front office, and there were a few stray students walking by. Not many people have mentioned it here, but oh, Malcolm had some real cringe-worthy moments. This was one of them.

As quickly as I could, I composed myself and, realizing how the game was played, rounded on him with, "That was Oedipus Rex by Sophocles! Get your old guys straight! Stick to science, old man!"

He grinned in delight, for I had taken the bait.

After that, every time he saw me it'd be another insult about Shakespeare, usually shouted when I didn't even notice he was in the vicinity, or I saw him talking to a student in the hall, and he'd break away just to yell that "Shakespeare's outdated and useless!"

Sadly, I didn't always have a good zinger, so I'd just yell back, "So are you!" Yeah, witty.

In 2019 when I was teaching AP English Literature, I had a lot of the same students that Malcolm had in his AP physics class. We read a poem about an inept physics teacher one day, and I had my students bring it to him, signed, "With my love, Trish." He sent it back the next day with corrections about physics assumptions that he claimed the poem's author had wrong, and I think he graded it with a D.

Once, during the summer program when we taught Chinese students, he came at me again between classes. But in my hand was a birthday present I'd just received: Shakespearian insults on bandaids. I immediately whipped out a bandaid and read him the insult, which I no longer remember, but it fit the moment perfectly. He nodded in defeat, but it was only for a moment. He'd be back, and he was.

Last year, a student put on his door a paper with Malcolm photoshopped sitting behind a desk with a sign that said, "Physics is the best; prove me wrong." It was near the end of the school year, and I was walking by after school. I saw the sign and since I had a pen in hand, I impulsively rushed over and wrote, "Shakespeare Rules!" across the bottom.

Then, terrified because I had just defaced a paper on his door that a student lovingly put there, I ran! Literally RAN down the hall and out the door, terrified that he would realize what I had done. And I had written in pen, so it's not like I could erase it!

What was I thinking?! I felt like a 15-year-old in trouble.

Then I thought, Maybe he won't know it was me.

Then I thought, Who else in the world would write that?!

Weeks went by, no word from Malcolm. I actually forgot about the sign I had marred, and school was nearly over. I was walking easily by his classroom again, and he was sitting on the desk and chatting with a student, when I heard, "Watch out for that one. She VANDALIZES signs on doors!"

Again I was stopped in my tracks, guilt and dread washing over me. I turned, with as much apology as I could show in my face, ready to plead my case and beg for forgiveness. But he was grinning, not angry at all. I'd taken a shot at him, and he was keeping tally. I think he respected the fact that I dinged him one. I wonder how long it took for him to realize what I had done, and how long he'd been waiting to call me out on it.

We often messaged each about deeper issues— family, children, religion, God: private things that he didn't discuss with many others, and we had some wonderful, thought-provoking discussions. I once told him I'd love to help him write his memoirs— I've helped a few people do so— and he said he'd like that, and would consider doing so in a few years. No one knew that he didn't have those few years.

But we also insulted each other on Facebook and in messaging, and sometimes went nearly too far. There were a few times apologies were issued, followed up immediately with jokes and gratitude. Twice we even messaged each other during a faculty meeting when the discussion turned a little uncomfortable, which nearly caused both of us to snort back giggles. I don't remember the context anymore, but I remember messaging, "By the way, you are always safe with me," to which he replied, "Thank you, friend."

When he got his diagnosis of cancer, and posted it on Facebook, the only way I could think to respond was through Shakespeare: "Boldness is my friend."

He gave it a thumbs up. No insult followed.

I didn't get a chance to say good-bye to him (it would have been too overwhelming for me anyway), nor did I get a chance to help him write his memoirs, but I hope helping to put together these stories of Malcolm goes a little way to helping future generations know who he was, and why so many in this tiny community revered, appreciated, and loved him so much. For a few weeks in the autumn of 2019 everything in the community seemed to be decorated in red and black buffalo check plaid. People in schools and banks and grocery stores wore flannel to honor him in his last weeks. It was impossible that anyone in the county could have not known who he was and that he was slowly making his exit.

It's also important that nobody forgets. — Trish Mercer

Mr. Holmes was one of those teachers you walk past every day where he would interrupt the conversation he was having to either say, "Look, there's trouble," or to the person in front of me, "Watch out! He's coming behind you!" I'll admit it took me a while to understand when he was joking about, and when he wasn't. But after numerous student council trips, I feel as if I've got it down pat. I also always know that I didn't need to stop at Dunkin before going to those field trips, as even being one of the most "in touch" people with nutrition, Mr. Holmes would always say, "We all need a donut now and then." I wish the last time I had seen him wasn't in his living room trying to relax, but in a classroom teaching. Everyone who knew him knows being in a classroom "fueling the minds of young adults" was his favorite. And the short period of time I had him in class was my favorite, too. — Ryan Conley