

In her last days, my mother built a bridge to the grandchild she'd never meet

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My mom was a master gardener. When she saw a stranger with hedge trimmers in her berm of swaying lilies and perky cone flowers, she had reason to worry. She stared at me with her cooperating eye and said, “I’m getting out there.” But she wasn’t going anywhere.

She sat in a wheeled desk chair in the kitchen next to her uneaten bowl of cereal. The nurse described my mom’s hallucinations as part of “an end-of-life rally” — a mostly futile attempt by the brain to outpace death of the body.

Two years before, I was wearing suits, eating steak on airplanes and perfecting PowerPoint presentations of my latest analyses. I worked in a fancy high-rise in downtown Chicago. Heavy diamonds dangled from the fingers of the female partners who had stay-at-home dads backing them. The world made sense back then — inputs and outputs, black and white — even if I didn’t have time to enjoy it. Kids? They were just something I avoided on airplanes.

One night before the diagnosis, my mom called with a predictable plea for me to slow down. “Can you go for a walk?” she’d asked. “To breathe?” Frustrated with the suggestion my stress could be walked or exhaled away, I’d hung up.

My Magnificent Mile doorman building had a communal library. It was in that library where I first noticed Paul. He had a long face, short eyelashes and a highlighter he used to drench pages of text in yellow. His backward ball cap and bad plaid shorts gave me pause, but I liked his hands. Thick knuckles, chewed nailbeds — they reminded me of hard work. Only four months had passed since my divorce, but the relationship had died years before.

One night, I asked Paul to join me for a drink.

On Mother's Day, my daughter was 10 weeks old and my mom had 3 weeks to live

We moseyed along Lake Michigan long after strollers were parked and bikes locked for the night. He told me about growing up on a farm, helping sows birth piglets. I told him my hometown didn’t have a stoplight. We shared a proud love of small upbringing and big living. When I told him I’d been married before, he hugged me closer.

We married three years later.

Six days after the wedding, I learned my mom had stage-four cancer. I told Paul I wanted to take a leave of absence from work and move in with her. “You should go,” he said, and kissed the top of my head.

We sought more opinions. The messages were consistent. “Picture snowflakes covering both lungs,” we heard. “I’m sorry.”

My mom held me. “There is always a way,” she kept saying.

I was accustomed to data, not “positive thinking,” so I kept researching. I bought a 500-page report and highlighted alternative treatments for cases like hers: young, healthy nonsmokers.

Meanwhile, I downloaded an ovulation app. The only concern as pressing as extending my mom’s life was having a baby she would know.

About the time I got pregnant, my mom landed a spot in a promising drug trial in New York City. With Paul’s encouragement — and an extension of my leave — I moved there with her for what was to be a six-week stint.

In New York, I let myself imagine her being an exception to the rule. The early stage immunotherapy made her *feel* good, and that was something. We picked farmers market bouquets for our shoebox studio. We licked ice cream from our fingers in the East Village. She held a “19 weeks” sign next to my growing belly and texted the picture to Paul.

When the six-week trial turned into six months, I flew home to have the baby — a boy. My mom came home shortly after, complaining of poor balance. The cancer had moved to her brain.

Back home in her garden, mom tended to clouds of tiny white flowers. Baby’s breath bloomed all summer long in Illinois. Most gardeners struggled to keep the hearty plant at bay, but the dry roadsides — and my mom — welcomed the floral spread when most everything else withered in the heat.

Mom was changing. An eye drifted and her hands shook, making it hard to read her handwriting in a card she signed for my son’s first birthday. But her laughter still fell silent when she laughed hardest.

When she started sleeping more, we set up a hospice bed in the dining room. I slept in an adjacent recliner. One night, she leaned out to wiggle my shoulder, her bangle clanking on the plastic bed rail. “Nik, do you see the big spiders on the ceiling?” she asked, as if she knew I might not.

She chattered about a painted woman at a piano, how Paul and I should build a blue house, how she wished bugs would stay outside. I scrounged for meaning in her words, storing details for later as if the other 34 years of conversation might be lost with her.

Then one day she surprised me.

“You’ll have a girl, you know,” she said. “I’ve met her. She has long, blonde, curly hair.”

The idea that my mom had met another child of mine, in some other realm, was too far-fetched for me. The image of light curls didn’t fit with my stick-straight, dark hair either.

“You never know,” I said.

I stopped myself from probing deeper because I was afraid doing so might send her back into rambling non sequitur and erase the image she’d painted in the space between us. Besides I couldn’t be disappointed if I never expected it to happen.

On a cold, sunny Sunday morning before the New Year, my mom died.

Two months later, I was pregnant — with a girl. There were days so heavy I could barely speak. To remind myself to breathe, I tied a pink ribbon to my keychain.

I passed 19 weeks and caught myself wondering if a daughter was somehow restitution for losing my mom. If I might be able to re-create the relationship we had. Woo-woo, maybe? But comforting somehow, too.

Ruby arrived with a tuft of dark hair. But over time, it started to lighten and, eventually, curl. When most 3-year-old girls were securing a first ponytail, Ruby’s golden ringlets tumbled all the way down her back.

I remembered my mom’s words: “She has long, blonde, curly hair.”

Look at that, I thought. *She was right.*

I still found comfort in data, but data or not, I began to feel like Ruby was a bridge to my mom. Why couldn’t it be true? What if somewhere beyond the world we knew, angels of those who came before and those yet to come intersected in some mystic, kindred dance?

Paul and I drove past the old house last year, five years after my mom died and seven since I’d left my job. I’d clipped some flowers from the roadside to lay on the berm. Through the back windows, I saw the dining room. I wondered what else my mom would have said if I’d asked. Did she know how Ruby would know from a glance when I’m sad? How her hardest laughter would fall silent?

Sometimes when I comb Ruby’s curls, watching them stretch and recoil, I think about the life I had before. I never imagined ringlets and some clipped flowers would be my great achievements. Or that I’d trade my fancy résumé for diapers and Play-Doh. Maybe the union between Ruby and my mom is something I created. But maybe it’s more than that.

There’s always a way, right?

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