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November Days

Caty Sacco

English 788 Senior Honors Thesis

Adviser: Andrew Merton

1 May 2012

It has been a beautiful summer day. It is June 3, 2010. Smiling, I make my way out of the church with my family: my younger but taller sister Lissa, my fair-haired, fair-skinned mother and my balding, mustachioed father. A small crowd of people follow. I am in a deep blue, shimmery dress with heels that I can barely walk in. I am weeks away from 21, and yet my 18 year old sister has more experience than I do when it comes to things like fashion and grace.

Across the street and down the road is the Wayside Inn of Sudbury, Massachusetts where the reception will be held. My Uncle Steve has just gotten married to Sarah Menecez, a woman he has known since he was 8 and she was 4. She moved to Scotland with her family when she was 14, but stayed in touch with my family. Her autistic brother died falling down the stairs a few years ago. He was her best friend. She took a leave of absence and came back to visit my family and other friends. She stayed with Uncle Steve for a few days, extended her stay, then came back again. He went to visit her. Before I knew it, I was standing in a front pew of an old, simple church, watching the look on my uncle's face as everyone else turned to see his stunning bride step through the front doors. My Uncle Steve is the last to get married in a family of five children. My father was the first. I feel nothing but joy as I head down the street.

I have a happy family. Parents who fall more in love the longer they are together, a little sister who is my best friend, an overprotective, massive black dog. Indulgent, loving grandparents. Dinner at Nana and Pops' with aunts, uncles and cousins. Holidays with relatives. Laughter. Long conversations. Happy marriages. Pictures. Hugs hello. Hugs goodbye. Arguments are worked out privately. I have grown up sheltered, healthy and loved. We are a cliché. People think I exaggerate when I talk about my family. But I don't.

My sister and I take a seat at a table with some of our cousins. We are the oldest on my father's side –after us is my Auntie Jo's daughter Allison who is 14. She sits next to Lissa and

chatters away while her younger sister Lauren sits silently beside me. Their little brothers Nathan and Sean run around the dance floor with Benjamin, my Aunty Robin's towheaded four year old. Blue eyes, fair skin and varying shades of red-blond hair are in all directions.

The wedding procession walks in: the parents of the bride – a dark Indian man and an elegant British woman; my tall, rail-thin Nana in a deep purple gown, her arm linked with my beaming, bald and bespectacled Pops; my Aunty H with her wild, tightly curled brown hair, looking the same at 50 as she did in pictures at 25; my Aunty Jo, still slim after four children, smiling, eyes dancing; my father with his baby sister Robin, both of them redheads and over six feet tall, my aunt's golden red hair falling in curls around her face. And then Uncle Steve, looking more Italian than any of us with his thick, powerful, hairy arms and his thinning dark hair and goatee. On his arm is his bride, a slim, ivory-skinned beauty with big, dark eyes and hair and slanting eyebrows that contrast sharply with her skin. I clap and bounce in my seat like a five year old.

My father is the best man. When everyone is settled and Sarah's father has said his part, Dad gets up and takes the microphone.

He teases his little brother, talks about how when they were younger, Dad would love to wrestle with him when Uncle Steve was half his size. He tells us how as Uncle Steve got older and bigger and stronger, Dad didn't like to wrestle him anymore. Uncle Steve would overpower him.

He congratulates him on finding a wonderful woman. "What's interesting is how they knew each other for their whole lives, and how now, they are even connected by tragedy--"

He breaks off. Looks at the floor. Clears his throat. After a long pause he takes a slow breath. "Sorry," he says softly.

For the first time in my life, I see my father lose his composure. I see my big strong Daddy cry. Only for a moment. But that is all it takes.

No one moves, no one speaks. I press my hand over my mouth as I burst into tears.

There is a hole in my family. An absence. A crater punched into an otherwise idyllic scene. All my life, someone has been missing from this family. I never knew what it was like to have that hole filled, but still, like everyone else sitting at the dinner table, I miss her. I think about her. I wish she were here.

There were six children in my father's family. He was second oldest. Heather, Robert, Joanne, Paula, Stephen and Robin. Heather lives in London, my father and family in Massachusetts, Joanne in Pennsylvania, Stephen in Massachusetts. Robin lives with her family in Connecticut and is moving to Holland at the beginning of 2011. Paula. Paula is dead. We are spread out all over the world, yet we can still come home to each other. Paula cannot.

My Aunt Paula was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia in October of 1983 at the age of 15. She had grown up happy and healthy – a sensitive, quiet girl with an ability to see people for who they really were. Tall with long brown hair, fair skin and bright blue eyes, she fit in with the rest of her family and towered over her friends. She loved one boy – her best friend – all her life, but never got a chance to tell him. She was an athlete and an artist. Her oil paintings cover the walls of my grandparents' home and have been mistaken as professional works. She was easily distracted by beauty and loved how light hitting crystal would cast rainbows around a room. There have been crystals hanging in windows for years at my grandparents' house. We think of her every time we see the splashes of color on the walls and floor.

Paula fought the battle for two years and lost on November 1, 1985. All Saints Day. Three weeks before her eighteenth birthday. It was the treatments that killed her. She had been in remission and was finally home. But an infection in her lungs came creeping in and stole her away within a week. She died quietly with her family – my family – our family – beside her.

I have grown up knowing my aunt had died. But I hadn't realized bits of my family members' hearts had died with her. My father has told dozens of stories about her. Not once has he shown what he feels when he talks about her, when he thinks of her, when he hears her name.

I have always believed that time heals everything just as it destroys everything. But not this. Standing up there alone, crying quietly over his little sister dead for more than half his life, my father shows me that this is a love that nothing can destroy nor heal. Not time, not patience, not change, not death. This love, this pain, will continue on for the rest of his life. It will never weaken. He loves her. My grandparents love her. My aunts and uncle love her. Always present tense. Always love. Never loved.

My father finishes his speech, makes a joke about how he should've saved that part until the end, and sits back down. I flee to the bathroom before he sees me, before my streaming eyes ruin my makeup. Like my father and grandmother, I am not one to cry.

As I mop my face with a coarse paper towel, I am overwhelmed with the realization of how deep the pain and love run through the bones of my father, of his family. How powerfully they still love their sister, their little girl, how they have never recovered from losing her. How, despite the various joys in their lives, they have never been quite whole since the day she died.

Joan Berg and Robert Sacco were married in January of 1954 when Joan was 20 and Robert was 23. They had six miscarriages before they had their first child, a little blue eyed girl they named Barbara. It was another five years before they had a second child – a laughing red-haired boy they named Robert Michael Jr. Two years later Joanne was born, then Paula. Their second boy Stephen was born a year and a half after that, and their youngest was a little red-haired girl they called Robin. The family of eight lived in Hudson, Massachusetts in a quiet neighborhood next to a lake.

Joan and Robert worked hard to treat all their children the same. Every night they took the time to tuck in each child separately. They kissed them goodnight, sang to them and blessed them.

Barbara was often the babysitter once she turned thirteen. A beautiful, headstrong girl with a high singsong voice, she grew to be artsy and different. She hated high school and was in detention more often than not. Her parents caught her smoking cigarettes in her room with her best friend Ingrid when they were teenagers. They had had the window open and were blowing the smoke through the screen; a neighbor had seen the smoke and called the house. She and Ingrid skipped school one late spring day and decided to go down to the beach. It was a two minute walk from the house, and they only lasted a few hours before Joan found them after a call from the school.

Barbara was an artist. She loved colors, the performing arts and painting. When she graduated high school she went to Mass College of Art, where she changed her name to Heather the day she turned 18. She had never felt like a Barbara.

Bobby was orange haired with bright blue eyes and very fair, very freckled skin. When he was little, he loved to run around the house and touch everything. He pulled things off tables

and shelves, knocked stuff over, threw things in the toilet. Joan couldn't let him out of her sight for more than a minute. She couldn't even take a shower. She called him a "little itch." One weekend Robert sawed Bobby's bedroom door in half to make a homemade Dutch door. Now they could keep Bobby in his room and he could still see his mother.

Bobby grew up to be kind, shy and awkward. He was quiet and observant and always saw the good in others. His way of talking to a girl he liked in middle school was "accidentally" smashing her fingers with his desk when she had her hand hanging off the side of hers. This way, he could apologize.

Joanne and Paula were closest in age. They were buddies and people often got them confused. At birthday parties, the two of them split a piece of cake – Joanne only wanted the cake while Paula only wanted the frosting. Joanne was a straight A student with long brown hair. She was chatty, athletic and popular. She barely ever cried and was very competitive in sports. Her passion lay in writing. Paula was stubborn and artistic. She admired Joanne and wanted so much to be like her. She played basketball, ran track and painted from when she was very young. Her favorite colors were yellow and purple. As a child, she suffered from separation anxiety and had meltdowns whenever her mother left the house.

Stephen was loud, intense and energetic. He loved to tag along with his older brother. Twelve-year-old Bobby and his friends would wrestle with four-year-old Stephen in the backyard. They pressed their hands against his forehead and held him at arm's length as he flailed; teeth gnashing, kicking and punching at the air. The boys thought it was hilarious. Stephen was very strong and they nicknamed him Powerhouse. He got in trouble a lot in school. A teacher once told him to go sit back at his desk, so he went and sat *on* his desk. He questioned

everything, and Joan once got a note from a teacher saying, “Stephen and I have finally decided that I’m going to be the leader of the class.” Like Barbara/Heather, he got a lot of detentions.

Robin was quiet and very independent. Bobby nicknamed her “Ribbon.” She would grow six inches in a year during her preteen years, reaching six feet before she was 15. The growth spurt would leave her looking stretched and much too thin, leading Bobby to change her nickname to “Ribs.” She had vibrant red hair, white skin and blue eyes. As a child, she would fall asleep on the kitchen floor. Her family would step around her as they prepared dinner. She was very smart and good with math and science. She also played basketball.

Robert worked full time and Joan took care of the children as they grew. She wrote little notes to herself in a diary:

- *Robin – needs attention from me – even if only a game played with her, some baking together perhaps; practically speaking some new socks*
- *Paula – has matured a lot this year; constantly needs encouragement though; becomes overwhelmed, especially if she falls behind.(needs clothes, uniform, socks)*
- *Joanne – might be overextended, not having enough time because of job; concerned about her rank at school (slacks)*
- *Stephen – doing well; has to be reined in, or guided more, so that he doesn't become thoughtless of others. He has leadership qualities and an aggressive nature, not unkind, just strong minded. He should be encouraged to strive more.*
- *Barbara – pray for her more, drop her a note more often, so she'll know how often she is in my thoughts.*
- *Bobby – What a good son; I'll try to remember the little things he likes; he never asks for much.*

“When you have a big family,” Nana tells me, “you have to remember that each individual needs something special.”

Robert came home at 5:30 every night. The kids greeted him at the door, climbing all over him and checking his pockets for treats. Robert was the type of man who noticed what people liked. He always had a gift. Joan’s favorite dessert was strawberry shortcake. For years he brought her some from the ice cream parlor in town. The kids liked candy and chocolate and he would occasionally stop at the convenience store and pick up a bag of goodies.

Dinner was at 5:45. It was controlled chaos. Grace was said before each meal. All six children had different colored cups so that Joan and Robert could tell who had finished their milk. The rules were to sit straight with elbows off the table and feet flat on the floor. The children learned how to hold a knife and fork properly and to never talk with their mouths full. Stephen was always bubbling over with stories or teasing Robin and Paula who were either too quiet or too young to defend themselves. He was never allowed to sit near Paula. Joanne chattered away while Bobby focused on the food. Everyone had a turn to talk about their day; Robert would ask each child and give them a certain amount of time before it was someone else’s turn. He was adamant about everything being fair and equal.

Spilling milk was something you never wanted to do. But someone always did. It was the one thing that enraged Robert. He would slam his fist on the table as the perpetrator hurried to mop it up. Bobby never understood why spilling milk was such a problem. He told himself he would never yell at his children for that.

They were a happy, busy family. They went to church every Sunday and had priests over for dinner. Their favorite priest was Father Rossi, a man missing the index and middle fingers on his right hand. When sitting on the bus, he would put them against his nose so it looked like he had one finger jammed up each nostril. He adored the Saccos.

There was no question of whether or not all six children would go to college. It was expected. Joan and Robert helped with homework and encouraged them in whatever they loved to do. Robert emphasized that it was *doing* your best that was important, not being the best. The children were involved in afterschool activities and played outside with neighborhood friends whether it was summer or winter. They spent most of the summer in a tiny cottage in Wareham, Massachusetts – a town right at the beginning of the Cape.

Cruelty was not tolerated and the siblings were punished for picking on one another. Their friends gravitated to the house; for dinner, for sleepovers, to play in the backyard. The Saccos had their flaws, but they loved each other.

It is Thanksgiving 2010. Everyone is coming to our house this year. I am excited. My mother makes the best stuffing and mashed potatoes.

Nana and Pops come with three apple pies, one pumpkin pie, and a giant Ziploc bag of M&Ms and candy almonds. Nana made the pies for dessert, Pops brought the candy just because he always does. I get the occasional package of chocolate in the mail from him when I'm at school. Aunty Robin and Uncle Bart come with their two beautiful children, Uncle Bart's parents who are visiting from Holland, homemade pumpernickel bread and several bottles of wine.

Aunty Robin is moving with her family to Holland this coming January. Aunty H has lived in England for over twenty years. Although Sarah has planned to move to Massachusetts to

be with Uncle Steve, she seems more reluctant than he to move across the ocean. He is spending Thanksgiving and Christmas over there, but I hope that is all. It has been twenty-five years since Aunty Paula died. Her forty-third birthday would have been two days ago. The only ones still here are my father in Franklin, Massachusetts, and my Aunty Jo and her family in Erie, Pennsylvania.

“I hate this,” I had said to my mother when we found out Aunty Robin was moving.

“I know,” she said. “But think about how Nana feels.”

It has been a hard year for Nana. She seems happy today. I take the pies from her, set them aside. Everyone laughs and talks while Benjamin, 4, and Emma, 2, run around underfoot or play with my old toys and my sister’s old coloring books. Benjamin speaks a mix of Dutch and English. He pronounces M&Ms “nem-nems.” Emma does not talk, but smiles shyly and hides her face when I say hi. So I sit beside them and take too many pictures.

I help Mom finish cooking and set the table. I serve food and find room on the table for the platters of turkey, cranberry jelly, bread and cornbread. I clear the table when everyone is done, load the dishwasher and put the leftovers in containers. I start the tea and coffee and wipe down the counters. I don’t know when I became so helpful.

We gather in the kitchen after the meal, standing or sitting at the island counter. Nana comes over to me.

“Thank you for all your help today,” she says. “You are so good to your parents.”

I smile. “I like helping.”

“Well that makes me happy. Where did they get such a wonderful daughter?”

I shrug. “It’s ‘cause I come from a wonderful family.”

Nana opens her mouth, then closes it. Her eyes are glassy as she smiles and pats my hand.

“You have no idea how much that meant to her,” Mom tells me later.

Paula had blonde hair when she was little, but by the time she entered first grade it had darkened to a reddish-brown. It was silky and smooth and fell to the center of her back.

Her first friends she made in grammar school were a skinny, dark haired girl named Lori O’Connell and a little boy with a mop of brown hair named John Weir. Both of them lived nearby and Paula had them over to play. They became her best friends.

The first time that John went over Paula’s house, Barbara took the two of them down to the beach. The three of them dug up baby saplings and stuck them into Dixie cups, pressing the damp dirt in around them. Paula put hers on the kitchen windowsill where it would get the most sun. John brought his home to show his parents.

He tried to take care of it, but the small leaves started to wilt and brown. It looked sickly and weak. Despite his best efforts, it eventually died.

I drive to John’s house on a Saturday morning. This is the meeting I have been most looking forward to, and have been most nervous about. I pull up to a pretty house in a quiet neighborhood in Andover, MA. The truck parked in front of me has a firefighter license plate.

A young girl with sandy blonde hair answers the door with a shy smile. She leads me into the kitchen.

And there he is. The man I’ve been wondering about for years. John walks over to me and shakes my hand, a wide smile spreading across his face. He is lean and athletic, with a thin face, shaved head and bright blue eyes. He looks just like the pictures I’ve seen of him as a child, without the head of hair. “Caty,” he says, “great to meet you.”

His wife, mother and one of his sons are in the kitchen as well. I introduce myself and shake hands with his wife who smiles warmly at me. I feel welcome, like an old friend rather than a random college student.

We sit down at the kitchen table to talk. He tells me the story about the trees.

“I was so mad when it died,” he says, smiling and shaking his head.

1970s – 1980s

John had a best friend named Mike Sabourin. Mike also lived in the same neighborhood as John and Paula. John started bringing him when he went to the Saccos' with Lori and the four of them played together after school. Paula and Lori jumped between crushes on both boys. The girls were boy-crazy. Any boy that looked at them could send them into giggles. Bobby had a best friend named Lee who they liked as well. But although they had crushes that changed weekly, Paula always had a soft spot for John. Even as a little girl.

In seventh grade, there was a new girl in school named Kathy O'Keefe. She had reddish blonde hair, a kind face and fair skin. She was very shy and Paula reached out to her. Soon she, Lori and Paula were inseparable.

Paula went to art classes with John when they were in middle school. They talked and giggled the whole time; their art teacher Mrs. Rink spent most of the hour telling them to focus.

Paula also took sewing classes with Lori. They sewed their own dresses for their eighth grade graduation. Both were white with floral designs. Lori's had pink trim, Paula's had purple.

In high school, cooties caused the group to go their separate ways after school. They were friends in school – Paula and John would fling things at each other in class, Paula would hip-check both boys into their lockers as she passed, they were all on the same bus – but outside of

school, girls stayed with girls and boys with boys. John and Mike played football and baseball, Paula played basketball and ran track. The girls' crushes continued to bounce around.

The five of them attended Hudson Catholic High where they wore blue and green uniforms and had a class of 49. Everyone knew everyone. There was very little drama. Life was quiet, content.

2012

Lori still lives in Hudson about a mile down the road from Nana and Pops. She is close with Nana. A year ago, my family had a surprise party for Nana – not for her birthday, but just to celebrate her – and Lori was there. She is now Lori Morton, married with two young boys. One of them has the middle name Paul. If he had been a girl, his name would have been Paula.

Lori is short and very slim with straight dark hair that falls to just above her shoulders. I walk into her house on a January afternoon and she leads me to her kitchen table.

“I went up to my attic to look for things and I found this whole box of stuff,” she tells me, patting a big cardboard box that sits on the chair next to her. She pulls out trinkets – little figurines from places on the Cape, a mug that says “Don’t let the turkeys get you down,” pads of stationery, a high school yearbook. Paula bought the trinkets for Lori whenever she went on vacation with her family.

“You can take something if you’d like,” Lori says.

I look up at her, surprised. “Oh, no, I couldn’t do that. I...she was your best friend, I don’t want to take any of your memories.”

“Look,” Lori says, “I’m at the time in my life where I’m letting go and getting rid of things I don’t need. I have memories of Paula, I have the things that matter to me. Please, take something. And take something for your sister as well.”

I decide on a pad of stationary for myself and the turkey mug for Lissa. Later that night, I hand Lissa her trinket and she reacts as if it is made of gold.

Mike lives in Stow, Massachusetts with his wife and seven children. He works for Life is Good®. I make the drive over there one cold January morning a few weeks after my meeting with Lori. I give the secretary my name when I walk into the lobby. The room has pictures and quotes all over its walls, arranged in a happy-go-lucky, scattered kind of way. The familiar Life is Good® stick figure grins down at me from different corners as he rides a bike, holds hands with friends, skips down a road.

After a few minutes, a slim man with blue eyes crinkled in a smile enters the room and walks right over to me, extending his hand.

“Hi, Caty,” he says, “I’m Mike. Great to meet you. You’ve got that Sacco look.”

It is November 1, 2009. Lissa and I are at Nana and Pops’ for dinner with Uncle Steve, Aunty Robin and Uncle Bart. The meal is a quiet one, though Uncle Steve makes us laugh and teases me the way he always does. Everyone is cheerful but more subdued.

The phone rings and Nana goes to get it. I watch her as she answers it and sits in the corner of the living room. She is there for a long time. We continue talking until she comes back. Uncle Steve turns and looks up at her.

“That was Mike Sabourin,” she says smiling sadly, eyes on the table. Her words come out in a sigh. Aunty Robin and Uncle Steve nod. “He calls me every year on Paula’s anniversary...and he cries.”

Mike tells me how he calls Nana every year. “I have a really hard time getting through that conversation,” he says, staring hard at a spot on the floor. His eyes are filling up. “I just feel so sad. Your grandparents are such wonderful people, and I feel so bad for them. They didn’t deserve that. Paula definitely didn’t deser—”

He breaks off and looks at me. His face is red as he gets up and walks over to his computer, fiddles with things on his desk, wipes his eyes with a tissue. I sit with my pen in hand and wait for him to sit back down.

Fall 1983

It was a warm day in the middle of September. Heather was living in New York. Bobby was home for the weekend from his junior year at BC and had spent the morning doing homework up in his room. Robin was down the street swimming in the lake with friends from middle school. Stephen was reading at the kitchen table. He was moody at 13 and kept to himself.

Paula had been lying on the couch for most of the day. She had been doing this a lot lately. She had slept much more than usual throughout the summer. But she was 15 and her parents had raised enough teenagers to know that this was normal at that age. Today she was fatigued and vaguely nauseous.

She got up to go to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her. Stephen turned a page in his comic book.

There was a thump from the bathroom. Then a bang. Stephen rolled his eyes, irritated. What was Paula doing in there? Was she knocking over *everything*?

But the banging continued. It sounded like she was kicking the toilet and shelves. Silence fell over the house as everyone turned toward the bathroom, heads cocked to listen.

Joan had paused on her way to the TV room. “Paula?” she called.

Nothing.

“Paula!” Joan shouted and rushed to the door. She pounded on it, tried the knob, and pounded again. “Paula! What’s wrong? Can you open the door?”

Joanne had risen from her seat on the couch. Stephen stood up. He could hear Bobby pounding down the steps.

“What’s going on?”

Joan had reached up to the top of the door frame where she kept a screwdriver. The children were always locking themselves in the bathroom. Her hands shook as she tried to undo the lock. It wasn’t working.

“Paula!” she shouted. “Can you hear me?”

Nothing. It sounded like she was thrashing around. Stephen could hear the trash can falling on its side, small objects crashing to the floor. The sound of something soft hitting ceramic. Blood pounded in his head. His heart was racing.

Joan tried again to unlock the door while Bobby hovered over her. No luck. Bobby reached around his mother, grabbed the door knob and yanked, trying to rip it off the door.

Stephen couldn't take it. He shoved past Bobby and bolted out the front door, leaping over the railing and into the bushes below the bathroom window. His father had left the storm windows in. He reached up and grabbed a corner, trying to peel it back. It held. He grabbed hold with both hands and yanked. With a shriek the screen and frame came away from the window. He pulled as hard as he could until it came off the house. He threw it aside, pressed his palms against the glass of the window and pushed it up.

“Paula?”

Nothing. He couldn't see her.

The top of his head was level with the windowsill. He grabbed the sill and jumped, pulling himself up to waist level and leaning in. Paula was lying on the ground, twisted in the tiny bathroom between the toilet, the sink and the shelves. Her eyes were rolled back and she thrashed from side to side. Stephen reached for the doorknob and twisted it just as his mother unlocked it.

“Stephen?!”

He pulled himself into the bathroom and helped his mother drag Paula out into the hall. Joanne was in a panic, crying and breathing in short, shallow gasps.

“Joanne, call 911!” Joan said as she and Stephen lay Paula out on the floor. Joan bent to see if she was breathing. Paula was no longer thrashing – her eyes were half open and glazed, she twitched and her head lolled – but she was breathing.

“Is she okay? I don't – how do we know – should we really call – should I call Dad? Where's Dad?” Joanne was holding the phone and staring at it blindly.

“Joanne, call 911!” Joan said, her voice rising. “And then call the Kushmans!” She had the sudden urge to slap her.

Bobby side-stepped his mother and hurried to Joanne's side. "Joanne," he said firmly, "calm down. Just call 911. Take a breath, and make the call please."

Joanne stared up at Bobby through wild eyes, then took a long breath and dialed.

Robin was walking home from the beach when she saw the ambulance.

She frowned. Who was that for? It looked like it was in front of her house. She wondered if something had happened to their neighbors the Bacons and the ambulance had pulled up in front of the wrong house. The Bacons were older; maybe one of them had fallen.

She quickened her step. As she got to her house, she ran into their neighbor Mrs. Kushman. She was hobbling down her driveway, face twisted in pain. She clutched her arm.

"Mrs. Kushman," Robin said, "What's going on? Are you okay? Did something happen to the Bacons?"

"Oh honey," Mrs. Kushman said, "Paula had a seizure in your downstairs bathroom. She's breathing, but she needs to go to the hospital. Joanne called the house and I went over to help restrain Paula. I slipped on the walkway and fell on the way there...I think I might have broken something. But...your mother is going to the hospital with Paula, and she wants you to stay here. Bobby's going to watch you guys, okay?"

Robin nodded numbly, eyes wide, mouth dry. She turned just in time to see two paramedics carry a stretcher out the front door.

"Paula!" She ran toward the ambulance.

"Robin!" Joan called from the door as she hurried down to the sidewalk. She stopped her youngest before she could get in the way. Robin watched in horror as her unconscious sister was loaded into the back of the ambulance. This wasn't happening.

All Paula remembered was not feeling well that day. She had walked into the bathroom and then...nothing. She would look back on it as a strange blur of noise and sound, of her mother's voice, of the bright interior of the ambulance, of cold hands and serious voices. She woke in a hospital bed, not knowing how she had gotten there.

Her mother was standing beside her bed, pushing her long brown hair out of her face.

"Mum, what happened?"

"It's nothing sweetie," Joan said softly. "You had a seizure, but the doctors said you'll be okay. They want to run a few tests on you, but don't worry. I'm sure it's nothing."

Less than fifty miles away in Boston, a young nurse by the name of Patricia Burke underwent surgery to get a lump in her back removed. She was 28 years old and worked at Children's Hospital. She had grown up in the Bronx with her parents, older sister and little brother and had been the only one in her family to go to college. She was purely Irish with short dark hair, bright blue eyes, high cheekbones and a curvy figure. A few years after she had graduated from the nursing program at Pace University in New York, her nursing instructor told her that if she wanted to go into pediatrics, then Children's in Boston was the place to go. Pat had packed up and moved away without a second thought.

The plastic surgeon removed the lump from her back without a problem. There was barely a scar. He sent it to the pathology unit in the hospital to run tests on it but told her that he was sure it was benign. Pat thought it was just a cyst.

Paula's blood tests came back abnormal and the doctors called to ask that she come in for more tests. They didn't like what they were seeing.

"I'm not going to school tomorrow," Paula told Kathy on the phone. "I have to go back to the doctor's."

"Why?" Kathy asked, playing with the cord. Paula had told her about her "fall" in the bathroom. "Do they really think you have epilepsy?"

"Oh, I don't know. I have to get blood tests done on my bone marrow now."

"What does that check?"

"My bone marrow."

"Oh, very funny."

That weekend was Homecoming Weekend at Hudson Catholic. Kathy had a doctors' appointment before the Powderpuff football game. She had been worrying about Paula all week. Bone marrow tests? For *what*? It sounded more serious than Paula was making it out to be.

She waited until her father left the room to ask her doctor about bone marrow tests. He frowned. "If doctors are running tests on bone marrow, it is usually to check for cancer."

Kathy's stomach rolled. She could feel the blood leaving her face.

"Oh."

Less than two weeks later, Paula went back to the doctor's office where her doctor sat her down and told her that she had either anemia or cancer and that she should go to Mass General or Children's Hospital Boston to get a professional opinion. Before she or her parents could respond, he said that he had already made an appointment for her at Children's.

It was October 5, 1983. A Wednesday. Pat's best friends Lin and Jim were getting married that Friday. Her mother Rose had come to Boston for the wedding and was spending time with her cousins that afternoon. Rose had come to America when she was 16, an Irish girl right off the boat. Her cousin Bob was coming to pick her up at Pat's two-room apartment. She was sitting in Pat's bedroom while she waited. Pat was in the kitchen when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Pat, this is Dr. Gargon." Dr. Gargon was the plastic surgeon who had removed the lump from her back. "I want to talk to you about the pathology of the mass we removed from your back."

"Okay," Pat said, frowning.

There was a short silence on the phone and when he spoke again, he sounded grim.

"That cyst was no cyst, Pat. It was a malignancy and we need to do more surgery and possibly radiation. Maybe even chemotherapy if the cancer has spread far enough."

Everything seemed to fall away as Pat hung up the phone. Her surgery was scheduled for that Sunday. She was dizzy. Cancer. She had cancer.

"Patricia?" her mother called from the other room, "Who was that?"

Pat took a slow breath. Not now. She couldn't tell her mother now. Not with the wedding two days away. It would ruin everything. She would have to wait until after.

Pat could barely talk to her mother. She pretended to cook lunch while they waited for Bob to show up.

The tears started falling as soon as Rose left the house. Finally alone, Pat collapsed on her bed and cried and cried. She was terrified. She needed to be alone, but needed to talk to

someone. Was there anyone she could call? She didn't want to tell her family yet, she couldn't tell friends involved in the wedding. Who else was there?

Michael Comeau was a fellow nurse at Children's. She called him several times, but he didn't answer. She tried other friends, but no one picked up. Pat spent the afternoon pacing the apartment and sobbing.

I want so much for this to be a bad dream, she wrote in her diary, and for someone to come and wake me up from it.

At Children's Hospital, Paula met with Dr. Arceci, a thin, reedy, middle-aged man with red hair and beard and rounded glasses. After reviewing her test results, he somberly told her that she indeed had cancer.

The wedding was a nightmare. Pat struggled to stay present, to appear happy. It almost hurt to dance, to laugh, to toast the newly wedded couple, to join in the conversation.

The doctor had sounded so grim on the phone. *Very serious. As soon as possible.*

I'm going to die, she thought.

She went out for drinks with a few girls after the wedding. A man approached her at the bar. He was nice enough, with dark hair and eyes and a too-clever smile. One of the girls came up to Pat at the end of the night to tell her they were leaving.

"Why don't you stay here with me and then come back to my place?" the guy offered.

The girl shot him a dirty look and turned to Pat. Pat looked at him. *Oh fuck it,* she thought. *It doesn't matter anymore.*

"You know what, just go," Pat said. "I'm going to stay."

Her friend looked long and hard at her. “Are you sure?” They were in the middle of Boston. They didn’t know who this guy was.

“Yup, I’m fine,” Pat said. *I’m just going to die anyway.*

“Okay...” She turned around and walked back to their friends. They looked nervously over at Pat. She turned back to the man as he put a hand on her arm. He was leering at her.

What did I just do?

Pat pulled her arm from his grip and turned around. The girls were heading out the door. “Hey, wait!” she called.

“Where you going?” the guy shouted after her. She didn’t turn back.

Paula was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia on October 8, 1983. She was fifteen going on sixteen, a daydreamer with bright blue eyes and a crush on almost every boy she knew. She was a junior in high school. She played basketball and ran cross country. She loved to paint and draw and read. And a month before she turned sweet sixteen, she was diagnosed with a rare, lethal form of cancer.

Acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) is a cancer of the blood and bone marrow. It affects white blood cells called myeloid cells that are produced in the bone marrow in a usually controlled manner. AML disrupts this process and causes the overproduction of immature myeloid cells that are then released into the blood stream. This overproduction prevents the body from producing other necessary blood cells including red blood cells, other white blood cells and platelets which causes anemia, excessive bleeding, and an increased risk of infection.

AML is the most common acute leukemia in adults; the average age at diagnosis is 65 years. In children, this cancer makes up only 10% of acute leukemia cases. The risk of this

cancer increases with age and is very rare in children and young adults. Acute leukemia gets worse quickly if left untreated.

Treatment includes chemotherapy, radiation and sometimes bone marrow transplants. Dr. Arceci wanted to start a grueling twelve-month session of chemotherapy. For the next year, they would be pumping poison into her body to try and destroy the leukemic cells. She would lose her hair, her appetite. She would be sick, weak, and exhausted all the time. The side effects were horrible and there was no medication to treat them. Paula was sitting in Dr. Arceci's office with her parents when she found this out.

“Okay,” she said.

Dr. Arceci looked at her for a long moment, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “You do understand that you have cancer,” he said. “The treatment is not going to be easy, and I would like to start right away.”

She shrugged. “Well then, we should probably get started.”

The Saccos had to meet with several doctors and nurses that day. They spent a lot of time in waiting rooms and cold, sterile offices. Paula became moody and quiet. She snapped at people when they asked her questions, glared at them coldly, turned away if she didn't feel like talking.

“Paula,” Joan said when the three of them were alone again. “I know this is hard. But you have a problem, and you need to adjust to that problem. You cannot be rude just because you are sick! These people are trying to help you! It is not their fault you are sick, and you cannot take it out on them.”

“Who cares about them?” Paula said. “I'm the one with cancer.”

“Honey,” Joan said, laying a hand on her arm, “I know how you feel, but you can't—”

Paula ripped her arm away from her mother. “No you don’t know how I feel!” she shouted, and collapsed into a chair as she burst into tears.

Nana stands in her kitchen across from me, leaning against the countertop. “And she was right,” she says, “I had no idea how she felt, and I shouldn’t have pretended that I did.”

That same Saturday, Pat woke in her own bed. Everything came flooding back to her as it had every morning since Wednesday. She wondered if there would ever be another morning where she didn’t wake up with this terror. Where her biggest problem would be getting up and into the shower.

She had a queen-sized bed and was sharing it with her mother while Rose was in town. She turned over and patted her on the shoulder. “Mom. Mom, wake up.”

Rose shifted and blearily opened her eyes. “What?”

“I have to tell you something, Rosie.”

Rose looked at her and lifted her head. “What is it?” she said in her thick Irish brogue.

Pat took a breath and looked at the ceiling. Her eyes were already filling up. “It’s not easy for me...to tell you. I don’t really know how. But the doctor called on Wednesday...”

Rose’s eyes were getting wider, her hand had flown to her face.

Pat bit her lip, took another breath. “The mass he removed from my back wasn’t a cyst. It was malignant. I have cancer. I’m going in for more surgery tomorrow.” She started to cry.

Rose clapped her hands over her mouth and stared at her youngest daughter. For a moment, she didn’t move. Tears filled her eyes as she cried through her hands, “I thought you were going to tell me you were pregnant, and now I wish you had!”

Bobby was home for the weekend again. He stayed at the house with Robin, Stephen and Joanne, waiting for the phone to ring. Waiting to hear what was wrong with Paula.

Their father was the one to call. Bobby picked up on the first ring.

“Dad.”

“Hi Bobby. How’re you doing?”

Bobby raised his eyebrows. “Um, good, how are you?”

“Good, good. What are you guys up to right now? Getting your homework done?”

He continued with the small talk until Bobby lost his patience. “Dad, what’s going on? What’s the news with Paula? There’s no need for polite conversation.”

Robert sighed. “Your sister has leukemia,” he said heavily. “They are going to start her on chemotherapy right away. She won’t be home tonight. I don’t know when we’re going to take her home. I’ll be back in a little while, your mother is staying overnight with Paula.”

The resounding click as Bobby hung up the phone echoed in his head with finality.

Word spread fast through Hudson Catholic High. *Paula has cancer. Paula has leukemia. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.* She had been out of school for a week, and the faculty had been telling the students that she was just out sick. But it leaked out and soon everyone knew.

In such a small, sheltered school, something like cancer was unheard of. Lori walked around in a daze. Kathy cried. John and Mike couldn’t believe it.

Joan called Heather in New York to tell her. Heather went to the library to research the disease. Waves of guilt crashed over her when she read that the disease was rare in children and

much more common in adults. She was almost 25, Paula almost 16. That wasn't right. That wasn't fair. Heather should have been the one that got the cancer, not her little sister.

Pat was diagnosed with fibrous histiocytoma – a form of soft-tissue sarcoma. Sarcomas are malignant tumors that develop in the tissues of the body that connect, support or surround other structures and organs. On October 12 she was operated on at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. A wide resection was done on her back where more tissue was removed from the same area that the mass had formed. She would undergo five months of chemotherapy starting at the end of February and lasting until July.

Dr. Gargon cried when she came in for the surgery. He promised he would do his best to keep the scarring to a minimum. He spoke gently when he addressed her, he was exceedingly patient and kind with her questions.

He knows I'm going to die too.

Paula started chemo on November 4. She was hooked up to a port that was strapped to her waist. The central line pierced the skin of her chest and traveled under her collarbone.

She stayed in the hospital for the first month. The chemotherapy made her so sick that the doctors sedated her before they administered it. She vomited, she seized and fainted, she had horrible diarrhea. She was put on steroids to try and help with the nausea and to reduce swellings. The steroids made her face puffy. Her slanting cheekbones disappeared and her cheeks became very round. She didn't look like herself.

Bobby worked in a blood research lab at Beth Israel Hospital across the street and visited Paula every day. She was miserable, pausing their conversations to vomit in the basin beside her bed.

“Here, Paula, let me get that,” Bobby said, rising to grab the basin as she pressed a hand to her mouth. Her whitened face had turned green. She leaned over and threw up for the second time that afternoon. Bobby could see where her hair was thinning. He patted her on the back as she tiredly wiped her mouth.

“Don’t do that,” she said when she was done, motioning to the basin. “It’s disgusting. I can get it.”

“I wasn’t home for a whole month,” Nana tells me. “When Paula was diagnosed and went through that first round, she didn’t leave the hospital and neither did I. People all over town were taking care of the kids. Looking back now, I feel so terrible, particularly about Robin...I feel like being the youngest, she needed the attention the most. She was only 11 at the time, and that’s an age where children need their parents. But I just couldn’t be there for her. Now I wish I had been. I feel like I should have done more. We’ve talked about it, and Robin says she understands, but...I don’t know.”

“Well, Nana...your daughter had cancer,” I say. “You had to be there for her. You can’t do everything.”

She nods sadly. “Oh, right, right...”

In the first few weeks of chemo, Paula’s hair started coming out in chunks. It was on her pillow, in her bed. It was everywhere. She started tugging at it, pulling out handfuls at a time.

“Alright,” she said. “This needs to come out.”

It was the side effect she had been dreading. Joanne was sitting by her hospital bed. She took Paula’s hand. “Paula,” she said, “if you want, I will shave my head, too.”

Paula looked at her incredulously. “Are you crazy? No!”

Joanne gritted her teeth. “I don’t want you to do it alone. If you need someone to go through it with you, I will do it. I *want* to do it.”

There were tears in Paula’s eyes. She looked down. “Thanks, Jo,” she said softly. “But I don’t want you to do that for me. If you have the option to keep your hair, you should keep it.”

Later that day, Paula had her head shaved.

Lee went into Boston one day with Bobby. The ride over had been quiet, but with some prodding, Lee got Bobby to open up about Paula. It was a cold, dreary November day. Rain drops speckled the windshield. The sky looked heavy and gray.

There was a short silence and then Bobby said what he had not shared with anyone else since the phone call from his father. “She’s going to die.”

Lee looked at him. “Come on, man. That’s not a good attitude. Why would you think that?”

Bobby shrugged, stared out the window. The rain was coming down harder. “If she has leukemia, she’s going to die. I just...know.”

Robin was in sixth grade and stayed after school for hours. Stephen was in eighth grade and the two of them walked to the library together where they would read or do homework. Sometimes Stephen would go to his friends’ houses and Robin would stay at the library on her

own. Their father would pick them up between 6 and 8 every night and bring them home to a quiet dinner. Robin started doing the family laundry and tried to learn how to cook. When her mother and sister finally came home, Robin fell asleep in the family room at night. She didn't want to leave them to go to bed. When Joan and Paula went to bed, Robert would carry Robin upstairs and tuck her in.

Paula had a few different roommates while she was in the hospital that month. A one year old boy with a brain tumor lay in the bed beside her. His family was poor and his father rarely had time to see him between shifts at work. His mother came in when she could, but the boy was alone a lot. Paula would talk to him and hold him. Bobby helped feed him.

“It was funny,” Dad says over the phone, “He'd be eating, and suddenly he'd just barf everywhere, and then look up at me and smile. And then he'd eat some more, barf again, and smile. I'd have to hold his hands so he wouldn't play with it.”

A few months later, the little boy died.

Paula loved playing with the children in her room and on her floor. She held races with them, running around in her hospital gown, dragging her IV pole with her.

She became buddies with a little girl named Erica who also had leukemia. She held her and cuddled with her for hours, drew pictures with her and played games. Erica adored Paula.

Paula had terrible veins. Whenever she got her blood drawn, it took multiple tries for the doctors to get the needle in the vein. They poked and prodded and poked again. The insides of

her elbows were always shades of green and brown, little pin pricks of blood spreading like constellations over her skin. Joan made a new rule. She told the doctors that they were allowed two tries, and if they couldn't do it, they would have to go get someone else.

Erica was just learning to speak. She saw how Paula hated the needles. Any time a doctor walked in with one, Erica toddled over to Paula, saying over and over, "Paula, prick! Paula, prick! Prick! Prick!" She pointed at the doctor.

It broke Paula's heart when Erica died.

Paula came home after the first miserable month and tried to return to her normal life. Her parents took her to buy a wig. The owner of the store was a kind, older gentleman who kicked Joan and Robert out so that Paula could have some time alone to decide. She settled for a dark brown wig with swooping curls that fell to just below her ears. Paula had loved her hair. She had let it grow to the center of her back. She didn't want short hair.

When she went back to school, Mike was quiet around her. It was hard for him. He found himself losing focus in the math class he had with her. He watched her from across the room, trying to process how sick she was.

Despite her treatments and the side effects, Paula played basketball both her junior and senior year of high school. Her wig would fall off if she wore it in the games, so she bought a little white turban to wear instead.

The winter of their junior year, Mike and John went to one of her games. They climbed up on the bleachers and as they sat down, Mike turned to look for her. When his eyes landed on the turban bobbing around on the court, his stomach lurched in shock. He had never seen her

without her wig. Paula had no hair. Paula was sick. Paula had cancer. He sat down heavily on the bleachers and pretended to tie his shoes. It felt as if his world was in free fall.

“That was um, that was the first time it really hit me how sick she was,” he says thickly, his jaw jutting out in an under-bite. “I just remember watching her play...in that little hat...and just...she had no hair. *She had no hair*. I couldn’t believe that she was that sick, and still, you know, playing sports. Carrying on like there was nothing wrong. I don’t know how she did it.”

He sniffs and gets up again to grab another tissue and rearrange papers and pencils on his desk. I take my time writing, eyes on my notebook, giving him a moment alone.

I leaf through Lori’s yearbook, find Aunty Paula’s senior picture. Underneath is the quote again, “Don’t let the turkeys get you down.”

“That was her favorite quote,” Lori tells me. “She always used to say it. It was her way of saying don’t give up.”

There is a list of what everyone aspired to be. Aunty Paula’s answer was a Bruce Springsteen groupie.

Lori laughs. “She *loved* Bruce.”

There is a picture of Paula standing at her high school locker, wig in place. Lori flips through and points at a picture of a basketball game. “There she is again,” she says, pointing to a girl with a white cap on her head.

“I was in charge of the yearbook committee,” Lori says, “and Paula was out of school a lot both junior and senior year. She asked me to make sure I put pictures of her in there. She was afraid she wouldn’t be in any.”

Spring 1984

Bobby was carrying a stack of medical papers one day at work when he glanced at the abstract. He paused mid-step. The paper was about AML. He read the abstract slowly, digesting the words. It said that in children, this type of cancer was deadly. The mean time of remission for AML was twelve to eighteen months. *That's it?*

“Ken,” he said to his boss as he dropped the papers on one end of the doctor’s desk, “this abstract, it says AML remission is twelve to eighteen months. Does that mean that it only lasts that long until a relapse?”

Frank looked at Bobby for a long moment. “Yes,” he said. “The remission is usually only temporary in this form of cancer.”

“It just...confirmed things for me,” Dad says.

Paula received the chemotherapy monthly and came in after school. Michael Comeau was one of the nurses taking care of her and she would meet him up in Division 28 – the Oncology Ward of the hospital.

“Paula is someone I can close my eyes and picture as if I saw her yesterday,” Michael tells me over the phone. “I have had a lot of patients over the years, but she was someone everyone remembers. She had a profound effect on people.”

Paula came in wearing her school uniform: blue and green plaid skirt, white button up shirt with a dark blue sweater over it. The moment she stepped foot in the hospital, the wig came off her head. She played with it as she walked – tossing it into the air, throwing it at people.

“She left that wig everywhere,” Michael chuckles. “I was always finding it on chairs, tables and beds. I’d have to remind her to take it. She hated that wig.”

The Oncology Ward was an 18-bed unit. The children would come in and sit on the beds to wait for the nurses and doctors to take their vitals, run tests and administer the chemotherapy. Paula befriended whoever was in the bed next to her. She became especially close with a girl named Beth who was also 16 and in the hospital as often as Paula. Beth’s will to live was not nearly as strong as Paula’s. She was pessimistic and depressed. Paula spent her days trying to encourage Beth to keep fighting. She wouldn’t let her complain.

Michael learned to be careful before he entered the room when Paula was there. More than once he opened the door and a stuffed animal would fall on his head or Paula would jump out from the other side and scare him. She got bored easily and loved to prank.

Michael couldn’t get away with anything around Paula. She had a sharp eye and an even sharper tongue. He gave it back to her, and they would bicker and banter as he hooked her up to the various drugs. Mid-laugh, she would pause and throw up into the basin that Bobby had ready for her, and then she would turn back to continue the conversation. The drugs made her sleepy and she would drift off. The doses of chemo could last anywhere from two hours to two days. Bobby brought books and homework to pass the time. Joan sat and watched her daughter.

“Your family was so devoted to her,” Michael says. “Just such a great family. I saw them back in 2009, and no one has changed at all. Your father was a really good brother to her. He was always there.”

“I just knew she was going to die,” Dad says over the phone. His voice is matter-of-fact, light. It is the tone he has always used when he talks about Aunty Paula to mask how he feels. It had me fooled for years, but I know better now. “I knew from the start that her time was fixed, and that I needed to spend as much time as I could with her while I still had the chance.”

Paula’s classmates wrote letters to her while she was in the hospital and she would write back. But some people would write to her about their own problems: boy troubles, fights with friends, strict parents, bad grades.

“It really makes me mad,” she told Lori, “there are bigger problems than a fight with a friend!” She didn’t answer those letters.

Lori isn’t finished with all the gifts she has for me. She reaches into the box once more. “Paula and I wrote letters to each other a lot while she was sick. I saved them all if you want to look through them.”

I stare with wide eyes as she pulls out a short stack of papers. She hands them to me and I touch them gently, afraid they will disappear. I sort through them, reading every word, studying the handwriting, the language used, the expressions. One page just says in huge letters, “P.S. this is my 1st letter to anyone so save it.” I laugh.

Each letter is like a little hello from her, showing me who she was. Each letter is hard for me to put down, to stop reading. Each letter means more to me than any story about her I have been told.

Summer 1984

Months passed, school let out for the summer. People started drinking and having parties. Kathy made friends with different girls while Paula was home sick, and she became close with a girl named Dawn. Dawn was slim and blonde and liked to party. Paula had never liked her. There was tension whenever Kathy mentioned her name. But Kathy liked Dawn and continued to hang out with her.

Kathy was the designated driver for parties over the summer and into senior year. She had no interest in drinking. Another boy named John had people over all the time to drink and get stoned. Kathy drove Dawn and whoever else wanted to go.

This John also lived right down the street from the Saccos. While Kathy talked and laughed and watched people stumble over each other, she couldn't shake the guilt creeping into her mind. She'd find herself staring out windows in the direction of the Sacco house. She didn't feel like she should be having fun at a high school party while Paula was so sick a few doors down.

Aunty Robin is addicted to the outdoors the way others are addicted to cigarettes and alcohol. No matter the weather, she spends time outside every day.

It is a cold day in January 2010 and we are sitting inside the new kitchen she and Uncle Bart have just renovated in their house in Connecticut. She suggests we go outside. The sun is out and there is no wind but still...it's January.

"Sorry," she laughs, "I just want some sun."

We bundle up and sit outside on the patio. I prop my notebook on my lap. "What makes you think of her the most?" I ask.

"Thunderstorms," she says without hesitation.

Robin hated thunderstorms. The crashing thunder and blinding lightning terrified her. Robin shared a room with Paula, but even with the company, she shook under her blankets, hands over her ears.

Paula lay on her side, watching her baby sister cower under the covers during one bad storm. She lifted up her comforter. "Get in."

In a flurry of movement, Robin tumbled out of bed and crawled in beside her. Paula wrapped an arm around her and held her close, moving her head so she didn't get a mouthful of bright red hair.

"See, it isn't that bad," she said as they watched through the window. "It's just noise."

Paula could feel Robin's trembling slow and finally stop. Her body relaxed in her sister's arms and she drifted off to sleep.

Aunty Robin has told me this story with a smile on her face. "Now I love thunderstorms," she says, "I'll sit by a window and watch the whole thing. It makes me feel..." she trails off and looks at the ground. Her lips are pressed into a thin line. I pause, thinking that she is trying to

find the right word. But then she looks up at me and tears roll down her cheeks. I am horrified. My Aunty Robin – the woman who snowboards, windsurfs, manages a company, fixes cars and lawnmowers, rebuilds her houses and swears like a sailor – is crying. I wasn't prepared for this.

The tears continue as she says in a voice much higher than usual, "It makes me feel like her arms are around me."

On July 19, 1984, Pat finished her last round of chemo. She was in remission. She could get on with her own life.

"I don't really remember the last round," Mom tells me. "For my cancer, they would administer the drugs through an IV. It wasn't such a big deal for me when it was done. For people with a cancer of the blood like Paula, they would have the port taken off and the central line removed from their chest, so that was a much bigger deal."

I am incredulous that she cannot remember her last round of chemo, how it felt to walk out after.

"I remember lots of blood tests and getting the drugs," she says, "but otherwise, nothing. It's not a time in my life that I want to remember, Caty."

Fall 1984

Senior year started. Chaos descended as everyone tried to pull their applications together and send them out in time. Paula applied with everyone else. Her top choice was B.C., following in Robert, Bobby, and Joanne's footsteps. She had been looking at Mass College of Art as well.

"Why would you want to go there?" Kathy asked.

“Because I want to be an artist,” Paula said.

“But you won’t make any money that way!”

Kathy was practical. This didn’t make any sense to her.

“It’s funny now to think about that,” Kathy says, smiling wryly from across her kitchen table, “because my husband is an artist, and a rather accomplished one. I feel like she had something to do with that...or at least she’s laughing at me now.”

Homecoming weekend was in October again. Paula was almost done with chemo. She played in the Powderpuff football games with Lori and Kathy. The separate grades made posters for each other. Paula made one for Lori. She cut out a football from a brown piece of paper and wrote “OUTTA MY WAY O’CONNELL” in big, scrawling letters. Everyone hung the posters on a wall in the school gym. All the girls had given each other nicknames. Paula’s poster said, “Sicko Sacco.”

She was quiet as she looked at it. “Why would they call me that?” she said to Lori.

“Oh, they didn’t mean it that way, Paula!” Lori said. “They probably meant like, you know, ‘sick ‘em.’ Or it sounds like your name so that’s why.”

“I don’t like that name,” Paula said.

Lori hands me the paper football that Paula made for her so many years ago. I take it and smile as I study the handwriting.

“I asked the girls to change Paula’s name,” she tells me. “And I know they did but I can’t remember what they changed it to. I just remember she hated being called that.”

Paula's last round of chemotherapy was November 23, 1984. The doctors informed her that she was officially in remission. Cancer free. It was also her birthday.

She floated out of the hospital. Everything seemed brighter, warmer, prettier. Even on that gray November day. She laughed at everything. It was the best birthday gift she could have asked for.

Robin and Stephen decorated the house for her arrival home. John, Mike, Kathy, Lori and other friends from school came over to celebrate both occasions. Paula was 17, and she was going to be okay.

Bobby came home for the party, hugged his little sister, smiled and laughed with the rest. But he couldn't celebrate the way everyone else was.

"I was happy. It was a good day," Dad says. "But I knew it was just a matter of time."

A week or so into her remission, Paula decided to write a letter to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"What are you going to ask for?" Robin asked as Paula settled down to write.

"A trip to Bermuda," she said. "The water there looks so beautiful – it's such a pretty turquoise blue. I want to swim in it."

So she wrote the letter and sent it off. Joan called to see what their chances were; she wasn't sure if it was possible for the Foundation to send such a large family on such a grand vacation. But the people she spoke with seemed very optimistic. Paula's hopes rose as November faded into December and Christmas decorations appeared all over town. This would be the

perfect Christmas – not only was she in remission, but to win a trip to Bermuda too? It sounded too wonderful to hope for.

But in the middle of December, Joan answered a call from the town's local news station. They wanted to do a short story about Paula and her wish to go to Bermuda.

As Paula and Robin cheered at the news, Bobby felt his own hopes lift. They wouldn't put her on TV to tell her she didn't win, would they? No. Was it possible?

A week later, Paula, Bobby, Robin and Stephen got in the car with their parents and headed over to the news center. They were introduced to the newscaster, whose name Bobby promptly forgot, and led over to the set.

Everyone settled awkwardly on hard, white circular chairs. Bobby sat with Stephen, Robin with Paula, and Joan with Robert. Bobby was annoyed with the hostess – prancing around in a bright red dress, she told the camera crew she'd wing it instead of first going over with what she was going to ask. He was uncomfortable on the seat – his feet didn't touch the floor unless he slid almost off the chair, and he was sure it was meant for one person: he and Stephen were neither side by side nor back to back, but somewhere in between. He didn't know which way to turn or where to put his hands. Paula sat with her hands in her lap, the shy look on her face betraying her nerves.

The cameras started rolling and the hostess asked questions that made Bobby raise an eyebrow. She asked where they were in the waiting process, how long ago Paula had written the letter, if she had any idea of the status. The questions were repetitive and pointless. He was sure Paula was having a hard time watching her mouth.

“Now do you believe in prayer or are you crossing your fingers, wearing a rabbit's foot...what kinds of good luck are you hoping for here?”

What?

“I’m just hoping we get to go,” Paula said.

Stephen sat silently beside Bobby, hands clasped and leaning on his knees. Robin smiled at everything their father said, her red hair glowing in the harsh light.

As his mother talked, Bobby began to tap his foot on the floor. Was it going to work out? Would Paula’s request be granted? Please, please, please...

“Well as a matter of fact we have someone here you want to meet,” the hostess said. “Her name is Judy Foley – come out here, Judy – she’s the travel coordinator representing Children’s Happiness Foundation and since nobody here was able to answer the question on the status of this trip, maybe you could help us answer that.”

Bobby’s heart started thudding as a short thin woman in a tan and black dress walked over to stand beside Paula. She beamed down at her. They wouldn’t bring this woman here just to let Paula down on TV...

Judy took the microphone and said, “Well I’m here on behalf of the Children’s Happiness Foundation to inform Paula that it has been granted and we’re sending you and your family on a week’s vacation to Bermuda the week of February 2nd.”

Paula’s mouth opened in a surprised smile. “Thank you...oh, my God!”

Robin’s face lit up and she grinned at Bobby. He laughed. Stephen shifted beside him.

The hostess turned to Robert and asked him if he was glad now that he had been included in this. He laughed and said, “I’m speechless but that’s *very* generous. A very generous thought. Thank you very much.”

She turned back to Paula and finally asked a worthwhile question, “Do you have friends back home waiting to hear about this with you?”

“Yeah,” Paula said quietly.

“And are there any of them out there who you’d like to make sure they get the message that you’re on your way?”

“Well, I know quite a few,” Paula said, “um...one of ‘em – she’s in the hospital, her name’s Beth – and I just want to say, well, you *can* get out of there and...she *can* go on a vacation.” A triumphant smile was spreading across her face.

Twenty-seven years later, Paula’s niece watches her hungrily on a buzzing, filmy screen. Arms swaying numbly at my side, I stand so close to my friend Guillermo’s TV I almost knock it over. Guillermo sits on his futon, watching with me. I am so focused on my aunt’s face that I miss everything said in the interview. I study everything: the way she smiles, the sound of her voice, what she’s wearing, how she sits. Was her voice really that soft? Was that the real color of her hair before it fell out? What did that smile mean? Was it genuine? What was she thinking about? Was she nervous being on TV?

This is the only time I have heard my aunt speak, seen her as alive as I am today, observed her mannerisms and movements. I have an urge to reach out and touch the screen.

“Are you alright?” Guillermo asks. My eyes are wet.

I don’t know if it is because I am finally seeing my aunt as a real, living person instead of just a collection of old photos, descriptions and letters, or if it’s because I already know the ending of this story. Either way, it hurts. And I am overwhelmed.

Paula never got to go to Bermuda.

January 1985

It was in the early days of the new year that Paula started to feel sick and tired again. Joan and Robert discussed calling the hospital.

“No, I’m fine, I’m fine!” Paula protested. “I don’t want to go back, I’m just tired.”

But the fatigue worsened and Joan brought her in for testing.

Dr. Arceci called about a week later and asked if Paula could come in. Joan’s heart sank. She called Bobby before they left.

“Bobby, dear,” she said quietly, “Paula and I are going back to the hospital – the doctors want to talk to her. I think it’s bad news. Is there any way you could...?”

“Of course, Mum. I’ll be over there as soon as I can,” he said.

The drive to the hospital was quiet. Paula stared out the window at the falling snow. Joan held her hand as they walked into the hospital and sat down to wait.

The examination room was chilly and Paula leaned on her mother’s shoulder. When Dr. Arceci walked in, his face told it all. He looked tired, older than he was, depressed.

“Paula,” he said, “the test results show that the leukemia is back. I am so sorry to say that you have relapsed. I believe your best option at this point would be a bone marrow transplant. You need bone marrow that will be able to produce healthy white blood cells to fight off the cancer, and yours is not able to do that. We would run tests on your family members to find who would be the best match and begin treatment right away.”

Paula looked at her mother. “But what about Bermuda?” she said desperately.

Joan swore she could hear her heart snap. “Oh, honey...” she said.

The look in her daughter’s eyes was enough to bring tears to her own.

Paula turned back to Dr. Arceci. “Okay,” she said softly.

Dr. Arceci looked at her. She stared back at him, blue eyes empty. “Do you want some time to think this over?” He asked. “You can talk to your mother about it, process the information.”

“No,” she said. “Just do what you gotta do.”

Paula wouldn't talk to Joan as they walked back out to the lobby. She stared straight ahead, barely blinking.

“Honey, are you alright?” Joan asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Fine, Mum. I just want to go home.”

Joan rubbed her daughter's back. Her eyes burned but she bit her lip. The last thing Paula needed was to see anyone cry.

They walked silently through the lobby, Paula's back straight, head up.

And then as they pushed through the doors and out into the snow, they saw Bobby's tall, lanky frame striding toward them. Without warning, Paula let out a cry, ripped her arm from Joan's grasp and ran to her big brother. He opened his arms and she collapsed into him. He held her close, rocking her as she began to sob. Joan's hands flew to her mouth. Bobby reached out and pulled his mother into him. She leaned into her newly 21-year-old son, putting an arm around her little girl. The three of them stayed like that for a long time, a young man holding his mother and sister as they cried, the snow falling gently down around them.

“Your father was such a rock through the whole thing,” Nana tells me at her house over tea. I am sitting there spellbound as she talks and fiddles with her mug. “He was the one that kept

us together, the one we all turned to. Your Aunty Paula *adored* him. She absolutely loved him. I don't know what we would have done without him.”

I tell the story to my mother later that night when I come home, and we both start crying.

Paula called Kathy one day and asked her to come over for the afternoon. When Kathy got there, Paula led her upstairs to her room and closed the door. They sat down on her bed. Paula was studying her hands.

“Everything alright?” Kathy asked after a moment's silence.

Paula looked up at her. “I have something to tell you,” she said quietly.

Kathy felt her stomach drop. *Oh, no. Oh no oh no oh no.*

“What's wrong, Paula?”

Paula looked back at her hands, opened her mouth, closed it and then took a breath that she let out in a huff. “I'm not in remission anymore,” she said in a small voice. She sniffled and wiped at her eyes. “The cancer's back, I'm not going to Bermuda, and I have to go back to the hospital for a few months.”

The two girls cried for a long time.

“So what does this mean then?” Kathy asked.

Paula's blotchy face changed. Her mouth thinned into a hard, determined line. “I'm just going to have to fight again.”

Pat had been working on the infant/toddler medical floor at Children's Hospital for over three years. The Intensive Care Unit had just opened a few years ago and she hoped that she could maybe find a job on that floor. She wanted a challenge.

It was in January of 1985 that a nurse approached her about a new job.

“Pat, we’ve heard that you really enjoy your work and are looking for a change,” she said. “There is this teenage girl with AML that is coming to the bone marrow unit in the ICU in March, and we are looking for people to be on her team. Michael and Becky suggested that you would be interested in working with her. She’s been here for over a year, and I’ve got to tell you – she’s an amazing kid. Great family too. I’m sure you’d love working with her.”

“Sure!” Pat said. “What’s the name?”

“It’s Sacco. Her name’s Paula Sacco.”

Sacco. The name rang a bell. If she strained her memory, Pat could swear she had heard someone mention the Sacco family before.

“Great,” she said, “I’ll do it.”

“I had heard that there was a nurse moving to the bone marrow unit who had cancer.” Nana has told me a few times. “So I asked if she could take care of Paula. Having cancer is such a lonely thing – I wanted someone she could talk to about it. Someone who actually knew what she was going through. I didn’t want her to be alone anymore.”

Pat met with the Saccos a few days later to witness the consent of the patient. She sat in a small waiting room with Dr. Arceci and the resident doctor Richard Weinstein facing a tall, fair-skinned girl with hair so short it looked like a buzz cut. The girl’s parents sat on either side, her mother thin with thick curly gray hair, her father tall and powerfully built, laugh lines crinkling his eyes. The girl held a brown wig in one hand. She played with it as the doctors talked to her.

Pat reached up to scratch at her own wig. She couldn't imagine walking around without hers on. This girl was brave.

The talk was light, the girl's parents introduced themselves as Bob and Joan and shook hands with everyone. Paula smiled shyly, displaying perfect teeth. Her face was unnaturally rounded, and when she smiled it was more obvious. *Steroids*, Pat thought.

When everything had been signed, Pat leaned over to Paula. "You know," she said, "it's funny that I'm working with you, because we have a lot in common. I had cancer, I just finished chemotherapy, and I wear a wig, too."

Paula studied her for a minute. She looked at her wig. "Human hair, right?"

Pat laughed, surprised. She touched her wig. "Yes, it's made of human hair."

Paula nodded thoughtfully, satisfied.

As they were leaving, Paula turned to Pat. "Can you take off your wig?" She asked abruptly. "Can I see you without it on?"

"Um...sure," Pat was self-conscious, but lifted it off her head.

Paula's eyes widened. "Oh, my God, your hair's so long! Why do you still wear that wig?"

Pat shrugged and smiled. She had never even thought to go without it.

Paula wasn't well enough to receive bone marrow right away. From January to March she received blood transfusions to get her counts up. Neighbors and family friends came into the hospital to donate their blood and platelets for her.

It was on one of the first days that Paula had been admitted in January when Pat came in to her moaning on her bed, her arm thrown across her face. Becky, another nurse who was

working with her had left for lunch and Pat was watching Paula until she came back. Becky had not bothered to check on Paula before she left. She had not given her any new pain medication, had not checked to see how she felt. Fury at Becky pulsed through Pat as she hurried to Paula's bedside. What the fuck was she thinking? This girl was clearly miserable and she just went to lunch? She muttered obscenities under her breath.

Two young men were sitting slumped by her bedside with their long legs splayed out in front of them. The one closest to Paula was tall and red-haired with a drooping mustache. His pant legs were pulled back enough to reveal long white socks with brown shoes. This was her older brother Bobby. And he was very in the way.

"You need to move," Pat said curtly as she brushed by him to Paula.

"He got out of the way real quick," my mother laughs as she tells me over the phone.

To keep herself occupied during the long nights, Paula wrote letters. Lori came home from school one day to find a letter from Paula sitting on her table. She grabbed it and ran up to her room to open it. It was written in a scrawling, lazy half-cursive.

Dear Lori,

How are you doing? I'm doing great. It's 2:00 am on January 29. I couldn't sleep so I decided that I would share my boredom with you so we both will have trouble sleeping!!! ha, ha. Anyways, I hope that you can read this because I can only guess what words I'm writing so bear with me okay? The nurses here are really nice (and young – not old hags as I expected them to be) in the ICU.

I feel okay, except I lost enough weight to make me dizzy and give them an excuse to worry about something! Lori, it was such a creepy feeling to walk into the x-ray room when I was being admitted, and then to get yelled at for not coming in on a stretcher or other ghastly thing to say "I'm sick." Some people are so intolerant to change that I had to spend 10 minutes explaining why I'm not crawling in on my last legs. Do you understand me? My head's starting to buzz. I'll have to stop writing for now and fill you in on the rest later. Sorry.

Okay, I'm back. Hey I wanted to thank you for the great letters; they really kept me goin'. I thought that I was the only one who loved sunsets (wow – I'm normal!) I wonder if Jim will give you your prom pictures. If he does, can I have a copy of one? I know you looked awesome. Oh guess what?! Can't guess, can you? Well, I'll tell you then – one of my friends named Robbie went to the Springsteen concert in Providence and got backstage passes and met the Boss. He also got me an autographed picture of him and his band, telling me to "keep the faith." I also got a born in the USA poster. 2 of my nurses got to TALK to him. Wow, I'm shellshocked. I probably would have gone into a vegetative state and drooled over him. I hope you can read this, because I don't know if I could even though I know what I want to write. They give me eye drops so I can't see. Sadistic, huh?

I'll attempt to write again soon.

Love, Paula

–I've got loads of eyebrows/eyelashes – yay!

Nana pulls out the Bruce Springsteen poster that she has kept all these years. "The nurses and doctors were so good to her," she says. "They loved her, and they absolutely spoiled her."

While Paula was being prepped for the bone marrow transplant, the hospital ran tests on every member of her family. Heather ended up being the closest match.

“Were you scared?” I ask her over a long distance phone call.

“No,” she says in her high, soft voice. “That was fine. I still felt like it should have been me that had the cancer so I was happy to do anything to help her. It was just a needle. If she could handle cancer, I could handle a needle.”

A bone marrow transplant is more than just a needle. It is a surgery. The donor is anesthetized in the OR, where the surgeon will make two to four incisions on the skin over the pelvic bones. The doctor then inserts a hollow needle through the skin and down to the pelvic bone. The bone is punctured to access the marrow, which is withdrawn into the syringe.

Some bone marrow donors describe the feeling as if one had been kicked by a horse.

“I don’t really remember much,” Aunty H says. “It did hurt; I don’t think I could walk for a few days. But I got over it. It was all very anticlimactic to me.”

March 1985

Paula was admitted into the isolation unit of the hospital on March 14, 1985. Her parents brought her in together. She walked into Children’s in a purple sweater, jeans and a shoulder-length, lime green wig. She had bought it for St. Patrick’s Day. Robert took a picture of her standing against a brightly painted wall before she was led to the unit. The three of them laughed as they watched the Polaroid develop. Paula looked ridiculous.

Over the next ten days, Paula received full-body irradiation. In order for her to receive the donated bone marrow, her immune system and her own bone marrow had to be destroyed. Otherwise her body would reject what it would perceive as a foreign substance entering her blood. If she rejected the bone marrow, she would die.

There were two rooms for patients receiving bone marrow transplants. These patients would be kept in isolation the entire time they were receiving treatment because they would be immunosuppressed. In order for anyone to enter, one would have to go into a different room right before the entrance. Hands would have to be scrubbed from fingertips to elbows for a full five minutes. A sterilized yellow gown would be donned along with latex gloves, a white face mask, a blue cap for the hair and blue booties. Anyone with so much as a sniffle was not allowed in. Paula was kept in isolation for three months. The only faces she saw were through a glass window. Everyone else was covered up.

Joan was there with her daughter every day. Bobby, then a senior, would come visit after work or class. Pat worked closely with Paula, spending eight hour shifts with her. They talked about everything. Pat began to realize that Bobby wasn't so bad either. He was funny, polite and genuinely kind. The three of them would spend hours talking, laughing, teasing. It became routine to see Bobby there, and he would keep them entertained as Pat gave Paula her various medications and blood transfusions. She would chase him out when she bathed Paula or helped her use the bathroom and he would come back in when she was done.

Paula wanted her mother to bathe her, but Joan wasn't comfortable with that. Pat could read it on her face.

"Oh, I'll take care of that," she said on the first few days there. Joan looked visibly relieved as she left the room.

“I was not that intimate with my children,” Nana tells me, tracing an invisible design on the table cloth. “I bathed them when they were younger, but Paula was a young woman, and I was just not comfortable doing that.”

Spring 1985

When Paula first received the bone marrow, things went well enough. She was weak and in pain, but it was manageable.

Only identical twins have the same tissue and bone marrow types. Before a transplant, the doctors find a donor with a very similar tissue type to the recipient. But the match is not perfect and sometimes the recipient’s body can still reject the donated marrow. One of the more malicious complications of a bone marrow transplant is graft-versus-host disease, where the transplanted cells attack the recipient’s body. The patient’s new immune system works against the body rather than protecting it, causing all sorts of side effects including abdominal pain, fever, jaundice, skin rash, lesions, vomiting and weight loss. The patient becomes highly susceptible to infection and sometimes dies from this disease.

In the month that followed the transplant, Paula’s skin started to peel. The inside of her mouth erupted in sores. Her eyes yellowed. She lost weight but her face remained too rounded. And before everyone’s horrified eyes, her skin began to darken. Joan watched as her fair-skinned daughter turned a deep, unnatural shade of brown. She looked as if she had switched races. Someone with a striking skin tone but all the wrong features.

I ask Mike how he reacted when he first saw Paula with her new skin color.

He looks off into space. “I tried not to pay attention to it...I definitely didn’t say anything to her about it. Pretended everything was normal. But I just remember how *blue* her eyes were. I mean, she always had the bluest eyes, but with the contrast of her skin, her eyes were just popping out. She had a natural beauty to her eyes...they were always...shining when I saw her. Shining through the pain. She never gave away how badly she felt when she was with us.”

He stops talking, his jaw clenched. He looks at me briefly, then away. “Hold on a minute,” he says in a small voice.

John does not even remember a change in Paula’s skin color. He looks past me, frowning. “No, I only remember her as...*Paula*. Rosy cheeks, blue eyes, fair skin. I don’t remember her ever looking any different.”

I watch him for a few moments, my own brow furrowed. I have pictures of her after the transplant with me, but I decide not to show him.

Spring 1985

The graft-versus-host made Paula miserable. There were days when she did not want to deal with anybody. She was sick all the time. Pat did her best to keep her comfortable but sometimes it wasn’t enough.

On one miserable day, Pat skipped lunch to stay with Paula. For her entire eight hour shift, she did not stop. She bathed Paula, gave her her blood transfusions and medications, cleaned things up, made sure she was comfortable. She chattered the whole time, but Paula wouldn’t even look at her. She stared straight ahead and gave Pat terse, one word answers. When Pat sat down beside her, she rolled over and faced the other way.

Pat was exhausted. She didn't know what else to do with the girl. She couldn't think of anything else to make her happy. Paula wouldn't even say goodbye as she headed out.

Just before she left, Pat turned in the doorway. "Well, I get an A for effort," she said.

Paula turned and looked her dead in the eye. "Hitler did, too." It was the only time she had looked at Pat all day, and then she looked away.

Good Lord that girl is brutal, Pat thought as she stormed out of the hospital.

Paula had a stream of visitors while in the ICU. Her father came in after work. Her siblings were always visiting. Mike visited her as often as he could. Lori's mother drove Lori, Kathy and John into Boston at least once a week. The high school principal Mr. Stanton came in every Sunday afternoon for long periods of time. Father Rossi came to make her laugh. Another priest named Father LeBlanc would visit Paula, but he talked about death and she grew to hate him. Whenever he came she pretended to be asleep.

The visitors would sit on the other side of a glass wall and talk through a speaker system. Paula sat on her bed and smiled at whoever was on the other side. No one mentioned her skin color, the glass wall between them, the fact that beside her Joan was covered from head to toe like something out of a sci-fi movie.

The more time Pat spent with Bobby and Paula in the isolation room, the more she realized how much she enjoyed Bobby's company. They became good friends over the long months. He was interesting, smart and so funny.

Bobby noticed how blue Pat's eyes were. It was the only part of her he could ever see while in the isolation room and he grew to appreciate how pretty they were.

“When you were in the isolation unit, you couldn’t touch your face,” Dad tells me. “If you did, you’d have to go and change your gloves. We had tongue depressors to scratch our faces with. I always forgot and ended up touching my face and Mom would make me change *every single time*. I could never get away with *anything* with her.”

Paula and Pat would plot together. Pat brought a squirt gun in with her one day and waited by the door of Paula’s room as Bobby washed his hands and arms and donned the scrubs. When he came to the door, Pat ripped it open and sprayed him in the face while Paula laughed behind her. His face mask stuck to his mustache and he had to get a new one.

He’s really cute, but too young Pat told herself, the eight years between them making it difficult for her to flirt. *I do want to keep in touch though, I’ll have to send him a card when he gets married. Lucky girl...*

“Why don’t you date Pat?” Lee asked Bobby one night.

Bobby looked at him and laughed. “Pat? She’s like my sister!”

Bobby liked to tease and Pat was an easy target. One Friday night he was being particularly obnoxious and she finally turned to him and said, “Oh, E.S.A.D.!”

He stopped. “E.S.A.D.? What does that mean?”

She grinned at him. “You don’t know what that means? Ha, find out for yourself!”

When Pat walked into Paula’s room Monday morning, Bobby was waiting for her.

“Eat shit and die? Nice...” he said the moment she entered. She laughed.

“That’s when I knew he liked me,” Mom says over the phone. “Because he cared enough to find out what that meant.”

I giggle. Smooth, Dad.

Summer 1985

Paula was announced as well enough to go home at the beginning of June. She left the ICU on June 14.

A few days before she came home, John, Mike, Kathy and Lori went over to the Saccos’ house to help clean. The entire place had to be disinfected from floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Everyone was given a bucket of cleaning solution and put to work, starting upstairs and working their way down. The bathrooms were scrubbed top to bottom, the carpets were vacuumed, all sheets, pillowcases and curtains were washed or changed. John spent time on the staircase, cleaning the walls and the banister. Lori and Kathy set up signs in the backyard that said, “WELCOME HOME PAULA” in huge, blocky writing. A white hospital bed was set up downstairs in the living room by the fireplace so she would not have to be carried up the steps every night.

Everyone was laughing and chattering as they worked. The atmosphere of the house was bright, ecstatic. Paula was finally, finally, *finally* coming home.

That morning Pat got up early to go to the hospital to see Paula off. She was in the kitchen when she felt it. Her back felt wet. She looked up at the ceiling. Was there a leak?

A few minutes later, she had the feeling again. What the hell? She walked back into her bedroom and turned around in the mirror, pulling her robe down. Her mouth opened in a cry of horror. The scar on her back had opened up. It was a hole the size of a walnut. Fluid was seeping from it, dripping down her back. It looked like her back was made of liquid; looked like it was melting away.

Necrosis. The chemo had caused the tissue in Pat's back to die and the flesh was starting to melt away. She was much more susceptible to infection. The doctor at Beth Israel cleaned and dressed the wound and told her to come back twice a week to get the dressings changed. If the opening did not close up on its own, she would need reconstructive surgery.

There was a party in the ICU for Paula before she left. Pat had bought her white sweatpants and a purple and white striped shirt that read "free at last" on the back. Paula changed into them for the party and had her father take pictures. Oncologists and hematologists from different floors came down for the party and cheered as Bobby wheeled Paula out into the room. Everyone wanted pictures with her. Pat knelt beside her with two other nurses and the Sacco family as people took turns being the photographer.

I am a freshman in college when Mom shows me pictures from that day. I find her leafing through old photo albums in our back room, her face pained.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

She sighs and says, "Oh, just look at Paula here. So sad."

I take the picture from her. It is of my mother and two other people I don't know. One is a young blonde nurse, the other an elderly black woman. I frown. "Um, where's Aunty Paula?"

"Right there." Mom points to the person in the middle, sitting in a wheelchair, skin the color of charred wood. Her face looks old, aged forty years. I take a step back. My stomach drops and I clap my hand to my mouth in horror.

I had never known about the graft-versus-host disease. The picture I have had in my head of my aunt is a fair skinned, soft-faced girl with curly brown hair. I have never been told anything to think she had lived and died looking any other way.

Paula was wheeled outside, face mask in place. She blinked in the sunlight and then her eyes crinkled, betraying a hidden smile.

Bobby and Stephen helped lift her out of the wheelchair and led her to their father's Station Wagon. She went home with her family. Bobby stayed behind and went out for drinks with Pat and a few of the other nurses. He sat beside Pat at the bar and they talked through the night. He had just graduated BC with a bachelor's in chemistry and had no idea what he was doing next. For the time being, he was staying at Beth Israel.

The group of them walked out together. Pat didn't want the night to end. It had been such a happy day and she was having so much fun with Bobby. Now that Paula was out of the ICU, when was she going to see him again?

"Do you want a ride home?" he asked as they made their way to their cars.

Before Pat could respond, Becky, who had been right behind them cut in. "Oh no, I'm driving her home, she's all set!"

Pat looked at her. Anger and frustration welled up inside her. Becky was watching Bobby with a gooey smile on her face. *Bitch*. Pat thought. *You like him, too, don't you?*

He shrugged. "All right."

"Well, let's keep in touch, now that I won't see you every day," Pat said. "What's your number?"

Throughout the rest of June, Pat went to Beth Israel to get her dressings changed. After her appointments, she would call Bobby in his research lab and they met in the hospital cafeteria for coffee. As the days passed, the necrosis worsened. Pat started getting her dressings changed every day. She got them done so often that Bobby started to redress them. He came to her apartment on the weekends to change them. The two talked for hours. Pat had never met a man that she could talk to for so long about so much. He was so much younger, but she found it harder and harder to remember that as the days and weeks passed.

Paula was in and out of the hospital for different reasons – sometimes just for a checkup, other times because she had spiked a fever or wasn't feeling well. Because she was so immunosuppressed, any decline in her health, no matter how slight, had to be taken seriously. Pat visited her whenever she was around.

On one such visit in the beginning of July, Pat was able to sit with Joan and Paula and talk for awhile. When she had to get back to work she said goodbye and headed for the door.

"Oh, Pat!" Joan called as she was about to turn the corner, "By the way, I was talking to Bobby the other day, and he said you were the most incredible person he has ever met." Joan smiled knowingly at her. Paula grinned from her bed.

“Oh!” Pat said. “Well, thank you!” She practically danced out the door. *He likes me! He really likes me!*

Bobby had gone to the movies earlier that summer with Pat, her mother and Pat’s friends Lin and Jim. On the way back, he had pointed out a bar called Cornwall’s.

“That’s a great place,” he had said to Pat. “I gotta take you there sometime.”

On July 14, Pat decided to step up and make it happen. The next time she got her dressings changed, she had made up her mind. She was going to ask Bobby out.

She called his phone in the research lab but he didn’t pick up. She went to the cafeteria to wait. Her nerves were stretched tight. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. She called him again. Still no answer. She was nervous. Where *was* he? After almost a half hour, she tried his phone one more time. When he didn’t answer, she gave up. Maybe another day. Disappointed, she made her way toward the back exit. She didn’t want to run into anyone she knew.

But as she reached out to shove open the door, it swung open. And there he was.

“Hey!” he said.

“Hi!” Why was her voice that high? Why couldn’t she look at him? Pat fiddled with the ID that hung from neck. “Hey...I was just wondering...you had mentioned Cornwall’s was a great place to go...I have to drop my mother off at the airport tonight, do you want to meet there after for a beer?”

“Sure,” Bobby said. “That sounds great.”

Pat smiled shyly at him. “Great. Okay. See you then!” She almost floated out the door.

“I knew you were asking me on a date ‘cause you couldn’t look at me,” Dad says, laughing, as Mom sticks her tongue out at him. He pitches his voice higher and stares obviously at the ceiling, then at the floor as he mimics her: “Ummm...do you want to get a beer...later tonight...? I was just wondering...”

“Bobby! Stop it!” Mom says shrilly, baring her teeth the way I do when my male friends tease me. She smacks him on the arm. He laughs.

“At least I had the guts to ask you out!” she says.

“What?” he says, throwing his arms up in mock confusion. “I would have asked you out eventually! If you had left it up to me, we’d probably be engaged by now!”

My stomach aches from laughing. She smacks him until he wraps her in a hug so tight she can’t move her arms. We are laughing so hard we can’t speak as my mother writhes under his grip. Finally they both relax, and mid-smile, kiss once, twice, three times.

July 14, 1985

Pat dropped her mother off at the airport later that night. She was all nerves and butterflies. She laughed at every little thing. As they said goodbye at the terminal, Rose smiled and said, “God help you, Bobby, you’re about to be snagged!”

The date was wonderful. They sat at the bar, ordered a few Watney’s each and talked the whole night. They stayed there until close and as they were leaving, Bobby reached out and grabbed Pat’s hand. He gave it a squeeze, smiled, and they parted ways.

“Once he grabbed my hand, I knew,” Mom said. “We were an item. And we were together every day after that.”

Nine days after that first date, Bobby told Pat that he loved her. They were having a picnic on a beach in Wareham, MA near the cottage he had spent his summers in as a child. Pat stared at him, taken aback.

“How can you go from saying she was like your sister to saying you loved her nine days after you started dating?” I ask Dad, disbelieving.

“I don’t know,” he says. “It all just clicked for me. It was a moment of clarity – everything came together all of a sudden.”

“Didn’t it bother you that she didn’t say it back?”

“No, I knew it was coming.”

A week later, Pat said it back.

Pat went to dinner at the Saccos’ a few weeks after she and Bobby had started dating. They had Paula’s favorite meal: an Irish boiled dinner of ham, cabbage and carrots. Pat was overwhelmed by the conversation; Bobby, Stephen and Robert talked about the World Wars, subjective pronouns, chemistry and the differences in various languages. Where was all this smart-people talk coming from? And how was she supposed to fit in? She quietly ate her dinner.

After dinner Paula settled in one of the reclining chairs in the living room to rest. Bobby sat beside her.

“Hey,” she whispered, tugging at his sleeve. She beckoned for him to lean in. When he did, she nodded at Pat. “Does Mum care about the age difference?”

He laughed. “No, she doesn’t.”

Paula nodded. “Good.”

“That was her own little way of telling us she approved,” Mom says over the phone. “I knew I was in her good books after that.”

August 1985

Pat was going to Scotland and England for three weeks in August.

“What do you want from Scotland, Paula?” she asked her a few days before she left. “I can get you a trinket!”

“I don’t know....get me a sheep.”

Pat raised an eyebrow at her. Wise-ass.

Paula frowned. “That sounds so weird. A sheep. Three sheep. Why is there no singular version of sheep? There should be. Hmmm. Oh! From now on, one sheep is a ‘shoop.’”

“Shoop?” Pat laughed.

Paula nodded seriously. “Yup. Shoop.”

Pat scoured what seemed like all of Scotland’s gift shops looking for the perfect ‘shoop’ for Paula. On one of her last days there, she finally found one. A little white sheep figurine in the corner of an Edinburgh gift shop. She smiled at the cashier as he handed it to her.

Paula was in the hospital again when Pat came back. She was lying in bed with her eyes closed. Joan sat beside her. Pat tiptoed in and placed the figurine on the little table suspended over Paula’s lap. She sat down next to Joan and they conversed in whispers.

Without opening her eyes, Paula asked, “Where’s my shoop?”

“Open your eyes,” Pat said.

Paula’s eyes flew open. She let out a squeal when she saw the sheep on her table. “Oh!” She picked it up. She hadn’t expected Pat to get her anything.

That figurine now stands at my grandparents’ kitchen window. Over the years, more sheep figurines have found their way into all our homes. I have my own ‘shoop’ mug. When my sister was little, she painted a plaque for my grandparents with one lone sheep on it. It hangs on the wall in their kitchen. I can’t look at sheep without thinking of Aunty Paula. I can’t look at sheep without thinking “shoop.”

August 1985

Joan had gone to bed early one night, exhausted from the day. The rest of the family was still awake. Robert had half-led, half-carried Paula upstairs so she could sit in her old room with Robin for a little while.

Joan was just drifting off to sleep when she felt the covers lift and someone plop down on the bed. She opened her eyes to find Paula snuggling up beside her.

“Paula!” she said, moving over to make room. “What are you doing?”

Paula leaned her head in her hand and said very seriously, “Mum, do you and Dad still have sex?”

Taken aback, Joan laughed aloud. “What a question, Paula!”

“Well who else was I going to ask?”

“She had a question, and she was going to ask,” Nana says, laughing.

Summer was drawing to a close. Everyone was packing up and getting ready for their freshman year of college. Lori was going to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA and Paula had been accepted at Boston College. The schools had been rivals for a very long time. Paula and Lori planned on buying each other sweatpants from their separate schools and wearing them around campus to see how many dirty looks they could get.

Lori spent a lot of time that summer at Paula's house. On one of her last days, she and Paula sat outside by the driveway. Mr. Sacco had painted hopscotch and foursquare grids on the cement. Robin was playing hopscotch with one of her friends.

It had been a warm summer day, a cool breeze played at their faces and pushed Paula's face mask against her mouth. She leaned back on her elbows and looked up at Lori.

"By the way," she said, "I'm not going to college this fall."

Lori stared at her. "What? Why?"

Paula shrugged. "I just need more time to recover."

"That was my first 'uh oh' moment," Lori tells me, "when she told me that. Before then I always thought she was going to be okay."

One by one, people left for school. Lori went off to Holy Cross, Kathy, Dawn and a girl named Katherine to Southeastern Massachusetts University, John to UMASS Amherst and Mike to Deerfield Prep in Western Massachusetts. Joanne began her sophomore year at BC. Robin started eighth grade, Stephen his sophomore year of high school.

One by one, Paula's classmates left to start the next part of their lives, leaving Paula behind.

Fall 1985

The doctors suggested that Joan go back to work while Paula was at home. Being trapped in the house together all the time wouldn't be good for their relationship.

Joan started working part time 8-1 each day. She could tell Paula didn't want her to leave by the way she sat quietly by her the night before, the way she visibly relaxed every time Joan walked into the room. Paula had two nurses – one that came for the day and one at night – so she would not be alone. But she didn't like the nurse that came during the day.

“Here, Mum,” she said as Joan put her to bed that night. She handed Joan a bottle of perfume that someone had given her on her last day in the ICU. “I want you to have this.”

“Oh, thank you Paula,” Joan said, kissing her daughter on the forehead.

The next morning, Paula was quiet and sullen while Joan got ready for work. The nurse fussed over her. Joan put on the perfume before she left.

As she passed Paula, her face lit up. “You're wearing my perfume!”

“She just wanted me to wear that perfume,” Nana says, “and was so happy that I did.”

Joan could see the resigned look on Paula's face as she threw on her jacket and checked herself in the mirror. But as she hugged her goodbye, Paula gave her a huge smile.

“Have a good day, Mum!”

The mornings when Joan was gone were hard for Paula. She missed her mother. The nurse that took care of her talked too much and treated her like a child. It drove her crazy.

The nurse started taking Paula for walks up and down the street to help her gain her strength back. On one sunny afternoon, their neighbor Mr. Bacon was out tending his lawn. He was an older man who had lived across the street with his wife as long as Paula could remember.

“Hi Mr. Bacon!” she called, turning to wave.

His face broke into a smile. “Hi Paula! How are you?”

The nurse was leading her back toward the house, but Paula turned to walk across the street.

“Paula, let’s go,” she said. “It’s time to go back inside.”

“I want to talk to Mr. Bacon!” Paula said impatiently, pulling her arm out of the nurse’s grasp. Carefully, unsteadily, she teetered across the street. The nurse stayed where she was, arms crossed.

“You’re looking great!” Mr. Bacon said as she stopped in front of his house. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling much better!” she said. “Getting stronger every day!”

They talked until Paula got tired standing on her own. She said goodbye and weaved back across the street. The nurse took her by the arm and led her up the walkway to the front steps.

But Paula was too weak to climb stairs. They stood there staring at the three blocks of concrete.

“Well why don’t you sit down on the steps and go up backwards?” the nurse suggested.

“Not in my new *white* pants!” Paula snapped. She was wearing the pants Pat had given her at her going away party. The steps were dirty.

The two of them stood there bickering when Mrs. Kushman walked by. She heard Paula's tone and walked over to them.

"Paula," she said, "what's wrong?"

"She wants me to sit down on those steps in my white pants!" Paula said.

Mrs. Kushman was used to Paula's stubbornness, her attitude. She smiled and said, "Okay, nothing to get worked up about. Here, we'll both take one of your arms and help you climb up the steps, okay?"

After a few long minutes and a lot of effort, the two women got Paula back into the house without ruining her new pants.

Paula was desperate to get out of the house. Joan decided to take her down to the public high school one day to walk on the path that wrapped around the building. It was a warm Sunday afternoon. School hadn't started and the campus was quiet. Paula wore her pale blue hospital scrubs and face mask. Joan helped her out of the car and they linked arms as they made their way slowly along the path.

But Paula was unsteady on her feet and lost her balance. She pitched forward, almost dragging her mother with her, and collapsed on the ground.

"Ouch!"

Joan's throat tightened as she watched her little girl, tall and slender and brown-skinned, try to push herself up into a crouch. Her arms shook with the strain. Joan bent to help, but Paula leaned away.

"Don't, Mum, I can do this. At least let me try."

But after a few attempts, Paula let out a huff. "Okay," she said, "I give up."

Joan bent down and reached under Paula's arms. The angle was awkward. Paula was the same height as her mother. With so little strength, she was mostly dead weight. Joan wasn't strong enough to help her own daughter up. She tried again and again, each attempt increasingly desperate. Finally she stood, her breathing ragged from something other than the exertion.

"I can't pick you up, Paula," she said. "I don't know what to do."

"It's alright, Mum, I'll keep trying," Paula said, reaching for a stump. She pushed and grunted but to no avail.

Joan was getting frantic. How was she supposed to get Paula to stand up again? She couldn't leave her lying on the ground. But she couldn't just stand there and watch. She felt trapped, overwhelmed with her daughter's helplessness.

She heard footsteps and turned to see a young man jogging up the hill. He had been up ahead of them for awhile but had turned around.

He stopped when he saw them, taking in the wild-eyed mother and the brown-skinned girl sprawled on the ground, face mask hiding her nose and mouth.

"Everything alright?" he asked.

Joan was torn. She avoided people at all costs when with Paula – she was scared of them even breathing on her for fear of germs. But she couldn't lift her daughter up on her own.

As if sensing her mother's hesitation, Paula spoke up. "Can you just help me up, please? I can't get up on my own."

"Oh, sure." He walked over to her, hooked his arms under her shoulders, and lifted her easily to her feet. She reached for her mother's arm as she turned to him.

"Hey, thanks!" she said brightly.

He smiled. If he felt pity, it didn't show. "Oh, my pleasure! Have a good one!" He turned and jogged away.

The two were quiet on the way home. Paula leaned on Joan more than usual and went to lie down when they got back to the house. Joan sat in the living room and stared into space. It wasn't the image of her daughter collapsed in defeat that haunted her. It was the feeling of not being able to pick her back up.

"I'm getting better at this every day, Mum," Paula said breathlessly as the two trekked through the woods one crisp morning. Fall had arrived – brightly colored leaves enflaming the September sky. "I think I might try going for a run around the school."

Joan looked at her. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Paula nodded. "I want to."

And she did. The next day she jogged one lap around the high school. The feeling was intoxicating. The pounding of her feet and heart, the sweat running down her face, the cool air stinging her ears, her legs, her cheeks. After just one lap, she was exhausted, but she had done it. She went home and called Kathy to tell her.

Miles away in a little phone booth, Kathy couldn't stop smiling. She hung up feeling lighter than she had since she started school.

Lori lets me bring her letters home. I wait until my father comes home from work, eats dinner and unwinds before I lay them out on the table. I am edgy and excited; a little girl with a gift. He and my mother sift through them. Most of them are in envelopes but one lies encased in

a plastic page protector. My father picks it up. It is written in pencil and has faded over the last twenty-six years. It is a letter Paula wrote to Lori in the fall of '85 when Lori was a freshman.

“Read it out loud,” Mom says, leaning back in her chair. I have already read all the letters and I don’t know if this is the best idea. I turn to him, mouth open in a warning, but I hesitate.

Dad puts on Mom’s glasses and begins, “Dear Lori, Sorry about the terrible handwriting, but I’m sorely out of practice. You know what? I miss you a whole bunch.” He pauses and laughs, showing us that Paula had drawn a bunch of grapes next to the sentence. He continues. “I’m getting stronger, Lo. Recently I fell out of a chair, and got up myself—”

Dad’s voice rises an octave and then breaks. He makes a muffled sound and my heart lurches. He stands there, leaning on the kitchen counter, letter held gently in his left hand. He takes a deep steadying breath, gulps, and lets it out slowly, his cheeks ballooning. His right hand comes to his face and he leans on his palm. He looks weary, trying to hide himself away.

“Oh, don’t read the rest, Bobby,” Mom says quietly.

I stand there, eyes filling with tears as Daddy wipes his own away.

Lori had read the letter in her room at school:

...and got up myself!!! (using a chair, but also my weak muscles.)

We’re under warning watches for Hurricane Gloria. CREEPY! Can you read this? I hope so.

Enough about me; how’re you doing? Is college very tough? Be careful, ok? Many people tend to get very sick their first year. We don’t need two sickies around. Anyways, sickness is my turf; so stay away! Beware the Sacco wrath!

Well, I think I’ll give you a break from this disgusting handwriting. Love you!!

Friends forever,

Paula

There was a little drawing at the bottom of a smiley face with a few hairs sticking on end. “Four hairs!” Paula had written, with an arrow pointing to the head.

A month later, Lori’s parents showed up without warning to tell her that Paula was dead.

“The sounds I made when they told me...” Lori tells me with a shake of her head, “I have never made before or again.”

October 1985

John was coming to visit. He had come home for the weekend and was dropping by to see Paula before he went back to school. Paula had gotten sick earlier that month and had spent a few weeks in the hospital. What little strength she had gained back was gone. She would have to start all over again. John’s visit was perfectly timed.

Paula had spent the morning fussing with her wig and trying to decide what she would wear that would best complement her skin. It was hard – all of her clothes were meant for a fair-skinned girl who never truly tanned. She was settled in the living room when he arrived, and Joan answered the door.

He stood there in the summer light, blue eyes crinkled, dark brown hair cropped short, a package under his arms and a smile on his face. Joan led him inside and handed him a face mask in a plastic bag. He took off his shoes and jacket, washed his hands and strapped on the mask.

She brought him into the living room where Paula was sitting on the couch, blue eyes betraying the smile hidden underneath her mask.

“John!”

“Hey, Paula!” He bent down and hugged her carefully as she threw her arms around his shoulders. She felt frail in his arms. Breakable. Was she weaker than the last time he had seen her? He pushed the thought away and sat down in a rocking chair across from her, trying to keep some distance. It was hard not being able to be too close. He didn’t want to get her sick, but the distance emphasized the state she was in. “How have you been?”

John stayed there for most of the afternoon. He struggled internally with conversation – he knew he was there to distract her from being sick, but felt guilty talking about his life, about stupid day-to-day things when what she was going through was so much bigger. He didn’t want to rub his happiness in her face. When he asked her how she was doing, she waved the question aside, said that she was feeling better, made a joke and change the subject. She asked about UMASS, his friends there, life at home, his girlfriend Kristen.

Too soon he had to leave. He gave Paula the package he had brought: a sweatshirt with UMASS written across the front.

“Oh, John, thank you!”

“I wanted to bring her something,” John tells me, “and I didn’t know what. But then someone told me that she was always cold because of how sick and weak she was, so I figured I’d get her a sweatshirt. And it was from my school so it’d be something a little more personal, something from *me*.”

She walked him to the door where they stood for another few moments, delaying the goodbye, Paula cradling her new sweatshirt close to her chest.

“It was really great seeing you again, Paula,” John said as he opened the door.

“Definitely,” she said. “You better come visit me when you’re home again.”

“Of course. I’ll give you a call when I’m around.” He reached over to hug her. Again the feeling of holding something so very fragile.

“Thanks for coming by,” she said. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

And then he was gone, walking across the dying grass of the lawn to his car. Paula stood in the doorway, watching him go, the rays of the setting sun shining on her dark skin. Joan, who had been watching from the kitchen, stood and walked over to her.

She was still watching him, clutching the sweatshirt close and standing bathed in the golden light when she spoke. Her voice was soft, whisper quiet in its wistfulness. “I have loved him since the day we met.” And she stood there, tall and thin with her face mask in place until he climbed in his car and drove out of sight.

In the middle of October, Dr. Gargon told Pat that the hole in her back was not going to close up on its own and she needed more surgery. He would perform a skin graft, taking some skin from both sides of her lower back.

The surgery was long and recovery slow. Pat took a couple of weeks off of work. The scar arced over the majority of her upper back, the top half raised and whitened, the bottom sunken and pink. The skin was stretched tight over it. When it healed, it looked like a heart on its side, splitting down the middle.

It was the last week of October, a few weeks after John’s visit. Paula had still not recovered from her last hospital visit. She woke up one Wednesday morning not feeling well.

Nauseating pain had settled on her chest. She was tired. Very tired. She felt slightly breathless. Chills ran up and down her body only to be replaced by sweats. She rubbed her eyes, staring up at the ceiling. Decided to stay in bed a little longer.

She stayed in bed all day. Joan came to check on her, felt her forehead. It was hot. Again.

Joan frowned. "Are you okay, darling? I think you have another fever."

"Don't call the doctor!" Paula said. "Don't! Don't tell them! I don't want to go back!"

"Honey, you know I have to," Joan said. The doctors had told her to call them for anything. A cold, a fever, a stomachache, a sniffle. Anything. Joan called the hospital. They told her to bring Paula in, so she helped her into the car and they made their way over there.

She was there for nine days.

They brought her first to Division 28. The look on her face as she entered the all-too-familiar unit was scared but resigned. She was so tired of being there.

Bobby came soon after she was admitted. He sat beside Paula through the day, and left to go home with the promise he would be back the next morning.

But Paula became oddly groggy the following day. She slipped in and out of consciousness as the hours passed. She responded to less and less when Bobby tried to talk to her. The doctors didn't know what to do.

Robin and Stephen came after school, Robert after work. Bobby was always by her side. She stopped responding to anyone besides the occasional flicker of eyelids at the sound of a voice. The atmosphere was desperate as the doctors ran tests, took vital signs, checked the IVs running through her veins. Cold dread coursed through Bobby's stomach, his mind, down his spine. He stared at his little sister, holding her hand, talking to her, trying to get her to respond.

“What’s wrong Paula?” he said quietly. “Tell me what’s wrong. Can you hear me? Paula? Paula, it’s Bobby.”

Silence.

“What’s wrong Paula?” he repeated. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

The same empty silence. Then, suddenly, “It hurts.”

She blurted it out, as if it had taken every ounce of strength to say those two words.

Bobby leapt to his feet. His heart pounded, nausea pulsed through him.

“What hurts Paula? What hurts? Tell me what hurts so I can help.” He shouted for a doctor, waved one over. Tried to get her to speak again.

Nothing. Not another word. She slipped back to where she had been and lay there quietly, barely holding his hand.

The doctors could not find what was hurting her.

Heather got the phone call on a Friday night. Her mother left her a voicemail, and she came home to find her roommate Katie crying. She pointed to the answering machine without a word. Heather left for the airport at 2 AM.

She had paused in the doorway on her way out. “I have a really bad feeling about this time,” she said slowly.

Katie was quiet. She looked down and rubbed her arms. “So do I.”

Saturday morning before dawn, the doctors called Joan to tell her that they had had to intubate Paula during the night to help her breathe. She had been moved to the ICU.

Joan was angry. “You should not have done that without asking me first! You needed my permission. I should have been there while you did it.” She imagined the terror Paula must have felt as the doctors stuck the long, thick tube down her throat.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Arceci said, “but we had to.”

The implication sank in. Joan hung up and headed over to the hospital. She had been spending every night at the Ronald McDonald house down the street and was there in minutes. She hurried into Paula’s room to find her daughter lying on the bed, mouth open around the tube. She was conscious but her eyes were closed. She looked peaceful. An IV in her arm passed morphine into her bloodstream. Joan sat down beside her, took her limp hand.

When Pat found out Paula had been readmitted again, she called the hospital. She spoke with a nurse who told her that Paula was having respiratory problems and had been intubated. Dread settled in the pit of her stomach. In her years as a nurse, many of her patients had been intubated. Very few were ever extubated.

On Sunday, Paula’s vitals were showing improvements. She was more alert and kept trying to talk. The doctors discussed extubating her. Pat’s heart leapt. Maybe this kid would be one of the miracle patients. One of the very few who managed to pull through this stage. She was so strong – it was possible.

But Monday her breathing began to falter again. The doctors decided to keep her intubated. And everything fell apart from there.

“I heard that Paula was back in the hospital about halfway through the week,” Michael says. “And I...didn’t think she was going to make it.”

She got worse by the day. Her body was rejecting her sister’s bone marrow. Her fever would not go down, her breathing did not improve.

As the week progressed, Heather felt as if the staff was withdrawing around them. They seemed to be pulling away, giving up. The doctors and nurses seemed resigned instead of frantic. Was she imagining this? Was the lack of sleep making her paranoid?

Robin was sitting outside in the small garden behind the hospital when her Uncle Bill found her. She had been staring off into space, enjoying the sun and the surprising green of the garden despite the November air. It was a bright, sunny day.

“Hey, Ribs,” he said as he sat down in a chair opposite her.

She smiled at him. He sat there in silence for a moment, studying her with a peculiar expression on his face. Then he sighed and leaned forward.

“Robin,” he said, “she’s going to die, you know. Nobody is going to tell you, but you need to know that. She is not going to get better.”

Robin’s throat closed. Her stomach turned cold. “How do you know?”

He shrugged. “I just know.”

Robin stared at him. He didn’t know what he was talking about. Paula wasn’t going to die. She was only 17. Why would she die? She was just sick and in the hospital again. And they would take her home when she got better.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that she was waking up into a nightmare instead of out of one. The day seemed less bright, the garden less green. The air was cold.

Uncle Bill left, but his presence hovered there, his words lingering like an acid taste in the back of her mouth.

October 30, 1985

It was Wednesday night. Kathy was studying in her room at Southeastern Massachusetts University when the pay phone rang. Dawn hopped off her bed and went to answer it. The conversation lasted a few minutes.

"Guys?" Her voice was strangled. Kathy's head snapped up. She heard Katherine shift on the bunk above her.

Dawn's face told it all.

"What? What's wrong?" Kathy said. Her books fell to the floor as she jumped off her bed. Katherine landed with a thud beside her.

"Paula," Dawn said. Tears were coursing down her face. She gulped for air. "M-my mom just called...she said to call – to call Father LeBlanc."

Kathy felt the color leave her face. Her hands went cold. "Why Father LeBlanc?" She babbled. "Paula hates him."

"Let's just call him," Dawn said. The three girls hurried back into the hall to use the pay phone. Dawn picked up the phone and dialed. She spoke to Father LeBlanc in short, hiccupping sentences. He was brief but gentle. Paula was in a coma in the hospital. It didn't look good, the doctors doubted she would make it through the night.

"But she just went for a run a few weeks ago..." Kathy whispered.

Dawn hung up the phone. The three girls huddled together and cried.

Wednesday and Thursday were wrought with fear, hope and then relief when Paula made it through another night. But the relief was short-lived.

October 31, 1985

Thursday night was Halloween. Bobby had plans to go to the movies with friends. He went over to the hospital before to see Paula and spent a few hours sitting beside her with his mother and father.

He went back to the research lab in Beth Israel to meet up with his friends.

“Hey,” one of the guys said as he walked in, “how’s your sister?”

Bobby looked up at him. “My sister’s going to die.”

And he broke down.

Bobby stood there for what felt like a long time, holding his face in his hands, gasping, trying to control the steady stream of tears. No one knew what to say.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, taking a breath.

“No, don’t...” one of the girls said. “Don’t say sorry.”

He wiped his eyes.

“Do whatever you feel like doing, man. We’re here for you,” someone said.

“I think,” Bobby said, “I think I still want to go to the movies.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

And for two short hours, Bobby was able to forget.

November 1, 1985

Friday morning, the doctors were looking grim. After looking desperately, hopefully, from face to face, Joan decided to make the call. She moved in a sickened daze. The ringing of the phone seemed to go on forever before Robert answered. His voice sounded far away, unreal in its cheerfulness.

“Bob?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Are the kids still home?”

“Nope, no I just dropped them off at school.”

Joan put her head in her hand, closed her eyes, massaged her forehead. “Robert, I think you should go get them and bring them here.”

“No, no, the kids are fine,” he said. “They don’t need to be taken out today.”

“Bob,” Joan said heavily, “get the kids and bring them here. Now.”

Silence. “Okay.”

Each night since Wednesday, Father LeBlanc had called to tell Kathy, Dawn and Katherine that Paula might not make it to the morning. The three girls were frantic trying to find a way home. As freshmen in college, none of them had a car. Kathy spent the agonizing days in bed with her headphones in, the music as loud as it could go. She played the same songs over and over. Didn’t go to class. Nothing else mattered.

Paula was brought into the OR at 11:30 Friday morning for an open lung biopsy. Pat sat with Bobby in the waiting room and held his hand. They were quiet. There was nothing to say.

The girls were finally able to go home on Friday. They arrived back in Hudson that afternoon after a long, quiet ride. Others from their class had come home as well. Was this really happening? People were gathering at former class president Ed Owens' house, and the girls headed there. About ten other people were inside. The hugs and greetings were perfunctory, distracted, automatic. It was odd to be reunited for the first time like this. People were scattered in tight, silent circles all over the house. The heat was up, the lights were on, but no one could seem to get warm. The darkness kept creeping in.

There was a waiting room for families of patients in the ICU. Joan met Robert there when he arrived with Heather, Robin and Stephen. He sat down with Joan as Heather and Joanne took the kids into an adjacent room. Bobby stood with his parents. The doctors walked in. They had performed the biopsy on Paula's lungs and found an infection there. It had been caused by the radiation she had endured before her bone marrow transplant. Pneumonia was setting in and they were filling up with fluid. Their haggard poker faces made bile rise in Bobby's throat. He turned away.

"I'm so sorry," Dr. Arceci said, turning to Robert. "But there is nothing more we can do for her. We've tried everything."

Robert nodded thoughtfully. "Okay, so what are you going to do next?"

There was a ringing silence in the room. Bobby turned to look at his father, Joan at her husband, as he sat there, patiently waiting to hear when his daughter could come home again. The doctors looked at each other. Dr. Arceci knelt down beside Robert.

“Mr. Sacco,” he said, using the voice used with the very sick or very young, “I’m sorry. There is nothing left to do. You’re going to have to let her go.”

And with that, Robert’s world visibly collapsed. He crumpled, folded into himself, cupped his face in his hands. To Bobby, it looked like the doctor had just hit his father over the head with a baseball bat.

“Oh, my God!” Robert shouted. “All this time I’ve been such a goddamn fool!” He started to sob. Dr. Arceci bowed his head.

Never once in the past two years had Robert thought that Paula could die. In his mind, she was always going to be okay.

The family gathered in Paula’s room where monitors beeped and machines breathed for her. They circled around her, a family of eight one last time.

“We’re going to take out the tube in her throat,” Dr. Arceci explained quietly, “and take her off all the machines except for the morphine drip. If she is able to breathe on her own, we will plug everything back in and try to help her. But if she can’t, she can’t.”

Heather sat on the left side and took Paula’s hand, rubbing her arm with the other. She squeezed Paula’s hand, trying to will some more of her own life into her, begging her own bone marrow to just *work*, but there was no responding pressure. Joan stood by her daughter’s head and caressed her too-short hair. Robin was beside her mother, crying as well, hands to her blotchy face, while Robert leaned over the bed, barely able to stand. He kissed Paula’s cheek. Bobby stood by her bedside. Stephen sat opposite Heather, holding Paula’s other hand, a black anger clouding his face. For once he wasn’t restlessly shifting. Joanne sat beside him, staring blankly at her little sister. Looking at her buddy, her other half, alive for the last time. Pat stayed

back, wavering between the line of former nurse and family friend. She leaned against the wall while tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Does Paula know?” Joan asked softly. Her eyes never left her daughter’s face.

“Yes,” Dr. Arceci said gently, “we’re going to ease up on the morphine so she can wake up and you can say goodbye. But she may wake up in a panic.”

He slowed the morphine drip. They waited. Paula’s eyes fluttered weakly, then opened wide. The expression in them was bewildered, confused. Scared. Did she know she was dying? Or was it from waking up with a tube down her throat? Heather gripped her hand, though there was still no pressure in return. Paula couldn’t even move her head.

The bright blue eyes found what they were looking for. She stared silently up at her mother.

“My sweet, sweet girl,” Joan murmured, stroking her head. “You have been so strong through all of this, and we are so proud of you. We love you very, very much, but it is okay...for you to go. We will see each other again someday. I *love* you, my darling angel, my sweetheart of the corn.”

Everyone reached out to touch an arm, a hand, her face as the doctors resumed the morphine drip. They turned off each machine and pulled out the tube that was keeping her alive. The room was silent. Cold. Dead. For a few minutes, she breathed on her own. Her family waited around her, holding their own breath. But as the minutes ticked by, her breathing grew ragged, uneven, sputtering.

The doctors looked at each other and then at Joan. She nodded. They increased the morphine little by little. She relaxed. Her breathing slowed. She took one long, gasping breath.

Let it out in a sigh. Relaxed. Heather felt a shock run from her sister's hand to her own and up her arm. Nothing more.

The room was quiet. Emptier than it had been a moment before. It looked the same on the outside. But there were nine bodies and eight people. Parents that loved six children but had only five. A new family of seven walked silently out the door.

"I don't think she had a peaceful death," Michael says quietly.

The phone rang a little after 10 PM. Everyone was still scattered around Ed Owens' house in nervous clusters. The sound was jarring, ripping through the stillness. People froze, faces tense and drawn. Mrs. Owens answered it in the kitchen. Talked for a minute and then hung up, shoulders sagging. She walked into the living room, put her arm around her son.

"It's over," she said. "She just died. Paula's gone. I'm so sorry."

Ed dropped his head in his hands. Girls burst into tears. For a moment, Kathy felt an odd relief. It was over. No more worrying. Paula didn't have to fight anymore.

Dawn and Katherine were hugging, crying into each other's shoulders.

Numbly, Kathy went into the kitchen to call her mother. She picked up on the first ring.

"Mom?" Kathy's eyes started to prickle.

"She's gone, isn't she?" her mother said softly.

Tears rolled down Kathy's face in rivers. She pressed her hand over her mouth, and when she tried to take a breath, it was a broken gasp. For a moment, she couldn't speak.

"Yes. Yes, she is," she finally stuttered into the phone. Grief broke over her in a crashing wave. Pushed her down, down, down.

The Saccos sat in a falsely cheerful yellow room adjacent to the ICU. No one said it, but everyone knew it. This was the room families were sent to after a loved one died. The room of no return, of no hope, of no chance. The room that led to the rest of your life.

Robin stood by a window and cried while Stephen slumped in an orange chair, clenched fists ripping at his hair. Robert was inconsolable. Joan stood by the door, waiting for the doctors to come back. The nurses were cleaning Paula up, removing the IVs. Dr. Arceci was signing the death certificate. As the minutes progressed, she felt increasingly numb. Cold. She couldn't think. She was unaware of what she was saying when she spoke, if she spoke at all.

Dr. Arceci entered the room. His eyes were bloodshot and wet. "You can, uh...you can go back in if you'd like," he said. His voice was unsteady and he looked away. He saw Robin standing by the window, walked over and wrapped her in a hug.

"Everyone stay here with Dad," Joan said. Heather nodded mutely as she wrapped an arm around her sobbing father. Joanne stared at a spot on the wall. Bobby held Pat's hand as she rubbed his back and cried.

Joan walked back into the room, took a slow breath, and pulled back the curtain.

Paula was lying there, eyes closed, free of tubes and wires and the cruelty of being left behind. She looked peaceful. Her face was relaxed. No eyes bright with fever, no mouth grimacing in nausea. Joan stroked her face, kissed her cheek. She was still warm.

"There now, darling. It's all over. You're better now."

"Is there anything about those two years when Aunty Paula was sick that sticks out in your mind?" I ask Dad over the phone.

He is plastering the walls in their bedroom. The scraping sounds stop. There is silence as he thinks. But the silence stretches on and on. I frown. Is he thinking or...?

And then I hear him clear his throat and take a shaky breath. My stomach turns over.

“Um...” he says.

Daddy’s crying.

There’s another silence. I am frozen. I don’t know what to say. He sniffles.

“We can talk about something else...” I say.

“No,” he says, “I can tell you. It’s important. I *want* to tell you. It’s just...” he breaks off, takes a breath.

“Daddy...” I say in a small voice.

“Just give me a minute,” he says.

I wait. *Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry.*

“One thing that I always...remember about that time...and that always makes me think of her...” he stops again. I can picture him sitting on the empty wood floor, leaning his head in his hand. I purse my lips, put my pen down and stare at a spot on my crowded desk.

He tries again. “Just cold, dreary November days.” His voice breaks. “There seemed to be a lot of them while she was sick. She started chemo in November of ’83, and was so sick that first month. And then she died November 1st. The day we buried her was a miserable, cold, gray day. I just remember the” – he gulps – “cold.”

I think of how my mother has told me that Dad gets terrible seasonal depression.

“Is that why you hate bad weather?” I ask.

“That could be part of it, yeah,” he says.

“Do you hate November?”

“For a long time I did. It’s not so bad now. But...I hate when the weather is like that. It was worse when you and Lissa were little, because it’d be too cold to go outside and play. I hated weekends like that, because we’d be trapped inside and I just wanted to get out. And the weekends at the hospital were the worst – everyone would go home, but Paula couldn’t. It was so empty and depressing.”

Later that day, when I am on the phone with Mom, she asks what I had talked to Dad about that made him so upset.

“I didn’t ask him anything bad,” I say. “I just asked him what he thought of the most when he thought of when Aunty Paula was sick.”

“What’d he say?”

“Cold November days.”

Mom is quiet for a long time.

Mike was studying in his room when the quarter master knocked on his door. The look on Mr. Harcrou’s face as Mike opened the door made him wish he had kept it closed.

“Mike,” he said, “you need to call your parents. Right now.”

Mike opened his mouth to speak, swallowed, and nodded. Mr. Harcrou gave him a long look, clapped him on the shoulder, and walked away. Mike didn’t even grab a sweatshirt. Walked out into the cold in a daze. Picked up the receiver with trembling fingers. Dialed his number.

His mother picked up on the first ring, his father picking up the extension. The conversation was brief. Mike felt his world ending. Paula. Paula was dead. Paula playing basketball in her turban. Paula beating him in races in gym. Paula in the hospital bed, laughing.

Paula looking at him with those astoundingly blue eyes. Eyes he would never see again. Paula dead. Lifeless. Silent in the worst possible way. No. It wasn't true.

He slammed down the receiver. Paced back in forth, the rage boiling up and overflowing.

“NO!” he shouted, turned and slammed his fist into the wall.

His friend Drew heard from his room and came outside as Mike was walking away.

“Hey man, you okay?” he asked. Mike walked past him without saying a word. He went back to his room, shut and locked the door. Lay down on his bed.

Bobby and Pat left the hospital together. Bobby still had yet to cry. The family was brought to the Ronald McDonald house to sleep.

“Everyone wanted to reminisce about her,” Nana tells me over the phone. “But I couldn't. I couldn't talk or stand. I remember as soon we got to the Ronald McDonald house, I went and lay down on the couch. I couldn't do anything. I was so numb.”

They were all to sleep together in the same room, but no one slept that night.

When John's parents called him, he went numb. He stood there, staring at the payphone. After a minute, or maybe an hour, he turned and started walking. It was a cold, November night and he was just in a sweatshirt. He walked and walked.

His friend Sean saw him and caught up with him. “What are you doing in just a sweatshirt? It's freezing out here.”

John looked at him blankly. Sean was in a winter jacket and hat. The jacket was zipped up to his chin. John looked down at his sweatshirt. He didn't feel cold. He didn't feel anything.

"I don't know," he said. "My friend just died. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Oh." Sean took a step back. "Wow. I'm so sorry man. That's horrible. Were you close?"

John looked up at him. "Very. I've known – I *knew* her all my life."

"I'm so sorry. Do you need anything? Anything I can do for you?"

John shook his head. "I'm just gonna keep walking for now."

"Okay, well if you need anything, let me know."

"Thanks." John turned and walked away, swallowed up in the darkness.

Pat and Bobby had been staying at Lin and Jim's house in Brookline. The drive there was silent. Bobby drove mechanically. Pat held his hand.

It was almost midnight by the time they got there and Lin and Jim were asleep. The pair walked up to the guest room they were staying in and sat down on the bed. Pat took Bobby's hand again. He stared at her blankly, wearily.

"I can't believe she's dead..." he said. His voice was hollow.

Tears pricked at Pat's eyes. "I know. I just...I can't...it's not fair. She was so brave. And so strong. I thought she was going to be okay."

They continued to talk about her, reminiscing. And then Bobby let out a strangled sob. He dropped his head in his hands and finally began to cry. Pat leaned her forehead against his and then drew him into a tight hug. They stayed like that as Bobby wept into her shoulder, his head a dead weight against her. She rocked him gently, the tears streaming down her own face.

They fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, gratefully giving in to oblivion.

2012

I surprise Nana with a visit one day in January. She takes me out to lunch. On the drive over, I chatter about how much I've been learning about myself through this project – I say how I've noticed different personality traits I have in common with my parents, aunts and uncle.

“I think I got my intensity from Uncle Steve,” I say, laughing. “Definitely not from Dad. He's always so cool, calm and collected. Nothing seems to bother him. He always knows what to do; he's always so patient and happy.”

“Well,” Nana says, giving me a small smile, “maybe on the surface.”

Mike sat in his room listening to Bruce Springsteen. People started coming by his room – Mr. Harcrou had told his friends – and offered everything from company to dinner.

“Don't listen to any songs you love,” Drew said over the music. “It will ruin it for you. Every time you hear it again, you'll just remember this day and how you feel right now.”

“But I didn't listen to him,” Mike tells me, looking at his feet. “I didn't want to lose that memory, or that feeling. I wanted to remember.”

John's parents picked him up that Saturday morning and brought him home. The ride was quiet, his mother turning around in the front seat every few minutes to check on him, to reach out and pat his leg. When they got home, he jumped in his father's old red convertible and drove up to Deerfield to pick up Mike. Although they hadn't seen each other since the summer, the two barely spoke on the drive home. It didn't matter – it was a relief to be together.

They went to the Saccos' house. Joan greeted them, and for awhile they just stood there holding each other. Her eyes were dry as she patted their faces and tried to soothe them.

John felt crushing guilt. Why was she comforting them when they should be comforting her? Mrs. Sacco was always the mother, always the strong one, always the one to dry someone else's eyes. Even when it was her turn to cry.

Mike couldn't look at her. How could something so terrible happen to such a wonderful, giving, loving woman as Mrs. Sacco? How could this happen to such a happy family?

They wandered through the house, expecting to see Paula bounding down the stairs to greet them, sitting on her bed waiting for them. They stayed until they couldn't stand it anymore.

Pat and Bobby stayed at his parents' house the days before the wake. The house was quiet, the atmosphere odd. There would be laughter heard from one room, sobs in the next. People would laugh as they cried. Stories about Paula were repeated over and over. Everything seemed to spark a memory. Friends and neighbors came in an endless stream of ringing doorbells, tight hugs and casseroles wrapped in tinfoil. Father Rossi visited for hours. But no matter how many people were in the house, to the Saccos it was always empty, empty empty.

Pat went with the Saccos to view Paula before the wake. Paula's wig was on her head, the bangs flipped up in front.

"Paula would hate that," Joanne said softly.

Everyone nodded. Paula hated the wig to begin with and always kept the bangs straight. Her face was still puffy. Her blackened skin glowed oddly in the yellow lighting.

"I think we should...we should keep the casket closed," Joan said heavily.

The line for the wake was out the door and around the building.

The children's Uncle Henry was one of the first ones there. He walked up to them, his eyes dead, and shrugged. "It's the shits," he said, his voice thick with anger. Heather couldn't think of anything more appropriate, more fitting to say.

The casket was closed with a single yellow rose and a picture of Paula resting on top. She wouldn't want people to see her skin the color it was. She wouldn't want people to know just how sick she had been. She wouldn't want the last memory people had of her to be like that. Of this Joan was sure. She stood beside the casket, statue-like, her face a numb mask, while the endless line of people embraced her, kissed her, cried. Inside, her daughter wore her favorite lilac sweater, one that in good days had complemented her fair skin, rosy cheeks and blue eyes. Against the new skin color and without the dancing eyes, the sweater looked wrong. No one should see that. Joan wished she hadn't.

"I hate that color lavender now. Anything that shade makes me nauseous," Aunty H says. "I can't stand it. I won't look at it."

Robert stood at the casket beside Joan, crying quietly. When Kathy came up to them, he wrapped her in a bear hug, held her for a long moment.

"Paula had a message for you," he said. Tears poured down his cheeks. Kathy's eyes ached from crying, but her heart lurched at his words. "She wanted me to tell you," he dropped his voice, "to be careful of people like Dawn, that she may be a friend of yours but you shouldn't trust her. Paula never wants you to get hurt."

Across from me at her kitchen table, Kathy is sobbing, struggling to get this story out. She tells me in short bursts, hands pressed against her eyes, mouth trembling. There are long pauses where I sit with my pen and say nothing.

“I just...I was so overwhelmed that...that she is so sick and in the hospital all the time and going through so much, and yet she’s thinking about me. She never thought about herself, especially when she got sick. She was always concerned about someone else. She was dying, and she wanted to make sure I’d be okay. And she was right about Dawn.”

A new wave of tears overtakes her. I sit there in silence, let her cry over my family member, over her friend. I am jealous that she can mourn someone who I will never know. That my Aunty Paula was someone her friends and family cry over more than twenty-five years later, and I will never get to truly understand why.

The church was filled for the funeral. Four busloads of high school students were sent over – some from Hudson Catholic High and some from the all-boys high school Stephen attended.

Robin smiled as Stephen’s classmates filed inside. She turned to Joanne and whispered, “Paula would have been psyched having all these boys come to visit!”

Joanne grinned and elbowed her. “Don’t say it too loud, you’ll embarrass her!” And for a moment, it all wasn’t true.

Almost all of Paula’s forty-eight classmates were there. Mike did a reading, his voice shaky but his eyes dry. Joanne was after him, reading a tribute to her little sister that she had written. Her voice was dead as she read it, but it finally broke as she came to the end. With tears

in her eyes, she took a deep, steadying breath and said clearly, “Paula, I hope you realize how much you are loved, you who loved so much.

Our fighter –
So full of life;
A life so full –
Of love,
Of compassion,
Of strength.
Mourned for, you are,
Now and forever
Our gentle, gentle Paula.”

The last two lines of the poem had been carved onto her headstone. Her family had agreed that it was perfect.

The weather was miserable the day of the funeral. It was a bitterly cold, wet day. Breath rose in clouds above the mourners’ heads.

Afterwards, people left in pairs and small groups. No one spoke. The yellow rose still lay across the coffin. Joan felt empty as she stood beside what was no longer her daughter and watched people walk up to touch the coffin, touch her arm and walk away.

Mr. Bacon was one of the last to leave. He stood there across from Joan, staring at the coffin and weeping openly. He didn’t even try to stem the flow of tears. Just stood there and cried as if it was his own child being buried beneath the frozen ground.

“I don’t know how they were able to leave their child at the cemetery,” Mom says over the phone. Her voice quavers. “I don’t know how any parent does it. Ever since I had you and Liss...I just can’t imagine. You think you know but...Caty, as a nurse, you see a lot of death. You think you get it, but you don’t. I don’t know how Nana and Pops ever recovered from that.”

I think about my grandparents. Their happy, cheerful ways. Nana’s dancing, Pops’ jokes. The way Pops says ‘I love you’ not just in his goodbyes, but in his greetings as well. The way Nana has a box of Paula’s things and her own diary and poems written about her daughter hidden away in her room. The way Aunty Paula’s paintings hang all over the house. The way Nana’s voice changes when she talks about her daughter, the way Pops talks about her but will always turn back to joking and teasing.

A lot of people say they don’t know how Nana and Pops recovered. But now I’m not sure if they ever did.

John was at the reception after the funeral when Joan approached him with a letter in her hand. The envelope had his name on it, but no address. A little smiley face with four hairs on its head was drawn under the return address.

“She wrote this to you after your last visit,” she said as she handed it to him. He stared at it numbly, turning it over in his hands. “She didn’t have your address, so she never got to send it.”

John nodded, his eyes stinging. “Thank you, Mrs. Sacco. Thank you, thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, dear,” she said. She smiled wanly and walked away. John waited until he was home and safely in his room before he read the letter.

Dear John,

It was so nice to see you the other night! I was really surprised. Thank you for the warm sweatshirt, it was a generous gift.

Guess what? Well, I'll tell you, I can run!! My mother and I jogged around Forest Ave School. I was tired after a short distance, but my muscles felt great. My energy level is really getting higher by the day.

I'm sorry it is so hard to read my letter, but my hand coordination is still a little off. It will be a while before you'll be able to read my letters quickly!

Well, it's about eleven o'clock, so I must close. It's great to know that I have such a good friend. I miss you terribly already; you always make me smile. I hope to see you soon.

Love,

Paula.

John clutched the letter to his chest as he cried.

John walks me outside. It is a clear, cold day. It has been a mild winter, and the air doesn't have its usual February bite. It is the kind of day that Kathy and Lori told me Paula always loved.

One thing has been on my mind this entire day – itching to be said, but I haven't found the right words. I look at my car. This is my last chance.

We talk for a few moments until I finally gather the courage to blurt out to this virtual stranger, "This might be weird for me to tell you this...but my Auntie Paula was in love with you all her life." I have been staring out at the street, but force myself to shyly look him in the eye. My voice is soft, my words have come out in a rush, my heart thudding against my temples.

He smiles at me and ducks his head. Looks out at the street and shoves his hands in his pockets. “You know, your grandfather came by once while I still lived in Hudson, and he told my parents that if Paula hadn’t died, we’d be married by now.”

I smile.

He shrugs. “She was a wonderful person, and a great friend. I grew up with her, we knew each other inside and out and I cared so much about her. Who knows what would’ve happened.”

“Who knows,” I repeat.

Thoughts and images suddenly erupt behind my eyes. Of how things would have been different if Aunty Paula had survived. How the possibility that this man – who I have wanted to meet for years, who was nothing but a handful of old middle school pictures, a couple of stories, an exchanged email and a phantom voice on the phone to me until this afternoon – could have been part of my family. I think of the family he has now – the very polite, friendly children, a wife he loves. A beautiful home. He seems truly happy. His family reminds me of my own. I think of my other uncles, how I love them, how close I am to them, how this stranger could have been one of them. It would be a different world. A different life. The feeling is strange and makes my stomach ache. I wonder if John is thinking thoughts along these same lines.

“I just wanted to tell you, because if I were her, I would have wanted you to know,” I say quietly.

He smiles at me, bright blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “Well thank you, I really appreciate it.” And then he reaches out and hugs me, saying, “I feel like I know you even though I just met you.”

He leans over the rail and smiles as I walk down the steps, cross the lawn and climb into my car, the way Paula watched him go so many years before.

Maybe he was wondering the same things. How it might have been. Goosebumps erupt on my arms as I drive away.

“Did you tell John?” Nana asks on the phone a few weeks later.

I hope she can hear the smile in my voice. “Yes. But he already knew.”

“Good,” she says.

After I have left, John will call Mike to talk about their separate meetings with me. “We talked for a while and it was funny how different people remember different things,” John will write in an email. “Mike and I both said the same thing, that after 10 minutes talking with you we felt like we had known you for years. You definitely have the Sacco smile!”

Winter 1985-6

Everything moved in a nightmarish blur after that. Bob and Joan tried to keep things the way they always were. Joan cooked dinner every night for the family and they sat down together. Bob asked Stephen and Robin about their day as he always did. The same rules applied.

Stephen withdrew from everyone. He grew angrier as the days went by and spent his time shut up in his room. Robin became quieter and quieter and focused all her energy on her studies.

Joanne came home from Boston College on the weekends to help cook and clean.

Back in New York, Heather went through the motions of her day-to-day. She was mechanical, quiet, unfeeling. It scared her – why couldn’t she cry over her sister? What was wrong with her? She felt like a robot. Work at the theatre was almost impossible – she couldn’t

concentrate on anything. She was haunted by images of Paula lying motionless in the hospital bed, tube plunging down her throat.

The house felt unreal to Joan without her daughter. She was trapped in a nightmare. She couldn't stand being home and would get in her car and drive for hours. The rides were a blank in her mind. She never knew where she was going, where she would end up. She just drove.

Robert wouldn't talk about it. He was so consumed by grief that any mention of Paula chased him out of the room. Joan tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't, couldn't. Their happy marriage fell under unexpected strain.

“If it hadn't been for the fact that we had had so many wonderful years, we may not have been able to work through it,” Nana tells me on the phone. She speaks gravely, heavily. The calm lifelessness to her voice weighs me down. “I married your grandfather when I was 20, and I didn't have the best life before that. I look back at our wedding, and I think of it as the day my life began. After Paula died, it was hard for quite awhile, but we acted like nothing was wrong for the children. They had enough to deal with, they didn't need to worry about anything else. We kept everything as normal as possible.”

Joan went back to work after an empty Christmas. During her lunch break she went down to the cemetery. She talked to Paula, brought flowers for her, lay her hand on the headstone.

On an early spring day, a young priest came upon her standing and staring at the grave. “Mrs. Sacco,” he said gently, “you shouldn't be down here all alone.”

“Oh, Father,” Joan said, shrugging in defeat. “I just want my daughter back.”

He stood there silently and looked at her, not knowing what to say.

“After I lost Paula, I just wanted to die,” Nana says in the same heavy tone. She chooses her words slowly, carefully, aware of what effect this may have on her granddaughter. “And I actually...really considered it for awhile. But I had a husband and five other children to think of, who needed me. So I just thought of them whenever I was...having a hard time.”

Early Spring 1986

Robin didn't sleep. Insomnia haunted her in the weeks following her big sister's death. Paula had been her guardian, quietly pulling her onto her lap when there were no seats left on the school bus, telling her not to slump but to stand up straight when Robin became self-conscious of her height. She went back to school without being aware of what she was doing in class.

Joanne took her to the Framingham Mall one weekend when she was home. Robin followed her around numbly.

“Ribs!” Joanne said sharply, catching her by the arm. “Watch where you're going! I'm so sorry!” she said to a tiny old woman passing them. Robin blinked and looked at the woman. They were standing outside a store called Lechmere's. Robin didn't remember going this way. The woman had stumbled, her bags swaying. She nodded at Joanne and kept walking.

“You almost just knocked her over!” Joanne said. “Come on, Ribs. Snap out of it.”

When Robin started sleeping again, she had nightmares. She woke up screaming in the middle of the night. She was terrified of the dark, of being alone. Of waking up to the empty twin bed beside her own. After a few weeks of this, Joan contacted a counselor at Dana Farber and sent Robin to her once a week.

It was about three months later that Robin woke up before her alarm. She rubbed her eyes and rolled over, then sat bolt upright.

Paula was sitting on her own bed, looking over at her. Her skin was fair and perfect, her hair was her own, her blue eyes danced in the weak morning light. She was wearing her nightgown and looked solid and whole and healthy. Real.

Robin pinched herself. It hurt.

“Paula?” she said slowly.

Paula grinned. “Hey, kiddo. How are you?”

“How...how are you here? Is this real?”

“Never mind that,” she said. “Tell me how you are, Ribs.”

Robin’s eyes started to burn. “I miss you. I hate it here without you.”

“You need to stop being so sad, love,” Paula said tenderly. She smiled at her baby sister. “I am happy, so happy. I mean, look at my skin!” She stretched out a white arm. “Pale Sacco all over again!”

Robin smiled uncertainly.

“What I wanted to tell you is that I am happy and I am where I’m meant to be. You need to go on living, because you are where you’re meant to be.” She glanced at the alarm clock and said quickly, “I love you so much, Ribs, and tell Mum and Dad I love them too.”

“But Paula,” Robin said desperately, “can’t *you* tell them? Can’t you stay?” The room got brighter. Her alarm clock started buzzing. She reached over to shut it off. “Why do you have to go? I miss...”

But Paula was gone. Robin was talking to empty air, alone in her room. Quiet joy was filling her, relaxing muscles that felt like they had been tensed for months. Her body felt light, as if she was floating. Had she been dreaming?

“My alarm didn’t wake me up, and I wasn’t asleep,” Auntie Robin tells me in an email.

Spring 1986

It was a spring day when Heather’s phone rang. She answered and nearly dropped it when she heard the voice on the other end.

“Hey Barbs,” Paula said. “It’s me – I’m all alone in the hospital and bored out of my mind. Why don’t you visit me anymore? I’m not dead, ya know.”

“Oh my God, Paula! I’ll be right over!” Heather hung up. As she did so, the room darkened to a nighttime shade and she found herself sitting up in bed. Paula was alive! She was still alive! It had all been a bad dream!

She got out of bed to call Mum and tell her. She was dialing the number when she stopped. She looked back at her bed. She looked at the clock. It was after 3 in the morning.

It had been a dream. Paula was gone. She wasn’t coming back.

Tears that hadn’t been able to form for months sprang to Heather’s eyes and she collapsed on the floor. She lay there sobbing until the weak morning light filtered through the window. Only when her alarm went off did she drag herself back to bed to hide under the covers.

Summer 1986

Robin sat in the back seat of a car with two of her friends. They were going to a girl's 14th birthday party. She stared blankly out the window as the girls beside her chattered away about things she didn't care about.

One of them said something a little louder, and when there was silence, Robin turned toward them. They were both looking at her.

"Hmm?"

"I *said* you need to snap out of it, Robin," the girl closest to her said, her voice bossy.

"What? Snap out of what?"

"Stop being so depressed and quiet all the time," the other girl said. "It's annoying. No one cares anymore that your stupid sister died. Get over it."

"Girls!" the mother said, glaring at them from the rearview mirror. "Shut. *Up*."

Robin stared at them. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats. She turned back to the window without saying a word.

"After that day," Aunty Robin says as she crumples up a candy wrapper in her clenched fist, "those girls were *dead* to me."

In April of '86 Pat and Bobby got engaged. Bobby had flown to New York to buy the ring under the pretense of going to a Red Sox game. He made sure he knew the score when he called Pat. They had talked about marriage and picked out a ring, but Pat had no idea when he would propose. He asked after dinner at his apartment one night. After a few tears, Pat said yes.

“As soon as we started dating, I knew he was the one,” Mom says. “He was already my best friend. Grandpa always told me to judge the quality of a man’s character by the way he treats his mother and his sisters. Going on that alone, your father is one incredible man. After that first date, I just knew.”

“I believe that everything happens for a reason,” I tell Kathy as we continue to talk at her kitchen table. “I don’t like to say that there was a reason good enough for my Auntie Paula to die, but at the same time I definitely don’t believe that she died for no reason at all. If she hadn’t gotten sick...my parents never would have met. I still don’t understand why she had to *die*, but...”

Kathy nods, then speaks while staring at the table. “You know, after Paula died, I was so angry, so upset. I was always looking for reasons why she had to die. There had to be a reason, you know? And...”

She pauses, gulps. Her eyes get glassy. “My two younger sisters were close to Paula, too. One of them...she had a hard time, I guess...as she got older. When she was in college, she tried to commit suicide –”

Kathy is crying again and pauses to catch her breath. She looks up at the ceiling, fans her face, manages that sorry smile we all make when annoyed by our own tears.

She tries again, tears flowing freely, “She took a whole bottle of pills while she was in her room...and as she was fading, floating away...she thought of Paula, and how hard she fought to stay alive. And how Paula hadn’t had that choice. She told me later that she couldn’t handle that kind of guilt...so she crawled out into the hall and called for help. They brought her to the hospital and pumped her stomach just in time.”

Kathy is sobbing. “Paula saved her,” she squeaks.

Summer 1987

Bobby and Pat were married over a year later in June of '87. They were married in the Boston College Catholic Church by Father Rossi, who mentioned Paula several times during the sermon. It was a beautiful wedding. Pat wore a high backed wedding gown that covered the broken heart on her back. Her dark hair had grown in full and curly. They danced for hours at the reception. Bobby hated dancing, but for that one day, he danced as much as Pat did. They honeymooned for two weeks in Ireland and when they came back, Pat moved in to Bobby's Dorchester apartment.

“I remember hearing from your grandparents that Bobby had married the nurse,” Mike says. It is odd to hear Mom referred to as ‘the nurse.’ The idea fascinates me. I had never tried to look at my parents' marriage from an outsider's perspective. In my mind, even when they had just met, they were always my mother and father.

“But it struck me that something good could come out of something so bad,” he continues. “Life goes on, ya know?”

1989 – Early 90s

Two years later, the first of the next Sacco generation was born. I entered the world on July 10, 1989 as a scrawny, six pound eight ounce baby girl. I came out, blue eyes open as wide as they could go and started screaming. Not crying, just flat out screaming, tiny fists flailing, face

scarlet with anger. The nurse cleaning me up said, eyes wide, “That’s the loudest baby I’ve ever heard!”

The doctor turned to Bobby and shouted, “You got a set of lungs on that one!”

They named me Caitlin Rose and a few days later, brought me home.

Stephen had struggled through the rest of high school. He was angry and withdrawn. He graduated quietly with the class of ’89, just months before his first niece was born. He had been accepted at Catholic University in Washington, DC and was leaving in the middle of August to try out for the soccer team.

“Stephen,” Joan called up the stairs, a week before he was supposed to leave. “Have you started packing yet?”

“Uh...no, not really Mum!” He shouted from his room, louder than was necessary. “I’ll do it later!”

Joan sighed. Not that she had expected anything else. She continued to ask him as the days passed, and his answers grew vaguer and more evasive.

He was up almost all night packing the night before.

He took a plane down to Washington. His parents were going to come down when tryouts ended for his freshman orientation.

Tryouts were hell. Nine hours a day for the next ten days – three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon, three hours at night. At the end of each day, the boys would sit together on the browning grass, faces stiff with dried sweat, praying that they would not hear their names as the coaches called out those who had not made the cut. Stephen worked the

hardest he ever had at a sport. Every night was greeted with relief, a cold shower and a nose dive into his pillow.

The very last day of tryouts, Stephen was cut from the team. Disappointment crushed him. All of that for nothing?

His parents, Joanne and Robin flew down to see him the next day. Heather came down from New York by train. It was hard to greet them with much enthusiasm.

“I didn’t make the team,” he said flatly.

“Well, why not?” Robert asked.

Stephen looked at him with incredulity. “Because I suck, Dad!”

His parents and the girls stayed in a hotel right off campus, and the next day they braved the heat to tour Washington. The following morning, while Stephen was busy with his orientation, Joanne, Robin and Heather went shopping in the city and Joan and Bob decided to go visit the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception.

“Oh, Robert...” Joan breathed as they walked inside. It was as if they were in a different world. The curved ceiling reached high above their heads, decorated with paintings of saints and angels. White marble columns rose and bent gracefully into arches, molding into one another, tinted by the sun streaming in through the stained glass windows.

They wandered into the gift shop. Joan walked through the aisles, looking at the tiny trinkets as she passed. Something caught her eye and she paused, frowning as she bent to get a closer look.

And there it was. The perfect figurine, as if it had been made specifically for Joan to find.

Behind a glass case, a little girl sat cross legged with an open book in her hands, her light brown hair cropped right below the ears, two great wings sprouting from her back. She was

turned, not toward the book that she was halfway through, but to a tiny butterfly perched on the tip of her wing, as if she was so sensitive that even the lightest touch, even a butterfly brushing against her skin, was enough to distract her. As if any sort of beauty, even that as simple as a butterfly, could keep her occupied for hours.

But what struck Joan the most was not all of this, even though each detail was enough to make her heart ache as it was. The most heartbreaking feature of this figurine was not the display of sensitivity or of the love for beauty, nor the short hair or even the fact that it was reading, but that despite the Caucasian features of this angel's face, her skin was a striking and unnatural shade of brown. A little bronze angel.

“Robert,” she said, “I have to have that.”

Today, that angel sits atop my grandparents' fireplace, hovering over our family as we relax in front of the flames.

A year after I was born, Bobby and Pat moved to Franklin, MA, a town about a half hour's drive south from Hudson. They had another blue-eyed, white-skinned baby girl on October 18, 1991. The opposite of her big sister the moment she came out, this infant slept through her own birth. They named her Elizabeth Joan.

The two of us would grow up best friends, nicknamed Caty and Lissa. We had our father's blue eyes, our mother's high cheekbones, and fair, freckled skin from both sides. We would squabble and fight; Lissa would bite me on the arm once over an Aladdin Barbie Doll. But we were two halves of a whole. Our parents would never play favorites. Everything was always – sometimes excessively – fair.

I would grow up an anxious child, suffering from anxiety disorders that made me quiet and antisocial as a little girl. I would go to therapy at 11 years old to be treated without medication. I would grow to have Bobby's kindness and inability to see the bad in anyone, Pat's easy laugh and quick temper, Robert's hatred of change, Stephen's intensity, Joanne's gift for writing and her good humor, and Paula's extreme sensitivity and love for beauty.

Lissa would not suffer from anxiety. She would watch me struggle with and succumb to panic throughout our childhood, battle until I was white and trembling with exhaustion through our preteen years, and finally triumph in high school and college. She learned to take care of her big sister, to shelter me. She would grow to have our father's quick wit and humor and our mother's undying loyalty and vehement instinct to protect her family. Like Joan, she did not take crap from anyone. She would be as tall and as stubborn as Paula and Robin. She would see people for who they were and be ready with a quick and sometimes cutting remark the way Paula always had. Lissa saw the world for what it was, while no matter how many years passed, I remained blinded by the belief that there is good in everyone.

Of all the cousins born in the years to come, Lissa would remind everyone of Paula the most.

Time passed, Stephen transferred to Providence College in Rhode Island as a sophomore and graduated with a degree in modern languages. He had majored in Spanish and minored in French. He moved to Spain where he would spend the next six years teaching English. Joanne went to the University of New Hampshire for her master's and met a Michael Ganger who was studying to be a biologist. They fell in love and were married in January of 1994. Lissa and I were the flower girls, but because it was winter, we were given cotton balls instead so that it

would look like snow. I remember holding my dad's hand as he walked me down the aisle. I stared at the floor and dropped the cotton balls as I went. Joanne and Mike moved from New Hampshire to Kentucky, to Massachusetts, to Pennsylvania. They had four blonde, blue-eyed children, all whom Joanne homeschooled.

Heather had eloped with a Frenchman and moved to Paris, but within a few years after Paula's death, she divorced him. She moved around and ended up in England, where she has stayed ever since. In the beginning of the new millennium, she went to a matchmaker who matched her up with an Englishman by the name of Jeffery Johnston – an eccentric, loving man who is missing several fingers and tells wonderful stories. They dated for awhile and decided to get married. The first time she brought him home, I greeted him at the door with a hug, as was expected with our family. He hugged me right back, and became Uncle Jeff.

Robin finished high school and attended Cornell where she graduated with a degree in chemical engineering. She traveled around the world, came home and moved from place to place for years in Massachusetts. She bought old, dilapidated houses, repaired and rebuilt them from the basement up, and sold them for much more than their initial worth. When I was 13, she met a Dutchman named Bart. She brought him to our house to meet my family and when they left, my father said, "Was Ribs wearing *perfume*?"

Lissa and I fell to giggles and excited dances.

"I think this is it," Dad said. "I think this is the one."

A year later, Bart and Robin were married. It was a late summer day. Instead of cake, they served apple pie at the wedding. They had two towheaded, blue eyed children, one boy and one girl. Both of which are as independent and strong-willed as their mother.

June 2010

And now it is Stephen's turn. All of Joan and Robert's children are happy, healthy, in love. They have families, they have homes, they have careers. Everyone but Paula. And as I watch my father grapple with emotions he has kept under control in front of me for almost twenty-one years, I feel for the first time the immense presence of her absence.

It is now that I suddenly want to know more, to know everything.

January 2012

Nana brings down a large cardboard box from her room. It is overflowing with papers, posters, letters, cards, diaries, notebooks, pictures, report cards. Everything of Aunty Paula's that she has saved over the years. She touches things tenderly as she leafs through them, leaning over to tell me a story about this or that. We sip tea as we go through the odds and ends. Nana picks up a few rough ink sketches of a girl lying in the grass, a flowering tree, a meadow.

"These were from when she was in elementary school," she says. "She always loved to draw, just like you." I smile. I used to draw and paint all through my childhood, up until college. It was in high school that I first really started to write, and my passions had shifted more and more as the time went by.

Nana gives me a diary of hers and walks into the other room to give me privacy. I am nervous. There are sporadic entries from over the years – little notes here and there, shopping lists, letters never sent, reminders. In the middle of the diary there are three short entries:

Friday 11/4/83
Chemo started, lance abscess/bone marrow biopsy same day
May be home next Friday
Be strong, my love, my little Paula

April '87 – *so sad*

June '87 – A year and a half later – and all I do is cry.

I sigh, feeling helpless, a little empty. I don't know what to say.

As I leave, Nana hands me an envelope. "I found this in Paula's room a long time ago.

It's bits of a poem she wrote...I think she wrote it when she came to terms with the fact that she was going to die."

It is only when I am alone that I open the envelope. It is stuffed with orange post-it notes, some written on with pen, others with pencil. The pencil has faded over the years and I have to squint to make out the words. Some of the poetry is jumbled and I have a hard time making sense of it. But still, I read:

Here's to the future; what it brings –
 Hopefully happy things
 Here's to treasures untold
 And wisdom of (g)old
 Here's to the present

Here's to you Beth dear
 Know in your heart that I'm always near

The grim reaper shall not come
 Until you are completely done
 I will stay until one day when He beckons me,
 Beyond sky or sea
 I will go alone, no regrets
 I have fought for my life and won,
 I must add
 And until you do the same, I will not go away
 You're stuck with me, kiddo.

I smile, remembering how Paula mentioned Beth when she was on TV for winning the trip to Bermuda, remembering Aunty H talking about how Beth had wanted to die and how Paula wouldn't accept that attitude, remembering how Nana told me that Beth survived.

Lights flash past
 Blurred images of past are reflected

In the oncoming car's windshield
Reminding you of yesteryear
Blurred images dance upon my eyes
None of which I see
The future is around the bend
I lean to forward peer to get a glimpse of me
20 years from now
I see only lights in the distance, no more.
The future is not mine to tell before
I traverse the paved trails of thundering dreams towering over my life
Disquieting me. I feel

And if perchance,
Death would say
Come, far far away to a peaceful land
I beg, please, not today! But no avail
Soon one day He will beckon me
To the end of the sky and sea
And I shall follow,
Just not today!
I want to stay!

I lean back,
Watching my dreams whizz past
Opportunities don't stop for me.

It is reading these last three lines that makes me burst into tears.

I try to write a paper about Uncle Steve when I am a junior in college. I am an English major at the University of New Hampshire and am learning how to write in a way I never knew I could. I sit in on Uncle Steve's Spanish classes at Hudson High, I talk to him on the phone and over video chat, I pull memories out of my head and put them down on paper. But I struggle to capture him. My professor asks for revisions every time.

It is during one of these frustrating conferences that my professor looks at me and asks carefully, "Is your uncle...happy?"

I laugh. "Uncle Steve? Oh yeah."

He hesitates. “There just seems to be an...underlying darkness.”

I shake my head. “No, my Uncle Steve’s always been goofy, always happy. He’s never been any other way.

But it is talking to Uncle Steve over video chat one day when I learn otherwise. He has his laptop on his roof with him as he does work on the apartment building he owns. He doesn’t seem to understand why I am so perplexed by this.

He is trying to help me fix a problem I am having with my computer and we talk between his suggestions. It is during this light conversation that he says casually, “I hated college at first...but after I transferred, I ended up loving it. I was *that guy* on campus. I had a blast. But the first year was tough...I was suicidal for a long time.”

I fight to keep my poker face as he continues, not realizing the bomb he has dropped on his unsuspecting, much-too-innocent niece.

In twelve pages, my professor picked up on something that in over twenty years I had never seen.

January 2010

I have spent most of the afternoon at Aunty Robin’s. Uncle Bart took Benjamin to the hardware store – a treat in Benjamin’s eyes – and Emma has been sleeping for the past hour. We only get through a third of the questions I have to ask her and spend the rest of the afternoon talking and digging through a box of candy. I forget that she is my aunt as we talk about boys and heartbreak, drinking and smoking, mistakes made and lessons learned. She swears more than I do. Used to watching my mouth around my family, it takes me awhile to loosen up. But before

I know it I'm telling her everything, with f-bombs decorating my every story. She tells me things I never would have expected to hear from an aunt.

"You know, you don't have to call us Auntie Robin and Uncle Bart anymore," she says.

"You can just call us Robin and Bart. You're old enough."

I laugh. "No, no I couldn't. That's one thing I could never change."

By the time I have left the house, I feel like I have found a new best friend. When I get home, my mother tells me that Auntie Robin had called after I left to say that she had had a great time with me. That she had forgotten she was spending time with her little niece. That she had felt like she was with a friend.

It is a Sunday afternoon, years before Auntie Robin will move to Holland and Uncle Steve will get married. I am at Nana and Pops' with my family. Auntie Robin and Uncle Bart have come up from their home in Connecticut; Uncle Steve is over as well.

Auntie Robin is pregnant again. She is having a girl this time. She and Uncle Bart tell us at the dinner table that they have decided on the name Emma Paula. Smiling, I leave the room to use the bathroom. When I come back, I stop dead. Half the people in the room are in tears. Auntie Robin is sitting in front of me, looking apologetically at my mother. Both are red-faced. My mom wipes her eyes, Auntie Robin lets the tears fall freely. Nana smiles sadly.

"Um...is everything okay?" I ask.

Auntie Robin laughs a little. "I just, uh...I just was saying that I was thinking about naming my baby Paula, but I...I can't handle hearing her name so often." She looks down at the table as her eyes fill up again.

"Oh."

My eyes start to burn as well.

October 27, 1991

It was a warm autumn day. Elizabeth Joan had been born nine days ago. Joan was thrilled to have another grandchild, and touched to have one with her name. She was still getting used to being a grandmother – what did grandmothers do? Did they sing and dance around the kitchen the way she did? Did they bake as much? That sounded like a good grandmother, right?

She brewed herself a pot of tea and took it outside to sit in the sun. She settled into a chair and stared out over the yard, watching the squirrels scamper up the trees. One ran along a tree branch above her head. A maple leaf dislodged and landed in her hair, startling her. She pulled the leaf from her gray curls and laughed at herself as she looked at it. It was browned and withered, easily crinkled.

Her laughter turned to tears without warning, and she began to cry.

“I wrote a poem that day,” Nana says as she lifts out a folded piece of paper and hands it to me. A perfectly preserved maple leaf slips out onto the table.

“No one has ever read this,” Nana says. She stands and goes to make a pot of tea.

The poem describes the day exactly as she just has. The maple leaf had reminded Nana of Aunty Paula. *My darling girl*, she wrote, *you touched me today*. It is the last lines that make my stomach feel hollow:

I see you again as you were that fall,
So fragile, tall and willowy,
Your skin bronzed and shiny,
Waiting for the wind
That broke your tender hold on us.

November 23, 1967

It was Thanksgiving Day when Joan gave birth to her fourth child – an eight pound baby girl with beautiful blue eyes and skin so white it was almost transparent. The little girl gurgled and cooed, her tiny fists opening and closing.

Robert had gone home to check on the children. His parents were at the house to take care of them during the holiday. Barbara was ten, Bobby five and Joanne three and they could be a handful. Robert returned to eat Thanksgiving dinner with his wife. Rules were strict about visitors then and he was not allowed to bring the family with him. Instead the two of them sat together and watched their new baby girl as they ate dried-out turkey and stuffing from the cafeteria. Joan picked at her food; Robert ate his turkey and most of hers.

They had decided on the name Paula Anne, and a few days later they took her home. They were sitting in the living room while Paula slept in a crib when Joanne toddled into the room and over to her mother. As she passed the crib, Paula woke with a cry, startling Joanne. Joanne jumped and grabbed onto her mother. She was so startled that she burst into tears. Laughing while she tried to soothe both at once, Joan pulled Joanne to the crib.

“Joanne, this is your new little sister. Her name is Paula.” Joanne eyed the baby suspiciously.

Robert and Joan had a crib in their room, where each of their children had slept as infants. Paula was fussy as the other three had been and Joan and Robert took turns rocking her and singing to her at night.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Joan said as the two of them stood by the crib that first night. Robert nodded, smiling down at his new daughter. Paula had finally fallen asleep to a lullaby and they had blessed her together.

“Goodnight, my little Paula,” Joan said softly, and Robert turned out the light.

Spring 2012

It was not until I saw my father cry that I took a step back and looked at my family. That I saw the parents who had lost a daughter, the children who had lost a sister. That although I am content when we are together, there is always someone missing to them. The picture is never perfect, never complete. That there is a gaping hole, an empty chair, a cool spot on the couch that will never be filled.

My family still suffers in a way that for years I did not see and that I do not truly understand. I feel the weight of it, but I will never grasp it.

Even in emails, Aunty Robin will not talk about Aunty Paula’s last days. Some questions are too hard for her to even write about. She tells me how only in the last few years has she stopped seeing Aunty Paula every night in her dreams. Uncle Steve was suicidal in college. Aunty H is able to talk about it calmly, but loses her appetite when she sees the color lavender. Dad cries when he talks of November days. And Aunty Jo can barely talk to me at all, not even about happy memories.

Almost twenty-seven years later and her siblings ache for her. Her parents think about her every day, save a box of her things under their bed. Visit her grave. Hang her paintings on their walls, crystals in their windows. They are irreparably damaged. Broken from loving so much. They will never forget, never stop loving the little girl they blessed and sang to every night before bed, the kid they brought to basketball games and track meets, the teenage girl who fought and fought until she finally lost. The girl Robert carried to bed as a baby and sometimes as a grown woman.

Their gentle, gentle Paula, their eternal little girl.

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"Donation FAQs." *Be the Match*. National Marrow Donor Program, 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <http://marrow.org/Registry_Members/Donation/Donation_FAQs.aspx>.

The National Marrow Donor Program's website is where people can learn more about the process of bone marrow donations and transplants and where they can sign up to be a donor. It explains everything in a manner for people who are not doctors, scientists or nurses. Donors would sign up at this website and if a patient in need of bone marrow has a matching blood type, the program contacts the donor. I used this source to learn more about the process that Heather went through to donate her bone marrow to Paula.

"Graft-Versus-Host Disease." *PubMed Health*. Ed. David Cial Dugdale, MD, Yi-Bin Chen, MD, and David Zieve, MD. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2 June 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002286/>>.

This website gives an overview of graft-versus-host disease – the side effect that Paula suffered after receiving the bone marrow transplant. It gives a patient-friendly summary of the causes, risk factors, symptoms, testing, treatments and complications associated with graft-versus-host. It is straightforward and easy to understand, providing the patient with other sources. I used this when writing about the time period when Paula contracted this disease when I needed to learn exactly how she got it, how it affected her and how the doctors and nurses would have reacted to this. It helped me to grasp the seriousness of her situation – I had thought it was just a side effect; I hadn't known that this meant the transplant was going badly or that this particular side effect could kill her.

Larson, Richard A., MD. "Patient Information: Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) Treatment in Adults (Beyond the Basics)." *UpToDate*. Ed. Bob Lowenberg, MD, PhD and Rebecca F. Connor, MD. UpToDate, Inc., 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 16 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/patient-information-acute-myeloid-leukemia-aml-treatment-in-adults-beyond-the-basics>>.

This is a website I accessed at Children's Hospital Boston. It is the website the doctors and nurses in that hospital use to look something up for themselves or for their patients. This particular section of the website is patient-friendly but "Beyond the Basics." There are several sections, the most basic for a younger audience. This website goes into further detail about acute myeloid leukemia. It is specifically for patients and their families, and gives an overview of the disease, its various treatments, remission and post-remission. It talks about treatments in older patients and also treatments for those who have relapsed. It goes into detail about what the patient will have to do and go through, how long they will be monitored after going into remission, and discusses clinical trials. Links are available that offer more information on the topic.

I incorporated a lot of this into my writing; I needed to know much more about AML than my family could tell me. This gave me a better idea of Paula's specific disease and helped me to understand what she was going through and why she received certain

treatments. I got a better idea of what having AML meant in the '80s as opposed to today. This information was in simple language as well, so I had no problem understanding the disease and everything it entails.

"National Cancer Institute." *Soft Tissue Sarcomas*. National Institutes of Health, 24 May 2007. Web. 16 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Sites-Types/soft-tissue-sarcoma>>.

The National Cancer Institute's website is very informative on many different types of cancers. This is also patient-friendly and easy to understand. This particular page talks about soft-tissue sarcomas, the cancer type of cancer Pat was diagnosed with in 1983. The page describes the different types of soft-tissue sarcomas and discusses the symptoms, locations, diagnosis, and treatment of the disease. It talks about clinical trials as well and offers links with more information. I used this website to learn more about the cancer that Pat had after she had described it to me. I was able to incorporate the information into my thesis in the places where I talk about her diagnosis and treatment.

Sacco, Paula. Interview. *Hudson Sunday Morning News*. Hudson: December 1984. DVD. 2 Feb. 2012.

My grandfather Robert made a copy of the interview the Sacco family went to when Paula won the trip to Bermuda. He had filmed it when it aired back in 1984. It is a short interview that ends with a member of the Children's Happiness Foundation telling Paula that she has won and is going to Bermuda. This was a big help in my thesis – it was an emotional moment then and a powerful, pivotal point in my piece, now knowing that Paula never got to go on this trip. There are a few pages dedicated to describing this interview and my own reaction as I had watched it for the first time. I had never heard my aunt's voice before, nor seen her face other than in pictures. It helped me to capture her character without relying on the descriptions of others. I was able to describe exactly what she looked like and how she sounded, the look on her face when she smiled, the way she dressed, how she moved, her facial expressions. I was able to capture her as a person instead of just a memory.

Schiffer, Charles A. MD, and John Anastasi, MD. "Clinical Manifestations, Pathologic Features, and Diagnosis of Acute Myeloid Leukemia." *UpToDate*. Ed. Richard A. Larson, MD and Rebecca F. Connor, MD. UpToDate, Inc., 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 16 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/clinical-manifestations-pathologic-features-and-diagnosis-of-acute-myeloid-leukemia>>.

This is also part of the website used at Children's Hospital Boston. This section is far more advanced and uses much more medical jargon. This page would be used mostly by doctors and nurses. It describes AML and goes into great detail about how to check for signs and symptoms when looking for a diagnosis. It talks about how the cancer affects different parts of the body including the skin, eyes, central nervous system, joints, etc. Blood abnormalities are discussed as well. A long list of references is at the bottom of the page. Although it was much harder for me to understand different terms on this article, I

was able to see the doctor's view of AML and read a more medical take on it. It helped me to flesh out the paper and the details about AML.

"Stem Cell Transplant (Bone Marrow Transplant)." *Children's Hospital Boston*. Children's Hospital Boston, 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.childrenshospital.org/az/Site2169/mainpageS2169P1.html>>.

This is another Children's Hospital Boston website. It goes over the bone marrow transplant process in a patient-friendly way. It explains the functions of bone marrow, what it is and where it is located, along with the definition of stem cells. It gives the reasons a patient may need a bone marrow transplant and the diseases that cause the need for it. There are several types of transplants and the website reviews each one, talking about how to find a donor as well. There is an FAQ page, as well as suggested questions to ask a doctor and descriptions of treatments, care and research done. I also used this while describing about the bone marrow transplant process that Heather and Paula had undergone.

"The Bone Marrow Harvest Procedure." *Cleveland Clinic*. The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, 2009. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.
<http://my.clevelandclinic.org/services/bone_marrow_transplantation/hic_the_bone_marrow_harvest_procedure.aspx>.

This is another website page dedicated to discussing bone marrow transplants in detail. It is sponsored by the Cleveland Clinic. It goes over the same things as the Children's Hospital Boston: diseases that require a transplant, the procedure, medication, side effects, treatment and research. I wanted to get another look at bone marrow transplants to double-check my own research. I also used this while discussing the transplant that Heather and Paula went through.

Acknowledgements

Thank you so much to the following people for graciously submitting to one or more lengthy interviews: Michael Comeau, RN, Joanne Ganger, Robin Houtman, Heather Johnston, Lori Morton, Kathy Kenny, Mike Sabourin, Joan Sacco, Pat Sacco, RN, Robert Sacco, Sr., Bob Sacco, Jr., Stephen Sacco, and John Weir. Without you I would not have started this project, would not have had the chance to know the aunt I never met.