

Letters To My Mother

A family bonds in prosperity, and grows through tragedy. As mother and daughter, two women lost one man. Identity forms through experience. These are ours.

Nanny, Champion of the World

When I was 10, Dad gave me a book to read called *Danny, Champion of the World*. It was about a 10 year old boy who lived with his dad. His dad was a poacher, and it talked about the trouble they got into, how they lived their lives as a twosome, and essentially, how his dad lifted him up to be his Champion of the World, because the only important thing was each other. This became a very special book for us, and really defined how we felt about each other as a family. Although this story was about a single father and an only child, it really hit home because of the relationship they had.

Single parenthood, a theme of this book, had no resonating reality with our family at the time. That wasn't what stood out to me. What I knew was that I had a relationship with each of you that was as close and as strong as if it *were* just the two of us. That's an incredibly strong bond, one that I don't think many people really experience with their children. I was lucky enough to have the closeness by choice that most people only get by circumstance.

That Christmas, I got a present from the two of you in a small box. I opened it to find a silver necklace with a pendant on it. It was rectangular with a large, decorative "N" on the front. When you turned it over, it said "Champion of the World."

I want you to know that I have treasured it. I used to wear it every day. When the chain broke, I put it in a box. And through every move, from house, to dorm, to house, to dorm, to house of my own, I have kept it safe and precious. When I got my first serious boyfriend in high school, I thought I was in love. I gave it to him because I wanted to give him the most important thing of mine that I had. He made it difficult for me to get back when we broke up, but I rescued it, and

vowed to never give it to anyone again. Even after *actually* falling in love and marrying Nathan, and even though he's an "N" too, years later, it stays tucked away in a fireproof box, belonging to no one but me.

Bring Him Home

It was 1996. For my thirteenth birthday, you and Dad got me tickets for the three of us to go see *Les Miserables* in Chicago. I had grown up on the soundtrack, because our 16-hour family road trips were always colored by full soundtracks of musicals. All three of us kids knew *Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon*, *West Side Story*, and *Phantom of the Opera* by heart by the time we were old enough to sing along.

You and Dad had seen the show before and raved about it, but all I knew of it came from listening to the soundtrack and you telling me the story, filling in the holes as it went along. I remember that me, Dayday and Julia always liked "Master of the House" the best because they said two swear words in it. Because you were excellent parents, you censored what we saw and heard; consequently, hearing "damn" in the score of a Broadway show was relatively shocking. When I officially became a teenager, you showed me that you knew I was mature enough to appreciate the music for more than just that.

We got all dressed up and went out for the evening together. It was one of the first times that I *really* felt "grown up." I remember feeling honored that the two of you would choose to share this experience with me. When I settled between the two of you in the red theater seats, the first notes came rushing like a powerhouse from the orchestra pit and we all flew back like a hurricane hit us. You grabbed my arm and said, "Are you ready?" The passion for music that united you with Dad clearly resides in me.

I remember tears coming to my eyes because of the sheer beauty of people's voices, a phenomenon that would frequently repeat itself as I got older. "Bring Him Home," one of the final songs, was a favorite of Dad's. He loved when I played it on the piano. It was one of the only songs he would

stop and listen to, and even ask me to play again. A gruff, burly man sang it, but the softest sounds came out of him that I have ever heard. It was comforting, protective, and selfless. The last note floated high into the rafters and settled on my eyelids, gently closing them.

Four years passed. My birthday came again. Just a few days after that, Dad died suddenly in his sleep. You later told us that you woke to a faint choking noise, realizing quickly that he wasn't breathing. I awoke to being violently shaken, although in the split second it took me to open my eyes, I saw only the rush of your nightgown through my doorway as you flew back to his side, screaming for us to help. In the blur that followed, Dayday attempted CPR until the paramedics flooded the house. My eyes were locked on Dad's near-naked body, a house for his soul for the past 46 years, showing the typical signs of middle age. The muscles around his waist and arms had softened through comfortable years of good food and relaxation with family. The crow's feet that cradled his eyes gave away a lifetime of laughter. His hands, wide and calloused, had pulled my tiny, fragile body onto his stomach countless times, where I had buried my face in the thick, wiry hair on his chest. But I was older, and he was vulnerable.

Lying on the floor in only his underwear, the strong figurehead of our family was completely exposed and unconscious in front of strangers. I didn't want them to see his belly, his crow's feet, or his body hair. I didn't want them to touch him. I thought that if I just pressed my face to his chest again, maybe he would feel it. But a wall of outsiders trying to help now formed between my father and me. Numbness began to creep over my body. I retreated to a corner in the living room, assumed the fetal position in Dad's recliner, covered my ears, and sang "Bring Him Home" in my head.

Even as the paramedics put him on a stretcher and carried him to the ambulance, I could not relax my muscles from the ball I was curled into. And I couldn't stop hearing that song. Eventually, although I'm not sure how I got there, I found myself sitting in our Suburban, waiting to follow the ambulance to the hospital. Julia was crying. Dayday was staring out the window and frantically asking why it was taking them so long to get going. I silently stared at the back of your

head as your white knuckles gripped the steering wheel. You knew there was only one reason why they wouldn't be moving yet. Even so, the song continued.

Still, while we sat in the hospital waiting room, it played. Even after the doctor came in and told us that Dad was gone, those words still echoed in my head, clear as a bell. At the time, it was a source of comfort. It was a reminder of that 13th birthday and the music that filled our family road trips. It didn't occur to me until later that I had been unwittingly lifting a prayer.

I have seen *Les Miserables* again since then, more than once. At the end of that musical, they sing a specific phrase. "To love another person is to see the face of God." You have often repeated it to me in conversation, reminding me of its importance. I think it is the greatest truth you and Dad ever taught me.

The Arkansas Special

In the spring of 2001, we took a family vacation to Eureka Springs to visit Memah, Dad's mom, for Easter. Along with you, me, Dayday and Julia, we brought Dayday's friend Chris, my best friend, Katie (your honorary daughter), and of course, our loyal and beloved family dog, Edith Ann. The Suburban was packed to the brim with people and their stuff, not to mention the fact that we were pulling our 30-foot trailer behind us. We formed a caravan, following Uncle Rick, Aunt Kathy and our cousins in their similar vehicle situation.

After several hours of driving, we found ourselves in Rolla, Missouri, about halfway to our destination. As we traveled down the highway framed in rolling hills, laughing about one thing or another, I turned my head slightly and saw a flash of green out of my left periphery. A jeep was swerving uncontrollably after cutting off an 18-wheeler. He jerked to the right and flew straight for us. You tried to compensate but turned the wheel too far, and the Suburban and trailer jackknifed. The semi drove into a ditch to avoid hitting us. We started spinning around in a frenzy of shattering glass and

screams. I was silent. It seemed to go in slow motion as I held my breath and waited for it to be over, my right arm secured tightly over Katie's chest, half protecting her, half clutching her for dear life. She was equally silent next to me. The wall of earth screamed toward the windshield, unwavering and unforgiving. I don't remember a deafening crash, but a deafening silence. It hung heavily in the air as we all began to tentatively exhale, afraid to breathe. Slowly, we started climbing out of the car. It was obvious at first glance that the trailer was totaled, probably the Suburban too. We had punted the propane tank about 30 feet away from where we crashed, and there was a gouge in the pavement an inch deep where the hitch of the trailer had scraped along the ground. Only then did we realize how close we were to flipping over and how easily we all could have died in that crash. We looked around at each other, suddenly marveling at our good condition. We were literally untouched; Dayday had a cut on his arm from the window exploding, but that was the extent of the injuries. We muttered words like "lucky" and "blessed," which were painfully inadequate.

I remember that Dayday and Chris stayed at the scene while we went with the tow truck and a stranger brought them McDonalds. I remember that many, many people stopped to help. I remember that Uncle Rick couldn't get off the highway to turn around right away and didn't know if we were ok. I remember that when he finally got there, his eyes were glistening with tears. I don't even remember him crying at Dad's funeral.

Most people would have turned around and gone home when that happened. But for some reason, the thought never even crossed our minds. Looking back, I really can't believe we kept moving forward. But you rounded up your family, took us to Walmart, bought a huge tent, rented a car, and kept driving.

A six day roller coaster followed. Sleeping in the tent that first night was one of the worst nights of my life; we were not typically tent campers, and we were unprepared. It was Arkansas, but it was April, and while the days were warm, the nights were definitely not. Katie and I slept on a thin blanket,

sharing an only slightly thicker blanket over us. The cold prohibited sleep; it was the kind of cold that seeps into your bones, causing muscles to involuntarily contract and spasm in an animal instinct to encourage blood flow. The brain fights it, though- moving around invites the cold air to swirl around you, and your every thought focuses instead on collapsing into the smallest, most contorted ball of human flesh and bone imaginable. Everything hurts. Katie and I tried to crawl inside each other, and eventually gave up, eyes squeezed shut, fists clenched, praying for sunrise. When it finally came and we all began to thaw, I started complaining and found out that Dayday and Chris had slept on the bare floor of the tent with only a sheet over them, so I shut up.

The stress you dealt with on that trip eroded your heart. You had been shocked with the responsibility of the sole care of your three children less than a year prior. And on this trip, you were caring for not only the three of us, but two of our friends as well. You were a single mother of five children in an unfamiliar place, stripped of your only means of travel and shelter. Your determination got us through that trip, but you were not without weakness.

One of those first few nights, you had a meltdown. You were wearing a flannel nightgown and your hair was in two blonde braids that stuck out asymmetrically. You looked like a tiny, scared little girl. The stray hairs that fell around your face were wet with tears and sticking to your forehead in feverish sweat. Your eyes were sunken and overcast, swollen and red. You walked toward the tent in a jolting stagger, staring straight ahead but seeing nothing, clutching your cell phone even though you had no service in the Ozark mountains. That image of you wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed it, tighter and tighter until I couldn't breathe. I followed you into the tent where you had laid down, still staring, still digging your nails into your phone. I asked you if you wanted me to take it and put it away for you, but you declined and gripped it tighter. In sad exasperation, I asked you why you needed it. You replied in a fragile, tiny voice, "In case I wanna call someone, or someone wants to call me." Your vulnerability pierced my chest and surged back up through my lungs, catching in my throat and choking me. Tears spilled uncontrollably from my eyes as I looked at you, helpless and

afraid. You clung desperately to a worthless chunk of matter that symbolized human connection to you, but its shape didn't fit the hole that Dad left.

Katie and I sat by the lake almost every night and sang "It Is Well With My Soul." Her voice, which by that point was well-established as a symbol of familiarity and solace, harmonized with mine and echoed over the water. I learned in those moments that you can create peace even in tumultuous circumstance. I also learned that small moments like those could be magic.

It was Easter. Death hung in the air, but redemption was imminent.

Thanksgiving

The scariest phone call I have ever gotten in my life came to me in a very roundabout way. It was the night before Thanksgiving, and I was with my boyfriend, Nate, playing Euchre at his friend Mike's house about 15 minutes away from home. Our neighbor, Tina, after having no luck getting through on my cell phone, somehow tracked me down through Nate's parents and began calling all his friends until one of them picked up. I knew right then that something bad had happened. Tina had never even called me on my own cell phone. If she had found a way to find me through people she didn't even know, this couldn't be a typical phone call.

Tina was so flustered that she could hardly talk, and all she told me was that you had fallen down the stairs and they had rushed you to the hospital. She wouldn't even tell me if you were ok or not, despite the fact that I asked repeatedly. All I could do was hang up the phone, sputter a fast explanation to the faces of my bewildered friends, and rush to Silver Cross Hospital to find out for myself.

Nate drove me. I don't remember the car ride there. But I do remember getting Julia on the phone; although hysterical, she managed to tell me that you had fallen down all thirteen steps

from our kitchen to the basement, and that you landed face-first.

That face was the first thing I saw. Your eyes had black and blue hoods over them, which swelled and traveled down around your nose. Blood was caked in your hair, and your bottom lip was quadruple its normal size and black. Your eyes looked empty as they stared around the emergency room, twitching and skittish. Your left hand was propped up on your elbow as you rotated your wrist around in a flowing figure eight, directing a choir that no one could hear.

We stayed with you as long as the hospital would allow, then went home to sleep. Dayday and Julia had left earlier and stayed with Katie and her family. When Nate and I left, we went to our house alone. Despite a number of beds to choose from, we slept on the couch. It was too small for Nate's 6'6" frame alone, much less the two of us. We slept under the comforter that you bought me for my first college dorm room, and we didn't move all night. We sank down together after hours of anxiety, fear and sadness, and turned to stone. We slept as though dead. Strangely, I remember waking up and thinking that I had gotten one of the best nights of sleep in my life. Somehow, contrary to every law of physics, we were comfortable all night. My limbs, which should have been completely numb from the tangled heap we slept in, felt renewed. Nate said the same. I don't know why, but it made me think that you were going to be fine. It was Thanksgiving morning.

I went to the hospital and stayed with you. You told me that you fell because you had been drinking and you began to tearfully apologize. I told you that you didn't have to apologize. I told you that God knew what you were going to do before you ever did it, and He forgave you before it ever happened. I told you that I wanted you to think of my forgiveness that way. You asked me how I got so wise, but I thought that was a silly question. You and Dad were the ones who raised me that way.

It is easy to discover the true meaning of Thanksgiving while sitting in a hospital room; there's rarely a shortage of things to

ask for, and always a promise of gratitude. Sometimes giving thanks before receiving is the only way to get what you need.

Full Circle

One day, I went with you to a wedding you had to sing for. I didn't know the bride and groom, I just went to hear you sing. You stationed yourself in the balcony where no one could really see either of us, so we had kind of a secret date that day.

You were upset. You had trouble singing for weddings since Dad had died, and it didn't help that you had recently lost the necklace that you had made out of his wedding ring. A small garnet cross, which you had kept since your childhood, fit perfectly inside the gold ring that was a larger version of the one on your left hand. It hung on a thin gold chain, never leaving your neck. It had vanished in the chaos of rushing you to the hospital that Thanksgiving, and you had ransacked every corner of our house looking for it. You looked in the car, you looked outside. You even thought the paramedics may have thrown it somewhere. It was absolutely nowhere to be found. Enough time had passed by this point that you had somewhat resolved yourself to believing that you would never find it, although a glimmer of hope remained every time you lifted a rug to clean beneath it or peeked behind a shelf to unplug something.

You practiced with the organist and got ready to begin the service. As we were waiting for things to start, I was looking in your purse for some gum. As I was digging around, I saw a shimmer of gold in one of the dark corners. My heart almost stopped. Fumbling, I frantically grabbed it and yanked it out of the purse, clenching the chain in my shaking fist between our faces, which were inches apart. Neither of us said a word; we could only gawk at each other and back at the ring. Your face twisted into a sob as tears rushed from your eyes in a flood of surprise, relief, joy, and grief. We collapsed together, clutching the chain and each other.

The service started soon after that. You stood and began to sing "How Great Thou Art." I sat down right behind you,

both arms around your leg, singing a soft harmony. No one could hear me. I don't even know if you could. All I know is that I felt God with us in the church that day. The bride and groom said their vows, everyone cheered and took pictures, and new beginnings were everywhere, especially up in that balcony.

*Sometimes healing happens when you aren't looking.
Sometimes you have to look for it long and hard. The woman
in these stories lives only in memory, but you are strong today
because of her. In many ways, so am I.*