

This is how I will always remember my mom. She was always young and always brave and always about to laugh. I wish Mom had lived long enough to see the treehouse. She never would have been able to climb the stairs—walking ended years ago—but she would have sat on the lawn and looked up in awe and laughed and applauded and jumped up and down in her wheel chair.

One evening, just before she died, Mom called me up. She was exuberant. “Oh, Pete,” she said, all out of breath as if she’d been running. “It’s so marvelous—just listen!” She held the phone up to her open window so I could bear the concert of peepers in the pond behind her house. She talked on and on about the wonders of spring and told me all her plans and then she said, “Oh, I love you, Pete,” and I said, “I love you, Mom,” and the words welled up from that deep down wonderful place where there are no strings attached. Missing my mom is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.



Day 828, May 22, 2004

Ted and I have been building window frames for the last few weeks and today we put in eight of them, including some of the big ones on the first floor. Some of the rough openings turned out to be too tight and we had to unscrew some of the siding and smack things with a big hammer. My dad was up visiting and he asked me what happened. “It’s his fault,” I said, pointing to Ted. “I told him I oversized the rough openings by an inch all around and he believed me.” Dad just looked at me sadly. “You screwed up, didn’t you?” he said. “Well...yeah.”

It was raining steadily as we brought out two of the big windows and Ted and I cleverly raised them over our heads as umbrellas. Dad, getting into the spirit of things but carrying only a cordless drill, held the drill over his head with both hands. A car drove slowly past our little procession and the driver stared at Dad the way you might stare at a man fishing in a bucket—the execution is good but the theory is flawed.

Day 834, May 28, 2004

Mom died today. I was walking across the dining room this evening and absent-mindedly reached out and grabbed the phone on my way by. “I think I’ll call Mom,” I said aloud to no one in particular. I dialed her number and her phone just rang and rang. That’s odd, I thought. Bedridden for two years with multiple sclerosis, Mom typically answered by the third ring, usually fumbling the receiver in the process (which always made us both laugh). I stood there staring at the phone and then quietly replaced it in its cradle. It rang almost immediately. It was my stepfather, Dick. “Peter, we’ve got real problems with your mother.” There was a long horrible pause. “Um...she passed away,” he finally said, breathlessly. I caught my own breath. “When?” I asked. “Just now,” he whispered. “Just a moment ago.”

Mom hadn’t answered the phone because while it was ringing she had been busy dying while the paramedics fought her all the way. I dropped the phone limply to my side. Hundreds of miles away, Dick sat in a chair waiting for me to come back. A man in a uniform walked over and rested his hand on Dick’s shoulder while red lights flashed in through the windows. I stood silently in the dining room, staring up at the ancient beams of my house, and felt so utterly alone I almost couldn’t stand it. The heartbeat of the world skipped, and then went on. I had lost my best friend.



I spent the week after Mom died in Connecticut, splitting the time between her home (where she had lived with Dick) and my father’s house (about an hour away). I did all the things a son is supposed to do when terrible things like this happen. Perhaps the worst was sending an emergency e-mail to the captain of the ship my son was riding on out in the heaving Atlantic. I wrote it hastily and it didn’t read right and Jeremiah was scared when the captain roused him out of his bunk and told him to