

The Art of Reassembly

A MEMOIR OF
EARLY MOTHER LOSS
AND AFTERGRIEF

PEG CONWAY



SHE WRITES PRESS

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For Mary Lee Wimberg Morse
March 20, 1933—November 5, 1970

In loving memory

“The Aftergrief is where we learn to live with
a central paradox of bereavement: that a loss can recede
in time yet remain so exquisitely present.”

—Hope Edelman



Prologue

The unraveling began after we finished dinner at a Thai place in Lincoln Park. Our young adult son, his girlfriend, and another friend—all Chicago residents—had joined my husband and me for a drink at our hotel’s rooftop bar before riding together to the restaurant. After our feast of sushi, stir-fry, and bottles of wine, I expected more chatting outside during the wait for separate transportation, a relaxed goodbye that would manage tectonic shifts beneath the surface. Two weeks earlier, Michael had informed us that he and Madeline would be moving in together this summer when their current leases expire. Though a minor geographic change, symbolically it widened the distance from our home in Cincinnati.

Instead, following dinner, I had barely left the restaurant when a random cab appeared at the curb. Madeline turned to Michael and said, “Should we just take this?” In the next instant, they hugged us in thanks and piled in the back seat. Michael waved and said, “See you tomorrow!” as the cab pulled away. Suddenly void of their youthful vibrancy, the neighborhood became sinister.

Just as abruptly, my switch flipped. My body taut, I launched a tirade about their hasty exit. “Leaving us alone on the street corner!”

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“They probably thought our Uber was on the way,” Joe said, his face angled to his phone as he tapped out a ride request.

Perhaps, a tiny corner of my brain suggested, they treated us as they would their friends, assuming competence to summon our own ride after dining out in a big city. Pacing the sidewalk, I couldn’t listen to that rational voice, not yet. Finally, our driver did a U-turn to pull up in front of us. Back in our room soon after, still I huffed and puffed, until suddenly the frenzy deflated like a balloon. I did not want negativity to define the evening or ruin the next day, the final one of our trip before returning home.

During our afternoon with Michael, Joe and I had attended a middle school boys’ basketball game at a YMCA where he and his friend coached. The impetus for our weekend trip was to witness this part of his life, where the pounding of the basketballs on the gym floor, the loud whine of the horn, the piercing tweet of the referee’s whistle, all of it had mirrored Michael’s grade school playing days. Madeline had joined us in the row of metal folding chairs by the sidelines partway through the first half, and we chatted easily for the rest of the game. Though down by fifteen at the half, Michael’s guys had gone on to win by four in overtime, a major accomplishment for them. On the way out, we had struck up a conversation with the parents on our left.

“Who is your child on the team?” they had queried.

Our response—“The coach!”—had evoked chuckles all around, but for me the levity had landed heavily, like a weight on my chest. I enjoyed watching basketball when Michael was involved. It was something we had shared during his growing up. Now it wasn’t the same. He was out of college, working, living his own life. Joe and I were truly just spectators. Naturally, things evolved as Michael became an adult. In theory, I hoped that he would find someone to share his life, but this juncture had arrived

sooner and in a different manner than expected. It was normal, but I struggled.

“Ooohh,” I whimpered aloud now in the hotel room, recognizing at last the familiar emotional flashover that occurred whenever circumstances pressed on an old wound. Whether it was being the last to leave a social gathering or watching a beloved child flourish independently, the reaction was the same, always a reverberation of early mother loss. An outburst was triggered, followed by self-recrimination, and then trembling vulnerability as the acute phase ebbed. Joe glanced over from the closet where he was hanging up his coat, eyebrows raised, questioning.

“Will you please hold me?” I said in a near whisper.

As he hugged me close, wordlessly, our physical contact broke the spell. Hot tears spilled down my cheeks. My breathing slowed. My muscles loosened. I returned to the present, knitted back into relationships, embracing a kinder self-understanding. *It's okay. It's always part of you. Just let it be there. You're okay. Breathe.*

PART ONE





Chapter One

Sweat prickled my neck and back as I entered the cafeteria line with my second-grade class on that September day. In vain, I lifted a tray from the stack and scanned the faces behind the counter. My voice pitch rose in tandem with my anxiety when I asked the person who dished up my plate, “Where’s my mom? I thought she was coming today.”

She shook her head, though her expression was kind as she replied, “She didn’t show up. She’s not here.”

I had been clinging to my mom’s expected presence on lunch volunteer duty as a life raft of normality, but now it floated away from my grasp. I ate my meatloaf and mashed potatoes without tasting them, tingling with dread, while attempting to keep up with the chatter of my classmates. That afternoon when I arrived home, I learned that my mom had fainted in the kitchen and, upon discovering her there, my little brother Tim, age five, immediately set out to find me at school. We lived more than two miles away, most of it a major four-lane thoroughfare. Not far off our street as Tim walked up this busy road, barefoot, a police car stopped. Tim explained his mission, and the police officer drove him home, where Mom had come to and was sitting at the kitchen table.

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I wonder now how much time had elapsed and what was crossing her mind. Did she realize Tim was gone? She was taken to the hospital, and it was determined she'd had a seizure, diagnosed as epilepsy. But my mom was a nurse and knew that was ridiculous, my aunt told me many years later. Mom had asked her younger sister to fetch her medical books and figured out for herself that the breast cancer, diagnosed two years earlier, was spreading to her brain. Her illness occurred several years before chemotherapy was used to treat the disease.

Mom stayed in the hospital for several days. My grandma was already coming over regularly. After her collapse, Mom no longer got dressed. Instead, she wore a knee-length, short-sleeved housecoat that snapped up the front, made of white cotton with tiny black dots, with a round collar and two square pockets in front. Sometimes she stayed in bed, and once I saw her throw up the sandwich she had just eaten into a napkin. Her skin was pale, her once-coiffed hair flattened to her head, and she was quiet. In that jewel-toned autumn, I saw only gray.

On November 6, about six weeks after the collapse, I woke to pale light in the pink-walled room I shared with my older sister and realized it was almost time to get up for school. I was still in bed when the door opened softly and my dad walked in, followed by my older brother Mike, a high school freshman, who was carrying Tim in his arms. My limbs tingled with sudden foreboding. Why was Mike still home? Why wasn't Dad wearing his shirt and tie for work? Why were they all coming into our room? Then Dad sat down between our twin beds. His distinctive wavy black hair, normally combed smoothly back from his forehead and temples, looked tousled. His blotchy face, eyes red-rimmed, made my throat constrict.

"Well, kids, we have an angel in the family," he said, his hoarse voice cracking as he finished.

“Mom?” I whispered, launching into his arms sobbing even before he nodded yes.

Soon after, displaying a child’s limited capacity to absorb such enormity, I left his lap saying, “I need to get ready for school,” but Dad said we would not be going to school that day.

Down in the kitchen, my mom’s parents were cooking breakfast. My aunt arrived shortly after. Their being at our house on a weekday morning when I should be at school heightened the sense of wrongness. I felt afraid but lacked words to even name it. My fear existed as a void. My insides felt empty, like I was floating in space, untethered. I sat in Mike’s lap sucking my thumb as the grown-ups conversed in subdued tones.

The morning of the funeral, I watched men in dark suits heave the casket from the hearse parked in the circle drive of our Catholic parish and carry it up the concrete stairs. I stood mesmerized by the slick unfolding of the metal stand where it was placed. Nearly unable to breathe as I walked down the aisle in the procession amid the booming organ music, my limbs again tingling, I caught the familiar faces of my classmates all seated together in the first few pews of the far-left section. A flash of pleasure was followed by a funny feeling that I could not yet name, the opening line of an inner narrative in which being motherless set me apart from other kids, somehow defective in a basic way. Into the vast and eternal silence of my mother’s absence, I felt myself falling, falling, falling. Where would I land? I had never known anyone without a mother before, could not imagine how to grow up without a mom. The world had tilted, and I had no idea what else might happen that could be even more terrible.

Nothing in my father’s life to this point had prepared him to be a single parent. In fact, just the opposite. He had been raised in modest circumstances during the Depression, an average student, the awkward older brother of a star athlete. His parents never

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owned a home. He never had a bicycle. He worked to pay his own way through college, including a stint as a school bus driver. Coming of age and marrying in the 1950s, his role as breadwinner defined his identity. Around the house he did traditional men's tasks like cutting grass and trimming bushes. My mom cooked, cleaned, and tended the children. They had met while she was still in high school as my dad attended the local Catholic men's college with her brothers. Her parents had a beer tap in the basement, so their house was the social hangout. Curled black-and-white snapshots of the time show men in white shirts, skinny ties, and dark trousers, and women wearing slim dresses, large clip earrings, and dark lipstick, all of them laughing or smiling with cigarettes held between two fingers off to the side and beers clasped in front.

School pictures of my dark-haired, dark-eyed mom suggest a serious, brainy young woman pursuing her goal of becoming a nurse. She attended a local Catholic women's college, and they married after my dad's two years in the army. He began working for her father's company, which sold supplies and equipment to hair salons, known then as beauty shops. My older brother arrived nine months later. His babyhood was well documented in photos depicting my mom, still in her early twenties, first beaming as she clutched her precious bundle and then delighting in his milestones. She stopped working as a nurse sometime after Mike was born and fully embraced motherhood. Over the next five years, the photo archive hints at but does not explicitly convey the ensuing heartaches: a stillborn baby girl, a midterm miscarriage, and then the premature birth of my older sister, Kate. My mom's smile is tired but joyful as she cradles her tiny daughter, home from the hospital two months later. It took much longer to discover that Kate had been permanently blinded by receiving too much oxygen in the incubator.

An obstetrician finally diagnosed my mom with an "incompetent cervix," meaning it could not hold a baby to full term, so

during her next pregnancy, with me, it was stitched closed, and I was delivered via a scheduled cesarean section with no complications. Two years later, the same protocol was followed for my younger brother, but in the process my mom nearly died of a hemorrhage. Even with the challenges and heartbreaks of her childbearing, the photo record depicts her continued smiles around the backyard plastic pool, on picnics, surrounded by paper and bows on Christmas morning, claspings hands with my sister and me at the beach, and later holding Tim, seemingly content with each moment and welcoming each new stage as it came.

Nurturing Kate's needs wove naturally into my mom's life. She made sure that Kate participated in ordinary activities like swimming or the sandbox and guided her in how to safely get around the house and yard. After Kate started school, my mom not only learned to read braille but also earned certification as a transcriptionist so that she could actively help Kate learn to read and write, which were areas of struggle for her.

As the third child in the family, I always paid careful attention to what my older brother and sister were doing. By age four, I could not wait to go to school "like Mike and Kate." When I turned five in August, kindergarten could not start soon enough. Back then it was only half-day. The first morning, my mom and Tim dropped me off, with the plan that I would take the bus home at noon and then both to and from school each day after that. We parked on the street at Mt. Airy Elementary, a public school just up the road a short distance from our parish, and walked together to the playground on the right side of the wide one-story red brick building.

A woman standing at the entrance with a clipboard checked her list and pointed us to the first classroom just inside the door. My whole being buzzed with excitement and a tiny bit of fear as we said hello to my teacher, but I waved goodbye without looking

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back. Three hours later, walking in line onto the playground at dismissal, ready to conquer the bus-ride adventure, I spied Mom and Tim standing off to the side, scanning the stream of faces.

Stopping in my tracks, I wailed, “Why are you here? I want to ride the bus!”

“We were just at the grocery and thought we’d swing by,” Mom said.

Tim stepped closer and started to tell me something, but I ignored him and scowled up at my mom, arms rigid at my sides.

“You really want to ride the bus?” she asked, tilting her head to one side and regarding me with a small curve to her lips.

“Yes!”

“Okay,” she said, “we’ll see you at home.”

Such independence would prove to be both a strength and a burden in my life after Mom’s death, but on this day, I was still an ordinary girl tussling with her mother.